

Dear Theo,

Thanks for your letter and the enclosure. I think the news about your patient is very favourable. Congratulations, the recovery from that anemia is decidedly a result of renewed hope and vitality, brought about by sympathy and kindness.

The heart that is fainting  
May grow full to o'erflowing  
And they who behold it  
Shall wonder and know not  
That God at its fountains  
Far off has been raining.

Now you will already have received – at least I sent it yesterday afternoon – a very rough sketch of a watercolour. This, in answer to your question about that.

It was not done recently, however. I started it a few months ago, and have occasionally given it a few touches since then. But it is still crude. Since then, I have made a large number of studies – that is, drawings of the figure, and especially of heads – with just such a scene in mind as this sketch represents; it must be finished by adding character and relief, especially to the beads, hands and feet. I am sending them to you because you will see in them more clearly than in many other watercolours I have done till now that I have a keen eye for striking colours – that I see them fresh, through a grey haze. However unfinished and imperfect it may be, this is part of a street chosen at random and done in the way in which I want to represent the Geest or the Jewish quarter. This sketch was no accident: I can take all kinds of scenes I see this far, getting the same relatively strong effects of colour and tone. Now if you compare this drawing with the lithographs and drawings of heads I sent you this winter, you can see my intentions clearly from those various failures.

The large studies of heads, for instance, of which I have still many others – for instance, with sou'westers, with shawls and white bonnets and top hats and caps – must serve for compositions such as the one I am sending you this time.

But I shall have to put up with many more failures, for I believe that in watercolour much depends on a great dexterity and quickness of touch. One must work in it before it is dry to get harmony, and one hasn't much time for reflection then. So the principal thing is not finishing each one separately, no, one must put down those twenty or thirty heads rapidly, one after the other.

Here follow a few curious sayings about water colours: "L'aquarelle est quelque chose de diabolique"; and the other is by Whistler, who said, "Yes, I did that in two hours, but I studied for years to be able to accomplish this in two hours."

Enough of this; I love watercolour too much ever to give it up entirely, I come back to it again and again. But the foundation of everything is the knowledge of the figure, so that one can readily draw men and women and children whatever they are doing. So this is my chief aim, which cannot be realized in any other way, I think.

And I try to work myself up to a higher level of knowledge and ability in general, rather than to care very much about finishing off some particular sketch. After having drawn for a month, I now and then make a few watercolours, for instance, by way of casting the plummet to fathom my depth. Each time I see that I have overcome some obstacles, but that new difficulties have arisen. Then I start drudging again to conquer those.

As for the colours, they are really all used up – and not only that, but because of some relatively heavy expenses, I am not only hard up, but absolutely penniless.

Spring is coming, and I should like to take up painting again, too. So that is partly the reason why I am not working in watercolour right now.

But indirectly I am always working at it, and now that I can study the effects of chiaroscuro better because of the alterations in the studio, I shall work more and more with the brush, even in Black and White drawings, and wash the shadows in with neutral tint, sepia, India ink, Cassel earth, and accentuate the lights with Chinese white.

Do you remember that last summer you brought me pieces of mountain crayon? I tried to work with it at the time, but it didn't work well. So a few pieces were left, which I picked up the other day; enclosed you'll find a scratch done with it; you see it is a peculiar, warm black. You would greatly oblige me by bringing some more of it this summer. It has a great advantage – the big pieces are much easier to handle while sketching than a thin stick of conté, which is hard to hold and which breaks all the time. So for sketching outdoors, it is delightful.

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Well, boy – it is difficult to write it all, and I wanted to answer your question about watercolour in more than words. I should not want anybody to see just this one sketch of mine, because I myself think nothing is right in this sketch except the general aspect, and I will wrestle with the figures till I get in watercolour what they are beginning to get in lithography – that is, more character and effect.

It is not pleasant to make sketches like the one I sent you, and then not to be able to finish them; I hate this so much that I rarely make them, except as a trial to see if I have made any progress. But now I have new courage and interest, just because I have been making a great many studies again.

I think the change in the studio will help me on, not the first day, but after a few months' struggling.

I can now do part of my work perfectly well at home, studying with models, such effects as the watercolour I sent you.

Here the windows are closed at the bottom so that the light on the group of figures falls from above. In this way I can group them in the studio, and then I get, for instance, the highlights on the heads of the figures.

Like in this watercolour.

I have tried it already with the old man, the woman and the children – it gives splendid effects. The desire to make them is not wanting, but I expect new failures – which I hope, however will have something in them to encourage rather than to make one lose courage though they are failures.

I had to pay for so many things at once out of the money you sent that I wish you could send some more but arrange it as best you can – I have so much work now that I can vary it just as I like. I long very much for your coming, just to show you the studies and to talk about the work.

Adieu, thanks again. With a handshake,

Ever yours, Vincent

[Sketch JH 323 was on the reverse of the envelope]