

Dear Theo,

Thanks for your letter of the 9th of March, and for the enclosed. Is your patient improving? I hope in this case “no news is good news.”

If it has been as cold in Paris as it was here last week, it cannot have agreed very well with her.

When you say that you sometimes wish we could talk together more, about a variety of things in art, I for my part have that longing continually, and sometimes very strongly.

So often I should like to know your opinion about this or that, about some studies, etc., for instance, if they might be of some use, or if it would be advisable, for some reason or other, to go more deeply into them.

So often I should like to have some more information about things on which you are better informed than I, and I should like to know more about the state of things, I mean what kind of work the painters are producing. One can write about it to some extent, but writing takes time, and one cannot always get to it, nor can one go enough into detail.

And just now, owing to a piling up of studies, it would be worth a great deal to me if we could talk things over together, and I should also like so much to have you see how the studio is improved.

Well, let us hope that it will not be so very, very long before you come to Holland.

Be clear in your mind, dear brother, how strongly and intensely I feel the enormous debt I owe you for your faithful help.

It would be difficult for me to express all my thoughts about it. It constantly remains a source of disappointment to me that my drawings are not yet what I want them to be. The difficulties are indeed numerous and great, and cannot be overcome at once. To make progress is a kind of miner’s work; it doesn’t advance as quickly as one would like, and as others also expect, but as one stands before such a task, the basic necessities are patience and faithfulness. In fact, I do not think much about the difficulties, because if one thought of them too much one would get stunned or disturbed.

A weaver who has to direct and to interweave a great many little threads has no time to philosophize about it, but rather he is so absorbed in his work that he doesn’t think but acts, and he feels how things must go more than he can explain it. Even though neither you nor I, in talking together, would come to any definite plans, etc., perhaps we might mutually strengthen that feeling that something is ripening within us. And that is what I should like.

This morning I was at Van der Weele’s, who was working at a marvellous picture of diggers, horses, and sand wagons, large size. It was beautiful in tone and colour, a grey morning haze, it was virile in drawing and composition, there was style and character in it – in fact it was by far the most beautiful and strongest thing of his I have ever seen. He had also painted three very beautiful serious studies of an old white horse, and also a beautiful little landscape in the dunes.

This week he will probably look in at my studio, which I should like very much indeed.

Last week I met Breitner in the street; his position in Rotterdam frees him from much anxiety; however, Van der Weele had a little note from him just this morning, to the effect that he was ill again. To tell you the truth, the impression I had when I saw him again was not very assuring; he had an air of disappointment, and he spoke in rather a queer way about his work.

Now I still have to tell you about the surprise I have had. I received a letter from Father, very cordial and cheerful, it seemed to me, with twenty-five guilders enclosed. Father wrote he had received some money, on which he had no longer counted, and he wanted me to share in it. Wasn’t that nice of him, however it quite embarrasses me.

But, involuntarily, a thought occurred to me. Can it be, perhaps, that Father has heard, from someone or other, that I was very hard up? I hope that this was not his motive, for I think this idea of my circumstances would not be correct. And it might give Father anxieties which would be quite out of place. You will understand my meaning better than Father would if I were to try to explain it to him.

In my opinion, I am often rich as Croesus, not in money, but (though it doesn’t happen every day) rich, because I have found in my work something to which I can devote myself heart and soul, and which gives inspiration and significance to life.

Of course my moods vary, but there is an average of serenity. I have a sure faith in art, a sure confidence that it is a powerful stream, which hears a man to harbour, though he himself must do his bit too; and at all events I think it such a great blessing, when a man has found his work, that I cannot count myself among the unfortunate. I mean, I may be in certain relatively great difficulties, and there may be gloomy days in my life, but I shouldn’t want to be counted among the unfortunate nor would it be correct.

You write in your letter something which I sometimes feel also: “Sometimes I do not know how I shall pull through.”

Look here, I often feel the same in more than one respect, not only in financial things, but in art itself, and in life in general. But do you think that something exceptional? Don’t you think every man with a little pluck and energy has those moments?

© Copyright 2001 R. G. Harrison

Moments of melancholy, of distress, of anguish, I think we all have them, more or less, and it is a condition of every conscious human life. It seems that some people have no self-consciousness. But those who have it, they may sometimes be in distress, but for all that they are not unhappy, nor is it something exceptional that happens to them. And sometimes there comes relief, sometimes there comes new inner energy, and one rises up from it, till at last, some day, one perhaps doesn't rise up any more, que soit, but that is nothing extraordinary, and I repeat, such is the common human fate, in my opinion.

Father's letter was an answer to a letter of mine, which I remember quite well was very cheerful, for I told him about the changes in the studio, and I did not write anything to Father that could give rise to thoughts of my being in any difficulties, either financial or otherwise. In fact, Father doesn't write anything about it, and his letter is very cheerful and cordial, but the money came so unexpectedly that involuntarily the thought came into my head, can it be that Father is worried about me? If I am mistaken in this, it would be very much out of place to write as if that were the principal impression his kindness has made upon me – the principal impression being that I feel very grateful for having received something which enables me to do several things that otherwise I couldn't have done. But I tell you my thoughts about it, because in case you should perceive that Father is worrying about me, you would be better able to reassure him than I.

At the same time, you see from this that I have had a real stroke of luck. I intend to spend it on getting my watercolour things in good shape. I will pay off Leurs and will be able to arrange for different things in the studio, in order to make it even more practical.

It sometimes seems to me that the prices of the various painting and drawing materials are terribly inflated. So that it thwarts many a person from painting. One of my ideals is that there would be more institutions like the Graphic, for instance, where people who want to work can find all the materials, on condition that a certain ability and energy is demonstrated.

Like Cadart, in his day, enabled many a man to etch, who wouldn't have been able to etch, because of the expenses, if he had had to pay them from his own pocket.

I am privileged above many others, but I cannot do everything which I might have the courage and energy to undertake. The expenses are so extensive, beginning with a model and food and housing, and ending with the different colours and brushes.

And that is also like a weaving loom, where the different threads must be kept apart.

But we all have to bear up against the same thing – so just because everyone who paints or draws has to bear it, and if alone would almost sink down under it, why shouldn't more painters join hands, to work together, like soldiers of the rank and file; and why, especially, are those branches of art which are least expensive so much despised?

As to the crayon, I do not know whether the one you gave me came from the Plaats, but I am quite sure that you gave it to me on your visit of last summer, or perhaps when I was still in Etten. In a drug store I found a few remnants, perhaps six pieces, but all in small bits. Please keep it in mind. When I again asked Leurs for it, he told me that Jaap Maris had asked him so often for it.

I have made two sketches with it again, a cradle, and one more like the one I sent you already, in which I washed a great deal with sepia. As to what you write about that sketch of those two figures, the one above the other, it is mainly an effect of perspective, and also of the great difference in size between the little child [F 872, JH 334] and the woman on the basket [F 1072, JH 341].

What I myself dislike more than that line of the composition is something which, in fact, you have noticed, that the two figures are too much of one tone, which is partly the fault of the crayon, which does not express all shades, and one would like to strengthen it with lithographic crayon, for instance. But I think that the principal reason is that I do not always have time enough to work as elaborately as I should like. If one works a long time on a drawing, it is possible to go more into detail, to seek the different tones. But too often I must work in a hurry. I dare not ask too much from my models. If I paid them better, I should have the right to demand longer poses, and could make better progress.

At present, I often think I get more from them than a just return on what I pay them in money.

However, I do not mean to say that there is not a still more important reason, namely, that I must become more skilled than I am before I can be ever so slightly satisfied with myself. And by and by I hope to make better and more elaborate things in the same amount of time that I now spend on them.

Well, brother, my best wishes for your patient, I long sometimes for another description of an aspect of Paris from you, and — rest assured I'll make shift as best I can, with what your faithful help gives me — that I try and try to make an even better use of it, and especially that I blame myself for being unable to manage to do what I want with it. Adieu with a handshake in thought,

Yours sincerely, Vincent