

Amice Rappard,

I received your telegram this morning. I was on the point of going to you when I heard you were prevented from coming to me, but on thinking it over I gave up the idea, because I thought it possible that the doctor thinks speaking might be harmful for you, etc.

As a matter of fact I don't think you would raise this objection yourself – I myself should not be uneasy about its hurting you. In a certain sense there is something peculiar in the constitution of every painter. Temporary fits of weakness, nervousness, melancholy are often caused by the exertion of working; but at the same time there is something like a rebound, so that weakness, etc., may be overcome again by exertion.

If one is fed up and sick of arguing and thrashing things out with friends, it may do him good to seek solitude for a while – but as far as I know this is not the case with you. So I thought I would go to you.

But I thought, Rappard has fathers [sic], mothers [sic], sisters, brothers, maidservants and menservants and I don't know who else, who might be standing guard to keep him quiet if the doctor has ordered such a thing. If one comes at such a moment, the guilt is off the gingerbread, and we would both feel embarrassed. Speaking for myself, I'll tell you frankly that sometimes I feel clearly that these two forces of exhaustion and reinforcement in my constitution are there through one and the same cause – the exertion of working. And I have so much faith in this, not only for myself but also for others, that last year, for instance, when I was ill, I boldly disregarded some of the doctor's advice, not because I thought his advice wrong, or because I thought I knew better, but because I reasoned like this, "Life means painting to me and not so much preserving my constitution."

Sometimes the mysterious words "Whosoever shall lose his life shall find it" are as clear as daylight.

And the fact is I recovered sooner than some others who I know took a long time to recover from the same disease.

But, my dear friend, I am writing you what I should otherwise have said to you orally – by all means economize your strength in this sense, that you do not expend your energy on things that do not lead you straight to your goal.

I say the same about making church ornaments that I say about decorations. It is wasting gunpowder and bullets on something that may very well be worth a shot fired by someone who has a well-filled cartridge box and can fill it again when it's empty – but, my dear friend, not a cartridge fired by a sharpshooter of the vanguard on whose alertness important things may depend, and whose position has laid a greater responsibility on his shoulders than on those of others.

What is permitted to others may be reprehensible in you, le mieux en ce cas étant l'ennemi du bien [the better being in this case the enemy of the good]. Ergo, beware of the mieux.

Do you share my opinion about your responsibility and about what depends on your position? – I'm not quite sure. There are two viewpoints for everyone: what one is and what one might be. In my opinion we must not shut ourselves up in the former with a "clear" conscience. The latter we must consider a formidable reality superior to our feelings; for, however imperfect and full of faults we may be, we shall never be justified in secretly concealing the ideal and all that approaches the eternal, as if all that were none of our business. For a number of reasons I consider your position very important under the present circumstances. Perhaps this makes me feel gloomier toward you. I ask myself, "What shall I do? Whose side is he on?"

But now is not exactly the moment to philosophize about this. So to come to the point – I am actually very eager to see you soon. I have seen absolutely nothing of your work for a year – even longer than that, for when you were here last year, I didn't see anything either. Besides, you saw only a little of my work – only the lithographs.

So, if you agree, we must try to manage things in such a way that we see each other and each other's work, i.e. so that it's mutual. So I propose that you let me know when there will be no obstacle to prevent me from spending a morning in your studio. As long as that symptom of coughing up blood persists, I don't think it's exaggerated to raise objections against your coming here; so let's agree to postpone this until those symptoms are entirely gone. However, please drop me a line the very first day you're yourself again, and I'll come to you if it's not contrary to the doctor's orders.

You see I am writing you before receiving the letter which you mentioned in your telegram. But I don't suppose your letter will greatly alter this plan; perhaps it will even fit in with it.

Don't get the idea that I object to all ornaments and decorations – but I object to them at present and under the circumstances which confront us in Holland nowadays. I do not object to a certain surplus of vigour being wasted in this direction during a time of great animation and energy and renaissance. But I object to it in times when the general atmosphere isn't one of animation and energy – especially among the younger generation; let the man who has energy concentrate – there is a time for gaiety, but also a time for being severe. It is really necessary not to share that particular feeling of security of those who think all is going well, which is the

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convention nowadays, and which can easily lead to a new periwig-and-pigtail era of taking it easy and letting things slide.

When there is decadence – then no ornaments, if you please – but a striving after spiritual communion with “les vieux de la veille” [the old ones of yesterday], ignoring the present.

To my mind, my dear friend, there are some things that take precedence over private affairs and private difficulties. The latter are not really my motive in being eager to speak with you. It so happens that I spoke to you about other matters before proceeding to thank you for your willingness to help me, which is a great relief to me, and will save me from devices that are obnoxious to me. ¹ I thank you for it. The truth is that, generally speaking, I hate it.

It will be the same when I come to see you. I cannot conceal the fact that, speaking for myself, I do not see the future very clearly, and that I deem it doubtful whether I shall be able to carry out what I intend to do. The fact is that I want to consult you in the hope of getting some enlightenment. I believe that you have an eye for my work in some way, and in some cases your judgment would be very useful to me, for instance in helping me to organize the studies I have of a certain subject into a definite whole. At the present moment I have a lot of studies, and I have in mind a vague conception of two or three more imposing compositions, for which I shall probably be able to find the greater part of the subject matter in my studies.

Exactly because I value your opinion, it is necessary for you to know my thoughts somewhat. And I think that you probably have enough imagination to understand my views, even if you should not agree with me in all matters.

If I object to a certain new style, this certainly does not refer to the style of Israël, Mauve, Maris – no. No! This is the best style, in my opinion, but something has resulted from it recently which – though there seems to be a resemblance – is in utter contradiction to the style of these masters, and that is what I disapprove of. Van der Weele, for instance, is more serious and keeps to the straight path. I saw his studies last Sunday.

Now I believe that the path you are following is straight too, but I’m not sure that certain things are not divergences in the direction I mentioned just now. I am quite willing to take this opinion back – but it is my impression. Well, I for my part am also trying to find the path I think best, let’s say the path of Israël, Mauve, Maris – I have no idea how far I have progressed on it – and know even less how far I shall progress on it – but I have done my best and shall go on doing my best. And this being so, it is as far from my intention as the north is from the south to object to your decorations in the manner or the tone of a schoolmaster; but, on the contrary, I do so as one who is himself seeking after something true and sound – and serious – not because I have found it already, but serious because I am searching for it myself too.

And all that I think about you, but certainly no less about myself, is that we must beware of being diffuse, and that we must seek concentration and terseness. When I come to see you, it will, before God, be to talk over practical things with you, and not theory or philosophy. For the sake of practice, as prosaic as a Monday morning.

You write about a beautiful sheet in the Graphic by Howard Pyle. If you mean a composition that reminds one of Terborch or Nicolaas Keyzer – “Penn and the Colonists” – yes, I was struck by it too, so much so that I have ordered the issue. Yes, it is a damned fine thing. I bought an issue of the London News for the same reason, because of a sheet by King – “Workmen in a Carriage of the Underground Railway.”

I have also subscribed to Le Salon 1883 by Dumas, of which the first issue has now been published at 1 franc, and which will be complete in twelve issues.

I am very sorry you did not come after all, but that is not your fault. I have had some scruples up to now about going to you, because so many would rather have my room than my company, and also because I think visiting an unpleasant chore in general. And here in The Hague this is partly because I have taken the woman and her two children into my house, and they think that for decency’s sake they must not associate with me at all. But having heard from yourself your conditional opinion, which is so different from the behavior of others, I think I can drop my scruples.

I act in this way: if anybody avoids me on account of this, I do not seek his company; I prefer staying away somewhere to not being welcome. The more so because I can make allowances a little, a very little, just a tiny wee little bit, for the prejudice of those who consider, or try to consider, only the social conventions, for which reason I leave them alone, especially as I look upon it as a weakness, so that I won’t fight them, or at least I won’t attack them. Acting thus, I certainly do save cartridges. Do you think this conceited?

Take me as you find me, and so let’s agree that I shall hear from you as to when I may come to see you without going contrary to the doctor’s orders.

And thanks again for your willingness to help me, and your letter will be welcome when it arrives, but if your condition makes it advisable for you to postpone writing, by all means do so.

Adieu, with a handshake in thought.

Ever yours, Vincent

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I just can't believe that a painter should have no other task and no other duty than painting only. What I mean to say is, whereas many consider, for instance, reading books and such things that they call a waste of time, on the contrary, I am of the opinion that, far from causing one to work less or less well, rather it makes one work more and better to try to broaden one's mind in a field that is so closely allied with this work – and that at any rate it is a matter of importance, which greatly influences one's work, from whatever point of view one looks at things, and whatever conception one may have of life.

I believe that the more one loves, the more one will act; for love that is only a feeling I would never recognize as love.

Well, I hope that this batch of wood engravings will please you.

Please return the things you already have sometime; then I will give them to Van der Weele. I have selected them as carefully as possible, and as far as I know these are all the duplicates I have. There are also a few French ones among them.

We can check the rest whenever you come here. Then too you will be able to see a lot of sheets of which I have, alas, no duplicates.

I wish you joy with them – and write again soon.

1. See letter 284 to Theo.