

Letter 296
The Hague, c. 23 – 28 June 1883

Dear Theo,

It is true that I have written you often lately, but my letters harp so much on the same thing that I am angry with myself for not writing you in a somewhat more amusing way. It will come back someday – I think that when you have been in the studio again, there will be more animating subjects to write about. At least I hope so, and there will be, if you feel sympathy for what I am doing and what you have not yet seen.

This week I saw in Paris *Illustré* a fine reproduction of a drawing by Ulysse Butin, “La Mise à l’Eau.” Fishermen and women pushing a boat into the sea. I saw it at the very time when I happened to be thinking of Butin and of Legros, while I was drudging on a thing with a subject quite different from what they make, namely those kneeling potato diggers working with their short-handled forks; not long ago I wrote you about making studies of them. I now have a sketch of it on the easel with four figures, three men and a woman [F 1034, JH 372]. I want something broad and audacious, with silhouette and relief in it. That is what I am seeking more and more.

I always remember the strong impression made on me by the first picture of Butin’s I saw (one of his later ones). It was the one which he himself made an etching of later. I think it is called “The Jetty,” women on the lookout for boats which are expected to come into port on a stormy night. That was the first one I saw of his, and since then I have seen the one at the Luxembourg and several others.

I find him very honest and serious, and I believe that just when it seems he has drawn with a hasty hand, his drawing has remained après tout no less reasonable and correct. He is one of the men I do not know personally, and yet when I see his work, I can imagine how he did it.

Don’t you like Blommers’s picture at the salon, “November”? I didn’t see the picture, only the reproduction. I think it looks exactly like a Butin, and it has more passion (and something dramatic) than Blommers’s pictures usually have.

Right now I am working on no less than seven or eight drawings of about a meter in size, so you can imagine that I am up to my ears in work.

But I hope so much that my hand will become more skillful from this long period of drudgery.

So, for instance, my dislike for working with charcoal is disappearing more every day. One reason for this is that I have found a way to fix the charcoal and then work over it, for instance, with printer’s ink.

Here follows a little sketch of potato diggers, but on the drawing they are sitting a little wider apart.

As I write you, I think of that evening – perhaps you remember it, though it is years ago – when you and I together spent an evening with Mauve, when he was still living near the barracks, and he gave us a photograph of a drawing of his, a plough.

Little did I dream at the time that I myself should become a draughtsman, nor could I think at the time that difficulties would ever arise between Mauve and me.

I always wonder at our not having made up, the more so because really, if one considers it thoroughly, there is hardly any difference of opinion between us. However, it is so long ago now that my good spirits with regard to my work and the confidence that it will come out right after all are beginning to return. I have experienced that before, notwithstanding everything, but one can’t help getting upset and having a melancholy feeling when such persons disapprove of it or say that you are on the wrong track.

Will you write soon? As always, your letter will be welcome. Can you believe that it is not at all easier to draw a figure of about a foot high than to draw a small one? On the contrary, it is much more difficult, and getting it in that size, yet in proportion as strong as the little figures, is sometimes hard work, I assure you.

Adieu, boy, have a good time and good luck in business. With a handshake,

Yours sincerely, Vincent