

Letter 315
The Hague, 20 or 21 August 1883

Dear Theo,

You will understand that I am longing to hear from you whether you have read my letter. As for myself, I think the cheapest way will be the most reasonable one for me under the circumstances – I think I shall have to move to a village.

If you can continue to send the 150 francs a month, I think it will be almost or entirely sufficient.

Dear brother, there doesn't seem to be a little more ease in store for me. I will try not to complain, I will bear what I can.

Though I stick to my conviction that my work really demands more, and that I also ought to be able to spend a little more on food and other necessities, if I must do with less, so be it. After all, my life is perhaps not worth the money, why should I worry about it? And it's really nobody's fault, neither is it my own. But I hope you will be convinced of one thing – that it is impossible to do more than stint oneself even in food, clothes, every comfort, every necessity. When one has skimped in everything, there can be no question of unwillingness, can there? You know very well that if somebody said to me, Do this or that, make a drawing of this or that, I should not refuse, yes, I would even make several trials with pleasure if the first one did not succeed. But nobody has said it – or only so vaguely, so generally, that it puts me out rather than helps me.

As for my clothes, dear brother, I put on what was given me, without wanting more, without asking for more. I have worn clothes I got from Father and from you, which sometimes do not fit me the way they ought to because of the difference in our sizes. If you will drop the matter of defects in my attire, I shall remain content with what I have, and even be grateful for little, though of course later I hope to remind you of it and say, "Theo, do you remember the time when I walked about in a long clergyman's coat of Father's?" etc. It seems to me that it is infinitely better to take things as they are now, and laugh over them later, when we have made our way, rather than quarrel about them now.

For the moment I have the suit you brought for me to wear when I go out, and more things that are still quite presentable. But you must excuse my not putting them on in the studio or when I work out-of-doors – it would be spoiling them recklessly, for one always gets some stains on one's clothes while painting, especially if one tries to catch an effect even in rain and storm.

My idea about earning money is as simple as can be – it is that it must come through my work, and that nothing can be gained by going to speak to people about it.

Yet whenever there is a chance, I try to catch it – as, for instance, what I told you about Belinfante, about Smulders, but up to now fortune has favoured me but little. Well, never mind, if only you do not upset me by suspecting me of unwillingness.

For I think if you consider things seriously, you will not doubt my working hard, and besides, if you should insist on my going to ask people to buy from me, I would do so, but in that case I should perhaps get melancholy.

If possible, let me go on as I have up to now. If not, and if you want me to take my work around to different people, I shall not refuse to do so if you think it better.

But, brother dear, human brains cannot bear everything; there is a limit. Look at Rappard, who got brain fever, and had to travel as far as Germany to recover. Trying to go and speak to people about my work makes me more nervous than is good for me. And what is the result? Rejection, or being put off with fair promises. It would not make me nervous if it were you, for instance – you know me and I am used to speaking with you.

I assure you, I feel less energy for my work when I have been among people. If we do not lose time now because of that kind of thing, we'll make slow but sure progress, and I do not know a better way. In no case would I refuse any serious order, whether to my liking or not. I would try to do it the way it is wanted – do it over again if necessary.

Well, I have made up my mind in no case to become impatient, even if people purposely put obstacles in my way.

I cannot say more than that, and if you were to order something yourself, you could make more than one trial. I am at your disposal.

I think there is a difference between now and the past. In the years gone by there used to be more passion both in making and in judging work. They deliberately chose this or that direction, they energetically took the part of one or the other. There was more animation. I think now there is a spirit of capriciousness and satiety; people are generally more lukewarm. For my part, I already wrote you some time ago that it

seemed to me that there had been a sharp decline since Millet, as if the top had already been reached and decadence had set in. This has influenced everybody and everything. I am always glad that I saw the collection of drawings by Millet in the Hôtel Drouot when it was there.

At this moment you are in Nuëen.

I wish, brother, there were no reasons for me to be absent. I wish we were walking there together in the old village churchyard, or looking in at a weaver's. Now that cannot be – why not? – oh, because I feel I should be a trouble-fête [killjoy] in my present mood.

I repeat – I do not quite understand it, and think it is going a little too far – when you as well as Father feel ashamed just to walk with me. For my part I stay away, though my heart longs for us to be together.

Because I cannot spare that one little moment of seeing you or Father without mental reservations, only for the sake of indissoluble ties, I wish we would never again speak about the question of manners or clothes when we meet again. You see that in everything I withdraw as far as possible instead of pushing myself forward. But don't let decorum breed a general estrangement. That one bright moment – of seeing each other once a year – must not be darkened. Adieu.

Yours sincerely, Vincent

I do not hesitate about the work.

You have read Fromont Jeune et Riszler aîné, haven't you? Of course I do not find you in Fromont Jeune, but in Riszler aîné – in his being absorbed in his work, his resoluteness there, for the rest a simple fellow and rather careless and short-sighted, wanting little for himself, so that he himself did not change when he became rich – I find some likeness to myself.

All my ideas about my work are so well ordered, so definite, that I think you would do well to accept what I say: let me go my own way, just as I am. My drawings will become good, even if we continue as we did till now; but as their turning out well depends a little on the money for my obligations and expenses – and not just on my efforts – be as liberal as you can about the money, and if you see a chance of finding any help from others, don't neglect it. But in fact, I have said everything I have to say in these few lines.

You must not let my conduct when I left Goupil's deceive you as to my real character. If business would have meant to me then what art does now, I would have acted more resolutely. But then I was in doubt whether it was my career or not, and I was more passive. When they said to me, "Hadn't you better go," I replied, "You think I had better go, so I shall go" – no more. At the time more things were left unspoken than said aloud.

If they had acted differently then, if they had said, "We do not understand your behaviour on this or that occasion, explain it," things would have turned out differently.

I already told you, brother, that discretion is not always understood. "Tant pis," perhaps. Now I think it is better that I have the career I have, but when I left Goupil's there were motives other than my attire, at least on my part.

There was a kind of plan then to give me a position in London in the new gallery, in the picture department, for which, in the first place, I didn't think myself qualified, and in the second place, I didn't like it. I should not have minded staying with Goupil if my work had been other than entertaining visitors.

In short, if they had asked me then, "Do you like this business?" My answer would have been, "Yes, sure." "Do you care to stay?" "Yes, if you think me worth my wages, and do not think me a nuisance or injurious to your interests."

And then I should perhaps have asked for a position in the printing office, or that one in London, but a little modified, and I think I should have got it.

But they did not ask me anything, but just said, "Vous êtes un employé honnête et actif, mais vous donnez un exemple mauvais pour les autres." [You are an honest and active employee, but you set a bad example to the others.] And I did not say anything in reply because I did not want to have any influence on my staying or not.

But I could have said a lot of things in reply if I had cared too, and such things as I believe would have made it possible for me to stay.

I tell you this because I do not understand why you do not know that the reason then was quite another than my manner of dressing.

Now – to you – I say what I do not doubt it is right to say, as my profession is my profession and I do not waver, but must stick to it. So I tell you this: not only do I wish to keep things as they are between us, but I am so grateful for our relation that I pay no attention to the question of being richer or poorer, having an

easier or a more difficult life – silently accepting the fact that I am content with every condition, and that I resign myself to everything and put up with everything, if it must be.

The only thing I do not want you to doubt is my good will, my zeal – and further, I want you to credit me with some common sense, and not suspect me of doing absurd things, and I want you to let me go on living quietly in my own way.

Of course I must experiment to find things, and suffer failures, but in the end the work will come out all right.

To have patience till it turns out well, not to give up before the end, not to doubt – that is what I wish you and I together would do and continue to do. I do not know to what extent we shall have financial success if we stick to that, but I feel sure of one thing, that – provided there is cooperation and harmony – we shall be able to continue as long as we live, sometimes not selling anything, and having hard times, then again selling and living more comfortably. That's the long and the short of it. Success depends on our will to stay together: as long as that remains, it is possible.

Now I mention Riszler ainé again (I think you know the book, otherwise you must read it, and you will see what I mean) and I call your attention to the fact that the man's appearance was more or less like mine, that he spent his life working at his designs and machines in the garret of the factory, not caring about or minding anything else, his greatest luxury being to take a glass of beer with an old friend.

Mind, the plot of the novel does not matter at all here, other things in the book of no consequence, but I called the character to your attention, Riszler ainé's way of living, without arrière-pensée of anything else in the story. In fact, only to explain to you that I think little of my clothes because my way of working – my way of doing business, if you like – is a personal thing, is not having to go to see other people. The few friends I shall make later on will take me as I am, I hope.

I think you will understand this, and that it does not make me angry when things are said to me about my clothes. No, it makes me inwardly more and more calm and concentrated, and it would take entirely different things to make me angry. Wherever I go, I should always be about the same – perhaps everywhere I should really make a bad impression at first. But I doubt if that impression should remain forever with those persons to whom I should speak about it intimately.

Well, from this moment I am again quite absorbed in my work. Do for me what you can, think yourself about what can be of use to us and hasten the success. I do not doubt your goodwill and your friendship. Goodbye, have pleasant days and write soon. Adieu.

Vincent