

Letter 325
Drenthe, c. 17 September 1883

Dear Theo,

Your letter just arrived, so I know that the mail will reach me regularly.

Some days ago I wrote you a line to tell you a few things about the country around here. Everything is beautiful here, wherever one goes. The heath is much vaster than in Brabant, at least near Zundert or Etten – a little monotonous in the afternoon, and especially when the sun shines, but I would not miss that very effect, which I tried vainly to paint several times. Nor is the sea always picturesque; but those moments and effects, too, must be studied if one does not want to be deceived in their real character. Then the heath is sometimes far from attractive at that hot midday hour – it is aggravating, monotonous, and wearying like the desert, as inhospitable and hostile, so to speak. Painting it in that blazing light and rendering the planes vanishing into infinity makes one dizzy.

However, one must not suppose it has to be taken sentimentally; on the contrary, that is what it hardly ever is. In the evening when a poor little figure is moving through the twilight – when that vast sun-scorched earth stands out darkly against the delicate lilac hues of the evening sky, and the very last little dark-blue line at the horizon separates the earth from the sky – that same aggravating, monotonous spot can be as sublime as a Jules Dupré. And the figures, the men and the women, have that very same characteristic – they are not always interesting, but when one looks at them with patience, one is sure to discover the Millet-like quality.

Yesterday I found one of the most curious cemeteries I ever saw. Imagine a patch of heath surrounded by a hedge of thickly grown little pine trees, so that one would think it just an ordinary little pinewood. There is an entrance, however, a short avenue, and then one sees a number of graves overgrown with grass and heather. Many of them marked with white posts bearing the names.

Herewith a sketch of the study I painted of it. I am making another study of a red sun between the little birches in a marshy meadow, from which the white evening haze is rising, and beyond which one can just see at the horizon a bluish-grey line of trees with a few roofs.

It is a pity you have not heard anything from C. M.

Of course he need not do anything, but I think it rather rude never to send a word in reply.

But you must understand one thing – it is increasingly apparent to me that we are living in a time in which things have got rather mixed up (I personally don't think it rather but enormously mixed up, but I won't force that opinion on you). As to C. M., he as well as many others would be very polite to a stranger, but "on ne hait que ses amis." [One only hates one's friends.] And as he is quite absorbed in the ebb and flow of trade and the art-dealing business, he is so engrossed by very abstract things that a very natural thing, such as, for instance, the fact that I have spoken to him and still do speak to him about my affairs strikes him as disagreeably as an open door that lets in a draught, for his thoughts are far, far away – always – and he knows no better than to free himself rather roughly, just as one slams the draughty door.

You will say that I suppose him to be very inconsiderate. Well, that is exactly what I do suppose, though I do not doubt that he can be very pleasant, but only when he has his attention fixed on the matter, which is certainly not so in my case, the more so because he seems to have certain unshakable opinions about me which I do not think I must try to change.

I hope to send you studies from here soon, when I have got some together; and just think over whether some of them would perhaps be the thing for Wisselingh.

My money is almost gone, and strictly speaking I had hoped to be able to lay in a small stock of colours and other materials, but well – we must cut our coat according to our cloth – though it's a pity there isn't a little more cloth. But by working on patiently, things may be mended. I am very glad though that I am here, for, boy, it is very beautiful.

I am longing to hear more from you. Perhaps I understand some things a little, but, above all, I know and trust you have acted well.

As for acting well, our circumstances sometimes make us different from what we should be if our intentions were not thwarted.

Personally, I would rather have stayed with the woman, though it would have been doubly difficult; but as far as I could see, it was impossible under the circumstances. And if I constantly imagine her as a phantom, it is not as a reproachful one, but I am melancholy because I did not have the means to act toward her as I should have wished. Times are hard, and you will have your share of it.

When I came here, I had with me a number of half-used tubes and a few new ones, just enough for about six studies, but certainly no more. So with the next money I will order some at once, enough for a few more

studies. For the rest, I am drawing, but you know quite well that painting must be the main thing as much as possible.

I don't know how I shall manage to get the money changed here. If it can't be done here, I might get it changed in Assen, but if you could arrange it so that, say, twice – till I know my way around better and have found a bank in Assen, where I have not yet been – if twice you could send me Dutch money or, for instance, a postal order, that would be a good thing; otherwise, I might not know how to manage.

I hope you will be able to send no later than September 20, for I paid a week in advance as soon as I arrived here, so another will be due, and I shall have to pay again.

On the back of the page you will find a sketch of the little churchyard. The colouring there is very unusual. It is very beautiful to see the real heather on the graves. The smell of turpentine has something mystical about it, the dark stretch of pine wood border separates a sparkling sky from the rugged earth, which has a generally ruddy hue – fawn – brownish, yellowish, but everywhere with lilac tones.

It was not easy to paint. I will try some more aspects of it; with snow, for instance, it must be very curious. I had already heard something about Liebermann, but your description, especially of his technique, gives me a better idea of him. His colour must be infinitely better than Henkes's (you express it very well "slate colour dissolving into greyish-yellow and greyish-brown"). I understand it perfectly. That way of painting is delightful if one has mastered it. And the reason I want to paint a great deal is just because I should like to have a certain firmness and system in my technique (though I have heard many people say you must not have a system).

But he and several others have it, all right. From your description I see that he, Liebermann, must work somewhat in Herkomer's manner. Especially in systematically carrying through and analyzing those patches of light and shadow caused by sunbeams coming through the leaves, which dazzle many an eye. The other day I saw the large engraving after Herkomer's "The Last Muster." I suppose you have seen it too – what a manly thing! I should love to see the "Fille d'un mineur" by Jules Breton. There is still a coal mine in Courrières. When I went there on a rainy day, the miners were just going home through the mud, like a caravan of chimney sweeps; I remember one with an old capote, but the women, at least the ones I saw, did not wear men's clothes the way they do in the Borinage, where the "loques de fosse" [the "pit rags"] are the same for everybody.

Well, boy, your letter will be very welcome again. If you have not done so already, write a little word to C. M. to tell him that I am now alone here in Drenthe, and mention something about my plans. But if he does not answer, I think I must give it up.

Thanks for all the trouble you have taken.

It is beautiful grey weather this morning, no sun for the first time since I got here; but for all that, it will be just as fine, so I am going to set out. The people with whom I board are excellent; the man works at the railway depot, the fellow has something De Groux-like about him – a face that sometimes has the colour of red cabbage, a real coolie; the woman, very active and neat; 3 children. Probably they will give me a back garret for a studio. Goodbye, brother, best wishes, with a handshake,
Yours sincerely, Vincent

You know the address is: A. Hartsuiker, Innkeeper, Hoogeveen.