

Letter 330
New Amsterdam, c. 3 October 1883

Dear Theo,

This time I am writing to you from the remotest corner of Drenthe, where I have arrived after an endless passage by barge through the heathland.

I don't think I shall be able to do justice to the countryside because words fail me, but imagine the banks of the canal as miles and miles of, say, Michels or Th. Rousseaus, Van Goyens or Ph. de Konincks.

Level planes or strips, varied in colour, that grow narrower and narrower as they approach the horizon. Accentuated here and there by a turf hut or small farmhouse or a few stunted beeches, poplars, oaks – peat stacked up everywhere and barges constantly passing by with peat or bulrushes from the marshes. Here and there skinny cows, subtle in colour, quite often sheep and pigs.

In general the figures that now and then put in an appearance on the flats are full of character; and sometimes they have an exquisite charm. I drew, amongst others, a little woman on the barge, wearing crape round her casque brooches because she was in mourning, and then a mother with a baby – the latter had a purple shawl over its head. [The headdress is a kind of golden casque worn by Frisian women. It consists of two oval plates with ornamental spirals at the temples. Over these plates is worn a cap of stiff lace with wide frills. Often this (costly) headgear is very becoming.] There are lots of Ostade types among them, physiognomies that put one in mind of pigs or crows, but now and then a little figure who is like a lily among the thorns.

In short, I am very pleased with this trip, for I am full of what I have seen.

This evening the heath was inexpressibly lovely. There is a Daubigny in one of the Boetzel Albums which conveys the effect precisely. The sky was of an inexpressibly delicate lilac-white – the clouds not fleecy, for they were joined together more, but in tufts covering the whole sky in tones of more or less lilac-grey-white, with a single small break through which the blue gleamed. Then, at the horizon, a glorious red streak, the surprisingly dark stretch of brown heath underneath and a host of little low-roofed huts against the brilliant red streak.

In the evening this heath often has the kind of effect the English call “weird” and “quaint.”

The fantastic silhouettes of Don Quixote-like mills or curious monsters of drawbridges are profiled against the vibrant evening sky. Such villages look wonderfully cosy in the evening sometimes, with the reflections of little lighted windows in the water, or in the mud and puddles.

Before I started out from Hoogeveen, I painted a few studies there, among others a large moss-roofed farm [F 017, JH 395]. For I had had paint sent from Furnée, as I thought on the subject like you wrote in your letter, that by absorbing myself in my work, and quite losing myself in it, my mood would change, and it has already greatly improved.

But at times – like those moments when you think of going to America – I think of enlisting for the East Indies; but those are miserable, gloomy moments, when one is overwhelmed by things, and I could wish you might see those silent moors, which I see here from the window, for such a thing calms one down, and inspires one to more faith, resignation, steady work. In the barge I drew several studies, but I stayed a while here to paint some. I am quite near Zweenloo, where, among others, Liebermann has been; and besides, there is a part here where you still find large, very old turf huts, that have not even a partition between the stable and the living room. I intend first of all to visit that part one of these days.

But what tranquillity, what expanse, what calmness in this landscape; one feels it only when there are miles and miles of Michels between oneself and the ordinary world. I cannot give you a permanent address as yet, as I do not exactly know where I shall be for the next few days, but by 12th October I shall be at Hoogeveen, and if you send your letter at the usual time to the same address, I shall find it there, on the 12th, at Hoogeveen.

The place where I am now is New Amsterdam.

Father sent me a postal order for ten guilders, which, together with the money from you, makes me able to paint a little now.

I intend to settle for a long time at the inn where I am now, if I can easily reach from there that district with the large old turf huts, as I should have better light and more space there. As to that picture you mention, by that Englishman, with the lean cat and the small coffin, though he got his first inspiration in that dark room, he would hardly have been able to paint it in that same spot, for if one works in too dark a room, the work usually becomes too light, so that when one brings it out to the light, all the shadows are too weak. I just had that experience when I painted from the barn an open door and a glimpse into the little garden.

Well, what I wanted to say is that there will be a chance to remove that obstacle too, for here I can get a room with good light, which can be heated in winter. Well, lad, if you do not think any more about America, nor I of Harderwijk [The place where Volunteers for the East Indian army enlisted] I hope things will work themselves out, I

admit your explanation of C. M.'s silence may be right, but sometimes one can be careless purposely. On the back of the page you will find a few scratches. I write in haste, it is already late.

How I wish we could walk here together, and paint together. I think the country would charm and convince you.

Adieu, I hope you are well and are having some luck. During this excursion I have thought of you continually. With a handshake,

Yours, Vincent

[Page of sketches, JH 405 was on the reverse of page.]