

Letter 341
Drenthe, c. 17 November 1883

Dear brother,

Thanks for your letter, though you yourself admit it to be rather short. I know that at present many people call everything that is only an interchange of views, everything outside their business or facts, quite superfluous and even nonsensical in a letter, and so they arrive at a certain very concise form, which, however, is at the same time a rather unsatisfactory, disappointing way of corresponding.

Well, brother, I wish you had written about it less curtly, but it may have been that you were too busy. As to your idea of letting some time pass, and then looking at the question again from all points of view, I think it wise, and not at all wrong in itself. But you add something to that proposal which I will answer quite plainly. You say, "Think over whether there isn't also much to be said for my staying at Goupil's." Well, brother, that subject has been in my thoughts from a long time ago until now, much more than I told you of in my letters, and as you ask me now to consider its advantages, I will, in all sincerity, tell you how it seems to me.

I tell you that more and more I doubt whether the advantage of being with Goupil is really to our good, I mean to your good, to the good of those at home and to my own good – I'm not just thinking of the financial advantage alone, but of other doubtful advantages too, such as direct or indirect relations with influential persons. In short, taking everything into account, I put a question mark after advantage.

You must understand me well – perhaps – no, certainly – there was a crisis at home as well as in my own life when, as I sincerely believe, all of our lives were literally saved by you. We have been saved from ruin by the protection and support we received from you; the situation was critical, especially for me. If I have now reached such a point that, when I stand before an object or figure, I feel within me clearly, distinctly, unhesitatingly, the power to draw it – to render it – not perfectly, but true in its general structure and proportion – well, that point has been reached, absolutely, absolutely, and if I have reached it, it has been primarily because your help was a kind of fence or shield between a hostile world and myself, and because I could in all calmness think almost exclusively of my drawing, and my thoughts were not crushed by fatally overwhelming material cares. And though I don't know the details of the matter – I believe that those at home are under great obligations to you, too. And indirectly also to Goupil & Co., so I fully acknowledge the advantage up till now; but in the future there comes the question mark after advantage. If your help was indispensable until now, I believe that in the future I myself at least must try to manage my affairs differently.

The germinating seed must not be exposed to a frosty wind – that was the case with me in the beginning. I'm afraid that if it hadn't been for you, Uncle Vincent's words, "ni fait, ni à faire," Tersteeg's words, and the accompanying cold shoulder from both at a critical moment would have been fatal to me, like a too cold wind to the germinating corn. But once the winter corn is rooted in the earth, it becomes a little stronger, and it struggles through the winter as best it can, at least it must get through. And now, brother, I would think it mean in myself if I said, The money from you must continue, in that way inducing you to stay with Goupil & Co. If you arrive at that decision I am so decidedly against it, I warn you, so decidedly – the art-dealing business will betray you in the end – that I will take no part in forcing you to such a decision by needing help myself.

And though I hope we shall remain as true friends as ever, and shall always feel our brotherhood tie, I repeat, it is my intention to refuse your financial help as soon as you bind yourself to Goupil & Co. for good, because I am sure you would regret such a decision in the end, and it would put you in a position of which you might say, I wish I had never accepted it; and at the same time you would think, Then why did my brother and my parents drive me into it? I will not be guilty of bringing you to that decision, so now you know what I really think in all frankness about the "advantages(?) of Goupil's."

How should I manage then? Well, for instance, I could try to get a job as an illustrator for a magazine, or, in short, do anything "n'importe quoi," for which perhaps you yourself would know an opportunity, or in which you could advise me – for instance, about the Moniteur Universel, though I do not consider this the most desirable connection.

But if I were left entirely to myself, I might take a chance in Paris, or London, or The Hague – in short, in some city in a printer's or a magazine's office – of course trying at the same time to make and sell drawings and paintings; and after that, manage to get back to Drenthe.

Then I should want, however, to submit myself to the utmost stress in order to force myself to be productive, and I would beg to stop the present assistance of my own accord.

But, brother, this is in case of your staying with Goupil & Co., and in the other possibility, your deciding to become a painter, we should of course feel the pressure of an enormous compulsion behind us, and would have to encourage each other in those circumstances by faithful comradeship; but though I shall always be, and remain, grateful beyond all words and expressions for your help, my intention for the future is fixed: if you stay with Goupil, this will push me straightway to the decision mentioned above, though our friendship will of course remain, unless you should object to having anything to do with me.

If it might be – and I don't think it absolutely impossible – that not the circumstances but your own soul lead you to painting, well, then it is quite natural for us to join hands for one and the same aim and ideal. But as to trying to put up with the thought of approving (?) of your staying with Goupil, of considering the advantages (?) of it – you see how I look upon these things. I have had my own experiences with Goupil in the past; a look thereon, a look at the present time, and a look into the future lead me to a Beware! And, for myself, I think Paris enervating, and I see no good in living there permanently, neither for myself nor for you.

As for me, perhaps I shall have to be there for a time in order to make some contacts (made impossible for me at The Hague), but I will stay in the country as much as I can, and the only thing which counts with me is painting or drawing. Goodbye, boy, for the rest, let some time pass, and receive in thought a warm handshake from,

Yours sincerely, Vincent

You know, brother, I had promised Wisselingh to show him some studies from Drenthe before the winter. Now I am sending you today six studies; be so kind as to show them to him someday, as a small sign of life, though of course I do not suppose they will be considered saleable.

The painting out-of-doors is over, it is already too cold of late. But what a relief it would be if I could settle in these parts for good.

The house rent is very low; if only one had company, how delightful it would be to rent a peasant's cottage and fix up everything more solidly and less precariously than at an inn.

Well, I repeat, let us possess our souls in patience, let things decide themselves.

Taking a house alone is so very melancholy and chilly. There must be some life in the camp to keep things going and to prevent stagnation.

But, Theo, how inexpressibly beautiful it is here!

You cannot see it at all from my studies yet; I still have much to learn before I can express how it really is here, and it is also a question of time.

One thing I declare, that this country had an influence of calm, of faith, of courage on me, and I believe you need that influence too – it would be the very, very best thing for you; it would make you discover yourself again, your soul, but in a more genuine and complete way than at the time of drawing mills. But I am afraid you consider what I say as the product of my imagination, my words as idle and without foundation.

And I admit it is very difficult to know what one has to do. Money plays a brutal part in society, and I partially share your feelings in that respect. But then, I feel such a vivid hope that painting will set our real energy free, and yet keep us afloat, though the first years may be very difficult. If I have to perish, then I shall perish, is the only thing one can say. As to my saying, If you stay with Goupil for good, I shall be obliged to refuse your help, do not suppose I think too highly of my present work.

No, I am well aware it had no market value, but my idea is that I want to work without any more protection than others have, and I shall throw myself into it headlong, not because I think I have arrived, but because I believe: “je grandirai dans la tempête” [I shall grow in the tempest].

You may ask, what is my intention in saying “stay with Goupil for good”? Look here – now winter is at the door and I am sitting here lost on the heath, what else can I do for the purpose but work?

But suppose toward spring, for instance the month of March, you are still on good terms with Goupil, without any prospect of leaving. That is what I should call “staying for good,” and then I should try to take another direction, or rather, I should force myself to it, by an enormous compulsion.

Fortune favours the bold, says the proverb, and though something may perhaps be said against it, I decidedly believe its basis to be a fact, in the same way as the opposite: that moral weakness or want of courage brings a kind of fatal doom in the end.

So my plan is always to risk too much rather than too little; if one is defeated by too much, well, so be it. In short, I don't want my needs to be a reason for your staying; if you want to stay, do so, but not for my sake, as I think it decidedly not the right road for you.

Once more a warm handshake,

Yours sincerely, Vincent

Please don't take what I tell you amiss, as if I should have a personal grudge against you if you stayed on, for even then I approve of you as you are.

It is absolutely nothing but the fact that I don't want it said that I should ever consent to your being in a profession against your will, with my knowledge, more or less for my sake.

"Je ne veux point que la poche d'autrui pâtisse de mes hardiesses." [I certainly don't want anybody's purse to suffer from my liberties.]