

Letter 363a
Nuenen, early April 1884

Dear Theo,

Because it may be that you did not quite understand what I asked you at the time, and in order to exclude the possibility that later on there might be a misunderstanding, I will say it again.

Late in January or in the beginning of February I wrote you that, on coming home, it suddenly became only too clear to me that the money I was in the habit of receiving from you was looked upon in the first place as something absolutely uncertain, precarious – and secondly as something in the nature of what I will call charity for a poor fool. And at the same time I could establish the fact that this idea was communicated to persons who had absolutely nothing to do with it – for instance, the respectable natives of these regions – and further that I was asked three times in one week by absolute strangers, “Why is it you never sell your work?”

To this must be added the fact that last summer, because of your making me feel the bridle a little in order to impress upon me that it was in my interest to be compliant in some things, I had already made up my mind to let you feel in return that I for my part, if I were inconvenienced by too much tugging at the bridle, should be quite willing to leave the bridle in your hands, as long as I was not attached to the other end, or in other words – if I am not free in my private life, I decline the subsidy. In short, that whether I should be able to get along financially would depend on my work (and not on my private life), at least as far as the 150 francs a month was concerned.

Summing up these and similar things, I said in my letter of the end of January that I should be unwilling to go on in the same way as up to then, that is to say, without a definite agreement.

That however I should be willing to – nay, glad to – nothing could be more pleasant to me than to go on in the same way on condition that a definite agreement was made about the supply of work. And that in order to make a trial I should send a number of things toward the beginning of March.

Your reply was evasive, it certainly was not straightforward, I mean it was not something like this: “Vincent, I see the reasonableness of a number of your grievances, and I approve of your proposal to make an agreement that every month you will send me a number of drawings that you consider equal in value to the 150 francs I am in the habit of sending you, so that you will be able to look upon this money as earned money.”

Most positively I noticed that you did not simply write something like this!

Well, I thought, towards the beginning of March I shall send him some things and wait for the result. Then I sent you nine watercolours and five pen drawings, I wrote you I had yet a sixth pen drawing and the painted study of the old tower [F 34, JH 459], which at the time you said you were eager for.

But now that I see that your expressions remain as vague as ever, I cannot but tell you without reserve that I do not consider this the way to treat me.

As for my work – up to now it seemed incontrovertible that you would rather I did not send anything than that I did. If this is still the case – well then, I am of the opinion that either I am not worth your protection, or you think a little too frivolously of my work. I have never withdrawn my proposal to send you my work regularly.

When I mention that I desire to look upon the 150 francs, or more or less as the case may be, as equal in value to what I send you, this is to a certain extent quite a private matter, and in no way do we touch upon the question whether my work has commercial value or not.

But in that case I shall be more justified in the eyes of Tom, Dick and Harry, and shall not have to put up with being reproached with idling away my time – or even being absolutely looked upon as “having no means of subsistence.”

At the same time it is proof on your part of your confidence in my future, which, however, I shall most certainly not extort from you – and I repeat that however you may decide in this matter, it will have no influence on my opinion of the past, and that I shall never ignore your help during these years, but on the contrary, appreciate it highly.

But you will have to decide quite independently whether our relations will be continued in the future or not – for instance during the current year.

However, I end with the assurance that in case you refuse to accept my proposal to send you my work regularly (you can do or not do whatever you like with it, at least as far as doing business with it is concerned, but at all events I insist on your showing it from time to time, as you did at the very beginning, and in my opinion rightly so), I shall carry through the separation – so either this alteration – or else finished.

All yours, Vincent

I did not send you the sixth pen drawing because, just as I insist on your showing my work now and then, I am going to show Rappard something once in a while – as he knows a lot of people – and that drawing was at Rappard’s, and I should have had it back, but up to now he has kept it, along with two other pen drawings, “Winter Garden.” [F 1130, 1128: JH 465, 466]

Well, and as to the painted study, I said a few words in my previous letter to the effect that I felt discouraged about sending it, because you did not think the one from Drenthe any good, and I do not think this one would please you either. If I can trust my memory, there are some among those made in Drenthe which I should do in exactly the same way if I had to do them all over again. As for the current month I already have the following drawings, which under other circumstances I should have sent you in April:

Winter garden [F 1133, JH 485] – pollard birches [F 1240, JH 469] – poplar avenue [F 1239, JH 464] – kingfisher [F 1135, JH 468].

[Further enclosed in this letter]

Another thing I should not want to hear later on is that what I call an agreement about this or that should be ascribed to my interpretation instead of being considered the intention of the other party – in other words, you. You know that you told me that C. M. said something of the sort about me to you. From this I learned how important it is to dot my i's and cross my t's in the matter of agreements.

I think – seeing that in the past I repeatedly wrote you about the proposed alteration, and that now I have given a summary of it all – everything has been explained sufficiently clearly, and I am now entitled to a plain Yes or a plain No.

[Another postscript obviously written after the receipt of a letter from Theo]

I want to say a few words with regard to your letter about my drawings – which you say I have interpreted in a most extravagant way.

What I say is:

1. Among the things you told me there were a few of which the purport was that in tone and sentiment there were some particulars that pleased you – well, all the better – if you like it, I shall say, I am delighted to hear it.
2. In the letter there is a comparison between Millet's and Lhermitte's methods. In what you said about Millet I found better and more sensitive expressions than I am accustomed to from you – however, this was overshadowed by the manner in which you said that now you were sick of Lhermitte again, and what I should like to say about your whole dissertation is: Tu files ton coton trop fin, you are cutting it too fine. Why not take a broader view of it all, and feel one and the same enthusiasm for them both (who bear the same relation to each other as Rembrandt to Maes, as I see it), without getting engrossed in hair-splitting casuistry about who is the greater man?
3. Something was missing from the letter – namely a reply to the question of whether we should go on or not. The question was urgent, and as my work is dependent on my colours and tools – to an extent which I cannot ignore – and these again on my receiving or not receiving money, it is impossible for me to consider your letter very useful. It would be less impossible for me to keep my temper in our correspondence if, when on the critical date you have not got the money, you should write, I haven't got it, you will get it on such and such a date. Now you did not write a single word in response to my saying, I am surprised that – taking into consideration that you told me I could get the money by return mail if I wanted it, and my having told you that I would rather have it at once than later – I have not heard anything about it.

If you had written at the time, I am sorry, but I haven't got it, I should not have tortured my brain with thoughts such as that you commit this negligence on purpose in order to make life a little more difficult for me. And – if you haven't got the money, I cannot reproach you with anything – but if you neglect sending it – on purpose or not on purpose, that does not matter – then it is something I wish you would unlearn – something that forces one to lose one's temper.

What I said about my trying to do something with my work for instance in Antwerp – this is definitely my intention – and I should assuredly not accept but reject your letter, if in addition you had not also written: [Here an ink line points to the passage beginning "I am not conscious of..." at the end of the paragraph following the sketch below] Your present frame of mind about me, and my frame of mind about you, is cool enough to allow for coolly asking questions and coolly answering them.

So to cut matters short – leaving caring for each other or not out of it – can I count on it that there is a definite agreement for one year that in exchange for the work I shall supply you, I shall go on receiving the usual monthly amount? The reason why I have to know this is that, if I can definitely count on it, I shall get a more spacious apology of a studio somewhere, a studio I need in order to work from the model.

The one I have at present has the following geographical situation:

Studio immediately adjoining coal hole, sewers and dung pit, and my imagination is not strong enough to see this an advance on last year's situation. However, this does not alter the fact that, as soon as I complain about something, I

find passages in your letters like “I (Theo) am of the opinion that now your situation is better than last summer” – you see? And I also draw the little ground plan in answer to your expression, “I am not conscious of,” etc. To this I have to say, I am indifferent to your being conscious or not conscious of the fact that there is something wrong with this or that – at least as long as you do not demand that I should go about anesthetized on the point, and as long as you provide me with the means of correcting things that are wrong I haven’t the slightest objection to your being “conscious” of all manner of things.

I hope this letter is as cool as your own – and I thank you very much for the money sent – which makes up for a good deal – at least makes up for all the other things, because I can now count on its continuing for a year, and I shall make no additional demands on you, and shall be delighted to send you my work.

And there is one little thing I should like to add to this: if I should succeed in selling anything in Antwerp or elsewhere, I shall inform you, and the amount will be deducted from the 150 francs.

I never write Rappard about business matters – at least I have not told him that the terms we have been on lately were not as good as before.

Now please think over whether it is right that you, who know Rappard, have seen nothing of his work, and have not the remotest idea what he is about – that you do not take the slightest notice of him any more, unless perhaps from hearsay, when I tell you something. For all that he is one of the fellows who will make their influence felt – whom they will have to reckon with – of whose work they will be obliged to take notice. At one time Rappard came to you, and felt small in your presence because you knew so much about art. Since that year he spent in Paris – what enormous progress he has made! – but you – haven’t you been resting on your laurels a little??

[On a separate leaf in this letter]

Your letter about Millet contains good passages, indicating a better insight than what you say about Lhermitte, toward whom you might continue to feel sympathetic, I think. Do not lose yourself in that absolutely sterile twaddle about who is first, and who is second, and so on – that is nothing but nonsense, and stupid. There are plenty who do this; you be one of those who think Millet very beautiful and Lhermitte too, so that no room is left for idiotically pondering on who is the best, who is the first – they are both above the average level. What would be the use of drawing comparisons between Rembrandt and Nicolaes Maes or Van der Meer? – nonsense, isn’t it? – so stop it. I have this question to put to you about Millet. Do you happen to think that Millet would have become Millet if he had lived without children and without a wife? It was all the easier for him to find his inspiration, his feeling for the simple people was so much purer and deeper, because he himself lived in the way a labourer’s family lives – but with infinitely more feeling than the common labourer. Millet’s maxim was, God blesses big families – and his life shows that he meant this, because it was in harmony with what he said.

Would Millet have been able to do without Sensier? Perhaps not. Why did Millet break with those men who were his friends at first, and from whom he nevertheless received an annuity? Sensier gives enough particular to suggest that the basic trouble was that they thought Millet personally a mediocrity and his work mediocre, and annoyed themselves and Millet with it until at long last the pitcher broke. Yet Sensier does not give a detailed account of the happenings in those days, as if he understood that Millet thought that time a period of execrable bother, and preferred not to be reminded of it. Somewhere Sensier says, When Millet thought of his first wife and the worries of those days, he clasped his head with both hands in a gesture as if once again he were overwhelmed by the huge darkness and unutterable melancholy of that period.

The second time his family life succeeded better – but then he was no longer in contact with those big fellows.