

Letter 391
Nuenen, late December 1884

Dear Theo,

Thanks for what you sent me. I appreciate your having done so, because so much depends on my working hard during those winter months when it is easier to get models.

In two or three days you will receive twelve little pen-and-ink drawings after studies of heads.

After all I feel most in my element when I am working on the figure, and there also seems to me to be more character in, for instance, those heads I already did in The Hague, and in some other figures, than in the other things I did. And perhaps it will be wise to concentrate more exclusively on the figure.

But the figure always stands in some surroundings, and one can't help doing those surroundings too, because one can't dispense with them.

Mother wants to add something to this letter, so I will be brief, as I shall send you those pen drawings one of these days.

I don't yet know what I shall do with those heads, but I want to extract the motif from the characters themselves.

But I know quite well why I made them, and what in general I have in mind. I am longing to see, sooner or later, that picture which you received. [A painting by the Swedish painter Josephson – a study for his later famous painting "The Watermix".]

I don't understand exactly what the legend itself means.

I don't understand it because you say the figure is Dante-esque, but it is the symbol of an evil spirit luring people into the abyss.

Surely these two things can hardly go together, for the sober, severe figure of Dante, full of indignation and protest against what he had seen happening, protesting against the terrible medieval abuses and prejudices, is certainly one of the most sincere, honest, noble ones imaginable. It was said of Dante, "Voilà celui qui va à l'enfer et qui en revient"; entering it and coming back again is quite different from the devilish luring others into it.

Consequently, a Dante-esque figure cannot be made to act a satanic part without the greatest misconstruction of character.

And the silhouette of a Mephisto is mighty different from that of Dante.

Contemporaries wrote of Giotto, "Le premier il mit 'la bonté' dans l'expression des têtes humains."

[Primarily he put 'goodness' into the expression of human heads.] Giotto painted Dante, and with much sentiment, as you know, for you remember the old portrait. From which I conclude that Dante's expression, however sad and melancholy it may be, is essentially an expression of something infinitely good and tender. So I cannot imagine Satan or Mephisto having anything Dante-esque about them. All the more reason why I am curious to see, someday what the picture is really like.

My best wishes for the New Year.

Ever yours, Vincent