

Letter 447
Antwerp, c. 28 January 1886

Dear Theo,

I have already delayed too long in telling you of the safe receipt of your letter and enclosure.

In any case I think it will do no harm if we see each other in Paris after a while. As to your letter, it is always the same, and as I see it, in judging me you rely too much on generalities and prejudices, which are too superficial and too incorrect for me to believe you will cling to them forever.

I have been tremendously busy this week, for besides the painting class, I go and draw in the evening too, and after that, from half past ten till half past eleven, I work from the model at a club. For I have become a member of not less than two of these clubs, and I now know two fellows who draw well, I think, both Dutchmen.

This week I painted a large thing with two nude torsos – two wrestlers posed by Verlat, and I like that very much. [Painting lost]

And the same with the drawing from the plaster casts. I have now finished two large figures. At all events there are two things to be said for it, in the first place it interests me, after having drawn for years from fully clothed models, to see the nude again, and the works of the ancients, and to verify things.

In the second place, to be accepted somewhere in Paris one must have worked somewhere else before, and not be absolutely green any more, and one is always involved with people who have already worked at an academy for a longer or shorter time.

The advice Verlat gives me is very severe, and also what Vinck of the drawing class tells me, and they strongly advise me especially to draw for at least a year, if possible to draw nothing but plaster casts and the nude, and that this would be the shortest way, and I shall then go back to my other outdoor work or my portraits quite a different man; and I believe it is true, so I must try to be somewhere where both plaster casts and nude models are within my reach, at least at first.

The best one in the class has done the same, and he says that with each study he felt he was making progress, and I have noticed it myself in his old things and his recent ones.

I suppose you remember, “Les Grecs ne prennent pas le contour, ils prennent par les milieux, par les noyaux. Géricault a pris cela à Gros, qui lui l’avait pris des Grecs, mais Géricault a voulu lui-même le prendre aux Grecs aussi, et les a étudiés pour cela même; après Delacroix a fait comme Géricault.” [The Greeks did not start from the contour, they started from the centres, the nuclei, Géricault got it from Gros, who had got it from the Greeks, but Géricault would also get it from the Greeks himself, for which very reason he studied them; later on Delacroix did the same as Géricault.]

That method – Millet too draws in the same way, more than anybody else – is perhaps the root of all figure painting, it depends enormously on that drawing the modelling directly with the brush, quite a different conception from that of Bouguereau and others who lack interior modelling, who are flat compared with Géricault and Delacroix, and do not emerge from the paint.

With the latter – Géricault, etc., – the figures have backs even when one sees them from the front, there is airiness around the figures – they emerge from the paint.

It is to find this – about which I would not care to speak with Verlat, nor with Vinck – that I am working; no fear they would teach me this, for the fault of both of them is in the colour, which, as you know, isn’t right in either’s work.

When I compare a study of mine with those of the other fellows, it is curious to see that they have almost nothing in common. Theirs have about the same colour as the flesh, so, seen close up, they are very correct – but if one stands back a little, they appear painfully flat – all that pink and delicate yellow, etc., etc., soft in itself, produces a harsh effect. The way I do it, from near by it is greenish-red, yellowish-grey, white-black and many neutral tints and most of them colours one cannot define. But when one stands back a little it emerges from the paint, and there is airiness around it, and a certain vibrating light falls on it. At the same time, the least little touch of colour which one may use as highlight is effective in it.

But what I lack is practice, I must paint about fifty of them; I think I shall have reached something then. Now I put the colours on somewhat too painstakingly, because I haven’t had enough practice; I must hesitate too long, and so I work the life out of it. But that is a question of time, of exercise, till the touch becomes more immediately correct, the better one has it fixed in one’s mind.

Some of the fellows have seen my drawings, one of them, influenced by the drawing of my peasant figures, has started at once to draw the model in the nude class with a much more vigorous modelling, putting the shadows down firmly. He showed me this drawing and we talked it over; it was full of life, and it was the finest drawing I have seen here by any of the fellows. Do you know what they think of it here? The teacher

Sibert expressly sent for him, and told him that if he dared to do it again in the same way he would be considered to be mocking his teacher. And I assure you, it was the only drawing that was well done, like Tassaert or Gavarni. So you see how things are. However, it doesn't matter, and one must not get angry at it, but pretend one should like to cure oneself of the bad habit, but unfortunately one falls back into it all the time. The figures they draw are almost always top-heavy and are toppling over head first, not a single one is standing on its feet.

And that standing must already be fixed in the very first planning.

Well, I am still very pleased that I came here, whatever may happen, and whatever the results may be, whether I get along with Verlat or not.

I find here the friction of ideas I want. I get a fresh look at my own work, can judge better where the weak points are, which enables me to correct them.

But I most urgently beg you, for the sake of a good result, to lose neither your patience nor your good spirits; it would be fouling our own nest if we lost courage at the very moment that might give us a certain influence if we show that we know what we want, and dare to do something and to carry it through.

As to the money, if I work in a studio and so don't have to pay the expenses for models, even then 150 fr. is certainly not much, for painting is very expensive, but it can be done if one economizes even on food, etc.

But if models must be paid, 150 fr. is definitely not enough and one loses time, etc.

So the cheapest way is to go on in the studio, seeing that, especially for more elaborate studies from the nude, it is impossible to provide the models oneself.

I do not think it impossible that in the long run, especially if the other fellows can't help beginning to draw stronger shadows, that then Verlat or someone else will pick a fight with me, even if I systematically try to avoid it. Which I certainly shall do systematically, because it is to my advantage to stay here for some time. I am longing to hear about your apartment. As for me, if I come to Paris, I shall be perfectly contented with a cheap little room in some remote quarter (Montmartre) or a garret in a hotel, but that is relatively unimportant, and we aren't yet that far. First let's stay here for some time, and don't let's worry before it's time.

The winter course ends on March 31.

Good-by,

Ever yours, Vincent