

Letter 117
Amsterdam, 9 January 1878

Dear Theo,

I am so anxious to know if you are feeling better that I am writing at once to beg you to send at least a postcard, to let me know whether you are all right again.

I arrived here safe and sound on Monday night. Tuesday morning, I began my lessons again. I intend to do the exercises I have already done all over again – at least as much as I have time for in addition to my other work. Father advised this, for once one is well grounded in grammar and the verbs, translation comes easier. I shall find time for it as soon as the sun rises earlier and it is less cold, so that I can begin early. If one works from early morning until late at night, one can accomplish a great deal in a few months, and so I hope to be ready for the examination by October.

I saw a great many fine drawings at Uncle Cor's, also a new and very clever one by Rochussen, "A Soriée of Diplomats." Tonight Mauve is showing his drawings in Arti.¹ I should have liked to go there, but probably I saw most of the drawings when we spent that evening at his house. Uncle Cor also had a very pretty picture by Valkenburg, "Interior of a Homestead," with four little figures.

I will hang those prints you gave me, "Le Four" [The Oven], by Th. Rousseau, and "The Road to Rijswijk" by Weissenbruch, in my room.

I'm sorry that I did not take a later train from The Hague – we could have been together a little longer – but now I hope to see you again in the spring when you go on your business trip. It is very cold here these days, and this morning everything was covered with snow. I am glad Uncle Vincent has gone abroad – he will be in Paris tonight. When you see Mauve, remember to ask him for that poem by Jules Breton, "Le Laboureur," and send it to me when you get it.

Uncle Cor asked me today if I didn't like "Phryne" by Gérôme. I told him that I would rather see a homely woman by Israëls or Millet, or an old woman by Édouard Frère: for what's the use of a beautiful body such as Phryne's? Animals have it too, perhaps even more than men; but the soul, as it lives in the people painted by Israëls or Millet or Frère, that is what animals never have. Is not life given us to become richer in spirit, even though the outward appearance may suffer? I feel very little sympathy for the figure by Gérôme. I can find no sign of spirituality in it, and a pair of hands which show they have worked are more beautiful than those of this figure. The difference is greater still between such a beautiful girl and a man like Parker or Thomas a Kempis or those Meissonier painted; one can no more love and have sympathy for two such disparate things than one can serve two masters.

Uncle Cor then asked me if I should feel no attraction for a beautiful woman or girl. I answered that I would feel more attraction for, and would rather come into contact with, one who was ugly or old or poor or in some way unhappy, but who, through experience and sorrow, had gained a mind and a soul.

There was also a beautiful drawing by Maris at Uncle Cor's, a view of the city with water in the foreground and a big sky. I suppose you know it. Write again soon, and have a good time. My regards to the Rooses; à Dieu, a warm handshake in thought, and believe me always,

Your loving brother, Vincent

1. Art club in Amsterdam.