

Letter 190
The Hague, c. 15 – 27 April 1882

Theo,

Since I wrote Mauve: “Do you know that those two months you spoke of have long since passed? Let us shake hands, and then each go his own way, rather than have a quarrel between you and me,” I repeat, since I wrote this and received no sign in reply, my grief chokes me.

Because – and you know this – I love Mauve, and it is so hard that all the happiness he pictured to me will come to naught. For I am afraid that the better my drawings become, the more difficulty and opposition I shall meet. Because I shall have to suffer much, especially from those peculiarities which I cannot change. First, my appearance and my way of speaking and my clothes; and then, even later on when I earn more, I shall always move in a different sphere from most painters because my conception of things, the subjects I want to make, inexorably demand it.

Enclosed is a little sketch of diggers, I will tell you why I’m sending it. Tersteeg said to me, “You failed before and now you will fail again – it will be the same story all over again.” Stop – no, it is quite different now, and that reasoning is really nothing but a sophism.

My not being fit for business or for professional study does not prove at all that I am not fit to be a painter. On the contrary, if I had been able to be a clergyman or an art dealer, then perhaps I should not have been fit for drawing and painting, and I should neither have resigned nor accepted my dismissal as such.

I cannot stop drawing because I really have a draughtsman’s fist, and I ask you, have I ever doubted or hesitated or wavered since the day I began to draw? I think you know quite well that I pushed on, and of course I gradually grew stronger in the battle.

Now, to come back to this sketch – it was done on the Geest, in the rain, in a street where I was standing in the mud, amid all the noise and confusion, and I send it to you to show that my sketchbook proves I try to catch things “in motion.”

Now put Tersteeg himself, for instance, in front of a sand trench on the Geest, where workmen are busy putting in water or gas pipes; I should like to see what face he would pull and what kind of sketch he would make of it. Strolling on wharves and in alleys and streets and in the houses, waiting rooms, even saloons, is not a pleasant pastime, except for an artist. As such, one would rather be in the dirtiest place where there is something to draw than at a tea party with charming ladies. Unless one wants to draw ladies – then a tea party is all right even for an artist. What I want to say is this, searching for subjects, living among working people, the worry and trouble with models, drawing from nature on the very spot, is rough work, even dirty work at times. Indeed, a salesman’s manners and clothes are not exactly the most suitable for me, or for anyone else who does not have to talk with fine ladies and rich gentlemen and sell them expensive things and make money, but who has, for instance, to draw diggers in a trench on the Geest. If I could do what Tersteeg can, if I were fit for that, I would not be fit for my profession; for my profession it is better that I am as I am than that I squeeze myself into forms which do not fit me.

I, who did not feel at ease in a fine store, who would not feel so especially now, and would certainly be bored and bore others – I am quite a different person when I am at work on the Geest or on the heath or in the dunes. Then my ugly face and shabby coat harmonize perfectly with the surroundings and I am myself and work with pleasure. As for the “how to do it,” I hope to be able to push on.

When I wear a fine coat, the working people that I want for models are afraid of me and distrust me, or they want more money from me.

Well, I struggle along as well as I can, and I don’t think I belong among those who complain, “There are no models in The Hague.”

So if remarks are made about my habits – meaning dress, face, manner of speech – what answer shall I make...that such talk annoys me?

Am I ill-mannered in another sense, that is, insolent and indelicate?

Look here, in my opinion all politeness is founded on goodwill towards everybody, founded on the necessity everyone who has a heart in his breast feels, to help others, to be of use to somebody, and finally, on the need to live together, and not alone. Therefore I do my best; I draw, not to annoy people, but to amuse them, or to make them see things which are worth observing and which not everybody knows.

I cannot believe, Theo, that I could be such a monster of insolence and impoliteness as to deserve to be cut off from society, or as Tersteeg says, “should not be allowed to stay in The Hague.”

Do I lower myself by living with the people I draw? Do I lower myself when I go into the houses of labourers and poor people and when I receive them in my studio?

I think my profession requires it, and only those who don't understand anything of painting or drawing could object to it.

I put the question, where do the draughtsmen who work for the Graphic, Punch, etc., get their models? Do they personally hunt for them in the poorest alleys of London – yes or no?

And their knowledge of the people, were they born with it – or did they acquire it in later years by living among the people and paying attention to things that many another overlooks, by remembering what many another forgets?

When I go to see Mauve or Tersteeg I cannot express myself as I should wish, and perhaps I do myself more harm than good. When they are more accustomed to my way of speaking, they will no longer take offense.

But do tell them now, in my name, how things are – that if I have hurt them in speech or action, I hope they will forgive me. Tell them in better words than I can, with as much style and grace as necessary, how they on their part have caused me much sorrow, much grief, much trouble in these few months which have seemed so long to me because of all these worries. Make them understand this, they don't know it: they think I am unfeeling and indifferent.

You will render me a great service by doing this, and I think things can be settled in this way.

I wish they would just take me as I am. Mauve has been kind to me and has helped me thoroughly and well, but – it lasted only a fortnight – that is too short.

Adieu, Theo, try to do what you can. If I have some good luck instead of bad luck, I needn't be such a burden on you. Enough for this time, believe me,

Yours sincerely. Vincent

[On a separate sheet]

You have doubtless heard about Father's new call, and that Mother is well again but Uncle Cent is sick. I am working on the drawings for C. M., but lately I have been so depressed by the things I wrote you about that they interfered with my work; and then I thought, I want to see light, perhaps Theo can give me some information.

It is not surprising that it depressed me, for Tersteeg told me to my face that I "should not be able to stay in The Hague"; and I thought he is certainly the kind of person who, once his mind is made up, will try to obstruct or thwart me in all things. But how is it possible, and what's got into him? Even if he doesn't think my drawings any good, is that any reason for crossing me so determinedly, and with such weapons?

[Written in the margin]

Where there is a difference of opinion in artistic matters I do not consider taking the bread out of somebody's mouth an honest weapon, nor taking steps to make his friends turn against him because of circumstances in his private life.

Occasionally I have wanted to pick a quarrel with somebody who often got bread from me. No, I thought, I can't do this; I will put up with it, for otherwise he will have nothing to eat. You see? But people with certain "distinguished manners" have different ideas about such things.