

Letter 228
The Hague, 3 September 1882
Sunday morning

My dear Theo,

I have just received your very welcome letter, and as am taking some rest today, I am answering it at once.

Thank you very much for it and for the enclosure, and for the various things you say in it.

And many thanks for your description of that scene with the workmen at Montmartre, which I found very interesting because you convey the colours so well that I can see them. I am glad you are reading the book on Gavarni. I found it very interesting, and it made me love G. twice as much.

Paris and its environs may be beautiful, but we have no complaints here either.

This week I did a painting that I think would remind you a little of Scheveningen as we saw it when we walked there together: A large study of sand, sea and sky – a big sky of delicate grey and warm white, with a single small patch of soft blue shimmering through – the sand and the sea light, so that the whole becomes golden, but animated by the boldly and distinctively coloured figures and fishing smacks, which tend to set the tonal values. The subject of the sketch I made of it is a fishing smack weighing anchor. The horses stand ready for hitching up before pulling the smack into the sea. I am enclosing a little sketch of it.

It was really hard to do. I just wish I'd painted it on a panel or on canvas. I tried to get more colour into it, that is, depth, strength of colour.

How strange it is that you and I so often seem to have the same thoughts. Yesterday evening, for instance, I came home from the woods with a study, having been deeply preoccupied with the question of depth of colour the whole week, and particularly at that moment. And I should very much have liked to have talked to you about it, especially with reference to the study I had done – and lo and behold, in this morning's letter you chance to mention that you were struck by the very vivid, yet harmonious, colours of Montmartre. I don't know if it was precisely the same thing that struck the two of us, but I do know that you would most certainly have been affected by what struck me so particularly and would probably have seen it in the same light.

As a start, I am sending you a little sketch of the subject and I shall tell you what the problem was.

The woods are becoming thoroughly autumnal, and there are colourful effects I don't often see in Dutch paintings.

Yesterday evening I was working on a slightly rising woodland slope covered with dry and mouldering beech leaves [F 008, JH 182]. The ground was light and dark reddish brown, emphasized by the weaker and stronger shadows of trees casting half-obliterated stripes across it. The problem, and I found it a very difficult one, was to get the depth of colour, the enormous power and solidity of that ground – and yet it was only while painting it that I noticed how much light there was still in the dusk – to retain the light as well as the glow, and depth of that rich colour, for there is no carpet imaginable as splendid as that deep brownish-red in the glow of an autumn evening sun, however toned down by the trees.

Young beech trees spring from the ground, catching the light to one side, where they are a brilliant green, and the shadowy side of the trunks is a warm, intense black-green.

Behind those saplings, behind that brownish-red ground, is a sky of a very delicate, blue-grey. Warm, hardly blue at all, sparkling. And against it there is a hazy border of greenness and a network of saplings and yellowish leaves. A few figures of wood gatherers are foraging about, dark masses of mysterious shadows. The white cap of a woman bending down to pick up a dry branch stands out suddenly against the deep reddish-brown of the ground. A skirt catches the light, a shadow is cast, the dark silhouette of a man appears above the wooded slope. A white bonnet, a cap, a shoulder, the bust of a woman show up against the sky. These figures, which are large and full of poetry, appear in the twilight of that deep shadowy tone like enormous clay figurines taken shaped in a studio.

I am describing nature to you – I'm not sure to what extent I reproduced it in my sketch, but I do know that I was struck by the harmony of green, red, black, yellow, blue, brown, grey. It was very de Groux-like, an effect like, say, that sketch of "The Conscript's Departure" formerly in the Palais Ducal.

It was a hard job painting it. The ground used up one and a half large tubes of white – even though the ground is very dark – and for the rest red, yellow, brown, ochre, black, sienna, bistre, and the result is a reddish-brown, but one ranging from bistre to deep wine-red and to a pale, golden ruddiness. Then there are still the mosses and a border of fresh grass, which catches the light and glitters brightly, and is very difficult to capture. So there in the end you have it, a sketch that I maintain has some significance, something to tell, no matter what may be said about it.

I said to myself while I was doing it: don't let me leave before there is something of the autumnal evening in it, something mysterious, something important. However – because this effect doesn't last – I had to paint quickly, putting the figures in all at once, with a few forceful strokes of a firm brush. It had struck me how firmly the saplings were rooted in the ground – I started on them with the brush, but because the ground was already

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impasted, brush-strokes simply vanished into it. Then I squeezed the roots and trunks in from the tube and modelled them a little with the brush.

Well, they are in there now, springing out of it, standing strongly rooted in it.

In a way I am glad that I never learned painting. In all probability I would then have learned to ignore such effects as this. Now I can say to myself, this is just what I want. If it is impossible, it is impossible, but I'm going to try it even though I don't know how it ought to be done. I don't know myself how I paint it, I just sit down with a white board in front of the spot that appeals to me, I look at what is in front of my eyes, and I say to myself: that white board has got to turn into something – I come back, dissatisfied, I lay it to one side and when I have rested a little, I go and look at it with a kind of awe. Then I am still dissatisfied, because I have that splendid scenery too much in my mind to be satisfied with what I made of it. Yet I can see in my work an echo of what appealed to me, I can see that the scenery has told me something, has spoken to me, and that I have taken it down in shorthand. My shorthand may contain words that cannot be deciphered, mistakes or gaps, and yet there is something left of what the wood or the beach or the figure has told me, and it isn't in tame or conventional language derived from a studied manner or from some system, but from nature itself.

Enclosed another little sketch from the dunes. There are small bushes there whose leaves are white on one side and dark green on the other and are constantly moving and glittering. Beyond them dark trees.

You can see that I am plunging full speed ahead into painting, I am plunging into colour. I have refrained from doing so up till now and I am not sorry for it. Had I had not already done some drawing, I should be unable to get the feeling of, or be able to tackle, a figure that looks like an unfinished clay figurine. But now that I sense I have gained the open sea, painting must go full speed ahead as fast as we are able.

If I am going to paint on panel or canvas then the expenses will go up again, everything is so expensive, paint is expensive, too, and is so quickly used up. Well, these are complaints all painters have, we must see what can be done. I know for certain that I have a feeling for colour and shall acquire more and more, that painting is in the very marrow of my bones.

I value your loyal and effective help more than I can say. I think of you so much; I should so like my work to become vigorous, serious, virile, so that you too may get some pleasure out of it as soon as possible.

One thing I should like to bring to your attention as a matter of importance – wouldn't it be possible to obtain paint, panels, brushes, etc., at discount prices? I am having to pay the retail price at the moment. Have you any connection with Paillard or someone like that? If so, I think it would be much more economical to get paints, say, wholesale, for instance white, ochre, sienna, and we could then come to some arrangement about the money. Everything would be cheaper, it goes without saying. Do think it over.

One doesn't paint well by using a lot of paint, but in order to do a ground effectively or to get a sky bright, one must sometimes not spare the tube. Sometimes the subject calls for less paint, sometimes the material, the nature of the subjects themselves demands impasto. Mauve, who paints very frugally in comparison with J. Maris and even more so in comparison with Millet or Jules Dupré, nevertheless has cigar boxes full of the remnants of tubes in the corners of his studio, as plentiful as the empty bottles in the corners of rooms after a soirée or dinner such as Zola describes, for instance.

Well, if there could be a little extra this month, that would be wonderful. If not, then not. I shall work as hard as I can. You ask about my health, but what about yours? I would imagine my remedy would be yours as well: to be out in the open, painting. I am well, I still feel like it even when I'm tired, and that is getting better rather than worse. It's also a good thing, I think, that I live as frugally as possible, but my main remedy is painting. I sincerely hope that your luck is in and that you will have even more. Please accept a handshake in my thoughts, and believe me,

Ever yours, Vincent

You will see that there is a soft, golden effect in the little marine sketch and a more sombre, more serious mood in the woods. I am glad that both exist in life.

[Sketch 'Beach and Boats' JH 227, was enclosed in letter]