

Letter 293
The Hague, 13 or 14 June 1883

Dear Theo,

Do you remember that I wrote some time ago, "I am sitting in front of two large blank sheets and do not know how I shall get something onto them"?

Since then, you know I did the refuse dump on one, but these last days I have also made good progress with the second one, which represents a coal yard on the grounds of the Rhine railway station as I see it from my studio window.

There are heaps of coal and men working in them and people coming with little wheelbarrows to buy a sack of coals, for which there is sometimes a great demand; and especially with the snow last winter, it was an intriguing sight.

I have been thinking it over for a long time, and a few days ago it was so splendid one evening and I made my sketch in such a way that later I made hardly any changes in the main lines of the composition. Then I had a man as a model right on the spot; he climbed onto those heaps of coal and stood in different spots so that I could see the proportion of the figure in different places.

But since then I have made several figure studies for it, though the figures will only be small.

Just while making these studies, the plan for an even larger drawing is beginning to take root, namely one of potato digging, and I am so absorbed in it that I think you will perhaps find something in it, too.

I should want the landscape to be a level ground with a little row of dunes on the horizon. The figures about a foot high, a broad composition, 1 by 2.

Right in front, in a corner, as a setoff, kneeling figures of women gathering the potatoes.

On the second plane, a row of diggers, men and women.

And I want to make the perspective of the field such that the spot where the wheelbarrows arrive is in the corner of the drawing opposite the one where the potatoes are being gathered.

Well, except for the figures of the kneeling women, I could already show you all the other figures in large studies.

Yes, I should like to start that drawing one of these days. I have the grounds pretty well in my mind, and will choose a fine potato field at my ease and make studies of it for the lines of the landscape.

The drawing ought to be finished – at least an elaborate sketch of it – toward autumn, when the potatoes are dug, and I should only have to put in the finishing touches.

Last year I saw it here, the year before last I saw it in Brabant, where it was splendid, and the year before that in the Borinage, where it was done by miners. So it has ripened in my mind.

The figures ought to be such that it would be true everywhere, rather than a costume study.

Well, that blank canvas preoccupies me continually, and while making studies, I am already looking for new ones.

The row of diggers must be a row of dark figures, seen only in the distance, but very elaborate and varied in movement and type. For instance, a simple young fellow beside one of those typical old Scheveningen men, in a white and brown patched suit with an old top hat, such a dull black one which they push back on the neck; for instance, a short, sturdy figure of a woman soberly clad in black, beside a tall grass mower in white trousers, Tight blue frock and straw hat – a bald head next to a young woman. These thoughts rise in my mind because of the contrast in the studies I have made already.

We must wait and see. But anyhow, I have bought a large stretcher (an old picture frame) at Laarman's and put canvas over it. And every day it becomes clearer to me, but it is confoundedly difficult to find figures which contrast well with each other and yet can be put in a very narrow space. And one has to draw each of them three times or more before it fits well.

But I shall make the sketch and do the same with it as I did with the refuse dump, that is, begin it anew later, on another sheet, if the first one doesn't turn out as I wish. But I wanted it almost finished about the real time of potato digging, though I may have to work it up again on a new sheet.

It was a good thing that I went to see Rappard, for I really got the first idea of making those large drawings there, and I have observed that one feels more definitely what kind of studies one has to make while composing. I am working with great animation these days, and am relatively untired because I am so interested in it. As you know, I had repressed my desire to make compositions for a long time, and in that respect a revolution has taken place in me now because the time was ripe for it, and I breathe more freely now that I have loosened the reins which I had put on myself. But I believe it was a good thing after all that I drudged so long on the studies; for it is true in all things, especially with regard to figures, that one must study seriously, and not suppose that one knows it already. I think it such a fine saying of Mauve's –

notwithstanding all his work and experience, he says, Sometimes I do not know the place of the joints in a cow. At present I personally often do it this way: when I draw a digger putting one leg in front of the other, or one arm in front of the other, or bending his head, I still draw in detail the leg, the arm, which disappeared behind the first one and consequently is out of sight or the neck and back of the head; and only then do I draw what comes in sight, to get it as correct as possible.

I hope I shall succeed in having the outline or ghost of the potato drawing ready by the time you come. I long very much to see you. Do you know anything more definite about your coming? Well, I must set to work on my coal men.

For the moment my entire supply of ready cash consists of a postal order for 1.23 guilders torn in two, which has already been refused once. So I need not tell you that I am already on the lookout for your letter. As a diversion I have just fixed the large frame, and so that I shall be able to work before I get the money on those days when I may not be able to take a model. But perhaps I shall after all.

My Scheveningen cape is a splendid possession; I made three elaborate studies with it: a woman with a dustbin and two others with wheelbarrows.

The next time you send money, I hope to be able to get a fisherman's jacket with high turn-up collar and short sleeves, and a woman's bonnet. It seems the bonnets are expensive and difficult to get; well, at all events, I already have one. Scheveningen drawings must be done as well, and shortly too. About this time last year, I was in the hospital – last summer's painted studies are bad and incorrect, I find – I think of it because I have just been looking up an old painted study of those coal heaps to see how the situation was last year: I now think them done in too slovenly a fashion, in too much of a hurry.

Well, since then, I have concentrated anew on the drawing of the figure, and I think only very vaguely of painting. Adieu, write as soon as you can. Good luck! With a handshake,
Yours sincerely, Vincent