

Letter 392
Nuenen, c. 20 January 1885

Dear Theo,

Enclosed are some more scratches of studies of heads. At home I heard you have had a good year, and had an offer of 1000 francs a month, which you refused. I can understand that once at G. & Co., you want to stay there; it was one of the first great houses, perhaps it might still be able to outlive many rivals. I think, however, that every year it will become more difficult to follow the routine which has hitherto been maintained in the art trade, and will it be possible to find a new method of doing business now? Perhaps not.

And yet – unless new tactics are going to be employed – doesn't the danger threaten more every day that, because of the fall of some big firm or other, for instance, some things will drop in price, which drop will cause a panic all round? I really think this is not merely an imaginary danger. Prices have risen to their present height within a relatively short time – let's say, within forty years at the most. And would more time than that be necessary for them to tumble down the mountain? As a rule it is easier to go downhill than up. But for all that – there is something in art which will always make at least a chance of extending the buying public possible. Only, I repeat, will they create this new public? If not, I personally am afraid it will go down as fast as it has risen.

I've hardly ever begun a year with a gloomier aspect, in a gloomier mood, and I do not expect any future of success, but a future of strife.

It is dreary outside, the fields a mass of lumps of black earth and some snow, with mostly days of mist and mire in between, the red sun in the evening and in the morning, crows, withered grass, and faded, rotting green, black shrubs, and the branches of the poplars and willows rigid, like wire, against the dismal sky. This is what I see in passing, and it is quite in harmony with the interiors, very gloomy, these dark winter days.

It is also in harmony with the physiognomy of the peasants and weavers. I don't hear the latter complain, but they have a hard time of it. A weaver who works steadily, weaves, say, a piece of sixty yards a week. While he weaves, a woman must spool for him, that is, supply the shuttles with yarn, so there are two who work and have to live on it.

On that piece of cloth he makes a net profit, for instance, of 4.50 guilders a week, and nowadays when he takes it to the manufacturer, he is often told that he cannot come with another piece for two weeks. So not only are wages low, but work is pretty scarce too.

Consequently, there is often something agitated and restless about these people.

It is a different spirit from that of the miners, among whom I lived during the year of strikes and many accidents. That was even worse, yet it is often pathetic here too; the people are quiet, and literally nowhere have I heard anything resembling rebellious speeches.

But they look as little cheerful as the old cab horses or the sheep transported by steamer to England.

Goodbye, I hope you will be able to send money, I have not quite a guilder left, and must have a model for a few hours more today, so tomorrow I shall be at a dead end, but maybe your letter will come.

Ever yours, Vincent