

Dear Theo,

Thanks for your letter and the enclosure. What pleases me so much is that now you yourself propose the plan of going to Cormon's.

Let me tell you how things have been going here.

The painting course ended last week, because at the end of the course a competition is held for those who have gone through the whole course, among whom I do not belong.

I am also drawing in the daytime now, and the teacher there, who makes portraits at present and gets well paid for them, has asked me repeatedly if I had never drawn from plaster casts before and if I had taught myself to draw, and he concluded: "Je vois que vous avez beaucoup travaillé," and, "Vous ne serez pas long à faire du progrès, vous y gagneriez beaucoup – il faut un an, mais qu'est-ce que ça fait?" [I see that you have worked a lot, and, it will not take you long to make progress, you will gain much by it – it will take a year, but what does that matter?]

Now there is one fellow of my age sitting next to me to whom he does not say that, and he has also painted a long time and he has been drawing from plaster casts for three years. As a rule they draw there without a background, and especially the man in question is absolutely forbidden to do it. This makes awfully dry drawings.

Now Sibert, that is the name of the teacher who also directs the class for drawing from the nude, said, "Quant à vous, vous dessinerez comme il vous plaira, puisque je vois que vous prenez le dessin au sérieux, quant aux autres, en général je ne leur permets pas de faire un fond, parce qu'alors ils escamotent le dessin des formes, tandis que sur fond blanc ils sont bien obligés de les faire, c'est donc une camisole de force." [As for you, you will draw as you please, for I see that you take drawing seriously; as for the others, I generally don't allow them to draw a background, for then they botch the drawing of the forms, whereas they are obliged to do them on a white background; so it is a straitjacket.]

Then he also said that Verlat had told him there was some good in my work which Verlat did not say to me.

Just after the receipt of your letter it happened that Sibert came to look at the drawings (mine was a head of Niobe and a hand that might be done by Michelangelo). I had drawn that hand within a few hours, and that was the drawing he liked best. Now I told him that I intended to go to Cormon, and he said: "Vous ferez comme vous voudrez, mais je vous dis que Verlat en a formé plusieurs de forts et nous y tenons à former des élèves qui nous fassent honneur – et je vous engage bien fortement de rester." [You may do as you like, but I tell you that Verlat has trained several strong ones, and we attach great value to training pupils who are a credit to us – and I advise you most strongly to stay (with us).]

This is almost a handsome promise, as if they guarantee success, and what shall I do? On the other hand, I have become better acquainted with those English fellows who have been in Paris, and I have heard their experiences. One was at Gérôme's and one at Cabanel's, etc.

They say that one is relatively freer in Paris and, for instance, one can choose one's subjects more freely than one can here, but that the correction is not worth much.

Do you know what I think? In Paris I should certainly work more than here, for instance a drawing a day or every two days.

And we know, or rather you know, enough clever fellows who would not refuse to look them over and give some hints. So in fact we are at all events on the right track, whether I stay here some time or come to you.

For the rest, Cormon would probably say the same thing as Verlat. Just because I now have the opportunity to talk to several people about my drawings, I see my mistakes, and that is half the battle.

At all events let's keep courage. But now you must write a little more and we must try to do things energetically. I hear they work for four hours in the morning at Cormon's, then in the evening one can go and work at the Louvre or at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts or some other studio where drawing is done.

As to the portraits, there will not be much time left for them if I want to keep up all the other things regularly. It is the same here.

But it has struck me forcibly that there are still other things that I absolutely must change.

When I compare myself to the other fellows, there is something stiff and awkward about me, as if I had been in prison for ten years.

And the cause of this is that for about ten years I have had a difficult and harassed life, much care and sorrow and no friends.

But that will change as my work gets better, and I shall know something and be able to do something.

And I repeat, we are on the right track to accomplishing this. But do not doubt it, the way to succeed is to keep courage and patience and to work on energetically.

And it is a fact that I must change my outward appearance somewhat. Perhaps you will say that has nothing to do with art, but on the other hand, perhaps you will agree with me I am having my teeth seen to, for instance,

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there are no less than ten teeth that I have either lost or may lose, and that is too many and too troublesome, and besides, it makes me look over forty, which is not to my advantage.

So I have decided to have that taken care of. It will cost me 100 fr., but it can be done better now while I am drawing than at any other time, and I have had the bad teeth cut off and have just paid half the money in advance.

They told me at the same time that I ought to take care of my stomach, for it's in a bad state. And since I have been here this has far from improved.

But if one knows where the fault lies, that is something gained, and with some energy much can be redressed. It is not at all pleasant, but necessity knows no law, and if one wants to paint pictures, one must try and stay alive and keep one's strength.

I thought my teeth were bad for another reason, and I didn't know that my stomach had deteriorated to such a degree. It is stupid if you will, but sometimes one has to choose between two evils, and is trapped on both sides. During the last month it began to trouble me a great deal; I began to cough continually too, and to expectorate a grayish phlegm, etc., so that I began to get uneasy. But we will try to redress it.

You see I am not stronger than other people in that if I neglected myself too much, it would be the same with me as with so many painters (so very many if one thinks it over), I should drop dead, or worse still – become insane or an idiot.

This is a fact, and the question is to steer a clear course between the various cliffs, and even if one gets damaged, to try to keep the ship afloat.

I know that Delacroix said he had learned the secret of painting: “Lorsqu'il n'avait plus ni dents ni souffle.” [When he had neither teeth nor breath left.] But I also know that from that moment he took care of himself. And that, except for his mistress, he would have died ten or more years sooner.

So do not be angry with me because of the expense. I shall try to economize, but things were getting too bad and I had to remedy them.

As to what you wrote about the folks at home, in this matter I shall do what you think best. ¹

I am free to leave here whenever I like. Let's say in the first days of March. But just consider if the help I might be able to give would be worth the journey there and back, for I would also approve of staying here without going back, and from here straight to Cormon, whenever you like. The journey is rather expensive when I reckon that the luggage costs me more than my own fare.

So let's think it over again.

I keep feeling satisfied with having come here, otherwise I should have remained in a fix; and now, though there are still many difficulties, I see some chance of making progress.

And by staying here somewhat longer, or by going to Paris, I shall get an even firmer hold.

As to the plan of possibly living together and taking a rather good studio where one can receive people if need be, keep it in mind, and let me keep it in mind too.

In the first place I see that year of drawing from which I'm afraid there's no escape. If it isn't expensive, and you find good quarters, then it would be all right; but if it is expensive, perhaps it would not be the cheapest way for the first year if we are rather hard up.

The year of drawing is the critical point; after that we are free to do other things, both portrait and landscape. I think we must put that first. There is no help for it – didn't Delacroix and Corot and Millet keep thinking of the ancients and continue studying them? People who just study them in a hurry are of course quite wrong. The ancients certainly require a great serenity, a knowledge of nature, they require tenderness and patience, otherwise they are no help.

And it is quite curious that Géricault and Delacroix both knew them more intimately than, for instance, David, and understood them better; they who were most strongly opposed to all academic routine.

I do not yet know Turgenev's books, but some time ago I read his biography, which was very interesting, how he had, in common with Daudet, that passion for working from the model, blending five or six models into a single type – I do not know Ohnet either, who I hear is very interesting too.

More and more I believe that l'art pour l'art, to work for work's sake, l'énergie pour l'énergie – is after all the principle of all great artists, for in the case of the de Goncourts one sees how necessary obstinacy is, for society will not thank them for it.

But in painting one finds a certain rest in the histories of those painters who aimed at the most sublime through it all.

Israëls himself, for instance, was still quite unknown and poor, even to the extent of having nothing to eat but dry bread – when he nevertheless wanted to go to Paris, though the circumstances were discouraging enough.

Not to be discouraged, even though one is almost starving, and though one feels one has to say farewell to all material comfort in life! So much for that. I wish you would write a little more, now that we are discussing a change.

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Founding a studio together would perhaps be a good thing, but we must feel sure that we can carry it through – and we must know our own minds perfectly, and once we begin it, we must have a certain confidence after all, left us after a long series of lost illusions.

And such a studio – in starting it one must know that it will be a battle and that people in general will be absolutely indifferent, so one ought to begin it feeling confident of some power – wanting to be somebody, wanting to be active – so that when one dies one can think, I go where all those who have dared something go – well, we shall see.

Ever yours, with a handshake,
Vincent

That impression I can't help getting of myself when comparing myself to others, namely that I look as if I had been in prison for ten years, is not exaggerated; but to change it – and I will change it – I must primarily not get too far out of the art world, but stay some time longer in a studio or at an academy. Then it will disappear.

1. He refers to the family's moving from the rectory in Nuenen to Breda, where their mother was going to settle. Theo wanted Vincent to help with the moving.