

Letters of Van Gogh from The Hague (1882-1883)

Letter 1

Friday, 3 March 1882

My dear Theo,

Since receiving your letter and the money¹ I've taken a model every day and I'm up to my ears in work. It's a new model I have, although I'd drawn her before superficially. Or rather it's more than one model, because I've already had 3 people from the same family, a woman of about 45 who's just like a figure by E. Frère, and her daughter, 30 or so, and a younger child of 10 or 12.²

They're poor people and, I must say, invaluable willing. I got them to pose for me, though not without difficulty and on the condition that I'd promise them steady work. Well, that was exactly what I wanted so very much, and I consider it a good arrangement. The younger woman doesn't have a pretty face because she had smallpox, but her figure is very graceful and I find it charming. They also have good clothes. Black woollens³ and nicely shaped caps, and a pretty shawl &c.

You needn't worry too much about the money, because we've agreed to compromise in the beginning. I've promised them a guilder a day as soon as I sell one. ^{1v:2} And that I'll make it up to them later for giving them too little now.

But I must manage to sell something.

If I could do so, I'd keep everything I'm now making of them for myself, because if I only kept them for a year I'm sure I could get more for them then than now.

But anyway, in the circumstances, it would be very nice if Mr Tersteeg bought a thing or two now and then, if necessary on the condition that he can exchange them if they don't sell. Mr Tersteeg promised to come and see me as soon as he can find the time.

The reason I'd like to keep them is simply this: when I draw individual figures it's always with an eye to making a composition with a number of figures, for instance, a 3rd-class waiting room or a pawnshop or an interior. But those larger compositions must ripen gradually, and *for a drawing with 3 seamstresses, for example, one must draw at least 90 seamstresses*. That's how it works.

I had a friendly letter from C.M. promising to come to The Hague soon and to visit me too. Well, that's just a promise, yet again, but perhaps something after all. Oh well. ^{1v:3}

For the rest I'll run after people less and less as time goes on, whoever they may be, neither art dealers nor painters, the only ones I'll run after are models, because I find working without a model totally wrong, at least as far as I'm concerned.

I say, Theo, it really is nice to see a tiny bit of light, and I do see a bit of light. It's nice to draw a person, something that lives, it's damned difficult but wonderful anyhow.

Tomorrow two children are coming to visit whom I must amuse and draw at the same time. I want some life in my studio, and already have all kinds of acquaintances in the neighbourhood. On Sunday an orphan boy is coming, a perfect type, but unfortunately I can have him only for a short time.

Perhaps it's true that I don't have the ability to mix with people who are keen on etiquette, but on the other hand I perhaps have more feeling for poor or simple folk, and if I lose on the one hand I win on the other

hand, and sometimes I simply give up and think, after all it's right and reasonable that I, as an artist, live in what I feel and try to express. Evil be to him who evil thinks.⁴

Now it's the beginning of the month again. Even though it hasn't been a full month since you sent me something, all the same, I'd like to ask you kindly to send me something if you can one of these days. ^{1r:4} It needn't be the 100 francs all at once, just as long as it's something to be getting along with between now and the time when you can send something. I say this because in a previous letter you mentioned that you couldn't get any money until the inventory had been finished.

Sometimes it grieves me to think that I might have to let the model wait, because they need it so much. I've paid them up to today, but next week I wouldn't be able to do it. But I can in fact have the model, be it the older woman or the younger or the child.

By the way, Breitner spoke to me about you recently, that there was something he very much regretted, for which he thought you might still be angry at him. For he still has a drawing that belongs to you, I believe, though I didn't rightly understand the matter. He's working on a large thing, a market scene which must accommodate a lot of figures.⁵ Yesterday evening I went out with him to look for figure types in the street in order to study them later in the studio with a model. In that way I drew an old woman I'd seen in the Geest district where the madhouse is – like this:⁶

Well, good evening, I hope to hear something from you soon.

Ever yours,
Vincent

I also had to pay the rent this week. Good-night. It's already two o'clock and I'm not finished yet.

Letter 2

Friday morning March 24 1882

Theo,

I've been working hard these last few days, and have been at it from morning till night. First, the small drawings for C.M. They're finished and have been sent to him, but I'd hoped that His Hon. would have sent the money immediately, and now that he hasn't sent it immediately I'm afraid it's slipped his mind, and when will he send it now??? I continue drawing similar small townscapes nearly every day and I'm getting the hang of it. I wish that Tersteeg and others who claim to be fond of me or willing to help me would ask me for things *I CAN make* instead of demanding impossibilities that discourage rather than encourage me. Well, so be it. But I did think that C.M. would pay me immediately. They were certainly no worse than the example that prompted His Hon. to order them, and they gave me enough trouble, more than 30 guilders' worth at the very least. If people understood that *nothing* is *nothing*, and that days without a penny in one's pocket are very tough and difficult, then I don't think they'd begrudge me that little bit of money I get from you, ^{1v:2} which allows me to keep my head above water at this difficult time, or make me faint-hearted by reproaching me because of what I get from you.

Theo, I believe that Tersteeg does neither you nor me a good turn by meddling in this matter. He has nothing to do with it. If I work hard, do I not earn my bread? Or am I not worth the means to carry out my work?

I just wish, old chap, that you'd come here soon and see whether or not I'm deceiving you.

Blommers has asked me to give a talk one evening at *Pulchri* about my collection of woodcuts after Herkomer, Frank Holl, iv:3 Du Maurier &c.² I'd very much like to do it, I have enough for two evenings if necessary. At any rate, I'm well and I feel I'm progressing in my work.

I have to draw for about a year more, or at least several months yet, until my hand is steady and sure, and my eye, and then I see no reason at all why I shouldn't become very productive commercially. That I ask for those few months' time is reasonable. It can't happen faster than that, or else I'd produce poor work and that's not necessary, with a bit of waiting I'll produce good work.

Can you send me something one of these days? I hope so. You know I gave Tersteeg the 10 guilders back.³ I repeat, I wish you'd become a painter, you could do it if you wanted to, and ir:4 you'd lose nothing by it, only become something better, it seems to me, than if you remain an art dealer, even if you were the very best of art dealers.

Still, to make the most of your potential, you'd have to throw yourself into it with all your might.

I haven't sent you any more sketches recently – I'm waiting now until you come here yourself – it's better that way. Am busy with figures, and also with a couple of landscapes of a nursery here in Schenkweg.⁴

Since when, I'd like to know, is one allowed to force or try to force an artist to change either his working method or his ideas? I find it very rude to try such a thing, especially if it's someone like Tersteeg, who has the presumption to think he has 'manners'.

Theo, if you can send me something, do, and every day earlier that you can send it is one day less of unpleasantness for me. Oh well, it's back to work in any case. Adieu, write soon.

Ever yours,

Vincent



Drawing of the Laan van Meerdervoort 1882 by Van Gogh.

Letter 3

April 19th 1882

My dear Theo,

Today I sent you 1 drawing of Kitchen gardens in Laan van Meerdervoort.¹

So now you have a figure of mine² and a landscape. And I think you'll see that I'm not staying at the same level.

Even though this is 'only white and black' and unsaleable??? and disagreeable??? I still hope that there may be something strong in it. And I think that, far from holding it against me for devoting myself specifically to *drawing* things, one can see it as definite proof that I'm taking the most practical path. Considering that one can more easily go from drawing to painting than the other way round: making paintings without drawing the necessary studies.

It goes without saying that it gives me great displeasure and doesn't make my life any easier when those whose sympathy I more or less thought I could count on, such as [Mauve](#) and [H.G.T.](#), become indifferent or hostile and hateful. I haven't heard anything from Mauve, sometimes he's ill, at other times he needs to rest or is too busy. How beautiful his painting for the Salon was. ^{1v:2} But you understand these things yourself, so enough of this.

This little drawing also needs a small grey mount.³

You write that you've moved house.⁴ I'll do my best to make something now and then for the walls of your new home.

I may also have a few nice woodcuts, if you'd like them, since I have duplicates of several nice things. But you must look at them when you come this summer.

Though I haven't moved, I've nevertheless made a change in my house by having a bedroom partitioned off in the attic, so I now have more room in my studio, the more so because the stove is gone.⁵

Drawing, you see, involves all kinds of things that many would prefer to disregard. ^{1v:3} There's the true perspective of an interior, for example (sometime I'll send you one of those as well), there are the broad outlines of a landscape, and as for me, I see no chance of success without studying the nude. All of that is essentially *drawing*, much is clarified when one has mastered that to some extent, and I, for my part, go calmly on my way, knowing that if I persevere, before long I'll overtake those who think they can skip over such things.

Well, I wish you the best – it's very bleak and windy here, which I find particularly annoying because I can't get on with the townscapes for C.M., which I'd otherwise capture in my spare moments.⁶ But surely it will become mild again.

With a handshake,

Ever yours,

Vincent

Perhaps more effort went into this little drawing than into many a watercolour. I sent it to Blvd Montmartre⁷ so that you could immediately mount it and press it flat.

Letter 4

July 21st 1882

Dear Brother,

It's already late, but I wanted to write to you again. You aren't here, yet I'm in need of you, and it seems to me as if we aren't far apart sometimes.

Today I made an agreement with myself, which was to regard my illness, or rather what's left of it, as non-existent. Enough time has been lost, the work must be carried on.

So, well or not well, I'm going to draw again regularly from morning till evening. I don't want anyone else to be able to say, 'Oh, those are only old drawings.'¹

I've drawn a study of the cradle today with touches of colour in it.²

I'm also working on a ditto like the meadows I recently sent you.³

My hands have become rather whiter than I care for, but what can I do about it? I'll also go outdoors again.

It matters less to me that it may strike me down than that I'm kept longer from my work. Art is jealous; she won't allow illness to be placed above her.⁴ So I'll let her have her way. I hope, therefore, that you'll soon have a few reasonable ones.

People like me aren't really *allowed* to be ill. You must really understand how I regard art. One must work long and hard to arrive at the truthful. What I want and set as my goal is damned difficult, and yet I don't believe I'm aiming too high. I want to make drawings that *move* some people. Sorrow⁵ is a small beginning – perhaps small landscapes like the Laan van Meerdervoort,⁶ the Rijswijk meadows⁷ and the Fish-drying barn⁸ are also small beginnings. At least they contain something straight from my own feelings. ^{1v:2}

Whether in figures or in landscapes, I would like to express not something sentimentally melancholic but deep sorrow.

In short, I want to reach the point where people say of my work, that man feels deeply and that man feels subtly. Despite my so-called coarseness — you understand — perhaps precisely because of it. It seems pretentious to talk like this now, but that's why I want to push on.

What am I in the eyes of most people? A nonentity or an oddity or a disagreeable person — someone who has and will have no position in society, in short a little lower than the lowest.

Very well — assuming that everything is indeed like that, then through my work I'd like to show what there is in the heart of such an oddity, such a nobody.

This is my ambition, which is based less on resentment than on love in spite of everything, based more on a feeling of serenity than on passion.

Even though I'm often in a mess, inside me there's still a calm, pure harmony and music. In the poorest little house, in the filthiest corner, I see paintings or drawings. And my mind turns in that direction as if with an irresistible urge. ^{1v:3} As time passes, other things are increasingly excluded, and the more they are the faster my eyes see the picturesque. Art demands persistent work, work in spite of everything, and unceasing observation.

By persistent I mean in the first place continued labour, but also not abandoning your approach because of what someone else says. I have hopes, brother, that in a few years, and even now already, you'll gradually see things by me that will give you some recompense for your sacrifices.

I've had very little conversation with painters lately. I felt none the worse for that. It isn't the language of painters one ought to listen to but the language of nature.⁹ I can now understand, better than six months ago or more, why Mauve said: don't talk to me about Dupré, talk to me instead about the side of that ditch, or something like that. It sounds crude and yet it's perfectly correct. Feeling things themselves, reality, is more important than feeling paintings, at least more productive and life-giving.

Because I now have such a broad, such a large sense of art and of life itself, of which art is the essence, it sounds to me so shrill and false when there are people like Tersteeg who are always on the hunt. ^{1r:4}

For my part I find a peculiar charm in many modern paintings that the old ones don't have. For me one of the highest and noblest expressions of art is always that of the English, for instance Millais and Herkomer and Frank Holl. What I mean to say as regards the difference between old and contemporary art is: perhaps the new artists are deeper thinkers.¹⁰

There's another great difference: in sentiment, between *Chill October* by Millais¹¹ and the *Overveen bleaching grounds* by Ruisdael,¹² for example. And equally between the *Irish emigrants* by Holl¹³ and the *women reading the Bible* by Rembrandt.¹⁴

Rembrandt and Ruisdael are sublime, for us as much as for their contemporaries, but there's something in the moderns that strikes us as more personally intimate.

That's how it is with the woodcuts by Swain, and those by the old German masters too.

So it was a mistake a few years ago when there was a vogue among the moderns for imitating the old masters.

This is why I think what *père* Millet says is so right: I think it absurd that people want to appear to be something other than they are.¹⁵ That seems to be an unremarkable observation and yet it's as unfathomably deep as the ocean, and I for one think it advisable to take it to heart in all things.

I just wanted to tell you that regular work will and must be resumed, come what may — and I want to add that I'm longing so much for a letter from you, and also to wish you good-night.

Adieu, with a handshake.

Ever yours,
Vincent

Please remember the *thick* Ingres if you can, a sample is enclosed.¹⁶ I still have enough of the thin. I can wash in watercolour on the *thick Ingres*; on the *sans fin*, for example, it always gets muddy without it being entirely my fault.

I'll draw the cradle, I hope, a hundred times apart from the one today. With *persistence*.

Letter 5 September 6th 1883

My dear Theo,

I couldn't yet go into detail about my plans in my last letter, but now I can in some respects.

I'll begin my telling you that I now know for certain that one thing and another that I already suspected as regards the woman is true — that recently she was negotiating about her future even before I'd come to the decision to separate. I had to decide to separate, precisely because I was almost as certain of that *then* as I am *now* that I know more exactly what the plans were.

Having taken the decision, I wanted to go ahead with my travel plans without delay.

The first measure to be taken was to give notice to the landlord — that has now been done.

The second measure is what to do with my things, which would be an encumbrance and lead to costs at a time of not knowing exactly where I'll stay for long. They'll stay *here in this house* in the attic, since I've agreed this with my landlord.

You will ask, do I have plans to come back to The Hague then? No.

But in, say, 1/2 a year or 1 year ^{iv:2} I may have to get in touch with some painters here, when I've got much further, when I have a batch of studies of the real countryside.

And then for a while I'll probably take a room or rather an annexe well suited for use as a studio from the same landlord in his own house in VOORBURG, *not in The Hague*, which will be much cheaper for me than living here in the city, which I shan't readily do again.

So I'm relieved of superfluous encumbrances, and know at once where to head for if I reach a point (certainly not for the time being, of course, but say in 1 year) when a temporary return here would be feasible. Why? — because, for instance, by that time I might be able to become a member of the Drawing Society,² just to mention one thing. Which is one of the things I might desire and could achieve then.

You'll agree with me that The Hague is a very remarkable place. It really is the centre of the art world in Holland, and at the same time the surroundings are varied and extremely beautiful, so that one can always work there. ^{iv:3}

And so — though certainly not for the time being — after a period of 1 year, say, there will probably be a reason for being here for a brief or a longer stay. And through this arrangement regarding my things I stay in touch with someone who knows me and so can at any rate find me a place to live, if I ask.

So I'm a free man without encumbrances, I can leave when I like.

And I can now do more with the 150 francs from you than when so much had to come out of it. And because I have some relief from worries that were nerve-racking.

The travel costs are made much simpler in this way.

The only 'drawback', 'disadvantage' or whatever you want to call it is that, for my part, I really did have hope that the woman would turn out all right in Drenthe, and now have grave doubts about that. It's certainly her own behaviour that made me decide to act, but if I'd been able to find the means I'd have taken her to Drenthe nonetheless, in a final attempt for her.

Well, I had to decide, because every week of delay got me more entangled in thorns here, without any progress with her.

If I took my things, a 1/2 wagon to Drenthe would certainly cost something more than 25 guilders, according to a revised calculation by Van Gend & Loos,³ because there's also the cost of delivering to and collecting from home, although this isn't all that much.

Well, some packing cases would be needed, which I would have to buy, and that's another expense.

It would have been convenient to have my things, but it works out too expensive, and especially if one moved about over there. ir:4

I would first like to have a look at Katwijk, to do some sea studies, and because that at any rate is within reach, even if the journey to Drenthe has to wait a while on account of the money.

Oh, Theo, you'll understand my feelings in recent days, a great melancholy about the woman and the children, but it couldn't be otherwise — at the same time all my thoughts are about work and I'm really eager, because now I can do things which would have been impossible for me otherwise.

Dear brother — if you could feel precisely what I'm feeling, and how I've devoted a piece of myself, so to speak, to the woman, namely forgetting everything else and concentrating on getting her back on her feet — if you could feel precisely a kind of sadness about life, which doesn't, however, make me indifferent to it, on the contrary, I would rather have my sorrow about one thing and another than forget or become indifferent — if you could feel precisely the extent to which I draw my serenity from *worship of sorrow*⁴ and not from illusion — perhaps even for you brother, my inner self would be very different and more detached from life than you can now imagine. I'll certainly not say much more about the woman, but I'll still continue to think about her often. From the beginning, with her, it was a question of all or nothing when it came to helping. I couldn't give her money to live on her own before, I *had* to take her in if I was to do *anything* of use to her. And in my view the proper course would have been to marry her and take her to Drenthe. But, I admit, neither she herself nor circumstances allow it. She isn't kind, she isn't good, but neither am I, and serious attachment existed throughout everything as we were.

I need to work and I also need you to write soon. Adieu, with a handshake.

Ever yours,

Vincent



Drawing by Van Gogh of the corner of the Prinsessegracht (1882)
where nowadays (just to the right of the image) the KABK is situated.



The actual corner in the 21st century.