

Letter 501
Arles, 21st June 1888

My Dear Theo,

I have just read Geffray's article on Claude Monet. What he says is really very good. I should so like to see that exhibition! The only way I can console myself for not seeing it is to look round and see so many things in nature that I hardly have time to think of anything else, for just now it is harvesttime.

I have had a letter from Bernard, who says that he is feeling very lonesome, but that he is working all the same, and has written a new poem on himself in which he makes fun of himself rather pathetically. And he asks, "What's the use of working?" Only he asks that while he is working; he says that work is no earthly good at all while he is working, which is not at all the same thing as saying it when one is not working; I should very much like to see what he is doing.

I am curious to know what Gauguin will do if Bernard does not go back to him at Pont-Aven; I've given them each other's addresses up to now because they might need each other.

I have had a week's hard, close work among the cornfields in the full sun. The result is some studies of cornfields, landscapes, and – a sketch of a sower.

A ploughed field, a big field with clods of violet earth – climbing toward the horizon, a sower in blue and white. On the horizon a field of short ripe corn.

Over it all a yellow sky with a yellow sun [F 422, JH 1470].

You can tell from this simple mentioning of the tones that it's a composition in which colour plays a very important part.

And the sketch, such as it is – a size 25 canvas – torments me, making me wonder if I shouldn't attack it seriously and make a terrible picture of it.

My Lord, how much would I like to do it. But I keep asking myself if I have vigour enough to carry it out.

Such as it is, I am putting the sketch to one side, hardly daring to think about it. I have been longing to do a sower for such a long time, but the things I've wanted for a long time never come off. And so I am almost afraid of it. And yet, after Millet and Lhermitte, what still remains to be done is – a sower, in colour and large size.

Let's talk of something else – I have a model at last – a Zouave – a boy with a small face, a bull neck, and the eye of a tiger, and I began with one portrait, and began again with another; the half-length I did of him was horribly harsh, in a blue uniform, the blue of enamel saucepans, with braids of a faded reddish-orange, and two yellow stars on his breast, an ordinary blue, and very hard to do [F 423, JH 1486]. That bronzed, feline head of his with a red cap, I placed it against a green door and the orange bricks of a wall. So it's a savage combination of incongruous tones, not easy to manage. The study I made of it seems to me very harsh, but all the same I'd like always to be working on vulgar, even loud portraits like this. It teaches me something, and above all that is what I want of my work. The second portrait will be full length, sitting against a white wall.

Did you notice in the Dessins Raffaelli, "The Street," published lately in the Figaro? The main one – you would say it was the Place Clichy with all its bustle – is very much alive. Figaro is said to have published a number with Caran d'Ache's drawings.

I forgot to tell you in my last letter that I received – it's a fortnight ago now – the consignment of paints from Tasset. I shall need a fresh batch, since these studies of wheat fields and Zouaves have fairly devoured my tubes.

Only a third or a half is urgent.

Among the studies of wheat fields there is one of the stacks, of which I sent you the first sketch; it is on a square size 30 canvas.

We have had torrential rain these last two days, which has gone on all day, and will change the appearance of the fields. It came absolutely unexpectedly and suddenly, while everyone was harvesting. They brought in a great part of the wheat just as it was.

I am hoping to go for a trip into the Camargue next Friday with a veterinary surgeon; there are bulls there and wild white horses, and pink flamingos too. I shouldn't be surprised if it was very beautiful.

There is no desperate hurry for the canvas either.

I am very curious to know what Gauguin will do, but to risk persuading him to come – no – for I do not know if it would suit him. And perhaps when you consider his large family, it is more his duty to try to bring off something that would bring in enough to let him be the head of the family again.

In any case, I certainly do not want to cramp anybody's individuality by any association, and if he is hankering after that plunge he mentioned, he may have good reason for it, and I should not like to deter him if he is really set on it, which remains to be seen. We may find that out from his reply.

Good-bye for the present. A handshake, and thank you for the paper, and good luck with your exhibition.

Ever yours,

Vincent.

What is old Tanguy doing? Have you seen him lately? I am always glad to get paints from him, even if they are just a little worse than elsewhere, provided however that they are not too expensive.

Letter 535a
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Here is the letter for Gauguin – I know that there is the following passage in the letter: “I insist that, supposing the capital is got together, or half of it got together, your brother will exert his powers to lead the enterprise to success, and will be its director.” I know quite well that he also writes: “In principle I accept your proposition.” But I think it would be going a bit too far if we did not firmly point out to him that our proposal was meant without all those special considerations, and that we ourselves are too short of money to be able to risk anything but living together and sharing the monthly money.

And it is true I did not know that he had such a big family; because of this he might prefer to stay in the North. The utmost one could do would be for me to leave the South and go and join him in Brittany, if this would solve his difficulties. And my longing to work in the South is naturally subordinate to the interests of fellows like him. For all that, one should not think lightly of a change.

Besides, I am a bit afraid of being scolded for having separated him from his family, or [for having stirred up] some such hornets’ nest.

My God, if he has such a big family, it is probably his duty not to absent himself any more. And possibly he would be much happier if you simply bought a picture from him once in a while.

If for the present I have neither referred to these two passages in his letter nor to certain others, it is because I feel it is too difficult to say Yes to them candidly. If on the other hand his whole plan is nothing but a fata morgana, which consequently will disappear of its own accord, he will speak of it again.

But there are the travelling expenses, the debt at the inn, his doctor’s bill; now he mentions another debt of 300 francs, which he will pay off with that picture, if that art lover he knows agrees. But if he doesn’t agree...?

In short, it would not be very prudent to hold out expectations beyond our means, and to enter into greater obligations than we could fulfill. Gauguin may say that he is very, very agitated, and this is bad enough, and will not do his work any good. No, one must not change haphazardly, without taking into account those doubts and alterations whose existence is not auspicious. The more I calm down here, and the more I recover my strength, the more I feel that after all work is the only sure thing. I admit that, if life in Brittany is considerably cheaper, I should if necessary have to sacrifice my plan to work here, and this I shall do with pleasure if it is to his advantage. But all the more reason to work hard at the fifty pictures that I should like to have finished before speaking again about projects of the kind we discussed last winter.

Just now a letter arrived from home. At present I am feeling so well that it is not indispensable for me to stay here solely because of my health. We must try to arrange things in such a way that you are not overburdened with expenses; that is what is necessary, and it is serious enough.