

Letter 518
Arles, 6 August 1888

My dear Theo,

I think you were right to go to our uncle's funeral, since Mother seemed to be expecting you. The best way to tackle a death is to swallow the image of the illustrious dead, whatever he was, as the best man in the best of all possible worlds, where everything is always for the best. Which not being contested, and consequently incontestable, it is doubtless allowable for us to return afterwards to our own affairs. I am glad that our brother Cor has grown bigger and stronger than the rest of us. And he must be stupid if he does not get married, for he has nothing but that and his hands. With that and his hands, and that and what he knows of machinery, I for one would like to be in his shoes, if I had any desire at all to be anyone else. And meanwhile I am in my own hide, and my hide within the cog-wheels of the Fine Arts, like corn between the mill-stones.

Did I tell you that I had sent the drawings to friend Russell? At the moment I am doing practically the same ones again for you, there will be twelve likewise. You will then see better what there is in the painted studies in the way of drawing. I have already told you that I always have to fight against the mistral, which makes it absolutely impossible to be master of your stroke. That accounts for the "haggard" look of the studies. You will tell me that instead of drawing them, I ought to paint them again on fresh canvases at home. I think so myself now and then, for it is not my fault in this case that the execution lacks a livelier touch. What would Gauguin say about it if he were here, would he advise seeking a more sheltered place? I now have another unpleasant thing to tell you about the money, which is that I shall not manage this week, because this very day I am paying out 25 Frs.; I shall have money for five days, but not for seven. This is Monday; if I get your next letter on Saturday morning there will be no need to increase the enclosure. Last week I did not one only but two portraits of my postman, a half-length with the hands, and a head, life size [F 1458, JH 1536; F 432, JH 1522]. The good fellow, as he would not accept money, cost more eating and drinking with me, and I gave him besides the "Lantern" of Rochefort. But that is a trifling and immaterial evil, considering that he posed very well, and that I expect to paint his baby very shortly, for his wife has just been brought to bed.

I will send you, at the same time as the drawings that I have in hand, two lithographs by de Lemud, "Wine" and "The Café"; in "Wine" there is a sort of Mephistopheles, rather reminiscent of C.M. when younger, and in "The Café"...it is Raoul exactly, you know that old Bohemian student type, whom I knew last year. What a talent that de Lemud had, like Hoffman or Edgar Poe. And yet he is one who is little talked of. Perhaps you will not care tremendously for these lithographs at first, but it is just when you look at them for a long time that they grow on you.

I have come to the end both of paints and canvas and I have already had to buy some here. And I must go back for still more. So please do send the letter so that I'll have it on Saturday morning. Today I am probably going to begin on the interior of the café where I have a room, by gas light, in the evening.

It is what they call here a "café de nuit" (they are fairly frequent here), staying open all night. "Night prowlers" can take refuge there when they have no money to pay for a lodging, or are too drunk to be taken in. All those things – family, native land – are perhaps more attractive in the imaginations of such people as us, who pretty well do without native land or family either, than they are in reality. I always feel I am a traveller, going somewhere and to some destination. If I tell myself that the somewhere and the destination do not exist, that seems to me very reasonable and likely enough.

The brothel keeper, when he kicks anyone out, has similar logic, argues as well, and is always right, I know. So at the end of my career I shall find my mistake. So be it. I shall find then that not only the Arts, but everything else as well, were only dreams, that one's self was nothing at all. If we are as flimsy as that, so much the better for us, for then there is nothing against the unlimited possibility of future existence. Whence comes it that, in the present instance of our uncle's death, the face of the dead was calm, peaceful, and grave, while it is a fact that while living he was scarcely like that, either in youth or age. I have often observed a like effect as I looked at the dead as though to question them. And that for me is one proof, though not the most serious, of a life beyond the grave.

And in the same way a child in the cradle, if you watch it at leisure, has the infinite in its eyes. In short, I know nothing about it, but it is just this feeling of not knowing that makes the real life we are actually living now like a one-way journey in a train. You go fast, but cannot distinguish any object very close up, and above all you do not see the engine.

It is rather curious that Uncle as well as Father believed in the future life. Not to mention Father, I have several times heard Uncle arguing about it.

Ah – but then, they were more assured than us, and were affirmers who got angry if you dared to go deeper. Of the future life of artists through their works I do not think much. Yes, artists perpetuate themselves by handing on the torch, Delacroix to the impressionists, etc. But is that all?

If the kind old mother of a family, with ideas that are pretty well limited and tortured by the Christian system, is to be immortal as she believes, and seriously too – and I for one do not gainsay it – why should a consumptive or neurotic cab horse like Delacroix and de Goncourt, with broad ideas, be any less immortal? Granted that it seems just that the most destitute should feel the most the springing of this unaccountable hope.

Enough. What is the good of worrying about it? But living in the full tide of civilization, of Paris, of the Arts, why should not one keep this “Ego” of the old women, if women themselves without their instinctive belief that “so it is,” would not find strength to create or to act?

Then the doctors will tell us that not only Moses, Mahomet, Christ, Luther, Bunyan and others were mad, but also Frans Hals, Rembrandt, Delacroix, and also all the dear narrow old women like our mother.

Ah – that’s a serious matter – one might ask these doctors; where then are the sane people?

Are they the brothel keepers who are always right? Probably. Then what to choose? Fortunately there is no choice.

With a handshake.

Ever yours, Vincent