

My dear Theo,

I spent yesterday evening with the 2nd lieutenant; he expects to leave here on Friday, then he will stop a night at Clermont, and from Clermont he will send you a wire to tell you by what train he will arrive Sunday morning. The roll he is bringing contains 35 studies, among which there are many I am desperately dissatisfied with, but which I am sending anyway, since at all events they will give you a vague idea of the very fine subjects there are in this country.

For instance, there is a rough sketch I made of myself laden with boxes, props, and canvas on the sunny road to Tarascon [F 448, JH 1491]. There is a view of the Rhone in which the sky and the water are the colour of absinthe, with a blue bridge [F 426, JH 1468] and figures of little black urchins; there is the sower [F 422, JH 1470], and a washing place, and others as well, which have not come off at all and are unfinished, especially one big landscape with brushwood.

What has happened to the Souvenir de Mauve? Not having heard any word about it, I have been inclined to think that Tersteeg must have said something disagreeable to you about it, to the effect that it would be refused, or some such unpleasantness. Needless to say, I shan't fret over it if this is so.

Just now I am working on a study like this

of boats seen from the quay above, the two boats are pink tinged with violet, the water is bright green, no sky, a tricolour on the mast [F 449, JH 1558]. A workman with a barrow is unloading sand. I have a drawing of it as well [F 1462, JH 1556].

Have you received the three drawings of the garden? In the end they'll refuse to take any more of them at the post office, because they are too big.

I am afraid that I shall not get a rather beautiful model; she promised, but then – as it appears – picked up some change by going on a long weekend, and now has something better to do. She was extraordinary, the expression like that one by Delacroix, the figure primitive and strange.

I endure these things with patience, failing any other way of bearing them, but this continual difficulty with models is maddening. One of these days I hope to make a study of oleanders. If I painted prettily like Bouguereau, people would not be ashamed to let themselves be painted, but I think that I have lost models because they thought that they were “badly done,” because “it was only pictures full of painting” that I did. The poor little souls are afraid of being compromised and that people will laugh at their portraits. But it is almost enough to make you lose heart when you think that you could do something if people had more good will. I cannot resign myself to saying – “sour grapes” – it does not console me for not having more models.

Well, I must have patience and look around again for others.

Our sister will soon be coming now to spend some time with you. I am sure she will enjoy herself.

It is a gloomy enough prospect to have to say to myself that perhaps the painting I am doing will never be of any value whatever. If it was worth what it cost to do, I could say, “I never bothered my head about money.”

But as things are, on the contrary it absorbs me. But there it is, and anyhow I must go on and try to do better.

Very often I think that it would be wiser to go to Gauguin, instead of recommending the life here to him. I am so afraid that after all he will complain of having been upset. Would it really be possible for us to live at home here, and could we make both ends meet, seeing that it is a new experiment? We can figure what it would cost in Brittany, whereas I haven't the slightest idea about here. I still find life pretty expensive, and you don't get anywhere complaining to the people here. Beds and some furniture would have to be bought here, and then there would be the cost of his journey and everything he owes.

It seems to me to be risking more than we ought, when Bernard and he spend so little in Brittany. Anyway, we must decide soon, and I for my part have no preference. It is simply a question of deciding where we have the best likelihood of living cheaply. I must write Gauguin today to ask him what he pays for models, and if he has any.

You see, when one is getting old, one must really rule out illusions, and count the cost before embarking on things.

And if when one is younger one can believe that it's possible to get a living by unremitting work, it becomes more and more doubtful now. I already told Gauguin in my last letter that if we painted like Bouguereau we could hope to make money by it, but that the public will never change, and it likes only easy, pretty things. With a more austere talent, you cannot count on profit from your work; most of the people intelligent enough to like and understand impressionist pictures are and will remain too poor to buy them. Will Gauguin or I work the less for that? – no – but we shall be forced to submit deliberately to poverty and social isolation. And to begin with, let's settle down where

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life costs the least. If success comes, so much the better, so much the better if we find ourselves in easier circumstances someday.

What touches me most deeply in Zola's L'Œuvre is the figure of Bongrand-Jundt. What he says is so true. "You think, you poor souls, that when an artist has established his talent and his reputation, he is safe. On the contrary, henceforth he is denied producing anything which is not perfect. His reputation itself forces him to take more pains over his work, as the chances of selling grow fewer. At the least sign of weakness, the whole jealous pack will fall on him and destroy that very reputation and the faith that the changeable and treacherous public has temporarily had in him."

Even stronger than this is what Carlyle says "You know the glowworms in Brazil that shine so that in the evening ladies stick them into their hair with pins; well, fame is a fine thing, but look you, to the artist it is what the hairpin is to the insects.

"You want to succeed and shine, but do you know what it is you desire?"

So I have a horror of success, I am afraid of "the morning after the night before" of an impressionist success, even these difficult days will later seem to us "the good old times!"

Well, Gauguin and I must look ahead, we must contrive to have a roof over our heads, beds, in short, the absolute necessities, to stand the siege of failure which will last all our lives and we must settle down in the cheapest place. Then we shall get the quiet which is necessary if we are to produce much, even if we sell little or nothing.

But if our expenses exceed our income, we should be mistaken if we hoped that all could be put right by selling our pictures. On the contrary, we should be obliged to get rid of them at any price and at the wrong moment.

To conclude, we must live almost like monks or hermits, with work for our master passion, and surrendering our ease.

Nature and fine weather are the advantages of the South; but I think that Gauguin will never give up the fight in Paris, he has it too much at heart, and believes in a lasting success more than I do. That will do me no harm; on the contrary, perhaps I am too pessimistic. Let's leave him this illusion then, but let's realize that what he will always need is his daily bread and shelter and paints. That is the crack in his armour, and it is because he is getting into debt now that he will be knocked out in advance.

If we two come to his aid, we are in fact making his victory in Paris possible.

If I had the same ambitions as he, we probably should not agree. But I neither care about success for myself nor about happiness; I do care about the permanence of this vigorous attempt by the impressionists, I do care about this question of shelter and daily bread for them. And I think it's a crime that I should have it when two could live on the same money.

If you are a painter, they think you are either a fool or a rich man; a cup of milk costs you a franc, a slice of bread two, and meanwhile your pictures are not selling. That is what makes it necessary to combine as the old monks did, and the Moravian Brothers of our Dutch heaths.

I can already see that Gauguin is hoping for success, he cannot do without Paris, he does not realize the eternity of poverty. You understand that under the circumstances it is all the same to me whether I stay or go. We must let him fight his battle, he is sure to win. He would feel that he was doing nothing if he were too far from Paris, but for our own part let's keep our utter indifference to success or failure.

I had begun to sign canvases, but I soon stopped, because it seemed too foolish. On one marine there is an excessively red signature, because I wanted a red note in the green. But you will see them soon. The end of the week will be a little difficult, so I hope to get your letter a day earlier rather than a day late.

With a handshake,

Ever yours, Vincent