

Letter 531
Arles, 3 September 1888

My dear Theo,

I spent yesterday with the Belgian, who also has a sister among the “vingtistes.” The weather was not fine, but a very good day for talking; we went for a walk and anyway saw some very fine things at the bullfight and outside the town. We talked more seriously about the plan, that if I keep a place in the south, he ought to set up a sort of post among the collieries. Then Gauguin and I and he, if the importance of a picture made it worth the journey, could change places – and so be sometimes in the north, but in familiar country with a friend in it, and sometimes in the south.

You will soon see him, this young man with the look of Dante, because he is going to Paris, and if you put him up – if the room is free – you will be doing him a good turn; he is very distinguished in appearance, and will become so, I think, in his painting.

He likes Delacroix, and we talked a lot about Delacroix yesterday. He even knew the violent study for the “Bark of Christ.”

Well, thanks to him I have at last a first sketch of that picture which I have dreamt of for so long – the poet. He posed for me. His line head with that keen gaze stands out in my portrait against a starry sky of deep ultramarine; for clothes, a short yellow coat, a collar of unbleached linen, and spotted tie. He gave me two sittings in one day [F 462, JH 1574].

Yesterday I had a letter from our sister, who has seen a great deal. Ah, if she could marry an artist it would not be so bad. Well, we must go on inducing her to develop her personality rather than her artistic abilities. I have finished L’Immortel by Daudet. I rather like the saying of the sculptor Védrine, that to achieve fame is something like ramming the lighted end of your cigar into your mouth when you are smoking. But I certainly like L’Immortel less, far less than Tartarin.

You know, it seems to me that L’Immortel is not so fine in colour as Tartarin, because it reminds me with its mass of true and subtle observations of the dreary pictures of Jean Bérend which are so dry and cold. Now Tartarin is really great, with the greatness of a masterpiece, just like Candide.

I do strongly ask you to keep my studies of this place as open to the air as possible, because they are not yet thoroughly dry. If they remain shut up or in the dark the colours will get devalued. So the portrait of “The Young Girl,” “The Harvest” [F 412, JH 1440](a wide landscape with the ruin in the background and the line of the Alpilles), the little “Seascape,” the “Garden” with the weeping tree and clumps of conifers [F 428, JH 1499], if you could put these on stretchers it would be well. I am rather keen on those. You will easily see by the drawing of the little seascape that it is the most thought out.

I am having two oak frames made for my new peasant's head and for my Poet study. Oh, my dear boy, sometimes I know so well what I want. I can very well do without God both in my life and in my painting, but I cannot, ill as I am, do without something which is greater than I, which is my life – the power to create.

And if, defrauded of the power to create physically, a man tries to create thoughts in place of children, he is still very much part of humanity.

And in a picture I want to say something comforting as music is comforting. I want to paint men and women with that something of the eternal which the halo used to symbolize, and which we seek to confer by the actual radiance and vibration of our colourings.

Portraiture so understood does not become like an Ary Scheffer, just because there is a blue sky behind as in the “St. Augustine.” For Ary Scheffer is so little of a colourist.

But it would be more in harmony with what Eug. Delacroix attempted and brought off in his “Tasso in Prison,” and many other pictures, representing a real man. Ah! portraiture, portraiture with the thought, the soul of the model in it, that is what I think must come.

The Belgian and I talked a lot yesterday about the advantages and disadvantages of this place. We quite agree regarding both. And on the great advantage it would be to us if we could move now North, now South.

He is going to stay with McKnight again so as to live more cheaply. That, however, has I think one disadvantage, because living with a slacker makes one slack.

I think you would enjoy meeting him, he is still young. I think he will ask your advice about buying Japanese prints and Daumier lithographs. As to these – the Daumiers – it would be well to get some more of them, because later there will be none to be got.

The Belgian was saying that he paid 80 francs for board and lodging with McKnight. So what a difference there is in living together, since I have to pay 45 a month for nothing but lodging. And so I always come

back to the same reckoning, that with Gauguin I should not spend more than I do alone, and be no worse off. But we must consider that they were very badly housed, not for sleeping, but for the possibility of work at home.

So I am always between two currents of thought, first the material difficulties, turning round and round to make a living; and second, the study of colour. I am always in hope of making a discovery there, to express the love of two lovers by a marriage of two complementary colours, their mingling and their opposition, the mysterious vibrations of kindred tones. To express the thought of a brow by the radiance of a light tone against a sombre background.

To express hope by some star, the eagerness of a soul by a sunset radiance. Certainly there is nothing in that of trompe d'oeil realism, but isn't it something that actually exists?

Good-by for the present. I will tell you another time when the Belgian may be leaving,, because I shall see him again tomorrow.

With a handshake,

Ever yours, Vincent

The Belgian says that his people at home have a de Groux, the study for the "Benedicite" in the Brussels Museum.

The portrait of the Belgian is something like the portrait of Reid [F 343, JH 1250] which you have, in execution.