

Letter 623
St.-Rémy, c. 12 – 15 January 1890

Dear Theo,

Thank you for your last letter; I hope Wil has recovered from her indisposition and that it was no worse than you said. Many thanks also for the package of canvas and paints which has just arrived.

I have enough subjects for pictures in my head for when the weather will let me work outside.

I am pleased with what you say of the copy after Millet, "La Veillée." [F 647, JH 1834] The more I think about it, the more I think that there is justification for trying to reproduce some of Millet's things which he himself had no time to paint in oil. Working thus on his drawings or on his woodcuts is not purely and simply copying. Rather it is translating – into another language – that of colour – the impressions of light and shade in black and white. So I have just finished the three other "Hours of the Day," after the woodcuts by Lavielle. [F 684, JH 1880; F 686, JH 1881; F 649, JH 1835] It has taken me a lot of time and trouble. For you know that I already did the "Travaux des Champs" last summer. Now I haven't sent these reproductions – you'll see them someday – because they were more groping attempts than these, but all the same they have been very useful to me for the "Hours of the Day." Later on, who knows, perhaps I shall be able to make lithographs of them.

I am curious to know what M. Lauzet will say of them.

They will take quite a month more to dry, the three last ones, but once you get them, you will see clearly that they have been done out of a profound and sincere admiration for Millet. Then, whether they are someday criticized or despised as copies, it will nonetheless be true that they have their justification in the attempt to make Millet's work more accessible to the great general public.

Now, I am going to speak to you again about what I think we could do for the future, to cut expenses. At Montevergues there is an asylum where one of the employees was an attendant. He tells me that one pays only 22 sous per day there, and that the patients are even clothed by the establishment. Further they make them work on the land that belongs to the property; and there is also a forge, a carpenters shop, etc. Once they get to know me a little, I do not believe that they would forbid me to paint; then there is always the point that it is less expensive for one thing, and for another, that one can work on something. Therefore one is not miserable there with something to do, which is good. But aside from the idea of Montevergues, if I return to Holland, are there not establishments there also where one works and where it is not expensive and where one has the right to take advantage of? While I do not know if Montevergues accepts foreigners, there would probably be a bit higher rate and especially admission difficulties, that it would be better to forget it.

I have to tell you that that reassures me somewhat to think things can be simplified. Because now it turns out to be too expensive, and the idea of going to Paris and then to the country, without having any other resource to offset the cost except painting, would be making the pictures expensive enough.

You should discuss it with C. M. someday, if you see him, and tell him frankly that I shall try my best, and that I have no preference at all.

I have seen Mr. Peyron again this morning, he tells that he leaves me at complete liberty to amuse myself, and that it is necessary for me to guard against depression as much as I can. Well, it is good advice to think about, and it is also an obligation. Now, you understand that in an establishment where invalids work the land, I would find many subjects for studies and drawings, and that I would not be in the least bit miserable there. Well, it is necessary to think of these things while one has the time.

I believe that if I came to Paris, I would not at first do anything but draw Greek casts again, because it is always necessary for me to study.

For the moment, I feel very well and I hope that that will remain so.

And I have the same hope that it will get even better, if I return to the North.

Don't forget that a broken pitcher is a broken pitcher and therefore in no way do I have any pretensions. I think that at home in Holland they always value painting more or less, so that an institution would hardly object to letting me do it. However, over and above painting, it would be important to have the opportunity for an occupation, and it would cost less. Hasn't the country, and working in it, always been to our taste? And are we not a bit indifferent, you as much as I, to life in a big city?

I must tell you that at times I feel too well to be idle, and I fear that I would not make anything good coming to Paris. I am able, and I very much want to earn some money with my painting, and it would be necessary to make enough that my expenses do not exceed their value, and even that the money spent could be returned little by little. To talk of something else, I cannot manage to see the South like the good Italians – Fortuny, Jimenez, Tapiró and others – on the contrary, I see it more and more with a Northerner's eye! It is not, believe me, that I should not like to be able to live as before, without this preoccupation with my health. Anyway, we will make the attempt once, but probably not twice in the spring, if this passes away completely.

Today I got the 10 francs which were still with M. Peyron. When I go to Arles, I shall have to pay three month's rent for the room where my furniture is, that will be in February. This furniture, I think, will be useful, if not to me, then to some other painter who wants to establish himself in the country. In case I leave, wouldn't it be wiser to send it to Gauguin, who will probably spend more time in Brittany, than to you, who will not have any place to put it? That's another thing we must think of in time.

I think that by giving three heavy old chests to someone, I could get out of paying the rest of the rent and perhaps the packing cost. I paid about 30 francs for them. I will write a note to Gauguin and De Haan to ask if they intend to stay in Brittany, and if they would like me to send the furniture, and then if they would wish me to go there too. I will pledge myself to nothing, only I shall say that most probably I am not staying on here. This week I am going to start on the snow-covered field [F 632, JH 1882] and Millet's "The First Steps," [F 668, JH 1883] in the same size as the others. Then there will be six canvases in a series, and I can tell you, I have put much thought into the disposition of the colours while working on these last three of the "Hours of the Day."

You see nowadays there are so many, many people who do not feel they are made for publicity, but who support and reinforce what others do. People who translate books, for example. Or engravers, lithographers. Take Vernier, for instance, and Lerat.

So that means that I do not hesitate to make copies. I should so much like, if I had time to travel, to copy Giotto's work, that painter who would be as modern as Delacroix, if he were not primitive, yet so different from the other primitives. However, I have not seen much of his work, but there is one piece which is comforting.

So what I think I shall do in painting is the "Men Drinking" by Daumier [F 667, JH 1884] and the "Convict Prison" by Régamey [F 669, JH 1885]. You will find them among the wood engravings.

For the moment I am busy with the Millets, but this means that I shall not lack things to work on.

So even half locked up, I shall be able to occupy myself for a good while.

What the impressionists have found in colour will develop even more, but many forget the tie which binds them to the past, and I will strive to show that I have little belief in a rigorous division between impressionists and others. I think it is very fine that in this century there have been painters like Millet, Delacroix and Meissonier, who cannot be surpassed. For though we do not like Meissonier as much as some people, there's no getting away from it when you see his "Readers," his "Halting Place," and so many other pictures, it is something. And then we leave out what is absolutely his strongest point, that is to say the military painting, because we like it less than the country.

Nevertheless, to be just, one must really say that what he has done cannot be surpassed or changed. Once more I hope our sister is better. Kind regards to all,

Ever yours, Vincent.

[The beginning of the postscript is missing]

.... exaggerated in the work. That parents who are ignorant of painting should cease loving a child who is a bit different from the others – but even if they understood painting, how could one reproach them with it in this society of money and soldiers? So, it would not be unfortunate for him if he should do his military service, it would only mean acknowledging in time that he is defeated by fate. What has become of Vignon? After all, this much is certain, what is important is not playing the part of a proud man or having great hopes for the future. Let's take the terrible realities for what they are, and if it should be necessary for me to give up painting, I think I should do so. At any rate, being in better health than I have been for two years, I will again do my best to find some job or other. I have often told myself that if I had had a calmer temperament two years ago, like Seurat's for instance, I should have been able to resist.

[On the back of the letter in Vincent's handwriting is the English poem which he included in the letter to Wil. See Letter W18.]