

Letter 459a
Paris, August – October 1886

[Letter written in English by Vincent van Gogh to the English painter Horace M. Livens, whom he had met in Antwerp. The text is reproduced without alterations.]

Paris, Aug-Oct. 1887

My dear Mr. Levens,

Since I am here in Paris I have very often thought of yourself and work. You will remember that I liked your colour, your ideas on art and literature and I add, most of all your personality. I have already before now thought that I ought to let you know what I was doing, where I was. But what refrained me was that I find living in Paris is much dearer than in Antwerp and not knowing what your circumstances are I dare not say, come over to Paris from Antwerp without warning you that it costs one dearer, and that if poor, one has to suffer many things – as you may imagine – . But on the other hand there is more chance of selling. There is also a good chance of exchanging pictures with other artists. In one word, with much energy, with a sincere personal feeling of colour in nature I would say an artist can get on here notwithstanding the many obstructions. And I intend remaining here still longer.

There is much to be seen here – for instance Delacroix, to name only one master. In Antwerp I did not even know what the impressionists were, now I have seen them and though not being one of the club yet I have much admired certain impressionists' pictures – Degas nude figure – Claude Monet landscape.

And now for what regards what I myself have been doing, I have lacked money for paying models else I had entirely given myself to figure painting. But I have made a series of colour studies in painting, simply flowers, red poppies, blue corn flowers and myosotys, white and rose roses, yellow chrysanthemums-seeking oppositions of blue with orange, red and green, yellow and violet seeking les tons rompus et neutres to harmonize brutal extremes. Trying to render intense colour and not a grey harmony. Now alter these gymnastics I lately did two heads which I dare say are better in light and colour than those I did before.

So as we said at the time: in colour seeking life the true drawing is modelling with colour.

I did a dozen landscapes too, frankly green frankly blue.

And so I am struggling for life and progress in art.

Now I would very much like to know what you are doing and whether you ever think of going to Paris.

If ever you did come here, write to me before and I will, if you like, share my lodgings and studio with you so long as I have any. In spring – say February or even sooner I may be going to the South of France, the land of the blue tones and gay colours.

And look here, if I knew you had longings for the same we might combine.

I felt sure at the time that you are a thorough colourist and since I saw the impressionists I assure you that neither your colour nor mine as it is developping itself, is exactly the same as their theories. But so much dare I say we have a chance and a good one finding friends. I hope your health is all-right. I was rather low down in health when in Antwerp but got better here.

Write to me in any case. Remember me to Allen, Briet, Rink, Durant but I have not often thought of them as I did think of you – almost daily.

Shaking hands cordially. Yours truly Vincent

My present address is
Mr. Vincent van Gogh
54 Rue Lepic, Paris.

With regard my chances of sale look here, they are certainly not much but still I do have a beginning.

At the present moment I have found four dealers who have exhibited studies of mine. And I have exchanged studies with many artists.

Now the prices are 50 francs. Certainly not much – but – as far as I can see one must sell cheap to rise and even at costing price. And mind my dear fellow, Paris is Paris. There is but one Paris and however hard living may be here, and if it became worse and harder even – the french air clears up the brain and does good – a world of good. I have been in Cormons studio for three or four months but I did not find that so useful as I had expected it to be. It may be my fault however, anyhow I left there too as I left Antwerp and since I worked alone, and fancy that since I feel my own self more.

Trade is slow here. The great dealers sell Millet, Delacroix, Corot, Daubigny, Dupré, a few other masters at exorbitant prices. They do little or nothing for young artists. The second class dealers contrariwise sell those at very low prices. If I asked more I would do nothing, I fancy. However I have faith in colour. Even with regards the price the public will pay for it in the long run. But for the present things are awfully hard. Therefore let anyone who risks to go over here consider there is no laying on roses at all.

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What is to be gained is progress and what the deuce that is, it is to be found here. I dare say as certain anyone who has a solid position elsewhere let him stay where he is. But for adventurers as myself, I think they lose nothing in risking more. Especially as in my case I am not an adventurer by choice but by fate, and feeling nowhere so much myself a stranger as in my family and country. – Kindly remember me to your landlady Mrs. Roosmalen and say her that if she will exhibit something of my work I will send her a small picture of mine.

[According to John Rewalt of New York, this letter was first published in the Sunday Times, London, February 17, 1929 (ed. F.V. Lucas). Livens painted mainly “farmyards.” The letter was written in 1886 (not 1887).]