

Letter 572a  
Arles, c. 22 January 1889

My dear friend Gauguin,

Thank you for your letter. Left behind alone on board my little yellow house – as it was perhaps my duty anyway to be the last to leave – I am not a little put out at my friends' departure.

Roulin got his transfer to Marseilles and has just left. It has been touching to see him these last few days with little Marcelle, making her laugh and dandling her on his knee.

His transfer means his being separated from his family, and you will not be surprised that the man whom you and I one evening nicknamed 'the passer-by,' was very heavy-hearted. And so was I, on witnessing that and other upsetting things.

When he sang to his child, his voice took on a strange timbre in which one could hear the voice of a woman rocking a cradle or of a sorrowing wet-nurse, and then another trumpet sound like a clarion call to France.

I reproach myself now that it was I – perhaps insisting too much that you stay on here to await events and giving you so many good reasons for doing so – I reproach myself now that perhaps it was I who was the cause of your departure – unless, of course, that departure was planned beforehand? And that it was therefore perhaps up to me to show I still had the right to be kept fully in the picture.

Be that as it may, I hope we still like each other enough to be able, if need be, to start afresh, assuming that the wolf at the door, alas ever-present for those of us artists without means, should necessitate such a measure.

You mention a canvas of mine in your letter – Sunflowers on a yellow background – and make it plain you'd rather like to have it. I don't think it's altogether a bad choice – for if Jeannin can claim the peony, and Quost the hollyhock, then surely I, above all others, can lay claim to the sunflower.

I think I'll begin by returning what is yours [Gauguin's fencing equipment], while observing that it is my intention, after what has happened, categorically to deny your right to the canvas in question. But since I commend your intelligence in choosing this canvas, I'll make the effort to paint two of them exactly alike. In which case it can all be done and settled amicably so that you can have your own in the end all the same.

I made a fresh start today on my canvas of Mme. Roulin, the one in which, due to my accident, the hands had been left unfinished. As an arrangement of colours, the reds moving through to pure orange, building up again in the flesh tones to the chromes, passing through the pinks and blending with the olive and malachite greens – as an impressionist arrangement of colours I have never devised anything better. And I'm sure that if one were to put this canvas just as it is in a fishing boat, even one from Iceland, there would be some among the fishermen who would feel they were there, inside the cradle.

Ah! My dear friend, to achieve in painting what the music of Berlioz and Wagner has already done...an art that offers consolation for the broken-hearted! There are still just a few who feel it as you and I do!!!

My brother understands you well and when he tells me that you are a poor sort of wretch like me, well, that just proves that he understands us.

I shall send you your things, but I still have bouts of weakness at times during which I'm in no position to even lift a finger to return your things to you. In a few days' time I'll pluck up the courage. And as for the 'fencing masks and gloves' (make as little use as possible of less infantile engines of war), these terrible engines of war will just have to wait until then. I am writing to you very calmly, but packing up what's left is still beyond me.

In my mental or nervous fever, or madness – I am not too sure how to put it or what to call it – my thoughts sailed over many seas.