

My dear comrade Bernard,

More and more it seems to me that the pictures which must be made so that painting should be wholly itself, and should raise itself to a height equivalent to the serene summits which the Greek sculptors, the German musicians, the writers of French novels reached, are beyond the power of an isolated individual; so they will probably be created by groups of men combining to execute an idea held in common.

One may have a superb orchestration of colours and lack ideas. Another one is cram-full of new concepts, tragically sad or charming, but does not know how to express them in a sufficiently sonorous manner because of the timidity of a limited palette. All the more reason to regret the lack of corporative spirit among the artists, who criticize and persecute each other, fortunately without succeeding in annihilating each other.

You will say that this whole line of reasoning is banal – so be it! However, the thing itself – the existence of a renaissance – this fact is certainly no banality.

A technical question. Just give me your opinion on it in your next letter. I am going to put the black and the white, just as the colour merchant sells them to us, boldly on my palette and use them just as they are. When – and observe that I am speaking of the simplification of colour in the Japanese manner – when in a green park with pink paths I see a gentleman dressed in black and a justice of the peace by trade (the Arab Jew in Daudet's Tartarin calls this honourable functionary zouge de paix) who is reading L'Intransigeant... Over him and the park a sky of a simple cobalt... then why not paint the said zouge de paix with ordinary bone black and the Intransigeant with simple, quite raw white. For the Japanese artist ignores reflected colours, and puts the flat tones side by side, with characteristic lines marking off the movements and the forms.

In another category of ideas – when for instance one composes a motif of colours representing a yellow sky, then the fierce hard white of a white wall against this sky may be expressed if necessary – and this in a strange way – by raw white, softened by a neutral tone, for the sky itself colours it with a delicate lilac hue.

Furthermore imagine in that landscape which is so naïve, and a good thing too, a cottage whitewashed all over (the roof too) standing in an orange field – certainly orange, for the southern sky and the blue Mediterranean provoke an orange tint that gets more intense as the scale of blue colours gets a more vigorous tone – then the black note of the door, the windows and the little cross on the ridge of the roof produce a simultaneous contrast of black and white just as pleasing to the eye as that of blue and orange.

Or let us take a more amusing motif: imagine a woman in a black and white checked dress in the same primitive landscape with a blue sky and an orange soil – that would be a rather funny sight, I think. In Arles they often do wear black and white checks.

Suffice it to say that black and white are also colours, for in many cases they can be looked upon as colours, for their simultaneous contrast is as striking as that of green and red, for instance.

The Japanese make use of it for that matter. They express the mat and pale complexion of a young girl and the piquant contrast of the black hair marvellously well by means of white paper and four strokes of the pen. Not to mention their black thornbushes starred all over with a thousand white flowers.

At last I have seen the Mediterranean, which you will probably cross sooner than I shall.

I spent a week at Saintes-Maries, and to get there I drove in a diligence across the Camargue with its vineyards, moors and flat fields like Holland. There, at Saintes-Maries, were girls who reminded me of Cimabue and Giotto – thin, straight, somewhat sad and mystic. On the perfectly flat, sandy beach little green, red, blue boats, so pretty in shape and colour that they made one think of flowers. A single man is their whole crew, for these boats hardly venture on the high seas. They are off when there is no wind, and make for the shore when there is too much of it.

Gauguin, it seems, is still sick.

I am very eager to know what you have been working at lately – I myself am still doing nothing but landscapes – enclosed a sketch. I should also very much like to see Africa, but I hardly make any definite plans for the future, it will all depend on circumstances.

What I should like to find out is the effect of an intenser blue in the sky. Fromentin and Gérôme see the soil of the South as colourless, and a lot of people see it like that. My God, yes, if you take some sand in your hand, if you look at it closely, and also water, and also air, they are all colourless, looked at in this way. There is no blue without yellow and without orange, and if you put in blue, then you must put in yellow, and orange too, mustn't you? Oh well, you will tell me that what I write to you are only banalities.

A handshake in thought,

Sincerely yours, Vincent