

Letter 506
Arles, c.9th. July 1888

My Dear Theo,

I have come back from a day at Montmajour, and my friend the second lieutenant was with me. We explored the old garden together and stole some excellent figs. If it had been bigger it would have made me think of Zola's Paradou, great reeds, vines, ivy, fig trees, olives, pomegranates with lusty flowers of the brightest orange, hundred-year-old cypresses, ash trees and willows, rock oaks, half-broken flights of steps, ogive windows in ruins, blocks of white rock covered with lichen, and scattered fragments of crumbling walls here and there among the greenery. I brought back another big drawing, but not of the garden. That makes three drawings. When I have half a dozen I shall send them along.

Yesterday I went to Fontvieilles to visit Bock and McKnight, only these gentlemen had gone on a little trip to Switzerland for a week.

I think the heat is still doing me good, in spite of the mosquitoes and flies.

The grasshoppers — not like ours at home, but of this sort, like those you see in Japanese albums; and Spanish flies, gold and green in swarms on the olives. The grasshoppers (I think they are called cicadas) sing as loud as a frog.

I have again been thinking that when you remember that I painted the portrait of father Tanguy, and that he also had the portrait of mother Tanguy (which they have sold), and of their friend (it is true that for this latter portrait I was paid 20 francs by him), and that I have bought without discount 250 francs worth of paints from Tanguy, on which naturally he made something, and finally that I have been his friend no less than he has been mine, I have very serious reason to doubt his right to claim money from me; and it really is squared by the study he still has of mine, all the more so because there was an express arrangement that he should pay himself by the sale of a picture. Xanthippe, Mother Tanguy, and some other good ladies have by some queer freak of Nature heads of silex or flint. Certainly these ladies are a good deal more dangerous in the civilized world they go about in than the poor souls bitten by mad dogs who live in the Pasteur Institute. And old Tanguy would be right a hundred times over to kill his lady...but he won't do it, any more than Socrates.

And for this reason old Tanguy has more in common — in resignation and long suffering anyhow — with the ancient Christians, martyrs and slaves, than with the present day pimps of Paris.

That does not mean that there is any reason to pay him 80 francs, but it is a reason for never losing your temper with him, even if he loses his, when, as you may do in this instance, you chuck him out, or at least send him packing. I am writing to Russell at the same time. I think we know, don't we, that the English, the Yankees, etc. have this much in common with the Dutch, that their charity...is very Christian. Now, the rest of us not being very good Christians...That's what I can't put out of my head writing again like this.

This Bock has a head rather like a Flemish gentleman of the time of the Compromise of the Nobles, William the Silent's time and Marnix's. I shouldn't wonder if he's a decent fellow.

I have written to Russell that I would send him my parcel in a roll direct to him, for our exchange, if I knew that he was in Paris.

That means he must in any case answer me soon. Now I shall soon need some more canvas and paints. But I have not yet got the address of that canvas at 40 francs for 20 meters.

I think it is well to work especially at drawing just now, and to arrange to have paints and canvas in reserve for when Gauguin comes. I wish paint was as little of a worry to work with as pen and paper. I often pass up a painted study for fear of squandering the colour.

With paper, whether it's a letter I'm writing or a drawing I'm working on, there's never a misfire — so many pages of Whitman, so many drawings. I think that if I were rich I should spend less than I do now.

Well, old Martin would say, then it's up to you to get rich, and he is right, as he is about the masterpiece.

Do you remember in Guy de Maupassant the gentleman who hunted rabbits and other game, and who had hunted so hard for ten years, and was so exhausted by running after the game that when he wanted to get married he found he was impotent, which caused him the greatest embarrassment and consternation.

Without being in the same state as this gentleman as to its being either my duty or my desire to get married, I begin to resemble him in physique. According to the worthy Ziem, man becomes ambitious as soon as he becomes impotent. Now though it's pretty much all one to me whether I am impotent or not, I'm damned if that's going to drive me to ambition. It is only the greatest philosopher of his place and time, and consequently of all places and all times, good old master Pangloss who could — if he were here — give me advice and steady my soul.

There — the letter to Russell is in its envelope, and I have written as I intended. I asked him if he had any news of Reid, and I ask you the same question.

I told Russell I left him free to take what he liked, and from the first lot I sent as well. And that I was only waiting for his explicit answer, to know whether he preferred to make his choice at his or your place; that if, in the former circumstance, he wanted to see them at his own house, you would send him along some orchards as well, and fetch the lot back again when he had made his choice. So he cannot quarrel with that. If he takes nothing from Gauguin it is because he cannot. If he can, I am inclined to anticipate that he will; I told him that if I ventured to press him to buy, it was not because nobody else would if he didn't, but because Gauguin, having been ill, and with the further complication of his having been laid up in bed and having to pay his doctor, it all fell rather heavily on us; and we were all the more anxious to find a purchaser for a picture.

I am thinking a lot about Gauguin, and I would have plenty of ideas for pictures, and about work in general.

I have a charwoman now for one franc, who sweeps and scrubs the house for me twice a week. I am banking very much on her, reckoning that she will make our beds if we decide to sleep in the house. Otherwise we could make some arrangement with the fellow where I am staying now. Anyhow, we'll try to manage so that it would work out as an economy instead of more expense. How are you now? Are you still going to Gruby? What you tell me of the conversation at the Nouvelle Athènes is interesting. You know the little portrait by Desboutin that Portier has? It certainly is a strange phenomenon that all the artists, poets, musicians, painters, are unfortunate in material things — the happy ones as well — what you said lately about Guy de Maupassant is a fresh proof of it. That brings up again the eternal question: is the whole of life visible to us, or isn't it rather that this side of death we see one hemisphere only?

Painters — to take them only — dead and buried, speak to the next generation or to several succeeding generations through their work.

Is that all, or is there more besides? In a painter's life death is not perhaps the hardest thing there is.

For my own part, I declare I know nothing whatever about it, but to look at the stars always makes me dream, as simply as I dream over the black dots of a map representing towns and villages. Why, I ask myself, should the shining dots of the sky not be as accessible as the black dots on the map of France? If we take the train to get to Tarascon or Rouen, we take death to reach a star. One thing undoubtedly true in this reasoning is this: that while we are alive we cannot get to a star, any more than when we are dead we can take the train.

So it seems to me possible that cholera, gravel, phthisis and cancer are the celestial means of locomotion, just as steam-boats, omnibuses and railways are the terrestrial means. To die quietly of old age would be to go there on foot.

Now I am going to bed, because it is late, and I wish you good night and good luck.

A handshake, Yours

Vincent