

Letter 509
Arles, c. 13 July 1888

My dear Theo,

I have just send off to you by post a roll containing five big pen drawings. You have a sixth of that series from Mont Majour – a group of very dark pines and the town of Arles in the background [F 1452, JH 1437]. Afterward I want to add a view of the whole of the ruins (you have a hurried scratch of it [F 1417, JH 1434] among the small drawings).

Since I cannot help at all with money just at this moment when we are entering this combination with Gauguin, I have done all I could to show through my work that I have had the plan at heart. In my opinion the two views of the Crau and of the country on the banks of the Rhône are the best things I have done in pen and ink. If Thomas should happen to want them, he cannot have them for less than 100 fr. each. Even if in that case I had to make him a present of the three others, as we must get some money. But we cannot give them for less. Not everyone would have the patience to get themselves devoured by mosquitoes and to struggle against the nagging malice of this constant mistral, not to mention that I have spent whole days outside with a little bread and milk, since it was too far to go back to the town every once in a while.

I have already said more than once how much the Camargue and the Crau, except for the difference in colour and in the clearness of the atmosphere, remind me of the old Holland of Ruysdael's time. I think that these two I've spoken of, the flat countryside covered with vines and stubble fields, seen from a height, will give you an idea of it.

Believe me I am tired out by these drawings. I have begun a painting as well, but there is no way of doing it with the mistral blowing – there's absolutely nothing doing.

Well now, about this canvas, I have compared Tasset's new canvas at 4.50 fr. with the price of the same quality at Bourgeois' (I ferreted out the price of the ordinary canvas as 40 fr. for 20 square meters from his catalogue). Well, once more Tasset has been no more expensive, it was exactly the same price. It follows that in just the same way we ought to be able to get the ordinary canvas from Tasset at 2 francs the square meter, and in the future we could do well to get this, for it is certainly good enough for the studies.

Please let me have a line at once to say if the drawings have arrived in good condition. They swore at me again at the post office because they were too big, and I am afraid perhaps they may make trouble in Paris. They took them, however, I was glad of that, because after the celebrations of July 14 you may be pleased to refresh your eyes with the wide-open spaces of the Crau.

The fascination that these huge plains have for me is very strong, so that I felt no weariness, in spite of the really wearisome circumstances, mistral and mosquitoes. If a view makes you forget these little annoyances, it must have something in it. You will see, however, that there is no attempt at effect. At first sight it is like a map, a strategic plan as far as the execution goes. Besides, I walked there with a painter, and he said, "There is something that would be boring to paint." Yet I went fully fifty times to Mont Majour to look at this flat landscape, and was I wrong? I went for a walk there with someone else who was not a painter, and when I said to him, "Look, to me that is as beautiful and as infinite as the sea," he said – and he knows the sea – "For my part I like this better than the sea, because it is no less infinite, and yet you feel that it is inhabited."

What a picture I would make of it if there was not this damn wind. That is the maddening thing here, no matter where you set up your easel. And that is largely why the painted studies are not so finished as the drawings; the canvas is shaking all the time.

It does not bother me when I am drawing.

Have you read Mme. Chrysanthème? It gave me the impression that the real Japanese have nothing on their walls, that description of the cloister or pagoda where there was nothing (the drawings and curiosities all being hidden in the drawers). That is how you must look at Japanese art, in a very bright room, quite bare, and open to the country.

Would you like to experiment with these two drawings of the Crau and the banks of the Rhône, which do not look Japanese, but which really are, perhaps more so than some others? Look at them in some café where it's clear and blue and nothing else in the way, or else outside. Perhaps they need a reed frame, like a thin stick. Here I work in a bare room, four white walls and a red paved floor. If I urge you to look at these two drawings in this way, it is because I so much want to give you a true idea of the simplicity of nature here. Well, as to Gauguin, suppose we show the drawings, and the harvest too, and the Zouave, to Thomas? A handshake, and thank you for the two tubes of zinc white that Tasset has just sent. I am curious to know if Mourier will remember the spots.

Ever yours, Vincent