

Arles, 31 July 1888

Dear Sister,

I will answer your letter of this morning without delay.

I shall probably hear from Paris by tomorrow what Theo is going to do, whether he will be able to get away. I don't doubt that he will go to you if he can. It is not always admirable for a person one knows to set out on the great journey to that other hemisphere of life whose existence we only surmise. But it goes without saying that my best wishes are with today's traveler.

I am working very hard now, and I think the summer here extremely beautiful, more beautiful than I ever saw it in the North, but people here are complaining loudly that it is not the same as usual. Now and then some rain in the morning or the afternoon, but infinitely less than in our country. The harvest was gathered long ago. There is much wind here, however, a very ill-natured, whining wind – le mistral – very troublesome for the most part, when I have to paint in it, in which case I put my canvas down flat on the ground, and work on my knees. For the easel does not stand firm.

I have a study of a garden one meter wide, poppies and other red flowers surrounded by green in the foreground, and a square of bluebells. Then a bed of orange and yellow Africans, then white and yellow flowers, and at last, in the background, pink and lilac, and also dark violet scabriosas, and red geraniums, and sunflowers, and a fig tree and an oleander and a vine. And in the distance black cypresses against low white houses with orange roofs – and a delicate green-blue streak of sky [F 429, JH 1513].

Oh, I know very well that not a single flower is drawn completely, that they are more dabs of colour, red, yellow, orange, green blue, violet, but the impression of all these colours in their juxtaposition is there all right, in the painting as in nature. But I suppose you would be disappointed, and think it unbeautiful, if you saw it. But you see that the subject is rather summery.

Uncle Cor has seen work of mine more than once, and he thinks it execrable.

I am now engaged on a portrait of a postman in his dark-blue uniform with yellow. A head somewhat like Socrates, hardly any nose at all, a high forehead, bald crown, little grey eyes, bright red chubby cheeks, a big pepper-and-salt beard, large ears [F 433, JH 1524]. The man is an ardent republican and socialist, reasons quite well, and knows a lot of things. His wife was delivered of a child today, and he is consequently feeling as proud as a peacock, and is all aglow with satisfaction.

In point of fact I greatly prefer painting a thing like this to doing pictures of flowers.

But since this can be done without ignoring the other, I am taking advantage of the opportunities as they come

I also have a portrait of a twelve-year-old girl, brown eyes, black hair and eyebrows, yellowish matte complexion. She is sitting in a cane chair, a blood-red-and-violet-striped bodice, a deep blue skirt with little orange dots, a branch of oleander in her hand. The background light green, nearly white [F 431, JH 1519].

I am always looking for the same thing – a portrait; a landscape; a landscape and a portrait.

I shall also get to paint the baby born today, at least I hope so. I have also got a garden without flowers, that is to say a lawn, newly mown, bright green with the grey hay spread in long streaks. A weeping ash and a number of cedars and cypresses, the cedars yellowish and spherical in form, the cypresses rising high into the air, blue-green. At the back oleander and a patch of green blue sky. The blue shadows of the shrubs on the grass [F 428, JH 1499].

Also a portrait bust of a Zouave, in a blue uniform with red and yellow trimmings, with a sky-blue sash, a blood-red cap with a blue tassel, and face sunburned – black hair cropped short – eyes leering like a cat's – orange and green – a small head on a bull's neck. In this one the background is a harshly green door and some orange bricks of the wall and the white stucco [F 423, JH 1486].

Now as regards what you ask, as to whether it is hot here, and whether I am going to live with somebody else. Well, this rather probably, and with a very clever painter too who, like the other impressionists, is leading a life full of cares, and who is the proud owner of a liver complaint besides. Some time ago Theo bought a large picture from him portraying Negresses in pink, blue, orange and yellow cotton dresses under tamarind, coconut and banana trees with the sea in the distance. Like *Le mariage de Loti*, that description of Otaheite. The fact is that he has been in Martinique, and has painted amid the tropical scenery there.

We have a second painting of his besides, which he exchanged for one of my studies, a dried river with violet mud and pools of water, mirroring the pure cobalt blue of the sky, green grass, a Negro boy with a red-and-white cow, a Negress in blue, and a patch of green forest. He is a fellow who works like one possessed and he does all sorts of things; he is in Brittany at the moment.

We shall probably go live together for the sake of economy, and to give each other company. He will come here if he or I can sell something one of these days so that he can pay for his journey. It is not impossible that some obstacle will crop up, but on the whole it is quite probable that it will happen. And even if it should not happen and I had to go on working alone, yet working in the same direction as the other fellows, although every one of them maintains his own style, brings about something of a comradeship, and at times leads to an interesting correspondence.

How is your health? Good, I hope. Above all you should try to get into the country as much as possible. Here I am afflicted now and then with an inability to eat, something of the sort you suffered from at the time. But on the whole I manage to steer clear of the rocks. When your body forsakes you, use your brains – you and I with our constitutions should take this to heart. For that matter work, if we are making headway, can help a lot.

I think it exquisitely beautiful here in summer; the green is very deep and rich; the air is thin and astonishingly clear. But for all that the wide plain might often remind me very strongly of the Dutch scenery – here where there are hardly any mountains or rocks – if the colour were not so different. But what pleases me very much is the gaily coloured clothes, the women and girls dressed in cheap simple material, but with green, red and pink, Havana-yellow, violet or blue stripes, or dots of the same colours. White scarves; red, green and yellow parasols. A vigorous sun, like sulphur, shining on it all, the great blue sky – sometimes it is as enormously gay as Holland is gloomy.

What a pity that not everybody has these two extremes.

Now I must stop. Uncle's death is a big event for you and Mother, and particularly for our aunt. The impression it makes on me is very strange, because in my mind there is an image of the man made up of memories of so long ago, of a great many years ago, and I think it so peculiar that a man one once knew at such close range should have become such a stranger. I suppose you will be able to understand this.

Looked at from this point of view, life is so much like a dream; and from the moment things are simplified again, and the sick man undertakes his great journey, one understands it better, and it is a certain fact that my feelings about it are similar to yours. Theo will feel it very much too; he has had much more intercourse with Uncle than I.

How is Mother these days?

I often think of you both, and it is from the bottom of my heart that I give you my best wishes.

Vincent

I am up to my ears in work, and it happens so seldom that I have anything else in mind.

My address is:  
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If you can manage it, don't lose sight of those books and prints of mine that I wrote you about.