

Letter 519
Arles, Wednesday, 8 August 1888

My dear Theo,

I have just sent off three big drawings, as well as some other ones, and the two lithographs by de Lemud. The little cottage garden done vertically is, I think, the best of the three big ones. The one with the sunflowers is a little garden of a bathing establishment, the third garden, horizontal, is the one from which I made some painted studies as well.

Under the blue sky the orange, yellow, red splashes of the flowers take on an amazing brilliance, and in the limpid air there is a something or other happier, more lovely than in the North. It vibrates like the bouquet by Monticelli which you have. I reproach myself for not painting flowers here. And although I've knocked off some fifty drawings and painted studies here, I seem to have done absolutely nothing. I'd gladly content myself with being a pioneer for the other painters of the future who come to work in the South.

Now the Harvest, the Garden, the Sower, and the two marines are sketches after painted studies. I think that all these ideas are good, but the painted studies lack clearness of touch. That is another reason why I felt it necessary to draw them.

I wanted to paint a poor old peasant, whose features bear a very strong resemblance to Father, only he is coarser, bordering on a caricature.

Nevertheless, I should have been very keen to do him exactly like the poor peasant that he is.

He promised to come, and then he said that he wanted to have the picture for himself, so that I should have had to do two the same, one for him and one for myself. I said No. Perhaps he will come back someday.

I am curious to hear if you knew the de Lemuds.

At the moment there are still many fine lithographs to be had, Daumiers, reproductions after Delacroix, Décamps, Diaz, Rousseau, Dupré, etc. But soon these will be exhausted, and what a great pity it is that this art tends to disappear.

Why doesn't one hold what one has, like the doctors and the engineers; once a thing is discovered and invented, they retain the knowledge; in these wretched Fine Arts everything is forgotten, nothing is kept. Millet gave the synthesis of the peasant, and now, yes, there is Lhermitte, certainly there are a few others, Meunier... Then have we in general learned to see the peasant now? No, hardly anyone knows how to pull one off.

Doesn't the fault really lie a little with Paris and the Parisians, changeable and faithless as the sea?

Well, you have damn good reason to say: Let's go quietly on our way, working for ourselves. You know, whatever this sacrosanct impressionism may be, all the same I wish I could paint things that the generation before Delacroix, Millet, Rousseau, Diaz, Monticelli, Isabey, Décamps, Dupré, Jongkind, Ziem, Israëls, Meunier, a lot of others, Corot, Jacque, etc., could understand.

Ah, Manet has come very near, very near to it, and Courbet, the wedding of form to colour. I would very much like to keep silent for ten years, doing nothing but studies, and then do one or two pictures of figures. The old plan, so often recommended, is so seldom put into practice.

If the drawings I send you are too hard, it is because I have done them in such a way as to be able later on, if they're still around, to use them as guides for painting.

The little cottage garden done vertically has in itself amazing colours: the dahlias are a rich and sombre purple; the double row of flowers is pink and green on one side, and orange with hardly any leaves on the other. In the midst a white dwarf dahlia, and a little pomegranate with flowers of the most vivid reddish-orange, with yellowish-green fruits. The ground gray, the tall reeds, "canes," blue-green, the fig trees emerald, the sky blue, the houses white with green windows and red roofs, in the morning full in the sunshine, in the evening drowned in the shadows thrown by the fig trees and the reeds.

If only Quost were here, or Jeannin! What's to be done? To include it all requires a whole school of men working together in the same country, complementing one another like the old Dutchmen, portrait painters, "genre" painters, landscape, animal, still-life painters.

Moreover I must tell you that I made a very interesting round of the farms with someone who knows the country. But you know in the real Provence there is more poor peasantry à la Millet than anything else. McKnight and Bock see nothing but the heat, or rather nothing at all. Now even if I begin to see things a little more clearly, it will take a very long stay to do them.

At times, however, it seems likely that it is I who shall have to make the journey if Gauguin does not succeed in getting out of the mess and we want to carry out our plan. Well then, so be it, I shall be among peasants just the same, it's all one. I should even advise our trying to hold ourselves in readiness to go to him, for I think that soon he may find himself in terrible trouble again, for instance if his landlord is not

willing to give him any more credit. That is so likely to happen, and his difficulties might be so great that starting the combination might become urgent. For me there is only the cost of the one-way trip, and the prices there which he has quoted are in every instance considerably lower than what we are bound to spend here.

I count on having your letter on Saturday morning; I have bought two more canvases, so that already, on Wednesday evening, I have exactly 5 francs left.

Only here there is still one advantage over the North during days of penury, that is the fine weather (for even the mistral is fine weather to look at). Perfectly glorious sunshine in which Voltaire let himself dry as he drank his coffee. You can't help feeling Zola and Voltaire everywhere. It is so alive! Like Jan Steen, like Ostade.

Certainly there would be a chance for a school of painting here, but you will tell me that nature is beautiful everywhere if you go into it deeply enough.

Have you read Madame Chrysanthème yet, have you already made the acquaintance of that so amazingly obliging ruffian M. Kangarou? And of the sugared peppers, and the fried ices, and the salted sweets?

I am feeling very, very well these days. In the long run I think I shall come to belong to the country altogether.

In a cottage garden I saw a figurehead of a woman carved in wood, from the bow of a Spanish ship. It was in a little grove of cypresses, and absolutely Monticelli.

Oh, these farm gardens, with their lovely big red Provençal roses, and the vines and the fig trees! It is all a poem, and the eternal bright sunshine too, in spite of which the foliage remains very green.

There is a cistern running clear water which irrigates the farm along trenches in a complete little system of canals. A horse, an old white animal from the Camargue, sets the machinery in motion.

No cows on these little farms.

My neighbor and his wife (grocers) are amazingly like the Buteaux.

But here farms and low pubs are less dreary and less dramatic than in the North, since the warmth, etc., makes poverty less harsh and melancholy.

I do wish you had seen this country. Well, first we must see how the Gauguin business will turn out.

I haven't yet told you that I had a letter from Koning. I wrote him a week ago. I can easily see him coming back. Is Mourier still there?

I'd be astonished if that book of Cassagne's were out of print. They ought to know it, or know where it could be got, at Lalouche's or at the colour shop in the Chaussée d'Antin. If I ever come to give lessons in drawing, or to have to speak to painters on the principles of technique, I must have it at hand. It is the only really practical book I know, and I know pretty well from experience how useful it is. Mourier, McKnight, even Bock, all need it, and how many others too. McKnight is always dropping in.

I have again been working on a portrait of a Zouave sitting on a bench against a white wall, which makes a fifth figure [F 424, JH 1488].

This morning I was at a washing place with figures of women, as big as Gauguin's Negresses, one especially in white, black, red, and another one all in yellow; there were at least thirty of them, old and young.

I am hoping to send you some more sketches after the painted studies.

I hope to hear from you soon, with a handshake.

Ever yours, Vincent