

Letter 527
Arles, c. 27 August 1888

My dear Theo,

Would you like to ask Tasset's opinion on the following question? To me it seems as though the more finely a colour is brayed, the more it becomes saturated with oil. Now needless to say, we don't care overmuch for oil.

If we painted like M. Gérôme and the other delusive photographers, we should doubtless ask for very finely brayed colours. But we on the contrary do not object to the canvas having a rough look. If then, instead of braying the colour on a stone for God knows how many hours, it was brayed just long enough to make it manageable, without worrying too much about the fineness of the powder, you would get fresher colours which would perhaps darken less. If he wants to make a trial of it with the three chromes, the malachite, the vermilion, the orange lead, the cobalt, and the ultramarine, I am almost certain that at much less cost I should get colours which would be fresher and more lasting. Then what would the price be? I'm sure this could be done. Probably also with the reds and the emerald, which are transparent.

I enclose an order which is urgent.

I am now on the fourth picture of sunflowers. This fourth one [F458, JH 1667] is a bunch of 14 flowers, against a yellow background, like a still life of quinces and lemons that I did some time ago [F 383, JH 1339].

Only as it is much bigger, it gives a rather singular effect, and I think that this one is painted with more simplicity than the quinces and lemons.

Do you remember that one day we saw a very extraordinary Manet at the Hotel Drouot, some huge pink peonies with their green leaves against a light background? As free in the open air and as much a flower as anything could be, and yet painted in a perfectly solid impasto, and not the way Jeannin does it.

That's what I'd call simplicity of technique. And I must tell you that nowadays I am trying to find a special brushwork without stippling or anything else, nothing but the varied stroke. But someday you'll see.

What a pity painting costs so much! This week I had fewer worries than other weeks, so I let myself go. I shall have spent the 100-fr. note in a single week, but at the end of this week I'll have my four pictures, and even if I add the cost of all the paint I have used, the week will not have been sheer waste. I have got up very early every day, I have had a good dinner and supper, and so I have been able to work hard and long without feeling myself weaken. But there, we live in days when there is no demand for what we are making, not only does it not sell, but as you see in Gauguin's case, when you want to borrow on the pictures, you can't get anything, even if it is a trifling sum and the work, important. And that is why we are the prey of every happening. And I am afraid that it will hardly change in our lifetime. But if we are preparing richer lives for the painters who will follow in our footsteps, it will be something.

But life is short, and shorter still, the number of years you feel bold enough to face everything.

And in the end it is to be feared that as soon as the new painting is appreciated, the painters will go soft.

But anyway, this much is positive, it is not we of the present time who are decadent. Gauguin and Bernard talk now of "painting like children" – I would rather have that than "painting like decadents." How is it that people see something decadent in impressionism? It is very much the reverse.

I enclose a line for Tasset. The difference in price ought to be considerable, and needless to say, I hope to make less and less use of the finely brayed colours.

With a handshake.

One of the decorations of sunflowers on royal blue ground [F 459, JH 1560] has "a halo," that is to say each object is surrounded by a glow of the complementary colour of the background against which it stands out. Goodbye for now.

Ever yours, Vincent