

Letter W07¹
Arles, 9 and 16 September 1888

My dear sister,

Your letter has given me a great deal of pleasure, and today I have the leisure to reply to it calmly. So your visit to Paris has been a success. I should very much like you to come here too next year. At the moment I am very busy furnishing the studio in such a way that I shall always be able to receive somebody as a guest. For upstairs there are two little rooms overlooking a very pretty public garden, and from which one can see the sun rise in the morning. I shall arrange one of these rooms in such a way that I can lodge a friend, and I shall keep the other one for myself.

In the latter I want nothing but straw-bottomed chairs and a table and a bed of unpainted wood. The walls whitewashed, red tiles on the floor. But I want a great wealth of portraits and painted studies of figures in it, which I think I shall do in the course of time. I already have one to begin with, namely the portrait of a young Belgian impressionist. I have painted him a little like a poet, the fine nervous head standing out against a background of a deep ultramarine night sky with sparkling stars [F 462, JH 1574].

However, I want to have the other room nearly elegant with a walnut bedstead and a blue coverlet. And all the rest, the dressing table as well as the cupboard, in dull walnut. In this very little room I want to put, in the Japanese manner, at least six very large canvases, particularly the enormous bouquets of sunflowers. You know that the Japanese instinctively seek contrasts – sweetened spices, salted candy, fried ices and iced fried things. So it follows, according to the same system, that in a big room there should be very small pictures and in a very little room one should hang very large ones. I hope the day will come when I shall be able to show you this beautiful country here.

I have just finished a canvas representing the interior of a night café lighted with lamps. A number of poor night wanderers are asleep in a corner. The room is painted red, and in it, under the gaslight, a green billiard table casts an immense shadow on the boarded floor [F 463, JH 1575]. There are six or seven different reds in this canvas, from blood red to delicate pink, contrasting with as many pale or deep greens. I sent Theo a sketch of it today which is like a Japanese crepe print [F 1463, JH 1576].

Theo wrote me that he had given you Japanese pictures. This is surely the practical way to arrive at an understanding of the direction which painting in bright clear colours has taken at present.

For my part I don't need Japanese pictures here, for I am always telling myself that here I am in Japan.

Which means that I have only to open my eyes and paint what is right in front of me, if I think it effective.

Have you seen a very little mask of a smiling fat Japanese woman at Theo's? It is surprisingly expressive, that little mask. Did you think of taking a picture of mine for yourself? I hope so, and I am very curious to know which one you chose. I am inclined to think that you took the white cottages surrounded by green plants under a blue sky, which I made at Saintes-Maries on the coast of the Mediterranean [F 419, JH1465]. I ought to have gone back to Saintes-Maries again, as there are now people on the beach. But never mind, I have such a lot to do here. At present I absolutely want to paint a starry sky. It often seems to me that night is still more richly coloured than the day; having hues of the most intense violets, blues and greens. If only you pay attention to it you will see that certain stars are citron-yellow, others have a pink glow, or a green blue and forget-me-not brilliance. And without my expatiating on this theme it will be clear that putting little white dots on a blue-black surface is not enough.

My house here is painted the yellow colour of fresh butter on the outside with glaringly green shutters; it stands in the full sunlight in a square which has a green garden with plane trees, oleanders and acacias. And it is completely whitewashed inside, and the floor is made of red bricks. And over it there is the intensely blue sky. In this I can live and breathe, meditate and paint. And it seems to me that I might go still farther into the South, rather than go up to the North again, seeing that I am greatly in need of a strong heat, so that my blood can circulate normally. Here I feel much better than I did in Paris.

You see, I can hardly doubt that you on your part would also like the South enormously. The fact is that the sun has never penetrated us people of the North. It is already a few days since I started writing this letter, and now I will continue it. In point of fact I was interrupted these days by my toiling on a new picture representing the outside of a night café. On the terrace there are the tiny figures of people drinking. An enormous yellow lantern sheds its light on the terrace, the house front and the sidewalk, and even casts a certain brightness on the pavement of the streets, which takes a pinkish violet tone. The gabled-topped fronts of the houses in the street stretching away under a blue sky spangled with stars are dark blue or violet and there is a green tree. Here you have a night picture without any black in it, done with nothing but beautiful blue and violet and green, and citron-yellow colour [F 467, JH 1580]. It amuses me enormously

to paint the night right on the spot. They used to draw and paint the picture in the daytime after the rough sketch. But I find satisfaction in painting things immediately.

Of course it's true that in the dark I may mistake a blue for a green, a blue-lilac for a pink-lilac, for you cannot rightly distinguish the quality of a hue. But it is the only way to get rid of the conventional night scenes with their poor sallow whitish light, whereas a simple candle already gives us the richest yellows and orange tints.

I also made a new portrait of myself, as a study, in which I look like a Japanese [F 476, JH 1581].

So far you have not told me whether you have read *Bel Ami* by Guy de Maupassant, and what in general you think of his talent now. I say this because the beginning of *Bel Ami* happens to be a description of a starlight night in Paris with the brightly lighted cafés of the Boulevard, and this is approximately the same subject I just painted.

Speaking of Guy de Maupassant, I want to tell you that I very much admire what he does, and I strongly urge you to read all that he has written. You ought to read Zola, de Maupassant, de Goncourt as completely as possible in order to get something of a clear insight into the modern novel. Have you read books by Balzac? I am reading him again here.

My dear sister, it is my belief that it is actually one's duty to paint the rich and magnificent aspects of nature. We are in need of gaiety and happiness, of hope and love.

The more ugly, old, vicious, ill, poor I get, the more I want to take my revenge by producing a brilliant colour, well arranged, resplendent. Jewellers too get old and ugly before they learn how to arrange precious stones well. And arranging the colours in a picture in order to make them vibrate and to enhance their value by their contrasts is something like arranging jewels properly or – designing costumes. You will see that by making a habit of looking at Japanese pictures you will love to make up bouquets and to do things with flowers all the more. I must finish this letter now if I want to get it off today. I shall be very happy to have the picture of Mother that you speak of, so don't forget to send it to me. Give my dearest love to Mother, I often think of you two, and it pleases me very much that you know our life a little better now.

I'm afraid Theo will feel too lonely now, but he will be visited by a Belgian impressionist painter one of these days, the one I told you about at the beginning of this letter, and who is going to spend some time in Paris. And there will be a lot of other painters who will return to Paris with the studies they did during the fine season ...

I embrace you and Mother.

Yours, Vincent

1. Written in French.