

Letter 539
Arles, c. 17 September 1888

My dear Theo,

I wrote to you already, early this morning, then I went away to go on with a picture of a garden in the sunshine. Then I brought it back and went out again with a blank canvas, and that also is finished. And now I want to write you again.

Because I have never had such a chance, nature here being so extraordinarily beautiful. Everywhere and all over the vault of heaven is a marvellous blue, and the sun sheds a radiance of pale sulphur, and it is soft and as lovely as the combination of heavenly blues and yellows in a Van der Meer of Delft. I cannot paint it as beautifully as that, but it absorbs me so much that I let myself go, never thinking of a single rule.

That makes three pictures of the gardens opposite the house. Then the two cafés, and then the sunflowers. Then the portrait of Bock and of myself. Then the red sun over the factory, and the men unloading sand, and the old mill. Not to mention the other studies, you see that I have got some work behind me. But my paints, my canvas and my purse are all completely exhausted today. The last picture, done with the last tubes of paint on the last canvas, of a garden, green of course, is painted without green, nothing but Prussian blue and chrome yellow.

I am beginning to feel that I am quite a different creature from what I was when I came here. I have no doubts, no hesitation in attacking things, and this may increase. But what a country! I am in a public garden, quite close to the street of the kind girls, and Mourier for instance hardly ever went there, although we took a walk in the gardens, practically every day – but on the other side (there are 3). But you realize, it is just this that gives a touch of Boccaccio to the place.

But this side of the garden is also, for the same reason of chastity or morality, destitute of any flowering bushes such as the oleanders. There are ordinary plane trees, pines in stiff clumps, a weeping tree, and the green grass. But it is all so intimate. Manet has gardens like this.

As long as you can manage to bear the burden of all this paint and canvas and all the money that I spend, keep on sending it. Because the stuff I am getting ready will be better than the last batch, and I think we shall make something on it instead of losing. If only I can manage to do a coherent whole. That is what I am trying to do.

But is it quite out of the question that Thomas would lend me 200 or 300 francs on my studies? That would let me make a profit of a thousand on it, for I cannot tell you often enough, I am ravished, ravished with what I see.

Today while I was working I thought a lot about Bernard. His letter is steeped in admiration for Gauguin's talent. He says that he thinks him so great an artist that he is almost afraid, and that he finds everything that he does himself poor in comparison with Gauguin. And you know that last winter Bernard was always picking quarrels with Gauguin. However this may be, and whatever happens, it is very comforting that these artists are our friends, and I dare say they will remain so, however the business turns out.

I am so happy in the house and in my work that I even dare to think that this happiness will not always be limited to one, but that you will have a share in it and good luck to go with it.

Some time ago I read an article on Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Giotto and Botticelli. Good Lord! it did make an impression on me reading the letters of those men.

And Petrarch lived quite near here in Avignon, and I am seeing the same cypresses and oleanders.

I have tried to put something of that into one of the pictures painted in a very thick impasto, citron yellow and lime green. Giotto moved me most – always in pain, and always full of kindness and enthusiasm, as though he were already living in a different world from ours.

And besides, Giotto is extraordinary. I understand him better than the poets Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio. I always think that poetry is more terrible than painting, though painting is a dirtier and a much more worrying job. And then the painter never says anything, he holds his tongue, and I like that too.

My dear Theo, when you have seen the cypresses and the oleanders here, and the sun – and the day will come, you may be sure – then you will think even more often of the beautiful “Doux pays” by Puvis de Chavannes, and many other pictures of his.

There is still a great deal of Greece all through the Tartarin and Daumier part of this queer country, where the good folk have the accent you know; there is a Venus of Arles just as there is a Venus of Lesbos, and one still feels the youth of it in spite of all.

I haven't the slightest doubt that someday you too will know the South.

Perhaps you will go to see Claude Monet when he is at Antibes, or anyway you will find some opportunity.

When we have mistral down here, however, it is the exact opposite of a sweet country, for the mistral sets one on edge. But what compensations, what compensations when there is a day without wind – what intensity of colour, what pure air, what vibrant serenity.

Tomorrow I am going to draw, until the paints come. But I have deliberately arrived at the point where I will not draw a picture with charcoal. That's no use, you must attack drawing with the colour itself in order to draw well.

Oh – the exhibition at the Revue Indépendante – good, but once and for all, we are too good smokers to put the wrong end of the cigar into our mouths. We shall be forced to try to sell in order to do the things we sell over again, and better. That's because we are in a bad trade, but let's try something different from the fun of the fair that's the pest of the house.

This afternoon I had a select public – four or five hooligans and a dozen street arabs, who were especially interested in seeing the paint come out of the tubes. Well, that same public – it meant fame, or rather I mean to laugh at ambition and fame, as I do at those street arabs, and at the loafers on the banks of the Rhône and in the Rue du Pont d'Arles.

Yesterday I was at Milliet's; he is coming tomorrow, having stayed on for four days.

I wish Bernard would go and do his military service in Africa, because he would do some fine things there, and I do not know what to say to him yet. He said he would exchange his portrait for one of my studies. But he says he dare not do Gauguin as I asked him, because he feels afraid in front of Gauguin. Basically Bernard has so much temperament! He is sometimes foolish and vicious, but I certainly have no right to reproach him with that, because I myself know the same disorder of the nerves only too well, and I know that he will not reproach me either. If he went to Africa to join Milliet, Milliet would certainly receive him kindly, because Milliet is a very faithful friend, and makes love so easily that he comes near to despising love itself.

What is Seurat doing? I should not dare to show him the studies already sent, but the ones of the sunflowers, and the cabarets, and the gardens, I would like him to see those. I often think of his method, though I do not follow it at all; but he is an original colourist, and Signac too, though to a different degree, their stippling is a new discovery, and at all events I like them very much. But I myself – I tell you frankly – am returning more to what I was looking for before I came to Paris. I do not know if anyone before me has talked about suggestive colour, but Delacroix and Monticelli, without talking about it, did it.

But I have got back to where I was in Nuenen, when I made a vain attempt to learn music, so much did I already feel the relation between our colour and Wagner's music.

It is true that in impressionism I see the resurrection of Eugène Delacroix, but the interpretations of it are so divergent and in a way so irreconcilable that it will not be impressionism which will give us the final doctrine.

That is why I myself remain among the impressionists, because it professes nothing, and binds you to nothing, and as one of the comrades I need not declare my formula.

Good Lord, how you have to mess about in life. I only ask for time to study, and do you yourself really ask for anything but that? But I think that you also, like me, must long to have the quiet necessary to study without prejudice.

And I am so afraid of taking it away from you by my demands for money.

However, I make such careful calculations, and again today I found that for the ten meters of canvas I had calculated all the colours except one, the fundamental yellow. If all my colours are used up at the same time, doesn't it prove that I know the relative proportions in my sleep? It is the same with drawing, I hardly measure at all, and in that I am definitely opposed to Cormon, who says that if he did not measure, he would draw like a pig.

All the same I think you did well to buy so many stretchers, because we must have a certain number to be able to dry the canvases, it preserves them, and I myself have a batch of them here as well. But don't let them get in your way by leaving them on the stretchers, you mustn't let the lot take up too much room.

Here I pay 4.50 francs for size 30, 25 and 20 stretchers, and 1 franc for size 15, 12 and 10 if I get them made by the carpenter.

Carpentering is very expensive here. Tanguy should be able to make and deliver them at that price.

I am trying to get a frame for the square size 30 canvas in light walnut at 5 francs, and I think I shall get it.

The heavy oak frame for the portrait, size 10 canvas, is costing me 5 francs also.

I have again had to order five size 30 stretchers for the new canvas; they have already been made, and I must go and get them. This will show you that I cannot get on without some money at this stage of the

work. It is a comfort that all the time we are dealing in the raw material, and not speculating, but only trying to produce. So that we cannot go wrong.

I hope that this will always be so, and if there is the fatal necessity of using up my paint and my canvas and my cash, all the same be very sure it isn't that which will ruin us.

Even if you on your part use up your purse and whatever is inside it, it's not so good, but just tell me quietly, "There's nothing left"; for there will be some more because of what I've done with it. And supposing you say, very rightly – "And meanwhile?" – Meanwhile I shall go on drawing, because doing nothing but drawing is easier than painting.

With a good handshake. What days these are, not for what happens in them, but I feel so strongly that both you and I are neither in our decadence nor done for yet, nor shall we ever be.

But you know, I do not contradict the critics who will say that my pictures are not – finished. With a handshake, and good-by for the present.

Ever yours, Vincent