

My dear comrade Bernard,

Thanks for your letter, but I am somewhat surprised to hear you say, "Oh, impossible to do Gauguin's portrait!" Why impossible? What nonsense is this! I won't insist, and we won't say another word about this exchange once and for all.¹ So, on his part too Gauguin hasn't even thought of doing yours. And such fellows call themselves portraitists; living so long together and not making up their minds to pose for each other, and they will separate without having painted each other's portrait! All right, I won't insist. And I repeat, there is no longer any question of an exchange.

Well then, I hope someday to paint your portrait and Gauguin's myself, as soon as we get together, which is bound to happen.

In short, I think that I am going to do the portrait of the second lieutenant of the Zouaves whom I told you about, and who is on the point of leaving for Africa.

Why haven't you replied with a single word to my question about your intentions with regard to your military service?

Now let's speak for a moment about your saying that you are thinking of coming here and spending the winter in Arles. I have expressly installed myself in such a way that I can put somebody up if necessary. But what if Gauguin comes? He has not definitely declined the offer yet; but even if I could take you in, I don't see how you could feed yourself well at less than 3 francs a day, and I should prefer to say 4 francs.

Of course, if we were hard up, we could have a lot of cheap meals in the studio; one can certainly always economize in this way. But I tell you, life here is a little more expensive than at Pont-Aven. I think you are only paying 2.50 francs a day – aren't you? – board, lodging and everything included. And if – what would tempt you the most – you were going to paint in the brothels – which is most certainly excellent – it can't be done free for nothing here!

So let it go until you have your uniform; in this respect soldiers – here and elsewhere – can get a lot of things free for nothing.

Take my own case, it is true that I have just done that study of the "Night Cafe," but nevertheless, though it is a free-love hotel, where from time to time you may see a whore sitting at a table with her fellow, I myself have not been able to do a brothel in the exact sense of the word, just because if I were to do it a little satisfactorily and seriously, it would cost me more money than I can possibly afford. So I refrain from starting that picture until I feel strong enough financially to bring it off. Now listen, I don't want to say that we shan't go and have a glass of beer there; we shall make acquaintances there, we shall work partly from imagination, partly from the model. And if we should want to, I don't say it would be impossible to do it, but at present I for one am in no hurry at all. Plans so often fall through, however well the calculations are made, whereas by relying on chance and working from day to day, without any fixed purpose, one does a lot of unexpected things.

So I cannot possibly recommend to you to come here for the express purpose – undoubtedly excellent in itself – of painting brothels. I repeat, once you are a soldier you will have a splendid opportunity for that, and it would probably be as well for your own sake to wait until you have your uniform. But, my dear comrade Bernard, the thing I want to say to you clearly and frankly is, Go spend your time in Africa. The South will charm you and make a great artist out of you. Gauguin himself owes his superiority to the South. I myself have now seen the stronger sunlight here for months, and the result is that, after this experience, those who maintain their position best from the point of view of colour are Delacroix and Monticelli; those painters of whom it is said erroneously nowadays that they are pure romantics, fellows with an exaggerated imagination. In short, you see, the South which is painted so dryly by Gérôme and Fromentin is from here [Arles] on already essentially a country whose intimate charm can be interpreted only by the colour of the colourist.

I hope you will write me again soon.

I wouldn't venture to take it upon myself to urge anyone to come here. If someone comes here of his own accord, well, that's his own business; but as for recommending it, I'll never do that. As for me, I'll stay here, and of course I should be pleased if you were to spend the winter here.

A handshake.

Sincerely yours, Vincent

1. See Letter 539.