

My dear comrade Bernard,

Just a word to thank you for your drawings; I think they were done a little too hastily, and I like the drawings of the whores better; but for the rest there is an idea in all of them. I have been overwhelmed with work lately, for the weather is glorious, and I must make the most of the fine days, which are short.

I cannot withdraw what I said about the price: three francs, just for food, and then the extras! But I have no doubt that all that Gauguin told you about the prices here is correct. But all that I can see is that the moment of your departure to do your military service is drawing near, and I very much wish to induce your father to provide you with what's necessary to fortify yourself with good food, without your work suffering under it. Let him do the handsome thing and give you all that is reasonable in the interval between now and the time of your service.

I have written you insistently and repeatedly that, if you go to Africa, you will work there, and you will see the very scenery which you ought to see to develop your talent as a painter and a colourist to its full extent. But this can only be done at the expense of your poor carcass, unless before your African hardships your father enables you to avoid getting anemic or catching a debilitating dysentery as a result of a lack of strengthening food.

It is hardly possible to fortify one's body over there; far be it from me to say that when one is going into a hot climate one ought to fatten oneself up first, but what I do say is that one should attend to one's nourishment some time in advance; and I abide by this through thick and thin, as this regimen agrees with me so well here, because there is some difference between the heat of Africa and the heat of Arles.

You will either come out of this trial of your service much stronger, strong enough for a whole artistic career – or a broken man.

However that may be, I should be enormously delighted if you came here, and if Gauguin came too; and then the only thing to be regretted will be that it is winter and not the season of fine weather. I am coming to believe more and more that the cuisine has something to do with our ability to think and to make pictures; as for me, when my stomach bothers me it is not conducive to the success of my work.

In short, I think that, if your father made up his mind quietly to preserve your pictures and grant you a somewhat generous credit, he would lose less in the end than if he acted differently. In the South one's senses get keener, one's hand becomes more agile, one's eye more alert, one's brain clearer, however on condition: that all this is not spoiled by dysentery or something else of a debilitating nature. But apart from that I venture to believe most firmly that anyone who loves artistic work will find his productive faculties develop in the South; but take care of your blood and take care of everything else.

And now you will tell me perhaps that I am boring you with all this – that you want to go to the brothel without giving a damn about all the rest. Good heavens, it all depends, but I cannot speak differently than I do. Art is long and life is short, and we must be patient, while trying to sell our lives dearly. How I wish I were your age, and could go off, knowing what I know, to do my military service in Africa; but then I should get myself a better body than I have now, and no mistake!

If Gauguin and I are here together, which will probably happen, then we shall certainly do our utmost to save you expense; but then your father, on his part, ought to do his utmost too, and have confidence in us, and realize that we are not trying to do him out of more money than necessary. To do good work one must eat well, be well housed, have one's fling from time to time, smoke one's pipe and drink one's coffee in peace.

I do not say that all the other things are without value, I want to leave everybody free to do what he likes; but what I do say is that this system seems preferable to me to a good many others.

A hearty handshake,

Sincerely yours, Vincent