

Letter 543

Arles, 28 September 1888

My dear Theo, thank you very much of your letter and the 50 francs note that it contained. It is not good that the pains in the leg have come back – my god – it would be good if it was possible if you could live in the Midi too, because I always think that we need each other, and the sun and good weather and the blue air are the strongest remedy. The weather here remains beautiful, and if it is always like this then it would be better than the paradise of those painters who are in Japan itself. I think about you and Gauguin and about Bernard all the time and everywhere. It is so beautiful and I would so like to see everybody here. Included a small sketch [F 1515, JH 1593] of a 30 square canvas – in short the starry sky painted by night, actually under a gas jet. The sky is aquamarine, the water is royal blue, the ground is mauve. The town is blue and purple. The gas is yellow and the reflections are russet gold descending down to green-bronze. On the aquamarine field of the sky the Great Bear is a sparkling green and pink, whose discreet paleness contrasts with the brutal gold of the gas. Two colourful figurines of lovers in the foreground [F 474, JH 1592].

Also a sketch [F 1453, JH 1590] ¹ of a 30 square canvas representing the house and its setting under a sulphur ² sun under a pure cobalt sky [F 464, JH 1589]. The theme is a hard one! But that is exactly why I want to conquer it. Because it is fantastic, these yellow houses in the sun and also the incomparable freshness of the blue. All the ground is yellow too. I will soon send you a better drawing of it that this sketch out of my head.

The house on the left is pink with green shutters. It's the one that is shaded by a tree. This is the restaurant where I go to dine every day. My friend the factor lives at the bottom of the street on the left between the two bridges of the railroad. The night café that I painted is not in the picture, it is on the left of the restaurant.

Milliet finds this horrible, but I don't need to tell you that when he says he doesn't understand that one can have fun doing a common grocer's shop and the stiff and proper houses without any grace, but I remember that Zola did a certain boulevard in the beginning of L'assommoir, and Flaubert a corner of the embankment of the Villette in the dog days in the beginning of Bouvard and Pécuchet which are not to be sneezed at.

It does me good to do difficult things. It does not prevent me from having a terrible need of, shall I say the word – of religion – then I go outside in the night to paint the stars and I dream ever of a picture like this with a group of lively figures of our pals.

Now I have had a letter from Gauguin who seems very sad, and says that certainly if he made a sale he will come, but he doesn't say clearly that if he would simply have his journey paid he would agree to come down here.

He says that the people where he lodges are, and have been, great to him, and that to leave them like that would be a bad thing to do. But that I turn a dagger in his heart if I would believe that he would not immediately come if he was able to. That besides, if you could sell his canvases at a low price he would be happy. I will send you his letter with the replies.

Certainly his arrival would be an increase of 100 percent in the importance of this enterprise of doing painting in the Midi. And once here, I don't see him leaving again because I believe that he would take root here. And I always tell myself that what you are doing in private would in the end, with his collaboration, be a more serious thing than just my work, without an increase in the expenses and you would have more satisfaction. Later on, if maybe one day you are on your own with the impressionist paintings you will only have to continue and to enlarge on those which actually exists. Finally Gauguin says that Laval found someone who will give him 150 francs per month for at least one year, and that Laval also would maybe come in February. And I have written to Bernard that I think that in the Midi he could not live for less than 3.50 or 4 francs per day just for lodging & food. He says that he believes that for 200 francs per month he would have food and lodging for all 3 which is not impossible, if we live & eat in the studio.

The Benedictine father must have been very interesting. What would, according to him, be the future religion? Probably he would always say the same as the past.

Victor Hugo says God is an eclipsing lighthouse, and certainly now we are passing through that eclipse. I only wish that someone could prove to us something calming which comforted us, so that we stopped feeling guilty or unhappy and that we could go forward without losing ourselves in the solitude or nothingness, and without having to fear every step, or to nervously calculate the harm we may unintentionally be doing to others.

In odd Giotto's biography it said that he was always suffering and always full of ardour and ideas.

There, I would like to arrive at this assurance that makes one happy, cheerful and alive all the time. That would be easier to do in the country or a small town than in that Parisian furnace.

I would not be surprised if you will like the starry night and the ploughed fields – they are more tranquil than the other canvases. If the work always turned out like that I would have less concerns about money, because people would take to them more easily if the technique continued to be more harmonious. But this blasted mistral is very bothersome to do brushstrokes that hold and are well interwoven, with a feeling like music played with emotion.

With this calm weather I let myself go and I don't have to struggle against impossibilities

Tanguy's consignment arrived and I thank you very, very much for it because I also hope to be able to make something during autumn for the next exhibition. What is now the most pressing is 5 or even 10 meters of canvas. I write again that I will send Gauguin's letter with the reply.

Very interesting what you say of Maurin; at 40 francs his drawings are certainly not expensive. More and more I come to believe that the true and proper trade of painting is one has to let oneself go with one's taste, one's learning before the masters, in short one's faith. It is not any easier, I am convinced, to make a good painting that to find a diamond or a pearl; it requires pain and one must risk his life as a dealer or as an artist. But once one has some good stones then self doubt is not necessary, and one must boldly stick to a certain price. In the meantime... but while this idea encourages me to work, still naturally I suffer at having to spend money. But in the midst of my suffering this idea of the pearl came to me, and I would not be surprised if it didn't do you good too in times of discouragement. There are as few good paintings as there are diamonds.

I wanted to do some sunflowers again but they were already finished. Yes, during autumn I would like to be able to make a dozen 30 square canvases and I can very well accomplish it as far as I can see. I have a terrifying lucidity at times when nature is so beautiful these days, and then I am not conscious of myself any more, and the painting comes to me as in a dream. I am rather afraid that it will have a reaction of depression when we have rotten weather but then I will seek for a distraction in the study of these questions of drawing figures from memory.

I am always frustrated in my best powers by the lack of models, but I don't let it worry me – I do a landscape and colour without worrying about where it will take me. I know this, that if I were to beg the models "Now pose for me I beg you," I would be behaving like Zola's good painter in his book. And certainly Manet, for example, didn't behave like that. And in his book Zola doesn't say how those that didn't see anything supernatural in painting acted.

But don't criticise Zola's book. I will send five of Bernard's drawings in the style of the others.

I wrote to him that since Gauguin had not definitely stated if he would come or would not come I could not offer Bernard the free hospitality, or even paid in pictures or drawings. That here just his food alone would cost him in any case a bit more than food and lodging up where he currently is. A bit less perhaps if we ate in the studio, with or without Gauguin, we could make some savings.

But that in any case I didn't urge him to come. That as I counted on wintering here, certainly his company would be very welcome, but that above all he must do his calculations well.

If one of these days Gauguin writes to you definitely, either to you or to me, we will be able to see again about Bernard. I think myself that Bernard would certainly find his business here but his father should be a little bit more magnanimous in his regard. Because Bernard is painstaking. - I don't like these drawings, however, as much as the previous ones.

At the beginning of next month there will again be a heap of things that will fall on my back at the same time. In the frames and stretchers that I am having made here for the decoration of the house at the same time as the month's rent and the cleaning woman.

But I can delay taking the frames and the stretchers, and therefore I hope I will get by in any case.

The only hope that I have that is that by working very hard, at the end of one year I will have enough paintings to be able to exhibit – if I want or if you want to – at the time of the exhibition. I am not set on it, but what I am certainly set on is showing something not at all bad.

I would not exhibit, but we would have in my house work of mine that would prove that I am not slothful, nor an idler. I would be at peace, but the main thing seems to me to be that I must not give myself less trouble than the painters who work expressly for it.

Whether one exhibits or one doesn't exhibit it is necessary to be productive, and from then on one has the right to smoke his pipe in peace.

But this year we will be productive and I'm endeavouring to make this new series better than the first two consignments.

And among the studies there will be some, I hope, that are paintings, so to speak, there.

As for the starry sky, I keep hoping very much to paint it, and perhaps I will one of these days, in the same ploughed field if the sky is glittering properly.

Tolstoy's book *My Religion* has already been published in French in 1885 but I have never seen it in any catalogue.

He does not appear to believe much in a resurrection of the body or the soul. Above all he barely appears to believe in heaven – he argues these things like a nihilist – but – in opposition to most of these people – he attaches great importance of doing the things that one does well, since that is probably all one has.

And if he doesn't believe in resurrection, he appears to believe in the equivalent – the continuance of life – the march of humanity, of man and his work continued almost infallibly by the humanity of the generation to come. After all, they must not be empty consolations that he gives. Himself a nobleman, he made himself a worker, he knows how to make boots, knows how to repair stoves, knows how to guide a plough and to dig the earth.

I know nothing at all of all that, but I respect an energetic human soul, noted for his reforms too. My god, all the same we don't have to pity ourselves for living at a time where there are nothing but loafers, when we are contemporaries of similar specimens of poor mortals who don't even believe very strongly in heaven. He believes – maybe I already wrote of it to you, in a non-violent revolution caused by the need for love and religion that, as a reaction to the scepticism and desperate and discouraging suffering, must appear in people.

Goodbye. Your last letter came on Friday; if I got the next letter on Friday too it would be awfully good.

But it is not pressing, it will be alright whatever happens. A handshake

Ever yours,

Vincent

1. I find it hard to equate this statement with the sketch de la Faille and Hulsker identify. It is certainly not a "sketch out of my head," but a close copy of the finished painting.
2. Here Vincent wrote "souffre," (suffering), instead of "soufre," (sulphur).