

Letter 544
Arles, 3 October 1888

My dear Theo,

Enclosed a very, very remarkable letter from Gauguin. Do put it on one side as a thing of extraordinary importance.

I mean his description of himself, which moves me to the depths of my soul. I got it along with a letter from Bernard which Gauguin probably read and perhaps approved of, in which Bernard says once more that he wants to come here, and proposes to me on behalf of Laval, Monet, another novice¹ and himself to make an exchange with the four of them.

He also says that Laval will come too, and that the other two want to come. I should not ask anything better, but when it is a question of several painters living a community life, I stipulate at the outset that there must be an abbot to keep order, and that would naturally be Gauguin. That is why I would like Gauguin to be here first (besides Bernard and Laval will only come in February – Bernard has to see his Military Board of Appeal in Paris). As for me, I want two things, I want to earn back the money which I have already spent, so as to give it to you, and I want Gauguin to have peace and quiet in which to produce, and to be able to breathe freely as an artist. If I can get back the money already spent which you have been lending me for several years, we shall enlarge our enterprise, and try to found a studio for a renaissance and not for a decadence. I am pretty sure that we can count on Gauguin staying with us always, and that neither side will lose. Only by associating thus, each of us will be more himself, and union is strength.

By the way, of course I shall not give anything to Gauguin in exchange for his portrait, because I think that it is sure to be too good, but I shall ask him to hand it over to us for his first month, or as payment for his fare.

But you can see that if I had not written to them rather strongly, this portrait would not exist, and now Bernard has done one too.

Say that I was angry, say that I was unjust, but anyway Gauguin has given birth to a picture, and Bernard too.

Oh! my study of vineyards, I have worked like a slave over it, but I have got it, again on a square size 30 canvas [F 475, JH 1595], and again for the decoration of the house. I haven't any more canvas left.

Do you realize that if we get Gauguin, we are at the beginning of a very great thing, which will open a new era for us.

When I left you at the station to go South, very miserable, almost an invalid and almost a drunkard, I still felt vaguely that we had put our very heart into our discussions with so many interesting people and artists that winter, but I hadn't the courage to hope.

After continued efforts on your part and mine, now at last something is beginning to show on the horizon: Hope.

It does not matter if you stay with the Goupils or not, you have committed yourself to Gauguin body and soul.

So you will be one of the first, or the first dealer-apostle. I can see my own painting coming to life, and likewise a work among the artists. For if you try to get money for us, I shall urge every man who comes within my reach to produce, and I will set them an example myself.

And if we stick to it, all this will help to make something more lasting than ourselves.

I have to answer Gauguin and Bernard this afternoon, and I am going to say to them that in any case we shall begin by feeling wholly united, and that I for one am confident that this union will be our strength against the inevitable deficiencies of money and health.

Do go and see Thomas in spite of everything, because before Gauguin comes I want to buy some more things – the following:

Dressing table and chest of drawers	40 fr.
4 Sheets	40
3 Drawing boards	12
Kitchen range	60
Paints and canvas	200
Frames and stretchers	50

There, it's a lot, and nothing of it is absolutely essential. We can do without any item. But all the same, the broader and more lasting character which I want this business to have demands it. For instance the four

extra sheets – I have four already – we shall even be able to put Bernard up for nothing if we put a straw pallet or mattress on the floor either for me or for him, just as we like. The kitchen range will warm the studio for us at the same time.

But you will say – “And these paints?”

Well, yes, I am ashamed of it, but I am vain enough to want to make a certain impression on Gauguin with my work, so I cannot help wanting to do as much work as possible alone before he comes. His coming will alter my manner of painting and I shall gain by it, I believe, but all the same I am rather keen on my decorations, which are almost like French painted porcelain. And these days are magnificent.

I am working on ten size 30 canvases now.

Over and above all this we have to add Gauguin’s fare, but if Thomas isn’t willing to be free-handed, Gauguin’s fare comes before everything else, to the detriment of your pocket and mine. Before everything else. All the expenses I have mentioned are only meant to make a good impression on him at the moment he arrives. I would like him to feel it all harmonious, and I wish that we could have managed – you by your money and I with a general effect and the arrangement of things – to have the studio complete, and a setting worthy of the artist Gauguin who is to be its head.

It would be a good stroke, like the old days when Corot, finding Daumier on the rocks, made life so secure for him that he found everything easy, but it will do very well even as things are.

The essential thing is the fare, and even my paints can wait, though I venture to think that I shall someday earn more with them than they cost. I shouldn’t make light of Gauguin’s giving you the monopoly of his work, and straight off his prices will go up. Nothing below 500 frs. He only needs confidence, and now he will have it. I feel that we are working in a great and good enterprise, which has nothing to do with the old kind of commerce.

As for the colours, it is almost certain that with Gauguin here, we shall bray them ourselves. I have painted the vines again entirely with Tanguy’s paints, and they are satisfactory, the coarser grain is in no way troublesome. If we go on attacking things in the right way, I mean from the human, not the material side, it seems to me not altogether out of the question that the material difficulties may smooth themselves out. Because one grows in the storm. I am going on framing studies, because it all goes to make part of the furnishing, and gives character to the place.

If Gauguin gives his work to you, officially because you are with the Goupils and privately as your friend and under an obligation to you, then in return Gauguin can consider himself head of the studio, and control the money as he thinks fit, and if it can be done, help Bernard, Laval and others by exchanging studies or pictures, while I shall abide by the same conditions, giving my studies for 100 francs and my share of the canvas and paints. But the more Gauguin realizes that when he joins us he will have the standing of head of the studio, the sooner he will get better, and the more eager he will be to work.

Now the more complete the studio, and the more solidly established it is for the use of those who are passing through, the more inspiration he will have, and ambition to make it a living force. They are talking of nothing else at the moment at Pont-Aven, which means that Paris will be talking too, and once again, the more solidly established it is, so much the better will the general impression be, and the greater the chance that it will catch on.

Well, what will be, will be. Only I say now, to prevent future discussions, if it catches on so that Laval and Bernard will really come, Gauguin and not I will be the head of the studio. As for the internal arrangements, I think that we shall agree pretty well.

I hope I shall get your next letter on Wednesday. Bernard’s letter is once more full of his conviction that Gauguin is a very great master, and a man absolutely superior in character and intellect.

A good handshake, and good-by for now.

Ever yours, Vincent

The Vineyard that I have just painted is green, purple and yellow, with violet bunches and branches in black and orange.

On the horizon are some blue-grey willows, and the wine press a long, long way off, with a red roof, and the lilac silhouette of the distant town.

In the vineyard there are little figures of women with red parasols, and other little figures of men working at gathering grapes with their cart.

Over it is a blue sky, and the foreground is of grey sand. This is a pendant to the garden with the clipped bush and the oleanders.

I think you will prefer these ten canvases to the batch I sent last, and I venture to hope to double the number in the autumn.

Day after day it grows richer and richer. And when the leaves start to fall – I do not know if this happens in the beginning of November here the way it does with us – when all the foliage is yellow, it will be amazing against the blue.

Zeim has given us that splendour many a time already. Then a short winter, and after that we shall have got to the orchards in bloom again.

What Gauguin says about “Persian” painting is true. I don’t believe that it would shock anybody in the Dieulafoi Museum, one might put it there without any difficulties. But, but, but...I myself do not belong to the world of the great, not even to any world at all...and...I prefer the Greeks and Japanese to the Persians and Egyptians. All the same, I do not mean to say that Gauguin is wrong in working in the Persian style. But I should have to get used to it.

1. E. Chamaillard.