

Arles, second half of December 1888

My dear Theo,

Gauguin and I went yesterday to Montpellier to see the museum there and especially the Brias room. [Alfred Bruyas (or Brias) had left his personal collection to the Museum.] There are a lot of portraits of Brias, by Delacroix, Ricard, Courbet, Cabanel, Couture, Verdier, Tassaert, and others. Then there are pictures by Delacroix, Courbet, Giotto, Paul Potter, Botticelli, Th. Rousseau, very fine. Brias was a benefactor of artists, I shall say no more to you than that. In the portrait by Delacroix he is a gentleman with red beard and hair, confoundedly like you or me, and made me think of that poem by de Musset – “Partout ou j’ai touché la terre – un malheureux vêtu de noir, auprès de nous venait s’asseoir, qui regardait comme un frère.” [Wherever I touched the earth, a wretch clad in black came and sat by us, looking at us like a brother.] It would have the same effect on you. I am sure. Please do go to that bookshop where they sell the lithographs by past and present artists, and see if you could get, not too dear, the lithograph after Delacroix’s “Tasso in the Madhouse,” since I think the figure there must have some affinity with this fine portrait of Brias.

They have got some more Delacroixs, the study of a “Mulatto Woman” (which Gauguin copied once), the “Odalisques,” “Daniel in the Lions’ Den”; and by Courbet: first, the “Village Girls,” magnificent, a woman seen from behind, another lying on the ground in a landscape, second, the “Woman Spinning,” superb, and a whole heap more of Courbet’s. But after all, you must know this collection exists, or else know people who have seen it, and consequently be able to talk about it. So I shan’t say more about the museum (except the Barye drawings and bronzes).

Gauguin and I talked a lot about Delacroix, Rembrandt, etc. Our arguments are terribly electric, we come out of them sometimes with our heads as exhausted as an electric battery after it has run down. We were in the midst of magic, for as Fromentin well says: Rembrandt is above all else a magician.

I tell you this in connection with our Dutch friends de Haan and Isaäcson, who have so sought after and loved Rembrandt so as to encourage you all to pursue your researches.

You must not be discouraged in them.

You know the strange and magnificent “Portrait of a Man,” by Rembrandt, in the Lacaze Gallery. I said to Gauguin that I myself saw in it a certain likeness in family or in race to Delacroix or to Gauguin himself, I do not know why, but I always call this portrait “The Traveller,” or “The Man Come from Far.” It is a similar and parallel idea to the one I’ve already spoken to you about, that I always look on the portrait of old Six, the fine portrait of the “Man with a Glove,” as you in the future, and the etching by Rembrandt, “Six reading near a window in a shaft of sunlight,” as you in the past and present. This is how things stand. Gauguin was saying to me this morning when I asked him how he felt “that he felt his old self coming back,” which gave me enormous pleasure. When I came here myself last winter, tired out and almost stunned in mind, before ever being able to begin to recover I had a strain of inward suffering too.

I do wish that some day you could see this Montpellier Museum – there are some very fine things.

Say to Degas that Gauguin and I have been to see the portrait of Brias by Delacroix at Montpellier, for we must make bold to believe that what it is, and the portrait of Brias by Delacroix is as like you and me as a new brother. As for founding a way of life for artists chumming it together, you see such queer things, and I will wind up with what you are always saying – time will show. You can say all that to our friends Isaäcson and de Haan, and even boldly read them this letter. I should have written to them already if I had felt the necessary electric force.

A good hearty handshake all round from Gauguin as from me.

Ever yours,

Vincent

If you should be thinking that Gauguin and I have facility in our work, I assure you that work does not always come easy, and that our Dutch friends may get no more discouraged than we do in their difficulties is my wish both for them and for you.