

Letter 571a
Arles, 22 or 23 January 1889

My dear friend Koning,

Thanks for having wished me a happy New Year all the way from the North of our native country. I received your postcard in the hospital at Arles, where I had been quartered following an attack of something the matter with my brains, or otherwise fever, which had nearly passed off already.

And as for the causes and consequences of said illness, I think I shall be wise to leave the solving of these problems to the casual discussions of the Dutch catechists, that is to say whether I am mad or not, or whether I have been mad, and am still mad, in some imagination of a purely sculptural nature.

And if not, whether I was already mad before that time; or whether I am so at present, or shall be so in the hereafter.

After having thus given you ample information with regard to the state of my mind and body...I suppose you will think it less miraculous that I did not answer you earlier. Meanwhile we must not forget to stick to the point.

And starting from there I ask you what you are doing in the art of painting, and how you are working with the colours.

As far as I know, I have seen absolutely none of your studies which you sent to Theo, in spite of my urgent request to you for one of your works. Does the fault lie with Theo, who possibly has other things to think of, or with the not inconsiderable distance between us?

Did you know that Theo is engaged, and is going to marry an Amsterdam girl within a relatively short time?

After this question on your work, a few words about mine.

At present I have in mind, or rather on my easel, the portrait of a woman.

I call it "La Berceuse," or as we say in Dutch (after Van Eeden, you know, who wrote that particular book I gave you to read), or in Van Eeden's Dutch, quite simply "our lullaby or the woman rocking the cradle." It is a woman in a green dress (the bust olive green and grey skirt pale malachite green). [F 508, JH 1671]

The hair is quite orange and in plaits. The complexion is chrome yellow, worked up with some naturally broken tones for the purpose of modelling.

The hands holding the rope of the cradle, the same.

At the bottom the background is vermilion (simply representing a tiled floor or else a stone floor). The wall is covered with wallpaper, which of course I have calculated in conformity with the rest of the colours. This wallpaper is bluish-green with pink dahlias and spotted with orange and ultramarine.

In this I think I have run pretty well parallel with Van Eeden and his style of writing, which consequently can be considered analogous to my style of painting in the matter of colours.

Whether I really sang a lullaby in colours is something I leave to the critics, particularly to the aforesaid ones.

But we talked all this over sufficiently at the time, didn't we? I mean the eternal problem of colours, which leads us on as far as our tranquillity of mind will allow.

At any rate, on leaving the hospital, I made a portrait of my own doctor [F 500, JH 1659]. And I haven't wholly lost my equilibrium as a painter.

But of course, from that time onward I have painted quite a considerable number of studies or pictures.

Among other things, last summer, two flower pieces with nothing but sunflowers in a yellow earthen pot. Painted with the three chrome yellows, yellow ocher and malachite green, and nothing else. [F 456, JH 1561; F 454, JH 1562]

For the time being I am staying on in Arles, and keeping myself at your disposal in the matter of correspondence or painted studies. Not long ago Theo went to see Breitner, and discussing his work, he told me that after all he considered Breitner the best painter and thinker over there.

Good-by, amice, with a handshake in thought,

Your friend, Vincent

The address is still Place Lamartine 2, Arles.

Should you meet Breitner, you have my permission to let him read this letter or tell him of it. I mean as I write it, and without letting your powers of imagination run away with you too much.