

Letter 588
Arles, 30 April 1889

My dear Theo,

On the occasion of the first of May [Theo's birthday] I wish you a tolerably good year, and above all good health.

How I should like to pass on to you some of my physical strength. I have the feeling I've too much of it at the moment. Which does not prevent my head from still not being all that it should be.

How right Delacroix was, who lived on bread and wine alone, and who succeeded in finding a way of life in keeping with his vocation. But the inevitable question of money is ever-present – Delacroix had private means. Corot too. And Millet – Millet was a peasant and the son of a peasant.

You may perhaps be interested in reading this article I cut out of a Marseilles paper because one catches a glimpse of Monticelli in it, and I find the description of the painting representing a corner of the churchyard very interesting. But alas, it's yet another deplorable story.

How sad it is to think that a painter who succeeds, even if only in part, pulls along half a dozen artists who are worse failures than himself.

However, remember Pangloss, remember Bouvard et Pécuchet – I do – and even that becomes clear then. But perhaps those people don't know Pangloss, or else, fatally marked by real despair and great suffering, they have forgotten all they knew about him.

And anyway, we are falling back again in the name of optimism on a religion that strikes me as the rear end of some sort of Buddhism. No harm in that, on the contrary, if that's what one wants.

I don't like the article on Monet in the Figaro very much – how much better that other article in the 19^{me} Siècle was! One could see the pictures in that, and this one is full of nothing but depressing banalities.

Today I am stuck in the middle of packing a case of pictures and studies. I've stuck some newspapers on to one which is flaking – it's one of the best, and I think that when you've had a look at it you'll understand more clearly what my studio, now come to grief, could have been. This study, just like some of the others, was spoiled by the damp while I was ill.

The flood water came up to within a stone's throw of the house, and more important, since the house wasn't heated during my absence, by the time I got back water and saltpeter were oozing from the walls. That was a blow to me, since not only the studio had come to grief, but even the studies that would have been reminders of it. It is all so final, and my urge to found something very simple but lasting was so strong. I was fighting a losing battle, or rather it was weakness of character on my part, for I am left with feelings of deep remorse about it, difficult to describe. I think that was the reason I cried out so much during the attacks – I wanted to defend myself and couldn't do it. For it was not to me, it was precisely to painters such as the poor wretch about whom the enclosed article speaks that the studio could have been of use.

In fact, we had several predecessors. Bruyas at Montpellier gave a whole fortune to that, a whole life, and without the slightest apparent result.

Yes – a chilly room in the municipal gallery where you can see a troubled face and many fine pictures, where you certainly feel moved, but, alas, moved as in a graveyard.

Yet it would be difficult to walk through a graveyard that demonstrated more clearly the existence of that Espérance which Puvis de Chavannes has painted.

Pictures fade like flowers – even some of Delacroix's have suffered in this way, the magnificent Daniel, Les odalisques (quite different from those in the Louvre, it was in a single range of purplish-blue), but how they impressed me, those pictures fading there, little understood, that's for sure, by most of the visitors who look at Courbet and Cabanel and Victor Giraud, etc.

What are we, we other painters?

Oh, well, I'm sure Richepin is quite right, for instance when he brutally bursts in and consigns them straight back to the madhouse with his profanities.

However, I assure you that I know of no hospital where they would be willing to take me in for nothing, even supposing that I myself shouldered the painting expenses and left the whole of my work to the hospital.

And that is, I don't say a great, but still a small injustice. Even so, I should feel resigned if one took me in. If I were without your friendship, they would drive me remorselessly to suicide, and coward that I am, I should end by committing it. At this point, I hope, we are permitted to protest against society and to defend ourselves.

We can be fairly sure that the Marseilles artist who committed suicide in no way did it under the influence of absinthe, for the simple reason that no one is likely to have offered him any and he could not have had anything to buy it with. Besides, he would not have drunk it purely for pleasure, but because, being ill already, he kept himself going with it.

M. Salles has been to Saint-Rémy – they are not willing to give me permission to paint outside the institution, nor take me for less than 100 francs.

So this is pretty bad news.

If I could get out of this mess by joining the Foreign Legion for 5 years, I think I should prefer that.

For on the one hand, being locked up and not working, I should find it hard to get better, and on the other hand, they would make us pay 100 francs a month during the whole long life of a madman.

It's a bad business, and what are we to make of it? But would they be willing to have me as a soldier?

I feel very tired after the conversation with M. Salles, and I don't quite know what to do. I myself advised Bernard to do his service there, so it's hardly surprising that I'm considering going to Arabia as a soldier myself.

I say that so you will not blame me too much if I do go. Everything else is so vague and so strange. And you know how doubtful it is that one will ever get back what it costs to paint. For the rest, it seems I am physically well.

Supposing I am only allowed to work under supervision! And in the institution – my God, is it worth paying money for that? In that case I could certainly work just as well, even better, in the barracks.

Anyway, I'm thinking about it. You do so as well. Let us remember that all is for the best in the best of all worlds – it's not impossible.

A really good handshake,

Ever yours, Vincent

Here is what I think is worth putting on stretchers from the consignment.

The Night Café [F 463, JH 1575] - The Alyscamps (lane of tombs) [F 486, JH 1620]

The Green Vineyard [F 475, JH 1595] - ditto [F 487, JH 1621]

The Red Vineyard [F 495, JH 1626] - Garden with large conifer bush and oleanders

The Bedroom [F 482, JH 1608]

The Furrows [F 574, JH 1586] - ditto with cedar & geraniums

ditto - Sunflowers

Portrait of Boch [F 462, JH 1574] - Flowers, scabious, etc.

Portrait of Laval - ditto, asters, marigolds, etc.

Portrait of Gauguin

Portrait of Bernard

The packing case contains some studies by Gauguin which belong to him, and his two fencing masks and some fencing gloves.

If there is room in the packing case, I'll add some stretchers.