

Letter 592  
St. Rémy, 22 May 1889

My Dear Theo,

The letter I have just received from you gives me great pleasure. You tell me that J. H. Weissenbruch has two pictures at the exhibition – but I imagined he was dead – am I wrong? Certainly he's a mighty good artist and a decent big-hearted fellow too.

What you say about "La Berceuse" pleases me; it is very true that the common people, who are content with chromos and melt when they hear a barrel organ, are in some vague way right, perhaps more sincere than certain men about town who go to the Salon.

If he will accept it, give Gauguin the copy of "La Berceuse" that was not mounted on a stretcher, and Bernard also, as a token of friendship, but if Gauguin wants the sunflowers, it is only fair that he should give you something you like equally well in exchange.

Gauguin himself liked the sunflowers better later on when he had been looking at them for a good while. What you also have to know is that if you arrange them this way, namely "La Berceuse" in the middle and the two canvases of sunflowers to the right and left, it makes a sort of triptych.

And then the yellow and orange tones of the head will gain in brilliance by the proximity of the yellow wings.

And then you will understand what I wrote you, that my idea had been to make a sort of decoration, for instance for the end of a ship's cabin. Then, as the size increases, the summary technique is justified. The frame for the central piece is the red one. And the two sunflowers which go with it are the ones framed in narrow strips.

You see that this frame of plain laths does quite well, and a frame like this costs only a very little. It would perhaps be a good idea to frame the green and red vineyards that way, the "Sower" and the "Furrows" and the bedroom interior as well.

Here is a new size 30 canvas, once again as run of the mill as a cheap chromo, depicting age-old love nests in the greenery. [F609, JH1693]. Large tree trunks covered with ivy, the ground similarly covered with ivy and periwinkle, a stone bench and a bush of roses, pale in the cool shadow. In the foreground, some plants with white calyxes. It is green, violet and pink.

It's all a question – and this is unfortunately missing from the cheap chromos as well as from the barrel organs – of putting some style into it.

Since I've been here, there's been enough work for me to do, what with the neglected garden with its tall pines and long, unkempt grass mixed with all sorts of weeds, and I haven't even been outside.

However, the countryside around St. Rémy is very beautiful, and little by little I shall probably make a few short trips.

But while I stay here, the doctor is of course in a better position to see what is wrong, and will have his mind set at rest, I hope, about what he can let me paint.

I assure you that I am all right here, and that for the time being I see no reason at all to take lodgings in or around Paris. I have a small room with greenish-grey paper with two sea-green curtains with a design of very pale roses, brightened by touches of blood-red.

These curtains, probably the legacy of some deceased and ruined rich person, are very pretty in design. A very worn armchair, probably from the same source, is covered with a tapestry speckled like a Diaz or a Monticelli in brown, red, pink, white, cream, black, forget-me-not blue and bottle green. Through the iron-barred window I can see an enclosed square of wheat, a prospect like a Van Goyen, above which, in the morning, I watch the sun rise in all its glory.

In addition – as there are more than thirty empty rooms – I have another room for doing my work.

The food is all right as far as it goes. It tastes a bit musty, of course, as in a cockroach-infested restaurant in Paris, or in a boarding-house. The poor wretches here, having absolutely nothing to do (not a book, nothing more to distract them than a game of boules or a game of draughts), have no other daily distraction than to stuff themselves with chickpeas, haricot beans, lentils and other groceries and colonial produce, in set amounts and at stated hours.

As the digestion of these foodstuffs offers certain difficulties, they fill their days in a way as offensive as it is costly.

But joking apart, my fear of madness is wearing off markedly, since I can see at close quarters those who are affected by it in the same way as I may very easily be in the future.

Previously, I was repelled by these individuals, and I found it distressing to have to reflect that so many in our trade, Troyon, Marchal, Méryon, Jundt, M. Maris, Monticelli and a whole lot more finished up like that. It was quite impossible for me to picture them in that condition.

Well, now I can think of all that without fear, that is to say, I find it is no more dreadful than if those people had died of something else, consumption or syphilis, for example. I see these artists being reinvested with their old serenity, and don't you think it's quite something to meet these old colleagues of ours again? That, joking apart, is what I am profoundly thankful for.

For though there are some who howl or rave a great deal, there is much true friendship here. They say we must tolerate others so that the others may tolerate us, and other very sound arguments, which they put into practice, too. And we understand each other very well. Sometimes, for instance, I can talk with one of them who can only reply in incoherent sounds, because he is not afraid of me. If someone has an attack, the others look after him and interfere so that he does not harm himself.

The same for those whose mania is to fly often into a rage. The old inhabitants of the menagerie come running and separate the combatants, if combat there is.

It is true there are some whose condition is more serious, who are either dirty or dangerous. These are in another ward.

I take a bath twice a week now, and stay in it for two hours; my stomach is infinitely better than it was a year ago; so as far as I know, I only have to go on. Besides, I shall spend less here, I think, considering that I have work in prospect again, for the scenery is lovely.

What I hope is that at the end of a year I shall know what I can do and what I want to do better than now. Then little by little the idea of a fresh start will come to me. Going back to Paris or anywhere at all in no way attracts me. I think my place is here. Extreme enervation is, in my opinion, what most of those who have been here for years suffer from. Now my work will preserve me from that to a certain extent.

The room where we stay on wet days is like a third-class waiting room in some stagnant village, the more so as there are some distinguished lunatics who always wear a hat, spectacles and a cane, and travelling cloak, almost like at a watering place, and they represent the passengers.

I am forced to ask you again for some paints and especially for canvas. When I sent you the four canvases of the garden I am working on, you will see that, considering my life is spent mostly in the garden, it is not so unhappy.

Yesterday I drew a very big, rather rare night moth, called a death's head, its colouring of amazing distinction, black, grey, cloudy white tinged with carmine or vaguely shading off into olive green; it is very big.

To paint it I should have killed it [F 610, JH 1702], and it was a pity, the beast was so beautiful. I will send you the drawing [F 1523, JH 1700] along with some other drawings of plants.

You could take the canvases at Tanguy's or at your place off the stretchers, if they are dry enough, and then put on any new ones you think worth it.

Gauguin ought to be able to tell you the address of a man who could reline "The Bedroom," [F 482, JH 1608] and who won't be too expensive. The restoration ought, I imagine, to cost 5 francs. If it is more, then don't have it done. I'm sure Gauguin didn't pay any more on the many occasions when he had his canvases, or Cézanne's or Pissaro's, relined.

Again – speaking of my condition – I am so grateful for yet another thing. I've noticed that others, too, hear sounds and strange voices during their attacks, as I did, and that things seemed to change before their very eyes. And that lessened the horror with which I remembered my first attack, something that, when it comes upon you unexpectedly, cannot but frighten you terribly. Once you know it is part of the illness, you accept it like anything else. Had I had not seen other lunatics close to, I should not have been able to stop myself from thinking about it all the time. For the suffering and the anguish are not funny when you are having an attack.

Most epileptics bite their tongue and injure themselves. Rey told me that he had seen a case where someone had mutilated his own ear, just as I did, and I think I heard a doctor from here, who came to see me with the director, say that he too had seen it before. I like to think that once you know what it is, once you are conscious of your condition, and of being subject to attacks, then you can do something to prevent your being taken unawares by the anguish or the terror. Now that it has all been abating for five months, I have high hopes of getting over it, or at least of no longer having such violent attacks.

There is someone here who has been shouting and talking like me all the time for a fortnight. He thinks he hears voices and words in the echoes of the corridors, probably because the auditory nerve is diseased and

over-sensitive, and in my case it was both sight and hearing at the same time, which is usual at the onset of epilepsy, according to what Rey said one day.

Now, the shock was such that even moving made me feel sick, and nothing would have pleased me better than never to have woken up again. At present this horror of life is already less pronounced, and the melancholy less acute. But I still have no will, and hardly any desires, or none at all that are to do with ordinary life, for example, almost no wish to see friends, although I do think of them. That is why I am not ready to leave here now or in the near future. I should feel depressed about everything again.

And anyway, it is only recently that my loathing of life has been drastically changed. There is still a long way to go from that to willing and doing.

What a pity that you are condemned to stay full-time in Paris and that you never see any part of the country other than that around Paris. I'm sure it's no worse for me to be in the company I now find myself than for you to be with that ill-fated Goupil & Co. all the time. In that respect, we are pretty much equal. For you, too, are only able to act partly in keeping with your ideas. However, once we have got used to these difficulties, it all becomes second nature.

Although the pictures swallow up canvas and paint, etc., nevertheless at the end of the month I'm sure it's more profitable to spend a little more on those, making use of what I've learned, than to abandon it all, when you have to pay for my board and lodging anyway. And that's why I'm carrying on. So this month I have four size 30 canvases and two or three drawings.

But the question of money, whatever one does, is always with us, like the enemy facing the troops, and cannot be denied or ignored.

As much as anyone, I know where my duties lie in that respect. And I may yet be able to pay back everything I've spent, for I consider it to have been, if not taken from you, at least taken from the family. So that's why I've been producing pictures and shall be doing some more. This is acting as you yourself are acting. If I were a man of means, perhaps my mind would be freer to produce art for art's sake. Now I content myself with the thought that by working diligently, I may perhaps make some progress, even without thinking about it

These are the paints I need:

3 emerald green

2 cobalt

1 ultramarine

1 orange lead (big tubes)

6 zinc white

5 meters of canvas

Thanking you for your kind letter, I shake your hand warmly, as I do your wife's.

Ever yours, Vincent