

Letter 604
Saint-Rémy, 5th or 6th September 1889

My dear brother,

I have already written to you, but there are still quite a few things you said to me that I haven't answered yet. Firstly, that you have rented a room in Tanguy's house and that my canvases are there, which is very interesting – provided you aren't paying too much for it – the expenses go on all the time and the canvases still take so long to bring anything in – it often frightens me.

Be that as it may, I'm sure it's a very good step, and I thank you for taking it, as for so many other things. It is curious that Maus had the idea of inviting young Bernard and me for the next Vingstistes exhibition. I should like to exhibit with them very much, though I'm conscious of my inferiority by the side of so many tremendously talented Belgians.

This Mellery, now, is a great artist. And has been one for a number of years. But I shall try my best to do something good this autumn.

I am working away in my room without interruption which does me good and chases away what I imagine are abnormal ideas.

Thus I've done the painting of the Bedroom once more [F 484, JH 1771]. That's certainly one of my best studies – and sooner or later it must definitely be relined. It was painted so quickly and has dried in such a way that the turpentine evaporated straight away and the paint hasn't stuck firmly to the canvas at all. That will also have happened with other studies of mine painted very quickly and with a very full brush. Anyway, after some time this thin canvas deteriorates and cannot take a lot of impasto. You've got some excellent stretchers, damn it, if I had some like that to work with, I'd be a lot better off than with these laths you get here which warp in the sun.

They say – and I am very willing to believe it – that it is difficult to know oneself – but it isn't easy to paint oneself either. So I am working on two self-portraits at the moment – for want of another model.

Because it is high time I did a little figure work. In the one I began the first day I got up, I was thin and deathly pale. It is dark purple-blue, and the head whitish with yellow hair, thus with a colour effect [F 626, JH 1770].

But I have since started another, three-quarter profile on a light background [F 627, JH 1772].

Then I'm retouching this summer's studies – in fact, I am working morning, noon and night.

Are you well? – damn it, I really wish that you were 2 years further on and that these early days of your marriage, however lovely they may be at times, were behind you. I'm quite convinced that a marriage grows better with time, and that it's then that your constitution will recover.

So take things with a pinch of northern equanimity, and look after yourselves, both of you. This confounded life in the world of art is exhausting, it seems.

Day by day my own strength is returning, and already I feel I have almost too much of it again. For one doesn't need to be a Hercules to remain hard at work at the easel.

What you told me about Maus having been to see my canvases made me think a lot about the Belgian painters these last few days and also during my illness. As a result I was overwhelmed with memories as by an avalanche, and I tried to recall the whole of that school of modern Flemish artists until I felt as homesick as a fish out of water.

Which isn't any good, because our way lies – forwards – and retracing our steps is both impossible and impermissible. In other words one can think about the past without being swamped by an over-melancholic nostalgia.

Anyway, Henri Conscience may not be a perfect writer by any means, but no two ways about it, what a painter!

And what human kindness in what he said and hoped for. There's a preface in one of his books on my mind all the time (the one to Le Conscrit), where he writes that he had been very ill, and says that during his illness, despite all his efforts, he felt his affection for mankind draining away, but that his feeling of love returned on long walks in the countryside.

The inevitability of suffering and despair – well, here I am, bucked up again for a time – and I thank him for it. I am writing you this letter bit by bit in the intervals when I am worn out with painting. The work is going pretty well. I'm struggling with a canvas I started a few days before my illness – a reaper. The study is all yellow, extremely thickly painted, but the subject was beautiful and simple. For I see in this reaper – a vague figure toiling away for all he's worth in the midst of the heat to finish his task – I see in him the image of death, in the sense that humanity might be the wheat he is reaping. So it is, if you like, the opposite of the sower which I tried to do before. But there's no sadness in this death, this one takes place in broad daylight with a sun flooding everything with light of pure gold. [F 618, JH 1773]

Well, here I am, at it again. But I won't give in, and shall try once more on a new canvas. Ah, I could almost believe that I have a new spell of lucidity before me.

So what next – carrying on here for the next few months, or moving elsewhere – I don't know. It's just that the attacks, when they come, are no joke, and running the risk of having a bout like that at your place or at anyone else's house is a serious business.

My dear brother – I always write to you in between bouts of work, and I am working like one truly possessed, more than ever I am in the grip of a pent-up fury of work, and I'm sure it will help to cure me. Perhaps something along the lines of what Eug. Delacroix spoke of will happen to me – “I discovered painting when I had neither teeth or breath left,” in the sense that my sad illness makes me work in a pent-up fury – very slowly – but without leaving off from morning till night – and – that is probably the secret – to work long and slowly. But what do I know about it? Still, I think I've one or two canvases on the go which are not too bad, firstly, the reaper in the yellow wheat, and the portrait on a light background which should go to the Vingtistes, if indeed they remember me when the time comes. Actually, I care very little one way or another, it might be preferable if they did forget all about me. For my part, I do not forget how inspired I am whenever I give my memory of certain Belgians free rein. That is the positive side, and the rest is of no more than secondary importance.

And here we are already in September, soon we will be in the middle of autumn, and then winter. I shall continue to work without let-up, and then if I have another attack around Christmas, we'll see, and when that's over, I can't see any objection to my telling the administration here to go to hell, and to my returning north for a fairly long time. To leave now, when I believe I may well have another attack this winter, that's to say in three months' time, would perhaps be too foolhardy.

It's been six weeks since I put a foot outdoors, even in the garden. Next week, however, when I've finished the canvases I'm busy with, I'm going to have a go.

But another few months and I'll be so flabby and lethargic that a change will probably do me a lot of good.

That's the way I'm thinking at the moment, though of course nothing is settled.

But I do believe that one shouldn't stand on ceremony with the people of this establishment, any more than of the proprietors of a hotel. We have rented a room from them for a certain length of time, and they are well paid for what they provide, and that's absolutely all there is to it.

Not to mention that they might like nothing better than for my condition to be chronic, and we would be unforgivably stupid to give in to them. They make far too many inquiries, to my mind, not only about what I am, but also what you earn, etc.

So let's not quarrel with them and simply give them the slip.

I am continuing this letter again at intervals. Yesterday I began the portrait of the chief attendant [F 629, JH 1774], and I may do his wife as well, since he is married and lives in a little farmhouse a stone's throw from the institution. A most interesting face. There's a beautiful etching by Legros of an old Spanish grandee – if you remember it, it will give you an idea of the type.

He was at the hospital in Marseilles during two cholera epidemics, in short, he is a man who has seen an enormous amount of suffering and death, and he has an indefinable expression of quiet contemplation, so that I am irresistibly reminded of Guizot's face – for there is something of that in his head, if different. But he is a man of the people and simpler. Anyway, you will see it if I succeed in doing it and if I make a copy of it.

I am struggling with all my might to keep my work under control by telling myself that success would be the best lightning rod for my illness. I make sure I don't overdo things, and take care to keep myself to myself. It's selfish, if you like, not getting used to my companions in misfortune here and not going round to see them, but still, I feel none the worse for it, for my work is making headway, and that's what we need, for it is absolutely vital that I do better than before, as that was not enough.

Supposing I get out of here one day, wouldn't it be far better if I came back definitely capable of doing a portrait with some character than if I came back as I started? That's clumsily put, for I'm well aware one cannot say, “I know how to do a portrait,” without telling a lie, because that is an infinite objective. Still you will understand what I mean, that I must do better than before.

At the moment my mind is working in an orderly way, and I feel completely normal – and when I look at my present condition, in the hope of generally having, between the attacks – if, unfortunately, it is to be expected that they will return from time to time – of having in between times, periods of lucidity and of working – when I look at my present condition, then I do indeed tell myself that it won't do to become obsessed with being sick. And that I must firmly continue my humble career as a painter. And so, staying in an asylum for ever would probably be going too far.

A few days ago, I was reading in the Figaro about a Russian writer who also suffered from a nervous illness of which, moreover, he sadly died, and which brought on terrible attacks from time to time [Dostoevsky]. But what is one to do? There is no remedy, or if there is one, it is to work with a will.

I am dwelling on this more than I should.

All in all, I prefer to be definitely ill like this than be the way I was to Paris when all this was brewing. You will also see that when you put the portrait with the light background that I have just done next to those portraits I did of myself in Paris, you really will see that I look saner now than I did then, indeed much more so. I am even inclined to believe that the portrait will tell you better than my letter how I am, and that it will reassure you – it took me a lot of trouble to do.

And the “Reaper” is also going well, I think – it is very, very simple.

By the end of the month I’d go so far as to say you can count on 12 size 30 canvases, but in most cases they will be the same picture twice over, a study and the final painting.

Still, perhaps my journey to the south will yet bear fruit, for the stronger light and the blue sky teaches you to see, especially, or even only, if you see it all for a long time.

The north will undoubtedly seem quite new to me, and I have looked at things so much here that I have become very attached to them, and I shall feel sad for a long time.

Something odd occurs to me – in Manette Salomon there is a discussion of modern art, and some artist or other, talking of “what will last,” says that what will last is “the landscape painters” – that view has already been proved true to some extent, for Corot, Daubigny, Dupré, Rousseau, and Millet do endure as landscape painters, and when Corot said on his deathbed, “I saw landscapes in a dream with skies all pink, it was charming,” well, yes, we see those skies all pink in Monet, Pissarro, and Renoir, so the landscape painters do last very well, it’s quite true. We’ll leave aside the figure painting of Delacroix and Millet.

In any case, what is it that we are now beginning hesitatingly to recognize as original and long-lasting? Portraiture. You might say that it’s old stuff, but it’s also quite new. We’ll talk about it again – but we must never stop being on the lookout for portraits, especially by artists such as Guillaumin – that portrait of the young girl by Guillaumin! – and take good care of my portrait by Russell which I’m so fond of. Have you framed Laval’s portrait? I don’t think you told me what you thought of it. I thought it splendid, that gaze through the glasses, such a frank gaze.

My urge to do portraits is very strong these days, in fact Gauguin and I talked about this and similar matters until our nerves were strained to the point of stifling all human warmth.

But I dare say some good pictures will come out of it, and that’s what we’re after. And I should imagine they’ll be doing some good work in Brittany. I got a letter from Gauguin, I think I already told you, and one day I should very much like to see what they are doing.

I must ask for the following things for painting.

10 meters of canvas	
<u>Large</u> tubes	6 tubes zinc white
	2 tubes emerald green
	2 tubes cobalt
<u>Small</u> tubes	2 carmine
	1 vermilion
1 large tube crimson lake	
6 marten brushes, black hair	

Then I promised the attendant here a copy of Le Monde Illustré, No. 1684, July 6, 1889, in which there is a pretty engraving after Demont-Breton.

There! The reaper is finished. I think it’ll be one of those you’ll keep at home – it’s an image of death as the great book of nature speaks of it – but the effect I’ve been looking for is – “on the point of smiling.” It’s all yellow, except for a line of purple hills. A pale and golden yellow. I find it odd that I saw it like that through the iron bars of a cell. Well, do you know what I hope for, once I allow myself begin to hope? It is that the family will be for you what nature, the lumps of soil, the grass, the yellow wheat, the peasant, are for me, in other words, that you find in your love for people something not only to work for, but to comfort and restore you when you need it. So, I beg you not to let yourself get too exhausted by business, but to take good care of yourselves, both of you – perhaps there will still be some good in the not too distant future.

I’ve a good mind to do the “Reaper” over again for Mother. If not, I’ll do another picture for her birthday – it will be coming later, as I’ll send it on with the rest.

For I am convinced that Mother would understand it – since it is, in fact, as simple as one of those primitive woodcuts one finds in farmer’s almanacs.

Send me the canvas as soon as you can, for if I still want to do other copies for the sisters, and if I am to make a start on the new autumn effects, I’ll have enough to fill my time from the beginning of this month to the end.

I’m eating and drinking like a horse at present. I must say that the doctor is taking very good care of me.

Yes, I do think that it's a good idea to do some pictures for Holland, for Mother and our two sisters. That will make three, that is to say the Reaper, the Bedroom, the Olive trees, Wheat Field and Cypress. It will even make four, for there's somebody else I'm going to do one for as well.

I shall work at that, of course, with as much pleasure as for the Vingtistes, and more calmly. Since I feel strong, you may be sure that I shall get through a lot of work.

I am choosing the best from the twelve subjects, so that what they'll get will have been thought about a bit and specially picked. And then, it's a good thing to work for people who don't know what a picture is.

A good handshake for you and Jo.

Vincent

I have re-opened this letter again to tell you that I have just seen M. Peyron. I hadn't seen him for six days.

He told me that this month he expects to go to Paris, and he will see you there.

This pleases me, because he has – this is certain – lots of experience and I know he will tell you frankly what he thinks.

To me he only said "Hope that it never comes back." But I expect it to return for a good long time, at least for several years.

But I also expect that work, far from being impossible for me in the intervals, can go on as usual, and it may even be my remedy.

And then once again I tell you – other than Mr. doctor Peyron – that with regard to the administration here it is probably necessary to be polite, but we must limit ourselves to that, and not bind ourselves to anything.

It is a very serious thought that wherever I should live here for any length of time, I would perhaps be subject to popular prejudices – I do not even know what these prejudices are – that would make my life with them unbearable. But after all I will wait for what M. Peyron says to you, I have no idea of what his opinion may be. This afternoon I have been working on the portrait of the attendant, which is getting on. If it were not a good deal softened – completely softened – by an intelligent look and an expression of kindness, it would be a veritable bird of prey. It is very much a Southern type.

I wonder whether M. Peyron's intended journey will come off this time. I am very curious to know what may come of it.

After another year I shall perhaps attain command of myself from the artistic point of view.

And that is always a thing worth seeking. But for that I must have some luck.

What I dream of in my best moments is not so much striking colour effects as once more the half tones. And certainly the visit to the Montpellier gallery contributed to turning my ideas this way. For what touched me there even more than the magnificent Courbets, which are marvels – the "Village Girls," the "Sleeping Spinner" – were the portraits of Brias by Delacroix and by Ricard, then the "Daniel" and "Odalisques" by Delacroix, all in half tones. For these "Odalisques" are quite a different thing from those in the Louvre, mostly in violet tones.

But in these half tones, what choice and what quality!

It is time I sent off this letter at last – I could tell you in two pages what it contains, that is to say, nothing new, but then I haven't time to do it again.

A good handshake once more and if it is not too much trouble, let me have the canvas as soon as possible.

Ever yours, Vincent.