

Saint-Rémy, 19 September 1889

My dear sister,

In the interval since my last letter I have tried more than once to write a letter to you and Mother. I therefore thank you very much for the second kind letter you wrote me. I think both you and Mother did right to leave Breda after Cor went away – it is certain that we ought not to let grief accumulate in our heart like water in a turbid pool. It is true that I have a profound feeling at times that my mind is turbid indeed, but this is a disease; for persons who are active and in good health, however, it is certainly necessary to do what you have done.

As I told Mother in my letter, I shall send her a picture – say within a month or so – and there will be one for you too.

These last weeks I have also painted some pictures for myself – I don't especially like to see my own pictures in my bedroom, which is why I copied one picture by Delacroix [F 630, JH 1775] and some others by Millet.²

The Delacroix is a "Pietà," that is to say the dead Christ with the Mater Dolorosa. The exhausted corpse lies on the ground in the entrance of a cave, the hands held before it on the left side, and the woman is behind it. It is in the evening after a thunderstorm, and that forlorn figure in blue clothes – the loose clothes are agitated by the wind – is sharply outlined against a sky in which violet clouds with golden edges are floating. She too stretches out her empty arms before her in a large gesture of despair, and one sees the good sturdy hands of a working woman. The shape of the figure with its streaming clothes is nearly as broad as it is high. And the face of the dead man is in the shadow – but the pale head of the woman stands out clearly against a cloud – a contrast which causes those two heads to seem like one somber-hued flower and one pale flower, arranged in such a way as mutually to intensify the effect.

I do not know what had become of this picture, but at the very time I was busy working on it, I happened to read an article by Pierre Loti, author of *My Brother Yves*, *Fisherman of Iceland* [Pêcheur d'Islande] and of *Madame Chrysanthème*. An article he wrote about Carmen Sylva. You have read her poems, if my memory doesn't deceive me. She is a queen – is she the queen of Hungary or of some other country? – that I do not know – and Loti, when describing her boudoir, or rather her studio in which she writes and applies herself to the art of painting, says that he saw the canvas of Delacroix's in question, and that it made a deep impression on him.

When speaking of Carmen Sylva he makes his readers feel that her personality is even more interesting than her words, though she says things like these: A woman without a child is like a bell without a clapper – perhaps the sound of the bronze is very fine – but...

As a matter of fact it does one good to think that such a painting should be in such hands, and it may be something of a consolation to the painters to be able to imagine that there really are souls who have a feeling for pictures. But there are relatively few of them.

I thought fit to send you a sketch of it in order to give you an idea of what Delacroix is. Please understand fully that this little copy hasn't the slightest value, whatever the point of view. Notwithstanding which you may see from it that Delacroix does not draw the features of a Mater Dolorosa after the manner of the Roman statues, but there is in it the grayish white countenance, the lost, vague look of a person exhausted by anxiety and weeping and waking, rather in the manner of Germinie Lacerteux.

It is a very good and fortunate thing, as I see it, that you are not quite enthusiastic about the masterly book by de Goncourt. All the better that you should prefer Tolstoi, you who read books in the first place to draw from them the energy to act. I tell you, you are a thousand times in the right.

But I, who read books to find the artist who wrote them, should I for my part be in the wrong if I like the French novelists so much?

The other day I finished the portrait of a woman upward of forty years old, an insignificant woman. The withered face is tired, pockmarked – a sunburned, olive-coloured complexion, black hair. A faded black dress relieved by a geranium of a delicate pink, and the background in a neutral tone, between pink and green [F 631, JH 1777].

For I often paint things like that – as insignificant and as dramatic as a dusty blade of grass by the roadside – and consequently it seems to me that it is only right that I should have a boundless admiration for de Goncourt, Zola, Flaubert, Maupassant, Huysmans. As for you, don't hurry, and go on courageously with your Russians.

Have you already read *My Religion* by Tolstoi? It is said to be very practical and really useful. So dive into the very depths of it, seeing that you like this.

I painted two pictures of myself lately [F 626, JH 1770; F 627, JH 1772], one of which has rather the true character, I think, although in Holland they would probably scoff at the ideas about portrait painting that are germinating here. Did you see the self-portrait by the painter Guillaumin at Theo's, and the portrait of a young woman by the same? They give an idea of what painters are looking for. When Guillaumin exhibited his self-portrait, public and artists were greatly amused by it, and yet it is one of those rare things capable of holding their own beside the old Dutch painters, even Rembrandt and Hals. I always think photographs abominable, and I don't like to have them around, particularly not those of persons I know and love.

Those photographic portraits wither much sooner than we ourselves do, whereas the painted portrait is a thing which is felt, done with love or respect for the human being that is portrayed. What is left of the old Dutchmen except their portraits?

In the same way the children in Mauve's family will always see him in the portrait Masker painted so well of him.

I just received a letter from Theo, in which he replies to what I told him about my wish to return to the North for some time. It is rather probable that this will happen, but it is impossible to say when, as this depends on what opportunities present themselves for going to live with some artist or other. But seeing that we know a good many of them, and that it is often to their mutual advantage for two artists to live together, it won't take long.

Well, in conclusion I say to you, "See you soon," and I thank you very much for your letters.

I don't know yet which canvases I am going to send you and Mother, probably a field of wheat and an orchard of olive trees, together with that copy after Delacroix.

It is splendid weather outside – but for a long time – two months to be exact – I have not left my room; I don't know why.

What I need is courage, and this often fails me.

And it is also a fact that since my disease, when I am in the fields I am overwhelmed by a feeling of loneliness to such a horrible extent that I shy away from going out. But this will change all the same as time goes on. Only when I stand painting before my easel do I feel somewhat alive. Never mind, this is going to change too, for now my health is so good that I suppose the physical part of me will gain the victory.

I embrace you in thought, and "see you soon!"

Yours, Vincent

1. Written in French.
2. See letter 607 to Theo.