

Letter W15 ¹
Saint-Rémy, c. 20-22 October 1889

My dear sister,

Many thanks for your last letter and for news it contained of Cor. One of these days you are going to move, and so this is the last time I shall write you at Breda.

Within a very short time I shall send Theo the painted studies I promised you, and he will see to it that they are sent to you at Leyden.

Here is what I have: an orchard of olive trees [F 711, JH 1791] – a field of wheat with a reaper [F 619, JH 1792] – a field of wheat with cypresses [F 743, JH 1790] – an interior [F 483, JH 1793] – a ploughed field, early-morning effect [F 625, JH 1768] – orchard in bloom – and a self-portrait [F 525, JH 1665].

Now suppose that I can send you as many during the next year, then they will make a little collection along with the two you have, and I should like you to keep them together if there is enough room, for I think that in Leyden you will meet artists from time to time, in which case other studies will join mine, I daresay.

Don't be afraid to hang them in the passage, in the kitchen, on the staircase – above all, my paintings are meant to be seen against a simple background.

I do my best to paint in such a way that my work will show up to good advantage in a kitchen, and then I may happen to discover that it shows up well in a parlour too, but this is something I never bother my head about. Here in the south we have bare walls, white or yellow, or covered with wallpaper with large coloured flowers. So it seems to me that it is a matter of using frank contrasts of colours. The same is true of the frames – the frames I use cost me five francs at the outside, whereas the gilt frames, which are less strong, would cost thirty or more. And if a picture shows to advantage in a simple frame, why put gilt around it?

Now listen – if I am going to continue sending studies to you and Mother with great pleasure, I also feel a desire, which is almost an irresistible urge, to do some more of them to be given to persons I often think of. So if, since you will be in Leyden, you should meet our cousins the ladies Mauve and Lecomte, please tell them that, in case they like my work, I shall be pleased, very pleased, to do things for them, but most of all I should like Margot Begemann to have a picture of mine. But letting her have it through your mediation would seem more discreet than sending it to her directly. So you will greatly oblige me by taking measures for the three persons I have just mentioned to get some work of mine. There isn't any reason for hurry, but I certainly have a right, yes, a right to work from time to time for friends who are so far away that I shall probably never see them again.

That physician here has been to Paris, and went to see Theo; he told him that he did not consider me a lunatic, but that the crises I have are of an epileptic nature. Consequently alcohol is also not the cause, though it must be understood that it does me no good either. But it is difficult to return to one's ordinary way of life while one is too despondent over the uncertainty of misfortune. And one goes on clinging to the affections of the past.

So, as I told you, I feel a nearly irresistible urge to send something of my work to Holland, and if you should succeed in getting people to accept anything, it will be my duty to be grateful.

You will probably think the interior of the empty bedroom with a wooden bedstead and two chairs the most unbeautiful thing of all – and notwithstanding this I have painted it twice, on a large scale.

I wanted to achieve an effect of simplicity of the sort one finds described in Felix Holt. After being told this you may quickly understand this picture, but it will probably remain ridiculous in the eyes of others who have not been warned. Doing a simple thing with bright colours is not at all easy, and I for my part think it is perhaps useful to show that it is possible to be simple by using something other than grey, white, black or brown. Here you have the justification for the study's existence.

You will think my wheat fields too yellow, but in our native country one should not begin by saying it is too yellow, too blue or too green.

You will get the studies at Leyden – I don't know when. Theo will probably have one of them framed in Paris, so that you will be able to put them into a frame if you should want to, and then he will put them in a case to be sent to The Hague at the first opportunity. But what matters is that as far as my painting is concerned the work is finished, and I assure you that it is not the worst work I have done. I should like you to have the red vine [F 495, JH 1626], which Theo has in Paris, and if I should ever go back to Paris I shall copy it for you.

Yes, I return once again to this interior. I certainly wish that other artists had a taste and a longing for simplicity as I do. But the ideal of simplicity renders life more difficult in modern society – and whoever has this ideal will not be able to do what he wants to in the end, as is the case with me. But so it is after all,

yet this is what society should grant an artist in my opinion, whereas nowadays one is obliged to live in cafés and low inns.

The Japanese have always lived in very simple interiors, and what great artists have not lived in that country? If a painter is rich in our society, then he has to live in a house which is like a curiosity shop, and this isn't very artistic either to my taste. As for me, I often suffered under the fact that I had to live in conditions in which order was impossible, with the result that I lost the notion of order and simplicity. That good fellow Isaäcson wants to write an article about me in one of the Dutch papers, on the subject of pictures which are exactly like those I am sending you, but reading such an article would make me very sad, and I wrote to tell him so.

At present I am working at a ward in the hospital. In the foreground a big black stove around which some grey and black forms of patients and then behind the very long ward paved in red with the two rows of white beds, the partitions white, but a lilac- or green-white, and the windows with pink curtains, with green curtains, and in the background two figures of nuns in black and white. The ceiling is violet with large beams [F 646, JH 1686]. I have read an article on Dostoevsky, who has written a book *Souvenirs de la maison des morts* [Memories of the house of the dead], and this has driven me to resume a large study which I had [done, corrected to:] started in the fever ward in Arles. But it is troublesome to do the figures without model.

The other day I read another of Carmen Sylva's "Thoughts," which is very true – when you suffer much, you see everybody at a great distance, and as at the far end of an immense arena – the very voices seem to come from afar. During the attacks I experience this to such a degree that all the persons I see then, even if I recognize them, which is not always the case, seem to come toward me out of a great distance, and to be quite different from what they are in reality, so much do I seem to see them in pleasant or unpleasant resemblances to person I knew in the past and elsewhere.

Au revoir, I wish you the utmost success in your labour of moving, and I embrace you in thought.

Yours, Vincent

1. Written in French.