

My dear friend Bernard,

Thanks for your letter and thanks above all for the photographs, which give me some idea of your work. In fact, my brother wrote to me on the subject not long ago, and told me he was greatly taken with the harmony of the colours and the dignity of many of the figures.

But now look, though I found the landscape in L'adoration des Mages so beautiful that I wouldn't dare say a word against it, you surely can't seriously imagine a confinement like that, in the middle of the road, with the mother starting to pray instead of suckling her child? Those bloated frogs of priests on their knees as though they're having an epileptic fit are also part of it, God alone knows how and why!

No, I can't call that sound, for if I am at all capable of spiritual ecstasy, then I feel exalted in the face of truth, of what is possible, which means I bow down before the study – one that had enough power in it to make a Millet tremble – of peasants carrying a calf born in the fields back home to the farm. That, my friend, is what people everywhere, from France to America, have felt. And having performed a feat like that, can you really contemplate reverting to medieval tapestries? Can that really be what you mean to do? No! You can do better than that, and know that you must look for what is possible, logical and true, even if that means turning your back on those Parisian things à la Baudelaire. How I prefer Daumier to that fellow!

An Annunciation? Of what – I see figures of angels – quite elegant, no doubt – a terrace with two cypresses which I like very much. There is an enormous amount of sky, of brightness but, once over this first impression, I wonder if the whole thing is not a misrepresentation, and then the figures lose their meaning for me.

Let me make it perfectly clear that I was looking forward to seeing the sort of things that are in that painting of yours which Gauguin has, those Breton women walking in a meadow so beautifully composed, the colour with such naive distinction. And you are trading that in for something – I won't prevaricate – bogus, spurious!

Last year you did a painting¹ which – according to what Gauguin told me – looked, I believe, something like this:

on a grassy foreground, the figure of a young girl in a blue or whitish dress, lying stretched out full-length; on the second plane the edge of a beech wood, the ground covered with fallen red leaves, vertical grey-green tree trunks across it. Her hair, I think, is in a tint that serves as a complementary colour to the white dress: black if that garment is white, orange if it is blue. Well, I said to myself what a simple subject and how well he knows how to create grace from nothing!

Gauguin also mentioned another subject, just three trees, the effect of orange foliage against a blue sky, but with very clear outlines, very strictly divided into planes of contrasting, clear colours – splendid!

And when I compare that with the nightmare of a Christ au jardin des oliviers, then, good God, I mourn, and with this letter I ask you once more, shouting at the top of my voice: please try to be yourself again! Le Christ portant sa croix is appalling. Are those touches of colour in it meant to be harmonious? I cannot forgive your using a cliché, yes, a cliché, for your composition.

When Gauguin was in Arles, I once or twice allowed myself to be led astray into abstraction, as you know, for instance in the Berceuse [F 508, JH 1671], in the Woman Reading a Novel, black against a yellow bookcase [F 497, JH 1632]. At the time, I considered abstraction an attractive method. But that was delusion, dear friend, and one soon comes up against a brick wall.

I don't say one might not try one's hand at it after a whole life long of experimentation, of hand-to-hand struggle with nature, but personally, I don't want to trouble my head with such things. All year I was doing little things after nature, without giving a thought to impressionism or whatever else. And yet, once again I allowed myself to be led astray into reaching for stars that are too big – another failure – and I have had my fill of that. So right now I'm working in the olive grove in search of all sorts of effects of grey sky against yellow soil, with a grey-green hue in the foliage, and then again with the soil and the leaves all purple against a yellow sky, or a red-ochre soil and green-pink sky. Yes, I do find that more interesting than the above-named abstractions.

The reason I haven't written for so long is that I've been trying to keep on top of my illness and was reluctant to enter into discussions, sensing danger in those abstractions. If one carries on working quietly, beautiful subjects come of their own accord. Believe me, it is of the utmost importance to immerse oneself in reality, without any preconceived ideas, without any Parisian prejudice.

As it happens, I'm not at all satisfied with this year, but it may yet provide a solid basis for the next. I have feasted upon the air in the hills and the orchards. For the rest I shall have to wait and see. My ambition reaches no further than a few clods of earth, sprouting wheat, an olive grove, a cypress – the last, for instance, far from easy to do.

How is it possible that you, who like the primitives and study them, don't know Giotto? Gauguin and I saw a tiny little panel of his in Montpellier, the death of some holy woman or other. In it, the expression of pain and

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ecstasy is so human that, even though we are in the middle of the 19th century, one could think and feel one was there, so much does one share the emotion.

If I were to see the canvases themselves, I might well be enchanted by the colour, but you also mention portraits you've done that are striking likenesses. That's good, and you will have put more of yourself into them.

Now a description of a canvas that is in front of me at the moment A view of the garden of the asylum where I am staying; to the right a grey terrace and a part of the house [F 659, JH 1850]. A few faded rose bushes, the garden to the left – red ochre – scorched by the sun, covered with pine needles. The edge of the garden is planted with large pines with red-ochre trunks and branches, the green foliage darkened with a mixture of black. These tall trees stand out against a yellow evening sky crossed with purple stripes, the yellow yielding to pink and green higher up. A wall – also red ochre – bars the view and only a purple and yellow-ochre hill appears above it. The nearest tree has an enormous trunk but has been struck by lightning and sawn off. However, a branch still juts high up into the air and sends down a rain of dark green needles. This sombre giant – with its hurt pride – contrasts, if you were to lend it human characteristics, with the pale smile of a last rose on the fading bush in front of it. Under the big trees, empty stone benches, mournful little box trees, the sky is reflected – yellow – in a puddle after the rain. A ray of sun turns the dark ochre into orange with its last reflection. Small black figures wander about here and there among the tree trunks.

Of course, you realize that the combination of red ochre, green darkened with grey and the black stripes indicating the contours, arouses that anguished feeling, the so-called "black-and-reds," with which some of my fellow patients are afflicted. Moreover, the motif of the great tree, struck by lightning, the wan pink-green smile of the last autumn flower, serve to reinforce this impression.

Another canvas shows a rising sun above a field of young wheat – receding lines, furrows that run to the top of the canvas, towards a wall and a row of lilac hills [F 737, JH 1862]. The field is purple and yellow-green. The white sun is surrounded by a large yellow halo. Here, in contrast to the first canvas, I have tried to express calmness, great peace.

I am telling you about these canvases, and about the first one in particular, to remind you that one can express anguish without making direct reference to the actual Gethsemane, and that there is no need to portray figures from the Sermon on the Mount in order to express a comforting and gentle motif.

Oh, it is only right and proper to be moved by the Bible, but present-day reality has so strong a hold over us that even when we try to imagine the past the minor events in our lives immediately wrench us out of our musings, and our own adventures throw us back irrevocably upon our personal feelings: joy, boredom, suffering, anger or a smile.

The Bible, the Bible! Millet, who grew up with it from childhood, did nothing but read that book! And yet he never, or hardly ever, painted biblical pictures. Corot did do a Mount of Olives, with Christ and the evening star, sublime. In his work you can feel Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles and sometimes the Gospels as well, but so discreetly and always taking account of all the modern feelings that all of us share.

But what of Delacroix, you may ask. Yes, Delacroix – but then you would have to study quite a lot more, indeed, you would have to make a study of history before you could depict things as he did.

So, my dear fellow, those biblical paintings of yours are hopeless. There are only a few who make such a mistake, and a mistake it is, but once you have turned your back on it, I dare say the results will be marvellous! Sometimes our mistakes show us the right way.

Come now, make up for it by painting your garden just as it is, or any way you like. Anyhow, it's a good idea to put something worthy, something noble, into your figures, studies take real effort and hence are never a waste of time. Being able to divide a canvas into large intermingling planes, to devise contrasting lines and forms – that is technique, tricks of the trade, if you like, but ultimately a sign that your craftsmanship is being strengthened, and that is all to the good.

No matter how odious and burdensome painting may be at present, those who have chosen this profession – if only they pursue it with zeal – are dutiful, sound and faithful men. Society often renders our existence hard, and that is the source of our impotence and of the imperfection of our work. I believe that even Gauguin suffers greatly from this and cannot develop, although he has it in him to do so. I myself am frustrated by a total lack of models. On the other hand, there are some very beautiful spots around here. I have just finished 5 size 30 canvases of olive groves. And the reason I am still here is that my health is making good progress. What I am doing is hard, harsh, but that is because I am trying to get back on my feet with work that is a bit rough, having been afraid that I would go soft with abstractions.

Have you seen my study of a small reaper, a yellow wheat field and a yellow sun? It isn't the real thing yet, but at least I have tackled the devilish problem of yellow in it. I am referring to the one with the thick impasto and done on the spot, and not to the copy with the hatchings, which has a much weaker effect. I'd like to do it in deep sulphur-yellow.

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I still have a great deal more to say to you, and though I can tell you today that my head has grown somewhat calmer, I used to be afraid of getting excited before I got cured. With a very cordial handshake in my thoughts, for Anquetin too, and any other friends should you see them, believe me,
Ever yours, Vincent

P.S. I don't need to tell you how sorry I am for your sake, as well as for your father's that he did not approve of your spending the season with Gauguin. The latter wrote me that your military service has been postponed for a year because of your health. Thanks all the same for your description of the Egyptian house. I should have liked to know too whether it is larger or smaller than a rural cottage in this country – in short, its proportions in relation to the human figure. But it is above all about the colouration that I am asking for information.

1. Madeline au Bois d'Amour, Musée d'Orsay. Vincent was absolutely right, the girl's dress is blue and her hair is orange.