

Saint-Rémy, c. 10 December 1889

My dear sister,

Many thanks for writing me a letter. As for me, I should be highly pleased if you went to stay with Theo next January – as it is not impossible that I too shall go to Paris, so that we might meet.

I am greatly interested in your description of your and Mother's abode, and it is a certain fact that this moving was a wise and well-considered thing to do. I should most assuredly be charmed to see it – that quay, where people came to wash the red and green wool, and those barges moored alongside, and that factory with its lighted windows at night. These are effects which I should like to paint.

And the garden with that mulberry tree trained on latticework. As for mulberry trees, there are a good many of them here. I painted one some time ago, when its dense foliage was of a magnificent yellow colour against a very blue sky. On a white stony field with the sunshine from behind [F 637, JH 1796]. I think I shall send to Brussels: sunflowers [F 456, JH 1561], a quite red vine in autumn [F 495, JH 1626], an orchard in bloom [F 516, JH 1685], tree trunks covered with ivy [F 609, JH 1693], and finally a field of young wheat at sunrise [F 737, JH 1862]. I am working on the latter canvas at the moment; it is (along with the orchard in bloom, which Theo liked, he said) the most delicate thing I have painted yet. The fleeing lines of the furrows rise high into the picture toward the distant hills of a violet hue. The earth is pink and violet, but marbled with the yellow-green of the wheat. The sky in the background with a sun in it is pale citron yellow and pink.

Do not imagine that it is less cold here than in Holland. The winter has only just started, and we shall have it until the end of March. Only less rain than in Holland, an unbearably harassing wind which is very cold, and dry and clear but severe spells of cold weather, although the sun has more power, and the sky is very blue.

I think that within a short time you will receive the canvases I promised you. What I think very unfortunate is what you write about my having said that Theo is still coughing – damn it – this does not please me at all – nevertheless I think that it will improve as soon as he is a father.³ I wish he had my health, by which I mean that I myself always have plenty of fresh air, whereas he is always, always sitting in his office with his head so full of bother. Indeed, they are evil-minded fellows at Boussod's, too proud and tyrannical. I am working on twelve large canvases, especially olive orchards, one of which has a sky that is entirely pink, another one with a green and orange sky, and a third one with a big yellow sun [F 654, JH 1868; F 586, JH 1854; F 710, JH 1856].

Moreover, tall weather-beaten fir trees against a red evening sky [F 652, JH 1843].

I just received a very good letter from Theo; he says that he and Jo are in good health, and he also says that you may come to stay with them. So let us hope that within a short time his health will be fully re-established – with him it is to a great degree his state of mind which influences all the rest.

At present a great number of painters who spent the winter in the country are returning to Paris. You ask me who Bernard is – he is a young painter – he is certainly not older than twenty – very original. He is trying to do elegant modern figures in the manner of the ancient Greek and Egyptian art, a gracefulness in the expressive motions, a charm in consequence of his daring colours.

I saw a picture of his of a Sunday afternoon in Brittany, Breton peasant women, children, peasants, dogs strolling about in a very green meadow; the clothes are black and red, the women's caps white. But in this crowd there are also two ladies, the one dressed in red, the other in bottle green; they make it a very modern thing.

Ask Theo to show you the watercolour [F 1422, JH 1654] that I made after the picture; it is so original that I wanted to have a copy of it. Now you say you seem to remember that you have seen rocks painted by him; he had done many of them, and also cliffs and beaches in Brittany.

He has also painted landscapes and figures of the outskirts of Paris. Theo has an excellent thing of his, which I exchanged with Bernard for a canvas of mine. It is the portrait of his grandmother, very old, blind in one eye; the background is the wall of a room covered with chocolate-coloured wallpaper, and a completely white bed. The other day he sent me six photographs of pictures he has done this year, and by way of contrast they are bizarre and highly debatable Biblical subjects – but by this you see that he is an original, a seeker who tries everything. They are like medieval tapestry, stiff and very brightly coloured figures.

However, I admire this only moderately, for the English Pre-Raphaelites have done such things more seriously and conscientiously, and with more ability and logic. Of these I suppose you know Millais, who did "The Huguenot" and an engraving, "The Light of the World." If you should like it, I shall tell Bernard

to paint your portrait while you are in Paris. He will certainly do it, and I assure you that he will do it well. I won't say anything about it to him, in case you shouldn't think it pleasant, but as for me I should very much like him to do it. And I should exchange it for a picture of mine, which he wants me to exchange. While I was writing this letter I got up to order to put a few brush strokes on a canvas I'm working on – the very picture of those weather-beaten fir trees against a red, orange, yellow sky – it was very fresh yesterday – the tones pure and brilliant – well, I don't know what thoughts came into my head while I was writing, but when I looked at my canvas I told myself it was not right. Then I took a colour that was there on the palette, a dull dirty white, which you get by mixing white, green and a little carmine. I daubed this greenish tone all over the sky, and behold, at a distance it softens the tones, whereas one would think that one would spoil and besmirch the painting. Don't misfortune and disease do the same thing to us and to our health; and if fate ordains that we be unfortunate or sick, are we not in that case worth more than if we were serene and healthy according to our own vague ideas and desires with regard to possible happiness? I don't know...

When I compare them with others, some of my pictures certainly show traces of having been painted by a sick man, and I assure you that I don't do this on purpose. It's against my conscious will that all my calculations end in broken tones. Bernard has parents who give him shelter and food with very bad grace, and continually reproach him because he does not earn money. So every now and then his home is hell, but as far as I know there is nobody who works so inexpensively. Well, he is a nice boy, very Parisian, very elegant. He should have gone into the army this year, but they granted him a respite until next year on account of his health.

I still have work to do, hope to see you soon, I embrace you thought.

Yours, Vincent.

1. Written in French.
2. See letter 621 to Theo.
3. Wil had probably suggested that Theo was suffering from tuberculosis.