

Saint-Rémy, c. 20 February 1890

My Dear Sister,

Many thanks for your last two letters, the one dated from Paris, and today's. I am touched by what you write further about Jo's confinement – how very brave and very good you have been, staying with her all the time. In those circumstances in which we feel the strain of anxiety, I should probably be, much more than you, like a frightened, wet chicken.

Well, the result is that after all that the child is there – and also I shall write a letter to Mother telling her so; a day or two ago I started painting a picture for her of a blue sky with branches full of blossoms standing out against it [F 671, JH 1891]. It is possible that I shall send it soon – at least I hope so – toward the end of March. Tomorrow or the day after I shall try to make the trip to Arles again as a kind of trial, in order to see if I can stand the strain of traveling out of ordinary life without a return of the attacks.

Perhaps in my case it is necessary to fortify my resolution not to allow myself to have a weak head. Naturally, in consequence of continual brainwork, an artist's thoughts get somewhat exaggerated and eccentric at times.

I thought the article by Mr. Aurier – leaving out of consideration whether I deserve what he says of me – very artistic and very curious in itself. But it is rather like this that I ought to be, instead of the sad reality of how I do feel. I wrote to tell him that in any case it seems to me that Monticelli and Gauguin are more like this – that it seems to me that the part which should be assigned to me is of a secondary, very secondary order.

The ideas he speaks of are not my property, for in general all the impressionists are like that, are under the same influence, and we are all of us more or less neurotic. This renders us very sensitive to colours and their particular language, the effects of complimentary colours, of their contrasts and harmony. But when I had read that article I felt almost mournful, for I thought: I ought to be like that, and I feel so inferior. And pride, like drink, is intoxicating, when one is praised, and has drunk the praise up. It makes one sad, or rather – I don't know how to express it, I feel it – but it seems to me that the best work one can do is what is done in the privacy of one's home without praise. And then you do not always find it a sufficiently friendly disposition among artists. Either they exaggerate a person's qualities, or else they neglect him too much. However, I should be pleased to be able to believe that justice is better done after all than appears to be the case.

One ought to be able to laugh now and then, and to make merry a little, or rather very much.

I think you were lucky to see Degas in his home. I am working on a portrait of an Arlésienne [F 540, JH 1892], in which I am after another expression than that of the Parisiennes. Oh Millet! Millet! How he painted humanity and that Something on High which is familiar and yet solemn. And then to think in our time that man wept when he started painting, that Giotto and Angelico painted on their knees – Delacroix so full of grief and feeling...nearly smiling. What are we impressionists to be acting like them already? Soiled in the struggle for life... “Who will give back to the soul what the breath of revolutions has taken away” – this is the cry of distress uttered by the poet of another generation, who seemed to have a presentiment of our present weaknesses, diseases, wanderings. And I often say, are we as fresh of mind as the old Belgian Henri Conscience? – “Ah, I was glad of the success at Brussels, because of that Campine of Antwerp, which I will seek to call to mind now and then when I see the quiet furrows of the fields, although I feel that I have become a rather degenerate child.”

Thinking of this, but far away, I feel the desire to renew myself, and to try to apologize for the fact that my pictures are after all almost a cry of anguish, although in the rustic sunflower they may symbolize gratitude. You see that I do not reason well yet – it would be better to know how to calculate the price of a pound of bread or a quarter of a pound of coffee, as the peasants do. And here we are again in the same spot. Millet set the example by living in a hovel, and holding intercourse only with people who did not know the bounds of pride and eccentricity.

So rather a little wisdom than a lot of energetic zeal. And for the rest – like all the rest –

I hope to write you again before long; keep in good health, Mother too.

I hope to do some portraits in Paris; I have always believed that one learns to think by painting portraits.

This is something the art lovers like least, but portraits are something almost useful and at times pleasant; like furniture one knows, they remind one of things long gone by.

I embrace you in thought; if the other sisters should also like to have some canvases, you can ask Theo for others, and you will select them according to your taste. Once again the best of wishes, and a cordial handshake.

Yours, Vincent

I should not be at all disgusted if some more pictures went to Holland, so you'll know this if an occasion arises.

1. Written in French.