

Auvers-sur-Oise, 5 June 1890

My Dear Sister,

I ought to have replied to the two letters I received when I was still at St. Rémy, but the journey, the work and a lot of new emotions caused me to postpone from day to day until this moment writing you a letter. I was greatly interested to hear that you nursed the patients at Walloon Hospital. It is certainly in this way that one learns a lot of the best and most necessary things one can ever learn, and I for one am very sorry that I know nothing, or next to nothing, about this.

It was a great happiness to me to see Theo again, and to make the acquaintance of Jo and the little one. Theo's cough was worse than it was when I left him two years ago, but when I talked with him and saw him at close range it seemed certain to me that, all things considered, there is a change rather for the better, and Jo is full of good sense, as well as good intentions.

The little one is not weakly but on the other hand he is not strong either. It is a good system that, when you are living in a big city, the wife goes into the country for her confinement, and stays there with her baby for some months. You know what it is, the first confinement in particular is a very serious thing, and they never could have acted better or otherwise than they did. I hope that before long they will come to Auvers for a few days.

As for myself, the travelling and all the rest have come off very well so far, and coming back north has been a great distraction for me. And then I have found a true friend in Dr. Gachet, something like another brother, so much do we resemble each other physically and also mentally. He is a very nervous man himself and very queer in his behaviour; he has extended much friendliness to the artists of the new school, and he has helped them as much as was in his power. I painted his portrait the other day, and I am also going to paint a portrait of his daughter, who is nineteen years old. He lost his wife some years ago, which greatly contributed to his becoming a broken man. I believe I may say we have been friends from the very first, and every week I shall go stay at his house one or two days in order to work in his garden, where I have already painted two studies, one with southern plants, aloes, cypresses, marigolds [F 755, JH 1999]; the other with white roses, some vines and a figure, and a cluster of ranunculuses besides [F 756, JH 2005]. Apart from these I have a larger picture of the village church – an effect in which the building appears to be violet-hued against a sky of simple deep blue colour, pure cobalt; the stained-glass windows appear as ultramarine blotches, the roof is violet and partly orange. In the foreground some green plants in bloom, and sand with the pink flow of sunshine in it [F 789, JH 2006]. And once again it is nearly the same thing as the studies I did in Nuenen of the old tower and the cemetery, only it is probably that now the colour is more expressive, more sumptuous.

But during the last weeks at St. Rémy I worked like a man in a frenzy, especially on bunches of flowers, roses and violet irises. I brought along a relatively large picture for Theo's and Jo's little boy – which they hung over the piano – white almond blossoms – big branches against a sky-blue background [F 671, JH 1891] – and they also have a new portrait of the Arlésienne in their apartment.

My friend Dr. Gachet is decidedly enthusiastic about the latter portrait of an Arlésienne, of which I have also made a copy for myself – and also about a self-portrait [F 627, JH 1772], which I am very glad of, seeing that he will urge me to paint figures, and I hope he is going to find some interesting models for me to paint.

What impassions me most – much, much more than all the rest of my métier – is the portrait, the modern portrait. I seek it in colour, and surely I am not the only one to seek it in this direction. I should like – mind you, far be it from me to say that I shall be able to do it, although this is what I am aiming at – I should like to paint portraits which would appear after a century to people living then as apparitions. By which I mean that I do not endeavour to achieve this by a photographic resemblance, but by means of our impassioned expressions – that is to say, using our knowledge of and our modern taste for colour as a means of arriving at the expression and the intensification of the character. So the portrait of Dr. Gachet shows you a face the colour of an overheated brick, and scorched by the sun, with reddish hair and a white cap, surrounded by a rustic scenery with a background of blue hills; his clothes are ultramarine – this brings out the face and makes it paler, notwithstanding the fact that it is brick-coloured. His hands, the hands of an obstetrician, are paler than the face. Before him, lying on a red garden table, are yellow novels and a foxglove flower of a somber purple hue [F 753, JH 2007].

My self-portrait is done in nearly the same way but the blue is the fine blue of the Midi, and the clothes are a light lilac. The portrait of the Arlésienne has a drab and lusterless flesh colour, the eyes calm and very

simple, a black dress, the background pink, and with her elbow she is leaning on a green table with green books.

But in the copy which is in Theo's possession the dress is pink, the background yellowish white, and the front of the open bodice is of muslin of a white colour emerging into green. Among all these colours only the hair, the eyebrows, and the eyes form black spots.

I do not succeed in making a good sketch of it.

There is a superb picture by Puvis de Chavannes at the exhibition. The figures of the persons are dressed in bright colours, and one cannot tell whether they are costumes of today or on the other hand clothes of antiquity.

On one side two women, dressed in simple long robes, are talking together, and on the other side men with the air of artists; in the middle of the picture a woman with her child on her arm is picking a flower off an apple tree in bloom. One figure is forget-me-not blue, another bright citron yellow, another of a delicate pink colour, another white, another violet. Underneath their feet a meadow dotted with little white and yellow flowers. A blue distance with a white town and a river. All humanity, all nature simplified, but as they might be if they are not like that.

This description does not tell you anything – but when one sees this picture, when one looks at it for a long time, one gets the feeling of being present at a rebirth, total but benevolent, of all things one should have believed in, should have wished for – a strange and happy meeting of very distant antiquities and crude modernity.

I was very much pleased to see André Bonger again too; he was looking strong and calm, and, upon my word, reasoned with much correctness on artistic subjects.

I was extremely glad that he was in Paris during the time I was there.

Once more thanks for your letters. I hope to see you soon, I embrace you in thought.

Yours, Vincent

1. Written in French.