

Gauguin 3
c. 20 November 1889

[Letter from Gauguin to Theo]

My dear M. Van Gogh,

I feel somewhat hesitant to respond to your letter. Should I answer to Van Gogh the art dealer or to Van Gogh Vincent's friend and brother? It's easy in words, more difficult by letter – however, I have to talk. But frankly speaking, I have to stop for a moment before I decide to answer the friend and thus express all my thoughts. For a month, I have been going over with de Haan the many facets of the tempest which arose over my latest paintings.

Everything has a beginning for want of an end. Are you listening directly to me, Van Gogh, with your mind and your heart?

This summer we created a distinct trend which was badly established but was given exposure, the art of Bernard and me with some followers. Be assured, Degas and others understood it well. There is a wolf in the fold! Impressionist, Synthetist, symbolic, all in ist and ic, etc. Well then, is art locked up in each period in the thoughts of a few, the powerful, with their methods – or else is it a direct personal emanation to come from the thoughts of those in existence? Those who suffered because they didn't follow the norm were enraged that the powerful ones at the Ecole did not want to understand them. Today they are somewhat satisfied, and they want to be the authority that is doing the injustice to others that had been done to them and about which they complain. Petty humanity.

Well then, we young people ourselves are seeking and will always seek. So down with them. Those are my exact thoughts from the point of departure. It has been said – they will want to walk in a path that is not ours, well then, we are waiting for them; we will see if they are strong enough.

Today you seem to feel that my latest works are stronger than my previous ones. Be logical and draw the conclusion – that the artist has not lowered himself and has worked more for art than for his business. New quests are more useful to the new generation than no searching at all; since what has been done was done more forcefully than anything modern. A Dutchman says that I resemble Bernard this year. I don't resemble him more than he resembles me, but we both are doing different research toward the same goal. A goal about which I have been thinking for a long time but which I have only recently formulated. I must sleep, this Dutchman says, but in sleep there is dreaming and you don't want dreaming. One does not yet know his God, adds the same Dutchman. But I don't know him yet myself: being infinite, my entire life isn't enough to arrive there to find him, to define him. He is the complete opposite of Degas, continues this friendly Dutchman. And why not! If one want to make art then one must be of the same opinion as Degas, as strong as he is.

He also writes to his friend de Haan before leaving for the Transvaal. Gauguin will do you wrong and you do the same for him. My God, what does all that mean? Forget it.

Now to enlighten you, my dear M. Van Gogh, I am going to give you an insight into my paintings. Examine them carefully, the wood at the same time as the ceramics. You will see that all this holds together. I am searching for and at the same time expressing a general state of mind rather than a unique thought, to have someone else's eye experience an indefinite, infinite impression. To suggest a suffering does not indicate what kind of suffering: purity in general and not what kind of purity. Literature is one (painting also). Consequently, suggested and not explained thought.

You ask me, or rather you tell me, that people do not at all understand the work I do in wood. It is, however, simple. There is a nude of a woman, a man, a fox, and an inscription. That is all! [Gauguin is referring here to his 'Be in Love and You will be Happy', Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.]

Since you want literature, I am going to give you some (for you only).

At the top the rotting city of Babylon. At the bottom, as though through a window, a view of fields, nature, with its flowers. Simple woman, whom a demon takes by the hand, who struggles despite the good advice of the tempting inscription. A fox (symbol of perversity among Indians). Several figures in this entourage who express the opposite of the advice ("you will be happy"), to show that it is fallacious. For those who want literature, there it is. But it is not for examination. The background of all this is sculptural art of bas-relief forms and colours in the expression of the material. Between the possible and the impossible. The same for the painting of the three women of stone holding Christ.

Brittany, simple superstition and desolation.

The hill is guarded by a line of cows arranged up the hill. My intention in this painting is that everything should breathe passive belief, suffering, primitive religious style, and great nature with its cry. It's wrong of me not to be strong enough to express it better – but I am not wrong to think it.

Moreover, the rest of us poor devils without lodgings, without models, we resemble virtuosos who play in a café on a tin-kettle piano. But Degas, he plays in complete silence, surrounded by brilliant company on an Erard piano.

It is good to meticulously touch up the model from nature, but be careful lest you smell its odour.

I think I said (in telegraph style) what I wanted to say, perhaps with bitterness – you have to admit that there is reason – but from the depths of my heart and without any misunderstanding with you. You know that I have an Indian – Inca – background, and everything I do is affected by it. It is the depth of my personality. To rotten civilization, I aim to oppose something more natural, beginning with savageness. I would need a lot of time and ink to explain my painting to you, but I hope, however, that you will feel its uncertainty with this letter.

You would like to see the grey and lugubrious sea of Le Poldu with us! Yes they evoke, in contrast, very nice visions. I will also take you to the visions evoked. And for these visions evoked, doesn't one feel an instinctive modesty to show them only veiled?

De Haan the disciple meditates at the window with me, and he who has not breathed any other air than those of the bedroom finds this harsh aspect of the great, hardly Parisian sea to be grandiose. What a powerful and sad voice. He sends you his regards and will write soon.

Now let's talk business. Schuff [enecker] found a buyer for a 30-franc pastel. The buyer is not rich; I gave it away, but it doesn't matter – a more flattering than productive affair.

The price of my work in wood. I'm scratching my head. I do not evaluate its artistic value. But the work of a craftsman and the costs of wood shipment, etc. If I ask 2,000 francs, that's nothing for it, and de Haan agrees with me. And the buyers will scream that it's expensive. On this, do what you can. Poor devil – I have nothing to say and am obliged to be content with a glance. Look, Van Gogh, you see it like I do (it is impossible for me to continue the struggle as an artist) or to smile at the public with professional paintings – (and that I cannot do). The most dignified thing for a good-hearted man to do is what I asked you to do. To leave for Tonkin and I ask you to please speak about it especially to Manet.

Do you have any better news from Vincent? I am sorry that he can't be there near you sometimes, in order to guide a bit in painting. You hear too many different voices. A painter, myself, and stubborn, I would be confused.

Follow your first impression; it will be better than contradictory reasonings of people who have a calculated interest.

Ever yours, Gauguin