

Letter 492
Arles, 23 May 1888

My dear Theo,

Your letter of this morning gave me great pleasure. Thank you very much for the 100-franc note enclosed. And I am glad that the case has arrived.

If you think the Souvenir de Mauve tolerable, you should put it in the next lot for The Hague, in a plain white frame.

If you find among them a study that seems to you more suitable for Tersteeg, you can put it in without any dedication and keep the one with his dedication, which you can then scrape off. Because it is better to give him one without any dedication. Then he can pretend that he hadn't realized it was a present and can send it back without saying anything if he would rather not have anything from me.

I certainly must offer him one to show that I have some zeal for the cause and that I appreciate his taking it up – but anyway, however it goes, whether you send one with or without a dedication, or send another one, it is all the same to me. Only as Mauve and he were such close friends, it seemed to come naturally to me, in the emotion of the moment, to do something for Tersteeg while I was doing a souvenir of Mauve. And that's the only thing I had in mind. That's all.

The study of the orchard you speak of – where there is a lot of stippling – is half of the principal subject for the scheme of decoration. The other half is the study of the same size, without stretchers.

And between them they should give some idea of the arrangement of the orchards here. Only I myself thought one study too soft and the other too harsh, both of them failures. It was partly due to the changeable weather, and then I was like the Russian who tried to gobble too much of the country in one day's march. I am very curious to see the results of Gruby's system – in the long run – say, after a year's trial. It would be wise to go and show yourself to him sometimes, and chat with him, and really to catch his attention, a really serious effort on his part, just as B. at last managed to get his sympathy and a more serious interest. Then I'd be happier about you. Now I cannot be.

These people's proposal to send you on short journeys across the water is terribly upsetting to you. And I accuse myself of upsetting you too – with my continual need of money.

It seems to me that what these people ask of you would be reasonable enough if they first agreed to give you a year's leave (on full pay) to regain your health. You would devote that year to going around and revisiting all the impressionists and the impressionist collectors. That would still be working in the interests of Boussod & Co. And after that you'd set off with a steadier health and nerves, and be able to start fresh business there.

But taking the chestnuts out of the fire for these people in your present condition means utterly exhausting yourself within a year. And that's no good to anyone.

My dear fellow, the Moslem idea that death comes only when it must – but that is a question – for my part I think that we have no proof of any direct management from above in this matter. On the contrary, I think there is proof that good hygiene not only prolongs life, but above all can make it more serene, a clearer stream; whereas bad hygiene not only muddies the current of life, but that in addition the absolute lack of it may put an end to life before its time. Didn't I myself see a very fine man die before my eyes for want of an intelligent doctor; he was so calm and serene through it all, but he kept on saying, "If only I had another doctor," and he died with a shrug of the shoulders and a look I shall never forget.

Would you like me to go to America with you? It would be only fair for these people to pay my passage. I am indifferent to most things, but not to this – that you should first of all really regain your health.

But I think that once again you must steep yourself more and more in nature and in the world of artists.

And I would rather see you independent of the Goupils, and dealing with the impressionists on your own account, than this other life of travelling around with expensive pictures belonging to these people. When our uncle was their partner, he got plenty out of it for some years – but look what it cost him.

As for you, your lungs are all right – but, but, but... a year of Gruby first, and then you will see the danger you are now running. At present you have had ten years of Paris, which is more than enough.

Perhaps you will tell me that Détaillé, for instance, has had thirty years of Paris, and that he is as fit as a fiddle. Very well, do the same if you have similar powers, I won't object, and our family is tough.

All that I want to say comes to this – if these people want you to pull their chestnuts out of the fire at such a distance, either make them pay you well, or refuse, and go over to the impressionists, doing less business as far as your financial turnover goes, but living more with nature.

As for me, I am feeling decidedly better, and my digestion has improved tremendously during the past month. Some days I still suffer from unaccountable, involuntary fits of excitement or else utter

sluggishness, but that will pass as I get calmer. I expect to make an excursion to Saintes-Maries, and see the Mediterranean at last.

I am sure our sister will be delighted to come to Paris, and it will do her no harm, no doubt of that.

I wish everybody would come South like me. I am always reproaching myself that my painting is not worth what it costs.

But I must work, only remember that if ever circumstances make it desirable for me to go into trade instead, provided it will relieve you, I will do so without regret. Mourier will give you two more drawings. You know what you must do with these drawings – make sketchbooks with 6 or 10 or 12 like those books of original Japanese drawings. I very much want to make such a book for Gauguin, and one for Bernard. For the drawings are going to be better than these.

Today I bought some paints here, and some canvases, for with the weather we are having I must return to the charge. That is another reason why there is nothing urgent in the list of colours except the ten large tubes of white.

Odd, but one evening recently at Mont Majour I saw a red sunset, its rays falling on the trunks and foliage of pines growing among a jumble of rocks, colouring the trunks and foliage with orange fire, while the other pines in the distance stood out in Prussian blue against a sky of tender blue-green, cerulean. It was just the effect of that Claude Monet; it was superb. The white sand and the layers of white rocks under the trees took on tints of blue. What I would like to do is the panorama of which you have the first drawings. It has such breadth and then it doesn't change into grey, it remains green to the last line – and then the range of hills, blue.

Today we have had a gale and rain, but it will only do good. If Koning prefers a painted study, do just as things turn out.

Think well before you agree to everything that the Goupils are asking, and if it entails a change for me, really, now that my health is improving, I can work anywhere, and have no fixed prejudice on the subject. A handshake for you and Koning.

Ever yours, Vincent

I think that white orchard needs a white frame, cold white and rough. Remember that I would far rather give up painting than see you killing yourself to make money. One must have it, to be sure – but has it come to the point where we must go so far to find it?

You understand so well that “to prepare oneself for death,” the Christian idea (happily for him, Christ himself, it seems to me, had no trace of it, loving as he did people and things here below to an unreasonable extent, at least according to the folk who can only see him as a little cracked) – if you understand so well that to prepare oneself for death is idle – let it go for what it's worth – can't you see that similarly self-sacrifice, living for other people, is a mistake if it involves suicide, for in that case you actually turn your friends into murderers.

So if it has come to this, that you have to travel around like this, with never any peace, it honestly kills any desire in me to get back my own ease of mind.

If you agree to these proposals, all right – but then ask these Goupils to take me on again, at my old wages, and take me with you on these journeys. People matter more than things, and the more trouble I take over pictures, the more pictures in themselves leave me cold. The reason why I try to make them is to be among the artists. You understand, it would make me wretched to be forcing you to make money. Rather, let's be together whatever happens. Where there's a will there's a way, and I think if you can get well now, you will be well for quite a number of years. But don't kill yourself now, either for me or for anybody else. You know the portrait of the elder Six, the man going away, his glove in his hand. Well, live until you go away like that; I can see you do so, married. You would carry it off well. Think it over, and consult Gruby before you accept such a proposal.

Ever yours, Vincent