

Letter 503
Arles, 28 June 1888

My dear Theo,

I suppose it was to convince me that, being myself one of the most absent-minded of mortals, I have no right whatever to reproach these Southerners with their carelessness. I was idiot enough once more to address my letter 54 Rue de Laval, instead of 54 Rue Lepic, so the post-office clerks, who sent me back the letter opened, have had the pleasure of edifying themselves by the contemplation of Bernard's brothel. I hasten to send on the letter as it is.

This morning I received part of the order for paints from Tanguy.

His cobalt is too bad for us to order any more of it from him. As his chromes are rather good, we can go on ordering those. But instead of carmine he sent some dark madder, which isn't too important, but not to have any more carmine at all would mean a very serious shortage in his poor old show. It is not his fault, but in the future I will put "Tanguy" beside the names of the paints that one can buy from him.

Yesterday and today I worked on the sower, which I have completely worked over. The sky is yellow and green, the ground violet and orange [F 422, JH 1470]. There is certainly a picture of this kind to be painted of this splendid subject, and I hope it will be done someday, either by me or by someone else.

This is the point. The "Christ in the Boat" by Eugène Delacroix and Millet's "The Sower" are absolutely different in execution. The "Christ in the Boat" – I am speaking of the sketch in blue and green with touches of violet, red and a little citron-yellow for the nimbus, the halo – speaks a symbolic language through colour alone.

Millet's "Sower" is a colourless grey, like Israëls's pictures.

Now, could you paint the Sower in colour, with a simultaneous contrast of, for instance, yellow and violet (like the Apollo ceiling of Delacroix's which is just that, yellow and violet), yes or no? Why, yes. Well, do it then. Yes, that is what old Martin said, "The masterpiece is up to you." But try it, and you tumble into a regular metaphysical philosophy of colour à la Monticelli, a mess that is damnably difficult to get out of with honour.

And it makes you as absent-minded as a sleepwalker. And yet if only one could do something good.

Well, let's be of good heart, and not despair. I hope to send you this attempt along with some others soon. I have a view of the Rhône – the iron bridge at Trinquetaille – in which the sky and the river are the colour of absinthe; the quays, a shade of lilac; the figures leaning on their elbows on the parapet, blackish; the iron bridge, an intense blue, with a note of vivid orange in the blue background, and a note of intense malachite green. Another very crude effort, and yet I am trying to get at something utterly heartbroken and therefore utterly heartbreaking. [F426, JH 1468]

Nothing from Gauguin. I certainly hope to get your letter tomorrow. Forgive my carelessness. A handshake.

Ever yours, Vincent

Many thanks for the paints. Goodbye for now.