

Letter 511  
Arles, 15 July 1888

My dear Theo,

You will already have received my letter of this morning, in which I enclosed the 50-fr. note for Bing, and there is still more I want to write you about this Bing business! The point is that we do not know enough about Japanese prints.

Fortunately we know more about the Japanese of France, the impressionists.

So Japanese art proper, already interred in collections, already impossible to find in Japan itself, is becoming of secondary interest.

But that doesn't mean that if I had a single day to see Paris again, I should not call at Bing's to see those very Hokusais and other drawings of the great period. Besides, Bing himself used to say to me, when I was admiring the ordinary prints, that after a while I should come to see that there are quite different things still. Loti's book *Mme. Crysanthème* taught me this much: the rooms there are bare, without decoration or ornaments. And that very thing wakened my interest in the excessively synthetic drawings of another period, which probably are to our prints what a sober Millet is to a Monticelli. You know well enough that I do not dislike Monticelli. Nor colour prints either, even when I am told, "You must get out of the habit of that."

But at the stage we have reached, it seems to me very essential for us to recognise that sober quality which is the equivalent of the colourless Millets. That has little or nothing to do with the stock proper, which can quite well stay as it is. For I never tire of the figures and landscapes. And there are so many!

If I was not caught and absorbed in my work, how I should love to sell the whole pile. There isn't much to be made out of it. That's why no one takes it up. Nevertheless, in a few years all these prints will become very rare, and will bring higher prices. That's why we must not undervalue the small advantage we have now in rummaging through thousands of them to make our choice.

So now if you give a whole Sunday to it, and choose a 100 francs' worth of stock, you can tell yourself beforehand that you will not sell them, having chosen them yourself, unless they displease you. You can pay for them in installments, always filling in the gaps – and when the lot is finally paid for, you will still have as many more in stock. And the result will be that whatever we like most out of the bunch will stay in our hands. That is how it has come about that there are a good many old prints, already well worth a franc apiece, in what you actually have at the moment.

So please hang on to the stock and do not get rid of any fine prints – for that matter it would pay us better to get more. We already have some prints that are certainly worth 5 francs. Lord, I could not do as I liked, for I was as enthusiastic over that heap of 10,000 prints to rummage in as Thoré was over a sale of Dutch pictures, with interesting ones among them. My Lord, my work has pretty well got hold of me now, and I myself can do no more in that field, but let me commend that attic of Bing's to your attention.

I learned there myself, and I made Anquetin and Bernard learn there too. Now there is still something to learn at Bing's, and that is why I strongly advise you to hang on to your stock and our right to inspect the attic and cellars, and you will see how far I am from seeing it as a speculation. Suppose it does cost something (I myself do not think that we shall lose on it), it will not be anything tremendous.

Whatever is Reid doing??? Perhaps he has been there already on his own account, as well as Russell. I did not conceal the fact there were some at Bing's, only I said that they were 5 sous, which Bing himself had told me, or rather the manager. If you keep the stock, tell the latter again that we often send people direct to him, but that he must keep his prints at the stated price – 5 sous – not less.

I only tell you this because I have rummaged in the heap four or five times, the prints at home are the result of a stock already several times renewed.

Let's go on in the same way. It has already caused me much regret, knowing something of the heap, that I did not pay on New Year's Day and choose the new stock myself. Because there are so many one gets confused.

And there isn't the same stuff in the other shops, because people are afraid to go to Bing, thinking him expensive. The place where I haven't hunted is the Library, where there are hundreds, thousands of bound books.

Look here, the best thing you can do is to go and see the manager – I still cannot remember his name – give him my profound apologies please, but tell him that I went three times on New Year's Day to settle up, and that after that I went South.

Then that will get you a Claude Monet and other pictures, because if you take the trouble to ferret out the prints, you have a perfect right to use them as exchanges with painters for their pictures.

But to wind up our connection with Bing, oh never! Japanese art is a thing like the Primitives, like the Greeks, like our old Dutchmen, Rembrandt, Potter, Hals, Van der Meer, Ostade, Ruysdael. They never pass away.

If, however, I were seeing Bing's manager, I should tell him that when we give ourselves the trouble of finding purchasers for his prints, a whole day is gone before we know it, and at the end of it all, whether we sell or not, we lose money on it. And as for yourself, if you don't want to lose on it, I advise you to make some exchange with the painters you know; Bernard still owes you a study, to tell the truth.

But it's all to be expected, and the difficulty of working in Paris! Today I sent six drawings after painted studies to Bernard. I have promised him six more, and I have asked for some sketches after his painted studies in exchange.

And so here's General Boulanger up to his tricks again. Both sides, it seems to me, had reason enough to fight, seeing that they couldn't agree. And anyhow, at least this way there won't be any stagnation, and they can't help but get something out of it, both sides. Don't you think he speaks very badly? – Boulanger, I mean: he can make no impression speaking at all. I do not think the less of him for that, since he is in the habit of using his voice for practical purposes, for explaining things to the officers or to the arsenal superintendents. But he makes no impression whatever in public. All the same, it's a queer city, Paris, where you can only live by spilling your guts, and where you can do nothing or even less as long as you are not half dead.

I have just read Victor Hugo's L'Année Terrible. There is hope there, but... that hope is in the stars. I think it is true, and well told, and beautiful, and indeed I should be glad to believe it myself. But don't let's forget that this earth is a planet too, and consequently a star, or celestial orb. And if all the other stars were the same!!! That would not be much fun; nothing for it but to begin all over again. But in art, for which one needs time, it would not be bad to live more than one life. And it is rather attractive to think of the Greeks, the old Dutch masters, and the Japanese continuing their glorious school on other orbs. There, that's enough for today.

Well, here's another Sunday got through, writing you and writing Bernard. I must say, however, I haven't found it long.

A handshake.

Ever yours, Vincent

If our sister could bring us some wood engravings and things like Gavarni's "Human Masquerade," 100 lithographs and the Charles Keenes, of which there are at least 200, it would not be a bad idea. Also there is a very fine book, Anatomy for Artists!