

Letter 513  
Arles, c. 22 July 1888

My dear Theo,

If I were younger, I'm sure I'd want to suggest to old Boussod that he send you and me to London without any other salary than 200 francs a month credit, but you to get half the profit on the impressionist pictures, which they could deduct from this salary of 200 fr.

But our carcasses are no longer young, and to undertake a journey to London in order to scrape together some money for the impressionists would be a job for Boulanger, or Garibaldi, or Don Quixote. And besides, old Boussod would send us away with a flea in our ear if we suggested anything like that to him. Only I would rather see you going to London than to New York.

These painter's fingers are growing supple, even though the carcass is going to pieces. And the merchant's head for selling – and a long job to learn it is – is getting more experience too. In our situation, which you may well say is so precarious, we must not forget our advantages, and let's try to hang on to our patience to do the right thing and see clearly. Isn't it true, for instance, that in any case it is better if someday they say to you, "Go to London," than chuck you out, your services no longer being required?

I am getting older than you, and my ambition is to be less of a burden to you. And, if no actual obelisk of too pyramidal a catastrophe occurs, and there's no rain of frogs in the meantime, I hope to achieve it sometime.

I have just taken thirty painted studies from the stretchers. If it's only our living we're after in business affairs, would it be such a hardship to go to London, where I think there is more chance of selling than elsewhere? In any case, I tell myself that out of the thirty studies I shall send you, you will not be able to sell one in Paris. But then, as old Prinsenhage would say, "Everything gets sold." And in our case, what I do is not saleable like the Brocharts for instance, but it can be sold to people who buy things because there is nature in them.

Why, a canvas I have covered is worth more than a blank canvas.

That – believe me my pretensions go no further – that is my right to paint, my reason for painting, and by the Lord, I have one!

All it has cost me is a carcass pretty well destroyed and wits pretty well crazed, and only to lead the same life I might lead if I were a philanthropist.

All it has cost you is, say, 15,000 francs, which you have advanced to me.

Well then...they've no reason to chuck us out.

Here's the conclusion of the whole matter: when dealing with this Boussod, keep cool and keep your head. And if they talk to you about London, don't put the thing just as crudely to them as I did at the beginning of this letter. But you do well not to resist the powers that be (such powers!).

My dear brother, if I were not broke and crazy with this blasted painting, what a dealer I'd make just for the impressionists. But there, I am broke. London is good, London is just what we need, but alas I feel I cannot do what I once could. But broken down and none too well myself, I do not see any misfortune in your going to London; if there is fog there, well, that seems to be increasing in Paris too.

What's wrong – basically – is that we are getting older, and must behave accordingly; that's all there is to it. Yet there is something for as well as against, and we must make the best of it.

It seems queer that you have not had any news of Gauguin either. I suppose that he is sick and discouraged. If I reminded you just now of what painting costs us, it is only to emphasize what we ought to tell ourselves – that we have gone too far to turn back, that's all I harp on. For, material existence aside, what else shall I ever need?

If Gauguin cannot pay his debts nor his fare, if he can guarantee me a cheaper life in Brittany – why shouldn't I go to him if we want to help him?

If he says, "I am at the height of my powers and my talent," why shouldn't I say the same myself?

But then, we are not at the height of our finances, so we must do what comes cheapest.

Lots of painting, few expenses, that is the line we must take. So once again I tell you that I lay aside all preference, either for the North or the South. Whatever plans one makes, there's always a root of difficulty somewhere. It would all be plain sailing with Gauguin, but once you shift him, is he going to be content?

But since no plans can be made, I am not worrying about the precariousness of our position.

Knowing and feeling this will wake us up and make us get on with the job.

If we do this and make a mess of it, which I myself doubt, we shall have something left. But I can see nothing in the future when one sees people like Gauguin up against a blank wall. Let us hope that there will be a way out for him and for us.

If I were to think of and dwell on disastrous possibilities, I could do nothing. I throw myself headlong into my work, and come up again with my studies; if the storm within gets too loud, I take a glass too much to stun myself.

Cracked, of course; when you look at what one ought to be.

But in the old days I used to feel less of a painter, now painting is becoming a distraction for me, like rabbit hunting for the cracked-brained: they do it to distract themselves.

My concentration becomes more intense, my hand more sure.

That is why I almost dare to swear to you that my painting will improve. Because I have nothing left but that.

Have you read in de Goncourt's book that Jules Dupré gave them the impression that he was cracked too? Jules Dupré had found a collector fellow who was paying him. If only I could find that, and not be such a burden on you!

After the crisis which I went through when coming down here, I can make no plans or anything; I am decidedly better now, but hope, the desire to succeed is gone, and I work because I must, so as not to suffer too much mentally, so as to distract my mind.

Yesterday McKnight broke his silence a little by saying that he liked my last two studies (the garden of flowers) very much, and talked about them for a very long time [F 430, JH 1510; F 429, JH 1513].

Well – but do you realize that if you were on your own, you might perhaps have to look for English business relations? That is to say, once more, would it really be such a great hardship to go to London – if it is inevitable, is there any need to be miserable about it? After all there is no comparison; except for the climate, it is infinitely better than the Congo.

A good handshake, and many thanks for your letter and the 50-fr. note.

Ever yours, Vincent