

Letter 514
Arles, c. 25 July 1888

My dear Theo,

Many thanks for your kind letter. If you remember, mine ended with “we are getting old, that is what it is, the rest is imagination and doesn’t exist.” Well, I said that more for myself than for you. And I said it because I felt the absolute necessity of behaving accordingly, of working, perhaps not more, but with a deeper understanding.

Now you talk of the emptiness you feel everywhere, it is just the very thing I feel myself.

Considering, if you like, the time in which we live a great and true renaissance of art, the worm-eaten official tradition still alive but really impotent and inactive, the new painters isolated, poor, treated like madmen, and because of this treatment actually becoming so, at least as far as their social life is concerned. Then remember that you are doing exactly the same work as these primitive painters, since you provide them with money and sell their canvases for them, which enables them to produce others. If a painter ruins his character by working hard at painting, a thing which leaves him useless for many other things, for family life, etc., etc., if therefore he paints not only with colours, but with self-denial and self-renunciation and with a broken heart – as far as you are concerned, your own work is not only no better paid than his, but it costs you exactly what the painter’s cost him, this sacrifice of the individuality, half voluntary, half accidental.

That is to say that if you paint indirectly, you are more productive than I am, for instance. The more irrevocably you become a dealer, the more you become an artist.

And in the same way I hope the same thing for myself. The more I am spent, ill, a broken pitcher, by so much more am I an artist – a creative artist – in this great renaissance of art of which we speak.

These things are surely so, but this eternally living art, and this renaissance, this green shoot springing up from the roots of the old felled trunk, these are such abstract things that a kind of melancholy remains within us when we think that one could have created life at less cost than creating art.

If possible, you ought to make me feel that art is alive, you who love art perhaps more than I do. I tell myself that it depends not on art but on myself, that the only way to get back my confidence and peace of mind is to improve my work.

And there we are again, back at the end of my last letter – I am getting old, it’s sheer imagination if I should think that art is old lumber too.

Now if you know what a “moussmé” is (you will find out when you read Loti’s *Madame Chrysanthème*), I have just painted one. It took me a whole week, and I haven’t been able to do anything else, because I still haven’t been too well. This is what annoys me – but I felt well, I would have been able to run off some more landscapes in the meantime, but to do justice to my moussmé I had to conserve my mental energies. A moussmé is a Japanese girl – Provençal in this case – 12 to 14 years old [F 413, JH 1519]. That makes two portraits now, the Zouave and her.

Take care of your health, above all take baths if Gruby recommends it, for in the four years by which I am older than you, you will see how necessary comparatively good health is for being able to work. Now for us who work with our brains, our one and only hope of not breaking down too soon is this artificial eking-out by an up-to-date hygienic regimen rigorously applied, as much as we can stand. Because I for one do not do everything I ought. And a bit of cheerfulness is better than all the other remedies.

I have had a letter from Russell. He says that he would have written me before if he hadn’t been busy moving to Belle Ile. He is there now, and says that he would be pleased if sooner or later I would go and spend some time there. He still wants to repaint my portrait. He says too – “I should have gone to Boussod’s to see Gauguin’s ‘Negresses Talking’ if the same thing had not prevented me from that too.” In short, he does not refuse to buy one, but makes it clear he does not want anything inferior to the one we have. You see that at all events that is better than nothing.

I will write this to Gauguin and ask him for sketches of pictures. We must hurry things and give up R. for the moment, but regard it as a matter that will come off, but is in abeyance now.

And the same goes for Guillaumin.

I wish he [Russell] would buy a figure from G. He says that he has had a very beautiful bust of his wife done by Rodin, and that on this occasion he lunched with Claude Monet and saw the 10 pictures of Antibes. I am sending him Geffroy’s article. He criticizes the Monets very ably, begins by liking them very much, the attack on the problem, the enfolding tinted air, the colour. After that he shows what there is to find fault with – the total lack of construction, for instance one of his trees will have far too much foliage for the thickness of the trunk, and so always and everywhere from the standpoint of the reality of things, from the

standpoint of lots of natural laws, he is exasperating enough. He ends by saying that this quality of attacking the difficulties is what everyone ought to have.

Bernard has sent me 10 sketches like his brothel; three of them were à la Redon; I do not altogether share the enthusiasm he has for that. But there is a woman washing herself, very Rembrandtesque, an effect like Goya, and a landscape with figures, very strange. He expressly forbade me to send them to you, but all the same you will get them by the same post.

I think that Russell will buy something more from Bernard.

Meanwhile I have seen this Bock's work; it is strictly impressionistic, but not powerful, it is the stage where this new technique still preoccupies him so much that he cannot be himself. He will gain in force and then his individuality will break free, I think. But McKnight does water colours of the quality of those by Destrée, you remember that Dutchman we used to know. However, he has washed some small still lifes; a yellow pot on a violet foreground, a red pot on a green, an orange pot on blue, better, but very poor.

The village where they are staying is real Millet, poor peasants and nothing else, absolutely rustic and homely. This quality completely escapes them. I think that McKnight has civilized and converted to civilized Christianity his brute of a landlord. Anyway the swine and his worthy spouse, when you go there, shake hands with you – it is in a café, of course – when you ask for drinks, they have a way of refusing money – Oh! I could not take money from an artiss' – with two esses. Anyway, it is their own fault that it is so abominable, and this Bock must get pretty well stultified in McKnight's company.

I think that McKnight has some money but not much. So they contaminate the village; but for that, I'd go there to work often. What one ought to do there is not to talk to the civilized people; now they know the station master and a score of bores, and that is partly why they get nowhere. Naturally these simple and artless country folk laugh at them and despise them. But if they did their work without taking up with these village loungers with their starched collars, then they could go into the peasants' homes and let them earn a few pence. And then this blessed Fontvieilles would be a gold mine for them; but the natives are like Zola's poor peasants, innocent and gentle beings, as we know.

Probably McKnight will soon be making little landscapes with sheep for chocolate boxes.

Not only my pictures but I myself have become haggard of late, almost like Hugo van der Goes in the picture by Emil Wauters.

Only, having got my whole beard carefully shaved off I think that I am as much like the very placid priest in the same picture as like the mad painter so intelligently portrayed therein.

And I do not mind being rather between the two, for one must live, especially because it is no use ignoring the fact that there may be a crisis some day or other if you were to change your relations with the Boussods. Another reason for keeping up this connection with artists, on my part as much as on yours.

Besides, I think I have spoken the truth, but if I should succeed in replacing in goods the money spent, I should only be doing my duty. And then, something practical I can do is portrait painting.

As for drinking too much ... if it is bad, I can't tell. But look at Bismarck, who is in any case very practical and very intelligent, his good doctor told him that he was drinking too much, and that all his life he had overtaxed his stomach and his brain. Bismarck immediately stopped drinking. After that he got run down and couldn't pick up. Secretly he must be laughing heartily at his doctor, because fortunately for him he did not consult him sooner.

So much for that, a good handshake.

Ever yours, Vincent

Mind, as to Gauguin we must not give up the idea of coming to his aid if the suggestion is acceptable as it stands, but we do not need him. So do not think that working alone bothers me, and do not push the affair on my account, be very sure of that.

The portrait of the girl is against a background of white strongly tinged with malachite green, her bodice is striped blood red and violet, the skirt is royal blue, with large yellow-orange dots. The mat flesh tones are yellowish-grey; the hair tinged with violet; the eyebrows and the eyelashes are black; the eyes, orange with Prussian blue. A branch of oleander in her fingers, for the two hands are showing.