

Letter 571
Arles, 17 January 1889

My dear Theo,

Thanks for your kind letter and also for the 50-franc note it contained. Even though you yourself might be able to answer all the questions at the moment, I do not feel capable of it. I want very much, after consideration, to find some solution, but I must read your letter again, etc.

But, before discussing what I might spend or not spend during a complete year, it might help us to go into the expenses of the current month alone.

It has been altogether lamentable in every way, and I should certainly count myself lucky, if at last you would give some serious attention to the way things are now and have been for a long time.

But what is to be done? It is unfortunately complicated by lots of things, my pictures are valueless, they cost me, it is true, an extraordinary amount, even in blood and brains at times perhaps. I won't harp on it, and what am I to say to you about it?

Meanwhile, let's get back to the present month and not talk of anything but money.

On December 23 I still had in hand one louis and 3 sous. The same day I received from you the 100-franc note.

These are the expenses:

Given to Roulin to pay the charwoman for the month of December	20 frs.
The same for the first fortnight in January	10 frs.
Paid to the hospital	21 frs.
Paid to the attendants who dressed the wound	10 frs.
On my return paid for a table, a gas heater, etc, which had been lent me and which I had taken on account	20 frs.
Paid for having all the bedding washed, the bloodstained linen, etc.	12.50 frs.
Various purchases like a dozen brushes, a hat, etc., etc., say	10 frs.

So on the day or the day after I came out of the hospital, we have already arrived at a forced expenditure on my part of 103.50 francs, to which must be added that on that first day I had a joyous dinner with Roulin at the restaurant, quite cheerful and with no dread of renewed suffering.

In short, the result of all this was that by the 8th I was broke. But a day or two later I borrowed 5 francs. That barely takes us to the 10th. I hoped for a letter from you about the 10th, but, this letter did not arrive till today, January 17th, the time between has been a most rigorous fast, the more painful because I cannot recover under such conditions.

I have nevertheless started work again, and I already have three studies in the studio, besides the portrait of Dr. Rey [F 500, JH 1659], which I gave him as a keepsake. So there is no worse harm done this time than a little more suffering and its attendant wretchedness. And I keep on hoping. But I feel weak and rather uneasy and frightened. That will pass, I hope, as I get back my strength.

Rey told me that being very impressionable was enough to account for the attack that I had, and that I was really only anaemic, but that I really must feed myself up. But I took the liberty of saying to M. Rey that if the first thing for me was to get back my strength, and if by pure chance or misunderstanding it had just happened that I had had to keep a strict fast for a week – whether he had seen many madman in similar circumstances fairly quiet and able to work; if not, would he then be good enough to remember occasionally that for the moment I am not yet mad.

Now considering that all the house was upset by this occurrence, and all the linen and my clothes soiled, is there anything improper or extravagant or exorbitant in these payments? If I paid what was owing to people almost as poor as myself as soon as I got back, did I do wrong, or could I have been more economical?

Now today on the seventeenth I at last received 50 francs. Out of that I am paying first the five francs borrowed from the patron at the café and the ten meals taken on credit during the course of last week, which makes

7.50 francs.

I also have to pay for the linen brought back from the hospital and then for this last week, and for shoe repairs and a pair of trousers, certainly altogether something like

5 frs.

Wood and coal owing for December and to be bought again, not less than

4 frs.

Charwoman, 2nd fortnight in January

10 frs.

26.50 frs.

Net amount left me tomorrow morning after settling this bill

23.50 frs.

It is now the seventeenth, there are still thirteen days to go.

Ask yourself how much I can spend in a day? I have to add that you sent 30 francs to Roulin, out of which he paid the 21.50 rent for December.

There, my dear boy, are the accounts for this present month. It is not over.

Now we come to the expenses caused you by Gauguin's telegram, which I have already expressly reproached him for sending.

Are the expenses thus mistakenly incurred less than 200 francs? Does Gauguin himself claim that it was a brilliant step to take? Look here, I won't say more about the absurdity of this measure, suppose that I was as wild as anything, then why wasn't our illustrious partner more collected?

But I shan't press that point.

I cannot commend you enough for paying Gauguin in such a way that he can only congratulate himself on any dealings he has had with us. Unfortunately there again is another expenditure perhaps greater than it should have been, yet I catch a glimpse of hope in it. Must he not, or at least should he not, begin to see that we were not exploiting him, but on the contrary were anxious to secure him a living, the possibility of work and...and...of decency?

If that does not obtain the heights of the grandiose prospectuses for the association of artists which he proposed, and you know how he clings to it, if it does not attain the heights of his other castles in the air – then why not consider him as not responsible for the trouble and waste which his blindness may have caused both you and me?

If at present this theory seems too bold to you, I do not insist on it, but we shall see.

He has had experience in what he calls "banking in Paris" and thinks himself clever at it. Perhaps you and I are not curious at all in this respect.

In any case this is not altogether in contradiction with some passages in our previous correspondence.

If Gauguin stayed in Paris for a while to examine himself thoroughly, or have himself examined by a specialist, I don't honestly know what the result might be.

On various occasions I have seen him do things which you and I would not let ourselves do, because we have consciences that feel differently about things. I have heard one or two things said of him, but having seen him at very, very close quarters, I think that he is carried away by his imagination, perhaps by pride, but...practically irresponsible.

This conclusion does not imply that I advise you to pay very much attention to what he says on any occasion. But I see that you have acted with higher ideals in the matter of settling his bill, and so I think that we need not fear that he will involve us in the errors of the "Bank of Paris."

But as for him...Lord, let him do anything he wants, let him have his independence?? (whatever he means by that) and his opinions, and let him go his own way as soon as he thinks he knows it better than we do.

I think it is rather strange that he claims a picture of sunflowers from me, offering me in exchange, I suppose, or as a gift, some studies he left here. I will send him back his studies which will probably be useful to him, which they certainly won't be to me.

But for the moment I am keeping my canvases here and I am definitely keeping my sunflowers in question. He has two of them already, let that hold him.

And if he is not satisfied with the exchange he has made with me, he can take back his little Martinique canvas, and his self-portrait sent me from Brittany, at the same time giving me back both my portrait and the two sunflower canvases which he took in Paris. So if he ever broaches this subject again, I've told you just how matters stand.

How can Gauguin pretend that he was afraid of upsetting me by his presence, when he can hardly deny that he knew I kept asking for him continually, and that he was told over and over again that I insisted on seeing him at once.

Just to tell him that we should keep it between him and me, without upsetting you. He would not listen.

It worries me to go over all this and recapitulate such things over and over again.

In this letter I have tried to show you the difference between my net expenses, directly my own, and those for which I am less responsible.

I have been miserable because just at this moment you have had this expense, which did no one any good. Whatever happens, I shall see my strength come back little by little if I can stick it out here. I do so dread a change or move just because of the fresh expense. I have been unable to get a breathing spell for a long time now. I am not giving up work, because there are moments when it is really getting on, and I believe

that with patience the goal will at last be reached, that the pictures will pay back the money invested in making them.

Roulin is about to leave, as early as the 21st. He is to be employed in Marseilles. The increase in pay is microscopic, and he will be obliged to leave his wife and children for a time; they will not be able to follow him till much later, because the expenses of a whole family will be heavier in Marseilles.

It is a promotion for him, but it is a poor consolation that the Government gives such an employee after so many years work.

And in point of fact, I believe that both he and his wife are heart broken. Roulin has often kept me company during the last week. I quite agree with you that we mustn't meddle with medical questions, which do not at all concern us. Just because you wrote a line to M. Rey saying that you would give him introductions in Paris, I understood you to mean Rivet. I did not think I was doing anything to compromise you by telling M. Rey that if he went to Paris, I'd be pleased if he took a picture to M. Rivet as a keepsake from me.

Of course I did not mention anything else, but what I did say was that I myself should always regret not being a doctor, and that those who think painting is beautiful would do well to see nothing in it but a study of nature.

It will always be a pity, in spite of everything, that Gauguin and I were perhaps too quick to give up the question of Rembrandt and light which we had broached. Are De Haan and Isaïcon still there? Don't let them get discouraged. After my illness my eyes have naturally been very sensitive. I have been looking at that "Croque-mort" [undertaker] of De Haans, which he was good enough to send me the photograph of. Well, it seems to me that there is a real touch of Rembrandt in that figure, which seems to be lit up by the reflection of a light coming from the open tomb in front of which the croque-mort is standing like a sleepwalker.

It is done with great subtlety. I myself do not try to get effects by means of charcoal, and De Haan has taken for his medium this very charcoal, again a colourless substance.

I should like De Haan to see a study of mine of a lighted candle and two novels (one yellow, the other pink) lying on an empty chair (really Gauguin's chair), a size 30 canvas, in red and green [F 499, JH 1636]. I have just been working again today on its pendant, my own empty chair, a white deal chair with a pipe and a tobacco pouch [F 498, JH 1635]. In these two studies, as in others, I have tried for an effect of light by means of clear colour, probably De Haan would understand exactly what I was trying to get if you read to him what I have written on the subject.

Although this letter is already very long, since I have tried to analyse the month's expenses and complained a bit of the queer phenomenon of Gauguin's behaviour in choosing not to speak to me again and clearing out, there are still some things that I must add in praise of him.

One good quality he has is the marvellous way he can apportion expenses from day to day.

While I am often absent-minded, preoccupied with aiming at the goal, he has far more money sense for each separate day than I have. But his weakness is that by a sudden freak or animal impulse he upsets everything he has arranged.

Now do you stay at your post once you have taken it, or do you desert it? I do not judge anyone in this, hoping not to be condemned myself in cases when my strength might fail me, but if Gauguin has so much real virtue, and such capacity for charity, how is he going to employ himself?

As for me, I have ceased to be able to follow his actions, and I give it up in silence, but with a questioning note all the same.

From time to time he and I have exchanged ideas about French art, and impressionism...

It seems to me impossible, or at least pretty improbable, that impressionism will organize and steady itself now.

Why shouldn't what happened in England at the time of the Pre-Raphaelites happen here?

The union broke up.

Perhaps I take all these things too much to heart and perhaps they sadden me too much. Has Gauguin ever read Tartarin in the Alps, and does he remember Tartarin's illustrious companion from Tarascon, who had such imagination that he imagined in a flash a complete imaginary Switzerland?

Does he remember the knot in a rope found high up in the Alps after the fall?

And you who want to know how things happened, have you read Tartarin all the way through?

That will teach you to know your Gauguin pretty well.

I am really serious in urging you to look at this passage in Daudet's book again.

At the time of your visit here, were you able to notice the study I painted of the Tarascon diligence [F 478a, JH 1605], which as you know is mentioned in Tartarin the lion hunter?

And can you remember Bompard in Numa Roumestan and his happy imagination?

That is what it is, though in another way. Gauguin has a fine, free and absolutely complete imaginary conception of the South, and with that imagination he is going to work in the North! My word, we may see some queer results yet.

And now, dissecting the situation in all boldness, there is nothing to prevent our seeing him as the little Bonaparte tiger of impressionism as far as...I don't quite know how to say it, his vanishing, say, from Arles would be comparable or analogous to the return from Egypt of the aforesaid Little Corporal, who also presented himself in Paris afterward and who always left the armies in the lurch.

Fortunately Gauguin and I and other painters are not yet armed with machine guns and other very destructive implements of war. I for one am quite decided to go on being armed with nothing but my brush and my pen.

But with a good deal of clatter, Gauguin has nonetheless demanded in his last letter "his masks and fencing gloves" hidden in the little closet in my little yellow house.

I shall hasten to send him his toys by parcel post.

Hoping that he will never use more serious weapons.

He is physically stronger than we are, so his passions must be much stronger than ours. Then he is a father, he has a wife and children in Denmark, and at the same time he wants to go to the other end of the earth, to Martinique. It is frightful, all the welter of incompatible desires and needs which this must cause them. I took the liberty of assuring him that if he had kept quiet here with us, working here at Arles without wasting money, and earning, since you were looking after his pictures, his wife would certainly have written to him, and would have approved of his stability. There is more besides; he had been in pain and seriously ill, and the thing was to discover the disease and the remedy. Now here his pains had already ceased.

That's enough for today. If you have the address of Laval, Gauguin's friend, you can tell Laval that I am very much surprised that his friend Gauguin did not take a portrait of myself, which I had intended for him, away with him to be handed over. I have another new one for you too.

Thank you again for your letter, please do try to realise that it will be really impossible to live thirteen days on the 23.50 francs which I shall have left; if you could send 20 francs next week, I would try to manage.

With a handshake, I will read your letter again and will write you soon about the other things.

Yours, Vincent