

Letter 581
Arles, 24 March 1889

My dear Theo,

I am writing to tell you that I have seen Signac, and it has done me quite a lot of good. He was so good and straightforward and simple when the difficulty of opening the door by force or not presented itself – the police had closed up the house and destroyed the lock. They began by refusing to let us do it, but all the same we finally got in. I gave him as a keepsake a still life which had annoyed the good gendarmes of the town of Arles, because it represented two bloaters [F 510, JH 1661], and as you know they, the gendarmes, are called that. You remember that I did this same still life two or three times in Paris, and exchanged it once for a carpet in the old days. That is enough to show you how meddlesome and what idiots these people are.

I found Signac very quiet, though he is said to be so violent; he gave me the impression of someone who has balance and poise, that is all. Rarely or never have I had a conversation with an impressionist so free from discords or conflict on both sides. For instance he has been to see Jules Dupré, and he admires him. Doubtless you had a hand in his coming to stiffen my morale a bit, and thank you for it.

I took advantage of my outing to buy a book, *Ceux de la Glèbe* by Camille Lemonnier. I have devoured two chapters of it – it has such gravity, such depth! Wait till I send it to you. This is the first time in several months that I have had a book in my hands. That means a lot to me and does a good deal toward curing me.

Altogether there are several canvases to be sent to you, as Signac could see, he was not frightened by my painting as far as I saw. Signac thought, and it is perfectly true, that I looked healthy.

And with it I have the desire and the inclination for work. Still, of course, if I had to endure my work and my private life being interfered with every day by gendarmes and poisonous idlers of municipal electors petitioning the Mayor whom they have elected and who consequently depends on their votes, it would be no more than human of me to relapse all over again. I am inclined to think that Signac will tell you very much the same thing. In my opinion we must firmly oppose the loss of the furniture, etc. Then – my Lord – I must have liberty to carry on my handicraft.

M. Rey says that instead of eating enough and at regular times, I kept myself going on coffee and alcohol.

I admit all that, but all the same it is true that to attain the high yellow note that I attained last summer, I really had to be pretty well keyed up. And that after all, an artist is a man with his work to do, and it is not for the first idler who comes along to crush him for good.

Am I to suffer imprisonment or the madhouse? Why not? Didn't Rochefort and Hugo, Quinet and others give an eternal example by submitting to exile, and the first even to a convict prison? But all I want to say is that this is a thing above the mere question of illness and health.

Naturally one is beside oneself in parallel cases. I do not say equivalent, being in a very inferior and secondary place to theirs, but I do say parallel.

And that is what the first and last cause of my aberration was. Do you know those words of a Dutch poet's – "Ik ben aan d'aard gehecht met meer dan aardse banden"? [I am attached to the earth by more than earthly ties.]

That is what I have experienced in the midst of much suffering – above all – in my so-called mental illness.

Unfortunately I have a handicraft which I do not know well enough to express myself as I should like.

I pull myself up short for fear of a relapse, and I pass on to something else. Before you leave, could you send me

3	tubes	zinc white
1	tube same size	cobalt
1	“ “	ultramarine
4	“ “	malachite green
1	“ “	emerald green
1	“ “	orange lead

This in case – probable enough if I find a way of resuming my work again – I should set to work shortly on the orchards again. Oh, if only nothing had happened to mess up my life!

Let's think well before going to another place. You see that I have no better luck in the South than in the North. It's pretty much the same everywhere.

I am thinking of frankly accepting my role of madman, the way Degas acted the part of a notary. But there it is, I do not feel that altogether I have strength enough for such a part.

You talk to me of what you call "the real South." The reason why I shall never go there is above. I rightly leave that to men who have a more well-balanced mind, more integrity than I. I am only good for something intermediate, and second-rate, and self-effaced.

However intense my feelings may be, or whatever power of expression I may acquire at an age when physical passions have lessened, I could never build an imposing structure on such a mouldy, shattered past.

So it is more or less all the same to me what happens to me – even my staying here – I think that in the end my fate will be evened up. So beware of sudden starts – since you are getting married and I am getting too old – that is the only policy to suit us.

Good-bye for now, write me without much delay, and believe me, after asking you to give my kindest regards to Mother, our sister and your fiancée, your very affectionate brother,

Vincent

I will send the book by Camille Lemonnier pretty soon.