

My dear Theo,

I have to thank you very much for a package of paints, which was accompanied by an excellent woolen waistcoat. How kind you are to me, and how I wish I could do something good, so as to prove to you that I would like to be less ungrateful. The paints reached me at the right moment, because what I had brought back from Arles was almost exhausted. The thing is that this month I have been working in the olive groves, because their Christs in the Garden, with nothing really observed, have gotten on my nerves. Of course with me there is no question of doing anything from the Bible – and I have written to Bernard and Gauguin too that I considered that our duty is thinking, not dreaming, so that when looking at their work I was astonished at their letting themselves go like that. For Bernard has sent me photos of his canvases. The trouble with them is that they are a sort of dream or nightmare – that they are erudite enough – you can see that it is someone who is gone on the primitives – but frankly the English Pre-Raphaelites did it much better, and then again Puvis and Delacroix, much more healthily than the Pre-Raphaelites. It is not that it leaves me cold, but it gives me a painful feeling of collapse instead of progress. Well, to shake that off, morning and evening these bright cold days, but with a very fine, clear sun, I have been knocking about in the orchards, and the result is five size 30 canvases, which along with the three studies of olives that you have, at least constitute an attack on the problem. The olive is as variable as our willow or pollard willow in the North, you know the willows are very striking, in spite of their seeming monotonous, they are the trees characteristic of the country. Now the olive and the cypress have exactly the significance here as the willow has at home. What I have done is a rather hard and coarse reality beside their abstractions, but it will have a rustic quality, and will smell of the earth. I should so like to see Gauguin's and Bernard's studies from nature, the latter talks to me of portraits – which doubtless would please me better.

I hope to get myself used to working in the cold – in the morning there are very interesting effects of white frost and fog; then I still have a great desire to do for the mountains and cypresses what I have just done for the olives, and have a good go at them.

The thing is that these have rarely been painted, the olive and the cypress, and from the point of view of disposing of the pictures, they ought to go in England. I know well enough what they look for there. However that may be, I am almost sure that in this way I'll do something tolerable from time to time. It is really my opinion more and more, as I said to Isaäcson, if you work diligently from nature without saying to yourself beforehand – "I want to do this or that," if you work as if you were making a pair of shoes, without artistic preoccupations, you will not always do well, but the days you least expect it, you find a subject which holds its own with the work of those who have gone before. You learn to know a country which is basically quite different from what it appears at first sight.

On the contrary, you say to yourself – "I want to finish my pictures better, I want to do them with care," lots of ideas like that, when one is confronted by the difficulties of weather and of changing effects, are reduced to impracticability, and finally I resign myself and say, It is the experience and the poor work of every day which alone will ripen in the long run and allow one to do something truer and more complete. So slow, long work is the only way, and all ambition and keenness to make a good thing of it, false. For you must spoil quite as many canvases, when you return to the charge every morning, as you succeed with. To paint, a regular tranquil existence would be absolutely necessary, and at the present time, what can you do, when you see that Bernard for instance is hurried, always hurried by his parents? He cannot do as he wishes, and many others are in the same fix.

Tell yourself, I will not paint any more, but then what is one to do? Oh, we must invent a more expeditious method of painting, less expensive than oil, and yet lasting. A picture... that will end by becoming as commonplace as a sermon, and a painter will be like a creature left over from the last century. All the same, it is a pity it should be this way. Now if the painters had understood Millet better as a man, as some, e.g. Lhermitte and Roll, have now grasped him, things would not be like this. We must work as much and with as few pretensions as a peasant if we want to last.

And instead of grandiose exhibitions, it would have been better to address oneself to the people and work so that each one could have in his home some pictures or reproductions which would be lessons, like the work of Millet. I am quite at the end of my canvas and I beg you to send me ten meters as soon as you can. Then I am going to attack the cypresses and the mountains. I think that this will be the core of the work that I have done here and there in Provence, and then we can conclude my stay here when it is convenient. It is not urgent, for after all Paris only distracts. I don't know, however – not always being a pessimist – I think that I still have it in my heart someday to paint a book shop with the front yellow and pink, in the evening, and the black passersby – it is such an essentially modern subject. Because it seems to the imagination such a rich source of light – say, there would be a subject that

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would go well between an olive grove and a wheat field, the sowing season of books and prints. I have a great longing to do it like a light in the midst of darkness. Yes, there is a way of seeing Paris beautiful. But after all, book shops do not run away like hares, and there is no hurry, and I am quite willing to work here for another year, which will probably be the wisest thing to do.

Mother must have been in Leyden for a fortnight now. I have delayed sending you the canvases for her, because I will put them in with the picture of the "Wheat Field" [F 737, JH 1862] for the Vingistes.

Kindest regards to Jo, she is being very good to go on being well. Thank you again for the paints, and the woolen waistcoat, and a good handshake in thought.

Ever yours,

Vincent