

Letter 502
Arles, 23 June 1888

My dear Theo,

Many thanks for your letter, and the 50-Fr note enclosed. I did not know that the article on Claude Monet was by the same person as the one on Bismarck. It does one good to read things like that, more than most of the stuff the decadents write, with their passion for saying the most obvious things in the most wildly contorted phrases.

I am very dissatisfied with what I have been doing lately, because it is very ugly. But all the same, figure is interesting me more than landscape.

Anyway, I shall send you a drawing of the Zouave today. In the end making studies of figures so as to experiment and to learn will be the shortest way for me to do something worth while.

Bernard has got to the point. Today he sent me a rough sketch of a brothel, which I am sending you enclosed to hang beside his clowns, which you already have. There is a poem on the back of the drawing, in just the same tone as the drawing; probably he has a more finished painted study of it.

I should not be surprised if he wanted to make an exchange with me for the Zouave's head, though it is very ugly. But as I do not want to deprive him of studies which he can sell, I will not suggest an exchange unless we could buy something from him for a small sum at the same time.

It is still raining heavily here, which is doing a great deal of harm to the wheat that is still standing.

But fortunately I have a model these days.

I am in need of a book – the A B C D of Drawing, by A. Cassagne. I asked for it at the bookshop here, and after waiting a fortnight, they told me that they must have the name of the publisher, which I do not know.

I'd be very grateful if you could send it to me. The carelessness, the lazy happy-go-lucky ways of the people here are beyond belief; you have trouble getting the most trifling things. That is why I'll have to go to Marseilles someday, to get what I want there. The cost of carriage from Paris is no joke and runs up the price of things, but to have to run one's errands in Marseilles makes them even more expensive.

What often vexes me is that painting is like having a bad mistress who spends and spends and it's never enough, and I tell myself that even if a tolerable study comes out of it from time to time, it would have been much cheaper to buy it from somebody else.

The other thing, the hope of doing better, is rather a fata morgana too. But there is no quick remedy for all this, unless sometime or another you can join hands with a good worker, and produce more together.

As for the publisher of Cassagne's book – surely you have his treatise on perspective, and the address must be in it; besides they keep those books at Lalouche and Rue's in the Chaussée d'Antin, that place that always has the continuations of the various series.

It is great that Claude Monet managed to paint those ten pictures between February and May. Quick work doesn't mean less serious work, it depends on one's self-confidence and experience. In the same way Jules Guérard, the lion hunter, says in his book that in the beginning young lions have a lot of trouble killing a horse or an ox, but that the old lions kill with a single blow of the paw or a well-placed bite, and that they are amazingly sure at the job.

I see nothing here of the Southern gaiety that Daudet talks about so much, but on the contrary, all kinds of insipid airs and graces, a sordid carelessness. But the country is beautiful in spite of it.

Nature here however must be very different from what it is at Bordighera, Hyères, Geneva, or Antibes, where there is less mistral and where the mountains have an entirely different character. Here, except for an intenser colouring, it reminds one of Holland: everything is flat, only one thinks rather of the Holland of Ruysdael or Hobbema or Ostade than of Holland as it is.

What surprises me is the scarcity of flowers; there are no cornflowers in the wheat, and seldom poppies.

What was the cost of the carriage on that last case of pictures? The impasto on some of the canvases is dry on the surface, but not enough to be rolled, or else I would send them.

McKnight has a friend with him now, I never see any of his work. Yesterday I showed four or five new studies to him and his friend; they looked at them in frosty silence. I think they are preparing a surprise on their own account, and I hope it will be good, because it would give me great pleasure to see what they have found their way.

A handshake for you and Mourier if he is not already installed in the studio à la Gérôme.

Ever yours, Vincent