

Letter 498
Arles, c. 5 June 1888

My dear Theo,

In case of doubt it is better to do nothing, I think that is what I said in the letter to Gauguin, and that is what I think now, having read his answer. If he on his part returns to the idea, he is very welcome, but we should look too – I don't know just what – if at the moment we pressed him to say Yes. You see that I have had your letter, thank you very much for it, there was a lot in it; thank you very much for the 100-franc note too. As for the delay of the wire, it was dated Sunday, so it is the postman's fault, but it did not matter, because the coach for Stes-Maries runs every day. Only what kept me back was the necessity of buying canvases and paying the rent.

I have already hinted that I don't greatly care for Tasset's canvas for work in the open air. In the future I think we will have the ordinary canvas. I have bought 50 francs' worth of canvas with stretchers as well, as I need stretchers of different sizes to stretch the canvas on, although I send them to you rolled up. They are the rather large sizes, 30, 25, 20, and 15 – all of them square. I think that the large sizes (after all they aren't very big) suit me better.

But I must talk about what you wrote in your letter. I congratulate you on having the Monet exhibition at your place, and I am very sorry I can't see it. It will certainly not do Tersteeg any harm to see this exhibition; he will come round to it yet, but, as you thought too, it will be late. It is certainly odd that he has changed his mind about Zola. I know from experience that once he couldn't bear to hear a word about him. What a queer character Tersteeg is; he has the excellent quality that, however hard and fixed his opinions may be, once he has realized that a thing is actually different from what he thought, as with Zola for instance, he turns around and becomes enthusiastic for it. Lord, what a pity that you and he don't see eye to eye in business now. But that's that; it's what I think is called fatality.

You have been lucky to meet Guy de Maupassant. I have just read his first book, *Des Vers*, poems dedicated to his master Flaubert; there is one, "Au bord de l'eau," which is already himself. What Van der Meer of Delft is to Rembrandt among the painters, he is to Zola among the French novelists.

Altogether Tersteeg's visit was not all that I had dared to hope, and I do not disguise from myself that I made a false calculation based on the likelihood of his co-operation.

And in the business with Gauguin too, perhaps. Let's wait and see. I thought that he was on the rocks, and there I was with money, and this boy who does better work than I do with none; so I said, He ought to have half of mine, and let him, if he likes.

But if Gauguin isn't on the rocks, then I am in no great hurry. And I withdraw my proposal categorically, and the only question left for me is simply this: if I looked for a comrade to work with, would it be a good thing, would it be to my brother's advantage and mine, and would the other fellow lose by it, or would he gain? These are the questions that my mind is running on, but they'd have to come up against reality to become facts.

I do not want to discuss Gauguin's project, having once thought the situation over this winter – you know the result. You know that I think a Society of Impressionists would be something of the same nature as the Society of the Twelve English Pre-Raphaelites, and I think that the artists would guarantee each other a livelihood, each consenting to give a considerable number of pictures to the society, and that the profits as well as the losses should be had in common.

I do not think that this society would last indefinitely, but I think that while it lasted we should live courageously, and produce.

But if Gauguin and his Jewish bankers came tomorrow and asked me for no more than 10 pictures for a society of dealers, and not a society of artists, on my word I do not know if I'd have confidence in it, though I would willingly give 50 to a society of artists.

Isn't it a bit like Reid – why say that Gabriel de la Roquette is a queer fellow if you do the same yourself? There, there, let the boy do as his heart inclines, but his plan is far from making me enthusiastic. I'd rather have things as they are, taking them for what they're worth without altering them, than have them only half reformed.

The great revolution – art for the artists – Lord, Lord, perhaps it is Utopia: well then, so much the worse for us.

I feel that life is so short and goes so fast; well, being a painter, one must paint after all.

You also know that since then, that winter, it has been casually discussed a good deal with Pissarro and the rest, and at present I will not try to say any more than this, that personally before next year I mean to do my share of 50 pictures; if I manage to do that, then I stick to my opinion.

Today I sent you 3 drawings by post.

You will think the one with the ricks in a farmyard too bizarre, but it was done in a great hurry as a cartoon for a picture and it is to show you the idea.

The "Harvest" is rather more serious.

That is the subject I have worked on this week on a size 30 canvas; it isn't at all finished, but it kills everything else I have, except a still life which I patiently worked out. McKnight and one of his friends who has also been in Africa saw it today, this study, and said it was the best I had done. Like Anquetin and friend Thomas – you can't help thinking something of yourself when you hear that said, but then I say, "The rest certainly must seem damn bad." And the days when I bring home a study I say to myself – If it was like this every day, we might be able to get on; but the days when you come back empty-handed, and eat and sleep and spend money all the same, you don't think much of yourself, and you feel like a fool and a shirker and a good-for-nothing.

And dear Doctor Ox, I mean our Swede Mourier, I am rather fond of him, because he goes ingenuously and benignly around this wretched world with his spectacles, and because I credit him with a more virginal heart than most, and with even more inclination to honesty than many a scoundrel has. And knowing that he has not been painting long, I do not care a bit that his work is the acme of fatuousness. And I saw him every day for several months.

Well, what can be the reason for his losing those qualities? This is what I think. He came to the South to recover from a nervous illness, caused by a lot of worry he has had, on account of which he changed his career. He was perfectly well here, he was very even tempered. But the shock of Paris has been too much, the change too sudden, he has not found the Paris of his dreams, and so he is restless and perhaps disagreeable, and anyway making an ass of himself.

He will soon get over his mental measles, I hope. Meanwhile let him do what he likes, without feeling that it matters. He counts a lot on Russell (I think), he wants an adviser and a master, and it's no good telling him that Russell may not be everything that he needs.

But I think that Russell will see that here's somebody who does not know the surroundings he has to deal with, and I think that Russell will take him seriously and will try to be good to him. I think Russell is getting a reputation among those who are instinctively afraid of Paris.

It is difficult to explain what I mean by that. Russell is such a good fellow, but you know that one can't order or force people to like Paris, any more than one can recommend that they take a pipe or black coffee with their brandy. Then Russell is rich, and has lost money in Paris, so he can and does say to people, "That's what I've been up against." But anyway, I'm going to write a short note to Russell.

It appears that McKnight was not very pleased with me, but that Russell told him in reply that he should hold his tongue.

All this is to tell you that I understand, thoroughly understand, since he has turned out like this, why you are not getting along with the Swede, who probably, judging by what you write, is again suffering from his nervous disorders and is set on edge by Paris. If he had money to waste by taking a studio à la Gêrôme, it would be serious; seeing that I rather imagine he hasn't a great deal to waste, he will be in for some censure, and my word, he rather deserves it. Nothing can be done if he won't listen, but he must not stay on.

I am not writing to Gauguin direct, but will send the letter to you, because in any case we had better sit tight. If we say nothing more, if the reply shows that we have made such and such a proposal but that there must be some initiative on his side too, then we can see if he is keen on it.

If he is not keen on it, if it's all the same to him, if he has something else in mind, let him remain independent and me too.

With a handshake for you and Mourier.

Ever yours, Vincent

What I'm inclined to think particularly strange in Gauguin's plan is this: The society gives its protection in exchange for ten pictures, which the artists have to give; if the artists did this, this Jew Society would pocket a good 100 pictures "to begin with." Pretty dear, this protection by a society which doesn't even exist!