

Letter W08¹
Arles, c. 27 August 1888

My dear sister,

It will really simplify the writing of my letter if you will let me write in French.

I am quite delighted to hear that you get more excited by sculpture than by painting – all the more since Theo assures me that your judgment of pictures is sound too.

Of course this cannot yet be a fixed taste that would never waver; but having intuition, instinct, is already a great thing, and it is exactly what not everybody always has. But all the same I am very curious to know what impression the Luxembourg will make on you.

It is true that at moments, when I am in a good mood, I think that what is alive in art, and eternally alive, is in the first place the painter and in the second place the picture.

Never mind, it is of no importance – however, to see fellows work is still something one will not find under glass in museums.

Poor Miss Harriet in Guy de Maupassant's book was perhaps in the right. But did the painter do wrong when he went with the servant girl from the farm? Perhaps not. There is always some pretty annoying fatality in life. Well, painters die, or go mad with despair, or are paralyzed in their production, because nobody likes them personally.

Have you read the American poems by Whitman? I am sure Theo has them, and I strongly advise you to read them, because to begin with they are really fine, and the English speak about them a good deal. He sees in the future, and even in the present, a world of healthy, carnal love, strong and frank – of friendship – of work – under the great starlit vault of heaven a something which after all one can only call God – and eternity in its place above this world. At first it makes you smile, it is all so candid and pure; but it sets you thinking for the same reason.

The "Prayer of Columbus" is very beautiful.

What is your opinion of the bunch of flowers by Monticelli which is at Theo's, and also of the "Spanish Woman" by Prévost? These are truly two pictures of the South.

I think of Monticelli terribly often here. He was a strong man – a little cracked or rather very much so – dreaming of the sun and of love and gaiety, but always harassed by poverty – of an extremely refined taste as a colourist, a thoroughbred man of a rare race, continuing the best traditions of the past. He died at Marseilles in rather sad circumstances, and probably after passing through a regular Gethsemane. Now listen, for myself I am sure that I am continuing his work here, as if I were his son or his brother.

We just spoke of the hour of fatality which seems sad to us. But isn't there another fatality which is charming? And what do we care whether there is a resurrection or not, as long as we see a living man arise immediately in the place of the dead man? Let us take up the same cause again, continuing the same work, living the same life, dying the same death.

When my friend Gauguin is here, and we two go to Marseilles, it is my firm intention to go saunter in the Cannebière there, dressed exactly like him, Monticelli, as I have seen his portrait, with an enormous yellow hat, a black velvet jacket, white trousers, yellow gloves, a bamboo cane, and with a grand southern air.

And there I shall find Marseillais who used to know him when he was alive, and if you have read in Tartarin what *fên de brût* means ...

And there will be noise du bruit, on that occasion. Monticelli is a painter who did the South all in yellow, all in orange, all in sulphur. The great majority of the painters, because they aren't colourists in the true sense of the word, do not use these colours there, and they call a painter mad if he sees with eyes other than theirs.* Of course all this is only to be expected. So I myself too have already finished a picture all in yellow – of sunflowers (fourteen flowers in a yellow vase and against a yellow background [F 458, JH 1667], which is certainly different from the previous one with twelve flowers [F 456, JH 1561] on a blue-green background).

And I expect that I shall one day exhibit the former at Marseilles, and then there will be some Marseillais or other who will remember what Monticelli said and did in his time.

Did Theo show you the tansy? It is very beautiful.

Enjoy yourself as much as possible; I embrace you in thought.

Yours, Vincent

* You will see Monthenards in the Luxembourg which are not yellow at all, and that I like very much nevertheless, but it is likely that Monthenard would think the things I do despicable.

1. Written in French.