

Letter 542
Arles, 24 September 1888

My dear Theo,

The fine weather of the last few days has gone, and instead we have mud and rain. But it's sure to come back again before winter. Only one must make the most of it, as the fine days are short.

Especially for painting. This winter I intend to do a lot of drawing. If only I could draw figures from memory, I should always have something to do. But if you take a figure by the most skilful of all the artists who sketch from life – Hokusai, or Daumier – in my opinion that figure will never compare to a figure painted from the model by those same masters or other master portrait painters.

Anyway – if we are so often fated to go short of models, and especially of intelligent models, we mustn't despair or tire of the struggle.

I have arranged all the Japanese prints in the studio, and the Daumiers, and the Delacroixs and the Géricaults. If you come across Delacroix's "Pieta" again, or the Géricault, I urge you to get as many of them as you can.

What I should really love to have in the studio as well is Millet's "Work in the Fields," and Lerat's etching of his "Sower" which Durand-Ruel sells at 1.25 francs. And lastly the little etching by Jacquemart after Meissonier, the "Man Reading," a Meissonier I've always admired. I cannot help liking Meissonier's things.

I am reading an article on Tolstoy in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* – it appears that Tolstoy is enormously interested in the religion of his people. Like George Eliot in England. I believe there is a book on religion by Tolstoy, I think it is called *My Religion*, it's sure to be very good. In it he goes in search, or so I gather from the article, of what all religions have in common. It seems that he admits neither the resurrection of the body, nor even that of the soul, but says, like the nihilists, that after death there is nothing else. Though man dies, and dies completely, living humanity endures forever.

Anyhow, not having read the book itself, I'm not able to say exactly what his conception is, but I don't imagine that his religion is a cruel one which increases our suffering, but must be, on the contrary, a very comforting one, inspiring one with peace of mind, and energy, and the courage to live, and many other things.

I think the drawing of the "Blade of Grass" and the carnations and the Hokusai in Bing's reproductions are admirable. But whatever they say, the most ordinary Japanese prints, coloured in flat tones, seem admirable to me for the same reason as Rubens and Veronese. I know perfectly well that they are not primitive art. But just because the primitives are so admirable, there is absolutely no reason for me to say, as is becoming the custom, "When I go to the Louvre, I cannot get beyond the primitives."

If I said to a serious collector of Japanese art – to Levy himself – "My dear sir, I cannot help admiring these Japanese prints at 5 sous apiece," it is more than probable he would be a little shocked, and would pity my ignorance and bad taste. Just as at one time it was considered bad taste to admire Rubens, Jordaens, and Veronese.

I'm sure I shan't end up feeling lonely in the house, and that during bad winter days, and the long evenings, I shall find something absorbing to do.

A weaver or a basket maker often spends whole seasons alone, or almost alone, with his craft as his only distraction.

And what makes these people stay in one place is precisely the feeling of being at home, the reassuring and familiar look of things. Of course I'd welcome company, but it won't make me unhappy if I don't have it, and anyway, the time will come when I will have someone, I have little doubt of that.

I'm sure that if you were willing to put people up in your house too, you would find plenty of artists for whom the question of lodgings is a very serious problem.

For my part I think that it is absolutely my duty to try to make money by my work, and so I see my work very clear before me.

Oh, if only every artist had something to live on, and to work on, but as that is not so, I want to produce, to produce a lot and with a consuming drive. And perhaps the time will come when we can extend our business and be more help to the others.

But that is a long way off and there is a lot of work to get through first.

If you lived in time of war, you might possibly have to fight; you would regret it, you would lament that you weren't living in times of peace, but after all the necessity would be there and you would fight.

And in the same way we certainly have the right to wish for a state of things in which money would not be necessary in order to live.

However, as everything is done by means of money now, one has got to think about making it so long as one spends it, but I have more chance of making it by painting than by drawing. On the whole there are a good many more people who can do clever sketches than there are who can paint readily and can get at nature through colour. That will always be rarer, and whether the pictures are a long time in being appreciated or not, they will find a collector some day.

As for the pictures done in fairly thick impasto, I think they need longer to dry out here. I've read that the works of Rubens in Spain have remained infinitely richer in colour than those in the North. Even the ruins here exposed to the open air remain white, whereas in the north they turn grey, dirty, black, etc. You may be sure that if the Monticellis had dried in Paris, they would be very much duller by now.

I am beginning to appreciate the beauty of the women here better, so my thoughts return to Monticelli over and over again. Colour plays a tremendous part in the beauty of these women – I'm not saying that their figures are not beautiful, but that is not the native charm. That is to be found in the grand lines of the colourful costume, worn just right, and in the tone of the flesh rather than the shape. It won't be easy doing them the way I'm beginning to feel about them. But what I am sure of is that by staying here I shall make some progress. And in order to do a picture which is really of the South, a little skill is not enough. It is observing things for a long time that gives you greater maturity and a deeper understanding.

I didn't think when I left Paris that I should ever find Monticelli and Delacroix so true. It is only now, after months and months, that I am beginning to realize that they didn't dream it all up. And next year I think you'll see the same subjects again, orchards, the harvest, but – with a different colouring, and above all, a change in treatment. And these changes and variations will go on.

My feeling is that I must work at a leisurely pace. Indeed, what about practicing the old saying, One should study for ten years or so, and then produce a few figures? That is what Monticelli did, after all. Hundreds of his pictures should be considered as nothing more than studies. But still, figures like the woman in yellow, or the woman with the parasol, the little one you have, or the lovers that Reid had, those are complete figures and one can only admire the way they were drawn. For in them Monticelli achieves drawing as rich and magnificent as that of Daumier and Delacroix.

Certainly, at the price Monticellis are fetching, it would be an excellent speculation to buy some. The day will come when his beautiful drawn figures will be considered very great art.

As for the beauty of the women and their costume, I'm sure the town of Arles was infinitely more glorious in the past. Everything has a blighted, faded quality about it now. Still, if you look at it for a long time, the old charm re-emerges. And that is why I can see that I will lose absolutely nothing by staying where I am and contenting myself with watching things go by, like a spider in its web waiting for flies.

I can't force things, and now that I'm settled in, I'll be able to profit from all the fine days and all the opportunities for catching a real picture now and then.

Milliet is lucky, he has as many Arlésiennes as he wants, but then, he can't paint them, and if he were a painter, he wouldn't have them. I shall just have to bide my time without rushing things.

I've read another article on Wagner – Love in Music – I think by the same author who wrote the book on Wagner. How we need the same thing in painting!

It seems that in the book, *My Religion*, Tolstoy implies that whatever happens in a violent revolution, there will also be an inner and hidden revolution in the people, out of which a new religion will be born, or rather, something completely new which will be nameless, but which will have the same effect of consoling, of making life possible, as the Christian religion used to.

The book must be a very interesting one, it seems to me. In the end, we shall have had enough of cynicism, scepticism and humbug, and will want to live – more musically. How will this come about, and what will we discover? It would be nice to be able to prophesy, but it is even better to be forewarned, instead of seeing absolutely nothing in the future other than the disasters that are bound to strike the modern world and civilization like so many thunderbolts, through revolution, or war, or the bankruptcy of worm-eaten states.

If we study Japanese art, we discover a man who is undeniably wise, philosophical and intelligent, who spends his time – doing what? Studying the distance from the earth and the moon? No! Studying the politics of Bismarck? No! He studies ... a single blade of grass. But this blade of grass leads him to draw all the plants – then the seasons, the grand spectacle of landscapes, finally animals, then the human figure. That is how he spends his life, and life is too short to do everything.

So come, isn't what we are taught by these simple Japanese, who live in nature as if they themselves were flowers, almost a true religion?

And one cannot study Japanese art, it seems to me, without becoming merrier and happier, and we should turn back to nature in spite of our education and our work in a conventional world.

Isn't it sad that the Monticellis have never been reproduced in beautiful lithographs or vibrant etchings? I should love to see what artists would say if an engraver like the one who engraved Velásquez's work made a fine etching of them. Be that as it may, I think it rather more our duty to try to admire and know things for ourselves than to teach them to others. But the two can go hand in hand.

I envy the Japanese the extreme clarity of everything in their work. It is never dull and it never seems to be done in too much of a hurry. Their work is as simple as breathing, and they do a figure in a few sure strokes as if it were as easy as doing up your waistcoat.

Oh, I still have to learn to do a figure in a few strokes. That will keep me busy all winter. Once I can do that, I shall be able to do people walking the boulevards, in the streets, and masses of new subjects. While I've been writing this letter to you, I've already drawn a dozen. I'm on the right track, but it's very complicated, as what I am trying to do in a few strokes is to provide the figure of a man, a woman, a child, a horse or a dog, with a head, a body, legs and arms that all fit together.

For the moment, and with a hearty handshake,
Ever yours, Vincent

One day Madame De Lareby Laroquette said to me, Monticelli, Monticelli, now he was a man who should have been at the head of a great studio in the South.

I wrote to our sister the other day, and to you, you remember, that sometimes I felt I was continuing Monticelli's work here. Well, now you can see we are setting up that studio in question.

What Gauguin will be doing, what I shall be doing as well, will be in keeping with Monticelli's fine work, and we shall try to prove to the good people that Monticelli did not die slumped across the café tables of the Cannebière, but that the little fellow is still alive.

And the thing won't end with us, we shall merely start it off on a fairly solid basis.