

Letter 574
Arles, 28 January 1889

My dear Theo,

Only a few words to tell you that my health and my work are not progressing so badly.

It astonishes me already when I compare my condition today with what it was a month ago. Before that I knew well enough that one could fracture one's legs and arms and recover afterward, but I did not know that you could fracture the brain in your head and recover from that too.

I still have a sort of "what is the good of getting better?" feeling about me, even in the astonishment aroused in me by my getting well, which I hadn't dared hope for.

During your visit I think you must have noticed the two size 30 canvases of sunflowers [F 456, JH 1561; F 454, JH 1562] in Gauguin's room. I have just put the finishing touches to copies, absolutely identical replicas of them. [F 455, JH 1668; F 458, JH 1667] I think I have already told you that besides these I have a canvas of "La Berceuse" the very one I was working on when my illness interrupted me [F 508, JH 1671]. I now have two versions of this one too. [F 505, JH 1669; F 506, JH 1670]

I have just said to Gauguin about this picture that when he and I were talking about the fishermen of Iceland and of their mournful isolation, exposed to all dangers, alone on the sad sea – I have just said to Gauguin that following those intimate talks of ours the idea came to me to paint a picture in such a way that sailors, who are at once children and martyrs, seeing it in the cabin of their Icelandic fishing boat, would feel the old sense of being rocked come over them and remember their own lullabies.

Now, it may be said that it is like a chromolithograph from a cheap shop. A woman in green with orange hair standing out against a background of green with pink flowers. Now these discordant sharps of crude pink, crude orange, and crude green are softened by flats of red and green.

I picture to myself these same canvases between those of the sunflowers, which would thus form torches or candelabra beside them, the same size, and so the whole would be composed of seven or nine canvases.

(I should like to make another duplicate for Holland if I could get hold of the model again.)

Since it is still winter, look here, let me go quietly on with my work; if it is that of a madman, well, so much the worse. I can't help it.

However, the unbearable hallucinations have ceased, and are now getting reduced to a simple nightmare, in consequence of my taking bromide of potassium, I think.

It is still beyond my powers to go into the details of this money question, and yet I want to do that very thing, and I am furiously at work from morning till night, to prove to you (unless my work is another hallucination), to prove to you that indeed and indeed we are following Monticelli's track, and what's more, that we have a light before our feet and a lamp upon our path in the powerful work of Brias of Montpellier, who did so much to create a school in the South.

Only don't be too amazed if during the next month I shall be obliged to ask you for the month's money in full and some extra money as well.

After all it is only right that during periods of productivity, on which I spend all my vital warmth, I should insist on what is necessary in order to take a few precautions.

Even in that case the difference in expenditure is certainly not excessive on my part.

And once again, either shut me up in a madhouse right away – I shan't oppose it, for I may be deceiving myself – or else let me work with all my strength, while taking the precautions I speak of. If I am not mad, the time will come when I shall send you what I have promised you from the beginning. Now perhaps the pictures are alas bound to be dispersed, but when you for one see the whole that is in my mind, I dare hope it will make a comforting impression on you.

You saw, as I did, part of the Faure collection being passed in review one by one in the little window of that picture framer's shop in the Rue Lafitte, didn't you? Like me, you saw that this slow succession of once despised canvases was strangely interesting.

Good. My great desire would be that sooner or later you should have a series of canvases of mine which might likewise march past in just that same window.

Now by continuing this furious work during next February and March, I shall hope to have finished the quietly composed repetitions of a number of studies I made last year. And these together with some canvases you have already had from me, such as the "Harvest" [F 412, JH 1440] and the "White Orchard," [F 403, JH 1378] will form a tolerably firm foundation. By that same time, not later than March, that is, we can arrange what there is to arrange on the occasion of your marriage.

But during February and March, though working, I shall go on considering myself an invalid, and I tell you beforehand that for those two months I shall perhaps have to take 250 a month from the year's allowance.

You will perhaps understand that what would reassure me in some fashion as to my illness and the possibility of a relapse would be to see that Gauguin and I had not exhausted our brains for nothing, but that some good canvases have come out of it.

And I dare to hope that someday you will see that by keeping steady and straight in this money business, in the longer run it will prove to be impossible that you have acted against the interests of the Goupils.

But if I should have eaten their bread indirectly through you as an intermediary, in that case my integrity would be directly involved.

Then, however, far from going on feeling more or less embarrassed by each other because of it, we shall be able to feel even more like brothers after that has been arranged.

You will have gone on being poor all the time in order to support me, but I will give you back the money or give up the ghost. Meanwhile this tender-hearted wife of yours will have to come, and will make us old fellows almost young again.

But this I believe, that you and I will have successors in our business, and that just as when the family, financially speaking, abandoned us to our own resources, once again it will be we who never flinched. And after that, the deluge... Am I wrong in this? Indeed, as long as this world lasts, so long will there be artists and picture dealers, especially those who, like you, are at the same time apostles.

What I am telling you is true. If it is not absolutely necessary to shut me up in a cell, then I am still good for paying, at least in goods, what I am considered to owe. In conclusion, I still have to tell you that the chief superintendent of police paid me a very friendly visit yesterday. He told me as he shook hands that if I ever needed him, I could consult him as a friend. I am far from refusing that, and I may soon be in just that position if they raise difficulties about the house.

I am waiting till the time comes for me to pay the month's rent to interview the agent or the proprietor face to face.

But if they try to kick me out, they will find themselves tripped up this time anyhow.

What would you? We have gone all out for the impressionists, and now as far as it's in my power I am trying to finish canvases which will undoubtedly secure me the little corner that I have claimed. Ah, the future of it all...but since old Pangloss assures us that everything is always for the best in the best of worlds – can we doubt it?

My letter has grown longer than I intended, but it doesn't matter. The main thing is that I am asking categorically for two month's work before making the arrangements which will have to be made at the time of your marriage.

After that, in the spring, you and your wife will found a commercial house for several generations. It will not be too easy. And that settled, I only ask the position of a painting employee, at least as long as there is enough to pay one.

The work distracts my mind. And I must have some distraction. Yesterday I went to the Folies Arlésiennes, the budding theatre here. It was the first time that I slept without a bad nightmare. They were giving (it was a Provençal literary society) what they called a Noël or Pastorale, reminiscent of the Middle Ages. It was a very carefully studied performance, and must have cost them a lot of money.

It represented, of course, the birth of Christ, mixed up with the burlesque of a family of gaping Provençal peasants.

But the amazing thing about it, like a Rembrandt etching, was the old peasant woman, just such another as Mme. Tanguy, with a head of silex or flint, dishonest, treacherous, silly, all this very evident from the preceding scenes.

Now in the play that woman, led before the mystic crib, began to sing in her quavering voice, and then the voice changed, changed from the voice of a witch to that of an angel, and from an angel's voice to a child's, and then the answer came in another voice, strong and warm and vibrant, the voice of a woman behind the scenes.

It was amazing. I can tell you these so-called "Félibres" had certainly put themselves to expense.

As for me, being in this little country of mine, I have no need at all to go to the tropics. I believe and I shall always believe in the art that is to be created in the tropics, and I think it will be marvellous, but personally I am too old and (especially if I have a papier mâché ear put on) too jerry-built to go there.

Will Gauguin do it? It is not essential. For if this ought to be done, it will happen of itself.

We are nothing but links in a chain.

Old Gauguin and I understand each other basically, and if we are a bit mad, what of it? Aren't we also thoroughly artists enough to contradict suspicions on that score by what we say with our brush?

Perhaps someday everyone will have neurosis, St. Vitus' dance, or something else.

But doesn't the antidote exist? In Delacroix, in Berlioz, and Wagner? And really, as for the artist's madness of all the rest of us, I do not say that I especially am not infected through and through, but I say and will maintain that our antidotes and consolations may, with a little good will, be considered ample compensation.

Ever yours, Vincent

See "Hope" by Puvis de Chavannes.