

My dear Theo,

Many thanks for your letter. First it gives me very great pleasure that you on your side had already also thought of old Pissarro. You will see that there are better odds there other than elsewhere. Meanwhile business is business, and you ask me to answer you categorically – and you do right – if I would consent to go into a home in Paris in case of an immediate departure for this winter.

I answer Yes to that, with the same calm and for the same reasons I had when I came to this place – even if this home in Paris should be a makeshift arrangement, which might easily be the case, for the opportunities to work are not bad here, and work is my only distraction.

But having said this, please note that in my letter I gave a very serious reason as a motive for wishing to make a change.

And I insist on repeating it. I am astonished that with the modern ideas that I have, and being so ardent an admirer of Zola and de Goncourt and caring for things of art as I do, that I have attacks such as a superstitious man might have and that I get perverted and frightful ideas about religion such as never came into my head in the North.

On the supposition that I am very sensitive to surroundings, the already prolonged stay in those old cloisters such as the Arles hospital and the house here would be enough in itself to explain these attacks.

Then – even as a last resort – it might be necessary for the moment to go into a private asylum instead.

Nevertheless, to avoid doing, or having the appearance of doing, anything rash I assure you, after having thus warned you of what I might wish at a given moment – that is, to go away – I assure you that I feel calm and confident enough to wait here another length of time to see if a new attack materializes this winter.

But then if I write you I want to get out of here you should not hesitate and arrange things beforehand, for you would know then that I had a serious reason or even several for going into a home not run, as this one is, by nuns, however excellent they may be.

Now if by some arrangement or other, sooner or later, I should make a move, then let's begin as if practically nothing was wrong, being very cautious all the same and ready to listen to Rivet in the smallest matters, but don't let's begin by taking too formal measures straight off, as if it were a lost cause.

As for eating a lot, I do – but if I were my doctor, I'd forbid it. I don't see any advantage for myself in enormous physical strength, because it would be more logical for me to get absorbed in the thought of doing good work and wishing to be an artist and nothing but that.

Both Mother and Wil have changed their surroundings after Cor's departure – they were damned right. Grief must not gather in our heart like water in a swamp. But it is sometimes both expensive and impossible to change. Wil wrote very nicely, it is a great grief to them, Cor's departure.

It is odd, just when I was making that copy of the "Pieta" by Delacroix [F630, JH 1775], I found where that canvas has gone. It belongs to a queen of Hungary, or of some other country thereabouts, who has written poems under the name of Carmen Sylva. The article mentioning her and the picture was by Pierre Loti, and he made you feel that this Carmen Sylva as a person was even more touching than what she wrote – and yet she wrote things like this: a childless woman is like a bell without a clapper – the sound of the bronze would perhaps be beautiful, but no one will ever hear it. I have now seven copies out of the ten of Millet's "Travaux des Champs."

I can assure you that making copies interests me enormously, and it means that I shall not lose sight of the figure, even though I have no models at the moment.

Besides, this will make a studio decoration for me or someone else. I should also like to copy "The Sower" and "The Diggers." There is a photograph of the drawing after "The Diggers." And there is Larat's etching of "The Sower" at Durand Ruel's. Among these same etchings is the snow-covered field with a harrow. Then the "Four Hours of the Day"; there are copies of them in the collection of wood engravings.

I should like to have all these, at least the etchings and the wood engravings. It is a kind of study that I need, for I want to learn. Although copying may be the old system, that makes absolutely no difference to me. I am going to copy the "Good Samaritan" by Delacroix too [F 633, JH 1974].

I have done a woman's portrait – the attendant's wife – which I think you would like [Lost]. I have done a duplicate of it which is less good than the one from life [F 631, JH 1777].

And I am afraid they will take the latter; I should have liked you to have it.

It is pink and black.

I am sending you my own portrait today, you must look at it for some time; you will see, I hope, that my face is

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much calmer, though it seems to me that my look is vaguer than before. I have another one which is an attempt made when I was ill, but I think this will please you more, and I have tried to make it simple. Show it to old Pissarro when you see him.

You will be surprised at the effect “Les Travaux des Champs” takes on in colour, it is a very profound series of his. I am going to try to tell you what I am seeking in it and why it seems good to me to copy them. We painters are always asked to compose ourselves and be nothing but composers.

So be it – but it isn’t like that in music – and if some person or other plays Beethoven, he adds his personal interpretation – in music and more especially in singing – the interpretation of a composer is something, and it is not a hard and fast rule that only the composer should play his own composition.

Very good – and I, mostly because I am ill at present, I am trying to do something to console myself, for my own pleasure.

I let the black and white by Delacroix or Millet or something made after their work pose for me as a subject. And then I improvise colour on it, not, you understand, altogether myself, but searching for memories of their pictures – but the memory, “the vague consonance of colours which are at least right in feeling” – that is my own interpretation.

Many people do not copy, many others do – I started on it accidentally, and I find that it teaches me things, and above all it sometimes gives me consolation. And then my brush goes between my fingers as a bow would on the violin, and absolutely for my own pleasure. Today I tried the “Woman Shearing Sheep” [F 634, JH 1787] in a colour scheme ranging from lilac to yellow. They are little canvases of about size 5.

Thank you very much for the package of canvas and paints. In return I am sending you with the portrait the following canvases:

Moonrise (ricks) [F 735, JH 1761]

Study of Fields

Study of Olives

Study of Night [F 612, JH 1731]

The Mountain [F 622, JH 1766]

Field of Green Wheat

Olives

Orchard in Bloom

Entrance to a Quarry [F 744, JH 1802]

The first four canvases are studies without the effect of a whole that the others have I rather like the “Entrance to a Quarry” – I was doing it when I felt this attack coming on – because to my mind the sombre greens go well with the ochre tones; there is something sad in it which is healthy, and that is why it does not bore me. Perhaps that is true of the “Mountain” too. They will tell me that mountains are not like that and that there are black outlines of a finger’s width.

But after all it seemed to me it expressed the passage in Rod’s book – one of the very rare passages of his in which I found something good – about a desolate country of somber mountains, among which are some dark goatherds’ huts where sunflowers are blooming.

The “Olives” with a white cloud and a background of mountains, as well as the “Moonrise” and the night effect, are exaggerations from the point of view of arrangement, their lines are warped as in old wood. The olives are more in character, as in the other study, and I tried to express the time of day when you see the green rose beetles and the cicadas flying about in the heat. The other canvases, the “Reaper,” etc., are not dry.

And now in the bad weather I am going to make a lot of copies, for really I must do more figures. It is the study of the figure that teaches you to seize the essential and to simplify.

When you say in your letter that I have always only been working, no – I cannot agree – I am myself very, very dissatisfied with my work, and the only thing that comforts me is that people of experience say you must paint ten years for nothing. But what I have done is only those ten years of unfortunate studies that didn’t come off. Now a better period may come, but I shall have to get the figure stronger and I must refresh my memory by a very close study of Delacroix and Millet. Then I shall try to get my drawing clearer. Yes, misfortune is good for something, you gain time for study. I am adding a study of flowers to the roll of canvases – nothing much, but after all I do not want to tear it up.

Altogether I think nothing in it at all good except the “Field of Wheat,” the “Mountain,” the “Orchard,” the “Olives” with the blue hills and the portrait and the “Entrance to the Quarry,” and the rest tells me nothing, because it lacks individual intention and feeling in the lines. Where these lines are close and deliberate it begins to be a picture, even

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if it is exaggerated. That is a little what Gauguin and Bernard feel, they do not ask the correct shape of a tree at all, but they do insist that one can say if the shape is round or squared honestly, they are right, exasperated as they are by certain people's photographic and empty perfection. They will not ask the correct tone of the mountains, but they will say: By God, the mountains were blue, were they? Then chuck on some blue and don't go telling me that it was a blue rather like this or that, it was blue, wasn't it? Good – make them blue and it's enough!

Gauguin is sometimes like a genius when he is explaining that, but as for the genius Gauguin has, he is very fearful of showing it, and it is touching the way he likes to say something that will really be of some use to the young ones. What a queer creature he is all the same.

I am very pleased to hear that Jo is well, and I think that you will feel much more in your element thinking of her condition, and of course having worries too, than alone without these family worries. For you will feel more in nature.

When you think of Millet and Delacroix, what a contrast. Delacroix without a wife, Millet surrounded by a big family, more than anybody. And yet what similarities there are in their work.

So Jouve has still kept his big studio and is working on decoration. That man came very near to being an excellent painter.

It is money trouble with him, he is forced to do a hundred things besides painting for a living; if he does do something beautiful, it costs him more money than it brings in. And he is quickly losing his knack of drawing with the brush. That is probably caused by the old way of education, which is the same as nowadays in the studios – they fill in outlines. And Daumier was always painting his face in the mirror to learn to draw.

Do you know what I think of pretty often, what I already said to you some time ago – that even if I did not succeed, all the same I thought that what I have worked at will be carried on. Not directly, but one isn't alone in believing in things that are true. And what does it matter personally then! I feel so strongly that it is the same with people as it is with wheat, if you are not sown in the earth to germinate there, what does it matter? – in the end you are ground between the millstones to become bread.

The difference between happiness and unhappiness! Both are necessary and useful, as well as death or disappearance ... it is so relative – and life is the same.

Even faced with an illness that breaks me up and frightens me, that belief is unshaken.

How I should have liked to see those Meuniers!

Well, let it be understood that if I were to write again expressly and briefly that I should like to go to Paris, I should have a reason for it, which I have explained above. That meanwhile there is no hurry, and that, having warned you, I have confidence enough to wait for the winter and the attack which will perhaps come back then. But if it is a fit of religious exaltation again, then no delay, I would like to leave at once, without giving reasons. Only we are not permitted, at least it would be indiscreet, to meddle with the sisters' management or even to criticize them. They have their own beliefs and their own ways of doing good to others, sometimes it does very well.

But I do not warn you lightly.

And it is not to recover more liberty or anything else that I don't have. So let's wait very calmly till an opportunity to settle things presents itself.

It is a great advantage that my stomach is behaving well, and then I do not think I am so sensitive to cold. And besides I know what to do when the weather is bad, having this project of copying several things that I like.

I should very much like to see Millet reproductions in the schools. I think there are children who would become painters if only they saw good things.

Regards to Jo and a handshake. Goodbye for now.

Ever yours, Vincent