

Letter 544a

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Arles, 3 October 1888

[Sent by Gauguin to Schuffenecker on October 8, 1888, with the observation: "I am sending you a letter from Vincent to let you know how things stand between us and with all our present plans."]

My dear Gauguin,

This morning I received your excellent letter, which I have again sent on to my brother. Your view of impressionism in general, of which your portrait is a symbol, is striking. No one could be more anxious than I am to see it – but I am sure even now that this work is too important for me to take in exchange. But if you would like to keep it for us, my brother will, if you agree, buy it at the first opportunity – and I immediately asked him to do so – so let's hope it happens soon.

For we are trying once more to make it as easy as possible for you to come here soon.

I must tell you that even while working I think continually about the plan of setting up a studio in which you and I will be permanent residents, but which both of us want to turn into a shelter and refuge for friends, against the times when they find that the struggle is getting too much for them.

When you left Paris, my brother and I stayed on together for a time, which will always remain an unforgettable memory for me. The discussions ranged further and wider – with Guillaumin, with the Pissarros, father and son, and with Seurat, whom I had not met before (I visited his studio only a few hours before my departure).

These discussions often dealt with something so near to my brother's heart and mine, namely what steps to take in order to safeguard the material existence of painters, to safeguard their means of production (paints, canvases) and to safeguard their true share in the price their pictures fetch these days – though not until long after they have left the artist's possession.

When you are here, we can mull over all these discussions.

Anyway, when I left Paris I was in a sorry state, quite ill and almost an alcoholic after driving myself on even while my strength was failing me – and then withdrawing into myself, still bereft of hope!

Now, hope is vaguely beckoning on the horizon again, that flickering hope which used sometimes to console my solitary life.

I should so much like to imbue you with a large share of my faith that we shall succeed in starting something that will endure.

When we have had a talk about those strange days spent in discussion in run-down studios and the cafés of the Petit Boulevard, you will understand the full scope of this idea of my brother's and mine – as yet unrealized when it comes to setting up a society.

Still, you will appreciate that in order to remedy the terrible situation of the last few years something is needed, either along the precise lines we proposed or else very much like them. That much we have taken for our unshakeable foundation, as you will gather when you have the full explanation. And you will agree that we have gone a good way beyond the plan we have already communicated to you. That we have gone beyond it is no more than our duty as picture dealers, for you probably know that I, too, spent several years in the trade and do not despise a profession in which I used to earn my living. Suffice it to say that I'm sure that, although you have apparently isolated yourself from Paris, you haven't stopped feeling a fairly close rapport with Paris.

I am having an extraordinary spell of feverish activity these days. Right now I am tackling a landscape with a blue sky above an immense green, purple and yellow vineyard, with black and orange vines. Little figures of ladies with red parasols and little figures of grape pickers with their small cart make it even gayer. Grey sand in the foreground. Another size 30 square canvas to decorate the house [F 475, JH 1595].

I've a portrait of myself, all ash grey. The ashen colour – which has been obtained by mixing malachite green with orange lead – on pale malachite background, all in harmony with the reddish-brown clothes. Not wishing to exaggerate my own personality, however, I aimed rather for the character of a bonze, a simple worshipper of the eternal Buddha [F 476, JH 1581]. Though I have taken rather a lot of trouble with it, I shall have to go over it again if I want to express the idea properly, and I shall have to recover even further from the stultifying effect of our so-called state of civilization if I am to have a better model for a better picture.

One thing that gives me enormous pleasure is the letter I received yesterday from Boch (his sister is one of the Belgian Vingtistes), who writes that he has settled down in the Borinage to paint miners and coal mines

there. He nevertheless intends to return to the south – to vary his impressions – and if he does he is certain to come to Arles.

I consider my views of art excessively ordinary compared with yours.

I have always had the coarse tastes of an animal.

I neglect everything for the external beauty of things, which I cannot reproduce because I render it so ugly and coarse in my pictures, albeit nature seems so perfect to me.

At present, however, my bony carcass is so full of energy that it makes straight for its objective. The result is a degree of sincerity, perhaps original at times, about what I feel, but only if the subject lends itself to my crude and clumsy touch.

I feel sure that if from now on you were to consider yourself head of this studio, which we shall try to ensure will become a refuge for many – little by little, as our unremitting labour provides us with the means of completing it – I'm sure that you would then feel more or less consoled for the present ordeals of penury and ill-health, seeing that we shall probably be devoting our lives to a generation of painters that will last a long while to come.

This part of the country has already seen the cult of Venus – in Greece, primarily artistic – followed by the poets and artists of the Renaissance. Where these things could flourish, impressionism can as well.

I have made a special decoration, the Poet's garden, for the room you will have (there is a first draft of it among the sketches in Bernard's possession – it was later simplified). The ordinary public garden contains plants and shrubs that conjure up landscapes in which one can readily imagine Botticelli, Giotto, Petrarch, Dante and Boccaccio. I have tried to distil in the decoration the essence of what constitutes the immutable character of this country.

And I set out to paint that garden in such a way that one is put in mind of the old poet from these parts (or rather from Avignon), Petrarch, and of the new poet from these parts – Paul Gauguin – .

However clumsy this attempt may be, it may show you perhaps that I have been thinking of you with very great emotion as I prepared your studio.

Let's be of good heart about the success of our venture, and please keep thinking of this as your home, for I feel very sure that all this will last for a very long time.

A warm handshake, and believe me

Ever yours, Vincent

I am only afraid that you will think Brittany more beautiful, indeed, that you will find nothing more beautiful here than Daumier, the figures here are often pure Daumier. It shouldn't take you long to discover that antiquity and the renaissance lie dormant under all this modernity. Well, you are free to revive them.

Bernard tells me that he, Morel, Laval and somebody else will be making exchanges with me. In principle I am very much in favour of the system of exchanges between artists because I have seen the important part it played in the life of the Japanese painters. Accordingly, one of these days I shall be sending you what studies I have that are dry and that I can spare, so that you may have first pick. But I shall make no exchanges at all with you if it means that on your side it costs you something as important as your portrait, which is sure to be too beautiful. Truly, I wouldn't dare, because my brother would gladly buy it from you for a whole month's money.