Vincent van Gogh – The Letters

The Complete Illustrated and Annotated Edition

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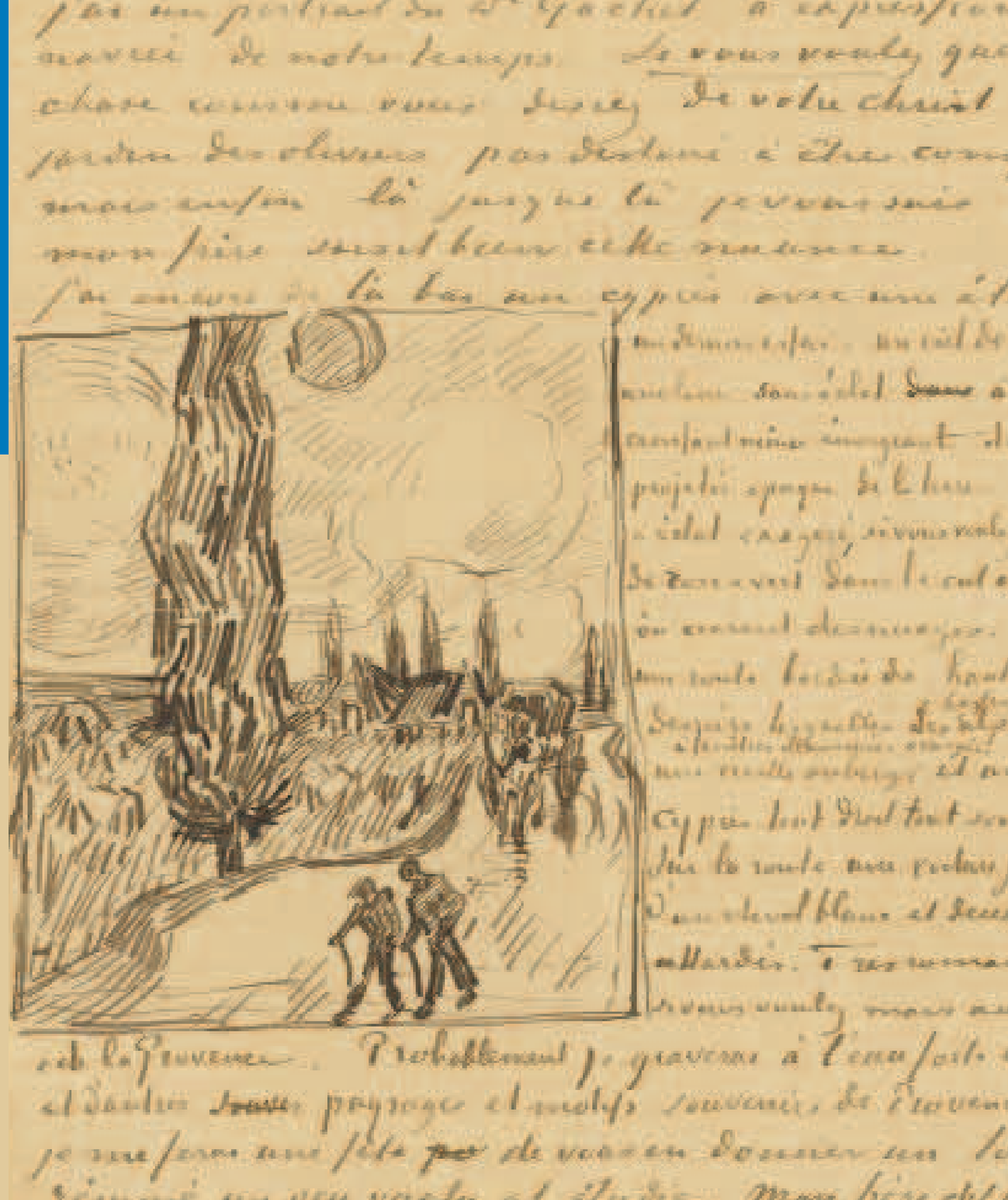

The letters of Vincent van Gogh in 6 volumes

Van Gogh Museum – Huygens Institute – Mercatorfonds

The publication of the correspondence of Vincent van Gogh in October 2009 marks the culmination of fifteen years of research by the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, and the Huygens Institute in The Hague. Its six volumes contain all of Van Gogh's correspondence, comprising 819 letters written by the painter and 83 addressed to him. Van Gogh often added sketches or drawings to his letters and filled them with references to the widest possible range of artists. Every mentioned work is reproduced here, including not only Van Gogh's own paintings and drawings, but also all the works that inspired him, a total of nearly 4,300 reproductions. The letters are accompanied by a detailed study of Van Gogh's life and work, reviewed in the light of this lengthy research.

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Cover: Letter from Vincent van Gogh to his brother Theo | Arles, 12 May 1888 | Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

ever I had need of him I could consult him as *a friend*. To which I'm a long way from saying no, and I may soon be in precisely that case if difficulties were to arise for the house. I'm waiting for the moment to come to pay my month's rent to interrogate the manager or the owner face to face.[11]

But to chuck me out they'd more likely get a kick in the backside, on this occasion at least. What can you say, we've gone all-out for the Impressionists, now as regards myself I'm trying to finish the canvases which will indubitably guarantee my little place that I've taken among them.

Ah, the future of that… but from the moment when *père* Pangloss assures us that everything is always for the best in the best of worlds[12] – can we doubt it?

My letter has become longer than I intended, it matters little – the main thing is that I ask categorically for two months' work before settling what will need to be settled at the time of your marriage.

Afterwards, you and your wife will set up a commercial firm for several generations in the renewal. You won't have it easy. And once that's sorted out I ask only a place as an employed painter as long as there's enough to pay for one.

As a matter of fact, work distracts me. And I *must* have distractions – yesterday I went to the Folies Arlésiennes, the budding theatre here – it was the first time I've slept without a serious nightmare. They were performing – (it was a Provençal literary society) what they call a Noel or Pastourale, a remnant of Christian theatre of the Middle Ages. It was very studied and it must have cost them some money.

Naturally it depicted the birth of Christ, intermingled with the burlesque story of a family of astounded Provençal peasants. Good – what was amazing, like a Rembrandt etching – was the old peasant woman, just the sort of woman Mrs Tanguy would be, with a head of flint or gun flint, false, treacherous, mad, all that could be seen previously in the play. Now that woman, in the play, brought before the mystic crib – in her quavering voice began to sing and then her voice changed, changed from witch to angel and from the voice of an angel into the voice of a child and then the answer by another voice, this one firm and warmly vibrant, a woman's voice, behind the scenes.

That was amazing, amazing. I tell you, the so-called 'Félibres' had anyway spared themselves neither trouble nor expense.[13]

As for me, with this little country here I have no need at all to go to the tropics.

I believe and will always believe in the art to be created in the tropics, and I believe it will be marvellous, but well, personally I'm too old and (especially if I get myself a papier-mâché ear) too jerry-built to go there.

Will Gauguin do it? It isn't necessary. For if it must be done it will be done all on its own.

We are merely links in the chain.

At the bottom of our hearts good old Gauguin and I understand each other, and if we're a bit mad, so be it, aren't we also a little sufficiently deeply artistic to contradict anxieties in that regard by what we say with the brush?

Perhaps everyone will one day have neurosis, the Horla,[14] St Vitus's Dance or something else.

But doesn't the antidote exist? In Delacroix, in Berlioz and Wagner? And really, our artistic madness which all the rest of us have, I don't say that I especially haven't been struck to the marrow by it. But I say and will maintain that our antidotes and consolations can, with a little good will, be considered as amply prevalent. See Puvis de Chavannes' Hope [9].

Ever yours,
Vincent

11. See letters 602, n. 16, and 735, n. 8.

12. See letter 568, n. 3 (Voltaire, *Candide*).

13. See letter 704, n. 10. The 'Folies arlésiennes' was a café-concert with a salle de fêtes at 4 avenue Victor Hugo. The play must have been *La Pastorale*, performed on 25, 26 and 27 January by a company from Marseille (see *L'Homme de Bronze*, 10 February).

14. See letter 739, n. 7 (Maupassant, 'Le horla').

Vincent van Gogh – The Letters

The Complete Illustrated and Annotated Edition

Edited by Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten and Nienke Bakker

6 volumes

1872-1890
Letters 1-902

Van Gogh Museum
Huygens Institute
Mercatorfonds

Preface

Vincent van Gogh's letters have attracted interest and admiration ever since they became widely known after their first publication more than a century ago. They have been eagerly seized upon as a source of information about Van Gogh's gripping life story and exceptional work, and there is broad recognition of the intrinsic qualities of his writing: the personal tone, evocative style and lively language. Without a gift for words, Van Gogh's account of his trials and tribulations would have been nothing more than a litany of hope and struggle. In fact, his extremely personal correspondence rises above the purely individual and, as a result, attains the universality of all great literature.

By far the majority of Van Gogh's letters are addressed to his brother Theo. The earliest known letter dates from 29 September 1872, the last one from a few days before his death on 29 July 1890. After Vincent's death, Theo felt that he had a mission to find understanding and esteem for this work, in collaboration with a small group of sympathetic artists and critics. But Theo survived Vincent by only six months, and it was left to his widow, Jo van Gogh-Bonger, and Van Gogh's friend, the artist Emile Bernard, to take over this responsibility. By organizing exhibitions of his work and publishing his letters, they helped to foster Van Gogh's reputation.

Although they were never written with any idea of publication in mind, Van Gogh's letters have been scrutinized by biographers, art historians, psychologists and imaginative writers for the many insights expressed in them. They can be studied for their literary qualities, for the clues they provide about Van Gogh's place in the artistic and intellectual context of his time in both Holland and France, for the information they give about the materials and techniques of his paintings and drawings, and, of course, for the way in which they document both his external experiences and his interior life. Van Gogh's letters also tell us a great deal about his opinions of other artists. We can follow his admiration of a diverse range of painters: Rembrandt, Eugène Delacroix and Jean-François Millet were among his role models, but artists from his immediate circle provided him with inspiration as well at various stages in his development, such as Anton Mauve, Emile Bernard and Paul Gauguin.

Wide-ranging though Van Gogh's letters are, it would be misleading to compare them to a diary. 'Writing is actually an awful way to explain things to each other,' Van Gogh wrote to his brother. That sounds paradoxical, coming from someone with such an obvious epistolary talent. But he understood that paradox better than anyone else, and for readers and students of his letters it is a warning always to be careful about interpretation and exegesis. Nevertheless, the letters do help us to arrange his oeuvre in chronological order and to understand the ambitions that lay behind it. Furthermore, they contain essential pointers to Van Gogh's intellectual development, both during his artistic career and in the period preceding it.

The letters make it possible to see how, as an artist starting out on his careeer, he first concentrated on drawing, using manuals and books; how he experimented with materials such as natural chalk, lithographic crayon and the reed pen, and implements such as the perspective frame; how he often worked in 'campaigns'; the stimuli he received from his reading and visits to museums; his ideas about the use of colour; how his first ambition to be a 'peasant painter' gradually metamorphosed into that of a 'modern painter'; what the ideals of the 'studio of the south' were; and the direction he felt that modern art should take. This list is incomplete; its only purpose is to illustrate the unparalleled wealth of information that these letters contain.

The letters Van Gogh wrote to artist friends form a distinct group within the correspondence. The importance of the exchange of letters with Gauguin and Bernard goes beyond the study of Van Gogh's life and work, for this was a key episode in art history. The friends' discussions about abstraction, colour, the use of the imagination and abandoning reality in favour of suggestion and symbolism touch on the roots of modern art itself.

Up until 1886 Van Gogh wrote almost all his letters in Dutch (they comprise about two thirds of the total), and thereafter almost always in French. There are also a few letters written in English. His French was good, thanks to his reading and his contacts with French speakers.

The answer to the question as to why, as a Dutchman, he corresponded in French even with members of his own family is simple. With his keen sense of language he had been surrounded by French for so long that he was losing his day-to-day feel for Dutch and found French easier. In addition, his brother Theo had lived in France for a long time.

Van Gogh used normal, everyday words in his letters. He was not averse to some sentimentality, but there is no literary lyricism in his letter-writing style. He very rarely used a higher idiom or intellectual terms, and when he had to he often made his excuses for doing so. He frequently revealed his driven personality through this direct, unadorned style of writing, and he showed his vulnerability by expressing ideals, by getting into arguments, and by sharing with the reader his outrage, his melancholy, and later his mental illness. In the isolation that he created through his difficult character, everything became a battle with the world around him and with himself.

The Van Gogh Letters Project

In 1914, writing in English, Jo van Gogh-Bonger recalled that 'When as Theo's young wife I entered in April, 1889, our flat in the Cité Pigalle in Paris, I found in the bottom of a small desk a drawer full of letters from Vincent, and week after week I saw the soon familiar yellow envelopes with the characteristic handwriting increase in number.' Theo van Gogh hoarded

many letters, photographs, bills, account books and other documents, some of them mere scraps. After his death in 1891 they remained in his estate thanks to Jo, their son Vincent Willem and the Vincent van Gogh Foundation, and they are now preserved in the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam.

The 902 letters published in the present edition represent all the known correspondence: it consists of 819 letters written by Van Gogh himself and 83 that he received. In addition to the letters, there are 25 documents (referred to here as 'related manuscripts') that consist of a number of loose pages, each of which probably once formed part of a letter but which cannot be placed, and several unsent letters or drafts.

The publication history of the letters (see Volume 6) is inextricably bound up with the public's growing appreciation of Van Gogh's paintings. The existence of the letters became known at around the same time that he was beginning to gain recognition. The most substantial portion of the correspondence, the group of letters to his brother Theo, was published in three volumes in the Netherlands as early as 1914, and these and subsequent publications were generally intended for a wide readership. Over the next forty years, as Van Gogh's reputation grew, more and more letters were published. In 1952 his nephew Vincent Willem van Gogh published the first of four volumes of a 'complete' edition: *Verzamelde brieven* (Collected Letters) was a milestone in the history of the publication of Van Gogh's correspondence. This edition was translated in its entirety and published in English (1958), French (1960) and German (1965). In the preface to the first volume V.W. van Gogh expressed his wish to provide a counterweight to all the free interpretations, tall stories and myths about Van Gogh. He wrote: 'I wish to say that this edition is exclusively documentary in nature.'

These books became the essential point of reference for half a century of international Van Gogh research. As the counterpart to J.-B. de la Faille's oeuvre catalogue (published in 1928 and revised in 1970), they can unreservedly be described as the most important Van Gogh source of the twentieth century.

However, there was still a need for a scholarly edition. As the eminent Van Gogh scholar Jan Hulsker wrote in 1987: 'An ideal edition of the complete letters […] would have to be more accurate in rendering the texts, the letters would have to be placed in their correct order in the light of the most recent research, and it would have to be annotated, however sparingly.'

The Van Gogh Museum produced a new edition of Van Gogh's complete correspondence in 1990 to mark the centenary of his death. New knowledge about the order and dating of the letters, amassed since the appearance of the previous major edition, the *Verzamelde brieven* of 1952–54, was incorporated, and 21 letters were added. Bound in four yellow volumes, *De brieven* was, at the time, the most comprehensive edition of the correspondence ever published, but since the letters were all published in Dutch only, the enlargement of the corpus benefited only a limited readership.

Hulsker's challenge was finally taken up by the Van Gogh Museum, which launched the Van Gogh Letters Project with the Huygens Institute in 1994. The present publication is the final result , together with an integral, scholarly web edition (www.vangoghletters.org). Most importantly, it corrects many misreadings and omissions in the 1952–54 edition, on which the subsequent translated editions were based. For the first time, every single work of art referred to by Van Gogh (as far as the editors were able to identify them) is reproduced with the letters. In addition to the comprehensive illustrations (the 1952–54 edition only had reproductions of letter sketches), this present edition offers substantial improvements in several ways over all other editions to date.

The newly transcribed text has been entirely retranslated from first to last. The aim has been to render the Dutch and French source texts into the most faithful possible English, in a manner that neither adorns nor 'improves' Van Gogh's original idiosyncratic voice. The letters are fully annotated, incorporating all the most recent scholarship, including new datings, and the altered composition of several letters (for example, where a sheet thought to belong to one letter is now placed elsewhere). The edition also contains information about Van Gogh's family and correspondents, a chronology of his life and an essay on the biographical and historical context of the letters, as well as maps, a glossary of materials and techniques and extensive indexes to help the reader navigate through the whole edition. There is also a comprehensive bibliography that includes not only works of literature to which Van Gogh himself makes reference in his letters, but also other scholarly sources that were consulted in the compilation of this edition.

The Van Gogh Museum and the Huygens Institute have made resources and manpower available on an unprecedented scale for the Van Gogh Letters Project, of which this edition is the result. It also takes every possible advantage of all the research into Van Gogh's works and letters that has been carried out over the course of more than a century. It will provide a source of reliable scholarship and constant pleasure to both specialist and general readers alike.

The following pages are taken from volume 4 of the present publication, Arles, 1888-1889.

The publication of the new edition of Van Gogh's correspondence will be marked by an exhibition in the Van Gogh Museum from 9 October 2009 to 3 January 2010 titled *Van Gogh's Letters: the Artist Speaks.* For more information see www.vangoghmuseum.com

Arles, Tuesday, 5 or Wednesday, 6 June 1888

621

To Theo van Gogh (F)

My dear Theo –

If Gauguin wants to accept, and if the only obstacle to going into business would be the travel, it's better not to keep him waiting. So I've written, although I hardly had the time, having two canvases on the easel [1].[1] If you think the letter's clear enough, send it,[2] if not, it would be better for us, too, to abstain when in doubt.[3] And the things you would do for him shouldn't upset the plan to bring our sisters over, and especially not our needs, yours and mine. Because if we ourselves don't keep ourselves in a state of vigour, how can we claim the right to get involved in other people's troubles? But at present we're on the way to remaining vigorous, and so let's do the possible, what's right in front of us.

I'm sending you enclosed herewith canvas sample for Tasset; however, I don't know if we should go on with his canvas.[4]

If you send me the next letter by Sunday *morning*, I'll probably go off to Saintes-Maries again at 1 o'clock that day and spend the week there.[5]

I'm reading a book about Wagner which I'll send you afterwards[6] – what an artist – one like that in painting, now that would be something. *It will come*.

Do you know that at

6 rue Coëllogon, rue de Rennes,
on 7 and 8 June from 1 to 7 o'clock
there's an exhibition of paintings and drawings by
Régamey

that could be very interesting; now there's two who've travelled all over the place, he and his brother.[7]

Handshake.

Ever yours,
Vincent.

I believe in the victory of Gauguin and other artists – but – between then and now there's a long time, and even if he had the good fortune to sell one or two canvases – it would be the same story. While waiting, Gauguin could peg out like Meryon, discouraged.[8] It's bad that he's not working – well, we'll see his reply.

Ongoing topics
Gauguin coming to Arles (602)
Theo's plan to get Willemien and Lies to come and stay with him in Paris (615)
Visit to Saintes-Maries (617)

[1] Van Gogh, *Fishing boats on the beach at Saintes-Maries-de-la-mer*, 1888 (620.6)

1. The second canvas was probably either ill. 622.1 or 622.2.

2. Vincent enclosed the letter for Theo to read and forward to Gauguin, who in turn sent it on to Emile Schuffenecker in the second week of June (see Merlhès 1989, p. 68).

3. Derived from the Hippocratic adage 'in dubio abstine'.

4. Cf. letter 614.

5. Van Gogh received a telegraph money order on Monday morning (letter 623), but letters 623 and 625 indicate that he could not afford to return to Saintes-Maries.

6. Probably Richard Wagner, *Musiciens, poètes et philosophes* (1887), translated and with an introduction by Camille Benoît.

7. The private exhibition in the studio of Félix Régamey (Guillaume Régamey's brother) was announced in *L'Intransigeant*, 5 June 1888.

8. Charles Meryon had starved himself to death in the asylum at Charenton.

Arles, on or about Thursday, 7 June 1888

622

To Emile Bernard (F)

My dear old Bernard,

More and more it seems to me that the paintings that *ought to be made*, the paintings that are necessary, indispensable for painting today to be fully itself and to rise to a level equivalent to the serene peaks achieved by the Greek sculptors, the German musicians,[1] the French writers of novels,[2] exceed the power of an isolated individual, and will therefore probably be created by groups of men combining to carry out a shared idea.

One has a superb orchestration of colours[3] and lacks ideas.

The other overflows with new, harrowing or charming conceptions, but is unable to express them in a way that's sufficiently sonorous, given the timidity of a limited palette.

Very good reason to regret the lack of an esprit de corps among artists, who criticize each other, persecute each other, while fortunately not succeeding in cancelling each other out.

You'll say that this whole argument is a banality. So be it – but the thing itself – the existence of a Renaissance – that fact is certainly not a banality.

A technical question. Do give me your opinion in next letter.

I'm going to put the *black* and the *white* boldly on my palette just the way the colourman sells them to us, and use them as they are.

When – and note that I'm talking about the simplification of colour in the Japanese manner – when I see in a green park with pink paths a gentleman

Ongoing topics
Gauguin's illness (581)
Visit to Saintes-Maries-de-la-mer (617)
Bernard's military service (575)

1. See letter 621, n. 6 (Wagner).

2. Van Gogh added 'de romans' (of novels) later.

3. Cf. letter 537, n. 6 (Blanc).

who's dressed in black, and a justice of the peace by profession (the Arab Jew in Daudet's Tartarin calls this honourable official shustish of the beace),[4] who's reading L'Intransigeant.

Above him and the park a sky of a simple cobalt.

Then why not paint the said shustish of the beace with simple bone black and L'Intransigeant with simple, very harsh white?

Because the Japanese disregards reflection, placing his solid tints one beside the other – characteristic lines naively marking off movements or shapes.

In another category of ideas, when you compose a colour motif expressing, for example, a yellow evening sky –

The harsh, hard white of a white wall against the sky can be expressed, at a pinch and in a strange way, by harsh white and by that same white softened by a neutral tone. Because the sky itself colours it with a delicate lilac hue.

<Letter sketch A>

Again, in this very naive landscape, which is meant to show us a hut, whitewashed overall (the roof, too), situated in an orange field, of course, because the sky in the south and the blue Mediterranean produce an orange that is all the more intense the higher in tint the range of blues –

The black note of the door, of the window panes, of the little cross on the rooftop, creates a simultaneous contrast[5] of white and black

<Letter sketch B>

just as pleasing to the eye as that of the blue with the orange [1–2].

To take a more entertaining subject, let's imagine a woman dressed in a black and white checked dress, in the same primitive landscape of a blue sky and an orange earth – that would be quite amusing to see, I imagine. In fact, in Arles they often do wear white and black checks.[6]

In short, black and white are colours too, or rather, in many cases may be considered colours, since their simultaneous contrast is as sharp as that of green and red, for example.

The Japanese use it too, by the way – they express a young girl's matt and pale complexion, and its sharp contrast with her black hair wonderfully well with white paper and 4 strokes of the pen. Not to mention their black thorn-bushes, studded with a thousand white flowers.

I've finally seen the Mediterranean, which you'll probably cross before me. Spent a week in Saintes-Maries, and to get there crossed the Camargue in a diligence, with vineyards, heaths, fields as flat as Holland. There, at Saintes-Maries, there were girls who made one think of Cimabue and Giotto: slim, straight, a little sad and mystical. On the completely flat, sandy beach, little green, red, blue boats, so pretty in shape and colour that one thought of flowers; one man boards them, these boats hardly go on the high sea – they dash off when there's no wind and come back to land if

[A–B] Letter sketches: *Cottage in Saintes-Maries-de-la-mer*; *Woman with a parasol* (F–/JH–) (Reduced to 75 percent of actual size)

4. See letter 609, n. 1 (Daudet, *Tartarin de Tarascon*).

5. See letter 536, n. 18.

6. No obvious examples of the fabrics described have been found.

there's a bit too much. It appears that Gauguin is still ill. I'm quite curious to know what you've done lately; I'm still doing landscapes, croquis enclosed [C–G].[7] I'd very much like to see Africa too, but I hardly make any firm plans for the future, it will depend on circumstances. What I'd like to know is the effect of a more intense blue in the sky. Fromentin and Gérôme[8] see the earth in the south as colourless, and a whole lot of people saw it that way. My God, yes, if you take dry sand in your hand and if you look at it closely. Water, too, air, too, considered this way, are colourless. NO BLUE WITHOUT YELLOW and WITHOUT ORANGE, and if you do blue, then do yellow and orange as well, surely. Ah well, you'll tell me that I write you nothing but banalities. Handshake in thought.

Ever yours,
Vincent

[B] Letter sketch: *Woman with a parasol* (F–/JH–)

Colour notations, in the sky: 'bleu' (blue); on the ground: 'orangé' (orange).

[A] Letter sketch: *Cottage in Saintes-Maries-de-la-mer* (F–/JH–)

Colour notations, in the sky, twice: 'bleu' (blue);
on the ground: 'orange' and 'orangé' (orange).

[1] Van Gogh, *Cottages in Saintes-Maries-de-la-mer*, 1888 (F419/JH1465)

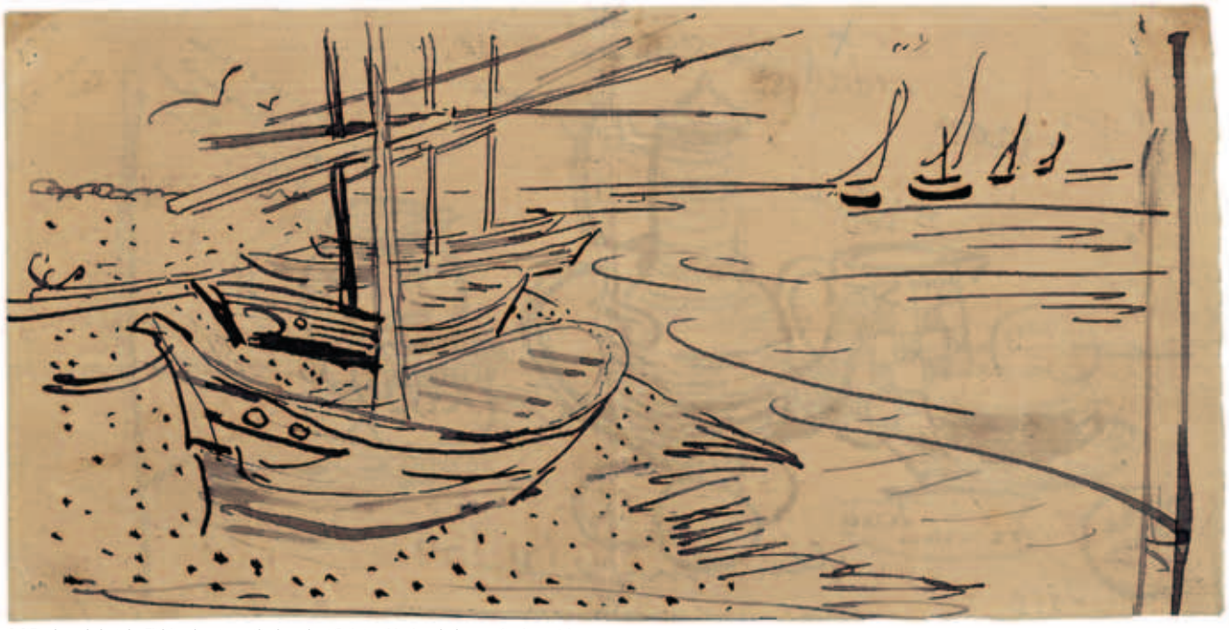
7. Done after the following paintings:
C after ill. 2; D after ill. 619.5; E after ill. 610.2;
F after ill. 609.1; and G after ill. 620.6.
Van Gogh also sent sketch H done after ill. 611.2.

8. Fromentin had painted in Algeria;
Gérôme in Turkey, Greece and Egypt.

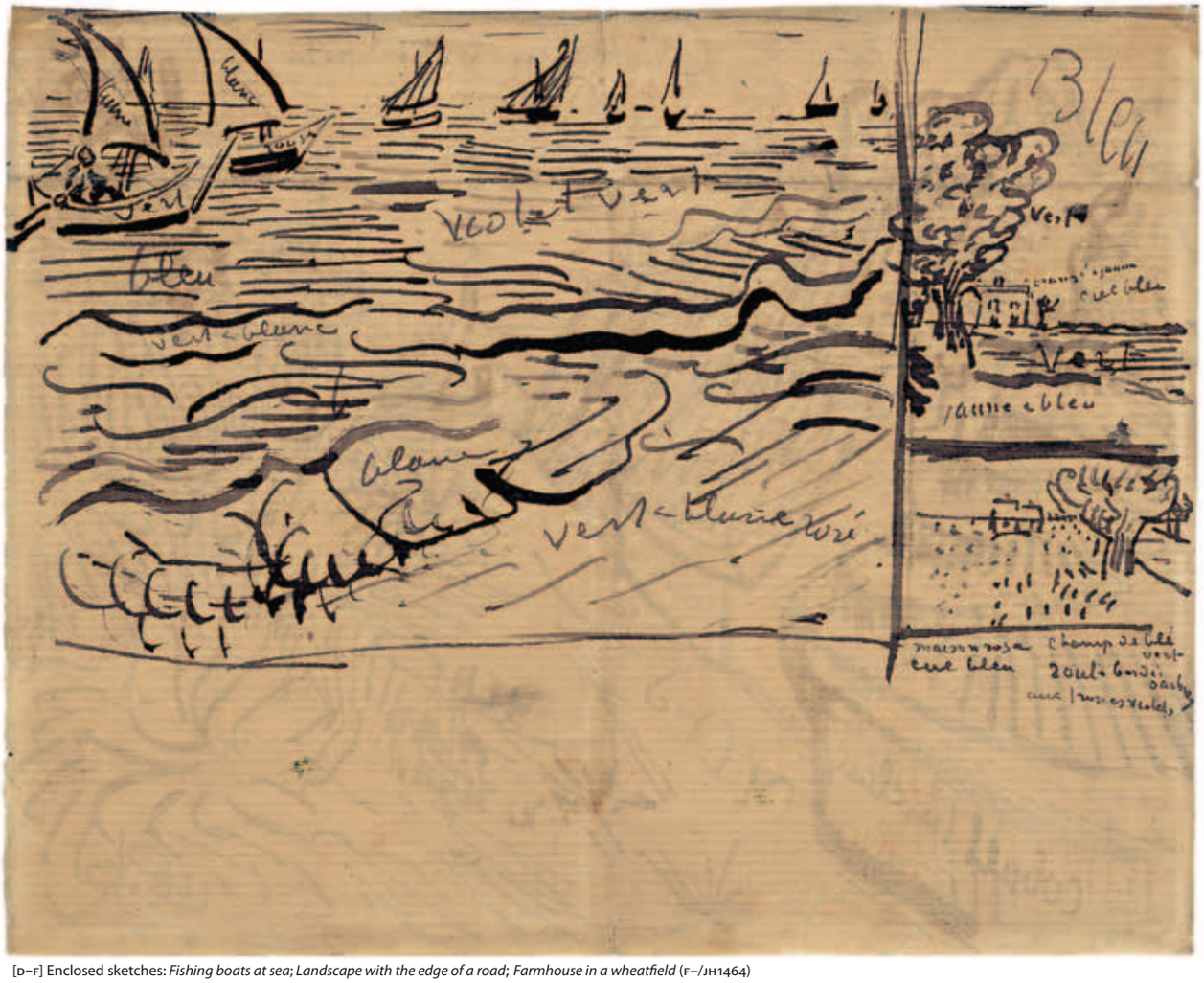
[c] Enclosed sketch: *Row of cottages in Saintes-Maries-de-la-mer* (F–/JH1463)

Colour notations, in the sky: 'Citron vert pale' (pale lemon green); on the roof of the house in the left foreground: 'bleu & orangé' (blue and orange); on the lower edge of the house: 'cobalt tres clair' (very light cobalt); on the side of the second house: 'chrome 2'; on the chimney and the lower edge of the house: 'blanc' (white), twice; on the roof: 'violet'; on the side of the third house: 'chrome 2'; on the house in the left background: 'émeraude' (emerald); on the front of the house second from left in the background: 'blanc'; on the roof of that house: 'violet'; on the third house in the background: 'orangé' and 'chrome 3'; on the surface of the street: 'rose' (pink); below the poppies beside the street: 'coquelicots rouge' (red poppies); on the vegetation on the right: 'Vert' (green).

[2] Van Gogh, *Row of cottages in Saintes-Maries-de-la-mer*, 1888 (F420/JH1462)



[c] Enclosed sketch: *Fishing boats on the beach at Saintes-Maries-de-la-mer* (F–JH1461)



[d] Colour notations, on the sail of the first boat: 'jaune' (yellow); on the sail of the second boat: 'blanc' (white); on the hull of the first boat: 'vert' (green); on the hull of the second boat: 'rouge' (red); in the water in front of these boats: 'bleu' (blue); a little lower down: 'vert & blanc'; on the shoreline: 'blanc'; on the beach: 'vert & blanc rosé' (green and pinkish white); in the water in front of the central boats: 'violet vert' (violet green).

[e] Colour notations, in the sky: 'Bleu' (blue); beside the leaves of the tree: 'vert' (green); beside the house in the background: 'orangé & jaune' (orange and yellow); below that: 'ciel bleu' (blue sky); on the ground in front of the house: 'Vert' (green); in the foreground: 'jaune & bleu' (yellow and blue).

[f] Colour notations: 'maison rose' (pink house); below that: 'ciel bleu' (blue sky); on the right: 'champ de blé/vert' (field of wheat/green); below that: 'route bordé/d'arbres/ aux troncs violets' (road lined/with trees/with violet trunks).

[d–f] Enclosed sketches: *Fishing boats at sea*; *Landscape with the edge of a road*; *Farmhouse in a wheatfield* (F–JH1464)

[H] Enclosed sketch: *Still life with coffee pot* (F–/JH1428)

Colour notations, in the background: 'Citron vert pale' (pale lemon green); on the orange in the left foreground: 'mine orange' (orange lead); below the cup and saucer on the left: 'tasse bleu de roi/or & blanc' (royal blue/gold and white cup); on the orange in the left background: 'chrome 3'; above the milk jug on the left: 'carrelé/bleu & cobalt' (blue and cobalt check); on the tablecloth, centre foreground: 'bleu myosotys' (forget-me-not blue); on the foremost of the three lemons: 'chrome/N° 1'; on the two other lemons: the numeral '1' (for 'chrome 1'); beside the coffee pot in the middle: 'émaillé/bleu' (blue enamel); on the edge of the saucer on the right: 'chrome 2'; beside the cup on the right: 'tasse blanche/ dessins bleu/orangé' (white cup/ patterns blue/orange); beside the jug on the right: 'pot en majolique/ bleu à flammes/brunes à fleurs/ roses & vertes' (blue majolica jug/ with wavy/brown decoration with/ pink and green flowers).

Arles, Tuesday, 12 June 1888

623

To Theo van Gogh (F)

My dear Theo,

On Monday morning I received your telegraphed money order for 50 francs, for which I thank you kindly. But I haven't yet received your letter, which surprised me a little.

I've received a letter from Gauguin, who said he'd received a letter from you containing 50 francs, by which he was very touched, and in which you said a few words about the plan.[1] As I had sent you my letter to him, he hadn't yet received the more clear-cut proposal when he wrote.[2]

But he says that he has the experience that when he was in Martinique with his friend Laval, the two of them together managed better than either one of them alone, and that he therefore fully agreed on the advantages a life in common would have.[3]

He says the pains in his bowels are still continuing, and he seems quite unhappy to me. He talks about a hope he has of finding capital of six hundred thousand francs to set up a dealer in Impressionist paintings, and that he would explain his plan and that he'd like you to be at the head of this business.[4]

I shouldn't be surprised if that hope is a fata Morgana, a mirage that goes with being broke. The more broke you are – especially when you're ill – the more you think of such possibilities.

So I see first and foremost in this plan yet another proof that he's despondent, and that the best thing would be get him back on his feet as quickly as possible.

He says that when sailors have to move a heavy load or raise an anchor, in order to be able to lift a greater weight, to be able to make an enormous effort, they all sing together to support each other and to give each other energy. That it's just what artists lack. So I'd be really surprised if he weren't glad to come. But the costs of the hotel[5] and the journey are made even more complicated by the doctor's bill, so it will be jolly hard.

But it seems to me that he should ditch the debt and leave some paintings as security if he's going to come here, and if the people don't agree to that, leave the debt in the lurch without any paintings as security. Wasn't I forced to do the same thing in order to come to Paris?[6] And although I suffered the loss of many things then, it can't be done otherwise in cases like that, and it's better to go forward anyway than to go on being depressed.

I haven't left for Saintes-Maries – they've finished painting the house and I had to pay, and I also have to buy quite a considerable supply of canvas.

And out of the fifty francs I've got one louis[7] left and we're only Tuesday morning, and so it was hardly possible for me to leave and I fear it won't yet be possible next week either.

I was pleased to learn that Mourier has come to lodge with you.[8]

If Gauguin would prefer to take the risk of throwing himself back into business at this point – if he really […]

Ongoing topics
Gauguin coming to Arles (602)
Gauguin's illness (581)
The plan to go back to Saintes-Maries-de-la-mer (621)
Request to Russell to buy a painting from Gauguin (582)
The proposed exchange with Russell (589)

1. Gauguin's letter to Vincent and Theo's to Gauguin are not known.

2. See letter 621, n. 2.

3. Gauguin and Laval sailed together from Saint-Nazaire to Panama on 10 April 1887, and then in mid-May on to Martinique, where they stayed until November.

4. Gauguin set out his plans – for an artists' association funded by Albert Dauprat and Henri Cottu, rich friends of Laval's – in his letter to Emile Schuffenecker (see letter 621, n. 2); see Merlhès 1989, p. 70.

5. See letter 616, n. 1.

6. See letter 567, n. 3.

7. 20 francs.

8. Mourier-Petersen arrived at Theo's apartment in rue Lepic on 6 June 1888, and stayed until about 15 August 1888.

Arles, on or about Wednesday, 21 November 1888

To Theo van Gogh (F)

722

Ongoing topics
Gauguin's plan to return to the tropics (716)
Van Gogh's ambition to show work at the 1889 World Exhibition (590)

My dear Theo,

Thanks for your kind letter and for the 100-franc note it contained. Am very happy that Gauguin's success as regards selling continues.[1] If in a year's time he could have made enough to carry out his plan of going and setting himself up in Martinique, I'd think that his fortune would be made. Only, to my mind he shouldn't risk going back there before he has 5 thousand put aside, according to him he would need 2,000. But then to my mind he wouldn't leave alone but with one other or several others, and would found a lasting studio there.

Anyhow, a lot more water will flow under the bridge before then.

What you write about the Dutchmen interests me greatly. I hope one day to get to know both of them personally. How old are they?[2] I dare to believe that in the final reckoning they'll feel their coming to France was a good thing.

The trouble they're having with colour – my goodness – that doesn't surprise me. May De Haan never lose touch with the *serious* study of Rembrandt, to which the two drawings of his that I'm currently looking at testify![3]

Have they read Silvestre's book on E. Delacroix,[4] and the article on *colour* in C. Blanc's Grammaire des arts du dessin?[5]

So ask them that on my behalf, and if they haven't read it they should. As for me, I think more about Rembrandt than may appear from my studies.

<Letter sketch A>

Here's a croquis of the latest canvas I'm working on, another sower. Immense lemon yellow disc for the sun. Green-yellow sky with pink clouds. The field is violet, the sower and the tree Prussian Blue. No. 30 canvas [1].

Let's calmly wait to exhibit until I have around thirty no. 30 canvases.

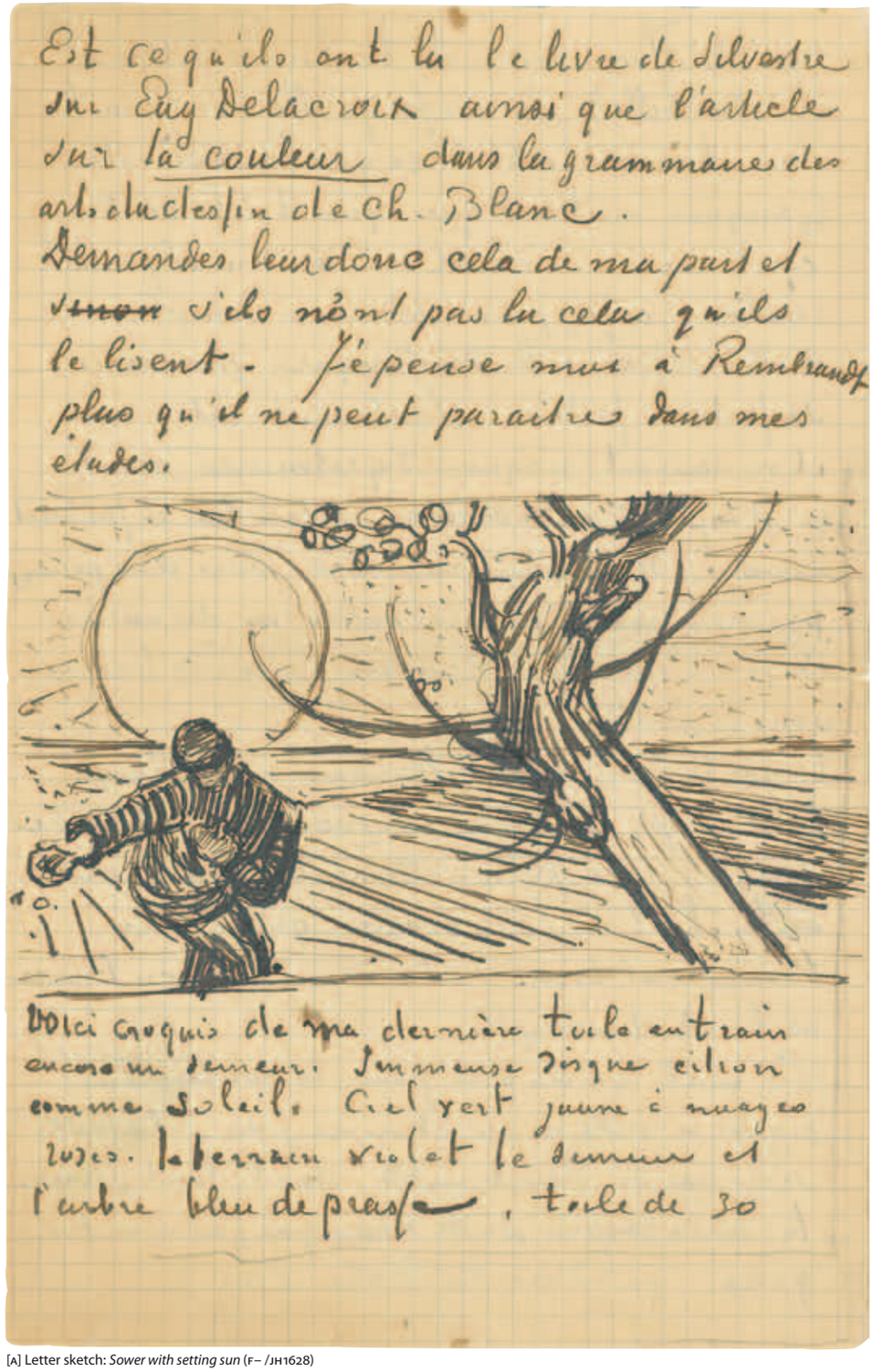
Then we'll exhibit them once in your apartment for the friends, and not exerting any pressure even then.

And let's not do anything else.

There are lots of reasons for not stirring now. Besides, it won't take long, I think I'll be able to send it to you at the time of the exhibition or a little later. In the meantime it will dry thoroughly here, and I can go over all the canvases again once they're thoroughly dry, even the impasted areas.

If at the age of forty I do a painting of figures or portraits the way I feel it, I think that will be worth more than a more or less serious success now.

Have you seen the studies that Bernard brought back from Brittany? Gauguin has told me many things about them. He himself has one which is simply masterly [4]. I think that buying one from him, from Bernard, would be doing him a service, and that he really deserves it.



[A] Letter sketch: *Sower with setting sun* (F– /JH1628)

[1] Van Gogh, *Sower with setting sun*, 1888 (F450/JH1627)

1. Theo had sold three canvases by Gauguin in November, and he sold a fourth at the beginning of December. See *Correspondance Gauguin* 1984, p. 280, and Wildenstein 2001, pp. 284, 384–385.

2. De Haan was 36 years old, Isaäcson 29.

3. See letter 708.

4. See letter 526, n. 2.

5. See Blanc, *Grammaire des arts du dessin*, pp. 22–26 (chapter 5, 'Principes'), 601–617 (chapter 13, 'Peinture').

Only we mustn't forget that either at New Year or in March, Gauguin will have to be repaid the money he may have laid out, for example for sheets or things that would remain in the studio.

For on both sides I think we'll find it best to change nothing, absolutely nothing, in the financial arrangement we've established.[6] If at the end of a year we continue to find it satisfactory, time will tell.

Gauguin's working on a very beautiful painting of washerwomen [2–3],[7] and also a big still life of an orange pumpkin and some apples and white linen on a yellow background and foreground.[8]

The weather here is cold, but we see some really beautiful things all the same. Such as yesterday evening, a sickly lemon yellow sunset, mysterious, of extraordinary beauty – Prussian blue cypresses, trees with dead leaves in every broken tone against that, not half bad.

You couldn't imagine how pleased I am that you have painters with you and aren't staying alone in the apartment, just as I too am very pleased to have such good company as Gauguin's.

More soon, and thanks once again for your kind letter.

Ever yours,
Vincent

What do De Haan and Isaäcson say about Monticelli? Have they seen any of his paintings other than the ones at your place?[9] You know that I still lay claim to continuing the job that Monticelli began here.[10]

[2] Gauguin, *Washerwomen on the bank of a canal*, 1888

[3] Gauguin, *Washerwomen*, 1888

[4] Bernard, *Breton women in the meadow*, 1888 (712.1)

6. See letter 717, n. 6.

7. One of the two paintings of washerwomen Gauguin made during this period, ill. 2 or ill. 3.

8. This lost still life is most likely depicted in part in Van Gogh's *Portrait of Paul Gauguin (Man in a red beret)* (F546/JH–).

9. See letter 578, n. 4.

10. See letters 689 and 702.

Arles, Monday, 28 January 1889

To Theo van Gogh (F)

743

My dear Theo,

Just a few words to tell you that I'm getting along so-so as regards my health and work.

Which I already find astonishing when I compare my state today with that of a month ago. I well knew that one could break one's arms and legs before, and that then afterwards that could get better but I didn't know that one could break one's brain and that afterwards that got better too.

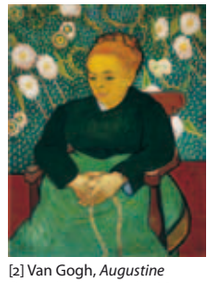
I still have a certain 'what's the good of getting better' feeling in the astonishment that an ongoing recovery causes me, which I wasn't in a state to dare rely upon.

When you visited I think you must have noticed in Gauguin's room the two no. 30 canvases of the sunflowers [5–6]. I've just put the finishing touches to the absolutely equivalent and identical repetitions [3–4]. I think I've already told you that in addition I have a canvas of a *Berceuse*, the very same one I was working on when my illness came and interrupted me [2]. Today I also have 2 versions of this one [1].

On the subject of that canvas, I've just said to Gauguin that as he and I talked about the Icelandic fishermen and their melancholy isolation, exposed to all the dangers, alone on the sad sea, I've just said to Gauguin about it that, following these intimate conversations, the idea came to me to paint such a picture that sailors, at once children and martyrs,

Ongoing topics
Vincent's first crisis and hospitalization (728)
Theo's journey to Arles (728)
Theo's engagement and marriage to Jo Bonger (728)
Gauguin's plan to return to the tropics (716)

[1] Van Gogh, *Augustine Roulin ('La berceuse')*, 1889 (F506/JH1670)



[2] Van Gogh, *Augustine Roulin ('La berceuse')*, 1889 (739.2)

[3] Van Gogh, *Sunflowers in a vase*, 1889 (F458/JH1667)

[4] Van Gogh, *Sunflowers in a vase*, 1889 (F455/JH1668)

[5] Van Gogh, *Sunflowers in a vase*, 1888 (668.5)

[6] Van Gogh, *Sunflowers in a vase*, 1888 (666.3)

seeing it in the cabin of a boat of Icelandic fishermen, would experience a feeling of being rocked, reminding them of their own lullabies.[1] Now it looks, you could say, like a chromolithograph from a penny bazaar. A woman dressed in green with orange hair stands out against a green background with pink flowers. Now these discordant sharps of garish pink, garish orange, garish green, are toned down by flats of reds and greens. I can imagine these canvases precisely between those of the sunflowers – which thus form standard lamps or candelabra at the sides, of the same size; and thus the whole is composed of 7 or 9 canvases.[2]

(I'd like to make another repetition for Holland if I can get the model again.)

As it's still winter, listen. Let me quietly continue my work, if it's that of a madman, well, too bad. Then I can't do anything about it.

However, the unbearable hallucinations have stopped for now, reducing themselves to a simple nightmare on account of taking potassium bromide, I think.

It's still impossible for me to deal with this question of money[3] in detail, but I want to deal with it in detail all the same, and I'm working furiously from morning till night to prove to you (unless my work is yet another hallucination), to prove to you that really, truly, we're following in Monticelli's track here and, what's more, that we have a light on our way and a lamp before our feet[4] in the powerful work of Bruyas of Montpellier, who has done so much to create a school in the south.[5]

Only don't be absolutely too amazed if, in the course of the coming month, I would be obliged to ask you for the month in full, and even the relative extra included.

After all, it's only right if in these productive times when I expend all my vital warmth I should insist on what is necessary to take a few precautions. The difference in expenditure is certainly not excessive on my part, not even in cases like that. And once again, either lock me up in a madhouse straightaway, I won't resist if I'm wrong, or let me work with all my strength, while taking the precautions I mention.

If I'm not mad the time will come when I'll send you what I've promised you from the beginning. Now, these paintings may perhaps be fated for dispersal, but when you, for one, see the whole of what I want, you will, I dare hope, receive a consolatory impression from it.

You saw, as I did, a part of the Faure collection file past in the little window of a framer's shop in rue Lafitte,[6] didn't you? You saw, as I did, that this slow procession of canvases that were previously despised was strangely interesting.

Good. My great desire would be that sooner or later you should have a series of canvases from me that could also file past in that exact same shop window.

Now, in continuing the furious work this February and March I hope I'll have finished the calm repetitions of a number of studies I did last year. And these, together with certain canvases of mine that you already have, such as the harvest [7] and the white orchard [8], will form quite a firm base. During this same time, so no later than March, we can settle what has to be settled on the occasion of your marriage.

But although I'll work during February and March, I'll consider myself to be still ill, and I tell you in advance that in these two months I may have to take 250 a month from the year's allowance.

You'll perhaps understand that what would reassure me in some way regarding my illness and the possibility of a relapse would be to see that Gauguin and I didn't exhaust our brains for nothing at least, but that good canvases result from it. And I dare hope that one day you'll see that in remaining upright and calm now, precisely on the question of money – it will be impossible later on to have acted badly towards the Goupils. If indirectly I've eaten some of their bread, certainly through you as an intermediary –

Directly I will then retain my integrity.[7]

So, far from still remaining awkward with each other almost all the time because of that, we can feel like brothers again after that has been sorted out. You'll have been poor all the time to feed me, but I'll return the money or turn up my toes.

Now your wife will come, who has a good heart, to make us old fellows feel a bit younger again.

But this I believe, that you and I will have successors in business, and that precisely at the moment when the family abandoned us to our own resources, financially speaking, it will again be we who haven't flinched.[8]

My word, may the crisis come after that… Am I wrong about that, then?

Come on, as long as the present earth lasts there will be artists and picture dealers, especially those who are apostles at the same time, like you. And if ever we're comfortably off, even while perhaps being old Jewish smokers, at least we'll have worked by forging straight ahead and won't have forgotten the things of the heart that much, even though we have calculated a little.

What I tell you is true: if it isn't absolutely necessary to shut me away in a madhouse then I'm still good for paying what I can be considered to owe, at least in goods.

Then, my dear brother, we have 89. The whole of France shivered at it and so did we old Dutchmen, with the same heart.

Beware of 93, you may perhaps tell me.[9]

Alas there's some truth in that, and that being the case let's stay with the paintings.

In conclusion I must also tell you that the chief inspector of police came yesterday to see me, in a very friendly way.[10] He told me as he shook my hand that if

[7] Van Gogh, *The harvest*, 1888 (623.9)

[8] Van Gogh, *The white orchard*, 1888 (594.7)

[9] Puvis de Chavannes, *Hope*, c. 1872 (611.3)

1. See letter 739, n. 4.

2. Van Gogh now had two *Berceuses* and four sunflowers, to form two triptychs: one for Theo and one for Gauguin. He was considering a third *Berceuse* for Holland (painted shortly after; see letter 745), possibly followed by two more canvases of sunflowers, to produce a third triptych.

3. See letter 736, n. 1.

4. Cf. Ps. 119:105.

5. See letter 726, n. 1 (Bruyas).

6. Jean Baptiste Faure's collection of Impressionist paintings included work by Manet, Monet, Sisley, Pissarro and Degas. The framer's shop is unidentified.

7. See letter 721.

8. Van Gogh added 'precisely at the moment when' later, and after 'when' he crossed out 'our uncle', meaning Uncle Cor and/or Uncle Vincent – who had refused in 1886 to give Theo financial support; see letter 568, n. 2.

9. The Jacobin Reign of Terror in 1793.

10. The chief of police Joseph d'Ornano filed his report on 27 February 1889 (see letter 750, n. 4).