

Vincent van Gogh, self-portraits from a letter of March 1886.

INTRODUCTION: The Letters of Van Gogh

The statements by Van Gogh specifically concerned with his ideas and theories on art are not numerous, and are most often very simple and direct. They occur almost exclusively during a very brief period, the first few fruitful and idyllic months when, having just left Paris at the age of thirty-five, he settled in Arles for a stay that lasted from February 1888 until May 1889. There are several reasons why these ideas and theories should have appeared in his letters at this particular time and for so brief a period.

He enjoyed at Arles, for the first time in two years, a solitude which he sorely needed, and which he had been unable to achieve in Paris, where he had lived with his brother Theo and had associated with artists in the studios and cafés of Montmartre. His high moral conception of what it meant to be an artist, rooted as it was in a profoundly religious spirit, did not allow him to tolerate for long the gay bohemianism of most of his colleagues. When he finally did set up his studio in the Yellow House in Arles he was independent of the many personalities and artistic forces of Paris that had so intoxicated him, and he was able at last to consider himself an independent artist. Now he had the time and the leisure to speculate upon the many ideas

and theories of art to which he had listened, and which he himself had discussed in Paris. And in his own house, he could make plans for the organization of the artists' brotherhood about which he had dreamed for so long.

In Paris he had become a close friend of the young Emile Bernard who, even at the age of eighteen, had an extraordinarily active intellect, one that was devoted to theorization. Bernard seemed always to know what was new in the way of ideas, especially the theories of the Pont-Aven artists, and he discussed them with his many friends. Van Gogh was also a friend and painting companion of Paul Signac, theoretician of Neoimpressionism, and while in Paris he had often spoken with great vehemence on this, the most controversial of the *avant-garde* movements. Because he lived in Paris in close personal contact with his brother and his artist friends, there was little necessity to write down the many ideas on art that were racing through his mind. So, in Arles he discovered a natural setting perfectly suited to meditation on the theories discussed in Paris. To the Dutchman accustomed to the cool, pale tones of the north, the brilliant sun, the blue sky, and the warm, rich colors of the flora and earth of Provence recalled the color of Japanese prints, and they offered as well a chance to put into practice some of the lessons he had learned from the Impressionists and the Neoimpressionists.

For all of these reasons, the letters written during the first few months at Arles, while he was assimilating the influences of the Paris art movements into his own individual and forceful style, were filled with thoughts of his friends and meditations on art. With the arrival of Gauguin in October, he was at first stimulated anew, but the violence of their many differences and conflicts soon created an emotional crisis for Van Gogh that put an end to this idyllic period.

Most of the statements on art are addressed, as were the letters, to Vincent's younger brother Theo, who had succeeded him in the employ of the art dealers, Goupil and Company in Paris. The devotion of Theo to his brother and his understanding of his problems is well known to readers of the letters. When Vincent left the art gallery in 1875, Theo had at once urged him to become an artist. This was five years before Vincent himself fully realized the possibility. Theo faithfully supported him out of his own modest income throughout the entire struggle, and was an unfailing source of the encouragement which Vincent so desperately needed. Since Theo achieved, by 1888, an influential position in the gallery, he was also for Vincent an important contact with the Parisian art world.

In his early decision to become an art dealer, Vincent entered a profession already well-established in his family. Of his father's five brothers,

Vincent van Gogh, signature on a letter, undated (ca. September 1888).

three were art dealers, all of them successful, and one had become the principal partner in Goupil and Company, one of the leading houses in Europe. This one, his uncle Vincent, took a special interest in his young namesake, and in 1869, when Vincent was 16, engaged him at the Hague branch of the firm. Young Vincent was highly successful and well-liked during his three years there. He was promoted to the London office, where he stayed for two years, and then, in 1874, to the principal office in Paris. During these six years as an art dealer, Vincent had become acquainted with the works of the masters of the past who were later to become important for him as an artist. He admired particularly those who, like the Barbizon painters Rousseau, Millet, Diaz, and Breton, were sympathetic to simple peasant people. In 1874, shortly after his arrival in Paris, he became deeply and emotionally preoccupied with a study of the Bible. This led to increasing dissatisfaction with the business and, in the next year, to his resignation from Goupil.

The next five years, from 1875 to 1880, were spent in a desperate struggle to establish himself as a minister, a period which not only inflicted the utmost hardships upon him, but ultimately resulted in failure in his every attempt to become a man of God. In this endeavor, too, he had a precedent in his family, since both his father and his grandfather (also named Vincent) were ministers, the latter having achieved considerable eminence because of his brilliance as a scholar and his nobility of character. Although Vincent strove mightily to master the difficult requirements necessary to prepare himself for entrance into a school of the ministry, he soon discovered that his own calling was worlds apart from the academic approach of the schools. Two attempts to fulfill his powerful emotional need to preach the Gospel, first as a lay preacher and then as a volunteer missionary in a mining village in the Borinage in southern Belgium, resulted in failure.

When Van Gogh finally came to art, he was 27 years old, and although he bore a family name distinguished by eminence and success, he had rejected the profession of his uncles and he had totally failed, despite great

personal sacrifices, in the profession of his father and grandfather. The resolve to become an artist was finally made in 1880, after a long period of painful self-examination while in seclusion in the Borinage. His intense desire to become an artist, fortified by his early experience with art and permeated with religious feeling, preceded even a knowledge of how to paint. As Meyer Schapiro has observed, he threw himself into art with all the intensity of a religious convert. In a long letter to Theo¹—a manifesto of his new consecration—he tells of his struggles:

I am a man of passions, capable of and subject to doing more or less foolish things, which I happen to repent, more or less, afterward . . . must I consider myself a dangerous man, incapable of anything?

. . . my only anxiety is, how can I be of use in the world? Can't I serve some purpose and be of any good?

And then one feels an emptiness where there might be friendship and strong and serious affections, and one feels a terrible discouragement gnawing at one's very moral energy, and fate seems to put a barrier to the instincts of affection, and a choking flood of disgust envelopes one. And one exclaims, "How long, my God!"

He writes of his loneliness for pictures, for which he had such a passion during his years in the art gallery, and exclaims:

I am good for something, my life has a purpose after all, I know that I could be quite a different man! How can I be useful, of what service can I be? There is something inside of me, what can it be?

He now writes about art as he had formerly written about his religion, seeing art as one means of worshipping God.

To try to understand the real significance of what the great artists, the serious masters, tell us in their masterpieces, *that* leads to God . . .

Thus, becoming an artist not only fulfilled his craving for art itself, but also consummated his powerful religious desires, whose frustration had so shaken him during the previous five years. He had found a purpose in life that absorbed his violent passions and directed them into a profession which he believed to be a socially useful one. It is for these reasons that we may speak of Van Gogh as a convert to art. He was as much concerned with its social purpose as with its theories, and these concerns both are reflected in

¹ Letter No. 133, July 1880, Vol. I, *The Complete Letters of Vincent van Gogh*. (See next section for full citation.)

the statements about art found in his letters. Throughout his entire adult life he poured into them his noblest ideas as well as his doubts and fears about himself; they were the chief means by which he achieved and maintained intimate contact with others, a contact which he rarely enjoyed for long in personal relations. So much do they reveal about him that they portray in detail both the finding of a self and the making of an artist.

VINCENT VAN GOGH:

Excerpts from the Letters

THE POTATO EATERS, 1885¹

*To his brother Theo, Neunen, 30 April 1885 (404, Vol. II, 369-370)**

As to the potato eaters, it is a picture that will show well in gold, I am sure of that, but it would show as well on a wall, papered in the deep color of ripe corn.

It simply cannot be seen without such a setting.

It does not show up well against a dark background, and not at all against a dull background. That's because it gives a glimpse of a very gray interior. In reality too it stands in a gold frame, as it were, because the hearth and the glow of the fire on the white wall would be nearer to the spectator, now they are outside the picture, but in reality they throw the whole thing into perspective.

I repeat, it must be shut off by framing it in something of a deep gold or brass color.

If you yourself want to see it as it must be seen, don't forget this, please. This putting it next to a gold tone gives, at the same time, a brightness to *spots where you would not expect it*, and takes away the marbled aspect it gets when unfortunately placed against a dull or black background. The shadows are painted in blue, and a gold color puts life into this . . .

I have tried to emphasize that those people, eating their potatoes in the lamplight, have dug the earth with those very hands they put in the dish, and so it speaks of *manual labor*, and how they have honestly earned their food.

I have wanted to give the impression of a way of life quite different from that of us civilized people. Therefore I am not at all anxious for everyone to like it or to admire it at once.

¹ Collection V. W. Van Gogh, Laren, The Netherlands.

In 1883, at thirty years of age, Van Gogh abandoned his two-year struggle as a student of painting in the academies of Brussels and The Hague and returned to his father's house in Neunen. There he devoted himself completely to painting, and wandered about the countryside painting the peasants for whom he had a very deep sympathy. This painting is the largest he had ever done, another indication of the importance he gave it (size 50, or about 32" × 45").

* The references in parentheses following the letter citation indicate, unless stated otherwise, the letters in Volume III. *The Complete Letters of Vincent van Gogh*, 3 Vols. (Greenwich, Connecticut, published by the New York Graphic Society, 1958), from which these selections are excerpted. Headings to the selections are by the editor.

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Vincent van Gogh, Self-Portrait Before the Easel, 1888, oil on canvas.

All winter long I have had the threads of this tissue in my hands, and have searched for the ultimate pattern; and though it has become a tissue of rough, coarse aspect, nevertheless the threads have been chosen carefully and according to certain rules. And it might prove to be a real *peasant picture*. *I know it is*. But he who prefers to see the peasants in their Sunday-best may do as he likes. I personally am convinced I get better results by painting them in their roughness than by giving them a conventional charm.

I think a peasant girl is more beautiful than a lady, in her dusty, patched blue skirt and bodice, which get the most delicate hues from weather, wind, and sun. But if she puts on a lady's dress, she loses her peculiar charm. A peasant is more real in his fustian clothes in the fields than when he goes to church on Sunday in a kind of dress coat.

In the same way it would be wrong, I think, to give a peasant picture a certain conventional smoothness. If a peasant picture smells of bacon, smoke, potato steam—all right, that's not unhealthy; if a stable smells of dung—all right, that belongs to a stable; if the field has an odor of ripe corn or potatoes or of guano or manure—that's healthy, especially for city people.

TROPICAL COLOR¹

To his sister Wilhelmina, Arles, 30 March 1888 (W3, p. 431)

But by intensifying *all* the colors one arrives once again at quietude and harmony. There occurs in nature something similar to what happens in Wagner's music, which, though played by a big orchestra, is nonetheless intimate. Only when making a choice one prefers sunny and colorful effects, and there is nothing that prevents me from thinking that in the future many painters will go and work in tropical countries. You will be able to get an idea of the revolution in painting when you think, for instance, of the brightly colored Japanese pictures that one sees everywhere, landscapes and figures. Theo and I have hundreds of Japanese prints in our possession.

IMAGINATION

To Emile Bernard, Arles, April 1888 (B3, p. 478)

The imagination is certainly a faculty which we must develop, one which alone can lead us to the creation of a more exalting and consoling nature than the single brief glance at reality—which in our sight is ever changing, passing like a flash of lightning—can let us perceive.

A starry sky, for instance—look, that is something I should like to try

¹ Vincent's trip to Arles, where he arrived on 20 February 1888, was motivated largely by a search for the rich color he had seen in Japanese prints.

to do, just as in the daytime I am going to try to paint a green meadow spangled with dandelions. So much in criticism of myself and in praise of you.

MY BRUSH STROKE HAS NO SYSTEM

To Emile Bernard, Arles, April 1888 (B3, p. 478)

At the moment I am absorbed in the blooming fruit trees, pink peach trees, yellow-white pear trees. My brush stroke has no system at all. I hit the canvas with irregular touches of the brush, which I leave as they are. Patches of thickly laid-on color, spots of canvas left uncovered, here and there portions that are left absolutely unfinished, repetitions, savageries; in short, I am inclined to think that the result is so disquieting and irritating as to be a godsend to those people who have fixed preconceived ideas about technique. For that matter here is a sketch, the entrance to a Provençal orchard with its yellow fences, its enclosure of black cypresses (against the mistral), its characteristic vegetables of varying greens: yellow lettuces, onions, garlic, emerald leeks.

Working directly on the spot all the time, I try to grasp what is essential in the drawing—later I fill in the spaces which are bounded by contours—either expressed or not, but in any case *felt*—with tones which are also simplified, by which I mean that all that is going to be soil will share the same violet-like tone, that the whole sky will have a blue tint, that the green vegetation will be either green-blue or green-yellow, purposely exaggerating the yellows and blues in this case.

In short, my dear comrade, in no case an eye-deceiving job.

BLACK AND WHITE ARE COLORS

To Emile Bernard, Arles, second half of June 1888 (B6, p. 490)

A technical question. Just give me your opinion on it in your next letter. I am going to put the *black* and the *white*, just as the color merchant sells them to us, boldly on my palette and use them just as they are. When—and observe that I am speaking of the simplification of color in the Japanese manner—when in a green park with pink paths I see a gentleman dressed in black and a justice of the peace by trade (the Arab Jew in Daudet's *Tartarin* calls this honorable functionary *zouge de paix*) who is reading *L'Intransigeant* . . .

Over him and the park a sky of a simple cobalt . . . Then why not paint the said *zouge de paix* with ordinary bone black and the *Intransigeant* with simple, quite raw white? For the Japanese artist ignores reflected colors, and puts the flat tones side by side, with characteristic lines marking off the movements and the forms.

In another category of ideas—when for instance one composes a motif of colors representing a yellow evening sky, then the fierce hard white of a white wall against this sky may be expressed if necessary—and this in a strange way—by raw white, softened by a neutral tone, for the sky itself colors it with a delicate

lilac hue. Furthermore imagine in that landscape which is so naïve, and a good thing too, a cottage whitewashed all over (the roof too) standing in an orange field—certainly orange, for the southern sky and blue Mediterranean provoke an orange tint that gets more intense as the scale of blue colors gets a more vigorous tone—then the black note of the door, the windows and the little cross on the ridge of the roof produce a simultaneous contrast of black and white just as pleasing to the eye as that of blue and orange.

Or let us take a more amusing motif: imagine a woman in a black-and-white-checked dress in the same primitive landscape with a blue sky and an orange soil—that would be a rather funny sight, I think. In Arles they often do wear black and white checks.

Suffice it to say that black and white are also colors, for in many cases they can be looked upon as colors, for their simultaneous contrast is as striking as that of green and red, for instance.

The Japanese make use of it for that matter. They express the mat and pale complexion of a young girl and the piquant contrast of the black hair marvelously well by means of white paper and four strokes of the pen. Not to mention their black thornbushes starred all over with a thousand white flowers.

COMPLEMENTARY COLOR

To Emile Bernard, Arles, second half of June 1888 (B6, pp. 491)

What I should like to find out is the effect of an intenser blue in the sky. Fromentin and Gérôme see the soil of the South as colorless, and a lot of people see it like that. My God, yes, if you take some sand in your hand, if you look at it closely, and also water, and also air, they are all colorless, looked at in this way. *There is no blue without yellow and without orange*, and if you put in blue, then you must put in yellow, and orange too, mustn't you? Oh well, you will tell me that what I write to you are only banalities.

To Emile Bernard, Arles, second half of June 1888 (B7, p. 492)

There are many hints of yellow in the soil, neutral tones resulting from mixing violet with yellow; but I have played hell somewhat with the truthfulness of the colors.

THE STARRY NIGHT, 1888¹

To Emile Bernard, Arles, second half of June 1888 (B7, p. 492)

But when shall I paint my *starry sky*, that picture which preoccupies me continuously? Alas! Alas! it is just as our excellent colleague Cyprien says in J. K. Huysmans' *En Ménage*: "The most beautiful pictures are those one dreams about when smoking pipes in bed, but which one will never paint."

¹ Museum of Modern Art, New York.

One must attack them nonetheless, however incompetent one may feel before the unspeakable perfection, the glorious splendors of nature.

SIMULTANEOUS CONTRAST OF COLORS

To Emile Bernard, Arles, second half of June, 1888 (B7, p. 493)

This is what I wanted to say about black and white. Take the Sower. The picture is divided in half; one half, the upper part, is yellow; the lower part is violet. Well, the white trousers allow the eye to rest and distract it at the moment when the excessive simultaneous contrast of yellow and violet would irritate it.

SIMULTANEOUS CONTRASTS OF LINES AND FORMS

To Emile Bernard, Arles, beginning of August 1888 (B14, p. 508)

When are you going to show us studies of such vigorous soundness again? I urgently invite you to do it, although I most certainly do not despise your researches relating to the property of lines in opposite motion—as I am not at all indifferent, I hope, to the simultaneous contrasts of lines, forms. The trouble is—you see, my dear comrade Bernard—that Giotto and Cimabue, as well as Holbein and Van Dyck, lived in an obeliscal—excuse the word—solidly framed society, architecturally constructed, in which each individual was a stone, and all the stones clung together, forming a monumental society. When the socialists construct their logical social edifice—which they are still pretty far from doing—I am sure mankind will see a reincarnation of this society. But, you know, we are in the midst of downright *laissez-aller* and anarchy. We artists, who love order and symmetry, isolate ourselves and are working to define *only one thing*.

EXPRESSIVE COLOR

To Theo, Arles, n.d. [ca. August, 1888] (520, p. 6)

What a mistake Parisians make in not having a palate for crude things, for Monticellis, for common earthenware. But there, one must not lose heart because Utopia is not coming true. It is only that what I learned in Paris is leaving me, and I am returning to the ideas I had in the country before I knew the impressionists. And I should not be surprised if the impressionists soon find fault with my way of working, for it has been fertilized by Delacroix's ideas rather than by theirs. Because instead of trying to reproduce exactly what I see before my eyes, I use color more arbitrarily, in order to express myself forcibly. Well, let that be, as far as theory goes, but I'm going to give you an example of what I mean.

I should like to paint the portrait of an artist friend, a man who dreams great dreams, who works as the nightingale sings, because it is his nature. He'll be a blond man. I want to put my appreciation, the love I have for him, into the picture. So I paint him as he is, as faithfully as I can, to begin with.

But the picture is not yet finished. To finish it I am now going to be the arbitrary colorist. I exaggerate the fairness of the hair, I even get to orange tones, chromes and pale citron-yellow.

Behind the head, instead of painting the ordinary wall of the mean room, I paint infinity, a plain background of the richest, intensest blue that I can contrive, and by this simple combination of the bright head against the rich blue background, I get a mysterious effect, like a star in the depths of an azure sky.

Again, in the portrait of the peasant I worked this way, but in this case without wishing to produce the mysterious brightness of a pale star in the infinite. Instead, I imagine the man I have to paint, terrible in the furnace of the height of harvest time, as surrounded by the whole Midi. Hence the orange colors flashing like lightning, vivid as red-hot iron, and hence the luminous tones of old gold in the shadows.

NATURE AND ART

To Theo, Arles, n.d. [ca. August 1888] (522, p. 10)

At all events, law and justice apart, a pretty woman is a living marvel, whereas the picture by da Vinci and Correggio only exist for other reasons. Why am I so little an artist that I always regret that the statue and the picture are not alive? Why do I understand the musician better, why do I see the *raison d'être* of his abstractions better?

PORTRAITURE OF THE SOUL

To Theo, Arles, n.d. [August 1888] (531, p. 25)

Oh, my dear brother, sometimes I know so well what I want. I can very well do without God both in my life and in my painting, but I cannot, ill as I am, do without something which is greater than I, which is my life—the power to create.

And if, frustrated in the physical power, a man tries to create thoughts instead of children, he is still part of humanity.

And in a picture I want to say something comforting, as music is comforting. I want to paint men and women with that something of the eternal which the halo used to symbolize, and which we seek to convey by the actual radiance and vibration of our coloring.

Portraiture so understood does not become like an Ary Scheffer just because there is a blue sky in the background, as in "St. Augustine." For Ary Scheffer is so little of a colorist.

But it would be more in harmony with what Eug. Delacroix attempted and brought off in his "Tasso in Prison," and many other pictures, representing a *real* man. Ah! portraiture, portraiture with the thoughts, the soul of the model in it, that is what I think must come.

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THE NIGHT CAFE, 1888¹

To Theo, Arles, 8 September 1888 (533, pp. 28-29)

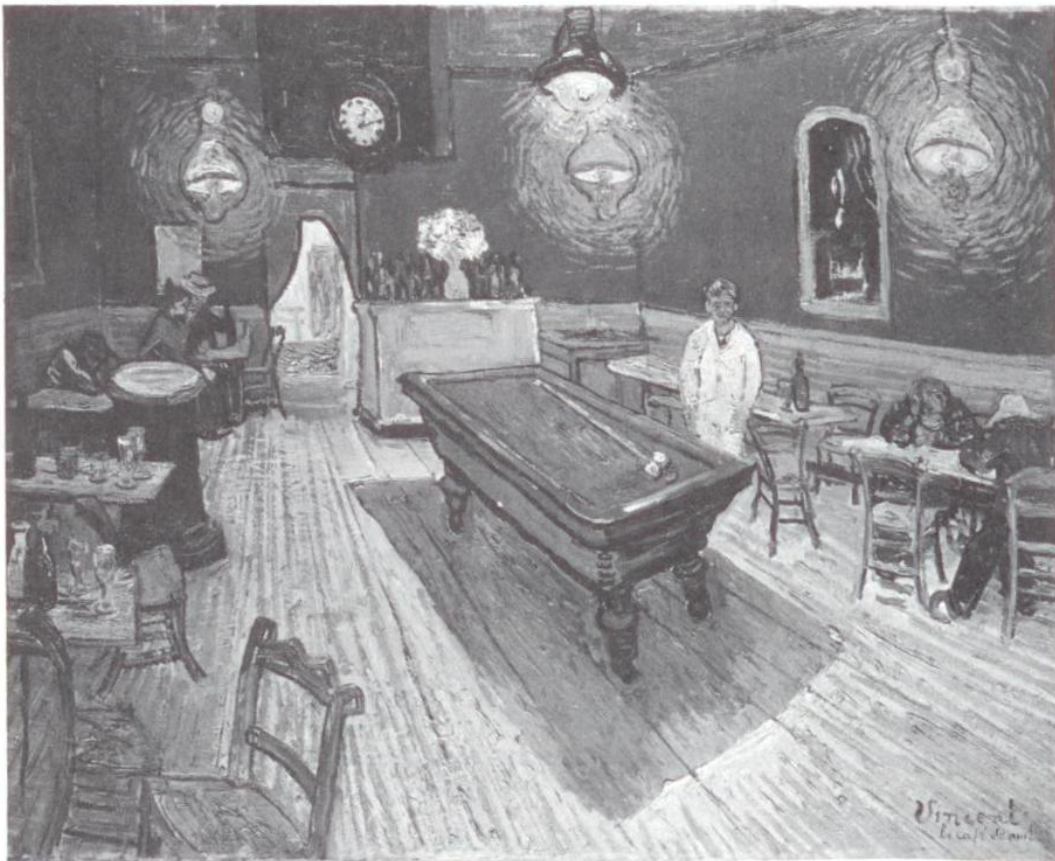
Then to the great joy of the landlord, of the postman whom I had already painted, of the visiting night prowlers and of myself, for three nights running I sat up to paint and went to bed during the day. I often think that the night is more alive and more richly colored than the day.

Now, as for getting back the money I have paid to the landlord by means of my painting, I do not dwell on that, for the picture is one of the ugliest I have done. It is the equivalent, though different, of the "Potato Eaters."

I have tried to express the terrible passions of humanity by means of red and green.

The room is blood red and dark yellow with a green billiard table in the middle; there are four citron-yellow lamps with a glow of orange and green. Everywhere there is a clash and contrast of the most disparate reds and greens in the figures of little sleeping hooligans, in the empty, dreary room, in violet and blue. The blood-red and the yellow-green of the billiard table, for instance, contrast with the soft tender Louis XV green of the counter, on which there is a

Vincent van Gogh, The Night Café, 1888, oil on canvas.



¹ Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven.

pink nosegay. The white coat of the landlord, awake in a corner of that furnace, turns citron-yellow, or pale luminous green.

To Theo, Arles, n.d. [ca. September 1888] (534, p. 31)

In my picture of the "Night Café" I have tried to express the idea that the café is a place where one can ruin oneself, go mad or commit a crime. So I have tried to express, as it were, the powers of darkness in a low public house, by soft Louis XV green and malachite, contrasting with yellow-green and harsh blue-greens, and all this in an atmosphere like a devil's furnace, of pale sulphur.

And all with an appearance of Japanese gaiety, and the good nature of Tartarin.

COLOR OF THE SOUTH

To Theo, Arles, n.d. [ca. September 1888] (538, p. 39)

But for my part I foresee that other artists will want to see color under a stronger sun, and in a more Japanese clarity of light.

Now if I set up a studio and refuge at the gates of the South, it's not such a crazy scheme. And it means that we can work on serenely. And if other people say that it is too far from Paris, etc., let them, so much the worse for them. Why did the greatest colorist of all, Eugène Delacroix, think it essential to go South and right to Africa? Obviously, because not only in Africa but from Arles onward you are bound to find beautiful contrasts of red and green, of blue and orange, of sulphur and lilac.

And all true colorists must come to this, must admit that there is another kind of color than that of the North. I am sure if Gauguin came, he would love this country; if he doesn't it's because he has already experienced more brightly colored countries, and he will always be a friend, and one with us in principle.

And someone else will come in his place.

If what one is doing looks out upon the infinite, and if one sees that one's work has its *raison d'être* and continuance in the future, then one works with more serenity.

To Theo, Arles, n.d. [ca. September 1888] (539, p. 42)

Because I have never had such a chance, nature here being so *extraordinarily* beautiful. Everywhere and all over the vault of heaven is a marvelous blue, and the sun sheds a radiance of pale sulphur, and it is soft and as lovely as the combination of heavenly blues and yellows in a Van der Meer of Delft. I cannot paint it as beautifully as that, but it absorbs me so much that I let myself go, never thinking of a single rule.

That makes three pictures of the gardens opposite the house. Then the two cafés, and then the sunflowers. Then the portrait of Bock and of myself. Then the red sun over the factory, and the men unloading sand, and the old mill. Not to

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mention the other studies, you see that I have got some work behind me. But my paints, my canvas and my purse are all completely exhausted today. The last picture, done with the last tubes of paint on the last canvas, of a garden, green of course, is painted with pure green, nothing but Prussian blue and chrome yellow.

SUGGESTIVE COLOR

To Theo, Arles, n.d. [ca. September 1888] (539, pp. 44–45)

I often think of his [Seurat's] method, though I do not follow it at all; but he is an original colorist, and Signac too, though to a different degree, their stippling is a new discovery, and at all events I like them very much. But I myself—I tell you frankly—am returning more to what I was looking for before I came to Paris. I do not know if anyone before me has talked about suggestive color, but Delacroix and Monticelli, without talking about it, did it.

But I have got back to where I was in Nuenen, when I made a vain attempt to learn music, so much did I already feel the relation between our color and Wagner's music.

PAINT FROM THE MODEL

To Theo, Arles, n.d. [ca. September 1888] (541, p. 48)

And to get at that character, the fundamental truth of it: that's three times now that I've painted the same spot.

It happens to be the garden just in front of my house. But this corner of the garden is a good example of what I was telling you, that to get at the real character of things here, you must look at them and paint them for a long time.

To Theo, Arles, n.d. [ca. September 1888] (542, p. 52)

This winter I intend to draw a great deal. If only I could manage to draw figures from memory, I should always have something to do. But if you take the cleverest figure done by all the artists who sketch on the spur of the moment, Hokusai, Daumier, in my opinion that figure will never come up to the figure painted from the model by those same masters, or other portrait painters.

And in the end, if models, especially intelligent models, are doomed to fail us too often, we must not despair for this reason or grow weary in the struggle.

JAPANESE ARTISTS LIVE IN NATURE

To Theo, Arles, n.d. [ca. September 1888] (542, p. 55)

If we study Japanese art, we see a man who is undoubtedly wise, philosophic and intelligent, who spends his time doing what? In studying the distance between the earth and the moon? No. In studying Bismarck's policy? No. He studies a single blade of grass.

But this blade of grass leads him to draw every plant and then the seasons, the wide aspects of the countryside, then animals, then the human figure. So he passes his life, and life is too short to do the whole.

Come now, isn't it almost a true religion which these simple Japanese teach us, who live in nature as though they themselves were flowers?

And you cannot study Japanese art, it seems to me, without becoming much gayer and happier, and we must return to nature in spite of our education and our work in a world of convention.

Isn't it sad that the Monticellis have never yet been reproduced in good lithographs or in etchings which vibrate with life? I should very much like to know what artists would say if an engraver like the man who engraved the Velásquez made a fine etching of them. Never mind, I think it is more our job to try to admire and know things for ourselves than to teach them to other people. But the two can go together.

I envy the Japanese the extreme clearness which everything has in their work. It is never tedious, and never seems to be done too hurriedly. Their work is as simple as breathing, and they do a figure in a few sure strokes with the same ease as if it were as simple as buttoning your coat.

THE YELLOW HOUSE, 1888¹

To Theo, Arles, n.d. [September 1888] (543, p. 56)

Also a sketch of a size 30 canvas² representing the house and its surroundings in sulphur-colored sunshine, under a sky of pure cobalt. The subject is frightfully difficult; but that is just why I want to conquer it. It's terrific, these houses, yellow in the sun, and the incomparable freshness of the blue. And everywhere the ground is yellow too. I shall send you a better drawing than this rough improvised sketch out of my head later on.

The house on the left is pink with green shutters, I mean the one in the shadow of the tree. That is the restaurant where I go for dinner every day. My friend the postman lives at the end of the street on the left, between the two railway bridges. The night café I painted is not in the picture, it is to the left of the restaurant.

I CANNOT WORK WITHOUT A MODEL

To Emile Bernard, Arles, first half of October 1888 (B19, pp. 517-18)

I won't sign this study, for I never work from memory. There is some color in it which will please you, but once again, I have painted a study for you which I should have preferred not to paint.

I have mercilessly destroyed one important canvas—a "Christ with the

¹ Collection V. W. van Gogh, Laren, The Netherlands.

² See table of sizes of canvases, p. 40.

POSTIMPRESSIONISM

No	Figure	Paysage	Marine
1	22x16	22x14	22x12
2	24x19	24x16	24x14
3	27x22	27x19	27x16
4	33x24	33x22	33x19
5	35x27	35x24	35x22
6	41x33	41x27	41x24
8	46x38	46x33	46x27
10	55x46	55x38	55x33
12	61x50	61x46	61x38
15	65x54	65x50	65x46
20	73x60	73x54	73x50
25	81x65	81x60	81x54
30	92x73	92x65	92x60
40	100x81	100x73	100x65
50	116x89	116x81	116x73
60	130x97	130x89	130x81
80	146x114	146x97	146x89
100	162x130	162x114	162x97
120	195x130	195x114	195x97

Table of sizes of canvases (in centimeters).

Angel in Gethsemane”—and another one representing the “Poet against a Starry Sky”—in spite of the fact that the color was right—because the form had not been studied beforehand from the model, which is necessary in such cases.

... And I cannot work without a model. I won't say that I don't turn my back on nature ruthlessly in order to turn a study into a picture, arranging the colors, enlarging and simplifying; but in the matter of form I am too afraid of departing from the possible and the true.

I don't mean I won't do it after another ten years of painting studies, but, to tell the honest truth, my attention is so fixed on what is possible and really exists that I hardly have the desire or the courage to strive for the ideal as it might result from my abstract studies.

Others may have more lucidity than I do in the matter of abstract studies, and it is certainly possible that you are one of their number, Gauguin too ... and perhaps I myself when I am old.

But in the meantime I am getting well acquainted with nature. I exaggerate, sometimes I make changes in a motif; but for all that, I do not invent the whole picture; on the contrary, I find it all ready in nature, only it must be disentangled.

THE BEDROOM, 1888¹

To Theo, Arles, second half of October 1888 (554, p. 86)

This time it's just simply my bedroom, only here color is to do everything, and giving by its simplification a grander style to things, is to be suggestive here of *rest*

¹ Collection V. W. van Gogh, Laren, The Netherlands.

or of sleep in general. In a word, looking at the picture ought to rest the brain, or rather the imagination.

The walls are pale violet. The floor is of red tiles.

The wood of the bed and chairs is the yellow of fresh butter, the sheets and pillows very light greenish-citron.

The coverlet scarlet. The window green.

The toilet table orange, the basin blue.

The doors lilac.

And that is all—there is nothing in this room with its closed shutters.

The broad lines of the furniture again must express inviolable rest.

Portraits on the walls, and a mirror and a towel and some clothes.

The frame—as there is no white in the picture—will be white.

This by way of revenge for the enforced rest I was obliged to take.

I shall work on it again all day, but you see how simple the conception is.

The shadows and the cast shadows are suppressed; it is painted in free flat tints like the Japanese prints. It is going to be a contrast to, for instance, the Tarascon diligence and the night café.



Vincent van Gogh, sketch for *The Bedroom at Arles* in a letter to Gauguin, undated (ca. October 1888). Vincent writes that it was "of a Seurat-like simplicity; with flat tints, but brushed on roughly with a thick impasto . . ."

To Paul Gauguin, Arles, n.d. [ca. October 1888] (B22, p. 527)

I have done, still for my decoration, a size 30 canvas of my bedroom with the white deal furniture that you know. Well, I enormously enjoyed doing this interior of nothing at all, of a Seurat-like simplicity; with flat tints, but brushed on roughly, with a thick impasto, the walls pale lilac, the ground a faded broken red, the chairs and the bed chrome yellow, the pillows and the sheet a very pale green-citron, the counterpane blood red, the washstand orange, the washbasin blue, the window green. By means of all these very diverse tones I have wanted to express an *absolute restfulness*, you see, and there is no white in it at all except the little note produced by the mirror with its black frame (in order to get the fourth pair of complementaries into it).

Well, you will see it along with the other things, and we will talk about it, for I often don't know what I am doing when I am working almost like a sleepwalker.

STRONG SOUTHERN COLOR

To Theo, Arles, October 1888 (555, p. 88)

So write me some details about the new friends' painting soon, and if they are really painters trying to make progress in virgin fields, boldly recommend the South to them. I believe that a new school of *colorists* will take root in the South, as I see more and more that those in the North rely on their ability with the brush, and the so-called "picturesque," rather than on the desire to express something by color itself. Your news gave me great pleasure, but it so astonishes me not to know what there was inside that frame.

Here, under a stronger sun, I have found what Pissarro said confirmed, and also what Gauguin wrote to me, the simplicity, the fading of the colors, the gravity of great sunlight effects.

WORKING FROM MEMORY¹

To Theo, Arles, n.d. [ca. 23 October 1888] (561, p. 103)

I am going to set myself to work from memory often, and the canvases from memory are always less awkward, and have a more artistic look than studies from nature, especially when one works in mistral weather.

¹ These two letters written during Gauguin's short stay with Vincent in Arles clearly show his influence on Vincent's thought. Compare them with Vincent's ideas on memory before this event (B 19, to Emile Bernard, first half of October, 1888) and a year after it (B 21, to Bernard, beginning of December, 1889). Gauguin's own thoughts on the role of memory are well expressed in his essay "Diverse Choses" (*see passages below*).

To Theo, Arles, December 1888 (563, p. 106)

Gauguin, in spite of himself and in spite of me, has more or less proved to me that it is time I was varying my work a little. I am beginning to compose from memory, and all my studies will still be useful for that sort of work, recalling to me things I have seen.

TREATMENT OF THE SUBJECT

To Theo, St. Rémy, 9 June 1889 (594, p. 179)

When the thing represented is, in point of character, absolutely in agreement and one with manner of representing it, isn't it just that which gives a work of art its quality?

BIBLICAL SUBJECTS

To Theo, St. Rémy, November 1889 (614, pp. 228–229)

If I continue, I certainly agree with you that it is perhaps better to attack things with simplicity than to seek after abstractions.

And I am not an admirer of Gauguin's "Christ in the Garden of Olives," for example, which he sent me a sketch of. And then as for Bernard's picture, he promises me a photograph of it. I don't know, but I fear that his biblical compositions will make me want something different. Lately I have seen the women picking and gathering the olives, but as I had no chance of getting a model, I have done nothing with it. However, now is not the moment to ask me to admire our friend Gauguin's composition, and our friend Bernard has probably never seen an olive tree. Now he is avoiding getting the least idea of the possible, or of the reality of things, and that is not the way to synthesize—no, I have never taken any stock in their biblical interpretations.

To Theo, St. Rémy, n.d. [ca. November 1889] (615, p. 233)

The thing is that this month I have been working in the olive groves, because their Christs in the Garden, with nothing really observed, have gotten on my nerves. Of course with me there is no question of doing anything from the Bible—and I have written to Bernard and Gauguin too that I considered that our duty is thinking, not dreaming, so that when looking at their work I was astonished at their letting themselves go like that. For Bernard has sent me photos of his canvases. The trouble with them is that they are a sort of dream or nightmare—that they are erudite enough—you can see that it is someone who is gone on the primitives—but frankly the English Pre-Raphaelites did it much better, and then again Puvis and Delacroix, much more healthily than the Pre-Raphaelites.

It is not that it leaves me cold, but it gives me a painful feeling of collapse instead of progress. Well, to shake that off, morning and evening these bright cold

days, but with a very fine, clear sun, I have been knocking about in the orchards, and the result is five size 30 canvases, which along with the three studies of olives that you have, at least constitute an attack on the problem. The olive is as variable as our willow or pollard willow in the North, you know the willows are very striking, in spite of their seeming monotonous, they are the trees characteristic of the country. Now the olive and the cypress have exactly the significance here as the willow has at home. What I have done is a rather hard and coarse reality beside their abstractions, but it will have a rustic quality, and will smell of the earth. I should so like to see Gauguin's and Bernard's studies from nature, the latter talks to me of portraits—which doubtless would please me better.

PAINT YOUR GARDEN AS IT IS

To Emile Bernard, St. Rémy, beginning of December 1889 (B21, pp. 522–525)

As you know, once or twice, while Gauguin was in Arles, I gave myself free rein with abstractions, for instance in the "Woman Rocking," in the "Woman Reading a Novel," black in a yellow library; and at the time abstraction seemed to me a charming path. But it is enchanted ground, old man, and one soon finds oneself up against a stone wall.

I won't say that one might not venture on it after a virile lifetime of research, of a hand-to-hand struggle with nature, but I personally don't want to bother my head with such things. I have been slaving away on nature the whole year, hardly thinking of Impressionism or of this, that and the other. And yet, once again I let myself go reaching for stars that are too big—a new failure—and I have had enough of it.

So I am working at present among the olive trees, seeking after the various effects of a gray sky against a yellow soil, with a green-black note in the foliage; another time the soil and the foliage all of a violet hue against a yellow sky; then again a red-ocher soil and a pinkish green sky. Yes, certainly, this interests me far more than the above-mentioned abstractions.

If I have not written you for a long while, it is because, as I had to struggle against my illness, I hardly felt inclined to enter into discussions—and I found danger in these abstractions. If I work on very quietly, the beautiful subjects will come of their own accord; really, above all, the great thing is to gather new vigor in reality, without any preconceived plan or Parisian prejudice. . . .

I am telling you about these two canvases, especially about the first one, to remind you that one can try to give an impression of anguish without aiming straight at the historic Garden of Gethsemane; that it is not necessary to portray the characters of the Sermon on the Mount in order to produce a consoling and gentle motif.

Oh! undoubtedly it is wise and proper to be moved by the Bible, but modern reality has got such a hold on us that, even when we attempt to reconstruct

the ancient days in our thoughts abstractly, the minor events of our lives tear us away from our meditations, and our own adventures thrust us back into our personal sensations—joy, boredom, suffering, anger, or a smile. . . .

Sometimes by erring one finds the right road. Go make up for it by painting your garden just as it is, or whatever you like. In any case it is a good thing to seek for distinction, nobility in the figures; and studies represent a real effort, and consequently something quite different from a waste of time. Being able to divide a canvas into great planes which intermingle, to find lines, forms which make contrasts, that is technique, tricks if you like, cuisine, but it is a sign all the same that you are studying your handicraft more deeply, and that is a good thing.

However hateful painting may be, and however cumbersome in the times we are living in, if anyone who has chosen this handicraft pursues it zealously, he is a man of duty, sound and faithful. Society makes our existence wretchedly difficult at times, hence our impotence and the imperfection of our work. I believe that even Gauguin himself suffers greatly under it too, and cannot develop his powers, although it is in him to do it. I myself am suffering under an absolute lack of models. But on the other hand there are beautiful spots here. I have just done five size 30 canvases, olive trees. And the reason I am staying on here is that my health is improving a great deal. What I am doing is hard, dry, but that is because I am trying to gather new strength by doing some rough work, and I'm afraid abstractions would make me soft.



Vincent van Gogh, sketch for *The Sower in a letter to Theo*, end of October 1888.

ON MONTICELLI, GAUGUIN

To G.-Albert Aurier, Saint-Rémy, 12 February 1890 (626a, pp. 256-257)

Many thanks for your article in the *Mercure de France*,¹ which greatly surprised me. I like it very much as a work of art in itself; in my opinion your words produce color; in short, I rediscover my canvases in your article, but better than they are, richer, more full of meaning. However, I feel uneasy in my mind when I reflect that what you say is due to others rather than to myself. For example, Monticelli² in particular. Saying as you do: "As far as I know, he is the only painter to perceive the chromatism of things with such intensity, with such a metallic, gem-like luster," be so kind as to go and see a certain bouquet by Monticelli at my brother's—a bouquet in white, forget-me-not blue and orange—then you will feel what I want to say. But the best, the most amazing Monticellis have long been in Scotland and England. In a museum in the North—the one in Lisle, I believe—there is said to be a very marvel, rich in another way and certainly no less French than Watteau's "Départ pour Cythère." At the moment Mr. Lauzet is engaged in reproducing some thirty works of Monticelli's.

Here you are; as far as I know, there is no colorist who is descended so straightly and directly from Delacroix, and yet I am of the opinion that Monticelli probably had Delacroix's color theories only at second hand; that is to say, that he got them more particularly from Diaz and Ziem. It seems to me that Monticelli's personal artistic temperament is exactly the same as that of the author of the *Decameron*—Boccaccio—a melancholic, somewhat resigned, unhappy man, who saw the wedding party of the world pass by, painting and analyzing the lovers of his time—he, the one who had been left out of things. Oh! he no more imitated Boccaccio than Henri Leys³ imitated the primitives. You see, what I mean to say is that it seems there are things which have found their way to my name, which you could better say of Monticelli, to whom I owe so much. And further, I owe much to Paul Gauguin, with whom I worked in Arles for some months, and whom I already knew in Paris, for that matter.

Gauguin, that curious artist, that alien whose mien and the look in whose eyes vaguely remind one of Rembrandt's "Portrait of a Man" in the Galerie Lacaze—this friend of mine likes to make one feel that a good picture is equivalent to a good deed; not that he says so, but it is difficult to be on intimate terms with him without being aware of a certain moral responsibility. A few days before

¹ G.-Albert Aurier, "Les Isolés: Vincent van Gogh," *Mercure de France* I, 1 (January 1890), 24-29.

² Adolphe Monticelli (1824-1886) was a late Romantic painter of vaguely-defined park scenes. His rich color was inherited from Delacroix, but it was quite dark with glittering bright colors playing over the surface. His somewhat theatrical brushwork and thick impasto had also impressed Van Gogh.

³ Henri Leys (1815-1869), Belgian academic history painter.

parting company, when my disease forced me to go into a lunatic asylum, I tried to paint "his empty seat."⁴

It is a study of his armchair of somber reddish-brown wood, the seat of greenish straw, and in the absent one's place a lighted torch and modern novels.

If an opportunity presents itself, be so kind as to have a look at this study, by way of a memento of him; it is done entirely in broken tones of green and red. Then you will perceive that your article would have been fairer, and consequently more powerful, I think, if, when discussing the question of the future of "tropical painting" and of colors, you had done justice to Gauguin and Monticelli before speaking of me. *For the part which is allotted to me, or will be allotted to me, will remain, I assure you, very secondary.*

⁴ *Gauguin's Chair* (December 1888), Collection V. W. van Gogh, Laren, The Netherlands.