

What can be learnt from Van Gogh's Letters?

He had many ideas for paintings

"Once I got out a little into the park I recovered all my clarity for work, I have more ideas in my head than I could ever put into action, but without it dazzling me. The brushstrokes go like a machine. So based on that I dare believe that in the north I would rediscover my confidence once freed from surroundings and circumstances which I neither understand nor wish to understand."

And

he would have possible subjects in mind for some time before painting them.

"In Paris, if I feel up to it, I'd immediately very much like to do a painting of a yellow bookshop (gas effect), which I've had in my mind for so long."

He gave a lot of consideration to how he could use colours and the effect this would have.

"I'm working on a canvas of roses on bright green background and two canvases of large bouquets of violet Irises, one lot against a pink background in which the effect is harmonious and soft through the combination of greens, pinks, violets. On the contrary, the other violet bouquet (ranging up to pure carmine and Prussian blue) standing out against a striking lemon yellow background with other yellow tones in the vase and the base on which it rests is an effect of terribly disparate complementaries that reinforce each other by their opposition. These canvases will take a good month to dry, but the man who works here will take care of sending them after my departure."

"The cave and the corpse are violet, yellow, white. The woman who is taking the handkerchief from the resurrected man's face has a green dress and orange hair, the other has black hair and a striped garment. Green and pink. Behind a countryside, blue hills, a yellow rising sun. The combination of colours would thus itself speak of the same thing expressed by the chiaroscuro of the etching."

He would consider scenery in terms of shapes

"Before reaching Tarascon I noticed some magnificent scenery — huge yellow rocks, oddly jumbled together, with the most imposing shapes.

In the small valleys between these rocks there were rows of little round trees with olive-green or grey-green foliage, which could well be lemon trees.

But here in Arles the land seems flat."

He would use tools to assist with his work

"I made my last three studies with the help of the perspective frame you know about. I attach importance to the use of the frame, because it doesn't seem unlikely to me that several artists will use it in the not too distant future, just as the old German and Italian painters, certainly, and, I'm inclined to believe, the Flemish artists too, used it.

The modern use of this tool may differ from the use people made of it in the past — but — isn't it also true that with the process of painting in oils we nowadays achieve very different effects from those of the inventors of the process. This is to say that I still hope not to work for myself alone. I believe in the absolute necessity of a

new art of colour, of drawing and — of the artistic life. And if we work in that faith, it seems to me that there's a chance that our hopes won't be in vain."

He studied people both in expression and anatomy

"I saw superb figures out in the country — striking in their expression of soberness. A woman's breast, for example, has that heaving motion that is the exact opposite of voluptuousness, and sometimes, if the creature is old or sickly, arouses compassion or else respect. And the melancholy which things in general have is of a healthy kind, as in Millet's drawings.

Happily, the men here wear breeches; it shows off the shape of the leg, makes the movements more expressive."

He is looking at the possibilities for painting wherever he is, and can see it in unlikely settings

"Everything is beautiful here, wherever one goes. The heath is much vaster than it is in Brabant, near Zundert or Etten at least — rather monotonous, particularly when it's afternoon and the sun's shining, and yet it's that very effect, which I've already vainly tried to paint several times, that I shouldn't want to miss. The sea isn't always picturesque either, but one has to look at those moments and effects as well if one doesn't want to deceive oneself as to its true character. Then — the heath is sometimes far from pleasant in the heat of midday. It's as irritatingly tedious and fatiguing as the desert, just as inhospitable, and as it were hostile. Painting it in that blazing light and capturing the planes vanishing into infinity is something that makes one dizzy. So one mustn't think that it has to be conceived sentimentally; on the contrary it's almost never that. That same irritatingly tedious spot — in the evening as a poor little figure moves through the twilight — when that vast, sun-scorched earth stands out dark against the delicate lilac tints of the evening sky, and the very last fine dark blue line on the horizon separates earth from sky — can be as sublime as in a J. Dupre. And it's the same with the figures. The peasants and the women aren't always interesting, but if one is patient one will nonetheless really see the whole Millet-like quality."

He certainly could have problems with his models

"At first I had some trouble here with models on the heath, where people laughed about it and I was ridiculed and couldn't finish figure studies that I'd started because of the unwillingness of the models, although I had paid them well, at least for these parts. I stood firm, though, and concentrated on a single family in that same place, where I can now get an old woman, a girl and a man, and have hopes that they'll remain willing. I have a few studies of the heath, which I'll send you when they're thoroughly dry, and have also begun watercolours. And I've also started pen drawings again, specifically with a view to painting, because one can go into such details with the pen as painted studies cannot do, and one does well to make two studies, one entirely drawn for the way things are put together, and one painted for the colour. If this can be done, that is, and the occasion permits, this is a way of working up the painted study later.

The heath is rich, and there are marshy meadows that often remind me of T. Rousseau."