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January 21, 2007

In the style of Renoir

Susan Bell tours the Montmartre home of the French Impressionist, which is now on sale for £3.2m

For those who long to buy into the Impressionist legend but cannot afford the prices on today's art market, an unusual answer could be at hand. Perched on the Butte de Montmartre, Paris's northernmost hill crowned by the domed basilica of Sacre Cœur, is the romantically named Château des Brouillards (Castle of Mists). Once the home of one of the greatest Impressionist masters of them all, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, it has gone on sale for €4.9m (£3.2m).

This may seem a fair whack for Paris, where property prices are well below their London equivalent, but considering the millions needed to acquire one of the artist's masterpieces, it seems a snip. Especially as, Xavier Attal, the estate agent selling it, jokes, there is always the hope of finding one of Renoir's forgotten works hidden somewhere within the property.

Built as a hunting lodge on the site of a ruined windmill in the late 18th century, the 300sq m house stands at the end of a cobbled impasse off the elegantly curved and extremely chic Avenue Junot. On first view, the simple three-storey white house with pale blue-grey shutters looks deceptively narrow. It is only on mounting the stone staircase with its impressive balustrade to the left of the building that one gets a true impression of the size of the property which stretches the length of the Allée des Brouillards. This impressive stone facade was added to the chateau in the late 18th or early 19th century to unify the two original buildings, which are still owned separately and belong to two different owners. Potential buyers should note that the €4.9m only buys you one of the buildings; the other is not for sale.

The current owner, Yveline Rathier, whose family have lived there for more than half a century, is unsure of the exact date that Renoir occupied the house, but André Roussard, a

local historian, pins it down to late 1889. Legend has it that the artist frequently sat on the chateau steps, smoking. Renoir, who changed address 20 times in 50 years, then moved across the narrow Allée des Brouillards to No 8, just opposite, where he lived until 1897.

It is not known exactly when he left the chateau, which was then squatted by several impoverished artists including Steinlen, Poulbot and Van Dongen, although it may have coincided with his marriage in 1890 to one of his favourite models, the young milliner Aline Victorine Charigot. Their second son, the filmmaker Jean, was born there in 1894 and it was during this period that the artist painted one of his most celebrated works, Les Baigneuses (The Bathers).

The interior of the house has a gothic flavour, with black and

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cream stone-flagged floors that came originally from Notre Dame cathedral and were installed in the early 20th century by a former owner, General Piraud, a keen collector of religious artefacts. The house still features two dark oak doors from a 17th-century confessional that separate the master bedroom from the hallway and study.

On the ground floor is a large drawing room with oak-beamed ceilings and a majestic stone fireplace with a heavy wood mantel. Four French windows open onto the rear garden. There is also a bedroom with en-suite bathroom and a kitchen, in need of modernisation.

There is something reminiscent of a church, too, in the beautiful old pale stone staircase that winds up to the first floor where the master bedroom opens onto a 20sq m terrace. There is an adjacent study and en-suite bathroom, a second bathroom and ample storage space.

Located under the eaves, the top floor, which holds a self-contained flat with mezzanine, has a high, steeply pointed ceiling and dark beams, like a country chapel. Best of all, the balcony offers a superb view of the Moulin de la Galette, the legendary 19th-century dance garden that inspired another of Renoir's famous paintings, Le Bal au Moulin de la Galette.

The property also has staff quarters, a cellar and a two-car garage.

The haunt of artists for more than a century, Montmartre, one of the most picturesque neighbourhoods of Paris, has also become one of its most fashionable. Despite soaring property prices, coupled with the influx of tourists encouraged by the success of the film *Amelie*, the quartier has so far managed to keep a balance between bohemian and hip while maintaining its village atmosphere; bespectacled concierges in carpet slippers can still be spotted queuing for a baguette at a local boulangerie sandwiched between designer boutiques and a bustling pavement cafe.

Montmartre has changed radically since Renoir's day, when Jean fetched milk from a local farm. According to Roussard, the area around the chateau was a notorious haunt of petty criminals, counterfeiters and anarchists — characters who appear in a 1932 novel by Roland Dorgelès entitled *Le Château des Brouillards*, which was inspired by the historic property.

The property is for sale through Immo Best International, 00 33 6 7220 6305, www.immobestinternational.com

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