



Eye for art . . . Gilles Perrault examines some of the Impressionist paintings being shown here. Photograph: Ricky Chung

Making an impression on Monet.

The great French artist round time to help his daughter-in-law, whose work forms part of an unusual exhibition, writes **Victoria Finlay**

GROWING up in his family home in the artistic *quartier* of Montmartre, Gilles Perrault was surrounded by paintings signed by Impressionist painter Utrillo, who had been a friend of his great-grandfather.

"They were fakes, painted by my great grandfather as a joke to annoy Utrillo," said Perrault, whose early experience stood him in good stead with his current work as an art expert looking for counterfeits for the French Customs office. "We do see quite a few: after all, it is easier to counterfeit a painting than a bank note."

But Perrault's visit to Hong Kong this month is not connected to the art smuggling trade: he is here to promote an exhibition of the lesser-known Impressionist painters being held at Mandarin Oriental Fine Arts.

He has collected the works over several years, visiting small dealers and families with private collections, all in the Seine Valley.

One of his favourite pieces is a landscape by Blanche Hochede Monet, who was stepdaughter, daughter-in-law and companion to Claude Monet. She was also his only student.

"He didn't want to be bored by pupils," explained Perrault. "But he was fond of Marie, and gave her a lot of his time."

It was an investment that was returned many times over when Marie's husband Jean died, and for 12 years she put aside her paintbrushes and devoted herself full-time to the care of her father-in-law.

Later, after Monet's death in 1926, she found solace in her art and, sharing Monet's love of flowers, she died just after the end of World War II painting cyclamens at her winter home in Nice.

"Her own personality comes through her paintings, but Claude Monet's influence is very apparent in her work," said Perrault, who maintained that Hochede's own career had not suffered from the years that she had not painted.

"She is well-respected in France now; I think it would have been the same if she had painted more," Perrault said.

He first came into close contact with Hochede-Monet's work when he was asked to help with the restoration of Monet's

house at Giverny, before it was opened to the public after being uninhabited for many years. The painter's brushes and canvases were still there, lying under decades of dust.

It was a change from the 18th century apartment he had lived in at the Palace of Versailles, when he had been employed for 10 years, restoring furniture and rooms, including the bedchamber of Louis XV, and near where he lives now with his family running a restoration business.

Dominating the show is *Vue de Bretagne*, a huge painting of the Brittany coastline, nearly two metres wide, painted by Robert-Antoine Pinchon, the son of the librarian in the town of Rouen.

"That is one of the biggest Impressionist works on the market at the moment," Perrault said.

And there are other works in the collection: views of the Seine by Joseph DeLattre, a vivid picture of the park at Fai-le-bac by Georges Le Meilleur, or an autumn scene by Julien Feron that, for Perrault, also epitomises what he finds exciting about the Impressionist period: the use of mauve to understand the sky, the varied colours of water, the mist in the mornings.

"You always have to remind yourself that when these people were painting, they were believed to be crazy," he said. "The French public was very conservative, very bourgeois, and they liked paintings like this."

He pointed to a painting of the Pont-Neuf by an unknown artist: "plenty of straight lines to show the perspective."

"But what the Impressionist painters were starting to do was to show the perspective through colours."

"They could see that a hillside is a different colour from close up than from far away, because of the way the air filters the colours, and they tried to use that change to show the difference."

"With the paintings you need to stand a certain distance away. Nearby they make no sense, then you stand back, and voila. No straight lines, but a real picture that the eye can understand much better."

Gilles Perrault's Collection at Mandarin Oriental Fine Arts, Mandarin Oriental until March 31



Picture perfect . . . *Vase de Fleurs* by Suzanne Leon is one of the paintings by lesser-known artists included in the show