



A stroke of inspiration

Paris might be known as the City of Light, but it is also the city of artists, as **Eve Middleton** discovers on a life-drawing course in Montmartre

“There is but one Paris,” Vincent van Gogh wrote to his artist friend Horace Mann Livens in 1886, “and however hard living here may be, the French air clears the brain and does one a world of good.” Though Van Gogh’s state of mind might not be the best reflection of the French capital’s virtues, the innate beauty of Paris and its inspirational setting have

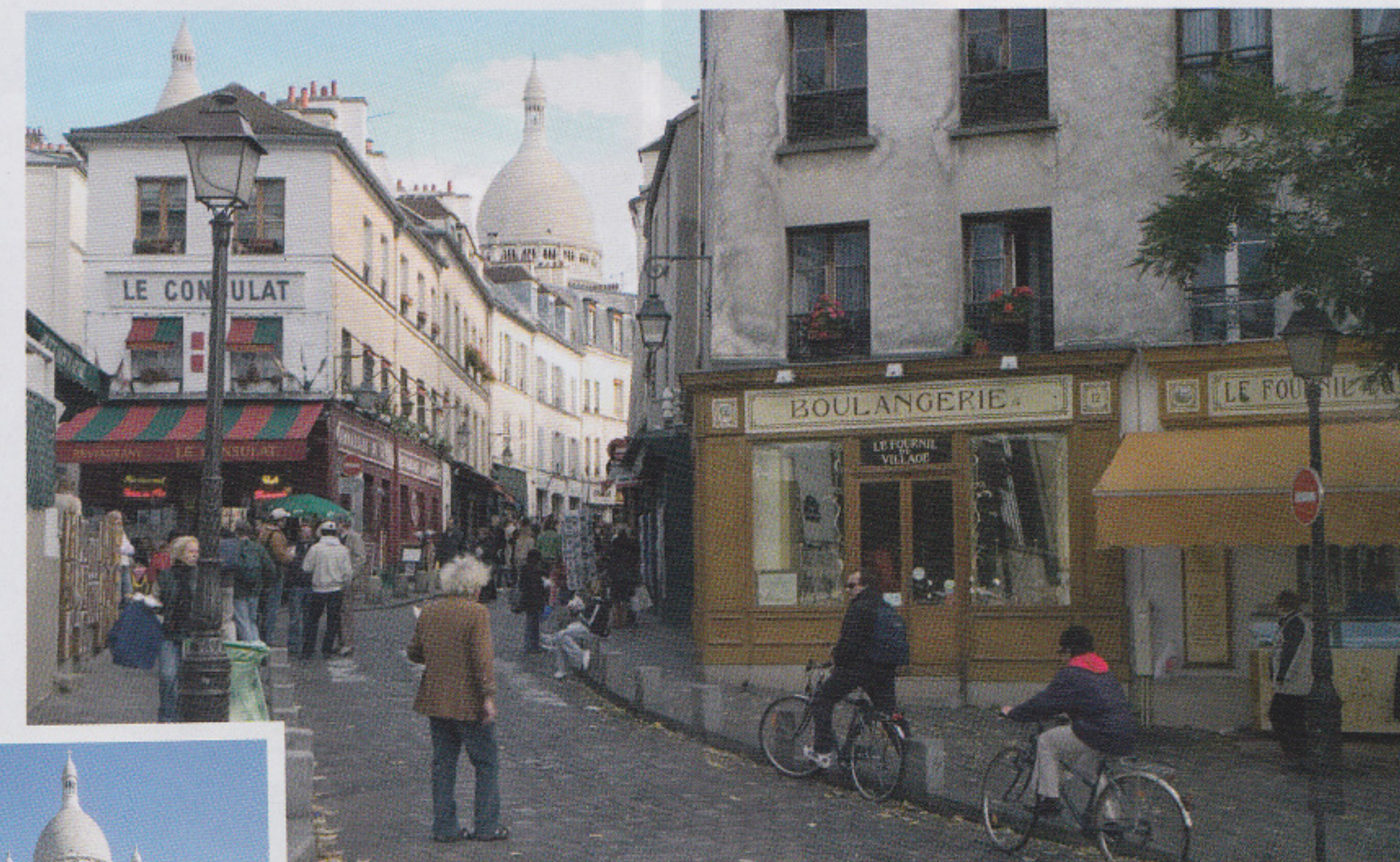
resonated with artists throughout the centuries. The Montmartre quarter, in particular, has played host to Toulouse-Lautrec, Monet, Matisse, Renoir and Degas among others – the roll call of creatives associated with the area reads like an impressive catalogue list from one of the world’s most illustrious museums.

And so it was, one dark winter afternoon when



FROM LEFT: A Life Drawing Montmartre costume session with model Hillary; Steps leading up to the Sacré-Coeur basilica; Street life in Montmartre

PHOTOGRAPHS: LIFE DRAWING MONTMARTRE; OT PARIS/DANIEL THERRY; OT PARIS/AMÉLIE DUPONT



all the leaves had fallen from the trees and left stark black branches silhouetted against a grey Paris sky, that I made my way to an artistic rendezvous for an hour’s tutorial with artist and Life Drawing Montmartre founder Maria Kuzma-Kuzniarska. Despite the fact that the last time I had put pencil to paper was some time in secondary school,

the idea of life drawing in Paris – in the same area as the greats, no less – held an achingly romantic appeal, not to mention a whole new perspective on the Montmartre so often swallowed up by weekend crowds of visitors.

With damp fog hanging in the air and with my hands shoved deeper into my pockets, I buried my face into my scarf and hurried across cobbles worn with history under the imperious gaze of the Sacré-Coeur. Down a stone staircase some two streets below the basilica, the cheery red wooden door of the Petit Théâtre du Bonheur was opened by an equally cheery Maria, welcoming me into the warmth of the pocket-sized building. After greeting our life model Coralie – all of us still bundled in our winter coats – Maria and I took a seat on the wooden-slat chairs to begin the session.

“The most important thing to remember when you’re doing life drawing is to think about the proportions of the body,” Maria instructed, handing me a stack of A3 paper and an HB pencil.

“Really observe the human form in front of you – look at how the body is formed.” Explaining that the adult human figure measures roughly seven-and-

a-half heads of the individual’s size (“one for the head, three for the torso and three-and-a-half thereafter”), she set about demonstrating her point with a series of stunningly anatomically correct sketches from her own portfolio. “Always start with the head,” she emphasised, “and be aware that perspective plays a part in the amount of space you accord any one part of the body on paper.” I nodded wisely, silently hoping that my stick figures would pass muster.

After our briefing, Maria set Coralie and me to work on a warm-up exercise to limber up pencil (me) and limbs (Coralie), setting a timer for a series of two-minute poses to be immortalised in something approaching sketch form. Taking my cue from Maria, I held my pencil at arm’s-length to measure an approximation of Coralie’s head, and began drawing, making sure to return time and again to measure limbs and torso with the same approximation.

Gentle suggestions

Hesitation with my HB pencil soon gave way to a more pressing need to capture each pose before the timer started again. While I cannot pretend that the first few pages bore any identifiable resemblance to Coralie, Maria’s mini-assessments with gentle suggestions after each two-minute session soon had me re-casting proportions and making changes.

Bearing her initial elegant sketches in mind, I was curious about Maria’s background, and she explained that her work as an artist and medical illustrator had its roots in a childhood dream: “I always wanted to be an artist, but I thought you couldn’t make a living out of it, so I put it second to academic work while I was a student.” Though a fresh-faced 36-year-old, Polish-born Maria has a fit-to-burst CV that would be intimidating →



were it not for her warm friendliness and genuinely easy manner. As an alternative to art, she did a volte-face and went into medical research, obtaining a PhD in biological sciences in the UK and working as a researcher at Oxford University's Institute of Musculoskeletal Sciences (little wonder, then, that her sketches are so accurate).

After arriving in Paris for work, Maria found life taking her in a different direction, and she ended up staying in the city to start Life Drawing Montmartre. "I don't have a formal art education," she explained, "but I received art training at several *ateliers* including L'Académie de la Grande Chaumière in Montmartre, and Bluecoat (the centre for contemporary arts) in Liverpool, Central Saint Martins in London and Oxford Printmakers Co-operative. A number of my clients for medical illustrations are from Oxford; I'm lucky to have links from my time there at the university."

Crayon confidence

Warm-up completed, we moved on to a series of ten-minute poses. This time, Maria was on hand throughout each section offering advice and suggestions. Although I was happy enough just to get the pencil strokes flowing freely, Maria helped to channel my new-found confidence with a crayon into something a little more sophisticated. Before the session, my main apprehension had been whether I was even able to produce something approaching a resemblance to the life model in front of me, but I found the basic outline of the human body relatively easy to replicate with Maria's words of wisdom about proportions ringing in my ears.

Details, however, were more challenging – shading (the next step after creating an outline) proved tricky, as did drawing hands and fingers (poor Coralie ended up immortalised in my pencil version with clawed arthritic hamfists). Taking the opportunity to satisfy my curiosity, I asked Maria why she chose Montmartre for her business. "The answer is very simple," she laughed, "I live in Montmartre! I moved here about four years ago from south of Paris and I completely fell in love with the district and its artistic heritage, so I decided to become *Montmartroise*."



With the timer beeping for the final time, my attention was lifted out of the all-absorbing sketching process. I glanced down at the pile of discarded A3 sheets on the floor, and wondered why I had been so worried about my initial artistic stage fright. Though it is not an instinctive process by any means, I found it deeply satisfying to produce something tangible by reviving my secondary school skillset – not to mention being inspired by the historic Montmartre setting.

While I had a winter one-to-one tutored session, group sessions – both inside and out – are held throughout the year, in untutored and tutored form. Those with more experience and with their own materials can choose from regular sessions, while beginners can take courses in life drawing, printmaking and human anatomy.

As for my next steps in the world of life drawing: had I continued with a further session, Maria assured me that our next meeting would have focused on learning to avoid common mistakes in drawing. Having covered the basics of body proportions, perspective and shading, our hour-long session was an enlightening experience that left me feeling pleased with my efforts.

Leaving the theatre and walking back up the steps, I passed the Sacré-Coeur with my sketches rolled up neatly under my arm and headed to Place du Tertre, lined with artists showcasing their works. As I looked out across the sea of easels, I thought of Van Gogh and his contemporaries doing much the same in years gone by. Although my pencil offerings would not have had Renoir et al quaking in their artists' smocks, I was happy in the knowledge that my hour's session had afforded me a little more insight into this most magical of Paris's worlds.

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Eve during her life-drawing class; Artists and sitters throng Place du Tertre; Maria shows some of her sketches; A 'life drawing for beginners' course with Maria and model Coralie; An outdoor session in Montmartre

As for artistic inspiration, she cited late-19th-century artist Suzanne Valadon "who lived and worked in Montmartre. She became the first woman painter with no formal art education admitted to the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts. She was primarily depicting nudes, which was very uncommon at the time, since women were not allowed to take part in life-drawing classes!" This was an irony not lost in the warmth of the theatre in which our three-female-strong group found themselves.

Francofile Learn the art of life drawing in Paris

Life Drawing Montmartre offers tutored and untutored life-drawing group sessions from €15pp (maximum group size 15). One-to-one tutored sessions such as Eve's cost €70 an hour. All sessions are held in English, no previous experience or materials are needed. From this year the Untitled Factory in Rue Gabrielle will be the main venue, although Life

Drawing Montmartre will continue to work with Au Petit Théâtre du Bonheur on some projects (lifedrawingmontmartre.com).

GETTING THERE

By train: The Eurostar service from London St Pancras to Paris Gare du Nord takes 2hr 25min with single fares from £29 (tel: 0343 218 6186, eurostar.com).



WHERE TO STAY

Hôtel Particulier Montmartre
23 Avenue Junot Pavillon D
75018 Paris
Tel: (Fr) 1 53 41 81 40
en.hotel-particulier-montmartre.com
Boutique hotel in a former private townhouse. Each of

the five suites is decorated by a different artist. Doubles from €390 per night.

WHERE TO EAT

Le Moulin de la Galette
83 Rue Lepic
75018 Paris
Tel: (Fr) 1 46 06 84 77
lemoulindelegalette.fr
This restaurant in Montmartre's only remaining 17th-century windmill was immortalised on canvas in Renoir's *Le Bal du Moulin de la Galette*. Main courses from €22.



WHERE TO VISIT

Musée de Montmartre
12-14 Rue Cortot
75018 Paris
Tel: (Fr) 1 49 25 89 39
museedemontmartre.fr/exhibitions
This museum in former artists' workshops now displays works by Toulouse-Lautrec among others.

PHOTOGRAPHS: EVE MIDDLETON; OT PARIS/MARIEBERTRAND; LIFE DRAWING MONTMARTRE