

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY



THE ART WORLD

### IN THE HEAD

*Balthus and Magritte reconsidered.*

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL



The superb Polish-French painter Balthus—an anti-modernist beloved of modernists, including Picasso—charms the eye and rattles thought. For more than six decades, until his death, in 2001, at the age of ninety-two, Balthus depicted young girls in gamy poses, attributing any perceived eroticism to viewers with unclean minds. His other perennial subject was the cat, his totem animal. A fat feline nuzzles his leg in a self-portrait made when he was twenty-seven; the artist cuts an imperiously Romantic figure and dubs himself, in an inscription in English, “The King of Cats.” It is the first painting in “Cats and Girls,” a fo-

cussed retrospective, finely curated by Sabine Rewald, at the Metropolitan Museum. Then come girls, by the dozen, often with cats in attendance. Was Balthus a pedophile? His interest, if not lust, didn’t stir before his subjects’ pubescence, but it waned in their late teens. The show occurs at a cultural moment that is stretched between sexualizing the young and reacting with horror and anger to the lately abundant cases of their sexual exploitation. If you can shrug off that tension at the Met, I salute your detachment. I sure can’t. Balthus puts me in two minds, attracted and repelled, in search of a third. He strains the moral impunity of high art to

an elemental limit, assuring himself an august, unquiet immortality.

He was born Balthasar Klossowski in 1908 in Paris. He added “de Rola” to his name, fancifully claiming noble birth; he was given to pretension all his life. He had a remarkably enriched childhood: his father, an art historian, and his mother, a painter who went by the name Baladine, hobnobbed with the literary and artistic élites. In his teens, he was mentored by the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, a family friend and a lover of Baladine’s, while his older brother, Pierre, became André Gide’s secretary. (Pierre went on to be a cult hero of French intellectuals as a devoutly obscene philosopher, novelist, graphic artist, and exegete of the Marquis de Sade.) When Balthus was eleven, his adored pet cat, Mitsou, ran away. He made forty ink drawings detailing his memories of the animal and his fruitless search for her. In the last, he stands alone, crying. Displayed at the Met, for the first time anywhere, the suite is fantastically talented—the most precocious art I believe I’ve ever seen, with boldly rhythmic compositions like those in German Expressionist woodcuts and uncanny affinities to Matisse. Rilke arranged for the publication, in 1921, of a handsome book of the Mitsou images, for which he wrote the preface. The artist was identified by his nickname, Baltusz. Imagine being thirteen years old and bathed in such glory. A year later, Balthus wrote in a letter, “God knows how happy I would be if I could remain a child forever.”

Balthus was a largely self-taught artist, who learned what he needed from copying paintings and frescoes in Italy, especially those of Piero della Francesca. Besides the loftily serene Piero, his other major influence was the guttural messiah of realism, Gustave Courbet. That improbable pairing registers throughout Balthus’s work as classical elevation infused with sensual vigor. The style doesn’t feel conservative; it feels outside historical time. You’re always off balance with it, sometimes as if you were being subjected at once to a high-church orison and a dirty joke. Balthus learned to soft-pedal the latter quality after his first gallery show, in Paris, in 1934. Craving attention, he got all too much of it with “The Guitar Lesson”—a painting not in the Met

*“Thérèse Dreaming” (1938). Balthus claimed a quality of sacredness for his “angels.”*



show—in which a bare-breasted woman holds a schoolgirl, naked from the waist down, across her lap and strums the girl's genitals. (In one study, the guitarist is male.) Strangely, Balthus was unprepared for the outraged critical response. Meanwhile, Antoinette de Watteville, a girl from a socially prominent Swiss family whom he had desperately wooed for four years, told him that she was engaged to a diplomat and to stop writing her. He attempted suicide with laudanum; his friend Antonin Artaud found him in time. He resumed painting only gradually, with commissioned portraits that bored him.

Then, in 1936, Balthus met Thérèse Blanchard, the eleven-year-old daughter of a restaurant worker. During the next three years, he made ten paintings of her, which are his finest work. They capture moods of adolescent girlhood—dreaming, restless, sulky—as only adolescent girls may authoritatively understand. (I've checked with veterans of the condition.) In two of the best, a short-skirted Thérèse raises her leg, exposing tight underpants. We needn't reflect on the fact that an adult man directed the poses, any more than we must wonder about the empathic author of "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland." But there it is. Balthus claimed a quality of sacredness for his "angels," as he termed his models. That comes through. Yet, looking at the paintings, I kept thinking of a line by Oscar Wilde: "A bad man is the sort of man who admires innocence." It's an odd relief of uncertainty, if nothing else, to learn that Balthus's later relationship with his teen-age model Laurence Bataille, a daughter of the writer Georges, was frankly carnal. The painting "The Week of Four Thursdays" (1949), in which a loosely robed Laurence reclines in abandon and plays with a smiling cat, commemorates days when school was out and she came to pose. She grew up to become a psychoanalyst, like her stepfather, Jacques Lacan.

In 1937, Antoinette de Watteville, having shed her diplomat, gave in and married Balthus. They had two sons. In the one painting of her in the Met show, "Girl in Green and Red" (1944), she looks half her age of thirty-two. Wearing a vaguely harlequin costume, she sits at a table, grasping a candlestick next to a loaf of bread with a knife thrust deep

into it. The picture marks one of Balthus's closest approaches to Surrealism, a movement whose leaders admired and courted him. He rebuffed them, but the equivocal sexuality of his art anchors it in a time, defined by Surrealism, of avant-garde evangelism for an anti-bourgeois, liberated libido. His reticence, in a classicizing style tremulous with carefully observed light, preserves his power to provoke, while the would-be-shocking sallies of, say, Max Ernst have become period curios. Eroticism fades in Balthus's later work, with simplified figures and rather dull, tortuously worked surfaces of matte pigment, archly evoking Renaissance frescoes. His pretentiousness survived his passion.