

# Mysterious Works From a Mysterious Man

**T**HE WORLD'S GREATEST LIVING painter, some say, is an elusive 85-year-old man called Balthus. Little is known of his life — which suits him perfectly. His work constantly elicits conjecture and controversy, but he issues no pronouncements about it. Although his subject matter encompasses landscapes, still lifes and portraiture, he is known above all for his provocative paintings of adolescent girls — a circumstance for which he holds his viewers responsible.

While not quite as inaccessible as the man, Balthus's works are scarce and exhibitions a rarity. But this summer, through Aug. 29, there is an exemplary Balthus show at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lausanne. Switzerland is the country where Balthus now lives and works (he was born in Paris of Polish parents) and where he spent some of the most inspired moments of his youth. The earliest work in the show is "Mitsou," a small volume of 40 drawings he made in Geneva at the age of 11, depicting the saga of a missing cat. The German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, an intimate of Balthus's mother, wrote the introduction to the book, which attracted the attention of numerous literary figures and artists — Bonnard among them — who regarded Balthus as a prodigy of artistic invention.

*Nicholas Fox Weber is writing a book about Balthus, to be published by Knopf.*

At the other end of the time line is a much-awaited large painting of a beguiling child ("The Cat at the Mirror III") that has been in the works for three years and was still on the easel only a few weeks ago. In between are 52 oil paintings and 60 drawings and watercolors, which show how Balthus has carried forward the traditions of European figurative art in a vigorous and highly personal way.

There have been major Balthus shows before, but this one is different. The largest previous one — held at the Pompidou Center in

---

## In Lausanne, a rare chance to see new and old paintings by the reclusive Balthus.

---

Paris in 1983, and the next year, with variations, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York — had flaws. In Paris, the modern setting and harsh lighting "murdered" the art in the eyes of its creator.

Balthus did not see the show in New York, but he let it be known that he disapproved of the Met's catalogue and was annoyed not to have been involved in choosing the pictures.

(He has never visited America, although much of his audience and patronage have been here since the 1930's, when James Thrall Soby bought his monumental painting "The Street" and the Pierre Matisse Gallery began to show his work.) There is little doubt that, had he made the trip, he would have been further distressed by the crowding of the art and by the wall color, which John Russell, writing in *The New York Times*, likened to "watered English mustard."

Not that the present exhibition gives Balthus unequivocal delight. He has complained to friends that the walls are too white. Neither is he happy with the position of his latest canvas. And he is almost never satisfied with his own work. Although he has occasionally allowed that he is pleased with his large figure compositions, in general none of his pictures looks quite right to this tortured perfectionist who perpetually seeks further refinement of the rhythms and balances and textures of his compositions. Balthus has on occasion gone so far as to say that he regards all his paintings as "utter failures."

But for the rest of us, the Lausanne show is a splendid event. It brings together well-known canvases that normally hang at great distances from one another in disparate museums — "The Children" (1937), once owned by Picasso and now at the Musée Picasso in Paris; "The Street" (1933), which Soby eventually gave to the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and important paintings from the

Pompidou Center and the Metropolitan. It offers the luxury of seeing the Met's "Mountain" (1937), a large and rich scene of an outing in the dramatic landscape of the Bernese Oberland, back near the world it depicts. In addition, this exhibition presents numerous major paintings from private collections — works seldom lent by their owners, almost all of whom have chosen to remain anonymous.

Visitors have the opportunity to see, for example, "The Méditerranée's Cat" (1949), one of Balthus's remarkable cat portraits. This canvas version of a signboard he made for a restaurant takes the notion of ocean-fresh fish to a new extreme by having fish leap from the sea in a vibrant rainbow and land on a plate. They are about to be devoured by a devilish cat-man who has a large feline face atop a human body. "The Méditerranée's Cat" epitomizes Balthus's mischievous playfulness as well as his ability to make a dynamic canvas that conveys lust and rhapsodic abandon.

"The Passage du Commerce-St.-André" (1952-54), reproduced in numerous books and articles but rarely seen, is another of Balthus's gems on view in Lausanne. A lot of theories have been published about this painting — most of which the artist disparages — that present it as a metaphor of infinite psychological complexity. Whatever the validity of

*Continued on Page 34*



Private Collection/Courtesy of Electa

*Detail of Balthus's "Passage du Commerce-St.-André"—A metaphor?*

# Mysterious Works From a Mysterious Man

*Continued From Page 29*

the interpretations one might apply to this everyday scene of a quiet cross-street near Balthus's studio in the sixth arrondissement of Paris, here one has the rare chance to form judgments from the 9-by-10-foot canvas itself.

"The Passage" gives sheer poetry

**THE FRESH AIR FUND**

to ordinary life. The act of walking with a fresh baguette in hand assumes monumental dignity. Sitting and playing become profound experiences. Nourished by his talent and sharp awareness of the methods of artists ranging from Piero to Poussin to Courbet, Balthus painted the details and the whole with power and grace. The sunlight on a small white dog — resembling a sacrificial lamb — illuminates the texture of its hair. The composition pulsates, thanks to the careful interplay of subtle colors

and the precise relationship of forms.

One of the most moving paintings here is the 1942-45 "Landscape at Champrovent." This clearly articulated canvas, painted during a time of turmoil, is the embodiment of the peace afforded by nature and of the power of painting. The rolling fields recede in fluid progression. The mountains are solid, the blue sky ethereal and crystalline. Sunlight bathes the foliage as if a religious event were taking place. The construction is precise and lively.

Balthus is this century's answer to Claude Lorrain. But he is also Balthus — with the inclusion of a voluptuous if oddly proportioned woman sprawling in the foreground. This amusing creature, lost in a reverie, seems both aware and heedless of her seductiveness.

The Lausanne show is missing a few paintings that would have made it a comprehensive retrospective. One would like to see some of the boldly painted, sexually suggestive works that caused such an uproar

when Balthus had his first show in Paris in 1934 — "Cathy Dressing" or the renowned "Guitar Lesson," which has been seen only once in public since then. It is unfortunate that the magisterial 1952-54 "The Room" is not here. And because "The Street" is under glass, it seems almost absent.



But in addition to Balthus's latest painting, this exhibition presents some works that are not even in the books — a bold 1940 self-portrait, portraits of other people, some landscapes painted between 1955 and 1960, and a range of intriguing works on paper.

All in all, this assemblage represents a diplomatic feat — not just on the part of Jörg Zutter, the curator, but also of Maria-Gaetana Matisse, the widow of Balthus's longtime dealer, Jean Leymarie, an authority on the artist; and Balthus and his wife, the painter Setsuko. It seems appropriate that they have gone to such efforts for a presentation at a museum in an old building on a hill near Lake Léman, where some of the finest scenes in "Mitsou" occur. Over the years, Switzerland has been a haven for Balthus. He and his wife now live in a large chalet in a mountain village not far from here. In Lausanne, Balthus is in his milieu, and it serves him well. □