

Truth falters on the altar of Balthus' mystique

By NICHOLAS FOX WEBER

Vanished Splendors

A Memoir

Balthus, as told to Alain Vicondelet
Translated from the French by Benjamin Ivry

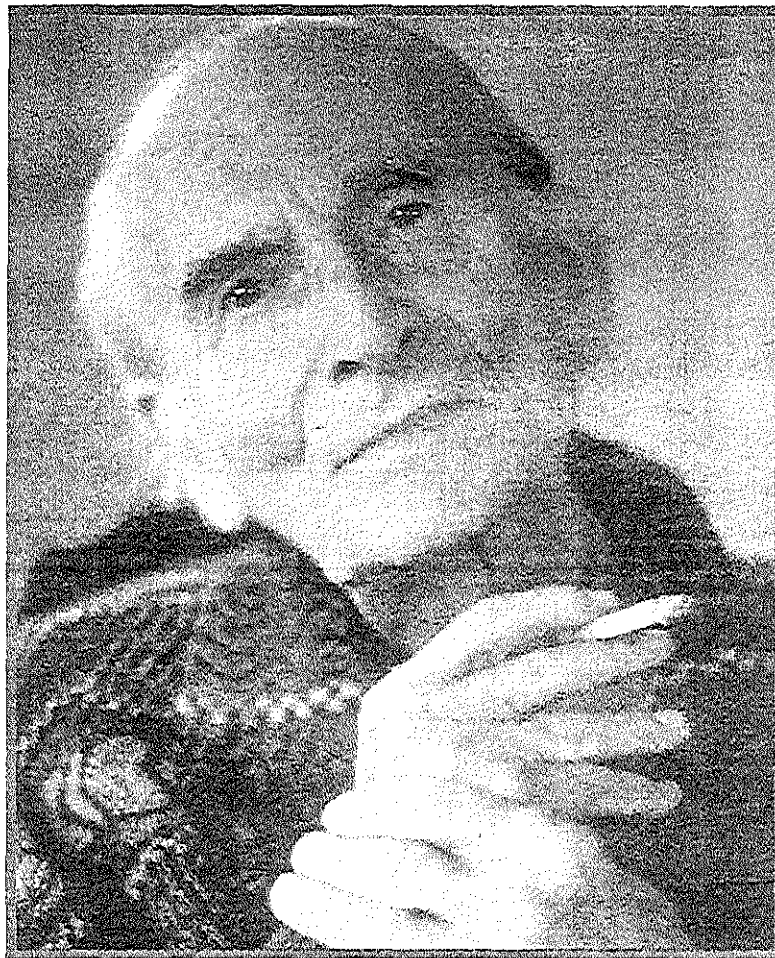
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THE mystique of the painter Balthus derives in part from his perfect mimicry of adolescent behavior. Alongside his repeated cries of "Leave me alone!" he revealed himself center stage. He convinced people that he was unknowable while he simultaneously posed in full-page color photos accompanying articles about him in *House & Garden*, *Vanity Fair* and *Paris Match*. In the so-called privacy of the elegant homes he flaunted, he appeared in marvelous clothing, surrounded by his devoted family.

And though Balthus, who died in 2001 at 92, declared his psyche off-limits to the world, he contradictorily made paintings — aesthetically and technically wonderful — that bravely revealed his most personal quirks and musings. Working in a style that updated Piero della Francesca's restrained geometry and Gustave Courbet's rich textures, Balthus evoked provocative subject matter — private teenage musing, sexual violence — with grace and finesse.

Purportedly so private, actually so public, he also maintained two selves with his names. As a painter, he was simply "Balthus" — as he had been ever since, at 12, he made a series of animated, articulate drawings for which the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, his mother's lover, wrote a text. In the world of his 45-room house near Gstaad — "the largest chalet in all of Switzerland," he unabashedly told me, so that I would have no trouble finding it the first time I visited him there (I nearly mistook the place for an Alp) — he was "Le Comte Balthazar Klosowski de Rola," or, to his cast of Philippine servants, simply "the Count."

In ways sad and fragile, burdened by daunting intelligence, hopping restlessly between his studio and the world of grandeur, he needed this complexity. A person of intense sensitivity, he used the veneers and layers as protection.



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NOT UNKNOWABLE: Balthus evoked provocative subject matter that revealed his personality.

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hand, when he repeatedly insists on referring to her as "the Countess" — her title existing only because, after World War II, Balthus decided to reinvent himself — he is blithely deceiving us.)

Balthus' tribute to the "millennium-old virtues of silence and work" is wise indeed. His swipes at Marc Chagall and the Surrealists, the independence of his attacks at the Centre Pompidou and conceptual art, and his insistence on painterly skill are refreshing. And when Balthus declares, "To paint is not to represent, but to penetrate, to go to the heart of the secret, to work in a way that reflects the interior image," we encounter the unquestionable seriousness of his life's endeavors — however much he would deprive us of the same quarry.

What is problematic is that he willingly forsakes accuracy. He says, for example, that he first went to Italy in 1915; while he might wish to have done so that year, it was in fact the very time that he moved, at age 8, from Paris to Berlin to live in his cousin's bedroom because his family was forced from their former life. (Emphatically Catholic in "Vanished Splendors" — Balthus desperately covered up his mother's Jewishness — he would certainly not want it known that he and that cousin were grandsons of a cantor in a Breslau synagogue.) He would not go to Italy until he was 16. He similarly reinvents the history of his meeting Rilke. Such details may not matter as much as the atmosphere and ambient taste of these pages, but, for some of us, the misrepresentations intrude.

Balthus lied lifelong — his mother used to complain to Rilke about the problem — but "Vanished Splendors," dictated in the very last years of his life, presents certain whoppers new to his history. One is the declaration that he knew Piet Mondrian well, a claim that suits his diatribe against abstract art but is otherwise without basis. And when Balthus describes a childhood visit to Giverny, during which painter Pierre Bonnard's son announced the arrival of an old white-haired Claude Monet, it is, however lovely, almost certainly without an iota of truth. (It is a story never before told in any of the highly detailed materials by or about him and is inconsistent with the account provided in Balthus' mother's letters to Rilke.)

Some of the mistakes seem deliberate, others inadvertent. When Balthus, who had no Scottish blood at all but who periodically convinced people that he descended directly from his hero Lord Byron, now revises that story by saying that Byron was a friend of one of his Scottish ancestors, he has simply toned down a myth. But when his son, named Thaddeus, becomes "Eustache" in "Vanished Splendors" and the Galerie Pierre (where Balthus had his first show in Paris) is said to have been owned by Pierre Matisse, a totally different person from its actual owner, Pierre Loeb, the errors are truly disconcerting.

Regardless, how can we not admire Balthus for his immersion in the art of painting and the marvels of his Earth? If tolerating his fables and inventions is part of the experience, so be it. He was unparalleled as an artist and mythomane, and "Vanished Splendors" provides the rare service of offering his own voice. ■

But that does not mean that we need worship Balthus' myths, as does Joyce Carol Oates in her introduction to "Vanished Splendors" (a pretentious title for this memoir that would have been more aptly named "Acquired Splendors"). Oates' essay shows the problem with the book it prefaces. Like most people, she responds to Balthus' manipulations by swallowing his story whole. She does not differentiate between his wisdom and his nonsense. She repeats the notion that "he refused all requests for interviews, photographs, visits" — an utter fallacy about a man who has granted so many "the artist who never gives interviews" interviews while convincing his interlocutor (me among them) that he or she was the chosen one, at last. Oates is so befuddled by the Balthus myths that she has him writing his memoir in Montecavallo, which she places "near the village of Rossiniere" in Switzerland, but that was the name of his castle near Rome where, except for rare visits, he ceased living years before he dictated these late-life reminiscences.

Yet the confusion is understandable. "Vanished Splendors" reads like the unedited ramblings of a very old man into a tape recorder, juxtaposing splendid insights and trenchant reflections with contradictions, repetitions and statements that elude all meaning. If you can accept the vagueness and ambiguity, the book will suit you. If, however, you demand honesty alongside even the loveliest poetic musing, you will find it a mixed bag.

Having written the only biography of Balthus, a book that has received some harsh rebukes, I don't claim to approach these memoirs objectively. I cannot naively join Oates in labeling as "conservative" a man who hung around with Antonin Artaud, creator of the Theater of Cruelty, and with author Ian Fleming, socialist Claus von Bülow and filmmaker Federico Fellini. Nor could I follow Oates in likening to a "Zen master" the man who threatened 8-year-old Dolorès Miró, painter Joan Miró's daughter, that if she did not remain totally still during a posing session, he would hang her out the window in a coal sack.

Yet, for the most part, in his own words, Balthus is less pompous — and full of hocus-pocus — than most of the folks who write about him. When he discusses the labor of making a painting, and the modesty and trepidation with which he undertook that task, it is a model for what an artist's efforts should be. The artist's evocation of the "intimacy and grandeur" and "the almost disarming simplicity" of Mozart is sublime. His description of his life of "sweetness and grace" constructed by a wife he calls "the dearest person on earth to me" is moving. (On the other