

What We Know About Balthus

"We must have the truth," the artist insisted. He proceeded to reinvent the past • BY NICHOLAS FOX WEBER

When the French painter Balthus died on February 17, practically the only certainty about him was the quality of his art. Because of the prescience of a few astute collectors and museum directors, Americans have long been able to savor its excellence, having had unequalled access to most of the artist's masterpieces. Balthus's 1933 *The Street*, at New York's Museum of Modern Art, brings Parisian life so near that one can take in the bakery smells and hear the street vendors' cries; the artist evoked daily life masterfully, even while imbuing it with a strange sense of everyone's isolation. The provocative images of teenage girls, their skirts thrown back and underpants in plain view, provide museumgoers in Washington, D.C., Chicago, and New York with outstanding examples of Balthus's masterful technique—based on Piero, Poussin, Géricault, and Courbet—while revealing his singular and tantalizing vision of lonely characters absorbed by their sexual fantasies and bizarre reveries. Also at the Modern, Balthus's portraits of André Derain and of Joan Miró with his daughter Dolores—the latter was the first Balthus image ever reproduced in color, as an *ARTnews* cover in 1938—have become the best-known likenesses of those artists, even if Derain's massive cloudlike presence and Miró's puckish yet iconic force ultimately reflected Balthus's quirky slant more than the subjects' actual personalities.

It has now been established that Balthus was born on February 29, 1908—his birth year used to be reported as later—but most of the facts about the man are less easy to ascertain. *Paris Match* wrote in its obituary that Picasso called Balthus the greatest figurative artist of the 20th century. While Picasso certainly admired the younger artist, with reservations, and owned his marvelous *The Children*, this grander claim is pure hype. *Le Monde* reported on the closeness of Balthus's family to Monet; this, too, is almost definitely an invention. Other statements about "Count Balthazar Klossowski de Rola"—the title and name Balthus began to use shortly after his 40th birthday—are no more accurate than the artist's periodic assertions that he was descended from Lord Byron, the Romanovs, or the family of Stanislas Poniatowski, the last king of Poland. What is hardly ever told is that Balthus spent much of his childhood not in glamorous Paris but in Berlin, with his mother's family, who were Jewish (his grandfather had been a

cantor in Breslau) and whose financial struggle was desperate. Balthus's mother even had to consider taking a job as a housekeeper; and in France, during the war, she was at risk as a Jew, while Balthus was enjoying refuge in Switzerland.

But these were truths that the artist ultimately could not bear to acknowledge. Although he claimed time and again that he did not grant interviews and wanted nothing known about his private life, in fact he agreed to any number of magazine and newspaper articles, in which he carefully controlled his public image, with most of the emphasis in recent years on his glamorous friends (Bono sang at his funeral) and his palatial 45-room chalet in the Swiss Alps. He dissembled and embellished as it suited him. This is too bad, because Balthus's reality was extraordinary. It involved his mother's love affair and his own close connection with the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, his intense friendship with Antonin Artaud, and his relationships with characters ranging from Alberto Giacometti and Federico Fellini to Ian Fleming and Claus von Bulow.

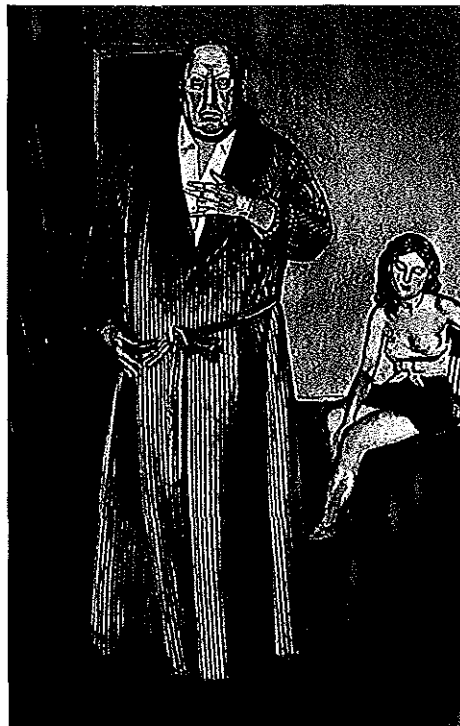
The first time I met Balthus, I waited for him in a large salon of Le Grand Chalet, to which I had been led by one of his four Filipino servants, dressed in full livery. Bright winter light, reflected off the snow-covered mountains beyond the many windows, flooded the room, filled with country antiques, works on paper by Bonnard and Morandi, and photos of the handsome, teenage Balthus seated between his mother and Rilke on a country outing. When the artist finally entered—he liked to keep people waiting—he seemed thinner than a sculpture by his beloved Giacometti and as riveting and intensely alive as anyone I had ever seen. His angular profile resembled Voltaire's. His first words to me, uttered in impeccable Oxonian English, were, "So here I am, a disabled old man." I politely attempted to argue, but he gently cut me off, saying, "No, we must have the truth." He proceeded to reinvent the past. But with his colorful inventions and his penchant for ceremony and elaborate myths, this brilliant artist, sharp-witted raconteur, and erudite aficionado

of literature and music and, foremost, painting, was a person of unequalled intelligence and knowledge. ■

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Balthus (1908–2001).



Balthus's portrait André Derain, 1936, at New York's Museum of Modern Art.