Jane, 1937

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The name Balthus is not widely known, yet he has been called "the last of the great European painters," by New York Times critic John Russell. Balthus cares little for fame or success and has steadfastly avoided publicity throughout his long career. The first book to be written about him was published only last year. Preferring the company of a small circle of friends (his closest friend for many years was the Swiss artist Alberto Giacometti), Balthus has never been a member of any school or any particular movement. Another reason for his undeserved obscurity is that he has produced only a few paintings each year, working slowly and meticulously on each canvas. Further, most of his works are held in private collections and remain outside public scrutiny. Finally, for fifteen years he served as Director of the Académie de France in Rome (1961-1976), seriously curtailing the time in which he could paint. Despite all of this, Balthus continues to attract an enthusiastic group of supporters, including many artists. In some ways he is a classic example of the artist's artist.

Born Balthazar Klossowski de Rola in 1908 and raised in France and Switzerland, Balthus is the son of an artistic and aristocratic family of Polish extraction. His family's friends included such well-known artistic and literary figures as the painters Pierre Bonnard and André Derain and the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke. Rilke so admired Balthus' precocious talent that he helped the thirteen-year-old boy publish a set of drawings for which Rilke wrote a preface.

Self-taught by copying the old masters, Balthus' influences can be traced back to the Renaissance master, Piero della Francesca, whose architectural compositions and momentarily frozen figures are echoed in Balthus' own paintings. A 1939 painting included in MATRIX 65 entitled Girl with Red and Green Jacket, for example, relates back to Piero in its use of strict organization of geometric forms and color areas, here broken only by the diagonal of the unexpected knife thrust into the meat.

Balthus is usually considered a realist, but the reality he depicts in his paintings is one rarely encountered through direct experience. The suggestion of violence (Camus wrote of Balthus, "...he shows a knife but never any blood"), the expressionless gaze of the girl, and the jester-like costume all tend to elude logical interpretation. The enigmatic mood is closer to that found in certain Surrealist paintings of the period. Balthus, however, denies any affiliation with the Surrealist group, though he had his first one-person show in 1934 in the popular Surrealist Galerie Pierre. Living in Paris during the twenties and thirties, he could not have been untouched by the Surrealist emphasis on the irrational subconscious.

The mysterious quality found in most of his works is less marked but still present in the earliest painting in the MATRIX unit, The Bernese Hat (1938-1939). Of the works shown, it owes most to the 19th century realist Gustave Courbet who has always been one of Balthus' idols. The simple and solid treatment of the figure and the limited palette recall Courbet, with whom Balthus shares a firm belief in the power of fact. Courbet, the first artist to call himself a realist, said he never painted an angel because he had never seen one. Balthus, too, may suggest another reality, but only through the representation of the here and now.

It is not Balthus' fidelity to the centuries-old tradition of realism alone, however, which makes him an outstanding painter. It has to do more with feeling than form, more specifically with Balthus' distinctly unique, post-Freudian vision of the world. He
is best known for his "...extra-ordinary versions of adolescents who abandon themselves to innocent and not so innocent, voluptuous reveries," as John Rewald noted in his introduction to the catalogue of the 1964 Balthus exhibition at The Arts Club of Chicago. Girl on Couch allows the viewer to eavesdrop on a young girl (twelve years old?) languidly pulling a string from her hem which lifts the skirt high enough to reveal a thigh. Erotic suggestion is undeniable, but it is mingled with the innocence, a time between childhood and sexual awareness.

Balthus' drawings are seen even less often than his paintings. Most of them are preparatory studies for the oils and hold little interest for him once they have served their function. They reveal a classical approach to the medium and by their very nature are more spontaneous than the finished paintings.

Balthus is alone among contemporary artists. As James Thrall Soby wrote in the cata-

logue for the 1956 Balthus retrospective exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art in New York, "The question of whether he is or is not a 'modern' painter probably has little interest for him. His obsessions are clear and strong, his gifts his own. One assumes that is all that matters in his intelligent, defiant mind."

Connie Lewallen Curator of MATRIX Berkeley
Girl with Green and Red Jacket, 1939

The Atheneum is fortunate in being able to augment the exhibition organized by MATRIX Berkeley with two important paintings generously loaned by private collectors on the East Coast. The first is a privately commissioned portrait of a young New England woman who had recently sailed to Europe on her honeymoon. Initially, Balthus had refused to take the commission. Subsequently, he encountered her at a social occasion and was very taken by her resemblance to a favorite English mistress. So it was that "Jane" was admitted, as were few others, to Balthus' studio off the Cour de Rohan. Jane and her groom had matching hand-tailored suits, and it is this outfit of the latest fashion that she wears here (the suit itself is in the Athenæum's Costume Collection). Balthus painted Jane during precisely the period when he created some of his most important portraits: Vicomtesse de Noailles (1936), André Derain (1936), and Joan Miro and Daughter Dolores (1937-38). As with these others, Jane is unmistakably the incisive portrayal of a specific personality. The subject is self-contained, with arms crossed. Her beguiling propriety is uncomfortably imposed upon by the artist who has placed her in a nearly untenable posture. (So unpleasant was this implausible position on the very edge of the table that after several days of such discomfort she burst out in anger at the artist's lack of consideration. Thereafter, Balthus showed her great kindness.) She, of course, was not allowed to view the painting until it was shipped to her home in the United States. But we can see now that Balthus intentionally placed both this youthful and pretty American bride and a plate which holds a ripe and delectable peach in similarly precarious situations. This is vintage Balthus.

The "nubile adolescent" in Girl with Red Hair (1947) sits languidly in an interior that is
so sparse its background seems almost a beachscape. There is a disquieting undercurrent to the scene. As in many works by Balthus (e.g. Jane), this feeling of dis-ease comes, in part, from lines of perspective which are intentionally askew and inconsistent.

Nothing more effectively introduces a note of high erotic tension in Balthus' paintings than the seemingly innocent revelation of portions of bare young legs usually bent (immodestly) at two different angles. This Balthusian convention is of particular interest in Girl with Red Hair. Careful examination of the painting's surface reveals that the model's left leg was originally far more outstretched. The model herself seems to be one of Balthus' favorites, possibly the same young woman pictured eight years earlier in Girl with Red and Green Jacket.

Andrea Miller-Keller
Curator of MATRIX Hartford

Works in MATRIX:
Jane, 1937, oil on canvas, 38 7/8 x 28 7/8 inches. Private Collection.


Girl on Couch, 1939, oil on panel, 28 1/2 x 36 inches. Lent by Dorothy and Richard Sherwood.


Girl with Red Hair, 1947, oil on canvas, 25 1/2 x 32 inches. Private Collection.

Selected one-man exhibitions:
Galerie Pierre, Paris '34;
Galerie Moos, Geneva '43; Wildenstein's, Paris '46, '56; Lefevre
Gallery, London '52; The Museum of Modern Art, NYC '56; Civica
Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Turin, Italy '61; The Arts Club of
Chicago '64; Hayden Gallery, Massachusetts Institute of Tech-
nology, Cambridge '64; Musée des Arts Decoratifs, Paris '66;
Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy '80; Museum of Contemporary Art,
Chicago '80; University Art Museum, Berkeley, CA Balthus/
MATRIX 38 '80.

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no. 7 (October '68). Reprinted from Pierre Matisse catalogue,
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