Press Release
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Rarely-seen portrait by Balthus on view at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art

Hartford, Conn. (November 18, 2022)—A rarely-seen portrait by Balthus (Balthasar Klossowski de Rola, 1908-2001) joins two related paintings by the artist at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Connecticut. *The Spell of the Studio: Balthus' “Portrait of Mrs. Cooley”* explores a crucial phase of the artist’s career—one that the Wadsworth and its patrons in Hartford played a significant role in supporting. The exhibition will be on view at the Wadsworth through February 26, 2023.

"*Portrait of Mrs. Cooley* is a remarkable and deeply moving work. It brilliantly captures the sitter’s forlornness and unease in a foreign environment. A strong emotive quality, rendered through techniques reminiscent of older French artists such as Courbet and Millet, allows this painting to speak to us in a truly timeless manner,” said Oliver Tostmann, the Susan Morse Hilles Curator of European Art at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art.

French painter Balthus is known today for his controversial imagery of adolescent girls. Portraits and related genres are a lesser-known part of his oeuvre, yet they reveal his talent for artistic experiments and psychological acuity. After moving to a new studio at the Parisian Cour de Rohan in late 1935, Balthus started a new phase in his career marked by American patrons’ rising interest in his art. A small circle of patrons connected to the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art played a crucial role in this early phase of Balthus’ career.

*Portrait of Mrs. Cooley* (1937, Private Collection) portrays the artist’s first American sitter, Hartford-born Jane Cooley. It was painted during her first visit to France on the occasion of her honeymoon. This portrait is closely related to *Still Life* (1937, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art), a rare and unusually charged still life. Bought by the Wadsworth in 1938, *Still Life* is the first painting by Balthus acquired by any museum, pointing to his rising success.
A third painting, *The Bernese Hat* (1938, Wadsworth Atheneum), an intimate portrait of Balthus’s wife Antoinette de Watteville, exudes a similar air of ambiguity. Balthus created all three paintings in the years leading up to World War II, using his austere studio space as his staging ground.

Jane Cooley was part of a local group of art enthusiasts in Hartford animated by Arthur Everett “Chick” Austin, Jr., the spirited director of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art. Yet it was the collector and curator James Thrall Soby who was the leading force in acquiring works by Balthus during the 1930s, in Hartford and beyond. His legendary collection of modern art included several key works by the French artist.

The intimate juxtaposition of the three paintings allows for a reassessment of this crucial time in Balthus’s career and demonstrates how the young artist came into his own. While rarely seen archival documents from the Wadsworth illustrate the painter’s surprising success in Hartford, *The Spell of the Studio* reveals the ambivalent and nonetheless persistent relationship between Balthus and his audiences.

About the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art
Founded in 1842 with a vision for infusing art into the American experience, the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art is home to a collection of nearly 50,000 works of art spanning 5,000 years and encompassing European art from antiquity through contemporary as well as American art from the 1600s to today. The Wadsworth Atheneum’s five connected buildings—representing architectural styles including Gothic Revival, modern International Style, and 1960s Brutalism—are located at 600 Main Street in Hartford, Conn.

Current hours are noon–5pm Thursday–Sunday. Berkins on Main café hours are noon–4pm Thursday–Sunday. The library is open Fridays by appointment only. Visitors are encouraged to wear a face mask/covering while exploring the galleries. Face masks are required for all tours and gallery talks. Admission: $5–15; discounts for members, students, and seniors. Free admission for Hartford residents with Wadsworth Welcome registration. Free “happy hour” admission 4–5pm. Advance ticket registration via thewadsworth.org is encouraged, not required. Phone: (860) 278-2670; website: thewadsworth.org.


High resolution image files are available upon request.

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