

Art/Thomas B. Hess

BALTHUS: SEEN AND SCENE

"... Looking at herself in a mirror, the Japanese figure examines her body; she watches herself become a vessel of generation..."

Modern painting is abstract—except for Balthus. He's been considered a legendary exception since the 1930s, when we first saw his portraits at the Museum of Modern Art: Miro clutching his daughter; Derain, posed like Napoleon, only giant and potbellied, in dressing gown, erect above the body of a sadly rumpled model. Painters as different as Willem de Kooning and Fairfield Porter, Mark Rothko and Leland Bell, have studied Balthus's pictures with pleasure. There are other contemporary realists, of course. Only they look more peculiar than "modern." Hopper is a realist, for example, and as parochial as a Socony station. De Chirico is another, but in a visionary way that is above or beyond such coarse facts as paints on canvas.

Balthus is different. Everybody visited his infrequent exhibitions at the Pierre Matisse gallery as dutifully as the latest shows of Franz Kline or Barnett Newman. There is something that joins him to us; it glistens in his new exhibition at Matisse (41 East 57th Street, 11/15–12/15), which includes works from the mid-1930s to 1977 and which has at least three sensational paintings.

The most shocking is pictorially the blandest. It's a mild, old-masterly scene painted in the tobacco colors that Balthus adapted from Chardin and Courbet. The mellow umber to ochre tones, enlivened by occasional sparks of orange-through-green-to-violet secondary contrasts, are deployed in a stable, foursquare, slightly raked stage-like area. Centered in the virtual space is a turning, wheeling pair of two interlocking figures. Their arms and legs set up a centripetal motif that's beautifully poised within the volumetric room. Titled *The Guitar Lesson*, 1934, it has never been shown before.

The two figures are a music teacher and her young (about twelve years old) pupil. A guitar lies fallen on the floor, slightly flattened, as if by pressures from Juan Gris and other Cubists. There has been a struggle. Balthus catches a moment of pause when actions started in anger are about to change to acts of love. The teacher has

stretched the child across her lap, face up, as if to begin a punishment. Her right hand pulls the child's left tress, bringing the head back and down, almost to the floor. The pupil's dress has fallen up (or been yanked) to bare a pubescent, wax-hued body, from navel to just below the knees, where the white cotton stockings begin. To keep the child from falling off her lap, the teacher grasps her inner thigh: The left thumb and index almost fondle the hairless pubis. The pupil's right hand, palm up, rests heavily on the floor. Her left hand, perhaps in a gesture to keep from falling, grabs the teacher's dress and pulls it open at the neck to expose, in the exact center of the composition, a full, bare breast.

Light pours into the room from the right, masking the far side of the teacher's face in shadows and falling directly on the child's genitals. The teacher wears a long, concert-style violet dress (the echo of "violence" in "violet" works in French—"violet-violence," with the addition of "violer," which means "to violate"). The pupil's costume is more problematic. For an almost naked child, she wears a lot of clothes—and for an almost raped person, she seems calmly seductive. Under a red-and-white schoolgirl's smock there's a black dress and a red blouse with green collar. That she came to her lesson wearing fur-lined bedroom slippers might suggest a certain complicity.

There is a curious stasis—a dignified quiet—to the violent tableau. It's due partly to the close balance of forms and colors. Negative shapes are strong—the wedge of wallpaper framed by hand and breast, for example. Values are precisely adjusted across the surface, moving from dark cloth to pale flesh with tenacious logic.

There is a willed stiffness in the drawing of the girl, a wooden *faux-naïf* drama to her oversize face. Her body seems clenched from fright or lust and from a whole library of art historical allusions. Balthus cites Seurat's heavy outlines, folk art, children's book illustrations (especially *Struwwelpeter* and Tenniel's *Alice*), as well as classic figures in the falling girl (Nar-

cissus is invoked, and perhaps St. Paul). Her face could be a Caravaggio St. Francis, drowned in ecstasy. The quantity of erudition stuffed among the interstices of the composition adds to the sensation of distance and remove. The event takes place far away from us, far in time as well as space. We do not peer at it through the keyhole of a voyeur; rather, the scene is offered in evidence, calmly, as if from some handbook on archetypal middle-class dreams or classroom legends.

I dwell at some length on *The Guitar Lesson*, even though it can't be illustrated in the pages of *New York*, because the intensity of its image, locked in a classic pictorial structure, suggests the particular quality of Balthus's art. It's seductive, intellectual, youthful, anxious, erotic, challenging, and, to use an old-fashioned word, "Byronic." For over 40 years the artist has worked at, and looked, the romantic part. His landscapes (there is a handsome, solid, Swiss view at Matisse, with a crystal-blue Cézanne sky), his still lifes (fatty fruits, as in Courbet), and figure pieces, even at their most demure, retain a whiff of brimstone.

In the 1960s his style became more relaxed. He began to experiment with heavier textures, softer pastes, glistening surfaces, flattened planes. He pulled images up against the picture plane for decorative, almost tapestry, effects. The spirit of late Braque, always a danger sign, seemed to be invoked. Then, around 1967, with his new wife, Setsuko, as a model for a series of drawings and studies, came a breakthrough—an astonishing second wind, as if this artist, who delighted the *beau-monde* as a prodigy in his twenties, will have an equally profound effect in his seventies.

At this point in the narrative some biographical clues are needed, even though Balthus (or M. le comte Balthasar Klossowski de Rola, to give his preferred address) resents all such intrusions. When John Russell was about to write a major catalog about him, he told the critic to act as if "Balthus is **Mirrored images:** Balthus's *Figure With Black Mirror* (top) and *Figure With Red Table*, 1967–76, six feet wide.



“... Balthus's models usually have been youthful, moving out of childhood...”

a painter of whom *nothing is known*.” A recognized painter to the “happy few” rather than by the mass mediums by the mid-1930s. Balthus emerged from the privacy of his studio from time to time to make stage sets for Antonin Artaud's version of *The Cenci*, to draw illustrations for *Wuthering Heights* and other highbrow, aristocratic, often Anglophile projects. (The drawings for *Wuthering Heights*, by the by, are the most evocative modern book illustrations ever made.) In 1961, André Malraux, de Gaulle's redoubtable minister of culture, named Balthus director of the French Academy in Rome. He became the only major modern artist, to my knowledge, to hold an important government appointment; traditionally such posts are the prerogatives of hacks. In 1977, Balthus retired; during almost twenty years' tenure he directed extensive restorations on the interior of Raphael's Villa Medici, headquarters of the school, and its famous gardens.

In 1967, he started two large canvases, titled, with usual reticence, *Japanese Figure With Black Mirror* and *Japanese Figure With Red Table*. They were slowly brought to conclusion in 1970 and then entirely reworked in 1976. Exhibited for the first time in Pierre Matisse's show this month, they are painted with a species of Italian casein which lends itself to Balthus's favorite technique of piling correction on top of correction, image over image, for immensely complicated, dense surfaces on which light dances as if in a dusty room. The impact of Japanese art (he made a journey to the islands) is apparent, even though Balthus himself, characteristically, denies it. And Japan has had as beneficial an effect on his vision as it did on the Impressionists. The clenched pictorial flatness that had imprisoned his shapes and, so to speak, coarsened his imagination, eased and opened under the isometrics of Eastern perspective and casual overlap. In the new pictures, there is ample breathing room for the long, undulating bodies whose conspicuously extra vertebrae surely are a tribute to J. A. D. Ingres, Balthus's most illustrious predecessor at the academy. The figures glide over rugs tilted up so that they almost parallel the picture plane, yet tilted back enough to support the pale arabesques.

Burnt rose, earth green, and bruised mauve are a dominant triad among broken whites and grayed browns. Some colors are smudged in mysterious deposits; some lines are cut across the

surface with the authority of a sword thrust. There is an over-all toning and rubbing that remind you of the sixteenth-century villa walls that Balthus labored to refurbish at the Villa Medici.

Japan, Renaissance Italy, and modern Paris collide in the strangely hushed arena where the disciplines of rapt introspection are performed under the surveillance of a *voyant-voyeur* artist and of his co-conspirators—you, me, the viewers. Women looking at mirrors are recurring themes in Balthus's art. Usually they are metaphors for the transactions of perception—the artist's eye re-creating on his canvas the model who looks at herself the way the artist looks at her. Balthus's models usually have been youthful, moving out of childhood. They observe their bodies—or sense them—becoming sexually charged. The artist, too, watches and tacitly encourages the spectator to join in a contemplation of the mysteries of pubescence. It's an intricate drama of seen and scene, of sight and sense; the eye is enlisted as an instrument of heightened sensuality.

In the pictures finished last year, the transaction is altered. For the first time in Balthus's *oeuvre*, the figure is mature, weighty, pregnant. (Setsuko has had two children with Balthus; the first-born died tragically young.) Looking at herself in a mirror, the “Japanese figure” examines her face and body; she watches herself become a vessel of generation. She doesn't sense the oncoming of maturity, as do the nymphets in Balthus's famous earlier paintings; she observes the beginning of a new life. Which suggests mortality. Birth is the first day of dying. The dangers of life. The artist's own premonitions. Looking into the mirror he is painting for his model to look into, Balthus sees, for the first time, instead of the dashing Heathcliffe or the Romantic milord Byron—a black void. The skull that was there all along.

Balthus would be the first to denounce any and all such readings. He's against interpretation, especially when it drags him into the act. And he's right, of course. The main thing about the new paintings with their fresco-fresh surfaces is the counterpoint of ivory silhouette with umber rectangle, the shrill of red lacquer diminishing at mysterious intervals to faint coral. You could go on and on; you can get lost in Balthus's new paintings as if in a forest; there always is something to catch the eye, to lure you deeper.

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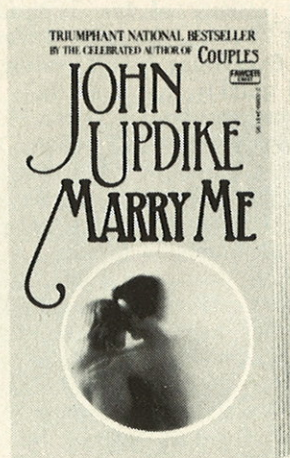
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