

ROOM GUIDE

Balthus

FONDATION BEYELER

BALTHUS

September 2, 2018 – January 1, 2019

 1–16

Where this symbol appears on the exhibit labels, you will find the work discussed in detail under the corresponding number in the guide.

Cover: Balthus, *Thérèse*, 1938 (detail)
Oil on cardboard on wood, 100.3 x 81.3 cm
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Bequest of Mr. and Mrs. Allan D. Emil,
in honor of William S. Lieberman, 1987
© 2018, Balthus

Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource/Scala, Florence

INTRODUCTION

In this exhibition the Fondation Beyeler shows work by Balthus (1908–2001), one of the last great masters of twentieth-century art and one of modern art's most idiosyncratic exponents. He was based at various times in France, Germany, Italy, and Switzerland, and adopted an individual approach that in many ways ran counter to the main developments in avant-garde art. His paintings are captivating and disquieting in equal measure, with some of their motifs continuing to provoke controversy.

The Fondation Beyeler's retrospective brings together 40 major paintings from all phases of this legendary artist's career. Ranging from portraits and interiors to landscapes and street scenes, they reveal the full variety and complexity of his art.

For several years *Passage du Commerce-Saint-André* (1952–54), the artist's large-scale *chef d'œuvre*, has been placed on permanent loan with the Fondation Beyeler from a major private collection. As a compelling synthesis of the chief concerns of Balthus's art, it forms the point of departure for the exhibition. Balthus's paintings are at once serene and tense. The artist focuses with particular intensity on the spatial and temporal dimensions of his

subject matter, which frequently centers on girls and young women. In doing so, he combines opposites in a challenging manner, uniting the real with the dreamlike, the erotic with the unbiased, the matter-of-fact with the mysterious, and the familiar with the uncanny.

The exhibition has come about with the generous support of the artist's family and is organized in association with the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid.

It is accompanied by a wide-ranging program of events that aim to promote deeper understanding of Balthus's work.

The exhibition has been curated by Dr. Raphaël Bouvier, Curator, and Michiko Kono, Associate Curator.

ROOM 1

1

Le Roi des chats, 1935

The King of Cats

Balthus was born in Paris on February 29, 1908 as Balthasar Klossowski. At an early age he decided to become a painter. *Le Roi des chats* is one of his few self-portraits. It shows the 27-year-old posing confidently as an elegant man about town. His elongated legs and the cat's strangely twisted head lend the painting a rather uncanny aspect.

The artist alludes to his *métier* not by means of attributes, such as a palette and brushes, but through a rather immodest inscription on the canvas or slab of stone leaning against the stool: "A portrait of H.M. [His Majesty] the King of Cats painted by himself, 1935." Cats played an important part in Balthus's life and work. They appear repeatedly in his paintings, not infrequently as the artist's alter ego. In this picture from 1935 a cat nestles up against the leg of its master the king, who is perhaps also its trainer. A whip on the chair hints at an animal tamer's gear. Balthus has clearly already tamed the cat in his painting.

ROOM 1

2

Place de l'Odéon, 1928

Balthus spent his childhood and adolescence in Paris, Berlin, and Switzerland. In 1924 he returned to Paris and began avidly copying Old Master paintings in the Louvre. Two years later he traveled to Italy, where he copied the work of such Renaissance artists as Piero della Francesca and Masaccio, whose art made a deep impression on him.

Balthus painted *Place de l'Odéon* at the age of twenty. The view is unusual, showing neither the broad space of the square nor the imposing façade of the Théâtre de l'Odéon. Instead, we look down the powerful row of columns on the other side of the square.

This early work reveals the artist's penchant for giving his images the quality of a *mise en scène*. The steps, columns, and heavy roof of the colonnade seem to form part of a stage set, on which the figures go about their daily business. The rear-view figure of a baker's boy carrying fresh rolls on his head and the cropped image of a waiter reading a newspaper at the left edge are figure types characteristic of the artist, which are re-staged in his later work in constantly new ways.

ROOM 2

3

La Rue, 1933

The Street

At first sight, the scene in *La Rue* resembles a snapshot of people on a street. The varied, almost bizarre collection of motifs presented to the viewer includes a man in white bearing a wooden plank on his shoulder, a woman carrying a puppet-like child, and a dwarflike girl playing with a ball. The people seem childlike, dreamy, even grotesque figures of fantasy. Only on closer inspection we do perceive the subtle arrangement of the nine figures. Balthus has related them meticulously to the buildings and objects, using their gazes and gestures to guide us through the picture.

To the left, unnoticed by the other figures, a young man clutches a girl from behind, grasping her left arm and holding on to her with his right arm. Is this an assault in broad daylight or simply two people jostling inadvertently? The painting provides a projection surface for the viewer's own thoughts and feelings.

La Rue, first exhibited in 1934 at the Galerie Pierre in Paris, is now considered one the artist's most important works.

ROOM 2

4

La Toilette de Cathy, 1933

Cathy Dressing

La Toilette de Cathy relates directly to the illustrations to Emily Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights* (1847) that Balthus produced in 1933–35. They provided a source of inspiration for many of his works. Balthus saw in the tragic love of Heathcliff and Cathy in Brontë's novel a parallel to his own relations with Antoinette de Watteville, a young woman from Bern whom he first met in 1924 and who for many years spurned his advances. He has given the two main figures in *La Toilette de Cathy* his own features and those of Antoinette. Heathcliff sits gloomily alongside Cathy, her dressing-gown opened to reveal her naked body while a servant combs her hair. Lost in thought, he seems to inhabit another world from that occupied by the two women. Balthus noted that in this painting he had treated Cathy "like a vision, like a memory conjured up by Heathcliff, who is essentially sitting in the room alone."

ROOM 3

5

La Jupe blanche, 1937

The White Skirt

From 1930 on, Balthus created nine portraits of his beloved Antoinette de Watteville, who eventually became his wife. The scion of a distinguished, well-to-do family, she for many years rejected the impoverished, if talented, artist in favor of a Belgian diplomat. In 1937, when Balthus's financial circumstances had improved, she herself finally offered to marry him. They lived together as a married couple until 1946 with two sons born from the union.

Femme à la ceinture bleue (Room 3) and most of the artist's other depictions of Antoinette are classic portraits, but *La Jupe blanche* is notable for its detailed treatment of the patterns on the shoes and drapery and for the young woman's seductive pose. Withdrawn into herself, Antoinette relaxes almost absent-mindedly in an armchair, her open blouse offering a view of a skin-colored bra that reveals more than it conceals. The curving folds of her silk skirt cling smoothly to the legs, emphasizing the body beneath. The enticing interplay between veiled and unveiled forms was a theme to which Balthus returned throughout his career.

ROOM 3

6

Portrait de Mrs. Paul Cooley, 1937

Portrait of Mrs. Paul Cooley

Portraiture helped Balthus to build a reputation and stabilize his finances following the commercial flop of his first solo exhibition in 1934, and a suicide attempt prompted by unrequited love. His portraits, couched mainly in shades of dark brown, capture remarkably the appearance and character of his sitters with unvarnished immediacy. Most of these works were commissioned by affluent or illustrious people. This example depicts Jane Cooley, an American on her honeymoon in Paris. She is shown in Balthus's plain, sparsely furnished studio in the Cour de Rohan, which served as the setting for several of his portraits from 1935 onwards.

ROOM 4

7

Les Enfants Blanchard, 1937

The Blanchard Children

From 1936 to 1939 an adolescent girl called Thérèse Blanchard became the artist's favorite model. In some paintings he portrayed her in serious, introspective moods in the style of classic bust-length portraits; in others he emphasized her poise and erotic aura. The 12-year-old Thérèse, who is presumed to have lived near Balthus's studio, appears in this picture with her brother Hubert, two years her senior. She kneels on the floor as she reads in a pose typical of children, while Hubert leans on the table and gazes into space with a bored expression. As in *La Rue* (Room 2), the figures' positions and postures are precisely calibrated so as to generate a subtle spatial interplay between figures and objects. The shape of the table, for example, echoes the girl's pose. Balthus reused or varied her pose in a number of works, including *Le Salon (I)* (Room 4) and *La Partie de cartes* (Room 6). In 1941 *Les Enfants Blanchard* was acquired by Picasso, with whom Balthus was friends.

ROOM 4

8

Thérèse rêvant, 1938

Thérèse Dreaming

Despite the variety of his œuvre, Balthus is generally associated with images of girls and young women. His fascination with this subject lay not least with the self-absorption and aloofness that he saw as characteristic of adolescents. Typically, his pictures of girls on the cusp of adulthood oscillate between the nonchalance of a child and the seductive erotic appeal of a grown woman. *Thérèse rêvant* is among the first and finest examples. The sitter's confident pose, and the pensive yet relaxed expression on her averted face, lend her a self-assured and sensual aura. Thérèse apparently believes herself unobserved, detached from time and space—or is she in fact deliberately exerting her seductive power over the viewer?

This painting in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, recently caused a great stir. An online petition demanded that it be removed from view or placed in a broader explanatory context. This prompted widespread

public discussion of the freedoms and boundaries of art, as well as the responsibility that museums have toward visitors and artists. The Fondation Beyeler's special program of events accompanying this exhibition offers an opportunity to continue this debate.

ROOM 5

9

Le Cerisier, 1940

The Cherry Tree

Balthus's œuvre is dominated by interiors, yet he also created exquisite landscape painting. He painted *Le Cerisier* in 1940, shortly after returning from the front in World War II. Exempted from military service, he left Paris and settled in the village of Champrovent in unoccupied Savoy. We notice the figure in the painting only on closer inspection: hidden in the shade of a cherry tree, a young woman in a dark dress stands on a ladder and reaches for a fruit on one of the branches. It is as if we have come across this idyllic, harmonious scene by chance.

Balthus painted no images of war during hostilities. Asked if he had never felt the need to do so, he replied: "It's enough to have experienced [the war]. When I was demobbed, after 1940, I painted *Le Cerisier*. That was the expression of an upsurge of joy. A way of saying 'go to hell' to war, to misery, to history."

ROOM 5

10

Les Beaux Jours, 1944–46

The Golden Days

This image of a bourgeois interior, painted in Fribourg in Switzerland, is dominated by an adolescent girl reclining languidly on a chaise longue, a mirror in her hand. Like a puppet on broken strings, she appears with one arm dangling, her legs largely naked, and her breasts bared. She is enjoying the "golden days" invoked by the title, oblivious of her surroundings and in a trancelike state. Time seems to stand still. At first, we may not notice the man illuminated by the open fire, who almost merges with the flames. The viewer is witness to a mysterious, intimate scene, once again turned into an onlooker. Balthus has generated a discomfiting situation that both unsettles and provokes us.

ROOM 6

11

Jeune fille au miroir, 1948

Young Girl at the Mirror

Balthus returned to Paris in 1946 after a lengthy stay in Switzerland and remained there until 1954. In *Jeune fille au miroir* a young woman stands in front of a mirror, naked but for a cloth somewhat covering her left shoulder, upper arm and private parts. Behind her, we see a smaller, elderly woman shrouded in darkness. Mirrors have a long history in art as an attribute of Venus, a symbol of vanity, and an instrument of prophecy. As a means of self-observation and self-admiration, they also point to transience. It is precisely in their contrasting elements that the two women in Balthus's painting are connected—light versus dark, old versus young, small versus large, dressed versus naked. As she gazes at her younger companion, the elderly woman, for whom Balthus drew on illustrations in the children's book *Struwwelpeter* for inspiration, seems to represent the shadow of the future falling across youthful beauty and vanity.

ROOM 6

12

La Partie de cartes, 1948–50

The Game of Cards

The card game, a frequent motif in the history of art, was also repeatedly used as a theme by Balthus. This example shows a boy and girl in a barely furnished room playing their last cards, it seems. The extinguished candle is merely a stage prop, since the light enters the picture from outside to illuminate the girl. While one half of her face is mysteriously shaded, the other half is starkly highlighted, revealing a saucy expression and sly smile. The light also models the boy's body, stressing its contorted pose and grotesque proportions. The girl exudes calm self-assurance as she sits at the table like a fortune-teller. Yet her opponent also seems confident of victory. The diagonal thrust of his body while he hides a card from the girl, but not from the viewer, generates tension and suspense. Who will win the game?

ROOM 7

13

Passage du Commerce-Saint-André, 1952–54

Balthus began working on this large picture, his *chef d'œuvre*, in 1952 in his studio in the Cour de Rohan in Paris. He finished it two years later, after moving to the Château de Chassy in Burgundy.

The painting depicts the end of the street in Paris that contained the artist's studio and apartment. In it Balthus takes up a subject he had addressed in *La Rue* (1933; Room 2), once more transforming an actual street into a mysterious stage set on which time seems to stand still. The ghostly, self-absorbed actors in this play appear frozen in their roles as representatives of the three stages of life: childhood, adulthood, and old age. This and other pictures of this period reveal a striking change in the artist's palette, whereby he increasingly adopted pastel shades veiled in gray, emphasizing the matte and rough painted surfaces, in the style of frescoes.

ROOM 7

14

Les Trois Sœurs, 1955

The Three Sisters

This is the second in a series of five group portraits depicting the three sisters Marie-Pierre, Béatrice, and Sylvia Colle, each of them in a similar setting. The sisters were the daughters of Balthus's gallerist Pierre Colle, who was already dead when the pictures were painted. Colle's wife, Carmen, commissioned the artist to paint them as compensation for returning a painting to him that she owned at the time, *La Jupe blanche* (Room 3). The elegantly dressed sisters are engaged in activities that probably reveal something of their respective characters. In compositional terms, they complement each other perfectly in their poses, including the position of their heads, and in the contrasting colors of their clothes. Moreover, the horizontal format creates a notably intimate atmosphere that enfolds the viewer as well.

ROOM 8

15

La Chambre turque, 1965/66

The Turkish Room

La Chambre turque dates from the mid-1960s when Balthus was director of the Academie de France à Rome and lived in the Renaissance building housing it, the Villa Medici. The painting's richly ornamental character and Oriental appearance come as a surprise in view of his previous work. It shows a petite woman reclining like an odalisque on a sofa in the villa's Turkish Room, her dressing-gown open as she gazes at herself in a hand mirror. But does she really look into it? Balthus's second wife, the Japanese painter Setsuko Ideta, adopts here a pose traditionally associated with Venus. The matte surface, resulting from a mixture of casein and tempera, recalls Renaissance frescoes, which Balthus studied often on his many trips to Italy. During his time in Rome he was closely involved in the restoration of the dilapidated villa and this awakened, furthermore, his interest in ornamentation. Sumptuous tiles, brightly decorated fabrics, and rich patterns became typical features of his late work.

ROOM 8

16

Le Chat au miroir III, 1989–94

Cat with a Mirror III

Cats and mirrors—two motifs that recur throughout Balthus's œuvre come together in *Le Chat au miroir III*. The artist continued to paint in his old age, producing works, which, with their rich colors, heavy and delicate fabrics, and distinctive patterns, bear testament to his undiminished powers. This example shows a girl in historical costume on a sofa covered with a variety of patterned textiles and cushions. She holds up a mirror to a cat rather than to herself, but neither does the animal look into it directly, nor is anything reflected in it. On returning from Rome to Switzerland in 1977, Balthus settled in the Grand Chalet at Rossinière in the canton of Vaud. There he led a secluded life with his wife until his death in 2001.

INFORMATION

Texts by Raphaël Bouvier, Christine Burger, Michiko Kono,
Nadine Koller, Daniel Kramer, and Jana Leiker
Edited by Daniel Kramer and Jana Leiker
Copyedited by Andrew Horsfield
Designed by Heinz Hiltbrunner

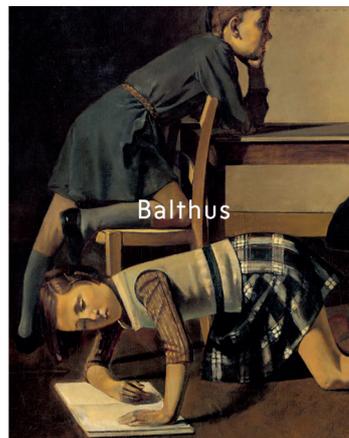
Your feedback is welcome at:
fondation@fondationbeyeler.ch

or via:
www.fondationbeyeler.ch/news
www.facebook.com/FondationBeyeler
twitter.com/Fond_Beyeler

The exhibition *Balthus* is generously supported by:
Beyeler-Stiftung
Hansjörg Wyss, Wyss Foundation

L. & Th. La Roche Stiftung
Vera Michalski-Hoffmann

CATALOGUE

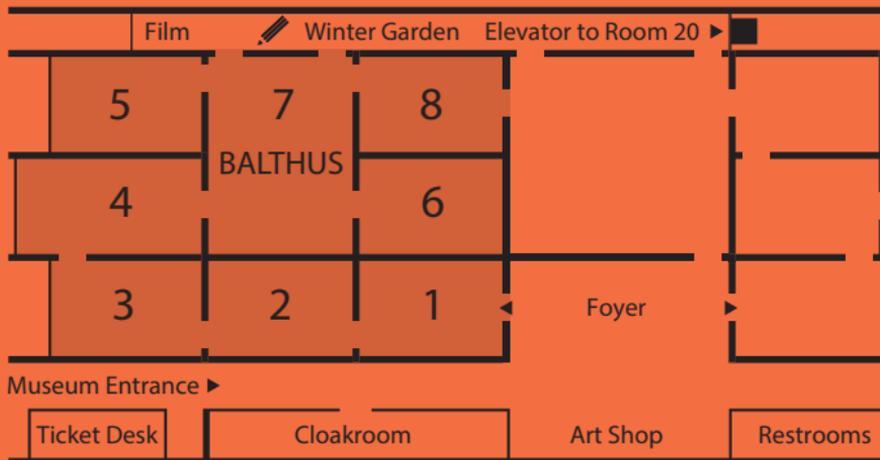


A catalogue is published in connection with the exhibition
by Hatje Cantz Verlag.
176 pp., 77 ills., CHF 62.50
Further publications on Balthus are available at the Art Shop:
shop.fondationbeyeler.ch

Upcoming exhibition:
The Early PICASSO – Blue and Rose Period
February 3 – May 26, 2019

FONDATION BEYELER
Baselstrasse 101, CH-4125 Riehen/Basel
www.fondationbeyeler.ch

BALTHUS



The exhibition is arranged chronologically, in the sequence indicated by the room numbers.

Caution: please do not touch the works of art!

“Balthus im Gespräch”

Museum tour and discussion (in German)

Every Sunday 1 – 2 pm

In the exhibition space questions will be addressed concerning the artist and his work and discussed in front of the pictures together with visitors to the museum. “Balthus im Gespräch”: free of charge

✍ In the museum’s winter garden (to the side of room 7), space has been created where you can leave your own opinion on the exhibition. Share your thoughts on Balthus with us!