

The sacred and erotic vision of  
**BALTHUS**

By April Kingsley



*Opposite page:*  
Nude in Front of a  
Mantel, 1955-, 77 x  
64½ inches, oil on  
canvas. *Right:*  
Balthus with his  
niece and model.

Loomis Dean

One of the strangest and most fascinating artists who ever lived is a man called Balthus. It is said that he's a Polish count, Le Comte Balthasar Klossowski de Rola, and his aristocratic life has been as shrouded in mystery as the thoughts of the nubile, day-dreaming little girls he so frequently paints. Rivaling Greta Garbo in reclusiveness, he

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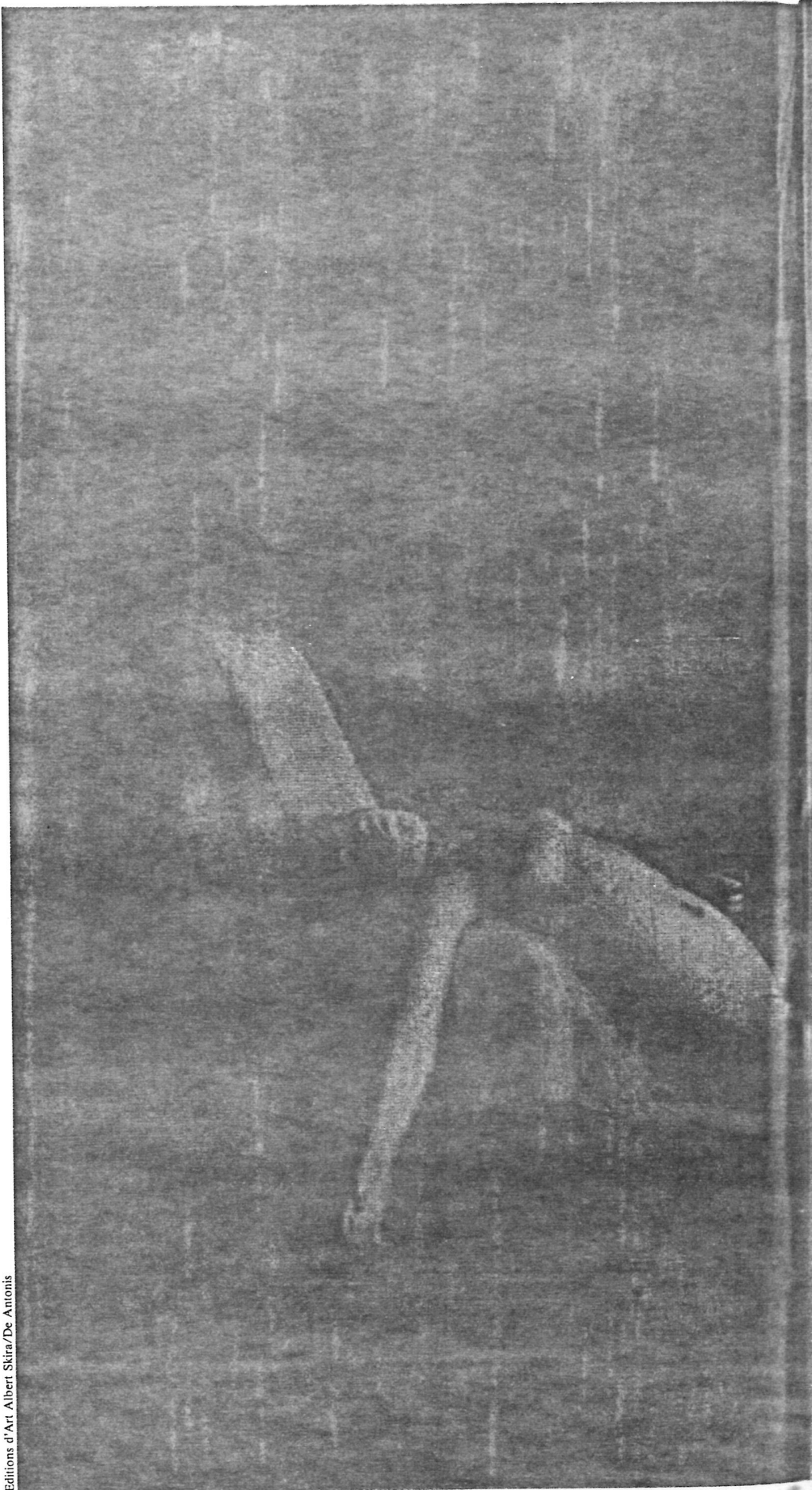
has been officially photographed only once, twenty years ago, by his friend Loomis Dean at Balthus' chateau in Classy, France. Poised in midaction at the pond which reflects his princely home, his gaunt, handsome face looking back over his shoulder, Balthus looks like a movie version of a World War II resistance agent—his long, lean body swathed in a windblown trench-coat and a cigarette dangling from his lips. Could this unlikely and secretive man be, as so many have claimed, our greatest living figure painter?

## Balthus' nudes parallel Nabokov's *Lolita*.

The question has not been easy to answer. Balthus paints precious few pictures a year and destroys most of the working drawings for his canvases by walking over them until they're erased. He exhibits as infrequently as possible, and the people who can afford to purchase his erotic and obsessive paintings guard them jealously, while the few museums collecting his work rarely put it on view. Despite this deliberately limited audience, Balthus' reputation has been steadily growing since his first one-man show in 1934. His Museum of Modern Art retrospective in 1956 was ill-timed, pitting his traditional canvases against a memorial exhibition of Jackson Pollock's dazzling pyrotechnics. So instead of making him an overnight star with a wide following, it only added the prestige of an official blessing to his endeavor. Two years ago, when he was sixty-nine, there were long lines to see his mini retrospective at New York's Pierre Matisse Gallery. In that show the public's curiosity was fueled by his long-standing underground reputation as a great realist and by the presence in the gallery of his most scandalous painting, *The Guitar Lesson*, 1934— in which a swooning girl student seems to be on the verge of learning more than music from her instructress.

Now Balthus' work will finally be available to a broader audience—Skira/Rizzoli has published an enormous (14 inches by 14 inches) monograph on him with a text by well-known French art historian Jean Leymarie—though the \$100 price tag is in keeping with the high cost and chronic inaccessibility of his work. One's understanding of Balthus' art is changed by seeing it in this kind of armchair retrospective. What is lost in tactile appreciation of the paint surfaces (a special and not always satisfying experience in any case since he's a laborious and unfacile painter) is gained in formal understanding. Obsessively repeated poses, exquisite color chords, echoing curves, and ingeniously interconnected linear networks (such as the rhythmically swinging web) in *Big Landscape with Cow* or the geometry in *The Méditerranée's Cat* all leap from the page with stunning vividness. The sensuousness of Balthus' forms is bound inextricably to the sensuality of his subject matter; their relationship is symbiotic, one might even say incestuous.

Editions d'Art Albert Skira/De Antonis



## Violence marked much of his early work.



Loomis Dean



The Minneapolis Institute of Arts

Balthus is an intensely serious artist who rejects abstraction in favor of deliberately classicized figuration; yet his paintings are rife with modernist ambiguity and stylistic complexity. On the one hand he is revered, even idolized, by conservative painters the world over for his steadfast devotion to pure realistic painting sans expressionism, surrealism, or any other adulteration. (He was even appointed by André Malraux to direct the French Academy in Rome at the Villa Medici, the epitome of artistic conservatism, between 1961 and 1977, despite his fame as a painter of Lolitas, and despite his reputation as a recluse.) On the other hand, all the artist friends he has and has had were committed modernists of the first order—Arp, Bonnard, Giacometti, Léger, Miro, Derain, Matisse, and Picasso—and none was an academic. Interestingly, Picasso, who bought one of Balthus' early canvases, *The Children*, 1937–, once said: “Balthus is so much better than all these young artists who do nothing but copy me; he is a real painter.”

Balthus may be the bulwark of traditional figuration, but the adolescent girls he paints, draped drowsing over chaises or buried in their books, legs up and apart, and wearing tiny skirts—to say nothing of

his swooning, ecstatic, and nubile nudes—are all intensely provocative. In fact, much of his early work is also marked by suggestions of violence. Sometimes this is symbolic as in his amusing sign for a restaurant, the painting called *The Méditerranée's Cat*, 1949–. The aggressive cat-man in this painting who is about to devour his fish dinner is Balthus' alter ego. He once painted a self-portrait entitled *A Portrait of H.M. The King of Cats*, and the cats that stare out at us from many of Balthus' depictions of female self-absorption hint at animalistic meanings beneath the surface beauty of these canvases. In other paintings, the violence is more blatant; *The Victim*, 1937– shows a naked girl splayed out on a blood-soaked sheet, and in the infamous *Guitar Lesson* sex and violence conjoin.

In a way that parallels Nabokov, with whom he has obvious affinities, Balthus' style is an uneasy mix of three ingredients: an idolatry of the great art of the past, an immediately obsessive sexual content, and an acute awareness of the structures of modernism. All three are held in delicate balance in his best work and are out of equilibrium in his weakest. The Metropolitan Museum of Art's *Nude in Front of*

*Top left: Balthus is a man of mystery. He only has been officially photographed once, twenty-years ago by his friend Loomis Dean. Above: The Living Room, 1941–1943–, oil on fabric.*



## His parents were intellectuals and aristocrats.



The Golden Days,  
1944-1949-, 58 1/4 x  
78 3/4 inches.

Hirshhorn Collection/John Tennant

*a Mantel*, 1955-, one of his finest canvases, obviously owes a major debt to the fifteenth-century master Piero della Francesca in its color, its use of perspective, and its ritualized formality. The studied Renaissance calm only serves to reinforce the erotic suggestiveness of the young girl's quiet, narcissistic contemplation—her self-absorption before the mirror becomes for us, as it was for the artist, a voyeuristic experience. At the left of the painting stands a fireplace which has been described by Pierre Klossowski, the artist's brother and author of the well-known erotic novel *The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes*, as Balthus' symbol of male power and aggression. In this large canvas its catlike mouth yawns open before her, as if ready to devour her delicate golden-pink flesh. But in addition to all this one senses the modernist presence of artists as varied as Seurat and Mondrian, Picasso and Degas. Its cool, calculating geometry would be unthinkable prior to twentieth-century developments in cubism and abstraction.

That Balthus asks so much of painting, and puts so much into it, must have some basis in his background, but since he never gives real interviews, talks painting only with close painter friends, and is rarely quoted, a writer has to search like a detective to piece his biography together. Even then the enshrouding myths he continuously weaves around himself—such as being the illegitimate son of Rilke—cause questions regarding every fact.

He was born on February 29, 1908, leap year, which is of interest because when he was forty-eight and chose to answer arch speculation about his youthful subjects, he said, "Having had only twelve birthdays, I may consider myself only twelve years old." Now he is only seventeen. Balthus' parents—Baladine and Erich Klossowski—are said to be descended from a long line of Polish aristocrats on one side and Anglo-Saxons going back to Lord Byron on the other—from whence came his title, and, some claim, his Byronic features and temperament.

When Balthus was only twelve years old he published a picture-story book on the life of his beloved cat Mitsou. The drawings for it show the direct influence of Bonnard, and the introduction was written by his spiritual (if not actual) father, Rilke.

Balthus' mother was a sensitive painter who had also been much admired by writers. Her work may well have been a direct influence on his very idiosyncratic style, perhaps tempering the Bonnard and Derain influences which are the only important ones he cites. Balthus' father, who was an art historian and wrote a book on Daumier, became an impressionist painter of noted competence, but Balthus rejected impressionism early on. His parents belonged to a social, intellectual, literary, and artistic milieu that recognized no borders between nations or barriers between disciplines, and this inheritance probably best accounts for his composite, international pictorial style.

Pierre Klossowski once wrote an article on his brother for *ArtNews* in which he discussed some of the painter's sources in nineteenth-century children's book illustrations, such as Tenniel's of *Alice in Wonderland*, and the drawings for Dr. Hoffmann's *Strubbelpeter*. But did he have a sister? No one says, just as there are only occasional references to a wife he married in 1937, a daughter, and two sons. How much of the time his children have been with him, whether they ever posed for him, or even if there are only three is not recorded. Neither is the status of his former relationship with a beautiful aristocratic Japanese woman who apparently instructed him in Eastern civilization during the sixties and posed for the two pendant pictures of 1967-76-, *Japanese Girl with Black Mirror* and *Japanese Girl with Red Table*. It is rumored that Balthus is now married again and the father of two small children.

An artist's models are always of iconographical interest, and, when the paintings of them are so provocative, our curiosity magnifies. Helene Valentine, a beautiful New York painter who met Balthus in the early 1960s when he was at the Villa Medici, allowed her two daughters, Cleo and Manouche Remy, age thirteen and eleven respectively, to pose for him twice a week for a few months. She says they had a wonderful time doing so, because he "spoiled them with huge boxes of chocolates" and, upon occasion, invited them to dine with him and his aristocratic friends. Both girls were unusually beautiful, and neither was shy about posing in the nude since they had done so before for their mother. One day when she came to pick

them up, Valentine recalls, she saw her younger girl, Manouche, who "had a catlike body which almost purred," standing in the exotically tiled Turkish Room, a dazzling vision with a turban on her golden hair, her body encircled by a halo of glowing sunlight.

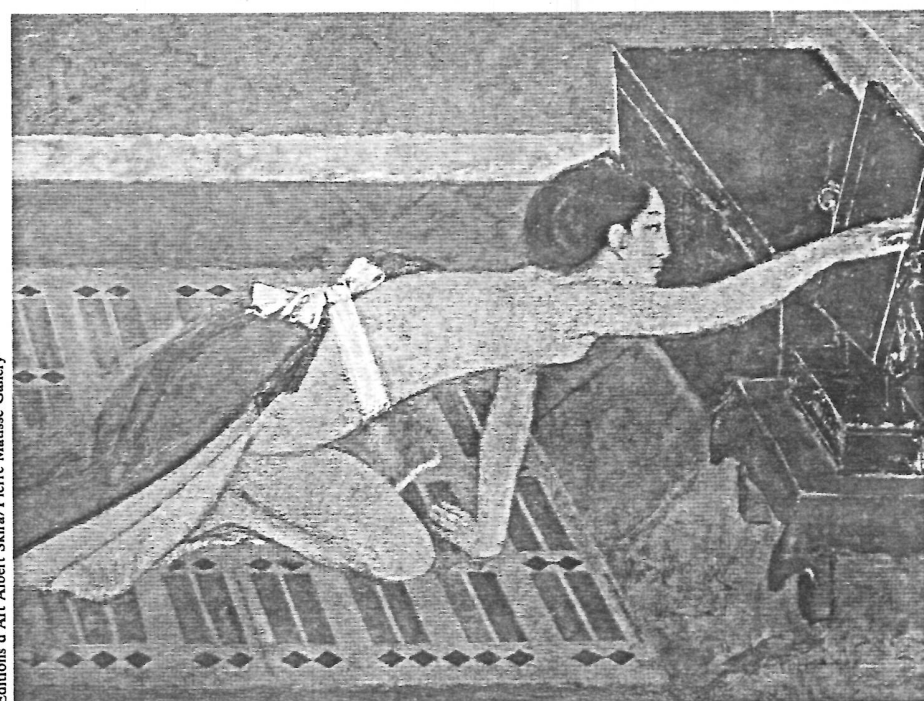
Though these two girls thoroughly enjoyed posing for Balthus, others have found sitting for him to be a painfully protracted experience even though he apparently only draws, never paints, from the model. Since he tries to capture a maximum amount of pictorial space with the body by splaying out the limbs, the poses are bound to be uncomfortable. According to John Rewald, whose wife sat for Balthus, the artist almost tears his hair as he agonizes over each few lines in a drawing, muttering to himself that he can't draw, that it's hopeless to try, ripping his sketches, and throwing them to the floor.

In his sense of inadequacy before the motif and in his intermittent awkwardness, he shares something of Cézanne's modesty and temerity in the face of art's transcendent difficulties. He has even gone to the extreme of calling all his pictures "utter failures," and in fact every date on a work of his is qualified by an open-ended dash—1964–, or 1967–76—indicating a supreme Cézannesque lack of confidence in their completeness. Ambrose Vollard, the famous Cézanne collector and dealer, was a member of the Klossowski circle, and Balthus was once taken to see Mont Sainte Victoire, but neither of these facts adequately account for the frequently striking similarity of Balthus' drawing style to Cézanne's, or for the many concordances between their landscapes and some of their interiors. Cézanne's influence is obvious in *Fruit on a Window Sill*, 1956– and *Big Landscape with Cow*, 1958–60– and covert in his paintings of cardplayers. Balthus claims to be an autodidact, and surely as many lessons were learned firsthand from Cézanne's work as were picked up by copying Poussin in the Louvre. Chardin, Courbet, and Corot must also have been well-digested, while some of the landscapes look as though he were strongly affected by German and Austrian romantic painting of the early nineteenth century. All of his many specific sources, both ancient and modern, bear investigation.

Because his first show was in a surrealist



Editions d'Art Albert Skira/Peter Willi



Editions d'Art Albert Skira/Pierre Matisse Gallery

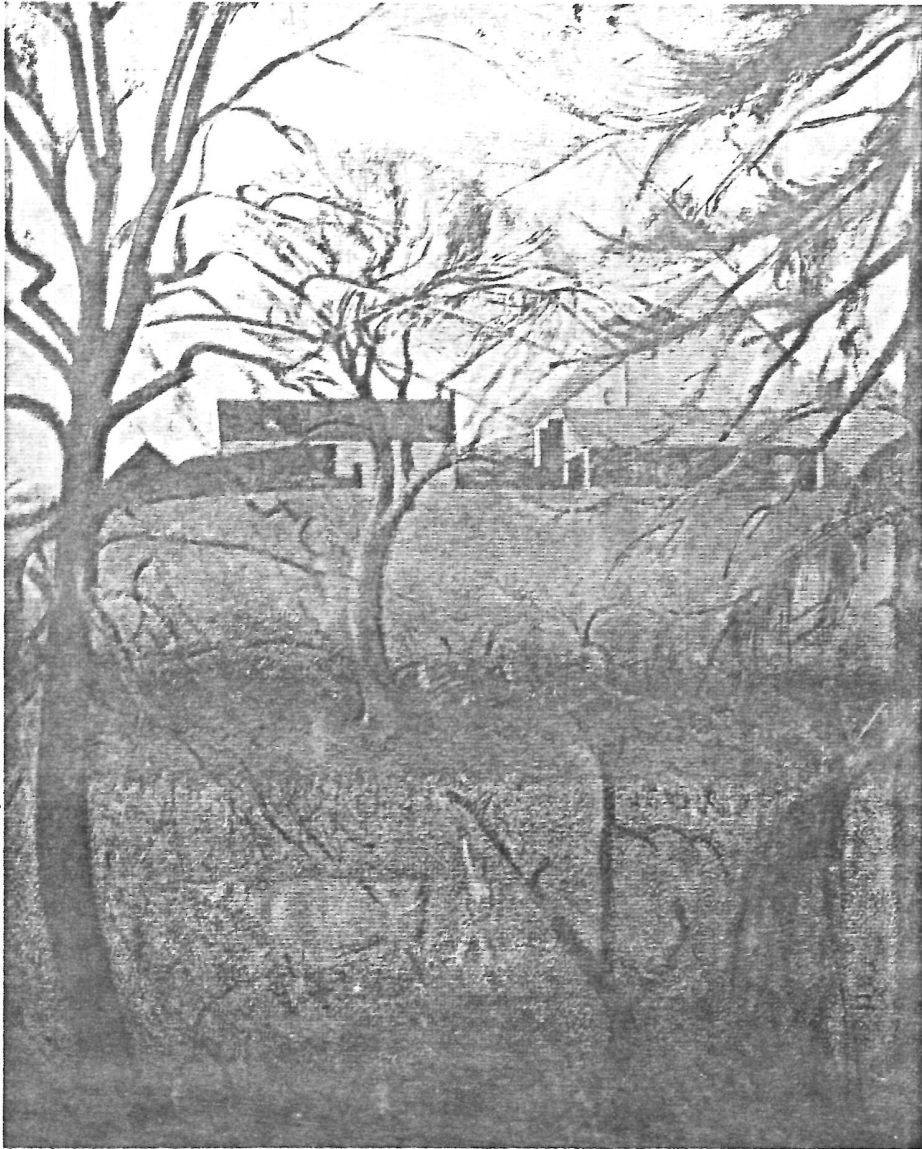
gallery, Balthus has long been mistakenly associated with that movement. The only thing he shares with surrealism is sexual content, and his particular approach to that content actually has much more in common with Dadaist Marcel Duchamp than with the theatrical juxtapositions and exploited subconscious of surrealism. Duchamp once said that the only thing in the world he considered serious was eroticism, and he based his life's work—*The Large Glass* and all its attendant paraphernalia—on that idea.

Balthus is interested in the idea of art as alchemy, and artist as medium or magician. And, like Duchamp, who transformed an

*Above: Japanese Girl with Black Mirror 1967–1976–, 57 x 77 inches.*

*Top: The Méditerranée's Cat, 1949–, 50 x 72¾ inches. The aggressive cat-man is Balthus' alter ego—and cats are also one of his most frequent subjects.*

## The painter owes much to Cézanne and Piero.



Editions d'Art Albert Skira/Pierre Matisse Gallery

Big Landscape with Cow, 1958-1960-, 64 x 51¼ inches. Balthus' debt to Cézanne is clearly shown in this painting executed in midcareer.

apparent obsession with virginity, androgyny, and incest into intellectually complex abstract art of exquisite beauty, Balthus transforms the Lolita syndrome into a symbol of spiritual enlightenment.

Known to feel that childhood is the heroic age of man, Balthus focuses on the moments of dawning self-awareness that are transforming child into adult. The ecstatic totality of self-absorption so graphically pictured in *The Room*, 1952-54- or *The Golden Days*, 1944-49— and so clearly suggested by every one of Balthus' inward-turning adolescents, is transformed into a metaphor for "seeing

the light"—carnally, intellectually, philosophically, and even religiously. The artist is the bringer of the light. He literally is portrayed stirring the fire in *The Golden Days*, while his place is taken by a perverse little female creature in *The Room*, where sharply pointed triangles take on a knife-like phallic meaning in the context of the swooning female's softly flowing curves.

Artist as seducer is an old theme, as old as the idea of the seductiveness of art. The self-absorption of Balthus' models goes hand-in-glove with his own extreme self-consciousness as an artist. This quality, which lends his work a stilted, studied air, is the very aspect that gives it such psychological depth. It is as though arrows point to hidden meanings everywhere. There simply aren't any nonexpressionist representational painters besides Balthus who plumb the psychological so deeply.

Light is the painter's medium, and Balthus' exalted manner of using it to define forms, letting it flow over the repeated curves of his nymphets' bodies, fills the viewer's body with the sensation of being caressed. This mastery of light which enables Balthus to embody the spirit in form is what makes him great. Little girls, pure and virginal, approaching the moment of realizing themselves and life, are necessary vessels into which he pours his most deeply-felt emotions. They are transformed into icons through the medium of light.

Balthus has noted that Poussin painted more than twenty sleeping nymphs and, whether actually asleep or only lost in reverie, daydreaming or reading, he has painted at least as many nymphets. "Erotic?" he said when someone suggested that people found them so. "Would they call Poussin erotic?" The answer is yes, now that Balthus' vision has made us see them so. André Malraux once said that the work of art doesn't speak a monologue with history but a dialogue. Great artists always change the way we view the art of the past, and this transformation is not the least of Balthus' accomplishments. □

The show "Balthus in Chicago Collections" will be on exhibition at the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art March 21 through May 18, 1980. It will include small drawings and watercolors and large paintings borrowed from Chicago-area collectors.