



The Living Room

Balthus (Balthasar Klossowski de Rola)

1941-1943

Painting/ Oil on canvas

France, 20th Century

Acc. # 66.66, Gallery 376

Gallery Label: Although his first exhibition was in a Surrealist gallery and he had many friends among the Surrealists, Balthus never adopted the methods of Surrealism. He has no interest in visual puns, automatism, abstraction, or other facets of the Surrealist program. What he does share with Surrealism is an interest in eroticism as a central fact of psychic life. His constant theme is the self-absorbed, dawning sexuality of the virginal adolescent.

Questions:

- **What's happening here?**
- **What adjectives would you use to describe this painting?**

- How does this scene make you feel?
- What about this scene makes you feel that way?
- What seems realistic ?
- What feels surreal? (dream-like)
- How do the two girls relate to each other?
- What makes you think "The Living Room", what are some symbols of domestic life in the picture? What are some signs this tableau is perhaps not so cozy?

The Artist:

Balthasar Klossowski de Rola , known as Balthus, was born in Paris in 1908 and died in 2001 in Switzerland and was considered an esteemed but controversial Polish-French modern artist. His father, Erich, was a noted art-historian and his mother Elisabeth Spiro was a painter who encouraged her son's interest in art. In "Balthus, a Biography " by Nicholas Fox Weber , Balthus had made dubious claims about his ancestry, once claiming he was descended from Lord Byron on his father's side. He would frequently add to the story of his mother's ancestry, saying she was related to the Romanovs. (The title of count was fabricated by the artist himself.) At any rate, the family was highly cultivated and Balthus was a pupil and friend of the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke. The painter Pierre Bonnard also further nurtured his talent.

He published a book including his drawings when he was only 13 years old, the theme of which was a boy and his cat, thereby establishing his life-long fascination with cats, including the presence of a cat in our painting of "The Living Room". He spent some time in Florence in the 20's and lived in Morocco in the early 30's, actually serving in the Moroccan infantry.

He moved to Paris when he was 25 on the advice of Bonnard, and proceeded to copy the works of Poussin and other classic masterpieces at the Louvre. He then exhibited "The Guitar Lesson", causing much controversy due to its

sexually explicit theme of a young girl and her female teacher. In a letter he described the painting as “an erotic scene. But you have to understand, it is not in the least quirky, none of the usual little naughtiness you show around under cover with winks and nudges. No, I want to proclaim in broad daylight, with sincerity and feeling, all the throbbing tragedy of a drama of the flesh, proclaim vociferously, the deep-rooted laws of instinct. Thus to return to the passionate content of art. Down with hypocrites!”

He married Antoinette de Watteville in 1937 and she became the model for a series of his portraits. He had two children from this marriage. When Germany invaded France, he and his wife fled to a farm, where in 1942 he completed “The Living Room”. After leaving for Switzerland in 1942 to escape Nazi France, he returned four years later. At this time he met Picasso and began designing stage décor.

His international fame grew with exhibitions at MOMA and he began to cultivate the image of himself as an enigma. When he was 59 he married Setsuko Ideta, whom he had met in Japan and who was 35 years his junior. They had one son, Fumio who died at the age of 2 of TaySachs disease and one daughter, Harumi.

His painting “The Children”, acquired from the private collection of Picasso, was exhibited in the Louvre, making him one of the few artists whose works were shown while he was still living.

In his later years, he rarely granted interviews and lived in near isolation with his family in Switzerland. His funeral was attended by rock stars, prime ministers, supermodels, and the president of France.

Style:

Balthus worked within the Western tradition of figure painting. He is best known for his paintings of every day life invested with a sense of mystery, symbolism, and eroticism.

When he first gained success as a painter in 1934, modernist art movements captivated Europe. While his contemporaries were painting in the cubist and surrealist styles, Balthus painted figures and landscapes in a more traditional style. The Bauhaus and expressionist movements had swept Germany, and France played host to a grand collection of artists such as Man Ray, Picasso, and Matisse. Most major artistic and creative movements in Europe were focused on defining the new and breaking from the old, classical orders that dominated the 19th century culture.

Balthus' work was always figurative, despite the strong tendency toward abstraction in the 20th century. Throughout his career the subject matter of his work was fairly constant, depicting street scenes, landscapes, portraits and interior domestic scenes. He is best known for his painting of adolescents, especially young girls who are often nude or partially clothed in intimate, indoor settings where the painter – and by extension the viewer- appear to be peeking. His figures and objects are weighty geometric forms that appear frozen in time. He created a sense of space in his composition by imitating Renaissance models, using the inter-relationship of figures, objects and setting . The atmospheric stillness in Balthus' painting infuses the everyday activities he depicted with a psychological sense of mystery and intrigue.

Later, he built up thick layers of oil paint on his canvases, called an impasto, and painted with warm, bright colors which made the paintings look like frescoes executed in plaster. He also executed work based on Japanese prints.

While nearly all of the modernist artists and groups were drawn to the erotic in one way or the other, Balthus made it his priority to present it as high art. Many of his paintings show young girls in an erotic content, but he insisted his work was not erotic but that it recognized the discomforting facts of children's sexuality. Balthus also played with nudes, confronting the viewer with the implied question: what is more erotic, nudity or suggestion? It's the clothed women in Balthus' paintings that appear most erotically charged. Balthus has used composition, drawn it seems from early Dutch portraiture, that draws a viewer's eyes where he wants them. His paintings are full of women and girls

on display, but they meander between the erotic and a direct confrontation of his audience. One of his hallmarks is a testy, teasing relationship with his audience as he pulls them between considerations of the sexual and exquisite compositions in the same moment. (Salon.com. Balthus' provocative poses. By Max Garrone.)

Balthus' work is difficult to place within the history of 20th century art as he never embraced any of this century's major art trends and he was never associated with any group of artists. He remained a kind of solitary figure. His insistence on working figuratively ran counter to much of the mainstream art of this century, although he was held in high esteem by many abstract painters. What identifies his work as modern is the presence of a highly personally psychology in his painting and the challenging nature of his subject matter. Balthus' art is not an art of experimentation or innovation, but one of reinvestigation of traditional painting attitudes and techniques and of an attempt to reinvest Western painting conventions with new meaning.

Our work: "The Living Room"

One of Balthus' most impressive and important work, it was begun in 1941 and left unfinished as the artist was dissatisfied with its progress; a second version was completed in 1942, but he returned to the first canvas with subtle changes and superb results. At first it appears simple, but like all Balthus' work it is compelling, with a haunting sense of mystery. The composition is exactly as the artist intended. He is a master of composition. Originally, there was a third figure on the right edge of the canvas that has been replaced with the piano. Tension is felt. What should be an idyllic interior is somehow fraught with impending violence. The awkward grace of the girl reading so intensely in the foreground is contrasted with the limpness of the sister who is indulged in sensuous reveries. The girls are worlds apart in spite of their physical proximity. Dominating the center of the painting is the bowl of fruit, symbolic of balance and order. It exists, isolated on the table, and balanced precariously on the edge. The cat is included which serves to suggest stealth, evil and the destruction of innocence.

Resources:

Artsconnected

Artchive.com/artchive/B/balthus.htm

Artsmia.org/viewer/detail.php?v=12&id=1627

Bookrags.com/biography/balthus

MOMA.org.>Explore>The Collection

Nickhaus.com/2010/02/balthus-in-lovely-lurid-color.html

Wikipedia.org/wiki/Balthus

Tour possibilities:

Compare the figures in this painting to the young girls in “On the Thames: A Heron”

Highlights of World Art 1850-present

Love and Scandal

Modernism

Submitted by Paula Sanan

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