



Balthus: A Biography

Nicholas Fox Weber

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The first full-scale biography of one of the most elusive and enigmatic painters of our time -- the self-proclaimed Count Balthus Klossowski de Rola -- whose brilliantly rendered, markedly sexualized portraits, especially of young girls, are among the most memorable images in contemporary art.

The story of Balthus's life has been shrouded by contradiction and hearsay, most of it his own invention; over the years he created for himself a persona of mystery, aristocracy, and glamour. Now, in Nicholas Fox Weber's superb biography, Balthus, the man and the artist, stands revealed as never before.

He was born in Paris in 1908 to Polish parents. At age twelve he first stepped into the spotlight with the publication of forty of his drawings illustrating a story about a cat by Rainer Maria Rilke, who was then Balthus's mother's lover and a crucial influence on the young boy. From that moment, Balthus has never been out of the public eye.

In 1934 his first exhibition, in Paris, stunned the art world. The seven canvases drew attention to his extraordinary technique -- a mix of tradition and imagination informed by the work of Piero della Francesca, Courbet, and Joseph Reinhardt, but unique to the twenty-six-year-old artist -- and to their provocative content; one of the paintings, *The Guitar Lesson*, was so powerful in its sadomasochistic imagery that it was deemed necessary to remove it from public display.

Continuously since then, Balthus's work has provoked both great opprobrium and profound admiration -- as has the artist himself, whether collaborating with Antonin Artaud on his Theater of Cruelty, transforming the Villa Medici into the social center of Fellini's Rome in the 1950s, or competing for the artistic limelight with his friends Picasso and André Derain.

The artist's complexities are clarified and his genius understood in a book that derives its particular immediacy from Weber's long and intense conversations with Balthus -- who never previously consented to discuss his life and work with a biographer -- as well as his interviews with the painter's closest friends, members of his family, and many of the subjects of his controversial canvases.

Weber's critical and human grasp (he acutely analyzes the paintings in terms of both their aesthetic achievement and what they reveal of their maker's psyche), combined with his rich knowledge of Balthus's life and his insight into the ideas and forces that have helped to shape Balthus's work over the past seven decades, gives us a striking, illuminating portrait of one of the most admired and outrageous artists of our time.

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