



Balthus Catalogue Raisonne of the Complete Works

Virginie Monnie, Jean Clair

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The fact that this 500-page catalogue raisonné was approved by Balthus himself, the most mutable of authorities on his own life and oeuvre, will make it suspect for some historians. And the fact that the texts for the 2,100 black-and-white reproductions are in French (a long, earnest essay by Jean Clair is translated into English) will limit its usefulness for nonacademic readers. But the book is beautiful, and something even better: a cautionary tale about an artist of enormous talent tarnished by unresolved neurosis. As the poet James Fenton wrote of Joseph Cornell, even the most devoted admirer must sometimes turn away, when "the pathology glints from the depths."

Balthus has often lamented that his paintings are mistakenly discussed in terms of their subject matter, but it is the imagery that rudely seizes the viewer's attention away from the paintings' serene, early Renaissance formality and lush 19th-century brushwork, so easy on the eye, and directs it toward the spread legs of all those pubescent girls, to the knife on the floor near the nude on the bed, or to the music teacher's teeth tearing the skirt of her trapped, flailing student.

The hundreds upon hundreds of drawings here, as well as the 80 beautiful color plates of paintings, show the young Balthus as a master of haunting imagery--cats and streets and hills in shadow--that often melds Piero della Francesca's classical forms with an edgy, slightly surreal anxiety. They convey the tender poet of the European countryside, heir to both Caspar David Friedrich and Cézanne. But the nymphet pictures ultimately overshadow Balthus's body of work--not that they are anything but tame in light of today's erotic tastes--but because they come to seem the *raison d'être* of a second-rate romantic painter, rather than the personal quirks of a great one. --*Peggy Moorman*

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