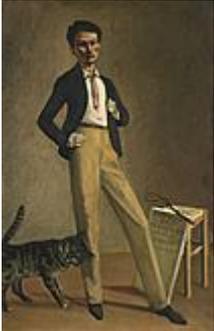




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Balthus, *Le Roi des chats*, 1935, huile sur toile, 78 x 49.5 cm (Bildmass), Fondation Balthus, Château-d'Oex. Depositum: Fondation Balthus, Château-d'Oex

## Documentation level



## Name

Balthus

## Other version/s of name

Baltusz

Klossowski de Rola, Balthazar

## Dates of birth and death

\* 29.2.1908 Paris, † 18.2.2001 Rossinière

## Nationality

F

## Brief biography

Peintre, dessinateur, illustrateur, décorateur de théâtre et commissaire d'expositions. Scènes d'intérieur, scènes de rue, paysages et portraits. Grande partie de son oeuvre produite en Suisse

## Fields of activity

peinture, dessin, décor de théâtre

## Lexicon article

Son of the art historian, painter, illustrator and stage designer Erich Klossowski and the painter and illustrator Baladine Klossowska (née Elisabeth Dorothea Spiro), both Germans of Polish descent. Brother of the novelist, screenwriter and illustrator Pierre Klossowski, who was three years his senior.

«SWITZERLAND. I've lived there so long that I am starting to think I am Swiss. I discovered the country during the First World War. There is so much I could say about that... Switzerland played an important role in my youth and I've been going back ever since, almost by accident... (Balthus)»

Forced to leave France in 1914, Balthus's family were taken in by Jean Stroh, professor in Zurich, before moving on to Berlin. In 1917 his parents separated. The mother took her children to live in Bern for a few months, in November they settled in Geneva, where Balthus attended the Lycée Calvin in 1919. His first work originated in Geneva: *Mitsou* (1919), a story without words. The idea, the form and the use of a cat as hero were influenced by [Théophile Steinlen](#) (whom his father used to visit in Montmartre when working on a little book about painters who lived in the neighbourhood), while the style was influenced by [Frans Masereel](#). Balthus's exile in Geneva coincided with Masereel's (*La Feuille* featured a drawing by the Flemish artist on its front page every day). The writer Rainer Maria Rilke, who began a relationship with Balthus's mother and became a substitute father for the teenager, wrote a preface for *Mitsou* and had it published in Zurich in 1921. From 1919, Balthus would divide his summers between [Margrit Bay](#)'s anthroposophical studio at Beatenberg near Interlaken and the chateau at Muzot in Valais lent to Rilke and Baladine by their benefactor Werner Reinhart. His first known painting, dating from 1922 when he was fourteen, is a *Paysage de Muzot*. That same year he wrote a play in the manner of Far Eastern theatre, which he tried to have staged in Germany. After a brief spell in Berlin, Baladine and her sons returned to Beatenberg in 1923. Balthus lived partly in Switzerland and partly in Paris. Encouraged by the art historian Hans Graber (who specialised in both Piero della Francesca and [René Auberjonois](#)) and by Strohl, he spent the summer of 1926 in Arezzo and Florence copying frescos by Piero della Francesca and Masaccio, references that were to pervade his future work. In spring 1927, he painted three frescos for the Lutheran church in Beatenberg (overpainted in 1934: *The Good Shepherd* framed by the *Evangelists*) and planned an ambitious *Tobias and the Angel*. In 1928 he stayed in Zurich and painted portraits of the sisters Hedwig and Gertrud Müller. In 1930, he became friendly with de Watteville, an aristocratic family in Bern, and especially Antoinette, with whom he fell in love and who sat for a first portrait – they married in 1937. During the same period, in Lausanne, he made friends with the literary critic Emo Bardleben and in particular René Auberjonois (an acquaintance of his father's when studying in Dresden), who exerted a tremendous influence on him. He visited him until 1946 and they often celebrated New Year together. After fifteen months of military service in Morocco, he stayed with de Watteville from May until October 1932 while spending time at the History Museum in Bern to copy the *Trachtsbilder* depicting traditional costumes by [Josef Reinhardt](#) of Lucerne, which set an enduring stamp on his portrait painting (*Portrait de Louis de Chollet et de ses enfants*, 1943). From March 1933 until 1939, he was in Paris turning out one masterpiece after the next (*Alice dans le miroir*, 1933, *La Rue*, 1933, *La*

*Toilette de Cathy*, 1933, *La Leçon de guitare*, 1934, *Le Roi des chats*, 1935). In 1936 he started work on *La Montagne*, a large canvas and very Swiss: «My entire childhood in the ineffable purity of those mountains, that view from the terrace of Le Grat out across Oberland [...], that enormous affective landscape of my ardent youth». The 1930s, one of the most prolific periods in the artist's career, was also a time of fruitful friendships with writers, notably Charles-Albert Cingria, Antonin Artaud and Pierre-Jean Jouve. In 1940–1941, Balthus sought refuge in Savoie at Champrovent. From summer 1942 until 1945, he lived in Fribourg on Place Notre-Dame (*Patience*, 1943, *Le Gottéron*, 1943, *Les Beaux Jours*, 1944–1946). In 1943, Galerie Moos in Geneva granted him a solo exhibition (his third, after Galerie Pierre in 1934 and the Pierre Matisse Gallery in 1938) and his first catalogue in French with an introduction by Pierre Courthion. In 1945, he moved to the Villa Diodati at Cologny near Geneva, teaming up with Albert Skira and André Malraux. At the Kunsthalle Bern he curated the exhibition *L'École de Paris* in summer 1946, choosing to include four works of his own. That same year he separated from Antoinette, although in 1952 he created the interior for her villa Fleur d'eau in Rolle. In 1953, after another spell in Paris (*Le Chat de la Méditerranée*, 1949, *Le Passage du Commerce-Saint-André*, 1952–1954), he moved to Chassy (F), where he was soon joined by his niece by marriage Frédérique Tison and where the scenery of the surrounding countryside soon dominated his art. From 1961 to 1977, Balthus resided at the Villa Médicis in Rome, where he had been appointed director on the initiative of Malraux. In 1962, Malraux sent him to Japan for three months to collect material for an exhibition, *L'Au-delà dans l'art japonais*, scheduled for the following year at the Petit Palais in Paris. In Japan, Balthus met Setsuko Ideta, who soon followed him to Rome and became his wife in 1967. Through her, the great masters of Japanese woodcuts entered his family of artists and his Rome studio. Harunobu, Koryûsai, Utamaro, Hokusai and Sukenobu were soon conversing with Piero della Francesca, the Sieneese school and [Gustave Courbet](#). Five works testify to the artist's sudden conversion and trace his gradual assimilation of this Japanese education: *La Chambre turque* (1963–1966), *Les Joueurs de cartes* (1966–1973), *Japonaise au miroir noir* (1967–1976) and *Japonaise à la table rouge* (1967–1976), *Katia lisant* (1968–1976). 1977 saw his definitive return to Switzerland, where he spent his remaining twenty-four years quietly with his family at the Grand Chalet de Rossinière in Pays-d'Enhaut. Apart from two unfinished canvases and a series of watercolours and drawings inspired by Rossinière, this final period brought forth *Le Lever* (1975–1978), *Paysage de Montecalvello* (1979), *Le Peintre et son modèle* (1980–1981) and *Le Chat au miroir* (three versions between 1977 and 1994).

Following a first museum retrospective at the Musée des Arts décoratifs in Paris in 1966, he was exhibited more frequently both in Switzerland (Musée cantonal des beaux-arts, Lausanne, 1993; Kunstmuseum, Bern, 1994; Musée Jenisch, Vevey, 2002; Fondation Pierre Gianadda, Martigny, 2008) and abroad (Tate Gallery, London, 1968; Venice Biennale, 1980; Centre Georges-Pompidou, Paris, 1984; Metropolitan Museum, New York, 1984; Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, 1996; Ludwig Museum, Cologne, 2007; Tokyo Metropolitan Museum – Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art, 2014; Kunstforum Wien, 2016).

From the early 1930s and in the privacy of successive studios, consciously swimming against the tide and maintaining his distance from the avant-gardes, Balthus developed an approach to painting that tapped into his childhood reading (*Struwwelpeter*, *Alice in Wonderland*) and the Italian Quattrocento (especially Piero della Francesca) while also fostering great French traditions (Poussin, David, Courbet). In Piero della Francesca and Poussin, Balthus took his cue from two artists who, several centuries apart, drew in their paintings on puppet theatre with its rigid cast. The first used clay models, the second wax figurines. Balthus had no need to waste money on such props, because in his eyes the modern world was a lifeless show: «You talk to a chap: suddenly you notice that he's a marionette. You turn to another: he's an automaton. A third, the intellectual: he's a glove puppet with no belly! Help! Help! They are all dummies! [...] No, I think the light is false, the shapes worn out, the movements all wrong». In 1932, at a time of rebellion and emotional despair (his future wife Antoinette de Watteville, engaged to someone else at the time, was about to slip away forever), Balthus embarked on his great project to illustrate *Wuthering Heights*. Apart from translating Emily Brontë into pictures, he wanted to pour out his own consuming passion for Antoinette. In his graphic rewrite of the novel, he projects his own features onto Heathcliff and Antoinette's onto Cathy. Those drawings, eight of which were published in 1935 in the magazine *M inotaure*, contained the seed of an entire aesthetic system and the basis for many compositions: «I want to put so much in there, lots of things, tenderness, childish nostalgia, dreams, love, death, cruelty, crime, violence, cries of hatred, roars and tears! All that, all those things hidden deep within our souls, an image of all the essential pieces of a human stripped of his thick crust of cowardly hypocrisy! A summary of man as he would be if he still knew how to be great». *La Toilette de Cathy* (1932–1933), *Les Enfants Blanchard* (1937), *La Patience* (1943) and *Les Beaux-Jours* (1946) emerged from those drawings.

Like [Alberto Giacometti](#), his ally from 1934, Balthus distrusted surrealism and clung to figurative art, turning to the very conservative, much criticised teachings of André Derain. In the 1930s he was close to Antonin Artaud and produced the sets and costumes for *Les Cenci*, and his work during those years reflects a deep inner rebellion, yielding a kind of sculptural equivalent to the *Theatre of Cruelty*. In 1934, his painting *La Leçon de guitare*, hidden behind a curtain at the Galerie Pierre, caused a furore. In 1935, his first self-portrait in *Roi des chats* testified to a cruel, feudal and brazen attitude. Alongside the cats and languid young nymphs that populate his universe, the painter produced archetypal cityscapes (*La Rue*, 1933, *Le Passage du Commerce-Saint-André*, 1952–1954) and landscapes (*La Montagne [L'Été]*, 1937, *Le Gottéron*, 1943, *Cour de ferme à Chassy*, 1960). This double fascination for cats and streets might have been inherited from Steinlen, but it is reinterpreted in a hieratic, stony manner that places their creator in «the great tradition of painting for which the canvas is a geometric space to be filled» (Antonin Artaud).

Works: Lausanne, Musée cantonal des beaux-arts; London, Tate Gallery; New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art; New York, The Museum of Modern Art; Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou; Paris, Musée Picasso; Washington, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian

Institution.

Dominique Radrizzani, 2010, updated 2017  
Translation: Katherine Vanovitch

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### Website

<http://www.fondation-balthus.com>

### Direct link

<http://www.sikart.ch/kuenstlerinnen.aspx?id=4026873&lng=en>

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