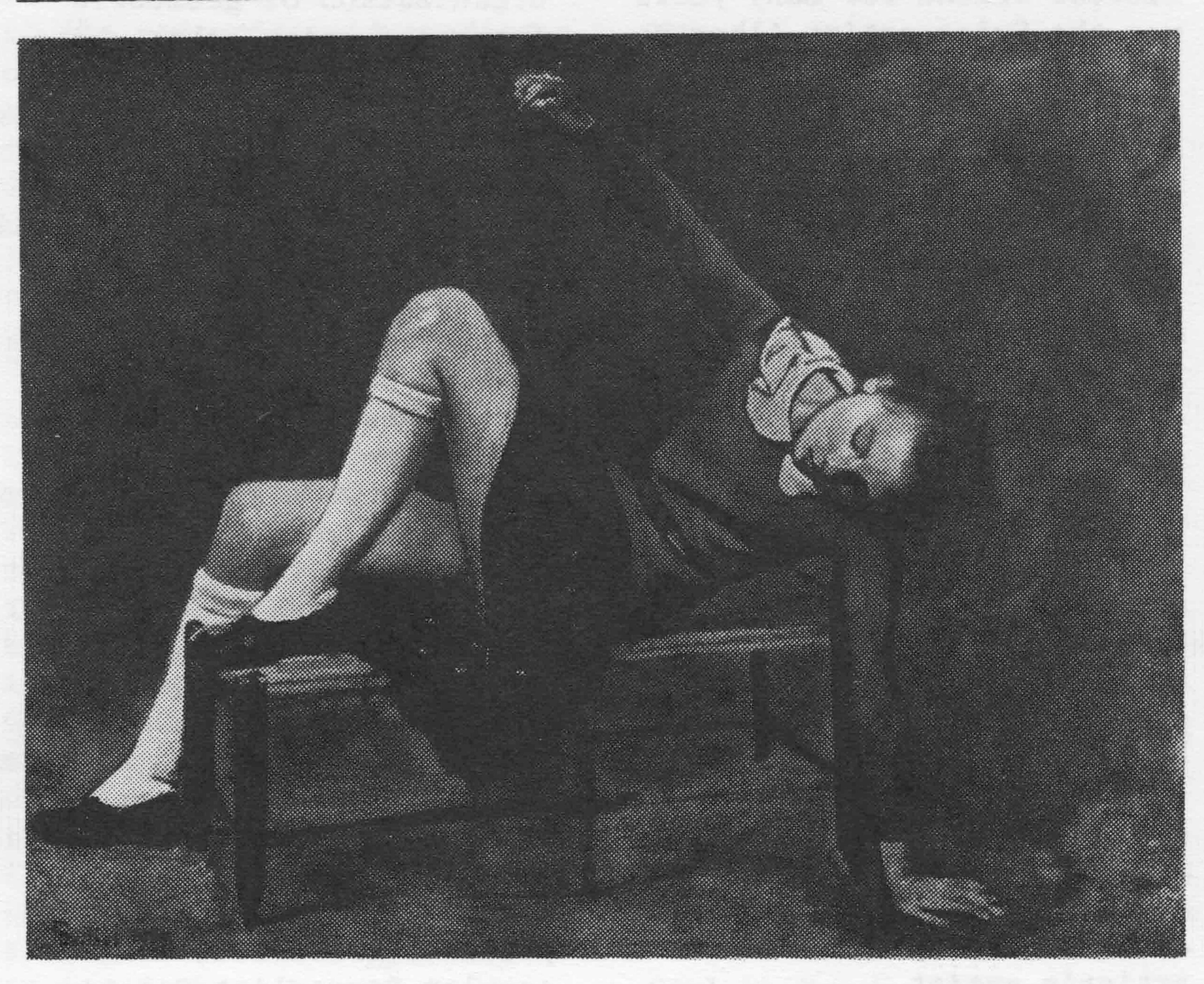
Girl on Couch, 1939



The name Balthus is not widely known, yet he has been called "the last of the great European painters," by New York Times critic John Russell. Balthus cares little for fame or success and has steadfastly avoided publicity throughout his long career. The first book to be written about him was published only last year. Preferring the company of a small circle of friends (his closest friend for many years was the Swiss artist Alberto Giacometti), Balthus has never been a member of any school or any particular movement. Another reason for his undeserved obscurity is that he has produced only a few paintings each year, working slowly and meticulously on each canvas. Further, most of his works are held in private collections and remain outside public scrutiny. Finally, for fifteen years he served as Director of the Academie de France in Rome (1961-1976), seriously curtailing the time in which he could paint. Despite all of this, Balthus continues to attract an enthusiastic group of supporters, including many artists. In some ways he is a classic example of the artist's artist.

Born Balthazar Klossowski de Rola in 1908 and raised in France and Switzerland, Balthus is the son of an artistic and aristocratic family of Polish extraction. His family's friends included such well-known artistic and literary figures as the painters Pierre Bonnard and André Derain and the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke. Rilke so admired Balthus' precocious talent that he helped the eleven-year-old. boy publish a set of drawings for which Rilke wrote a preface.

Self-taught by copying the old masters, Balthus' influences can be traced back to the Renaissance master, Piero della Francesca, whose architectural compositions and momentarily frozen figures are echoed in Balthus' own paintings. A 1939 painting included in MATRIX 38 entitled Girl with Red and Green Jacket, for example, relates back to Piero in its use of strict organization of geometric forms and color areas, here broken only by the diagonal of the unexpected knife thrust into the meat.

Balthus is usually considered a realist, but the reality he depicts in his paintings is one rarely encountered through direct experience. The suggestion of violence (Camus wrote of Balthus, "...he shows a knife but never any blood"), the expressionless gaze of the girl, and the jester-like costume all tend to elude logical interpretation. The enigmatic mood is closer to that found in certain Surrealist paintings of the period. Balthus, however, denies any affiliation with the Surrealist group, though he had his first oneperson show in 1934 in the popular Surrealist Galerie Pierre. Living in Paris during the twenties and thirties, he could not have been untouched by the Surrealist emphasis on the irrational world of dream and the subconscious.

The mysterious quality found in most of his works is less marked but still present in the earliest painting in the MATRIX unit, The Bernese Hat (1938-1939). Of the works shown, it owes most to the 19th century realist Gustave Courbet who has always been one of Balthus' idols. The simple and solid treatment of

the figure and the limited palette recall Courbet, with whom Balthus shares a firm belief in the power of fact. Courbet, the first artist to call himself a realist, said he never painted an angel because he had never seen one. Balthus, too, may suggest another reality, but only through the representation of the here and now.

It is not Balthus' fidelity to the centuries-old tradition of realism alone, however, which makes him an outstanding painter. It has to do more with feeling than form, more specifically with Balthus' distinctly unique, post-Freudian vision of the world. He is best known for his "...extraordinary versions of adolescents who abandon themselves to innocent and not so innocent, voluptous reveries," as John Rewald noted in his introduction to the catalogue of the 1964 Balthus exhibition at The Arts Club of Chicago. Girl on Couch allows the viewer to eavesdrop on a young girl (twelve years old?) languidly pulling a string from her hem which lifts the skirt high enough to reveal a thigh. Erotic suggestion is undeniable, but it is mingled with the innocence of adolescence, a time between childhood and sexual awareness.

Balthus' drawings are seen even less often than his paintings. Most of them are preparatory studies for the oils and hold little interest for him once they have served their function. They reveal a classical approach to the medium and by their very nature are more spontaneous than the finished paintings.

Balthus is alone among contemporary artists. As

James Thrall Soby wrote in the catalogue for the 1956
Balthus retrospective exhibition at The Museum of Modern
Art in New York, "The question of whether he is or is not a 'modern' painter probably has little interest for him. His obsessions are clear and strong, his gifts his own.
One assumes that is all that matters in his intelligent, defiant mind."

CL

Works in MATRIX:

The Bernese Hat, 1938-39, oil on canvas, 36 1/8" x 28 5/8". Lent by Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection.

Girl on Couch, 1939, oil on panel, 28 1/2" x 36". Lent by Dorothy and Richard Sherwood.

Girl with Green and Red Jacket, 1939, oil on canvas, 36 1/8" x 35 3/4". Lent by The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Bequest of Helen Acheson, 1978.

Not titled, date not known, double pencil drawing, 5 1/4" x 7 1/4". Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Richard E. Lang, Medina, Washington.

Standing Nude, 1957, graphite on paper, 20 1/2" x 14 3/4". Lent by Odyssia Gallery, New York.

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