





By Pierre Klossowski



Balthus self-portrait from a detail of a painting of 1933.

## Balthus: beyond realism

*Insights to the style and symbolism of Balthus,  
and how they developed; he will be the  
subject of an exhibition at the Modern Museum*

**Biographical note:** Balthus was born in Paris, February 29, 1908, to the painter and art historian Eric Klossowski (the descendant of an old Polish family and author of an important book on Honoré Daumier) and to Baladine Klossowski, also a painter, thanks to whom Balthus knew Rainer Maria Rilke from childhood. His father was attached to the Impressionist school and intimately knew Pierre Bonnard, Théodore Duret and Ambroise Vollard, as well as such painters as Roussel and Derain.

Balthus' childhood was spent in Paris to start with, then at Berne and Geneva, where, at the age of eleven, he composed a picture-book, *Mitsou* (the story of a cat), which was published in 1921 in Zurich with a French preface by Rilke. In 1924, [Continued on page 67]

**T**here is something paradoxical about wanting to talk about an art founded on the negation of talk: how to assimilate into language what is transmitted to the mind by glance alone? And how to separate thought from word in an image which is understood the instant it is seen? For suppose the image were not understood as soon as seen; then from the moment it was understood—would it still be an image? Is it vain to want to talk about a painter, and absurd to speak of painting at all? Such talk would imply that one paints oneself; but if painters themselves speak of painting continually, it is in a way that is most meaningful when addressed to their colleagues; they argue about what is or is not proper to their métier; and here again what they say is only intelligible insofar as it concerns procedures directed towards what they *want* to achieve, and not to what they may have achieved—those inexpressible contents of vision which we call

### Balthus: *The Room*

One of the artist's major, mural-size paintings, its subject-matter is characteristically ambiguous and impossible to verbalize. "What has happened"—except for the creation of a painting? The monster-cat is a frequent actor in Balthus' art.



WORCESTER ART MUSEUM

Sources of Balthus' subject-matter and style; children's picture-books of the late nineteenth-century, like "Little Pauline burned for disobedience," from *Struwwelpeter* (Slovenly Peter, left), and Courbet, as in *Woman with Cat*.



In 1919, aged 11, Balthus drew a picture-book, *Mitsou* (the story of a cat); it was published with a preface by Rilke in 1921 [left]. By 1925 he was influenced by Italian Renaissance painting, as his picture, *Communicant*, reveals.

KAISER FRIEDRICH MUSEUM, BERLIN



Balthus refers to art history openly in many paintings. One of the most evident instances is the sketch [right] based on Caravaggio's *Amor Victorious* [left]. He also poetically "quotes" Seurat, Chardin, Piero della Francesca and Courbet.



Balthus continued

pictures. But we are the ones for whom these visions are destined; now should we feign blindness in order to take account of what we have seen, substituting words for those objects of sensation which are pictures, hoping thus to capture their meaning and move freely behind them as behind a mirror? A mode of non-discursive expression, the picture does not duplicate but

suppresses the word which fights against being forgotten. For while the word also has a capacity to make us forget many things in order to make certain other things present to us, the image, on the other hand, has for its content precisely the existence which has been forgotten; it ignores devouring and distancing time; in it, past existence remains omnipresent. This is why painted perspective gives as much importance to the distant as to the near object, foreground and background being only divisions of one and the same surface. Painted space, visual simulacrum of physical space, restores the *felt* space which had vanished in physical space; but this simulacrum has the capacity to restore and unfold the past experience in the form of an extended object, the picture, present with other objects in physical space. As an object, the picture is separated by its frame, its dimensions, from the rest of the world in which it is inserted; but as a simulacrum, it puts in question the reality of the other objects which happen to surround it. These commonplace objects of various uses become so many words to me the minute I shut my eyes or leave my room, and if I keep some of

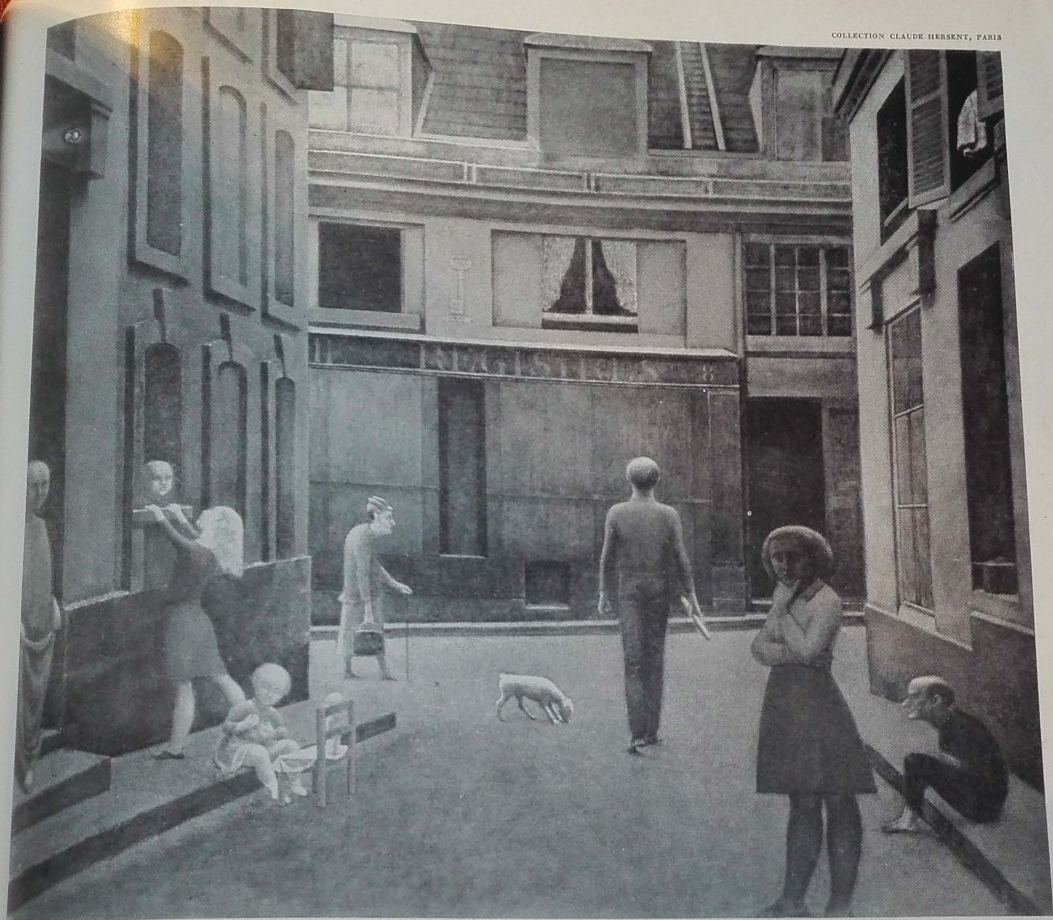


*The Street*, 1933, Balthus' first major work, grew out of a series of cityscapes, including *The Quays*, 1929 (left). He has returned to the urban theme throughout his career.

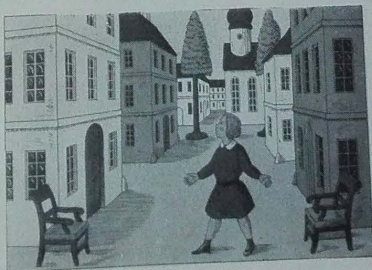
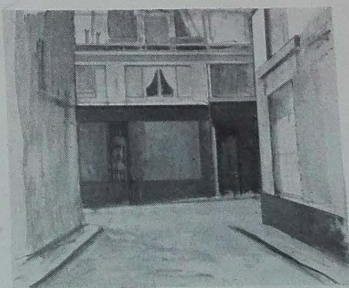


COLLECTION JAMES T. BOWY, NEW CANAAN, CONN.





*Passage de Commerce St. André*, 1954, masterfully restates the theme of *The Street*. A sketch [below] sets the Parisian scene (it is near Balthus' former studio), and note how its architecture is reminiscent of the mood of 19th-century children's picture-books—as this one from *The Nutcracker King* by Hoffmann [bottom], also author of *Struwwelpeter*.



them as images, these are inseparable from my thoughts about them. Then I think of the big painting by Balthus which hung for a while in the room in which I write and what I find in myself is simply the following words: "THE ROOM—painting by Balthus," with all that this suggests of atmosphere, arguments, sympathies or antipathies, etc. What is strange is both that this picture represents precisely the room I live in now, and that one sees in the picture a strange scene not unlike one I described in a book which Balthus tried to illustrate; he gave this up: the fact is he was about to paint *The Room*. I look at the wall and the picture is no longer there, instead there is a mirror: if one forgets its usual use, a mirror can be considered an illusory means of capturing the surrounding objects and detaining them where they are not. The prolongation of an interior by a mirror appeals to our obscure need for an "imperishable" reality. But what we have here is an imperfect simulacrum to supplement our verbal reverie: the word always slips in between the reflected image and the image of my dreaming. On the other hand, the picture is not pure contemplation, but its simulacrum, and this is why the life frozen on its surface has such fascination. The picture has no being as such, but, thanks to the "non-being" of its simulacrum-function, it does enable us to see the very





In Balthus' tightly-painted prewar style: *A Reclining Nude*, ca. 1938.



One of a series of brilliant illustrations for *Wuthering Heights*, ca. 1934.



One of a series of portraits (that included the well-known *Miro and His Daughter*): *Roger and His Son*, ca. 1936.

Little girls playing and dreaming is a recurrent Balthus theme: *Children*, 1935.



COLLECTION PABLO PICASSO, PARIS

*Large Landscape with Trees*, 1954, in Balthus' recent highly textured style.



being within which things can no longer die because they are no longer living: they are. It is not so much that the picture offers us an object for contemplation, as that it causes us to wait for the spectacle of that which we are already looking at but which will be animated by intermediary demons between the artist and the spectator.

These generalities come to mind as I look at Balthus' pictures, especially as when looking at them one feels confronted with a highly individual solution to the problem of continuity in contemporary life. What relation can we have with our world where men as well as things seem separable into parts and made of separate pieces, like the objects men themselves produce? Standardizing life and its pleasures, even its sufferings, the laws of mass consumption give us ever more deficient products. In such a world, what can a painter like Balthus represent, a man who remains for months before an immense canvas at the risk of spoiling it, and after leaving it for a time, is perfectly ready to devote a new long period of work to it? Even in his methods of working there is a rhythm proper to the ages of agrarian civilization, and unsuited to the industrial spirit of our world. He shares this rhythm with the landscapes he has painted, and they give us, perhaps, a truer sense of his real inspiration than his most characteristic pictures. However Balthus is a man of our time: his moral indignation is itself a modern phenomenon; so much so that a double violence is perpetrated in his struggle to insert his own vision into our world: the violence he does to his own sensibility, and that which he does to things in snatching them from the life of the world with which he himself lives at odds. And in some of his figure compositions one feels that the rhythm of vegetable life has stopped, as if all being has been bewitched. He does violence to his own sensibility, to certain infantile nostalgias, to certain aristocratic claims; hence to his own pathos when he snatches things from life and sets them outside of life into an ontological reality. But such violence also serves magically to dramatize his own pathos. So here three factors come into play: the structural problem, which, in turn, stems from a perpetually insistent theme, and the support that a prodigious erudition gives to the visualization of this theme.

Balthus paints according to the traditional rules which recommend building the painted surface in superposed layers. He clings to the craft which to painting is as important as syntax to language. With Balthus this professional discipline is the very opposite of a direct exaltation of temperament; it is, of course, well known that every true painter facing nature does nothing more than seek a certain already-perceived vision. What is outside makes him remember an inward image. This inward image is of a collective and ancestral origin and becomes conscious through knowledge. In this context, the old masters represent zones of experiences opened-up through their own initiative; thanks to them, these realities appear in their full ontological value. In Balthus' art, every plastic emotion has reference to an authority; the latter not only authorizes emotion by an appeal to the mind, but legitimizes the new expression of that emotion. Such "authorization" implies a culture developed in the public as well as in the artist; not that this [Continued on page 50]





*Balthus: Figure in Front of a Mantel, 1954*

A recent monumental figure piece in Balthus' colors and with a more baroque composition, this picture will be in the artist's show of new works at Pierre Matisse in January.



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involves a work made of simple juxtapositions of references (as some have been too ready to see in Balthus, calling him "muséumal"); nor that Balthus, for instance, would say: "Courbet felt this thing, hence one must paint it that way" (naïve reasoning); but indeed in the following sense: "there had to be Courbet for this thing to be painted"; which is to say that the images of many sensibilities made use of Courbet to manifest themselves. So what matters, then, is not the affinity of an artist with an old master, but the still inexhaustible experience which is in the artist but also transcends him. Thus the artist is never isolated but belongs to a common enterprise. He will appear as a conservative or a Johnny-come-lately only to those whose visual habits remain unconsciously dependent on the stereotypes of industrialized good taste.

In Balthus, the asstringency of the traditional plastic disciplines continually censures his own personal pathos; but, as with the "classics," this pathos gains all the more. But what is his pathos?

Balthus says that he has never stopped seeing things as he saw them in his childhood (around 1912-20). Anyone who knows the old picture-books of the nineteenth century, like *Struwwelpeter* (*Slovenly Peter*), well known to children of that generation, or the Epinal prints of 1830, or Tennyson's illustrations to Lewis Carroll's *Alice*, will be able to form a fairly clear idea of the sort of thing Balthus was struck by in his childhood. And let us forget the recent praise for the style of 1900 and the curiosity for prints in old magazines which inspire certain young talents with a certain accidental Romanticism; there is nothing of this kind in Balthus. With him it was a question of something *already seen*, a part of the common experience of a whole generation, hence something belonging to the sphere of convention, but he was concerned only with retaining certain elements of it: a certain "Häuslichkeit" — the bourgeois atmosphere of the parents' home with all the objects of daily living (as they appear in *Struwwelpeter*) and with every figure emotionally felt—from the parental couple incarnating all the taboos to the burning cinders in the fireplace (the heap of cinders of little Pauline burned alive for disobedience)—showing all the terrors of study, the games, the teas which brought together bands of children under the eyes of one or two young governesses, unconscious initiators of sexual desires.

I call attention to these elements of childhood simply because they reverberate like a leitmotif in his work; doubtless they have undergone many transmutations in the course of a development in which the métier of Balthus was to respond in turn to Piero della Francesca, to certain hesitations between an almost Prudhonian classicism (the canvases giving evidence of this have disappeared), and to Impressionist and Pointillist temptations which he soon surmounted, aided no doubt by the monumental stasis of the Italians, and finally to the discovery of Courbet, in whom he found again, mag-

nified, his own childhood reminiscences.

Among the visual residues of these reminiscences, the structure of the fireplace, of the whole formed by the mirror, the mantel, the flue and the hearth, seem to me one of those schemas already present in the infantile imagination. The mirror, at once celestial and aquatic, is the symbol of woman and of the mother; the flue, infernal and terrestrial, is a symbol of male violence (though perhaps the fireplace formed one and the same figure, at once male and female, like the sphinx, for the dark orifice of the hearth with its flaming breath may well have evoked the disquieting vaginal mystery of a monster with a mirror's face). In a way it might be that from this ambiguous ensemble have issued many of Balthus' creatures, and it may be, too, that the architectural character of the ensemble played the same role in his sensibility as his perception of façades of houses, whose doors and windows, gaping or closed, seem to take on the function of a dark hearth (the taste for the Parisian alley, for the "outside" felt as "inside," expresses a familiarization of the cave). Balthus lived for a long time in Alpine regions—which are the subject of some of his landscapes—and in his own vision the contrast between vegetation and salient rock, between anfractuosités and streams, seems to have had the same symbolic value that the couple formed by the mirror and the fireplace originally had.

This innate architectonic sense, which might explain his liking for the static, also reveals an experience of time, a nostalgia for the eternal, even as does the rhythm of vegetable life, to which I have referred, and whose suspension, paradoxically, might be compensated for by this very architectonic sense. For in a discontinuous world like ours in which the respiratory rhythm of the soul, by means of which it communicates with the cosmos, is in some way synecopated, the artist's reaction will bring him to its opposite pole, to the static monumentality which represents a hidden and sacred order. To give objects a monumental representation is to affirm their hieratic presence and at the same time to tear them from the accidental condition in which only the anxious and hunted people of our epoch could endure seeing them. Here, it seems to me, we touch upon the dominant preoccupation of Balthus. Hence, perhaps, his way of posing objects, of assimilating the very poses of his figures to the linear rigor of things, in short, his tendency to push the pose to the point of excess. Hence, doubtless, a certain monomania of attitudes, which seems indicated in his obsessional return to the same subject in many pictures. A quasi-pedagogical will to re-educate the eye of the spectator by going back to the traditional understanding of faces and things is complicated in Balthus by his demand for something which his figures of children are called on to express; in their often stiffened attitudes there is a strange obstinacy, a stiff-necked insistence on making the ear deaf



Balthus, from sketch to finished painting: study for *Seated Girl in White Smock* [left] and the finished work, 1955.



to the sounds of our industrial world, of the world in which the spectator is standing. But if Balthus plunges his children into an atmosphere of prolonged siesta and perpetual recess—his cats are like emblems of aggressive nonchalance—if he underlines in this way the taboo against "the green paradise of childish loves" within our world—it is never without referring the very appearance of the commonplace to some hidden order, an order lost for modern man along with the representation of the ancient cosmos. With what does the frozen attitude of his figures correspond? Is it there to evoke a *fundamental scene* (the original determining event) of which one will find fragments dispersed in some of his other canvases? Or is it a hidden order of the archetypes which is mimed in their gestures? Both perhaps, for the reconstitution of any fundamental scene could not but reveal the soul's aspiration to reintegrate a hidden order of immutable images. Here the artist succeeds in converting the time in which beings live into the space where they subsist outside of life and beyond death; hence this impression of "living statues" given by the immobile pantomime in some of Balthus' big compositions. For if in general every painted scene has the visual effect of a snapshot of pantomime, this is not what the painter consciously had in view nor what the informed spectator feels. A scene by Watteau, taken from the theater, does not give such an impression but rather suggests a scene from life. It is the contrary with Balthus: he gives us a to-and-fro of life between its own scene and that of its spiritual origin which lies outside of life.

The artist who follows the right road may tolerate for a while two traveling companions: depression and humor, which claim to be able to compensate the artist for his sacrifices in the pleasures of vehement sexual suggestion, for instance. But when he seems willing to admit this pleasure, he does so only at the price of nightmarish evocation. Monstrosity in Balthus' work is doubtless a defense against the monstrosity of existence itself, for the artist masters dullness by the projection of his own

re-created boredom. Depression, anxiety, are invincible only when the visage which characterizes them is absent, only until the moment when the artist encloses them in the features of his own monsters. More often, humor in its monstrosity, or the monstrous as such, is present in those scenes where eroticism seems at first sight to be dominant. In the large painting, *The Room*, the voluptuous impression given by the provocative nakedness of the girl on the chaise longue is in some way made "uneasy" by the presence of two monsters. The picture, as I remarked at the outset, shows things by depriving words of them; once painted, the things become unnamable. Let us look at *The Room*: at first we say there is a nude in such and such a pose, etc., and then here is—what? And, in fact, we are immediately compelled to delay our impression and to keep it at a distance from us by means of words. The figure of a dwarf with pageboy hair-do and dry angular face pulling back the curtain of a high window—is this the old demon of infantile vices, or is it simply the soul of the artist disguised as a chambermaid for the occasion? Could it be the personification of his own glance avid for visual treasures? Have we happened on the issue of sinister adventures? Daylight falls on the physical charms of the victim; she is thrust back and offered to the sight. Is this the orgasm following rape? Or has nothing at all happened? The picture seems situated at the extreme point where the *nothing-has-happened* and the *irrevocable* are held in equilibrium. The determined gesture of the figure drawing the curtain is like an endless reiteration of the *flagrant offense* which only the cat on the table witnessed; this cat (belonging to the same race as the dwarf in skirts), observes with astonishment the light-bringing act of its partner. And what result has the latter in view other than to expose to our sight a sumptuous picture?

*Passage de Commerce St. André* does not refer exclusively to the external scene set in a Parisian alley of that name; it doubtless has the additional meaning of a "passage" to freedom by virtue of the "com-



force" which every true artist always makes with death, yielding to death the obsessions of life. It is for this price that the artist attains access to that realm of being of which art is only the simulacrum; and it is the curse of art that it is only such a simulacrum. If the *living picture*, a false genre in itself, informs us about this effort of life to find a meaning in life's suspension, then the insertion of the "*living picture*" in the painting which I detected in Balthus' work, reveals the function of the suspending gesture as apprehension of the repose in which lies final perfection—coinciding with the supreme spectacle. Thus *Passage de Commerce*, as an image of suspended life, ought to reveal a certain expectation of the *beatific vision*, even as it reveals the desolation of life in its own reiteration. When Balthus constructed this big picture, separated the lights and shades, set up the façades on both sides and the background of houses, situated the various figures, he was of course swayed

by quite different preoccupations. However he put all this in the painting. Light glides over the various figures, and plays a muted serene melody against a background of obscure rumors and long-felt suffering. Two answering voices seem to alternate: "*thus it was*" and "*thus it will always be*"—like an evocation of things long past, and the perpetual return of this evocation in the rhythm of a daily life that is resigned to be as it is. But insofar as such obsessions indicate defeated desire, the painting is a definitive liquidation of an adieu to a whole section of life. Let us compare this picture with *The Street*, done in 1933. With the effrontery of a *commedia dell'arte* performance the old obsessions appear on the picture of twenty years ago. But while they may have been stronger than the means of expression then at Balthus' disposal, in *Passage de Commerce*, on the other hand, Balthus, with so much more plastic experience, has been able to exploit the distance separat-

ing him from the early Balthus. Perhaps each one of the various figures represents a particular state of soul which Balthus has felt. Perhaps this picture has the importance of a kind of panorama of his own life. Depression haunts the picture in places; Balthus had to assign it some spot, and he put it in the silhouette of an old woman in the background who walks to the right; he yields to it, too, in the individual squatting on the curb—the figure who, overwhelmed by the "*it will always be thus*," stares at the group of children to the left, looking particularly at the little girl playing with the doll set on a chair. A great tenderness surrounds these children, and is expressed by the gracious gesture of the girl extending her arms towards the child in the window; the roundness of the heads emerging from the dark and heavy background of the façade, like the roundness of the head of the child of indefinite sex at the very edge of the picture, have a kind of stellar character.

These children seem to live here, yet the scene they compose gives the impression that they are no longer living, that they no longer belong to this world, and that they are beings that die in the reverie of the young girl who, in the foreground, dreamily looks at the spectator. Behind her, at some distance, is a man seen from the back who is about to carry, with the assurance of a somnambulist, into the background of the painting a long, thin, yellow breadloaf. Between him and the girl in the foreground extends the zone of "*it was thus*"; between him and the old woman—a reappearance of childhood in the face of old-age—lies the ultimate zone, so dangerous to cross, of "*it will always be thus*." But is not the promise of breaking through this despair held in hand? It is the golden breadloaf—the emblematic intention of Balthus.

Translated by Lionel Abel  
The first monograph on Balthus in any language is published by the Museum of Modern Art to accompany its exhibition. It is by James T. Solby.

## The fantastic eye continued from page 40

formation of the appearances of things could also become a vehicle of philosophic or religious ideas. In one of the most fascinating chapters of his book, Baltrušaitis has shown how in the richly veridical painting of *The Ambassadors* by Holbein, a master of the real if ever there was one, the artist has introduced a large human skull, apparently deformed but in fact a correct projection of a real skull from an odd viewpoint, as a symbolic element in a hermetic pictorial allegory of the

vanity of earthly skills and avocations.

In the volume on the fantastic in the Middle Ages, which is only a part of a larger work on this subject, Baltrušaitis' aim is to reveal the continuous absorption of Asiatic art by the West in the very period in which, it has been supposed, the West had become self-sufficient and was evolving a new civilization from its own resources and problems after long centuries of dependence. It is remarkable how many motifs of

Gothic and Renaissance art have come to Europe from Asia, and not simply from the neighboring Moslem or Byzantine world, but from India and even China. Monsters, demons, grotesques, types of ornament and frames, are traced with great ingenuity in their passage across two continents. Some of the confrontations—the bat-winged demons of Buddhist art with the similar but much later devils in the Western images of Hell—are astonishing and delightful. Baltrušaitis does not pre-

tend, like some other scholars, to revise our ideas about the origin of Western art as a whole in the light of these borrowings, nor does he wish to minimize the distinctiveness of the European achievement. But he has surely disclosed some unsuspected affinities of imagination and the susceptibility of the West to the different cultures with which it had contact in that long period. Though one may question certain deductions, the resemblances to the Asiatic works are undeniable.

## Paris continued from page 48

tees good art than gold on a canvas makes a painting precious. Many artists, nonetheless, harbor this illusion. One of its more naïve forms is to hang on for dear life to the men of distinction, the legendary figures of the day—MacAvoy (Drouot-David) paints Picasso in Buffet-like, simplified contours and soft greys. Discernment of the day's glories, however, is not as easy as one might think; it does not grow out of fashionable acclaim and snobbish consensus, but out of profound conviction, usually unconscious. MacAvoy's glories are faded in the bud: *Cécile Sorel* trapped in van Eyckian folds; Cocteau caught giving birth to an archangelic ephebe.

Themes (or myths) have a cultural value only when they correspond to the cultural ambiance in which they were stated. Save for a Marquet drawing, there are no really excellent works in the Galerie Vendôme's show on the theme of the horse-carriage. But Raffaelli, Daumier and even Steinlen and Buhot are saved by their "timeliness" — Mallarmé wrote poems on Raffaelli's etchings whereas the modern contributors, for whom that mode of locomotion is at best a picturesque souvenir, can fall back on no cultural values to excuse their lack of esthetic density. While more expertly formulated, in the whole, the fundamental dimensions are the same at the Ecole de Paris exhibition (Galerie Charpent-

ier) as at the Surindépendants. Here too, the shuttle is busy between myth and essence. And in both salons, the liveliest contributors, in general, are those who have sought to remain in the present, at equal distance from those equally abstract extremes: Ferron, Champeau, Goldfarb, Smith here; Soulages, Schneider, Hartung, Riopelle there. What they seek, with varying success, is the concrete gesture, the immediate reality.

### Portraits, brutal and miniature

But is appearance really as imaginary as they would have us think? If we were to base our answer on the work of Appel (Galerie Rive Droite), it would be affirmative. Here Dubuffet's delicate brutality becomes ruthless brutality. Expressionist devices are used to deform the human face as much as to form it. But when all is said and done, these violent, eruptive portraits look like the *pochades* of a cartoonist trying to show that "he can do it, too"; grotesquely enlarged. However, this may be an unjust test: the human face is the theme where painting is at greatest odds with reality for a portrait has more solidarity with its model than a still-life or a landscape. Identity strives against transfiguration. This is demonstrated by the beautiful show of miniatures from the David-Weill fund on view in the Louvre's Cabinet des Dessins. From the late seventeenth to the middle of

the nineteenth century, the school of European ivory and enamel miniaturists, which thrived until the age of photography, parallels the history of

painting with great virtuosity. There are many exquisite pieces. Still it would be more appropriate to speak not of an art but of a magic craft.



Karel Appel's Portrait of Stéphane Lupasco, at the Galerie Rive Droite.