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Balthus lessons - five controversial works by the French artist

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Cathy Dressing eerily subverts the subject of the woman at her toilette, turning it into a scene of conflict and foreboding. The dreamy self-absorption that usually characterizes scenes of women dressing -- in states of erotic dishevelment amid seductive surroundings -- has been replaced by what seems a grim preparation for some somber if ill-defined ritual. In actuality, Cathy Dressing represents an episode from Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*: the moment when Cathy is giving a finishing touch to her dress, assisted by the maid Nelly, and the jealous Heathcliff asks her about her fancy attire. **Balthus** shows Cathy with her gown open to reveal her naked breasts, nipples erect, and a torso that has been manneristically attenuated. Meanwhile, Heathcliff, who in the book wears clothes fit for stable work, is here quite dressed up. The figures are portraits of **Balthus** and Antoinette de Watteville, his future wife. They do not look at each other, but instead seem lost in their separate broodings.

Cathy Dressing is a harsh and disquieting tableau. **Balthus** painted it quickly, not even bothering to complete the flower pattern on Cathy's robe. Soby acquired the painting from Loeb via Matisse in July 1937 and shipped it to Farmington. However, he came to like the picture less and less. As he explained in letters to Matisse and Monroe Wheeler in 1956, his dislike was based not on moral compunctions but rather on a growing sense that the painting was sloppily executed.(13) Apparently **Balthus** did not much like the work himself and had spoken of destroying it.(14) In October 1943 Soby sold Cathy Dressing to Matisse, who then held on to it for some 34 years. As with *The Window*, he showed it but rarely, including it in just two exhibitions at his gallery -- in 1949 and 1962 -- and lending it to a retrospective of the artist's work at the Tate Gallery, London, in 1968. In 1977 Matisse sold Cathy Dressing to the Musee National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, in Paris, where it was featured in the large inaugural exhibition "Paris-New York." The painting remains at the Pompidou on permanent View.(15)

Alice disturbs by its clinically realistic representation of a young woman, not particularly attractive, with strong legs and one disproportionately large breast bared. She is combing her hair in a corner of the painter's studio. If, as seems likely, the title is an allusion to Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, then the painting's surface is the mirror before which Alice stands, and the viewer becomes a voyeur. The figure's sexual accessibility is contradicted by the remote expression of her clouded eyes. Antonin Artaud, a friend of Balthus's, described this ambiguity in his review of Balthus's exhibition:

The nude I have in mind has about it something harsh, something tough, something unyielding, and ... there is no gainsaying the fact ... something cruel. It is an invitation to lovemaking, but one that does not dissimulate the dangers involved.(16)

Balthus matter-of-factly records the outsized breast and the graceless right knee. The model for Alice was the 23-year-old **Betty Leyris**, the English wife of the French writer and poet Pierre **Leyris**. Both she and her husband were close friends with **Balthus** at the time. In the artist's earlier 1930 **portrait of Betty Leyris**, she appears haughty, prim and more diminutive. She remembered that **Balthus** painted Alice rapidly.(17) Things did not proceed as smoothly as **Balthus** had wished, however. In a burst of impatience or anger, **Balthus** took the chair on which **Betty/Alice** rested her foot and flung it against the canvas. The small repaired tear is still visible in the upper right corner.

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