New Balthus retrospective and unfinished works

By swissinfo.ch with RTS

Balthus' widow, Setsuko Klossowska de Rola, with his painting "Turkish room"

(KEYSTONE)

The Fondation Beyeler in Basel is holding a retrospective exhibition of work by the controversial French artist Balthasar Klossowski de Rola (1908–2001), known as Balthus. A collection of unfinished Balthus works are also currently on show in Lausanne.

The Balthus retrospective, which opened at the [Fondation Beyelerexternal link](#) on September 2, mixes young girls and cats, meditation and reality, eroticism and innocence, the familiar and the unusual. It features 40 paintings from the United States, France and Switzerland. The show is the first exhibition of Balthus's art in a Swiss museum since 2008 and the first comprehensive presentation of his work anywhere in German-speaking Switzerland.

The Basel exhibition features a Balthus painting which has been the source of recent controversy. Last December, a #MeToo activist launched an online petition against the painting "Thérèse rêvant" [Thérèse dreaming], which shows a young girl relaxing on a chair with her leg up. The activist accused the painter of "romanticising infantile sexuality". Nearly 12,000 signatures called for the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York to remove the work, but it refused. Today, the painting features in the Basel exhibition.

Fondation Beyeler curator Raphaël Bouvier told Swiss public television, RTS: "There was never any question of giving up this painting because of this controversy. On the contrary, it seemed all the more important to us to show it, so that everyone can make their own opinion."

During his lifetime, Balthus was a divisive artist. Some people described his paintings of young girls in lascivious poses as paedophilia, while others said they were art. His widow, who also served as his model, says she does not understand the recent scandal.

"First and foremost, it's a magnificent painting," she told RTS. "You must maintain an innocent approach. If a raised skirt evokes sex, I believe that's mainly a problem in Christian countries."

In Lausanne, a new building is being built near the train station to house the collection of the Cantonal Museum of Fine Art. It will open its doors to the public in 2019. A new exhibition "Unfinished Balthusexternal link" is being shown at the construction site, showing for the first time unfinished works the artist produced during his final years. These include sketches and paintings previously stored in his studio in the mountain village of Rossinière in the Vaud Alps. This exhibition was organised by the Association atelier de Balthusexternal link and curated by the American director Robert Wilson.

Balthus (Balthasar Klossowski de Rola)

He was born in Paris in 1908, the second son of a German-Polish painter and art historian. He worked as a painter from the age of 16, copying the works of Piero della Francesca and Massacio. From the age of 27, he painted his own figurative paintings in Paris and then often controversial neoclassical works representing the "perfect beauty" of teenage girls.

Balthus settled in Bern during the First World War, then moved to Geneva where he spent his adolescence. He returned to Paris but during the Second World War, he took refuge in Switzerland in Bern, Fribourg and Geneva. He married Setsuko and during the last 24 years of his life, he settled with his family in the Grand Chalet in the village of Rossinière, in canton Vaud, where he set up his studio. Balthus died in Rossinière at the age of 93 in 2001.