

Balthus

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I love art. I love the visual stimulation—being led to look at things from different angles, perspectives, and ideas. Naturally I value and enjoy some artists more than others. I can appreciate the brilliance of the Renaissance greats. Caravaggio is my favorite painter, Michelangelo my favorite sculptor. My school teachers dragged me and my classmates around national galleries on school trips. But I found the classical paintings too academic, too Christian, or just boring landscapes and portraits. It took Impressionism to excite me, and then onwards I was hooked. I am now an unreserved modernist. Of all the moderns it is Mark Rothko I would love to have on my walls more than any other painter. Nonrepresentational art permits so much more freedom to fantasize and allow one's senses to explore, without having things laid out explicitly to study, work out, decipher. It enables one to either accept or reject.

My father loved art. He encouraged me to draw and paint. Actually, he sent me to the Ruskin School of Art at Oxford briefly. At one point at university, when I abandoned architecture because I could not see myself making it my career, I nearly took up fine arts. But in the end, I decided to become a teacher. I thought philosophy would stand me in better stead. And it did.

Despite my preference for nonrepresentational art, there are some realists that intrigue me. The surrealists of course. But one of my favorites is someone born Jewish, who desperately tried to mask his Jewish identity under many different and invented stories and personalities. He was born in Russia as Klossowski. His mother, Elisabeth Spiro Klossowska, was the daughter of a Hazan from Kovelitz near Novgorod. But he called himself Balthus and claimed that his mother came from a Protestant Aristocratic family in France. He lived mainly in France and Switzerland.

He was a complex, reclusive character. Known for his representational realist paintings of pubescent girls and cats. (Pussy cats?) They are erotic, dreamy, and evocative. And highly controversial. You might have thought that only religious fanatics of different religions would be the ones with a problem. But in this present lunatic climate of dogmatic witch-hunters, it is lefties too. Petitions have been submitted to the Metropolitan Museum of Art by the #metoo activists to have his paintings removed or notices attached saying how dangerously inappropriate they are.

Oh, my goodness. Must we remove all the Renaissance nudes and Fragonard ladies swinging through the air, their petticoats swept up by the breezes. Cover up the crucifixions. Put more fig leaves on penises? Blot out breasts and pubic hair and dress classical sculptures in burkas? Iconoclasm is back, wherever you turn. We shall be left only with boring portraits of pompous rulers and second-rate magnates.

Art can be good and bad. Sacred and profane. It defies definition, but we

know it has something to do with what our senses seem to respond or react to. I do not understand or appreciate a great deal of art nowadays that sells for millions. In my opinion, a lot of it is rubbish. But I try my best to understand, give the benefit of the doubt, to work out if the artist is trying to tell me something or just say, "Hey, look at this! Isn't it amusing/fun/shocking/scandalous or just pretty?" And to allow the visual objects to inspire me, entertain me, or just bamboozle me. That is why I continue to enjoy going to exhibitions and museums and reading books about the great artists and their lives. As with music, I know I often have to separate the artists, their ideas, their personalities, and their cultural contexts from the art itself. But there are limits I set. I will not go to hear the music or see the art of an evil, revolting human being, or one who would rather see me dead.

Is there a conflict between my love for art and my Jewish values? Shouldn't I be revolted by immodesty? Explicit sexuality? Yes, I should distance myself, because I have other values. I try to reconcile them when and if I can, but I always give primacy to Jewish values whenever there is any conflict. I allow the cultural norms of Western, Greco-Roman culture to enter into my consciousness and to affect my thought processes.

My late father always argued that the way to respond to a challenge is to face it, not hide from it. Those Jews who pretend they can completely insulate themselves from external images are fooling themselves. We need to recognize the cultural and moral challenges and learn how to deal with them positively and creatively.

In the way that the compiler of the Mishna, Rebbi Yehuda Hanassi, engaged in discussions with the Roman Antoninus. Or Maimonides and the other great medieval Jewish philosophers allowed the ideas of Aristotle and Plato to enter their minds either to be stimulated by, to reject, or to modify them. The clash between the Talmud and Greek Wisdom was not over the technological or intellectual innovations. It was over morality and how to live one's life. It was Torah that had to be supreme. Jerusalem over Athens. A Jewish way of life as opposed to a pagan, materialist, self-indulgent one.

Two thousand years ago Jews used to decorate their synagogues with art and sculptures of different kinds. You can see examples in the ruins of the Hamat Synagogue in Tiberias or the Dura-Europos Synagogue in Syria (if anything is left after ISIS). There were cherubs in the Temple. But in Europe Jews had a problem with icons and religious representations, because of their association with the Trinity and Christian worship. But Maimonides, who lived in a Muslim world where art was nonrepresentational and theologically neutral, was more open. In his Eight Chapters he advises one to go and look at beautiful objects and gardens when one feels depressed.

Balthus represents one small sliver of artistic expression. One man's experience of the world. I am not sure what he is telling me to see. Am I supposed to see the beauty of pubescence? The contradiction between age and wisdom? The capacity to seduce? Or is the artist telling us what he finds beautiful? I do not believe Balthus was ever accused of being a pedophile. His relationships with his girlish models seems to have been platonic. So, as

they say, "Honi soit que mal y pense." (Or, "Shame on you for thinking dirty!")

Yet typically I come back to a Jewish postscript. If Balthus tried so hard to hide and erase his Jewish identity, why would I not think he is hiding something in his art too?