

SETSUKO

KLOSSOWSKA

DE

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ROLA





Information
92









**‘IT’S WHAT IN JAPAN
WE CALL *SHIBUI*—IT
MEANS BITTER, INNER
BEAUTY, NOT SHINY’**

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hen she is in Paris, the artist Setsuko Klossowska de Rola, widow of the painter Balthus, works out of the Astier de Villatte ceramics factory in a nondescript modern building on the outskirts of the city. The contrast is jarring: push open the modern, seventies-style door—like something you'd find at a high school gym—and, on the other side, find a beautiful Japanese woman in a kimono in conversation with a Tibetan monk. (Many of the artisans there are Tibetan, largely political refugees, and several have taken religious vows.)

In Setsuko's atelier, a study in accidental beauty, the tables are strewn with ceramics in various states of completion—as well as paints, tools, brushes and unidentifiable things in plastic containers. Atop some shelves painted light turquoise, there is a cactus beside two unglazed clay dolls. In the corner stands a red and white Japanese screen. She proudly shows me the pieces she has just made for a show at the Château

she has practised since she was a child. She calls her iPhone her 'drug', and can't get up in the morning without catching up on her email and WhatsApp messages. (Though these days she can't linger in bed because Wim Wenders is staying with her while he films his new movie, and she has to wake him up lest he sleep the day away.)

Where Balthus surrounded her with people like Federico Fellini or the Dalai Lama, the next generation has brought her into the world of fashion: her daughter, Harumi Klossowska de Rola, is a jewellery designer who collaborates with Chopard and Boucheron; her stepson Thadée was married to Loulou de la Falaise, the muse of Yves Saint Laurent. She has posed with Kate Moss for *Vogue Italia* and lounged in decadent black, ruffled Cavalli for the Italian fashion magazine *Tar*. She's a fixture at Haider Ackermann shows; search for her on Google Images and you'll find her on the front row

'SPEAKING WITH SETSUKO IS LIKE TOUCHING THE PAST: THIS IS A WOMAN WHO WAS MARRIED TO A MAN WHO KNEW RILKE'

de Malmaison, the one-time home of Empress Joséphine. A pair of hands cup a bowl, which will hold a flower arrangement. A smallish white-glazed deer sits with her legs folded daintily beneath her. She has a detachable back and you can fill her torso with candy, or nuts, or whatever you like, Setsuko says—and, for a moment, I glimpse the consummate hostess that she was for many years as Balthus's consort at his chalet in Switzerland, or during his tenure as the director of the Villa Medici in Rome.

Speaking with Setsuko is like touching the past. This is a woman who was married to a man who knew Rilke; that kind of continuity is hard to come by these days. But I was unprepared for the way in which Setsuko reveals that she is aware of herself as a conduit to the past; the way she cultivates an air of history and timelessness. She wears a classic Japanese kimono, obi belt and zori sandals, her hair in a chignon, her face traditionally lightened. And yet in other ways she is thoroughly modern. She does yoga every morning, an ancient Chinese form that

next to Tilda Swinton, Lou Doillon, Timothée Chalamet and even Kanye West.

She strikes me as someone who is less interested in the buzz of it all and more cognizant of the way we are all part of the 'energy of the universe', as she puts it, which we take into our bodies every time we inhale. 'Because we're on the ground moving,' she says. 'It is turning, and the sun is there, and the moon is there, and the animals, the birds, the trees—you cut the flowers, and even cut from the root they can live. It's energy. So when you *inspire* [inhale], you have to think to take in your body the most precious energy of the universe, and when you *expire* [exhale], it's like the golden light of the sun goes through your body and gives you the full energy of the universe.' I do not think these are the kinds of things Kanye thinks about at a fashion show. But this is the way Setsuko approaches each day, in her yoga practice and in the deliberateness of her work.

She has a quietness and contentedness that sets her apart. Born in 1942 in Tokyo, she is descended





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from a samurai clan in Kyushu, who were originally from Kyoto. Her grandmother taught her the *Man'yōshū* (a collection of 6th- to 8th-century poetry), the tea ceremony and the importance of ritual. A musician who played the *biwa* (like a Japanese lute) would visit the house to play music and recite old epics, but she also learnt ballet and piano, and western languages. When she met Balthus, Setsuko was 19 years old to his 54, and in her first year of study at Tokyo's Sophia University, a Jesuit institution. She studied French literature and had a good command of English, so when a contingent of French artists and cultural administrators were going to be touring the temples of Kyoto, her teacher invited her to come along as an interpreter.

She and Balthus fell in love, and she agreed to move to Rome with him. This was her childhood dream, she told me: to meet a man whom she could love with a great love, and to whom she could give herself completely, unreservedly. She says this vehemently, with a wave of her hand: 'I wanted a dramatic, most difficult, even impossible love.'

'I REMEMBER, WHEN I WAS VERY SMALL, I HAD A KIMONO AND I COULD USE IT AS THE COVER OF MY BED, OR AS A CUSHION'

Even now, she says, in the relationships she has had since Balthus, 'I love when it's difficult.'

Balthus had had, since childhood, a deep love of Japanese culture. André Gide took him to see Noh theatre, and Rilke introduced him to Kazuko Okakura's *The Book of Tea*. At a time when, Setsuko says, the youth in Japan were trying to overthrow the spiritual values they had inherited in the interests of modernising and adopting western ways of living, Balthus loved and respected the old spiritual values. 'I married Japan,' she says.

When he arrived at the Villa Medici, it had fallen into disrepair. Balthus made it his business to completely renovate the place, and he did so, Setsuko says, with Japanese values in mind. It had been arranged, she said, 'in 19th century taste: the doors were heavy, dark red. Everything was like that. There was a gilt-covered chair and he stripped it off and it became blue, very nice, painted blue. And that is exactly what in Japan we call *shibui*—it means bitter, inner beauty, not shiny.'

It was Balthus who encouraged her to wear the kimono; when they met, she dressed like any other young woman in Tokyo. He taught her to take a closer look at the beauty of the weaving,

the pattern, the textile. And, she adds, the kimono is very practical as well as beautiful. 'When you're pregnant, you just loosen it like this [she tugs at it a little bit], and when you give the milk you just go like this [she mimes pulling the kimono open to breastfeed].' If you're working in the kitchen, there is a way to tie back the sleeves, she says.

A kimono can be used in different ways, not just as clothing—'I remember, when I was very small, I had a kimono and I could use it as the cover of my bed, or as a cushion'—which appeals to Setsuko's sense of environmentalism.

When Balthus met Setsuko, his 'style became more relaxed', as the *New York Magazine* art critic Thomas B. Hess wrote in 1977, he 'pulled images up against the picture plane for decorative, almost tapestry effects'. Balthus painted her several times. There is the gorgeously tiled *The Turkish Room* (1963), which hangs in the Pompidou; *Japanese Girl with Black Mirror* (1967), in which a flawlessly beautiful young woman, all elongated face and torso and limbs, extends herself on a *tatami* mat to touch

a darkened mirror; or *Japanese Girl With Red Table* (1967-76), where she wears an almost melancholic look on her face, as if she is either daydreaming or wondering how she got up on this canvas.

Balthus, she says, reminded her of some of the old spiritual values, which the younger generation were giving up. 'For instance?' I ask. 'If someone asks, "Would you like to go to a film?" you think: *Ah she would like to go to the film, so she will be happy if I say yes*. For me, it's all right to go, or not to go, but she will be happy if I go. And maybe if I don't go it's not good... so you go to keep the harmony.' In the West, she says, this isn't the case. 'You do what you want.'

Setsuko seems to have gone out of her way to keep the harmony with Balthus, running their massive chalet and all its staff, managing her ageing husband's medical treatment and keeping up with her own work painting gouaches. For years she painted their house, their cats, the things she would find at estate sales. She's brilliant at patterns: baskets, anything woven really, rugs, wallpaper, chessboards, cushions, scarves, hats, teapots, painted bowls... she revels in their textures and designs. The palette has much in common with Balthus's Japanese palette—lots of ochres, sepias, light greens. Sometimes her





Quintus Curtius
L'origine du monde
1666
129



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vases of flowers and arrangements of fruits float freeform in space, in an intense way that defies the domestic settings typically found in her work. But in *Coin d'Atelier* (1987-88), with its strong sense of Cézanne and Monet (who gave that title to one of his paintings), the furniture is jumbled and imposing, the planes and angles are pronounced—the Japanese girl reclaiming from the French painters what they took from her culture.

Balthus people can be condescending about her—his biographer Nicholas Fox Weber calls her work 'charming' but 'somewhat lightweight', 'pleasing and very well executed, if somewhat stultified'. 'There is little question,' he writes, 'that the polite Palm Beach veneer of his wife's art [...] would have horrified Balthus's friends from the old days,' such as Artaud and Giacometti. If her paintings have a decorative quality, this does not seem to me reason to dismiss them. Why should a lack of shock value or avant-garde troublemaking make her a mediocre artist? Life throbs on in her still lifes; the flowers are wild, spiky, exuberant. And the attention she gives to

and went to visit his shop—which he co-owns with Ivan Pericoli—on Rue Saint-Honoré.

The Astier de Villatte ceramics have a very particular aesthetic: dark, almost black clay imperfectly glazed a milky white, so the clay shows through in classic French *ancien régime* shapes. For Setsuko, who has been collaborating with the brand since 2014, it is expressive of *wabi-sabi*, the Japanese concept of imperfection, simplicity, intimacy.

The first thing she made for them was an ingenious cat incense burner, where you put the stick inside the cat's body and the smoke comes out of its mouth. It was an instant success. After that, they told her, she could make anything she liked. Through the collaborations with Astier de Villatte, her work evolved from painting to include sculpture—in particular a series of haunting, broken trees that, depending how you look at it, have either been destroyed by or survived a very harsh storm. As she has: her first-born child, a boy, died of Tay-Sachs disease at age two; a second pregnancy had the same disease and had to be terminated. She told me she made a vow that if she

'THE VALUE OF LIFE IS HOW TO OVERCOME, NOT TO BE BEATEN BY SUFFERING... IT'S HOW YOU DECIDE TO SEE'

the most modest of household belongings reminds us that there is value in the small, the lovely, the handmade. This is the tea ceremony aesthetic that is so important to Setsuko.

After Balthus died in 2001, it was like her life began all over again. She has described herself as 'open to everything' and she is living life to the fullest, taking romantic partners as the feeling strikes her. She became sought-after as a spokeswoman for Balthus's work, as someone who could attest the life and times of the great artist and his lofty friends. She was asked to speak at conferences, to write books, to give interviews, and she said yes to everything out of a spirit of curiosity and adventure. All the while she continued to make her own art, which today is in prominent collections around the world—including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and she has shown in several Gagosian group shows, officially becoming a Gagosian artist last year. But it has been her collaboration with Astier de Villatte that has really breathed new life into her practice.

She met Benoît Astier de Villatte when he was just a baby—his father, the sculptor Pierre Carron, was staying at the Villa Medici. Years later, she got wind of the grown-up Benoît's ceramics business

could just have one healthy child, she wouldn't ask for more, and her daughter Harumi was born in 1973.

When Setsuko was a small child, she suffered from tuberculosis, she tells me, and a yoga teacher saved her life. He taught her how powerful perspective can be: 'For example, if there is something you have that you like and it becomes few, there are two ways of thinking about it. One is to say, "Oh, I only have this much left," while another is "I still have..." That, he explained, changes everything. One is to be happy as you are. Another is to feel the lack of something. The value of life is how to overcome, not to be beaten by suffering... it's how you catch the things.'

'What do you mean, how you catch them?' I ask.

'To say, "I don't have much" or "I still have". It's how you decide to see.'

The trees she sculpts, caught somewhere between entropy and rebirth, depict specific trees on her property in Switzerland. In their new forms, she tells me, 'They are given new life. I like that idea.' They also remind her of Balthus himself, 'Because there is a root that stems from a very old tradition, and there will be flowers and fruits and seeds.' It is perhaps the job of the artist to show us the things that endure, so we may know how to catch them. ■







