

Note:

Rilke wrote his preface two days later, on November 26. As he reported in a letter to Nanny Wunderly-Volkart on November 27: "Yesterday I started pacing back and forth outdoors at three thirty, thinking over my preface for Balthazar K.'s cat story, and at night (until almost midnight!) I wrote it in one go. The first piece of work I have written here, if you want to dignify it with that name. But I enjoyed bringing forth something in French—and it was thought in French, never once translated in my mind from a German idea." To Balthus's mother he wrote: "Last night I set to work and composed all at once my little preface to Mitsou. I am very happy to include it here. . . . I also plan to send it to Vildrac, first to interest him in our publication so that he will stock copies of it, and secondly so that he can tell me frankly about any mistakes in the French that are too embarrassing—and there will be some!"

Berg-am-Irchel Castle, Zurich Canton

December 31, 1920

Dear Balthus,

Do you know what has kept me from writing you all this time? Certainly not the fear of "spoiling" you with too fulsome praise.⁴ I don't believe in this precaution that people think is educational: withholding reasonable praise from those who deserve it simply because they are young. On the contrary, I feel certain that we must express our approval, and if anything it is better to conceal our criticisms than suppress the joy of showing someone our pleasure—this joy does far more good to the recipient than the praise can harm him by overinflating his self-regard.

Anyway, in your case, my dear Balthus, there is nothing at all to fear: young as you are, your artistic instincts strike me as deep enough to bear within themselves an unconscious judgment, which, long before I came along, must have told you that these drawings, your spontaneous accompaniments to your memories of a Chinese story, are blessed with happy inspiration. I spend half an hour with your pictures almost every night, and each time find new reasons to be delighted. The inventions are charming; their facility proves the richness of your inner vision; the arrangement unfailingly highlights the excellent choices you made, more or less unconsciously, between the various possible elements in a rapid composition . . . In short, to say no more, if we

could look at this series of four by three images together, we would have—you the artist, and I to whom you have given this charming gift—an entirely comparable pleasure, one might almost say the same pleasure. How could that be harmful?

No, my friend, if I am reluctant to draw your attention too much to my pleasure—our pleasure—it is because I am taking into account something I'm wrong to insist on but nonetheless feel I must. It's terrible that our schools don't start with their individual students' strongest aptitudes, they practically ignore these talents or even fight them, if they happen by chance to discover their unfortunate existence! I can imagine only too well the enormous difference between the intense and joyful attention you pay to these works of yours and the other, compulsory, dry, required attention they try to inculcate in you once you've set foot in the classroom. But my dear Balthus, at the moment how can I do anything but very unwillingly encourage the latter? This must be your exam period. I *very much* hope that your exams won't create an obstacle to your usual movements, the path you have to follow during these years. It seems to me that with an effort of will you will be able to rein in part of your *real* attention and direct it instead in the other direction, toward your schoolwork, most of it boring but unavoidable. This would not be a compromise—believe me—but a small act of generosity, taking place at the high level of your other talents. To do this for a little while would not change how school seems to you, but with the superior-

ity resulting from this effort you would be able to take from school everything that might serve your own ideas and individual interests. It's not as if school doesn't contain all sorts of things you'd enjoy; it's just that it doesn't manage, or manages only badly, to make contact and offer those things to you.

There you have it, my dear. Try, make an effort, there is nothing in life that doesn't produce a very valuable and ultimately individual pleasure if only we are a little persistent.

You weren't feeling well at Christmas, my poor Balthus . . . I hope that you will enter into the new year happy, with renewed strength and confidence. As for me, I may well let myself be carried into 1921 in my sleep, and not see the new year until it is already several hours old. I have been writing all kinds of letters over the past few days, until my head is spinning, so as not to carry into the coming year the debts of correspondence I owe from this one. Out of my long list of several hundred names (now all crossed out), this letter to you will be the last to bear the old date. You see, I made sure to arrange for a happy ending.

It is up to you to start 1921 off right; try not to miss your chance, my dear friend, and bring Pierre and your dear Maman along with you.

RENÉ