

Modigliani—an artist between worlds

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Modigliani: Beyond the Myth, *at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, October 23, 2004 to January 23, 2005*

The current exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) offers an affecting presentation of the works of the Italian painter and sculptor Amadeo Modigliani (1884-1920), one of the most intriguing artists of his time. It focuses on his most productive period, the last 14 years of his brief life, when he lived in Paris. The exhibition is presented by the Jewish Museum in New York, where it opened earlier last year, and includes 87 drawings, paintings and sculptures from both public and private collections.

The art of Modigliani continues to generate both admiration and criticism, even as it did when the public first viewed the work following his death at the age of 35. In addition to a consideration of his distinctive contribution to modern art, this exhibition attempts to distinguish the legendary “bohemian” Modigliani from his real life and work, as well as furthering an appreciation of his importance as a Jewish artist.

His tragically early death, his volatile temperament, his amorous adventures, a dissolute life on the streets of Paris and his relative obscurity in the art world during his own lifetime, all have combined to turn Modigliani into something of a modernist romantic cliché. The recent biopic featuring Andy Garcia (2004, directed by Mick Davis), for example, relies almost entirely on this caricature. While the current show attempts to separate the real figure from the myth and deepen an appreciation of his significant contribution to the development of modern art, it conspicuously ignores certain important questions, above all, historical context.

The period treated in the exhibition witnessed historic upheavals, leading up to and through the First World War and culminating in the Russian Revolution. Although these events may not have penetrated the consciousness of Modigliani as directly as they did many others, they unquestionably conditioned the cultural and social climate in which he worked and developed. To approach his life and work with some awareness of this context would seem an elementary obligation and one can only speculate why the organizers have limited their scope to his cultural heritage, as well as other, relatively minor matters.

While any attempt to draw a straight line between artistic and broader social development would distort the picture, an understanding of the world from which a given artist draws influences, ideas and feelings seems nonetheless indispensable. And while the absence of such an approach is hardly unique to this exhibition, the seriousness that the organizers have otherwise brought to this exhibition falls somewhat short in the absence of this broader consideration.

Born in 1884 in the port city of Livorno, in northwestern Italy, Amadeo Modigliani was the youngest of four children born to middle class Jewish parents who were facing financial ruin at the time of his birth. His father, who came from an orthodox religious background, was a rather unsuccessful trader in commodities such as metals and coal, and was away a good deal during the artist’s childhood.

As a result of the family’s dire economic situation, his mother, whose family was much more liberal in its views, decided to open a school—an emancipated initiative for a woman at the time and one which brought

enough income to keep the family’s head above water.

At the time of the artist’s birth Livorno (Leghorn), located on the northwest coast of Italy, was one of the more open-minded cities in Europe. A principal Tuscan trading center, it expanded into a major port during the rule of the Medici family in the sixteenth century. As an open port since 1590, Livorno became home to many Sephardic Jews expelled from their homelands during the Spanish Inquisition. The Modigliani family had thrived in these culturally diverse and tolerant surroundings. This highly cultured and literate family allowed Amadeo to develop an unshakeable personal confidence, as well as the independent and critical view of the world that characterizes his art.

Due in part to his father’s absence, young “Dedo,” his mother called him, grew very close to his grandfather and was devastated, when he was 10 years old, by the latter’s death. The boy soon fell ill with pleurisy and from that point on ill health plagued Modigliani until he contracted the tubercular meningitis that ultimately killed him. The young man made known his desire to become an artist at an early age and received the most generous support possible from his family for the rest of his life.

At 17 he declared his ambition to become a sculptor, but stone carving proved to be too taxing for his frail health and he set it aside in favor of painting, which he learned through various apprenticeships, but with otherwise little formal training. Although he never abandoned his interest in the discipline, he returned to sculpting for only a brief period in his thirties, to do a series of stone head carvings that are among the most powerful works in the AGO exhibition.

Until the artist arrived in Paris in 1906, it seems unlikely that Modigliani had been exposed to the sort of persecution of Jews that was increasingly promoted by ruling circles in Europe and taken up by the most unstable, backward social elements. Although Modigliani had not previously put much stock in his Jewish heritage, under such conditions he felt compelled to announce his religious background loudly, and often with the intent of confronting anti-Semites.

Although Modigliani was not explicit in his political views, he evinced an early sympathy for the downtrodden; many of his early works depict impoverished urban settings. Significantly though, his older brother Emanuele had been imprisoned for his activities in the socialist movement when Amadeo was a youth and as a result had become something of a hero to the boy. Nevertheless, he had only implicit sympathies with the socialist cause and even his opposition to anti-Semitism seems to have been more a visceral protest against such treatment than anything consciously worked out.

Modigliani participated in a number of exhibitions prior to the First World War, but received little notice from the critics and no gallery expressed an interest in representing him. He fell into unproductive despair during this time, drinking heavily and smoking hashish—worsening his already poor health. When war broke out in 1914, he tried to enlist along with the other artists of his circle, but was refused on medical grounds. He spent the war sketching portraits in bars, exchanging them for a drink or a bite to eat.

Modigliani's facility with color—his subtle use of tones to startling and moving effect—was one of his great strengths. His portrait of Jeanne Hébuterne, shown at the AGO, combines the softness of pastel flesh with brilliant blues to affect an endearing melancholy. The elongated neck and eyes skewed and hollow give the simplicity of this work a haunting aspect.

Provocative in the presentation of their subjects' nakedness, yet sophisticated in composition and color; innocently mundane in pose and facial expression, but at the same time inviting, the series of reclining female nudes is perhaps his most well-known work. The artist did not typically paint his subjects—most often lovers and friends—in the nude, and these now famous works only came into being because they were commissioned for what was to be his only, ill fated one-man show.

Although the female nude was hardly novel as a subject in the galleries of Paris, the gallery that featured these subjects was forced to close the same day it opened in 1917 due to public protest. The paintings remain a compelling, if problematic depiction of female sexuality.

Despite the highly artificial and elegant quality of the images, the artist has represented convincingly and in a manner that indicates both progressive and retrograde attitudes toward their sex. The models were veritable strangers to Modigliani and that may help explain their particular treatment at his hands, but it seems that in some measure he did view women in this "objectivized" manner. Their vulnerability and proximity is disturbingly tangible—offered to the viewer for consumption. On the other hand, in paintings such as "Nude with Coral Necklace," there is a placid strength that shows a genuine respect for the subject's sexual and moral autonomy, indicating a more enlightened view as well.

In contrast to his contemporaries, Modigliani dealt almost exclusively with portraits, a genre that was not in particular favor at the time and considered passé by galleries and art traders. The other subject that he favored was the Caryatid—a sculpted female figure used as a support in ancient Greek and Egyptian architecture. This theme was rendered in a number of paintings and drawings that advance an innovative synthesis of sculpture and painting that cuts across existing artistic and cultural boundaries in some of his strongest images.

In addition to his unpopular choice of genre, he worked in a style that does not fit neatly into any definable school of painting and this in part explains his difficulty in garnering greater commercial success in his day. Although he readily absorbed the artistic advances such as cubism that surrounded him and worked closely with this vanguard, he stubbornly refused to be associated with schools such as the Italian Futurists that solicited his support. The matter of his Jewish heritage is somewhat more complex and beyond the scope of this review, although it must be stated that the recent attention paid to this question, which is highlighted in this exhibition, seems disproportionate given his own relative indifference to the matter.

It is regrettable that the aggressive marketing, particularly of his notorious nudes, and a more general overexposure have to some extent desensitized contemporary audiences to an objective viewing of Modigliani. It is also unfortunate that so little remains of his own thoughts and words, much of his archive having been destroyed during World War II. A good deal of what survives is contradictory and cryptic—perhaps a fitting legacy. "Life is a gift: from the few to the many; from those who know and have to those who do not know and have not," and "I want a short but intense life." In this latter at least, he seems to have gotten his wish.

This was also the year he began Hastings, the radical journalist featured in the AGO show in one of a number of portraits. Their volatile affair was characterized by self-indulgence and infidelity, and soon ended badly. The following year he met Simone Thiroux. He eventually spurned her upon learning that she was pregnant with his child. Shamefully, he never acknowledged the baby born in 1917.

In the spring of that year the still struggling and sickly Modigliani fell in with an adoring young art student, Jeanne Hébuterne, with whom he remained through ever declining health until his death. They had a child the following year, and she was eight months pregnant at the time of Modigliani's death on January 24, 1920. Tragically, the following day, in despair, Jeanne jumped to her death.

Modern art was flourishing in the early 1900s and "the school of Paris," which comprised a number of artistic styles and approaches, was at its center. In Paris Modigliani encountered and interacted with such figures as Picasso, Brancusi, Soutine, Lipschitz—and even Diego Rivera with whom he shared a studio for a time—all of whom in their day received a measure of recognition that he did not.

In his development the artist drew on a range of influences from the old masters to African primitives. His stone head carvings are clearly African-inspired, while many of his paintings such as "Madame Pompadour" draw on the sensibility of the cubists. In addition to the effect of contemporary currents such as fauvism, cubism, Dadaism and even art nouveau, Modigliani also acknowledged his profound and obvious debt to the work of the post-impressionist Paul Cézanne.

Modigliani's painting harks back in many ways to classicism with an "objective" approach to the world in his idealization of his subjects painted in restrained and even somber tones. But he advances a sensibility that is distinctly modern in the stark expression of inner emotional and psychological tensions that threaten to erupt onto the canvas. It is this artistic "no man's land" that he staked out which continues to confuse adherents of both the old and the new. Even today, Modigliani's portraits are sometimes mistaken for a sort of caricature of his subjects. The elongated faces, impassive in expression, but rendered in a contrasting warm palette, can easily be underestimated. However, behind the apparent simplicity and coolness of his work, lies a sophisticated and instinctively civilizing response to the increasingly violent world around him.

One of the great strengths of this show is its range, demonstrating Modigliani's virtuosity at different points in his evolution. On display here are numerous artistic treasures that are often more powerful than his more widely known works. One such is "The Jewess" (1908), an oil painting done in bold rich strokes that has a haunting power expressing a deep passion for his medium and a profound compassion for his subject.



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