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Torrid Life, Transcendent Art

It's awfully hard to revise the romantic myth of Modigliani.

By Christopher Benfey

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The romantic myth of the artist dies hard. Van Gogh in Arles, Gauguin in Tahiti, Caravaggio boozing and brawling in the mean streets of Rome! Wouldn't we much rather hear about the impulsive escapades of the bad boys of art than follow the incremental progress of a bourgeois toiler like Monet, turning out one more view of haystacks with the light striking them just so, or Cézanne, shifting the apples around on his table?

Among 20th-century artists, few can compare for sheer cinematic drama with the Italian painter and sculptor Amedeo Modigliani, "probably the most mythologized modern artist since Van Gogh," according to the art historian Kenneth Silver. Scenes from the life of Modigliani might include "Modi" hobnobbing with Picasso in Montmartre, having a torrid affair with the married Russian poet Anna Akhmatova (before "the breath of art," as she wrote, had "charred ... our two existences"), and ending his long relationship with the English journalist Beatrice Hastings when her new lover drew a gun on him at a drunken party attended by Picasso, Matisse, and Juan Gris.

Modigliani drank heavily, used cocaine and hashish, and, a gorgeous hunk of a man despite his modest height of 5 feet 3 inches, fathered an indeterminate number of illegitimate children. "To say that he was loved by women," Meryle Secrest writes in her well-informed new biography, [Modigliani: A Life](#), "is an almost laughable understatement." Apparently, he had no need of pickup lines. "Sometimes, when drunk, he would begin undressing," a friend reported in a typical account of Modigliani misbehaving, "under the eager eyes of the faded English and American girls who frequented the canteen ... then display himself quite naked, slim and white, his torso arched." When his life was cut short by tuberculosis at the age of 35, his final lover, Jeanne, eight months pregnant with their second child, threw herself out of a window. With a life like that, the art can seem like an afterthought. No wonder two biopics of the artist have been released.

The time is right, however, for a renewed appreciation of Modigliani's art. His lyrical portraits and languorous nudes, always more popular with the museum-going public than with art critics, combined the flat patches of color of Cézanne (who died in 1906, the year Modigliani arrived in Paris) with the sinuous grace of Botticelli. Modigliani's almond-eyed faces sometimes resemble masks, as Secrest notes, but his portraits of vibrant characters like Cocteau have a startling immediacy, the personality captured in an arched eyebrow or a mouth pursed just so. He was a sculptor of genius, working side-by-side from 1910 to 1913 with his close friend the great

Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi. Secrest is dismissive of what she calls Modigliani's "short career as a sculptor" — is four years short? — and repeatedly uses the word "experiments" for his work in stone. But critical opinion concerning the 27 or so vigorously conceived limestone heads in existence is on the rise. One that sold recently in France for \$52.8 million arrestingly combines an impassive, vertical face with hair billowing back as though caught in the wind, like a Greek goddess turned Parisian flapper.

On the whole, Secrest seems more comfortable with details of Modigliani's life than with his art, often relying on remote sources for her insights. She dutifully follows his training with a succession of Italian artists and his growing interest in archeology and Renaissance art. But when it comes to an assessment of the results, she's at a loss. She incongruously compares one of Modigliani's sculpted heads — based on African masks and other "primitive" models — with Monet's water lilies for their "intimations of infinity." She approaches Modigliani's paintings as though they are filled with coded symbols drawn from alchemy or the occult (black means death; doors stand for rebirth), when the real power of these disarming and vulnerable pictures is right there on the surface, in the fleeting gesture or the gracefully turned neck.

Secrest is at her best in portraying Modigliani's own vulnerability as an outsider in Paris, precariously living hand-to-mouth and painting-to-painting. There is much to be said about Modigliani as a self-consciously Jewish artist. ("I forgot to tell you I'm Jewish," he told Akhmatova.) Modigliani was brought up in a large family of Sephardic origin in the port city of Livorno, with financial interests in banking and mining and close ties to France. He was among the extraordinary number of Jewish artists, many driven from Russia and Poland by pogroms, who settled in Paris during the opening decades of the 20th century. (Some 80 Jewish artists from Montparnasse, as Kenneth Silver has noted, are estimated to have died in the Holocaust.) Well-read and well-connected, Modigliani, who was often described as "aristocratic" by his friends, easily assimilated into French society, and served as a mentor for Jewish artists of the "School of Paris" (a slightly pejorative term reserved for immigrants, as opposed to the "French School" of Matisse or Derain) such as his rough-edged friend Chaim Soutine.

While there seems little evidence that Modigliani's family suffered from overt anti-Semitism, Secrest uncovers other signs of stress and underlying tension. Financial setbacks plunged the family "from wealth to want" just before Modigliani's birth in 1884. One of his mother's sisters committed suicide, while another was institutionalized for mental illness. His brother Emanuele, a major figure in the Italian Socialist Party who was imprisoned for his views as a young man, was later forced to flee the country when Mussolini rose to power. Modigliani's youthful bouts with life-threatening diseases, including typhoid and scarlet fever, were part of a larger pattern of family suffering. Nonetheless, his mother, a literary translator and novelist, understood his vocation.

With her richly textured account of his family origins and training, Secrest persuades us that Modigliani was indeed a hardworking and ambitious artist who was determined, against all obstacles, to succeed in Paris. But Secrest's primary aim is not a fresh take on Modigliani's art. Instead, she wishes to destroy, once and for all, what she calls the "legend" of his life. "It is axiomatic," as she sums up the prevailing view, "that Modigliani was a brilliant young artist who ruined his health and died prematurely." This Modigliani myth, she contends, "is based on a tragic misconception." Modigliani was not self-destructive, she argues, but was instead a heroic survivor

of a series of devastating illnesses, before succumbing, after a long battle, to TB. She sounds like a defensive family member when she claims that Modigliani "only drank in moderation," "experimented with hashish along with everyone else," and didn't inhale.

In her view, Modigliani deliberately erected an elaborate smoke screen of increasingly flamboyant behavior—drinking, drugs, and womanizing—in order to conceal his true secret, tuberculosis, the shameful fin-de-siècle equivalent of AIDS, transmitted, it was thought, through "contamination," dirty bed-sheets, and squalor. "The received wisdom is that he drank himself to death," she writes. "The reverse is the case; alcohol and drugs were the means by which he could somehow keep functioning, the necessary anesthetic, as well as hide the great secret that must be kept at all costs." He was, in her view, a brilliant actor. "Here was no shambling drunk but a man on a desperate mission, running out of time and calculating what he had to do in order to go on working and concealing his secret for however long remained. He was gambling, and willing to take the consequences. It must have been a courageous and lonely masquerade."

It's actually Secretst who sounds a bit desperate here, turning up the volume to conceal a thin and unconvincing theory. Isn't it possible that Modigliani was in fact a shameless drunk and drug abuser—"a craving, violent bad boy, overturning tables, never paying his score and insulting his best friends," as Hastings wrote—who also tried to hide his fatal illness? Couldn't he have been both self-destructive and a serious and gifted artist who worked hard in the time allotted to him?

The real irony of Secretst's revisionist view of Modigliani is this. After all her labor to destroy the myth of Modigliani as a self-destroying artist who died young, she has managed to substitute the oldest of all the tragic myths of the bohemian artist: the consumptive painter dying for art in his garret. She repeatedly aligns Modigliani's fate with the famous consumptives of 19th-century art, especially Keats, "that fellow sufferer," and Chopin. She invokes the doomed heroines of [La Traviata](#) and [La Bohème](#). Ultimately, it's not from the realm of legend that she wants to rescue Modigliani. She just wants a different legend, one that reflects better on the man she rightly admires.

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