Modigliani Misunderstood

A new exhibition positions the bohemian artist's work above even his operatic life story

BY DOUG STEWART

LATE IN 1919, in a squalid Paris studio strewn with wine bottles, Amedeo Modigliani painted a wistful portrait of his 21-year-old lover, Jeanne Hébuterne. A few months later, on January 24, 1920, the impoverished artist died of tubercular meningitis at age 35. The following evening, Hébuterne, eight months' pregnant with their second child, leapt to her death from a fifth-story window.

During Modigliani's short and difficult life, the going rate for his elegant, oddly distorted paintings was less than $10, and takers were few. A landlord who confiscated some of his work in lieu of rent used the canvases to patch old mattresses. Last November an anonymous bidder at Sotheby's auction house in New York City paid $31.3 million for the Hébuterne portrait.

One of the many ironies of Modigliani's career is that so tortured a life could produce so serene a body of work. His art managed to bridge the stylistic chasm between classical Italian painting and avant-garde Modernism. The French poet Jean Cocteau, writing in 1959, some 40 years after the two had hobnobbed in Paris' Montparnasse cafés, called Modigliani "the simplest and noblest genius of that heroic age." Yet conventional art histories barely mention him. His work, it seems, is too hard to pigeonhole within the canon of 20th-century painting. Perhaps more important, his colorful, tragic life has overshadowed his accomplishments as an artist.

"Modigliani in his personal life is almost a caricature of the misunderstood bohemian painter," says Tamar Garb, an art historian at University College London. "If Van Gogh is the quintessential mad genius, Modigliani is the quintessential tubercular alcoholic."

A Modigliani retrospective (on view February 26 through May 29 at the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C.) attempts to get past his tabloid-worthy reputation as a dashing, drug-using, womanizing wastrel. Organized by the Jewish Museum in New York City, where it drew huge crowds last summer, "Modigliani: Beyond the Myth" offers a portrait of the artist as a serious, disciplined intellectual whose uniqueness as a painter mirrored his outsider status as an Italian immigrant and Jew in Catholic France. (The exhibition's use of the word "myth" is a bit misleading, since Modigliani really *was* a dashing, drug-using, womanizing wastrel.)

AMEDEO MODIGLIANI was born in the Tuscan seaport of Livorno on July 12, 1884. He was a dreamy, precocious mama's boy, the youngest of four children, in a family of cultivated, left-leaning intellectuals. His father, Flaminio, a failure in business, was absent for most of Modigliani's childhood. To make ends meet, his mother, Eugenia, opened a school in the family home, teaching French and English, among other subjects. A sickly child, Dedo, as he was called, had several bouts with pleurisy and at 14 nearly died of typhoid fever. Two years later he was diagnosed with tuberculosis, which would slowly kill him over the next 20 years. Though he rarely spoke of his condition, he seemed aware that his time was short. Later, in Paris, he would announce to a friend, Lithuanian sculptor Jacques Lipchitz, that he sought above all "*une vie brève mais intense*" ("a brief but intense life").

In Italy as a young man, he enrolled in art schools in Livorno, Florence and Venice, where he dutifully studied academic painting and life drawing. He was entranced by the great artists of the Italian Renaissance, a passion that in Paris would set him apart from so many of his militantly modern peers. Still, he wanted to break new ground. At 17 he wrote from Venice to his Livorno friend Oscar Ghiglia: "Always speak out and keep forging ahead. The man who cannot find new ambitions and even a new person within himself . . . is not a man." His own ambitions would take him to France. "As an artist," Modigliani liked to say, quoting Nietzsche, "a man has no home in Europe save in Paris."

Arriving there in 1906 at age 21, Modigliani emerged from

his second-class train compartment wearing a smartly tailored black suit and a dramatic black cape. Though slight, he looked taller than his 5 feet 6 inches, and he carried himself like an aristocrat. In his suitcase he packed a well-worn edition of Dante (whom he was prone to recite from memory at high volume, day or night) and a small reproduction of *Two Courtesans*, a painting by the Venetian Renaissance artist Vittore Carpaccio, which he would tack to the walls of an endless succession of rented rooms. He brought enough money from mama to last a few months, if he was careful. But Modigliani was never careful.

In Paris, he discovered the work of Renoir, Degas, Gauguin and, among the younger, more radical set, Matisse and Picasso. Cézanne in particular he pronounced "admirrrable," one of his favorite adjectives; whenever Cézanne's name was mentioned, he'd pull a reproduction of the painter's *Boy in a Red Vest* from his pocket and kiss it. His own early works were somber, Expressionist-influenced portraits with roughly applied gray green colors and heavy outlining that borrowed all too obviously from Cézanne and Toulouse-Lautrec.

Modigliani quickly assumed the pose of the flamboyant bohemian: he frequented the artist hangouts of Montmartre and later Montparnasse, wore a bright silk scarf knotted around his neck in place of a cravat or tie and answered to the nickname Modi, a pun on *peintre maudit* (accursed painter). Russian artist Chaim Soutine was a close friend, and Maurice Utrillo, later famous for his painted scenes of Montmartre, was a favorite drinking companion. Modigliani was also friendly with Picasso, though not part of his inner circle. Picasso, who affected a workingman's look with his patched clothes and fisherman's sweaters, seems to have admired Modigliani's wardrobe more than his paintings; needing canvas, he once painted over a Modigliani work he had acquired. Modigliani, for his part, recognized the Spaniard's genius but told a friend that artistic talent was no excuse for not dressing decently.

For much of his life, Modigliani was better known as a character than as a painter. Some 40 years after his death, his daughter, Jeanne Modigliani, wrote that some people nearly swooned at his suave, cultivated manner, while others found him "an unbearable buffoon" and a "boring, drunken spoilsport." (Jeanne, a toddler when her parents died, was raised by her father's sister in Italy. She knew her father only from interviews, letters and other documents. An artist and writer, she died in 1984 at age 66.)

Modigliani's first patron was Paul Alexandre, a young surgeon and would-be dealer who ran a low-budget art colony of sorts in a run-down house on Paris' Rue du Delta. Modigliani painted there rent-free and turned over his canvases to Alexandre for 10 to 20 francs each ($2 to $4), and his sketches for perhaps 20 centimes (4 cents). It wasn't much, but the doctor let the artist retrieve his work if he could get a better offer. Between 1909 and 1913, Modigliani painted three oil portraits of Alexandre. The first was a conventional portrait with the subject posing stagily, with hand on hip. The last (far left), which the artist painted from memory, is the most distinctively "Modiglianiesque," with the rapid brushwork, elongated face and blank eyes that would become his trademark.

Modigliani had entered seven watercolors and oils in Paris' Salon d'Automne exhibition in 1907 and five works in the Salon des Indépendants in 1908, but they'd attracted little attention. Other than Alexandre, no one seemed interested in his art. Embittered, he threw himself instead into carving stone, inspired in part by Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi, a friend and neighbor. Modigliani was convinced Rodin and his followers had corrupted sculpture with an overreliance on clay—"too much mud," he called it. Real sculptors, he declared, carved directly from stone. To do so himself, he stole chunks of limestone from building sites. For an occasional sculpture in wood, he swiped oak crossties from the new Metro line then being extended to Montmartre.

From about 1909 to 1914, though the stone dust weakened his frail lungs, Modigliani carved a series of large, highly stylized stone heads. With their impossibly long noses and tiny pursed mouths, the massive works combined the serenity of early Renaissance tomb sculpture with the exotic spookiness of Easter Island monoliths. He also drew and painted caryatids—load-bearing architectural figures—almost obsessively.

"The influence of tribal art, especially African sculpture, on the avant-garde in Paris during this period cannot be overestimated," says Mason Klein, associate curator at the Jewish Museum, who believes that Modigliani's acute awareness of himself as a Jew (if a nonpracticing one) and an outsider opened him to the richness of non-Western art. "If you look at his sculpture," says Klein, "you see the influence of not only African art but Khmer art and the art of archaic Greece, ancient Egypt and Rome. You even see some of the iconic presence of Byzantine art."

Unfortunately, Modigliani's carved heads were simply too strange to attract buyers. He used them as giant candleholders in the disheveled studio where he often slept and worked. One limestone block that he had transformed into a kneeling caryatid (p. 78) was too heavy for him to cart away from the vacant lot where he found and carved it. Friends rescued it shortly after his death in 1920. It is now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

"Sculpture helped him think about how you can simplify forms, how you can show the essence of something using the simplest possible means," says art historian Tamar Garb. When Modigliani refocused on painting around 1914, his work had a new energy and confidence.

Most of the painters who made names for themselves in the early 20th century took part in new movements with their own theories and manifestoes: Fauvism, Futurism and the like. "Modigliani has been an anomaly," says Klein. "His work doesn't fit into the standard art-historical categories like Expressionism or Cubism. Not to paint any still lifes and to be so exclusively focused on portraiture was very unusual,

if not unique, in his time." But Modigliani was happy to stand apart. Charles Beadle, an English journalist who contributed to a 1941 biography of Modigliani titled *Artist Quarter*, had known the artist in Paris around 1913. "Once," Beadle wrote, "when I asked him what he called his 'manner,' he retorted haughtily: 'Modigliani! When an artist has need to stick on a label, he's lost!'"

Impulsive and argumentative, Modigliani had neither the inclination nor the social skills needed for commissioned portraiture. (In an early portrayal of a fox-hunting French baroness, he changed the woman's scarlet riding jacket to canary yellow. Insulted, the baroness refused to pay for the painting.) Many of his subjects were friends or acquaintances. His portrait of Jean Cocteau (p. 3) is a deft blend of the signature Modigliani "look"—mismatched eyes, crooked nose, elongated head balanced on a plinthlike neck—and the poet's icy hauteur. "You see Cocteau sitting there imperious on his thronelike chair with one eyebrow lifted, ready to dismiss someone's stupid remark," says Klein. The painting has elements of caricature but exudes the gravitas of a royal portrait.

Equally revealing are Modigliani's depictions of Paul Guillaume, his first serious art dealer. In a 1915 portrait, Guillaume looks sleek and confident, with a fussy little mustache and one gloved hand holding a cigarette. "Modigliani wrote 'Novo Pilota' below the figure," says Klein. "He saw Guillaume as his 'New Pilot,' a savvy member of the avant-garde who was going to advance his career. But you also see his distrust for this cosmopolitan know-it-all in the way he emphasized the cocky tilt of the head, the fancy suit, the cigarette, almost as though Guillaume were a pimp selling Modigliani's work."

Of course it is Modigliani's stylized interpretations of languid, melancholy women that are best-known today. But what makes many of his portraits linger in one's memory is the unease clouding his subjects' faces. "All are like hurt children, albeit some of these children have beards or gray hair," wrote Russian novelist Ilya Ehrenburg, who had also known the artist in Paris. "I believe that the world seemed to Modigliani like an enormous kindergarten run by very unkind adults." The vulnerable-looking child wringing her hands in *Little Girl in Blue* had, in fact, just been scolded. The artist had sent her out for a bottle of wine, and she'd returned with lemonade.

Perhaps the unease reflected, too, the burden of Modigliani's own poverty. He was evicted from a series of rooms in Montmartre and Montparnasse and slept in one-franc-a-night hotels, train-station waiting rooms and abandoned buildings. He managed, however, to maintain his elegance whatever his finances and attracted a number of lovers, though his relationships tended to be stormy and brief. Unlike his artist friends, he refused to work odd jobs, though his efforts to sell his own work often ended badly. Writing in 1925, painter Maurice de Vlaminck recalled Modigliani showing some drawings to a dealer who had tracked him down in his studio: when the dealer angled for a discount, "Modigliani, without a word, picked up the pile of papers and straightened them carefully, made a hole through the entire pile, threaded a string through the lot and went and hung them up in the lavatory."

Aside from small sums that his mother occasionally mailed him from Livorno, Modigliani survived mainly on quick sketches of people in cafés that he traded for coins, a meal, or a drink. Vlaminck remembered Modigliani's casual dignity as he worked the Café de la Rotonde: "With the gesture of a millionaire he would hold out the sheet of paper (on which he sometimes went so far as to sign his name) as he might have held out a banknote in payment to someone who had just bought him a glass of whisky."

In 1916, Modigliani befriended a small-time art dealer named Leopold Zborowski, a Polish émigré and self-styled poet who managed to provide the artist with a small monthly allowance in return for a regular allotment of paintings. The arrangement boosted the painter's spirits as well as his income. As part of the deal, Zborowski gave the artist a room, food, painting materials and studio space, along with coal to heat it. The coal proved essential in the chilly winter of 1917, when, with Zborowski's encouragement, Modigliani painted a string of large nudes that are among the artist's most indelible works.

"Modigliani is a deeply Italian painter, and he's clearly interested in the language of the body, which is the language of Italian art," says Griselda Pollock, an art historian at England's University of Leeds who wrote about the nudes for the Jewish Museum's exhibition catalog. "When you stand in front of some of Modigliani's nudes, you are literally embarrassed being in the presence of such frank physicality. Yet even though he's reputed to be this dashing man with lots of lovers, these were typically models hired for him by Zborowski. He didn't know them."

Zborowski sold one nude for an unprecedented 300 francs ($60), but in general they proved problematic. Francis Carco, a writer friend of Modigliani's, acquired one for his bachelor apartment. "The next morning," he recalled, "when my concierge came to do the room, she nearly dropped dead on seeing the picture over the bed." For Modigliani's first and only one-man show, at Paris' Berthe Weill gallery in December 1917, a large nude was placed in the shop's front window, across the street from a police station. Noticing a crowd gathering on opening night, the police investigated and ordered all the nudes removed. When Weill demanded an explanation, the inspector fumed, "*Ces nues . . . ils ont des p-p-poils!*" ("These nudes . . . they have b-b-body hair!") The planned month-long show was shut down before it had officially begun, although Weill did manage to sell two drawings. (Forty years later, Modigliani's women were still raising blood pressure. Postal authorities in New York City deemed a Guggen-

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heim Museum postcard of one of his reclining nudes unfit for the U.S. mails in the 1950s.)

WHEN MODIGLIANI met his last and most devoted lover, Jeanne Hébuterne, in 1917, she was a promising art student of 19. She promptly moved in with him, leaving her petit-bourgeois family aghast that she had taken up with a failed artist, and a Jewish one at that. The couple shared a ramshackle apartment on Rue de la Grande Chaumière where, according to a later tenant, "one could see the sunlight shining through part of the wall."

Hébuterne was slender with almond-shaped eyes, a pale complexion and long light-brown braids. She was so reserved that Zborowski's wife, Hanka, later could not recall ever having heard her voice. Modigliani introduced her as his "best beloved"—an endearment he'd apparently never used with the other women in his life—and he pledged in writing to marry her (although he never followed through). Hébuterne's love for Modigliani was apparently unconditional; she even condoned his drinking and barhopping.

In 1918, with Paris under German bombardment, Hébuterne pregnant, and Modigliani's always fragile health worsening, Zborowski organized an artistic retreat in Provence, for himself, his family and a group of artists (including Modigliani and Hébuterne), that lasted nearly a year. There, Modigliani's palette grew brighter and his compositions bolder. Hébuterne gave birth to their daughter, Jeanne, in Nice on November 29, 1918. By summer 1919, she was pregnant again. "I'm getting fat and becoming a respectable citizen of Cagnes-sur-Mer," Modigliani told an artist friend that summer in mock-horror. "I'm going to have two kids; it's unbelievable. It's *sickening*!"

His art was finally getting noticed. That summer, Modigliani and Utrillo were the stars of a major art exhibition in London. The influential novelist and critic Arnold Bennett wrote in the exhibition's catalog that Modigliani's portraits "have a suspicious resemblance to masterpieces."

On a page in his sketchbook at the start of 1920, Modigliani scrawled, "A new year. Here begins a new life." Says curator Klein: "He wrote this in Paris three weeks before he died. He knew he was dying, but he worked right up to the end." Modigliani probably caught pneumonia. Weak and emaciated, he collapsed at home and was taken unconscious to a charity hospital, where he died two days later.

His funeral was attended by a Who's Who of the Paris art world: Picasso, Léger, Derain, Brancusi and hundreds more. In the funeral procession mourners reported being approached by dealers eager to buy Modigliani paintings. Galleries with his work in stock raised their prices tenfold; purchasers marked them up tenfold again. Forgeries flooded the market. Even police officials were eager for his paintings. Modigliani's mother and siblings in Italy never benefited—they owned few, if any, of his paintings. Fourteen-month-old Jeanne's only inheritance was a collection taken up on her behalf by her father's fellow artists.

Four years after Modigliani's death, French novelist Michel Georges-Michel made him the tragic hero of a melodrama, *Les Montparnos* (the English edition was called *Left Bank*), which he modeled on the opera *La Bohème*. Since then, Modigliani's life has been romanticized in other books, on stage and in films, most recently in a movie (no release date has been set) by Scottish writer-director Mick Davis, starring Andy Garcia. Cultural historian Maurice Berger, who has examined the artist's posthumous reputation, says that Modigliani has "never been a darling of Modernist art historians, who consider his work perhaps not that important, but the public has always loved it: its elegance, its refinement, its panache. And people always love a good story."