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## Modigliani's Recipe: Sex, Drugs and Long, Long Necks

By PETER PLAGENS

VINCENT VAN GOGH had a 10-year working life that can hardly be called a "career," and yet he's just about the biggest draw ever in museum exhibitions, at least per square inch of canvas covered. When the 1998 "Van Gogh's van Goghs" exhibition entered the home stretch of its run at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, officials had to keep the place open 24 hours a day on the last weekend to accommodate the crowds.



Amedeo Modigliani

O.K., that's van Gogh. But since June 26, visitors have been streaming into the same museum at the rate of more than 1,400 a day (which a spokesperson calls "astounding" for them) to see the work of a different painter with an equally brief working life. The attraction, which originated at the Albright-Knox Gallery in Buffalo (where the museum had to turn away visitors during the last two weeks) and then stopped at the Kimbell Museum in Fort Worth, is an exhibition called "Modigliani and the Artists of Montparnasse." (It runs through Sept. 28.) Although the show includes healthy doses of Chagall, Soutine and Rivera (among others), the benighted Amedeo Modigliani (1884-1920) is the real draw.

What is it about this artist, who painted deceptively simple, semi-abstracted, sloe-eyed women over and over again, that pleases the public so much?

It could be at least partly the biography. Modigliani was born an outsider — his parents were Sephardic Jews in Livorno, Italy — and grew up sickly and tubercular. He arrived in Paris at 18, wide-eyed and ambitious, and quickly fell into a passionate, bohemian existence of drugs, alcohol and brothels. He really wanted to be a sculptor and daubed mostly because of poverty (the ultracheap medium of assemblage hadn't been invented yet). In addition to Chagall, Soutine and Rivera, his supporting cast of avant-garde arrivistes included Giorgio de Chirico, Juan Gris, Elie Nadelman, Piet Mondrian, Constantin Brancusi, Jacob Epstein, Sonia Delaunay and Jacques Lipchitz.

Oh, yes, and Picasso.

Modigliani met Picasso in 1909 and was later haunted, enraged, awed and made envious by every artistic move this transplanted Spaniard made. But where the wily Picasso gradually cobbled together a kind of prosperity, Modigliani stayed dirt poor, frequently changing residences only one jump ahead of eviction and constantly trying to settle unpayable debts with drawings. He died Byronically, of meningitis, at 35. A day after his burial in Père Lachaise cemetery, his distraught mistress, Jeanne Hebuterne — the mother of his 14-month-old daughter and pregnant again — committed suicide by defenestration. Modigliani's doomed life is the stuff of which movies are made. Sure enough, a feature film about him, with Andy Garcia in the title role, was announced in April.



But give the public some credit: the art on the wall must have something to do with it, and it does. Modigliani's painting — although it probably seemed to the haute bourgeoisie of Paris in the teens as incomprehensible as anything produced by the overwrought Fauves and certifiably crazy Cubists — was never really as far out as that of his peers, especially Picasso. Modigliani liked the attenuated, melancholic figures of Picasso's Blue Period, not the spiky, angry and downright threatening fragmented prostitutes of "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon," and his own painting shows it.

Modigliani also liked Brancusi's aerodynamically modern sculpture, which, if militantly abstract (or at least abstracted), is nothing if not harmonious in the economical extreme. Modigliani's painting shows that, too. We might say — as some critics have — that Modigliani looks a little bloodless next to the fevered, meaty angst of Soutine, but we can't deny the ingeniously soothing design (yes, design; it's not a dirty word) in Modigliani's paintings. The public lines up for sage introspection (Rembrandt) and the sunny, leafy outdoors (Monet), but it also likes finely balanced "S" curves. It's almost a kinesthetic thing; try it by drawing a figure 8. That graceful, graphic simplicity, together with his embracingly warm colors, lends Modigliani's painting what the Futurist artist Gino Severini called a "Tuscan elegance."

Amedeo Modigliani's "Black Hair (Young Seated Girl With Brown Hair)" is in "Modigliani and the Artists of Montparnasse" in Los Angeles.

Modigliani painted portraits and female nudes almost exclusively. Since most people like to look at images of people, and even straight women like to look at the cleavage on the covers of women's magazines like Cosmopolitan, Modigliani's paintings have a broad and deeply anchored appeal.

Sitters in Modigliani's portraits are invariably elongated, especially in the neck. From El Greco and Parmagianino through today's fashion illustration, elongation is preferred. The portraits' faces resemble masks in a comforting, Hello Kitty! sort of way (as opposed to a terrifying, Jason-from-the-"Halloween"-movies sort of way). Whatever inner turmoil —

or ennui — the subject is suffering, Modigliani manages to bowdlerize it without entirely obliterating the sitter's engaging humanity. His 1916 portrait of his hyper-expressionist friend Soutine looks a lot like Keanu Reeves.

As for the nudes, they're the modernist version of the socially sanctioned cheesecake — Cabanel's "Birth of Venus," for example — that emanated from the late-19th-century French academy. (I can recall arty undergraduate friends pinning up Modigliani repros instead of Playboy centerfolds in their dorm rooms.) Modigliani also pushes the envelope a bit: the viewer looks down at a Modigliani nude, seeing her as if she's waiting for a hovering lover to come to bed, and his paintings were occasionally confiscated for exposing too much pubic hair. People who go to contemporary-art exhibitions in museums these days enjoy that quaint trace of transgressiveness.

If this sounds dismissive, it isn't. It's just a partial inventory of the buttons his work pushes. Were that the sum of Modigliani's painting, he'd be little better than one of those nightclub "elegant" poster artists like Patrick Nagel, whose works decorate hairdressing salons and white-shag-carpet condos from Coral Gables to La Jolla.

But Modigliani doesn't just delineate — he paints, really paints. There's enough color and surface modulation, beautifully and subtly achieved through a short, staccato brush stroke (which some historians attribute to his carved sculptures), to keep serious viewers coming back for second, even third looks. In Los Angeles, that seems to be joyfully the case.

As for New York, traditionally a tough town, it's nevertheless likely that the public's love affair with the star-crossed painter will resume in full when the Jewish Museum opens its own full-scale Modigliani retrospective in May.

*Peter Plagens is a painter and the art critic for Newsweek.*