



Modigliani: A Life

Meryle Secrest

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“People like us . . . have different rights, different values than do ordinary people because we have different needs which put us . . . above their moral standards.” —Modigliani

Amedeo (“Beloved of God”) Modigliani was considered to be the quintessential bohemian artist, his legend almost as infamous as Van Gogh’s. In Modigliani’s time, his work was seen as an oddity: contemporary with the Cubists but not part of their movement. His work was a link between such portraitists as Whistler, Sargent, and Toulouse-Lautrec and that of the Art Deco painters of the 1920s as well as the new approaches of Gauguin, Cézanne, and Picasso.

Jean Cocteau called Modigliani “our aristocrat” and said, “There was something like a curse on this very noble boy. He was beautiful. Alcohol and misfortune took their toll on him.”

In this major new biography, Meryle Secrest, one of our most admired biographers—whose work has been called “enthraling” (*The Wall Street Journal*); “rich in detail, scrupulously researched, and sympathetically written” (*The New York Review of Books*)—now gives us a fully realized portrait of one of the twentieth century’s master painters and sculptors: his upbringing, a Sephardic Jew from an impoverished but genteel Italian family; his going to Paris to make his fortune; his striking good looks (“How beautiful he was, my god how beautiful,” said one of his models) . . . his training as an artist . . . and his influences, including the Italian Renaissance, particularly the art of Botticelli; Nietzsche’s theories of the artist as Übermensch, divinely endowed, divinely inspired; the monochromatic backgrounds of Van Gogh and Cézanne; the work of the Romanian sculptor Brancusi; and the primitive sculptures of Africa and Oceania with their simplified, masklike triangular faces, elongated silhouettes, puckered lips, low foreheads, and heads on exaggeratedly long necks.

We see the ways in which Modigliani’s long-kept-secret illness from tuberculosis (it almost killed him as a young man) affected his work and his attitude toward life ; how consumption caused him to embrace fatalism and idealism, creativity and death; and how he used alcohol and opium with laudanum as an antispasmodic to hide the symptoms of the disease and how, because of it, he came to be seen as a dissolute alcoholic.

And throughout, we see the Paris that Modigliani lived in, a city in dynamic flux where art was still a noble cause; how Modigliani became part of a life in the streets and a world of art and artists then in a transforming revolution; Monet, Cézanne, Degas, Renoir, et al.—and others more radical—Matisse, Derain, etc., all living within blocks of one another.

Secrest’s book, written with unprecedented access to letters, diaries, and photographs never before seen, is an extraordinary revelation of a life lived in art . . . Here is Modigliani, the man and the artist, seemingly shy, delicate, a man on a desperate mission, masquerading as an alcoholic, cheating death again and again, and calculating what he had to do in order to go on working and concealing his secret for however much time remained . . .

Modigliani: A Life Details

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From Reader Review Modigliani: A Life for online ebook

Louise Leetch says

A good insight into Modigliani's miserable life. Crummy childhood beset by Pleurisy, Scarlet Fever, Cholera and TB. Then he lives the bohemian life in Paris finding his simple line, but mostly drinking to hide his consumption. TB is highly contagious and people were very paranoid about anyone with a bad cough. The author has written 10 biographies so she knows what she's doing, but she gives us more details than you'd ever care to know. Her task, to debunk the many myths about Modigliani's drinking and drugs, is all the more difficult when there are so many "friends" who spread the myths. She also was denied any help or documents from Modigliani's common law wife and mother of their child, Jeanne. Not a great book, unless you're into early 20th century artists.

Carol says

I am sure that Meryle Secrest's goal was not to get me thinking more about how public health has changed over the last century than Amedeo Modigliani. However, that's what happened. I have always been appreciative if not wild about Modi's elongated portraits, and that has not changed. Despite Secrest's best efforts, I see him as no more than a Very Good Artist. While he hung with Picasso, he is more in Moise Kisling's cohort (Who is Moise Kisling? Exactly).

What this book did do was make me realize that, the necessity of health insurance reform aside, as far as public health goes, we are very lucky. Modi suffered from tuberculosis, among other things, and when I say suffered, I mean it. It was a disease that, in improperly heated homes and on poor diets, would ravage and wither a body. Because its origins were not understood, those who had it were often shunned or displaced. Let's hope that only a lack of talent keeps would-be artists from succeeding in the future.

Arnoldo Garcia says

I haven't finished reading this latest biography of Modigliani and does not yet feel definitive. The only biography that IS definitive is Modigliani's work, his paintings, sculpture, and other art. In comparison to Manning Marable's biography of Malcolm X, this is a slow, peaceful, thoughtful exposition of another artist who died way before his time. Like Malcolm X, Modigliani's short life keeps us wondering: what if he had lived to a ripe old age, a la Picasso?

Charles Matthews says

Sometimes you decide to read a book just because you don't know anything about the subject. That's the case with this one. I had read one biography by Meryle Secrest, of Richard Rodgers, and I liked it. But I had an interest in Rodgers to start with. In Modigliani's case, all I knew was that he did paintings of long-necked women with almond-shaped faces, and my attitude was pretty much that if you've seen one of those paintings, you've seen them all. So when the bound galley of this book showed up, I decided I'd check it out

to see why Modigliani deserved a biography.

The premise of Secrest's biography is that he has been misrepresented as a self-destructive drunk who just happened to paint a lot of good pictures. She puts the blame for his erratic behavior and his alcoholism on tuberculosis, which because it was a disease that once had the stigma that AIDS more recently carried, was something he was made an effort to conceal. And that his drinking was really to keep him from coughing so much. I think she makes her point, though at the expense of reiterating it unnecessarily.

Oddly, it is not until the very end of the book that she comes to grips with Modigliani's stature as an artist, admitting that in academic and critical circles, his work is not always considered of the highest rank. It fetches high prices at Sotheby's and Christie's, and is generally popular, but the same could be said of Salvador Dalí, whose work lacks critical cachet these days. On the scale of great moderns, does Modigliani belong in the company of Picasso and Matisse, or in the company of Dalí? It's probably an unanswerable question, but to my mind, after reading Secrest's book and looking at a lot of Modigliani on the Web, I'd say that Modigliani was a great colorist with a superb skill for line and composition, but that on the other hand a lot of his portraiture verges on caricature. There is a hint of mannerism in his work that makes it tiresome after a while.

But Secrest's analysis of some of his paintings is persuasive, and if anything, has sent me back to look at his work with a keener eye -- no, if you've seen one Modigliani, you haven't seen them all.

Michael says

We can talk about Van Gogh's ear (or lackthereof) or Turner's lilies or even Turner's sunsets but Modigliani's elongated portraits can be quite ephemeral. This bio opens up a little window (and corrects a lot of misconceptions) into his life and gives one more insight into another misunderstood artist.

Sandy says

Modigliani: A Life was scrupulously researched by its author Meryle Secrest, who clearly was passionate about the subject. I found her book a fascinating account of the artists life. He was filled with contradictions and wracked by recurring illness - tuberculosis - which he self-medicated with alcohol and various drugs. Meryle Secrest's most interesting insight, in my opinion, was the way in which Modigliani's need to keep his illness secret - to wear a mask - informed and influenced his art. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, tuberculosis, was a shameful scourge, which caused people to be shunned for fear of contagion. Tuberculosis was a wasting disease without a true medical cure. Women who suffered its effects, such as those immortalized by Pre-Raphaelite painters, were considered fashionably beautiful - willowy ultra-thin bodies, elongated necks, pale complexions, wan expressions, shining eyes.

It seemed that, for the most part, Modigliani lived to sculpt and paint. Art was his life. All else was either pleasure, pain, joy, sorrow, distraction or inspiration but creating art was at the center of his being. He was true to himself in this essential way - although he wore a mask to hide much of who he was from the world.

Beth Blahut says

Lots of interesting facts, but also way more facts than I needed to know about his relatives. Cool to read about all the artists he spent time with in Paris

Rachel says

"What seemed superficial was in fact full of nuance." (p.5)

"Unmarried, they shuttled from house to house, feeling stifled, unappreciated, and blocked, taking refuge in a kind of neurasthenia common to intelligent women who have caught a glimpse of a wider world and then been barred from entering it." (p.39)

"...in the nineteenth century, calling a woman insane was often a convenient way of getting rid of her. A sense of frustration was seen as a perverse refusal to be happy, arguing with a husband a sacrilege, and rebelling against her natural roles as dangerous." (p.45)

"A group of artists had rejected the stale formulae of the academics and were dedicated to an art that would mirror the reality they saw around them." (p.53)

"This is what geniuses are like- childish, rather silly, self-centred and impossible to put up with." (p.58)

"There is considerable evidence that the experience of almost dying can have a life-altering, if not transfiguring effect." (p.68)

"I am a reflection of other people's lives." (p.81)

"He trusted any stranger we might introduce to him, and was completely open, with no pretences, inhibitions or reserve." (p.113)

"He already had a deep-rooted confidence in his own worth. He knew that he was an innovator rather than a follower, but he had not as yet received a single commission." (p.114)

"In a former age artists might never be rich, but they could count upon the patronage of the church or the aristocracy and were honored and valued. Now art had become a commodity, to be sold for whatever the market could bear, and the artist a sort of tradesman with no special claim to respect or status." (p.119)

"Each evening, candles fixed to each stone head would transform a squalid studio into a sacred space. One imagines him seated there in the darkness, safe in the magical circle of his imaginary temple." (p.143)

"Carco thought, in common with Baudelaire, that the only escape from the eventual annihilation of the spirit that Bohemia represented was the discipline of work." (p.152)

"...great artists seldom take any interest in the events of the outside world. They are occupied in realising

their own images and achieving formal necessities." (p.202)

"And he grandly threw out, or threw away, pearls of his imagination as if they were small change." (p.233)

"“Happiness is an angel with a grave face.” No one who had endured what he had, and survived, could possibly think otherwise." (p.237)

"His was the dilemma common to every artist, i.e., how to be true to his inner vision and at the same time reconcile himself with what the market wanted to buy, or was ready for at that moment." (p.266)

"Great artists like these go to the end of themselves, and the beauty of their work is a reflection of themselves, after all. They are courageous, to the edge of death." (p.299)

Tim says

This NYT book review pulled me in. Starting in on the book this week.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/20/boo...>

J. says

Sometimes the stars method of rating books doesn't quite make sense. As described by hovering the mouse, they are classifications that describe various levels of 'like'. Did, didn't, really did, did a lot. Sometimes that is the most important thing about a book, and we'd 'like' to think that if we approved, that the book must ergo be a good book. Sometimes though, verifiably good is more valuable than liked-- there are gaps between good and liked.

Modigliani, What I See

There is no significant light source in a Modigliani portrait. There are no beams or motes of dust caught in shafts from window or lamp or the heavens; this is not to say there is no light. Similarly, there is no significant meaning-- no overriding event or drama that shapes the content or execution, because it is nearly always the same content, and similar execution. Elegant line-drawings render well-massed re-imaginings of the human figure, generally relying on simplification, elongation, and some variation on the age-old beauty of the 'S' curve in their composition. Palette is amber-red and gold against green-grays and touches of delfty blues, and the tube of Umber must have always been squeezed out first.

Deceptively simple, and to be honest, never any real challenge to the Cezannes, Matissees or Picassos that were the front line of the School Of Paris of his day.

Not for Modi the wild reinvention of conception that Painting would undergo in these years; his subject was a tranquil, unsmiling, pared-down head-and-shoulder portrait, each and every one a sibling, another constant in his life's unvarying work. Male or female, a quiet sitter in an artist's studio, background just out of focus. Never would there be a *Guernica*, and Modi was a student of his contemporaries, as well as a big admirer of Picasso.

Rather, there is a taste and discretion that captures the small tensions and sometimes the turmoil of his subject; and there is the beautifully somber palette and graceful line that describe things that are innermost secrets, yet face the world every day.

There are small abstractions, the twists and gentle contortions of mass, the conscious allusion to masks, the reluctance to go too deeply into the eyes (sometimes abstracted to blank orbs). The anxiety in the hands, the rake of the shoulders, the turmoil in the glance remove the need for a storyline. There is the quiet moodiness in the illumination, contrasty and yet soft; there is the gentle palette of the surroundings, never featured but always a modifier. There is the Italianate sensuality of the forms and the line, rather than the furious French modernism of the day.

Modigliani's worst can sometimes seem like outdoor café-table caricaturing given the finearts razzle; there's no reason to dispute that, since quite often that was the beginning of one of his compositions. But his best, and most of it is his best, is single-mindedly sure, a purist vision of the human comedy --painted in the middle of a cyclone of the obstreperous modernism to be seen eating it's own tail for breakfast, daily, in Paris.

How The Book Sees It

I don't think author Seacrest would disagree very much with the way I see the work, and yet, as biographer, she has an agenda to keep, dragons to slay.

Amedeo Modigliani is often portrayed as one --a ringleader, even-- of the unstable, unwashed, absinthe-soaked madmen that terrorized Montmartre in the name of Art. Modern Art. Great serial-womanizing egotists leading lives of impropriety, scandal and worse. Ms Seacrest wants to emphasize that as a lifelong tubercular, Modi had no choice but to kill the pain with drink and drugs, and thus his Legend is misleading. Fine; this is one of those distinctions that always surround a Maestro; was Mozart such a genius because he wrote under the gun in poverty, or because he *could* write under the gun... was Shakespeare influenced by others or was he ... does it shift the work any ? If it can't be established, is it not a wild goose chase ? Once a controversy or inconsistency is mentioned, it's covered; but Seacrest labors on.

There's no real need to deny *any* of the biographical facts, and certainly no real way to pin particulars of the artist's work on any given aspect. Don Modigliani may have been a grand old padrone with a huge family back in Livorno Italy if he hadn't had tuberculosis; he might have lived to the age of a hundred. But he didn't, his life was short, a supernova, the very grail of Paris School mad artist, and his paintings are exquisite.

Kenneth Wayne's *Modigliani And The Artists Of Montparnasse* structures itself that way, and still doesn't miss the point of the artist himself. I think it's the better way to approach things, since it ties together so much of the spirit of the place and time.

Seacrest's book does fairly well by the Parisian underground it depicts; the lofts and lavoirs are the kind where you hang your bicycle from the ceiling, so the rats don't eat the tires. Still, it wants to downplay the absurdist modernist madman theme whenever possible, and if the paintings were the only evidence, she'd have a fair point; unfortunately, we know way too much about him and his world to call an entire subculture accidental. Her book is very well populated with family and descendants who wish the madman legend was not so. But. Modigliani was both genius and self-destructive madman, very likely willfully so in the face of the death sentence of tuberculosis. Unfortunate that there always has to be a new wrinkle to validate any new biography.

Sheila says

I found this book very well-written, and the subject fascinating. It was carefully researched and thoughtfully presented. I came to it initially after seeing a rather bad movie on the artist, which piqued my curiosity, mainly because nothing and no-one can make Modigliani boring. I was also taken with Jeanne Hebuterne, his last mistress, who died at 22, and wanted to learn more about her. I intend to do more research on her, but this book did fill in many gaps.

Secrest's main thesis seems to be that Modigliani was not the debauched, selfish libertine he has been portrayed as being. However, although I believe his tuberculosis may well have been behind his use of drugs and alcohol, as well as affecting his brain, I have trouble forgiving a man who knew he had a highly infectious and deadly disease, chose to mask it, and run the risk of infecting others with absolutely no compunction.

This is no reflection on Secrest; in fact, it is to her credit that she does not try to gloss over her subject's faults and failings, presenting us with a richly nuanced and detailed portrait of a complex artist. Modigliani, after all, is fascinating partly because of his mix of exceptionally good and appallingly bad character traits. I also enjoyed the picture Secrest painted of Bohemian Paris, very detailed and atmospheric.

John Grochalski says

a concise biography on Modigliani, and one that tries to dispell the myth with more factual informaiton. the problem that i have with this bio is that there is still little known about Modigliani on his own without this biography become more a biography about the people who KNEW modigliani. i still found it a noble try on Secrest's part to dispell the myth of Modi as a boozier by delving further into his lifelong battle with tuberculosis. that said, if a man is downing drinks all day to battle a disease....he's still a drunk.

Geoff says

I got this mad cheap on the sale rack, 's why I'ma read it maybe. But really what do I care about Modigliani's life, is what I'm asking myself.

Mike Zickar says

I enjoyed reading this, my first biography of Modigliani. His life is fascinating and it was a great book to encounter his art on a deeper level. And to its credit, the book was enjoyable to read and went fairly quickly (that is, after making it through the "early days" which generally aren't that exciting for anybody).

Having said that, Secrest is a professional biographer and I felt like much of the book was a distillation of things that she had learned through the years by writing the lives of Frank Lloyd Wright, art critic Kenneth Clark, and others. At times, the story veered from Modigliani's life. In addition, for good and bad, the author works hard to correct the historical record that Modigliani was a drunken soot. At times, it reads like an

activist piece in that she works really hard to defend his behavior.

Overall, I enjoyed the book a lot though I kept thinking that there must be a better Modigliani biography, either out there, or to be written in the future.

Grady says

The Tragedy of Modigliani,

Meryle Sechrist has proven her merits as a biographer in her books on Frank Lloyd Wright, Kenneth Clark, Bernard Berenson and Leonard Bernstein and she has always shown a penchant for cleansing the facade of famous people and examining their lives in context with the times in which they lived and worked. In **MODIGLIANI: A LIFE** she has written a near novel about a fascinating artist whose works are deeply admired but whose personal reputation has been to date that of a inordinately handsome alcoholic, hashish addicted, imbibor of absinthe womanizer whose behavior when under the influence of his drugs of choice was that of a self destructive and cruel bohemian.

What Sechrist brings to light in this book is how Modigliani's shame at having tuberculosis for most of his life, hiding that ominous fact by altering his mind with alcohol etc. partially explains his behavioral patterns. It may sound like a clinical soap opera story but in Sechrist's learned and highly respected hands a new vision of the life of Modigliani surfaces, making way for a closer appreciation of his art. Though he died young (at age 35!) he left behind his trademark elongated necked portraits of women and men, his polished portraits of colleagues and interesting models, his highly sensually charged nudes on both canvas and paper, and his sculptures whose lines are still being imitated today by artists. Sechrist shares his life as an Italian born Sephardic Jew from an impoverished family, his affairs with Russian poet Anna Akhmatova and the English journalist Beatrice Hastings and his preoccupation with psychic phenomena.

The book is accompanied by numerous photographs of the artist and his colleagues and acquaintances and reproductions of some of his works. It is a fine mix, the creative writing being enhanced by the art instead of the usual 'byline' format many biographical works assume. This is not only the definitive book on the artist Amedeo Clemente Modigliani (July 12, 1884 - January 24, 1920), it is also as well written a historical novel as any on the shelves of books on artists.

Grady Harp
