This month’s essay deals with one of the important Italian artists of the first decades of the 20th century. At the time that art was going through important changes, such as cubism and expressionism, this artist was a major contributor to the modern movement. He did most of his work in France, where he became acquainted with Picasso and other important modern artists in the École de Paris. From 1909 to 1914, he devoted himself mainly to sculpture. By 1912, he was exhibiting highly stylized sculptures with the Cubists of the Section d’Or group at the Salon d’Automne exhibitions in Paris. His main subjects both in his paintings and in his sculptures were portraits and full human figures. He became famously known for portraits and nudes in a modern style that was characterized by a surreal elongation of faces, necks, and figures. His works were not received well during his short lifetime of 35 years—his nudes scandalized audiences with their depiction of features such as pubic hair and their frank, unadorned sexuality—but later they became much sought-after by private collectors and museums as among the most important portraits of the 20th century.

Amedeo Clemente Modigliani, who was nicknamed “Dedo” as a young boy, was born on July 12, 1884 into a Sephardic Jewish family in Livorno. A port city, Livorno had long served as a refuge for those persecuted for their religion, and was home to a large Jewish community. His maternal great-great-grandfather, Solomon Garsin, had immigrated to Livorno in the 18th century as a refugee. Amedeo was the youngest of four children born to his mother, Eugénie Garsin Modigliani, who had been born and raised in Marseille. She was descended from an intellectual, scholarly family of Sephardic Jewish ancestry that for generations had lived along the Mediterranean coastline. Fluent in many languages, her ancestors were authorities on sacred Jewish texts and had founded a school of Talmudic studies. Family legend traced the family lineage back to the 17th-century Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza. Her family’s business was moneylending, with branches in Livorno, Marseille, Tunis, and London, though their fortunes ebbed and flowed with the vagaries of the economy in the areas of their branches.

Amedeo’s father, Flaminio Modigliani, was a member of an Italian Jewish family of successful businessmen and entrepreneurs. While not as culturally sophisticated as the Garsins, they knew how to invest in and develop thriving business endeavors. At the time of his marriage to Eugénie, Flaminio was a wealthy young mining engineer. He managed the family’s mine in Sardinia and also the almost 30,000 acres of timberland the family owned.

In 1883, because of an economic downturn in the price of metal, Flaminio’s prosperous family suffered economic collapse and went into bankruptcy. Amedeo’s birth in 1884 coincided with
the financial collapse of his father’s business interests. His birth, however, saved the family from total ruin, since, according to an ancient law, creditors could not seize the bed of a pregnant woman or a mother with a newborn child. The bailiffs entered the family’s home just as Eugénie went into labor; the family protected their valuable heirlooms by piling them on top of her and her bed.

Ever resourceful, Eugénie used her social contacts to establish a school and, along with her two sisters, made the school into a successful enterprise. Nevertheless, money was always tight and this may well have affected the youngster’s health.

As a child, Modigliani suffered from pleurisy and typhus, which prevented him from receiving a conventional education. Since Modigliani had always had a close relationship with his mother, she taught him at home until he was ten. The boy was also strongly influenced by his grandfather and aunt, who valued education and quickly began to show him what they considered the best of the visual, literary, and philosophical arts from the Renaissance onward.

While suffering from typhoid fever at the age of fourteen, he raved in his delirium that he wanted, above all else, to see the paintings in the Palazzo Pitti and the Uffizi in Florence and to become an artist himself. Since Livorno’s local museum housed only a few paintings by the Italian Renaissance masters, the tales he had heard about the great works that were in the Florence museums intrigued him, and it was a source of considerable despair to him, in his sickened state, that he might never get the chance to view them in person. His mother promised that she would take him to Florence herself, the moment he had recovered, which she did. They visited the museums to see the great Renaissance works housed there.

Although Eugenia preferred an academic education for her son, she later acceded to his wishes to become an artist, as she recounted in her diary: “On the first of August [1898], he begins drawing lessons, which he has wanted to do for a long time. He thinks he’s already a painter.” The following year (1899), Amedeo gave up his regular schooling entirely to study with the best painting master in Livorno, Guglielmo Micheli.

Modigliani worked in Micheli’s Art School from 1898 to 1900. Here his earliest formal artistic instruction took place in an atmosphere steeped in a study of the styles and themes of 19th-
century Italian art, especially the Macchiaioli movement (from macchia — “dash of color” or, more derogatively, “stain”). The movement was begun by a group of Italian painters active in Tuscany in the second half of the nineteenth century. Many of them had been revolutionaries in the uprisings of 1848, and in the late 1850s, they met regularly at the Caffè Michelangiolo in Florence to discuss art and politics. They strayed from antiquated conventions taught by the Italian art academies, and did much of their painting en plein air in order to capture natural light, shade, and color. (While sympathetically connected to, and actually pre-dating, the French Impressionists, the Macchiaioli did not make the same impact upon international art culture as did the contemporaries and followers of Monet, and are today largely forgotten outside Italy).

Modigliani’s teacher, Micheli, was an active participant in the movement. In his art school, Modigliani studied not only landscape, but also portraiture, still life and the nude. (His fellow students recalled that it was with nude figure painting that he displayed his greatest talent, and apparently this was not an entirely academic pursuit for the teenager: when not painting nudes, he was occupied with seducing the household maid of the boarding house where he lived.)

Micheli’s work, however, was so fashionable and the genre so commonplace that the young Modigliani reacted against it, preferring to ignore the obsession with landscape that, as with French Impressionism, characterized the movement. Micheli also tried to encourage his pupils to paint en plein air, but Modigliani never really got a taste for this style of working. He much preferred doing his sketching in cafés, and his painting indoors, especially in his own studio. Even when compelled to paint landscapes (three are known to exist), Modigliani chose a proto-Cubist palette more akin to Cézanne than to the Macchiaioli.

After being again diagnosed with tuberculosis in late 1900, Modigliani was forced to leave Micheli’s studio and to recuperate in southern Italy with his mother. She took him on a tour of southern Italy: Naples, Capri, Rome and Amalfi, then north to Florence again, and finally to Venice. This time Modigliani familiarized himself with classical Italian painting and sculpture from many periods, and these visits fueled his enthusiasm for the fine arts. After their return to Livorno, he convinced his mother to allow him to move to Florence, where he studied human figure drawing at the Accademia di Belle Arti di Firenze - Scuola Libera del Nudo (Florence Academy of Fine Arts - Free School of the Nude). Possibly inspired by his admiration for Michelangelo, he moved for a short time to Pietrasanta in 1903 (a town in the province of Lucca where Michelangelo got some of his marble and sculpted) to devote his time to sculpture, but he found his strength insufficient for the strenuous and time-consuming stone-carving process.

Returning to Florence, Modigliani became acquainted with the Chilean artist, Manuel Ortiz de Zarate, an artist who had worked with the Impressionists in France. He became intrigued by Zarate’s descriptions of Paris and its avant-garde approach to art. Modigliani decided to pursue his artistic ambitions there, but his mother encouraged him to stay in Florence. However, restless for new opportunities away from Florence, Modigliani moved to Venice and enrolled in the Istituto di Belli Arti- Scuola Libera di Nudo (Institute of Fine Arts- Free School of the Nude).
After a while, he became frustrated by what he saw as the Institute’s hidebound and old-fashioned approach to the subject of human figure painting. So, he increasingly spent his time haunting the city’s cafes and bohemian bars, where he did his fragile health little good by experimenting extensively with illicit drugs. The impact of these lifestyle choices upon his developing artistic style is open to conjecture, although these choices do seem to be more than simple teenage rebellion, or the clichéd hedonism and bohemianism that were almost expected of artists of the time. Modigliani’s pursuit of the seedier side of life appears to have roots in his appreciation of radical philosophies, especially the philosophy of Nietzsche.

As time went on, he continued to grow increasingly dissatisfied with the art scene in Italy, and constantly pestered his mother to allow him to move. She eventually consented and allowed him to move to Paris in 1906. When he arrived in Paris, Modigliani initially spent most of his time visiting noted local galleries, though he also enrolled formally at the Académie Colarossi (Colarossi Academy). He met a number of established figures in the Parisian art world by becoming part of the so-called Bateau Lavoir set (Washhouse Boat, nickname of a building in the Montmartre district of Paris that was famous as the residence and meeting place for a group of outstanding early 20th-century artists, men of letters, theater people, and art dealers). Artists who were members of this group included Juan Gris, Max Jacob, Pablo Picasso, and André Salmon. Inspired by these great personalities of the Parisian arts scene, Modigliani looked for a way in which he too could make his mark on the local artistic community. Among his first major paintings done in Paris in 1907, was Head of a Woman Wearing a Hat, which makes use of a curvilinear style that is characteristic of Art Nouveau, but also exhibits the influence of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec in the tilt of the woman’s shoulders and the thoughtful, emotional expression on her face, revealing Modigliani’s early interest in representing psychological states.

By this time, he had put on his first exhibition, a modest affair featuring only three paintings. It was almost completely ignored, and Modigliani was at times reduced to the humiliation of approaching galleries door to door, sometimes resorting to trading his art for food or other necessities. Frustration with his lack of success led him to abuse drugs and alcohol, which further exacerbated his health problems.

In 1907, Modigliani met Paul Alexandre, a young physician, who became a friend and a much-needed patron of his work. This gave him a renewed sense of accomplishment and a steady source of work. One of Alexandre’s favorite works by the artist was The Jewess (1908), a painting influenced by Paul Cézanne and also by the German Expressionists. The thickly painted canvas, with its solid shapes and dark colors, contrasts sharply with the delicate outlines of the earlier Head of a Woman Wearing a Hat. There are dominant blue tones that lend an air of
melancholy to the composition, while the clashing areas of black and white convey strong emotion. Despite Alexandre’s support, however, The Jewess and four other pieces that Modigliani chose to show at the 24th Salon des Indépendants (Salon of the Independents) in 1908 were passed over; he did not sell a single piece.

In 1909, Modigliani returned home to Livorno, sickly and tired from his wild lifestyle, and trying to recover from the public rebuffs of his paintings. But soon he was back in Paris, this time renting a studio in Montparnasse, and trying his hand at sculpture. He had originally seen himself as a sculptor rather than a painter, and at this time he refocused his attention on that art form. He was encouraged to return to it after Paul Guillaume, an ambitious young art dealer and an associate of the French poet Max Jacob, took an interest in his work and introduced him to the sculptor Constantin Brâncuși. He was Constantin Brâncuși’s disciple for one year.

The elegance of Brâncuși’s simplified forms made a strong impression on Modigliani; the older artist’s style began to manifest itself in Modigliani’s work. In his sculptural works, Modigliani sought to produce pure, strong forms with a minimum of embellishment or decoration. This is especially exemplified in one of his major sculptures—Tête (Head, 1910-12) a limestone carving of a woman’s head, which also incorporated elements from “primitive” African and Southeast Asian art that were embraced at the time by many Parisian avant-garde artists such as Picasso. (This piece later, postmortem, became the third most expensive sculpture ever sold).

At the Salon d’Automne (Autumn Art Salon) of 1912, he exhibited eight stone heads whose elongated and simplified forms reflected the influence of African sculpture. However, by 1915 he abandoned sculpting and focused solely on his painting; a move that was precipitated by the difficulty in acquiring sculptural materials due to the outbreak of World War I, and by Modigliani’s physical debilitation which made it difficult and painful to work in the strenuous art of sculpture. That year, Guillaume purchased some of his work; soon afterwards, he began to act as Modigliani’s promoter. However, Modigliani’s experience as a sculptor did have fundamental consequences for his painting style. The characteristics of Modigliani’s sculptured heads—long necks and noses, simplified features, and long oval faces—became typical of his paintings. He reduced and almost eliminated chiaroscuro (the use of gradations of light and shadow to achieve the illusion of three-dimensionality), and he achieved a sense of solidity with strong contours and the richness of juxtaposed colors.

**The War Years and Sexual Affairs**

At the outbreak of World War I, Modigliani tried to enlist in the army but was refused because of his poor health. The war increased the difficulties of his life. Paul Alexandre and some of his
other friends were at the front; his paintings did not sell; and his already delicate health was deteriorating because of his poverty, feverish work ethic, and abuse of alcohol and drugs.

Modigliani was a handsome man, and attracted much female attention. Women came and went in his life and he had short relationships with many. He never really became seriously involved with any of these until the English writer, literary critic, and poet Beatrice Hastings—her real name was Emily Alice Haigh—entered his life. She lived with him for almost two years (1914-16), and was the subject of several of his portraits in which he gave her a somewhat ethereal, almost angelic appearance, including Madame Pompadour (1915). She was also, unfortunately, the object of much of his drunken wrath. She was impressed with her lover’s work and attempted to get his art work more widely appreciated, but she fell out with him over his dissolute behavior and his abusive treatment of her. Before long, the couple ended their relationship. Soon after their separation, Modigliani fell seriously ill from malnutrition, alcoholism and depression.

After regaining his strength, Modigliani continued to paint portraits. Modigliani was not really a professional portraitist; for him the portrait was only an occasion to isolate a figure as a kind of sculptural relief through firm and expressive contour drawing. He continued to paint his friends, usually personalities of the Parisian artistic and literary world (such as the artists Juan Gris and Jacques Lipchitz, the writer and artist Jean Cocteau, and the poet Max Jacob), but he also portrayed unknown people, including models, servants, and girls from his neighborhood. By this time, he had melded the influences of the Parisian avant-garde and arrived at his signature painting style, characterized by elegant linearity and the depiction of stylized, yet expressive figures. The best of these works also give subtle glimpses into the personality of the sitter, such as his 1916 portrait of the artist Jacques Lipchitz and his wife Berthe.

The several dozen nudes Modigliani painted between 1916 and 1919, with their warm, glowing colors and sensuous, rounded forms, are among his best and most famous works of art. This series of nudes was commissioned by Modigliani’s dealer and friend Léopold Zborowski, who lent the artist the use of his apartment, supplied models and painting materials, and paid him between fifteen and twenty francs each day for his work. The paintings from this arrangement were thus different from his previous depictions of friends and lovers in that they were funded by Zborowski either for his own collection, as a favor to his friend, or with an eye to their “commercial potential.” In December, 1917 Zborowski arranged Modigliani’s first and only solo exhibition during his lifetime at the Berthe Weill Gallery. The exhibition is considered
“notorious” in modern art history for its sensational public reception and the attendant issues of obscenity. Modigliani chose to display seven paintings of nudes for the exhibition. To entice passersby, Weill installed an attractive live nude woman in the front window of the gallery. Scandalized, the local police temporarily shut down the exhibition on its opening day on moral grounds, but the show was allowed to continue, most likely after removal of the nude woman from the gallery’s street front window. However, the unintended publicity resulted in better attendance and sales of his paintings than usual for the habitually impoverished artist.

In 1917, Modigliani met Jeanne Hébuterne, a 19-year-old art student from the Académie Colarossi. She was from a conservative bourgeois background, and was renounced by her devout Roman Catholic family for her liaison with Modigliani, whom they saw as little more than a debauched derelict. Despite her family’s objections, soon the two fell in love and began living together in a studio on the Rue de la Grande Chaumière in Montparnasse. She began to pose for him and appeared in several of his paintings. (She later became his common-law wife). Zborowski, who had committed himself to supporting Modigliani’s work, hoped that their relationship would provide both a new source of inspiration for Modigliani’s portraiture and a measure of stability for the artist that would help temper his dissolute lifestyle. Although his alcohol and drug consumption remained virtually unchanged during their time together, the portraits of Hébuterne reflected his newfound sense of relative tranquility that had previously been absent. This calmness was also present in his 1919 self-portrait.

**Final Years and Death**

Towards the end of World War I, early in 1918, Modigliani left Paris with Hébuterne to escape the war. They travelled to Nice and Cagnes-sur-Mer, where they spent a year. During that time they had a busy social life with many friends, including Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Pablo Picasso. On November 29, 1918, Hébuterne gave birth to a daughter whom they named Jeanne (1918-1984). (Modigliani already had a son, Gérard Thiroux (1917-2004), from a short relationship with Simone Thiroux, and at least two other extramarital children). In May 1919 they returned to Paris with their infant daughter and moved into an apartment on the Rue de la Grande Chaumière. New familial responsibilities that included the determination not to repeat the poverty of his own childhood, combined with his professional obligations to Zborowski, pushed him to increase his output despite his increasingly failing health.
Although happier in his domestic affairs than he had been for many years, Modigliani never managed entirely to rid himself of his health problems, and he suffered frequent alcoholic blackouts. When Hébuterne became pregnant again, Modigliani got engaged to her, but her parents were against the marriage, especially because of Modigliani’s reputation as an alcoholic and drug user. (Modigliani, however, did officially recognize her daughter, Jeanne, as his child). The wedding plans were shattered independently of Hébuterne’s parents’ resistance when Modigliani discovered in January, 1920 that he had contracted tubercular meningitis, at that time incurable in its final stages.

Amedeo Clemente Modigliani died on January 24, 1920 at the age of 35. He died destitute since he had managed only one solo exhibition in his lifetime and had given his paintings away in exchange for meals in restaurants. There was an enormous funeral, attended by many from the artistic communities in Montmartre and Montparnasse. When Modigliani died, 21-year-old Hébuterne was eight months pregnant with their second child. The day after Modigliani’s death, Hébuterne was taken to her parents’ home. There, inconsolable, the following day on January 26 she threw herself out of a fifth-floor window, killing herself and her unborn child. Her family blamed Modigliani and insisted she be buried separately from him.

Amedeo Clemente Modigliani was buried in Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris (Oscar Wilde, Jim Morrison and Frédéric Chopin are also buried in this cemetery). Jeanne Hébuterne was buried at the Cimetièr de Bagneux near Paris. It was not until 1930 that her embittered family relented and allowed her to be moved to Père Lachaise Cemetery to rest beside Modigliani. A single tombstone honors them both. His epitaph reads: “Struck down by death at the moment of glory.” Her epitaph reads: “Devoted companion to the extreme sacrifice.”

Conclusion and Modigliani’s Legacy

Little-known outside avant-garde Parisian artistic circles, Modigliani had seldom participated in official exhibitions. His works were not especially popular with art buyers while he lived, but later their reputation improved greatly. Fame started to come after his death, first with a postmortem solo exhibition at the Bernheim-Jeune Gallery in 1922 that was well-attended, and later with a biography by his close friend André Salmon.

While not closely associated with any one particular or formal movement, Modigliani arrived at a signature style that fused aspects of contemporary European artistic developments, such as Cubism, with non-Western art forms like African masks. His portraits and nudes overturned the conventions of both genres, uniquely combining innovative formal experimentation with probing candor and psychological insight.

For decades critical evaluations of Modigliani’s work were overshadowed by the dramatic story of his tragic life: the romantic legend of the quintessential bohemian artist, bound up with a life of excess, of passionate hedonism, and of penniless misery combined with Jeanne Hébuterne’s
heart-rendering suicide two days after Modigliani’s death. But, he is now acknowledged as one of the most significant and original artists of his time, and as one of the great portrait painters of all time.

His biography has been used as the basis for numerous books and feature films. One of these, 
**Modigliani: Man and Myth**, was written by his daughter, Jeanne, in 1959. To date, there have been two movies that recount his life and times, all of which center on this legend, portraying him as a passionate individual with a decadent, self-destructive lifestyle. A third is now in the works, directed by Johnny Depp and co-produced by Depp and Al Pacino, to begin filming sometime in 2023. In addition, at least nine biographies have been written about Modigliani, which focus to varying degrees on this tragic theme.

Modigliani’s paintings have sold for high prices on the international art market. His nudes are the most sought after. One nude that appeared in his single solo exhibit at the Berthe Weill Gallery in 1917, *Nu Couché* (Reclining Nude, 1917-18), was sold at auction by Christie’s, New York for $170.4 million on November 9, 2015, a record for a Modigliani painting and placing it high among the most expensive paintings ever sold. Another nude shown at that exhibit, *Nu Assis sur un Divan: La Belle Romaine* (Nude Seated on a Divan: The Beautiful Roman Woman, 1917), sold for $68 million in 2010. One of his portraits of Jeanne Hébuterne sold for $19 million.

Amedeo Clemente Modigliani, although a tragic and sickly figure unappreciated in his own time, showed great artistic qualities and genius that became appreciated by the art world long after his death in 1920. He is now among the celebrated artists of the 20th century.

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Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from:

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