

Validating True Modigliani Paintings and Ensuring His Legacy for Posterity

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There are no confirmed reports of fake Modigliani paintings or copies emerging during the artist's lifetime. However, dozens of unfamiliar and awkward-looking paintings started to appear soon after the artist's passing in January 1920¹. Some of these seem fine but many do not, and they do not appear later in the well-regarded tome *Catalogue de l'Oeuvre Peint de Modigliani* (Italian edition, 1970, French edition, 1972) by the respected Milanese Modigliani researcher, Ambrogio Ceroni. Some of these works seem to have disappeared completely from the field, which makes testing impossible. The pigment titanium white started to be distributed in 1924 and its posthumous appearance guarantees that a given Modigliani painting containing it is not authentic. However the reverse is not true: the absence of titanium white does not automatically make a painting authentic².

Modigliani was popular during his lifetime and his work was actively collected then. Upon his passing, he became a superstar whose work was coveted internationally. Then, the words “copy” and “fake” quickly started to be whispered about some of the newly-available paintings. Authenticity issues have been a problem in the Modigliani field for a century with various resources available and recently improved--but not necessarily used systematically—to help address this problem. We even know who some of Modigliani's leading fakers were. It was not and is still not standard practice in the art field to test paintings for authenticity, partly because of the cost and also due to the limited availability of the specialized equipment. But issues can be addressed better through testing and research.

Part of the reason that the issue of Modigliani fakes has lasted for about hundred years is that the artist lived a short life and was not able to supervise the fate of his own oeuvre himself, as were his longer-lived contemporaries. All of them were vexed by fakes as well but had more time to manage the situation. In addition, Modigliani's family did not inherit any paintings because all of the works had gone to the artist's dealer Léopold Zborowski, by arrangement. Thus, the family has not

had the wherewithal, monetarily or in terms of holdings, to establish a proper legacy. Moreover, Modigliani's daughter, Jeanne (named after her mother) was only 14 months old at the time of his death so she could not help until much later when she became an adult. Making matters worse, Zborowski and Paul Guillaume, the artist's other main dealer, both died young, in 1932 and 1934 respectively, both at 43 years old. For these various reasons, the Modigliani market has not been managed, controlled or promoted in a professional manner. That has allowed unsavory characters to step in and manipulate the situation. There have been a total of five Modigliani catalogue raisonnés compiled to date—each of which has some strengths—but none of them was written by a trained art historian or other art professional³.

On January 31, 1922, the French newspaper *L'Intransigeant* reported that a well-known art dealer made a proposal to the artist Othon Coubine (1883-1969) to paint four “Modigliani” paintings each month for 2000 francs per month. About a week later, on February 8, 1922, the same newspaper seemed to suggest that it was perhaps a fellow painter who approached Coubine to paint the works and then sell them. This anecdote is evidence of the strong interest in Modigliani's work soon after his death. It is not clear if Coubine actually created the fake Modigliani paintings or copies at this time, or was simply asked. His personal style was figurative and appealing, loosely similar to the work of Modigliani, so it is not out of the question that he would have had the ability to do this. In addition, he seemed to know associates of Modigliani (e.g. Picasso and Adolphe Basler) and might have known Modigliani himself as well. On March 31, 1923, André Warnod wrote in the newspaper *Comoedia* that fake Modigliani paintings abounded and that the artist would have been very amused to know how much his work was being “imitated.”⁴

In October 1929, the art dealer Berthe Weill, who had mounted Modigliani's first and only lifetime solo

exhibition in December 1917, wrote in that month's gallery bulletin (no.79) that she could estimate the relatively small number of paintings that the artist had made, but not the "Kolossal" [sic] number that had been sold. So copies and fakes of Modigliani's paintings existed from the beginning of this posthumous period.

It has long been suspected that Modigliani's own dealer Léopold Zborowski was involved in having Modigliani paintings produced by Kisling or others in the 1920s as the dealer ran out of stock. The suspicion may have arisen because of the large number of portraits of Zborowski's common law wife Hanka Zborowska, a few of which do look questionable. There are some Modigliani paintings that passed through Zborowski's hands which require close scrutiny but many that do not.

There are three confirmed forgers of Modigliani's art in the twentieth century: the Hungarian Elmyr de Hory (1906-1976, born Elemer Hoffmann)⁵, the Egypt-born Frenchman David Stein (1935-1999, born Henri Haddad) and the Englishman John Myatt (b.1945). The majority of fake Modigliani paintings in the world today were probably produced by one of the three forgers mentioned here. There are archives related to their deceitful activity. In addition, there is a professional copyist named Susie Ray (born about 1960), also British. There could be an endless number of copyists, which is not illegal if the artist signs his or her name on the back of the painting.

Elmyr de Hory was a prolific painter of fakes who had a strong attraction to the work of Amedeo Modigliani, in addition to that of Picasso, Matisse and Van Dongen. He may have made hundreds of fake Modigliani paintings⁶. He is generally considered to have practiced his fakery in the post-WWII era, during the late 1940s and beyond. However new research indicates that he started much earlier. De Hory trained in Paris at the famous Académie de la Grande Chaumière from 1926-1928 with Fernand Léger, at no. 14, rue de la Grande-Chaumière, a few doors down from no.8, the building where Modigliani had lived and died six years before⁷. De Hory would surely have known that and perhaps it inspired him in his life-long interest in Modigliani. They could not have known each other personally because of the timing. "Jeune Fille Brune," a "Modigliani" painting that was sold on December 11, 1928 to the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune, turns out to have been a De Hory fake⁸ [Fig.1]. In a book published in 2012, De Hory's companion, assistant and bodyguard at the end of his life, the curiously-named Mark Forgy, identified that work as a De Hory fake⁹. Galerie Bernheim-Jeune sold the painting to the well-known Italian collector Riccardo Gualino on January 11, 1929, before it ended up in

the Jesi Bequest to the Brera Museum in Milan. It was later de-accessioned. The exact number of Modigliani fakes that De Hory produced in 1920s Paris is unknown at this time. A recent documentary "Real Fake: The Art, Life and Crimes of Elmyr de Hory" (2017) revealed that De Hory was arrested numerous times in Paris in the 1920s for petty crimes and even served jail time, confirming that his illicit activities began early. It is not clear if he used his real name at the time, Elemer Hoffmann, or Elmyr de Hory, or one of his many other pseudonyms. On his website, Forgy noted at one point his own interest in preparing a catalogue raisonné of all of De Hory's fakes, including those in the style of Modigliani, using the personal archive that he inherited from De Hory. The archive and any publications made from it would be invaluable for the field. See www.Elmyr.net.



Fig.1
Elmyr de Hory, *Jeune Fille Brune*

Generally, De Hory's paintings are of very high quality and should be taken seriously. The De Hory works of Matisse and Van Dongen are outstanding. Van Dongen reportedly swore that a painting by De Hory was one of his own¹⁰. Moreover, the forger traveled to major cities and countries constantly, one step ahead of the law, so his fakes are everywhere. On film, De Hory said that he never offered a painting to a museum that they did not buy. De Hory claimed that he rarely made copies of pre-existing paintings, because that was a sure way to be found out as a faker he felt. Instead, he created works in the artist's style.

However, there is also some potentially good news: many if not all of the De Hory paintings can be dismissed today with a simple, inexpensive test. Forgy believes that De Hory's paintings all contain the aforementioned titanium white. This is usually the first test that a conservator will try when assessing the authenticity of a potential Modigliani painting, and for works by other artists as well. Fake Modigliani works could have been made in every year of the 1920s.

There is a group of highly suspicious Modigliani works that were clearly done by the same hand. I call the painter "the Master of the Bangs." The bangs in certain paintings are awkward and silly. One sees these semi-regularly in De Hory's paintings. Another weakness or "tell" in De Hory's art are small beady eyes. They can have an empty, vapid quality to them, creating another red

flag. Still, his paintings have many strengths and can be deceptive.

De Hory was uncovered as a faker in 1964 when, at age 58, the quality of his work declined significantly according to reports and he was found out. Unexpectedly, he became a celebrity thanks to counterculture attitudes at the time in which renegades were considered heroes, leading to a bestselling biography of him by Clifford Irving called *Fake!: The Story of Elmyr de Hory, the Greatest Art Forger of our Time* (1969)¹¹. *The Portrait of Hanka Zborowska* [Ceroni 159] [Fig.2] which was on long-term loan to the Brooklyn Museum from the Rita and Alex Hillman Foundation appears on the jacket cover of the book *FAKE!*. That painting has appeared in Modigliani exhibitions for years including most recently at the Tate Gallery (2017-2018). The painting has been removed from the Brooklyn Museum and they have no comment on it. It should be tested. Orson Welles famously made a documentary called “F for Fake” (1974), all about De Hory. The movie is a bizarre mish-mash of thoughts. Mark Forgy has a group of the artist’s works and is confident in his ability to spot a De Hory fake. Many of De Hory’s fakes can also be seen on the internet on Google images under the words De Hory and Modigliani, aiding in research.



Fig.2
Elmyr de Hory, *The Portrait of Hanka Zborowska*

David Stein was born in Alexandria, Egypt and started as a thief, an artist, an art dealer and copyist. Then he graduated to forger. His favorite artists to copy and forge were Chagall, Modigliani, Picasso, and Matisse. He was active from the mid-1960s to the late 1980s. His fakes appeared in the movie “The Moderns” (1988) with actor Keith Carradine. Stein reportedly sold some fake Chagall gouaches one afternoon in New York, having made the works that morning. Stein was arrested when Marc Chagall himself saw some of Stein’s forgeries of his work in a New York gallery and declared that he did not make them. Stein’s companion Anne-Marie Stein wrote a book about her experiences with him, *Three Picassos Before Breakfast: Memoirs of an Art Forger’s Wife*, which can be quite useful to authenticators and interesting to the general reader too¹².

Making works in the style of an artist, versus a copy, is much more difficult for an artist because it requires some creativity, and is more dangerous. Copies can be compared to the original and reveal immediately that

they are bogus. Copied and faked Modigliani works often appear tight, stiff and without soul. The surfaces and colors appear flat and do not have the same vibrancy of an authentic work.

Englishman John Myatt is known to have forged about two hundred works by a variety of artists from 1986-1995, including: Modigliani, Picasso, Matisse, Chagall, Le Corbusier, Albert Gleizes, Jean Dubuffet, Alberto Giacometti, Ben Nicholson, Nicolas de Staël, Graham Sutherland and a minor but interesting artist named Roger Bissière¹³. Myatt made perhaps a total of two dozen Modigliani fakes. He used a very peculiar combination of materials as his paint: an easily-detectible household emulsion paint instead of oil paint—akin to titanium white—and K-Y jelly, a sexual lubricant, to add fluidity (!). Both could easily be discovered by simple testing. Indeed, Myatt was surprised that he was not found out much earlier¹⁴. He said, “There was a negligence to everything I did.” Myatt’s paintings appear bright, even garish, quite unnatural. He started out as a legitimate painter making self-labeled “genuine fakes,” i.e. copies, and selling them for very modest amounts, in the hundreds of dollars. He had a loyal customer named John Drewe, who re-sold these works as genuine through Christie’s, Sotheby’s, Phillips and art dealers for very substantial sums. Drewe altered provenance information in exhibition catalogues to support his deception. Drewe bragged to Myatt about his activities and soon this struggling single father joined Drewe in this deceit. The operation seems to have unraveled after the artist learned that Drewe made exponentially more money than he himself did: tens of millions of dollars versus a few hundred thousand. To hide evidence, Drewe burned down a house which resulted in the death of two individuals. Today, Myatt has returned to making copies or “real fakes.”

Another British artist, actually an illustrator, named Susie Ray, makes copies of works by various artists including Modigliani, Renoir, Manet and Monet, and signs them with her own name on the back (susierayoriginals.co.uk). Thus, she is officially a copyist, not a forger, which is a sub-culture or category in the art field. According to her website, she received a first-class degree in college (top 5% of students) in scientific illustration. Her paintings are usually commissioned, often by the owner of the original work who places their real painting in a bank vault to save on insurance costs and keeps the copy on their walls. One has to be sure that Ray’s paintings are not re-lined though—the gluing of a second canvas to the back of the main surface to strengthen it—which would hide her signature. Ray’s copies are quite competent. There are other copyists as well, as a simple visit to the Louvre will demonstrate because you see them there

working in plain sight. In those cases, the copyist needs a permit from the museum and cannot make a copy with the same dimensions as the original. This activity is allowed because copying is an age-old method for artists to learn.

One issue which has thwarted the discovery of fakes is secrecy. Collectors are usually too embarrassed to admit that they have bought a fake. Some may do so if the quality is extremely high and they purchased the work at a deep discount. Similarly, galleries would never admit that they acquired a fake. That would kill their business and reputation, since they are supposed to be the experts who vet the market. Another factor was the extreme charm of both De Hory and Stein. Those who had been duped found it difficult to hate either of them even when they learned the truth.

There are three essential components to authenticating a Modigliani (or works by any artist): connoisseurship, scientific testing and provenance. Surprisingly, connoisseurship has largely been the exclusive method for evaluating Modigliani paintings in the twentieth century. That essentially involves using one's "eye" to make determinations, having seen many examples of the artist's work and subconsciously forming opinions. X-rays have existed since 1895, but have been rarely used on paintings, surprisingly. For example, Ambrogio Ceroni is not known to have used x-rays, infrareds or pigment analysis in forming his *Catalogue de tout l'oeuvre peint de Modigliani*. Even today if one speaks with specialists preparing a catalogue raisonné on a particular artist, they rarely say that they are using scientific analysis.

Provenance, the ownership history of a work of art, is another tool in authentication. Given Modigliani's fame in the 1920s and the 1930s, his work was exhibited and reproduced extensively in catalogues, books and articles. The chances for a given valid work to have been reproduced somewhere pre-WWII are very high. Thus, individuals with works not in Ceroni are advised to find a pre-WWII image of the work. It is very rare for a painting to appear after WWII with no previous trace of it. For a "new," unknown painting to emerge today, for example, and be correct, is highly unlikely but possible. That would be an instant red flag. A related issue: when an extensive exhibition history is given but at unknown galleries and none of the galleries produced an exhibition catalogue, it is not possible to verify the information.

Testing paintings in groups is particularly effective because one can tell quickly if they are by the same hand. I learned of one technique early in my career when I was an intern at a major American museum: when a painting was being considered for purchase, curators would place

it between two known works by that artist. How did they look together? Were all three by the same hand? They would turn the paintings upside down to look at them purely as brushstrokes, not as portraits, landscapes, or whatever. But obviously one needs access to numerous genuine works by a given artist.

Now, soon after the centennial of Modigliani's passing, there is unprecedented attention being directed towards the technical aspect of the artist's work. The Modigliani Technical Research Study initiated by the Tate Gallery in London produced five articles for *The Burlington Magazine* in 2018¹⁵. (One flaw in the Tate study is that they only tested paintings in Ceroni and automatically considered them all to be authentic.) See also the recent 600-page doctoral dissertation on Modigliani's paintings by Spanish conservator Greta Garcia Hernandez¹⁶. There has also been a study conducted in France of Modigliani paintings in French public collections, titled "The Secrets of Modigliani," that will be published in 2022. In addition, the International Foundation for Art Research in New York held a symposium on Modigliani, largely about technical considerations, in April 2018, and then they published the proceedings titled "What is It About Modigliani."¹⁷ Testing has included pigments; digital x-ray and infrared; plus thread weave. Canvas weave reveals the knots and imperfections and can tell which other paintings came from the same canvas roll. It could be determined which pigments Modigliani used and did not use, e.g. the type of red and white, and the thickness of his paint application. X-ray and infrared reveal how he composed his compositional infrastructure underneath, which is important. It was quickly confirmed that Modigliani was a highly-skilled artist with many years of academic training. That is not necessarily true for other artists of his generation for whom the compositional infrastructure can be a hodgepodge. Modigliani's techniques indicate a very knowledgeable and sophisticated artist. Conservators have learned that Modigliani was very consistent in his approach, especially within categories. Thus, the war-time portraits share common characteristics, the Nice period paintings do too, and same with the nudes. That is useful information.

My own study, The Modigliani Project (www.modiglianiproject.org), based in New York, helps collectors by considering paintings not found in Ceroni and putting the works through a rigorous state-of-the-art testing protocol, which a committee then evaluates. Successful paintings are added to the organization's on-line catalogue raisonné. My research suggests that 50-60 paintings could rightfully be added to Ceroni. That is about a 15% increase, which is quite significant when one is trying to accurately assess his oeuvre.

In general, scientific testing needs to be done in a conservator's studio or lab, either at a museum or university, or in independent labs which cater to collectors. There are stop-gap, less formal processes that could be used to begin, however. Art professionals have used black lights—the size of small batons—to see if a painting has had extensive conservation work done or are hiding signatures under dirt and grime. These can be bought at a variety store for a few dollars and are sometimes used at Halloween gatherings to create an eerie mood in a room. One can even turn one's iPhone into a black light by purchasing an app. These lights can reveal brushstrokes and infrastructure quite readily and be quite useful.

The art field is very Old School. Many basic tests have been around for decades but are not being employed. Titanium white has been around since 1924 but is rarely tested for. A thirty-year veteran of one of the major auction houses told me that he had never heard of pigment testing being performed at his auction house, let alone any x-ray or infrared tests. At the same time, there is a very well-funded art historical institute that is leading a large number of catalogue raisonné projects, but does not examine pigments, x-rays, infrareds and canvas weave as part of their testing protocol.

Fake Modigliani drawings are an even greater problem in the field than the paintings. There are thousands of them. However, they too are a solvable problem. Professor Albert Elsen of Stanford University and his graduate student Kirk Varnedoe (later Chief Curator of the Museum of Modern Art) solved the same issue with regard to Rodin drawings. Evaluating key markers such as line pressure and length, they were able to say with 100% confidence whether a drawing was by Rodin or not. Three individuals were largely responsible for producing fake Rodin drawings. Elsen and Varnedoe wrote a book about their methodology and how they arrived at it¹⁸. Paper quality and age can be tested. Also, Artificial Intelligence (AI) may be helpful in the future. A large number of drawings will need to be scanned and then the computer measures such minute elements as the typical number of millimeters between body parts, including the nose and lips, and the length of limbs. Then a drawing is tested against this set of criteria.

To sum up, some problems with authenticity exist in the Modigliani field, but are solvable. The aforementioned methods are available today and could quickly and expeditiously eliminate some fakes. Museums, collectors and galleries are advised to have their Modigliani paintings tested, even if their work is in the Ceroni tome, especially if they have doubts. In the end, all such work will benefit scholarship and solidify Modigliani's legacy and place in history.

Notes

- 1 See photographs and acquisition details in Guy-Patrice et Floriane Dauberville, *Modigliani Chez Bernheim-Jeune*, Editions Bernheim-Jeune, 2015. Founded in 1863, the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune closed in 2018.
- 2 Paintings could have been produced, 1920-1924.
- 3 Anna Ceroni and Simonetta Fraquelli, "The catalogues raisonnés of Amedeo Modigliani," *The Burlington Magazine*, CLX, March 2018, pp.189-195.
- 4 I am grateful to Alessandro De Stefani for bringing these newspaper articles to my attention.
- 5 A birth date of 1906 is usually given, but the recent movie "Real Fake" (2017) showed it being 1905 in a student register, so De Hory had shaved a year off his age. Because fakers are also liars, none of their facts can be relied on. Nonetheless, De Hory may have started earlier than previously suspected.
- 6 Per his assistant Mark Forgy, in conversation with me.
- 7 De Hory is listed on the Académie de la Grande Chaumière's website as a past student.
- 8 *Modigliani Chez Bernheim-Jeune*, no.48, *Jeune Fille Brune*.
- 9 Mark Forgy, *The Forger's Apprentice, Life with the World's Most Notorious Artist*, Independent Publishing Format, 2012, p.204.
- 10 Clifford Irving, *Fake! The Story of Elmyr de Hory the Greatest Art Forger of Our Time*, McGraw-Hill, 1969, pp.84-85.
- 11 Clifford Irving himself wrote a fake autobiography of Howard Hughes in the format of "as told to..." That was made into a movie starring Richard Gere called *The Hoax* (2006).
- 12 Anne-Marie Stein, as told to George Carpozi, Jr., *Three Picassos Before Breakfast: Memoirs of an Art Forger's Wife*, New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1973.
- 13 Peter Landesman, "A Twentieth-Century Master Scam," *The New York Times Magazine*, July 18, 1999, n.p. on-line.
- 14 See above. All stories on these fakers are slightly different, making it difficult to report on them with 100% confidence.
- 15 Three issues of *The Burlington Magazine* in 2018 contain *The Modigliani Technical Research Study* composed of various articles. **March 2018**: "Editorial: Modigliani, Taste and the Canon," p.181; Annette King, Nancy Ireson, Simonetta Fraquelli and Joyce H. Townsend, "An Introduction to Modigliani's materials and techniques," pp.182-188; Anna Ceroni and Simonetta Fraquelli, "The Catalogues raisonnés of Amedeo Modigliani," pp.189-195; **April 2018**: Barbara Buckley, Michael Duffy, Allison Langley and Mina Porell, "Modigliani's Paris portraits 1915-1917," pp.311-318; Aviva Burnstock, Isabelle Duvernois and Lena Stringari, "Modigliani's painted nudes, 1916-17," pp.319-324; **May 2018**: Annette King, Isabelle Duvernois, Joe Fronck, Joyce H. Townsend and Silvia A. Centeno, "Modigliani in the South of France," pp.394-399; Aniko Bezur, Pedro H.O.V. Campos, Silvia A. Centeno, Isabelle Duvernois, Frauke V. Josenhans, Pablo Londero, Ana Goncalves Magalhaes, Marcia Rizzutto and Cynthia Schwarz, "Modigliani's late portraits," pp.400-407.
- 16 Submitted to the Polytechnic University of Valencia in February 2016, titled (in English), "Scientific Methodology for Expertise: The Artistic Technique of Amedeo Modigliani."
- 17 "What is it about Modigliani?" Kenneth Wayne, Lena Stringari, Isabelle Duvernois, Marc Restellini, Sharon Flescher (moderator), pp.26-47, "Q & A," pp.48-54, *IFAR Journal*, vol. 19, nos. 1 & 2, 2018.
- 18 Albert Elsen and J. Kirk T. Varnedoe, *The Drawings of Rodin*, New York and Washington: Praeger Publishers, 1971.

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