

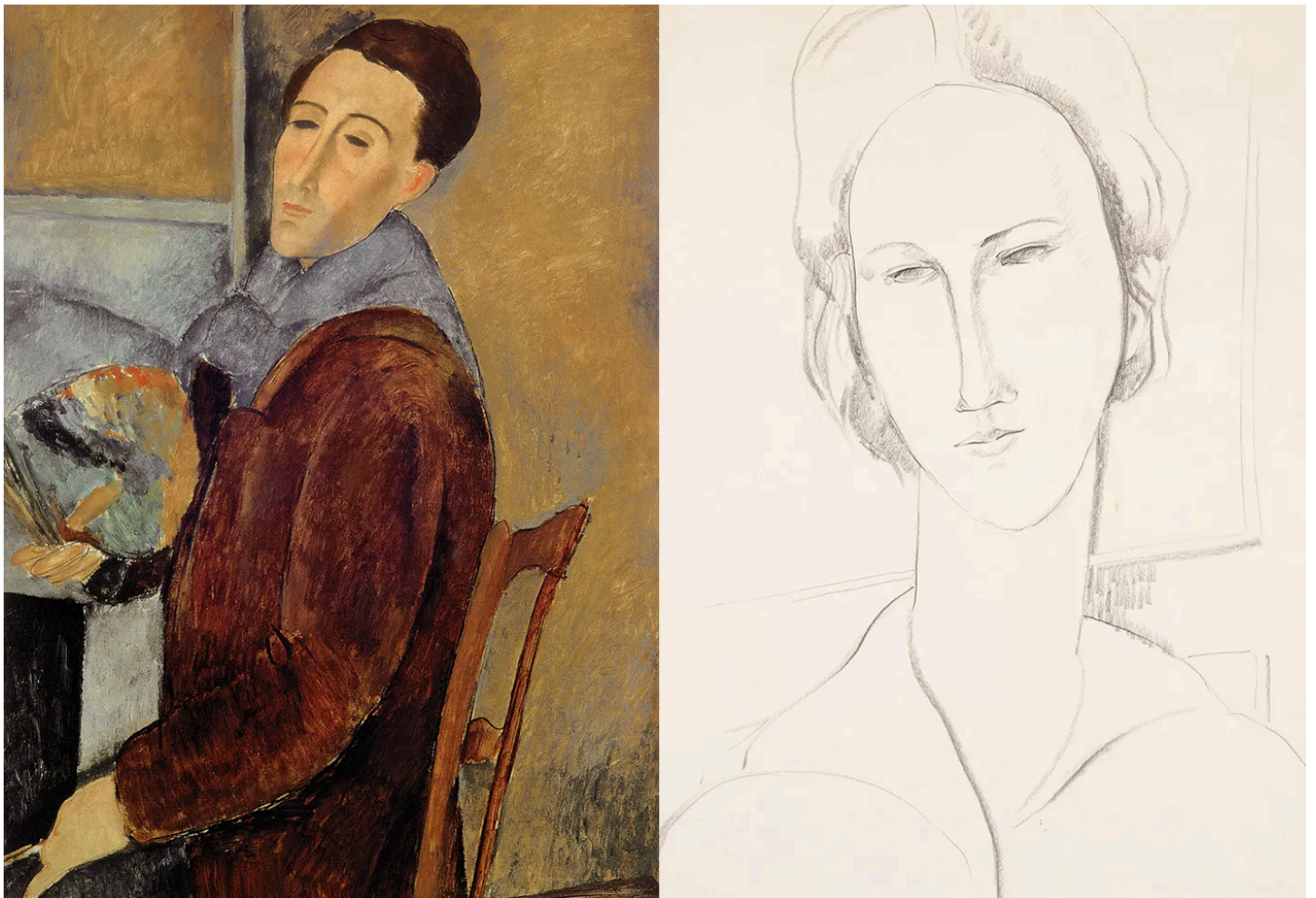
FROM THE MAGAZINE MAY 2017 ISSUE

The Art Market's Modigliani Forgery Epidemic

A skyrocketing interest in Amedeo Modigliani's work is producing Picasso-level price tags, with major museum shows stoking the flame. Buyers are wary, though: the mystery surrounding one of the world's most-faked artists has led to death threats, lawsuits, and hoaxes.

BY MILTON ESTEROW

MAY 3, 2017



A HOT MARKET *Self-Portrait*, by Amedeo Modigliani, 1919. Right, *Portrait of a Woman*, by the forger Elmyr de Hory, circa 1974. LEFT, FROM BRIDGEMAN IMAGES; RIGHT, FROM THE COLLECTION OF MARK FORGY.

 **SAVE**

Nearly a century after the premature death of Amedeo Modigliani, his allure continues to grow, with the price of his work soaring into Picasso territory and several major exhibitions in the offing. The

only question is: How many Modiglianis are fakes? As experts vie for authority and museums test their collections, Milton Esterow delves into the artist's turbulent legacy

'It's good, bad, ugly, and bizarre,' Kenneth Wayne, one of the world's leading Modigliani scholars, said at a recent symposium at New York University on fakes, forgeries, and stolen art. "To say that the catalogue raisonné situation of works by Modigliani is a mess is an understatement."

There have been lawsuits, charges of slander, death threats, hoaxes, and thefts. A Modigliani specialist has been convicted of falsely attributing works to Modigliani. A skyrocketing market for works by the artist has been plagued by fakes in Russia, Serbia, and Italy (where Modigliani was born). Perhaps appropriately for one of the world's most faked artists, there have even been fake fakes. Experts, meanwhile, are jockeying to be recognized as the ultimate authority on what should and should not be accepted as authentic.

Jean Cocteau was drawn by Modigliani many times. Cocteau once recalled, "He used to hand out his drawings like some gypsy fortuneteller, giving them away, and that explains why, although there are some fifty drawings of me in existence, I only own one." It also explains why it's hard to say where every Modigliani comes from.

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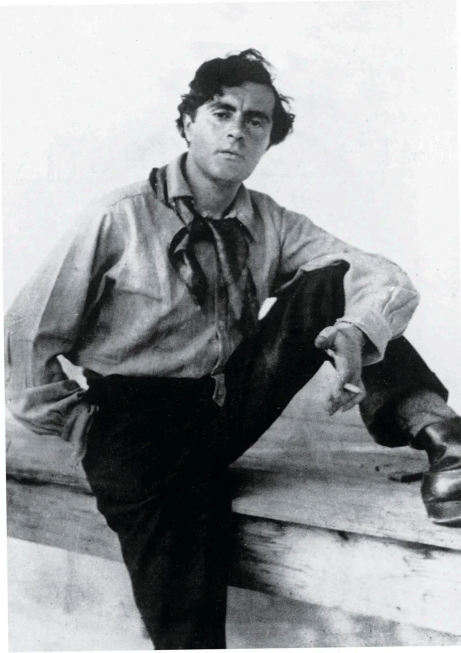
Modigliani's legend continues to grow, and as one of his biographers, Pierre Sichel, has noted, "it has been assisted by sensational novels, hoked up or fictionalized biographies, and films that of course accent drink, drugs, degradation, sex, sin, and madness . . ." Others have been divided about the man himself. "He was a visionary, a poet and philosopher, even a mystic," wrote biographer Meryle Secrest, "or he was a minor character, whose romantic life story led some to place more importance on his work than it deserved."

The stakes are high and are only getting higher. Modigliani prices, long dormant, have been climbing dramatically. Liu Yiqian, a former taxi driver who built a fortune in the stock market and has become one of China's leading art collectors, paid \$170.4 million in 2015 at Christie's in New York for a Modigliani painting, *Nu Couché* (Reclining Nude). The previous record for a Modigliani was \$70.7 million, paid at Sotheby's in 2014 for a carved-stone head of a woman. The acceleration in the Modigliani market is said to have begun in 2010 at a Christie's sale in Paris, where a Modigliani sculpture, expected to sell for between \$5 million and \$7 million, went for \$52 million.

Although the prices for Modigliani's work have reached those for works by Pablo Picasso, Francis Bacon, Edvard Munch, Alberto Giacometti, and Andy Warhol—all of them members of the exclusive \$100 Million Club—the Modigliani market is beset with problems. Writing in *ARTnews*, the global director of Art Basel, Marc Spiegler, quoted a Parisian dealer: "The drama here is that I could find a Modigliani in an attic tomorrow, with a letter from Modigliani attached to it, and people would still hesitate."

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Modigliani in his workshop in Paris, circa 1918. BY MARC VAUX/APIC/GETTY IMAGES.

Starting this fall, experts will examine dozens of Modiglianis now in museums to learn more about how he created his works. Leading the way is a committee of prominent curators and conservators that will test the 27 paintings and three sculptures in French museums. “It’s a work in progress,” Jeanne-Bathilde Lacourt, a member of the committee (Kenneth Wayne is another) and the curator of modern art at the Lille Métropole Museum of Modern, Contemporary and Outsider Art, told me. “We expect to finish the testing by the end of 2018 or early 2019. By then, I think, we will know a lot more about Modigliani’s methods.”

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Next November, the Tate Modern, in London, will open “Modigliani,” the largest show of his work ever held in England. It will run through spring 2018 and include about 90 of his paintings, drawings, and sculptures, works borrowed from museums and collectors in six countries. “The purpose of the exhibition is to show Modigliani’s personal and creative development, to introduce Modigliani to a new generation and indicate how relevant he is now,” Nancy Ireson, co-organizer of the show, told me. “The Modigliani story is of a young person arriving in a foreign city and finding their creative identity. He would not be Modigliani if he had not moved from Italy and experienced the cosmopolitan character of Paris at a particular moment in time.” Before it opens, the Tate will subject its three Modigliani paintings and its one Modigliani sculpture to testing and analysis. The Courtauld Institute, in London, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Guggenheim Museum, which are lending works to the exhibition, have already indicated that they will closely examine their own Modiglianis. Other institutions may do the same.

The Tate Modern show will follow closely on the heels of “Modigliani Unmasked,” which is devoted to the artist’s early work and will run at the Jewish Museum in New York through the fall and winter. Mason Klein, a curator at the museum who is organizing the show, told me that it will include about 150 works, mainly drawings from the collection of Dr. Paul Alexandre, who from 1907 until 1914 was Modigliani’s principal buyer and his closest friend.

A Drawing for a Drink

medeo (it means “Beloved of God”) Modigliani was known as the Melancholy Angel, the Prince of the Bohemians—a friend to all the artists of Montmartre and Montparnasse. He was witty, charming, and handsome, with curly black hair, milky skin, and deep-set piercing black eyes. “How beautiful he was, my

A God, how beautiful,” recalled Aïcha Goblet, one of his models. He could recite Dante, Baudelaire, and d’Annunzio from memory. Parisians admired his clothing—a chocolate-brown corduroy suit, a yellow shirt, a red scarf. “There is only one man in Paris who knows how to dress, and that is Modigliani,” Pablo Picasso once said.

He was born in 1884 on a kitchen table in the family home in Livorno. His parents were Sephardic Jews who had been wealthy (mining interests) but went into bankruptcy that same year because of a business crash. “Dedo,” as he was called, suffered ill health most of his life. He developed pleurisy at age 11 and was diagnosed with tuberculosis several years later. When he was 12, his mother wrote, “He already sees himself as an artist.” Modigliani studied at art schools in Venice and Florence, and in 1906 went to live in Paris at the Bateau Lavoir, the ramshackle studio in Montmartre where Picasso and other artists and writers lived.



The sale of Modigliani's *Nu Couché* (1917–18) at Christie's in New York in 2015. BY TIMOTHY A. CLARY/AFP/GETTY IMAGES.

For a few years he painted in the styles, variously, of Toulouse-Lautrec and Picasso. After meeting Constantin Brancusi, he devoted himself even more to sculpture. One of his friends, the sculptor Jacob Epstein, wrote in his autobiography about a visit to Modigliani's studio, which was filled with 9 or 10 long heads and one full figure: “At night he would place candles on the top of each one and the effect was that of a primitive temple. A legend of the quarter said that Modigliani, when under the influence of hashish, embraced these sculptures.” After he moved to Montparnasse, according to Meryle Secrest, when drunk “he began to yell, break glasses, take off his clothes, and insult the waiters.” He would also walk the streets with his portfolio, trying to sell a drawing for a drink. He spent much of his time at the Louvre and other museums studying the old masters, ancient Egyptian reliefs, Greek statuettes, masks from the Ivory Coast, and fragments from the Angkor

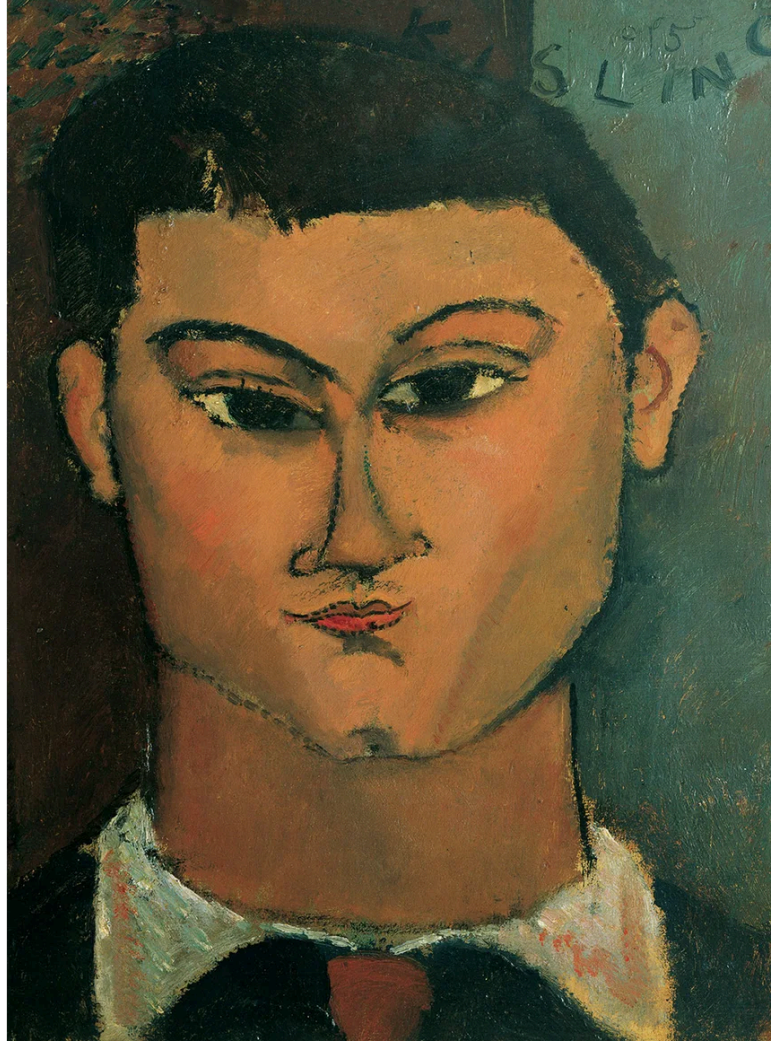
temples. His mother and brother occasionally sent him small amounts of money, but as soon as he had it he would spend it.

Modigliani abandoned sculpture in 1914. Scholars have given several reasons, including poor health and the cost of materials. He returned to painting for the last five years of his life and continued with his signature style—the long necks and faces, the almond-shaped eyes, the button mouths. He held his first solo show in 1917, at the Galerie Berthe Weill, in Paris, which was across the street from a police station. Weill had placed some Modigliani nudes in the window of the gallery, which did not impress the police chief, who sent an officer to insist that the paintings be removed. Weill refused and was escorted to the station. “Those nudes, they have pubic hair!” the police chief reportedly shouted. Weill backed down. One of the nudes in the window is believed to have been *Nu Couché*.

Dr. Paul Alexandre, Modigliani’s patron, maintained that the artist was not as dissolute as some writers have said. “Anyone who knows how to look at his portraits of women, of young men, of friends, and all the others, will discover a man of exquisite sensibility, tenderness, pride, passion for truth, purity.”

Modigliani died of tubercular meningitis in Paris in 1920 at the age of 35. The next day, his mistress, Jeanne Hébuterne, a 21-year-old artist said to be his last and only true love, jumped to her death from a window of her parents’ apartment. She was eight months pregnant. They already had a daughter, Jeanne, who was 13 months old at the time. She was raised by Modigliani’s mother in Livorno and later studied art history. She herself had two daughters and died in 1984 at the age of 65.

The market for Modigliani’s work began to climb soon after his death. As Kenneth Wayne explains, “Modigliani was an internationally known artist during his lifetime and exhibited alongside the leading artists of the day, not only in Paris but also New York, London, and Zurich. He did not die unknown and unappreciated.”



Left, Modigliani's *Léopold Zborowski with a Walking Stick*, 1917; Right, Modigliani's *Portrait of the Painter Moïse Kisling*, 1915. LEFT, FROM BRIDGEMAN IMAGES; RIGHT, FROM PHOTOSERVICE ELECTA/UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK.

“Extremely Problematic”

At the auction houses today, the consensus is: “If it’s not in Ceroni, it’s good-bye,” Lisa Dennison, chairman of Sotheby’s Americas, told me recently. “It doesn’t mean your painting is a fake. It means that Ceroni is the authority that auction houses depend on. But scholarship changes all the time. It’s hard to predict whether future voices will be accepted. But it could happen. It takes a long time to put together a catalogue raisonné.”

“Ceroni” refers to the Italian appraiser and critic Ambrogio Ceroni, whose catalogue raisonné, first published in 1958 and last updated in 1970, the year Ceroni died, is considered the bible of Modigliani. It enjoys what has been described by Wayne as “messianic status” in the art world. But scholars agree that his catalogue is incomplete and that he generally did not include works that he never saw, including many in the United States, which he never visited. Scholars have also raised questions about several works in Ceroni but have declined to identify them publicly pending further analysis (and perhaps for fear of lawsuits).

If scholarship changes, so do auction houses. “In the 1970s and 1980s, much less attention was paid to provenance than today,” noted John Tancock, who retired from Sotheby’s as a senior vice president in 2008 and is now an adviser to Chambers Fine Art, in New York. After a respected Modigliani scholar, Marc Restellini, appeared on the scene in the 1990s, Sotheby’s often consulted him. “In exceptional cases,” Tancock said, “a work would be included in a sale even if it was not in Ceroni but in the eye of the auction-house expert it looked like an authentic Modigliani.”

But there are experts and then there are experts, and they come with varying degrees of credibility. For years, Restellini locked horns with an older Modigliani scholar, Christian Parisot, whose career has more than once landed him in court. Parisot, who is now in his late 60s, has produced several books on Modigliani, including a catalogue raisonné that has been criticized by scholars for grammatical errors, misspellings, and above all the listing of questionable works. Those works include an oil-on-canvas and an unsigned, undated painting that Parisot believes to be an early Modigliani self-portrait. Many of the drawings in Parisot's catalogue have been described as "extremely problematic." As reported in *ARTnews*, Parisot met Jeanne Modigliani in 1973 and they became friends. She handed over to him, he has claimed, the *droit moral* over her father's works, which gave him the right, under French law, to authenticate them. Parisot has also said that Jeanne Modigliani gave him an archive containing nearly 6,000 documents and pieces of memorabilia—letters, photographs, film footage, and commercial records—collected under the name Archives Légales Amedeo Modigliani. Secrest wrote in her 2011 biography of Modigliani that the archive's Web site ostensibly offered access to researchers and journalists, but that she had sent e-mails to the archive for a year without response.

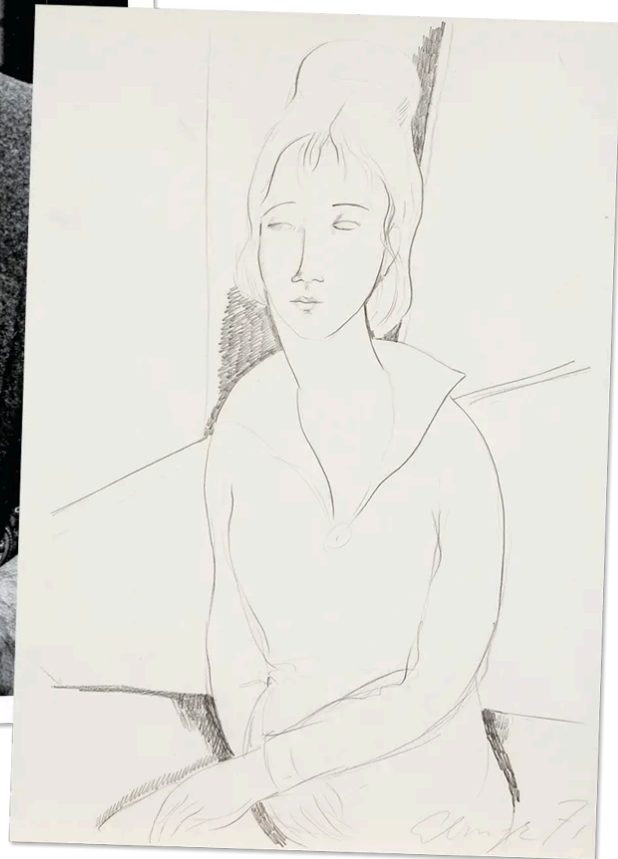
"If I wrote that I had doubts about the Modiglianis that belonged to them they would kill me."

In 2006, *ARTnews* reported, French police went to the Musée du Montparnasse, a tiny institution with a few rooms, which Parisot had said was the official location of the archive. They were investigating a case involving several Modigliani works that Parisot had authenticated and that were possible forgeries. The museum's director told the police that they had made a mistake: the archive was not there and never had been. Parisot said at the time that he used the museum only as a mailing address and that the archive had been stored elsewhere, in a bank in Italy. At some point the archive had been transferred to Rome, which prompted Italian officials to consider creating a new museum dedicated to Modigliani. The museum never opened.

In 2010, Parisot received a two-year suspended sentence and was fined \$70,000 by a French court after being convicted of fraud. He had been accused of falsely authenticating 77 drawings and watercolors by Jeanne Hébuterne for a show in Spain. (Parisot claimed that he had bought the works at a flea market.) In 2012, Parisot was arrested after the police seized 59 works, including drawings, sculptures, and a painting, that had been, it was alleged, falsely attributed to Modigliani. The police also seized certificates of authenticity alleged to have been provided by Parisot. He was convicted and placed under house arrest, from which he was released last year, according to a source close to the police.

Not long ago, Parisot cut a deal to license companies that would develop "the Modigliani brand" by using reproductions from the archive. An Italian vintner has been offering Modigliani wine with a label that reproduces one of the artist's paintings. There is also a Modigliani cigar. Last August, the mayor of Spoleto, Fabrizio Cardarelli, announced a campaign to create what he called the Casa Modigliani to exhibit Modigliani reproductions, promote contemporary Italian artists, and celebrate in 2020 the centenary of Modigliani's death.

Jeanne Modigliani's daughter Laure Nechtschein Modigliani, who lives in Paris, said she believes that her mother never gave the archive to Parisot but rather entrusted it to him so that he could use it. In 2014, Nechtstein Modigliani tried to regain control of the archive, but an Italian court ruled in favor of Parisot. (Parisot did not respond to repeated requests to be interviewed for this story.)



De Hory in Madrid, 1975; De Hory's *Portrait of a Sitting Woman*, 1971. PHOTOGRAPH, FROM A.P. IMAGES; INSET, FROM THE COLLECTION OF MARK FORGY.

A Thousand Fakes?

The Modigliani scholar Marc Restellini, 52, was born in Saint-Omer and lives in Paris. He told me that he first saw a Modigliani painting when he was five years old and that his grandfather was an artist who had been represented by one of Modigliani's dealers. Restellini studied art history at the Sorbonne and lectured there for seven years. Starting in 1992 he organized Modigliani exhibitions in Tokyo, Milan, Lugano, and Paris. He said that auction houses began consulting him in 1997 and that he continues to be consulted by some of them. Restellini told me that he met Parisot when he himself was still a graduate student; he was involved with an exhibition and had asked Parisot for some accompanying text, which upon delivery he considered to be "inept." When I asked Restellini recently for his opinion of Parisot, he declined to comment.

Restellini has been working on a catalogue raisonné of Modigliani's paintings and drawings for more than 20 years. The paintings catalogue was sponsored until 2015 by the Wildenstein Institute, the art-history

organization in Paris founded by the international dynasty of art dealers. The institute had also planned a drawings catalogue, but this effort ended in 2001. “When the institute came on the Modigliani scene, in the 1990s,” David Nash, a prominent New York dealer, told me, “auction catalogues would say, ‘This work will be in the forthcoming Wildenstein catalogue raisonné.’ ”

Restellini explained that the reason the Wildenstein drawings project had been canceled was that he had received telephone death threats. “Dealers said that if I wrote that I had doubts about the Modiglianis that belonged to them they would kill me,” he said, adding, “Dealers offered me money to include paintings that I considered fake.” He declined to identify the people who had threatened him or had tried to bribe him. As for the other catalogue, “the institute decided in 2015 that it wanted to do the paintings catalogue with a committee, which I did not want.” Guy Wildenstein, president of Wildenstein & Co., told me, “Since taking over the institute in 2001, we have always published catalogues raisonnés with a committee of scholars.” Last year, Restellini closed the Pinacothèque de Paris, a private exhibition space that he had founded a decade earlier and where he organized well-attended exhibitions, including “The Dutch Golden Age,” “Edvard Munch,” and “Modigliani, Soutine, and the Legend of Montparnasse.” In 2015, he created the Institut Restellini—“to make appraisals and offer expertise on artwork from the Renaissance to the contemporary,” he said. He plans to launch his catalogue raisonné of Modigliani paintings this year. “It will be online and we will charge for using it, but I don’t know yet what the cost will be. It will have about 80 more works than Ceroni.” Restellini has also devoted time to the study of “Modiglianis” that are not by Modigliani. “There are at least 1,000 Modigliani fakes in the world,” he told me. Another expert said that Modigliani’s daughter included sculptures in her book, *Modigliani: Man and Myth*, that scholars do not believe to be authentic—one of bronze, one of wood—and that two of Modigliani’s models issued certificates that are not considered credible. Léopold Zborowski, who was Modigliani’s primary dealer (he also represented Chaim Soutine and Moïse Kisling, who was one of Modigliani’s closest friends), sold many authentic Modiglianis but, one expert told me, “there are works that he sold that would make people wonder.” Kisling’s son Jean was certain that his father had finished some of Modigliani’s unfinished works.

One of the most prolific forgers was Elmyr de Hory, who faked not only Modigliani but also Picasso, Henri Matisse, André Derain, and Raoul Dufy. Mark Forgy, who was de Hory’s assistant on the island of Ibiza for seven years, until de Hory’s suicide—in 1976, at the age of 70—told me that he is de Hory’s heir and that he inherited about 300 de Horys, many in the style of Modigliani. Forgy, who now lives in Minnesota, sells the drawings at prices ranging from \$2,500 to \$8,000 and the paintings for \$6,000 to \$35,000. “I see fake de Horys all the time on online auctions with the fake signatures of Modigliani and others on the front and a fake Elmyr signature on the back,” Forgy said. “They sell for \$2,000 to \$3,000, but they are fake fakes.”

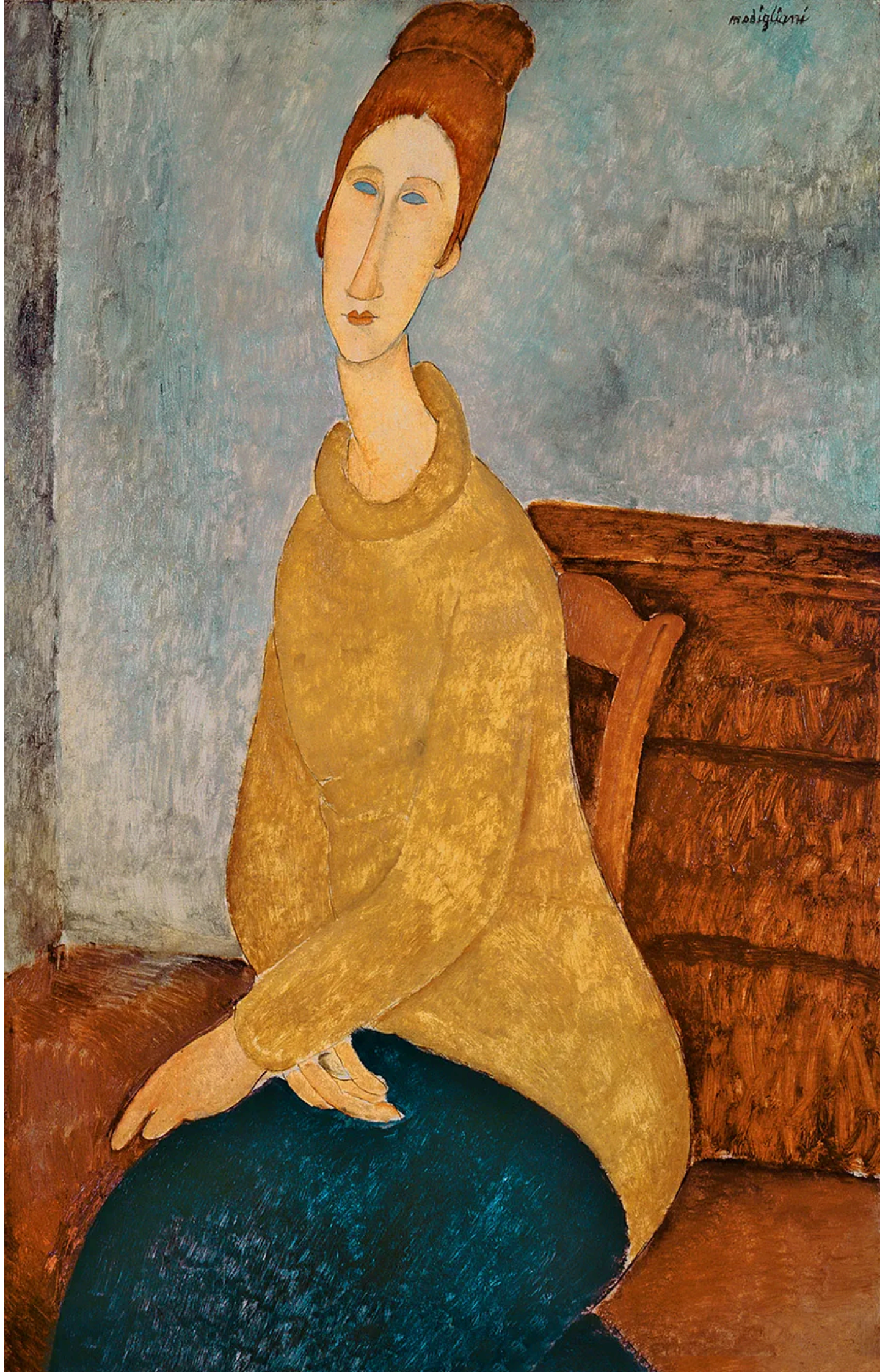
Another Modigliani forger could have started a gang war. As recounted in Meryle Secrest’s biography, about 15 years ago a museum director in France, Daniel Marchesseau, was contacted by French police—they had seized what was said to be a Modigliani painting listed in Ceroni’s catalogue—*Seated Man Leaning on a Table*. After examination, Marchesseau said it was a fake. Other police officers, who were part of a unit investigating currency fraud, told him that the fake Modigliani was being offered as an original by a criminal gang. The prospective buyers, a rival gang, were paying with counterfeit money.

Breaking the Code

‘**M**odigliani is entering a golden age,” Kenneth Wayne told me recently. “There are more exhibitions, more interest in seeing his works, and more scientific studies of his paintings than ever before. We are close to breaking the code and learning exactly what we should find in an authentic Modigliani painting. And not find.”

Wayne, 55, is dark-haired and personable. He holds a master-of-arts degree from the Courtauld Institute of Art and a Ph.D. in art history from Stanford University. He writes scholarly articles on Modigliani regularly and has organized dozens of exhibitions on various artists, including the highly acclaimed “Modigliani and the Artists of Montparnasse” in 2002—3. He is now organizing an exhibition on Modigliani for the Barnes Foundation, in Philadelphia, to commemorate the centenary of the artist’s death. The Barnes and the National Gallery of Art, in Washington, D.C., have the largest collections of Modigliani paintings in the world. Each owns 12.

modigliani



“During his lifetime,” Wayne said, “it was rare for a work to be reproduced in an exhibition catalogue, auction catalogue, or newspaper article. . . . So despite the fact that he exhibited extensively during his lifetime, we do not have a photographic record of what he showed. . . . There is a Modigliani-family archive—the one now in Parisot’s hands—but its exact contents are unknown, and it has never been made available to the public. There are various catalogues raisonnés, but each has significant problems.”

Fakes began to emerge in the 1920s, soon after Modigliani died. Scientific testing is only just starting on a large scale. Wayne went on: “Which pigments did he use and not use? . . . The pigment titanium white was distributed in 1924, after Modigliani’s death, so if a painting contains that, it is automatically not authentic. Which specific types of canvases and supports did he use? Some conservators can count the threads or see if the weave of the canvas matches known works by the artist. X-rays and infrared tests are particularly important.”

Wayne, who founded the nonprofit Modigliani Project in 2013, intends to publish his own new catalogue raisonné. He has assembled an advisory board that includes two cousins of Modigliani’s and the daughter of Ambrogio Ceroni. By 2020 he plans to publish a supplement of about 50 Modigliani works to the 337 listed by Ceroni. When I spoke with him, he mentioned two paintings that “are generally accepted as by Modigliani” but not in Ceroni—*Portrait of Pierre Reverdy*, an oil-on-canvas work from around 1916, in a private collection but on loan to the Baltimore Museum of Art, and *Portrait of Thora Klinckowstrom*, 1919, an oil-on-canvas work in a private collection. Wayne told me that Thora Klinckowstrom had written in her memoir about having a portrait painted by Modigliani.

The good news is that the reference in the memoir helps establish the provenance. The bad news is what she wrote: “I got El Greco lines, and it didn’t look very much like me.”

Additional reporting by Judith Harris and Laurie Hurwitz.

Milton Esterow

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