



Amedeo Modigliani, *Self-Portrait*, 1919. Museum of Contemporary Art, São Paulo, Brazil

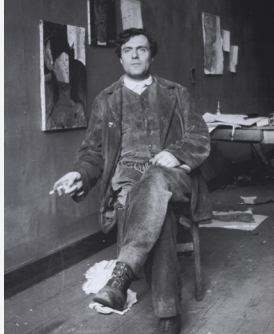
Amedeo Modigliani was born in Livorno, Italy, the fourth child of a middle-class Jewish family. His father, Flaminio, came from a line of successful businessmen who suffered a reversal of fortune and declared bankruptcy shortly before Amedeo's birth. His mother, Eugenia Garsin, descended from an intellectual Jewish family, and she passed her love of culture and learning to her son. Modigliani suffered from serious illnesses, including pleurisy and typhoid fever, during his youth, and later he contracted tuberculosis. As an adult, he was known for his combination of personal elegance, intellectual prowess, and frail health.

From his early teens, Modigliani resolved to become an artist. In 1898, he began to study with local plein-air painter Guglielmo Micheli, who stressed working directly from nature. Modigliani also was exposed to a wide variety of Italian art over the course of travels through his home country, where he received formal training in Florence and in Venice. While studying in Venice in 1903, Modigliani met a Chilean artist, Manuel Ortiz de Zárate, who told him tales of life in Paris and its bohemian center, Montmartre. Deciding to experience Paris for himself, Modigliani moved there in 1906, first to Montmartre and later to Montparnasse, which superseded Montmartre as the home of the avant-garde in the 1910s.

In 1909, Modigliani moved to Montparnasse, a district on the Left Bank of the Seine, which was replacing Montmartre as the meeting place for Paris's intellectuals and artists. As in Montmartre, they were attracted to the cheap rents and the opportunity to live in a community of like-minded men and women. Foreign-born artists were drawn to the many independent art academies in the area, which were more welcoming to them than the École des Beaux-Arts and provided instruction by École-trained artists. Modigliani enrolled in several of these academies. The lively and cosmopolitan environment of the cafés on the Boulevard du Montparnasse was an equally critical component in the development of new forms of art and poetry. Artists and writers would gather at Café de la Rotonde, Café du Dôme, and La Closerie de Lilas to discuss art, engage in political debates, and share their work. Modigliani hired many of his models in the cafés and even painted some of his portraits there.

## Paris and the Avant-garde before the Great War

When Modigliani moved to Paris, he settled in Montmartre, a hill to the north of Paris that



Amedeo Modigliani. From Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository

is dominated by the white domes of the Basilica of Sacré Coeur (built between 1875 and 1912) and gives its name to the surrounding neighborhood. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the district was the center of the Parisian avant-garde, those artists and writers who were committed to pushing the boundaries of creativity in the name of modernity. Many avant-gardists (including Pablo Picasso, who might have encouraged Modigliani to move to the area) lived and socialized in a rundown building nicknamed “Le Bateau-Lavoir.” (The name was coined by the poet Max Jacob, who found the building’s manner of swaying in bad weather reminiscent of the movement of

washing-boats on the Seine River.) Montmartre also was known for its raucous nightlife and for the singers and dancers who performed in cabarets, including Moulin Rouge and Le Chat Noir.

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*Montparnasse henceforth replaces Montmartre. Mountain for mountain, we are still on the heights; art still prefers the summits. Daubers, however, no longer feel at home in the modern Montmartre. It is difficult to climb and full of fake artists, eccentric industrialists, and devil-may-care opium smokers.*

— Guillaume Apollinaire (1914)

*(The Café de la Rotonde) is a very welcoming establishment and a good place to sit down. It has been chosen as the headquarters by those men the cubist painters. That is where they gather. That is where we can see their pope, Mr. Picasso, surrounded by his cardinals, Masters Kisling, Modigliani, Ortiz de Zárate, etc. . . . That is where their prophets Masters Guillaume Apollinaire and André Salmon establish their attack plans against the bourgeois spirit and debate between them the most abstruse questions of pyramidal, spherical, cylindrical, and conical aesthetics.*

— *Le Cri de Paris* (June 3, 1917)



In 1902, Modigliani turned his attention to sculpture, and the medium became his primary focus from 1909 to 1914. He was inspired in part by meeting the Romanian-born sculptor Constantin Brancusi, whose stylized forms, devotion to direct carving, and fierce independence had an impact on Modigliani. The latter created about twenty-five carved stone sculptures that focused on abstracted female heads. Conceiving of these works as a series, he exhibited seven heads at the 1912 Salon d'Automne, under the title *Têtes, ensemble décoratif*.

Amedeo Modigliani, *Head*, ca. 1910–11. The Henry and Rose Pearlman Foundation, on long-term loan to the Princeton University Art Museum.

*Head* is part of a series created between 1909 and 1913, which includes approximately twenty-eight pieces. Modigliani's fascination with West African art is evident in the severe elongation, graphic scoring, narrow noses, and rounded mouths of his sculpted heads, reminiscent of the masks made by the Baule of today's Ivory Coast and by neighboring tribes, such as the Guro.

**Modigliani and Non-Western art**

In the early twentieth century, the artists of the Parisian avant-garde found non-Western modes of art an appealing alternative to the naturalism favored by the Academy. African sculpture had been brought to Europe beginning in the 1870s, the bounty of colonial conquests and expeditions. These works were displayed at the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro and offered for sale in curio shops and flea markets as trophies of conquered peoples, not as art objects. Artists such as Picasso and Modigliani were drawn to the objects' visual power and their abstraction of the figure. The dealer Paul Guillaume was among the first to recognize the value of these works on the art market; he began to sell them in his own gallery and served as a middleman for other dealers. Guillaume later represented Modigliani as well as the sculptor Brancusi and the painter Chaïm Soutine.

In addition to his fascination with African art, Modigliani took inspiration from a variety of cultures, both Western and non-Western. His sculptures melded the influence of African sculpture with strains of Egyptian, Cycladic, Greek, Romanesque, and Gothic styles.

*In (Modigliani's) drawings there is invention, simplification, and purification of form. This was why African art appealed to him . . . It was Modigliani who introduced me to tribal art, and not the reverse. He took me to the Trocadero Museum, where he was in fact fascinated by the Angkor exhibition in the Occidental wing.*

— Paul Alexandre, Modigliani's patron

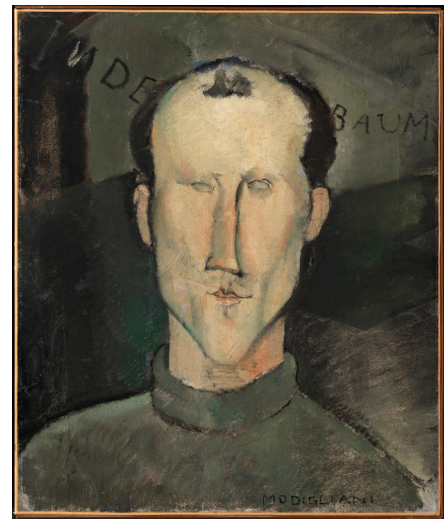
Modigliani ceased working on sculpture around 1914, apparently due to health concerns and other practicalities, and turned his focus to drawing and painting. Whether in stone or in paint, portraiture was Modigliani's dominant subject. Modigliani's portraits combine abstraction and elements of caricature; the influence of his sculptural work is also apparent. The stylized faces and bodies he depicted are surprisingly revealing in their degree of penetrating observation and psychological subtlety. His portraits depict many leading figures in the artistic and literary avant-garde, among them Jacques Lipchitz, Pablo Picasso, Diego Rivera, Chaïm Soutine, Jean Cocteau, and Max Jacob.

The collector Henry Pearlman recounted a story the artist Léon Indenbaum told him of how Modigliani came to paint his portrait:

One night, Modigliani, while rather drunk, saw Indenbaum at a café and said he would like to paint his portrait, if Indenbaum would furnish a canvas and an easel to work on. The following morning at nine, Modigliani arrived, spruced up and ready to get to work. Indenbaum had various canvases of paintings by contemporary artists at his atelier. They had been returned, unsold and unclaimed, from a sale for a charitable fund. After turning down several of these canvases because he thought the paintings were too good to spoil, Modigliani found a still-life that he thought could be sacrificed, so he scraped off the heavy paint and commenced.

After three morning sittings of about four hours each, the portrait was finished, and presented to Indenbaum. On looking at it carefully one can see the table and bottle that were part of the original still-life. Several weeks later, Indenbaum, being short of money, sold his portrait for forty francs (eight dollars). When he finally explained to Modigliani that he was forced to sell it, Modigliani said, "That's all right, I'll do it again." However, this never happened.

In the spring of 1916, Picasso brought the poet Jean Cocteau to meet the artists and poets who habitually gathered at painter Moïse Kisling's Montparnasse studio. Cocteau apparently irritated the group of friends with his pretensions: the poet Pierre Reverdy recounted later that Cocteau talked incessantly, his voice like the rain beating on the roof, while everyone ignored him. Both Modigliani and Kisling painted Cocteau, and Modigliani's devastating portrait captures his vanity. Cocteau paid for the portrait, but, claiming that it would not fit in a taxi, left it behind and never sent for it. Perhaps he disliked the depiction of his nose; Modigliani emphasized the bump that had recently appeared, much to Cocteau's chagrin. Cocteau later wrote, "It does not look like me, but it does look like Modigliani, which is better."



Amedeo Modigliani, *Léon Indenbaum*, 1916. The Henry and Rose Pearlman Foundation, on long-term loan to the Princeton University Art Museum.

Educated in Ukrainian art schools, the Lithuanian sculptor Léon Indenbaum (1890–1981) came to Paris in 1911 and probably met Modigliani in the artistic circles of Montparnasse. Indenbaum would be nearly forgotten today were it not for impressive portraits of him by his friends Modigliani and the Mexican painter Diego Rivera.



Henry Pearlman recalled Cocteau's telling of the story:

When Modigliani did my portrait, he worked in the same workshop as Kisling on rue Joseph Bara. I do not know what has become of the portrait by Kisling where one can see Picasso having lunch in the background, and wearing a black checked shirt.

The portrait by Modigliani was on a large canvas. He sold it to me for 5 francs. I had not, alas, enough money to pay for the car which would enable me to take the portrait to my house. Kisling owed 11 francs to the Café Rotonde. He proposed to give the proprietor this portrait in exchange. The proprietor accepted, and the canvas commenced a voyage which was terminated by a sale of 17 million francs in America.

*I am not telling you this story to complain, but to tell you that we could have become wealthy, and that we did not become so.*

— Jean Cocteau, quoted by Henry Pearlman

Modigliani's friends called him "Modi," a shortened version of his last name as well as a homonym

for "*maudit*," the French word for "cursed." The nickname was inspired by Modi's outrageous, sometimes violent behavior and abuse of alcohol and drugs, which exacerbated his frail health. He died from tubercular meningitis at the age of thirty-five.



Amedeo Modigliani, *Jean Cocteau*, 1916. The Henry and Rose Pearlman Foundation, on long-term loan to the Princeton University Art Museum.

Modigliani's portrait of Jean Cocteau seems to have been painted as part of a friendly competition between Modigliani and the Polish-born painter Moïse Kisling. It would appear that the perpetually hard-up Modigliani needed assistance in getting started. He must have taken a canvas from Kisling, as an X-radiograph reveals that underneath Modigliani's portrait is a depiction of Kisling with his wife, Renée, and their dog.

## Amedeo Modigliani

### Jean Cocteau, 1916

The Henry and Rose Pearlman Foundation, on long-term loan to the Princeton University Art Museum

### Before your visit

Compare Modigliani's portrait of Jean Cocteau with a seventeenth-century portrait of a woman by the Dutch artist Cornelis Jonson van Ceulen (on view in the Museum's galleries of European art from the fourteenth through eighteenth centuries).

You can download a high-res image of the Modigliani portrait from the Henry and Rose Pearlman Collection's website at [http://www.pearlmancollection.org/files/artwork/L1988-62-18\\_0.jpg](http://www.pearlmancollection.org/files/artwork/L1988-62-18_0.jpg)

You can download a high-res image of the Van Ceulen portrait from the Art Museum's website at <http://artmuseum.princeton.edu>.



- *What is the subject of each of these portraits?*
- *What does each artist communicate about his sitter? What do you think each subject is feeling? What does the expression on his/her face tell you? What about his/her body?*
- *Which elements of painting (e.g., color, line, light and dark, texture) did each artist use to communicate his sitter's personality?*
- *Where do you think you (the viewer) are in relation to the subject of each painting?*
- *What differences and similarities between these two paintings do you notice?*

## During your visit

- *What shapes, lines and colors do you see in the painting?*

**Compare the portrait of Jean Cocteau with Modigliani's sculpted head**

([http://www.pearlmancollection.org/files/artwork/L1988-62-71\\_0.jpg](http://www.pearlmancollection.org/files/artwork/L1988-62-71_0.jpg))

- *What are some of the similarities and differences between the sculpture and the portrait?*
- *What could Modigliani do with a three-dimensional work of art that he could not do in a two-dimensional work of art, and vice versa?*

**Compare the portrait of Jean Cocteau with the portrait of Léon Indenbaum**

([http://www.pearlmancollection.org/files/artwork/L1988-62-19\\_0.jpg](http://www.pearlmancollection.org/files/artwork/L1988-62-19_0.jpg))

- *What are some of the similarities and differences between these two portraits?*

## After your visit

**Compare Modigliani's work with a mask by an artist from the Baule people of the Ivory Coast. Similar masks inspired Modigliani when he was creating his sculptures. An example can be found on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's website:**

(<http://www.metmuseum.org/collections/search-the-collections/317834>)

- *Which elements of masks like this one did Modigliani use as inspiration for his work?*
- *How is the idea of a mask at play in Modigliani's portrait of Jean Cocteau?*
- *Cocteau said about his portrait, "It does not look like me, but it does look like Modigliani, which is better." What does this mean to you?*

**Locate other examples of work by artists of this period, such as Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, or the German Expressionist painters Ernst Ludwig Kirchner or Max Beckmann, who also were interested in African art. What did these artists borrow from their source material, and what did they ignore?**

**Creative writing exercise:** Ask the students to look closely at the painting. What words emerge to describe Jean Cocteau? Ask the students to imagine themselves as Cocteau, sitting for his portrait. Have the students write first-person narratives from his point of view



## ***Vocabulaire en français*** (French vocabulary words)

*atelier* (m.): workshop or studio

*cadre* (m.): frame

*dessin* (m.): drawing

*exposition* (f.): exhibition

*huile* (f.): oil (painting)

*masque* (m.): mask

*nu* (m.): nude

*oeuvre* (m.): work

*peintre* (m.): painter

*peindre*: to paint

*pinceau* (m.): paintbrush

*plan* (m.): plane

*portrait* (m.): portrait

*tableau* (m.): a painting

*tache* (f.): mark or smudge

*toile* (f.): canvas

## ***les mots-clés de l'analyse picturale*** (keywords for formal analysis)

*complémentaire*: complementary

*contrastée par*: contrasted by

*couleur* (m.): color

*équilibre* (m.): balance

*espace* (m.): space

*fond* (m.): background

*forme* (f.): shape

*ligne* (f.): line

*lumière* (f.): light

*masse* (f.): mass

*motif* (m.): pattern

*noir* (m.): dark (n.); to describe a color as dark:  
foncé, e.g. vert foncé

*ombre* (f.): shadow

*perspective* (f.): perspective

*premier plan* (m.): foreground

## Blaise Cendrars, “Sur un portrait de Modigliani”

The modernist poet Blaise Cendrars (born Frédéric-Louis Sauser in Switzerland in 1887) was a central figure in the Parisian avant-garde of the 1910s. He collaborated with artists on works that blur the lines between poetry and painting, such as the two-meter-long poem/artist’s book *La prose du Transsibérien et de la Petite Jehanne de France*, cocreated with the designer Sonia Delaunay, and *La fin du monde*, filmée par l’Ange N.-D., a never-realized film script illustrated by the painter Fernand Léger. (For more on these and other works from the era, visit

<http://artmuseum.princeton.edu/art/exhibitions/1913-modernism>.)

Cendrars also collaborated with his friend Modigliani, who painted his portrait in 1917. That year, he wrote a poem, “Sur un portrait de Modigliani,” which was included in the catalogue for Modigliani’s one-person exhibition at Galerie Berthe Weill in December. The display of a number of Modigliani’s nudes, including one in the window, caused such a sensation that the police commissioner requested that the gallery owner close the exhibition.

### “Sur un portrait de Modigliani” Blaise Cendrars

Le monde intérieur  
Le coeur humain avec  
ses 17 mouvements  
dans l’esprit  
Et le va-et-vient de la  
passion

### “On a Modigliani Portrait” Blaise Cendrars

The world inside  
The human heart with  
Its 17 movements  
in the mind  
And the to-and-fro of the  
passion

**The following works were consulted in the preparation of this guide:**

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