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# Modigliani The Fated

*By* MAURICE SACHS

*Amédéo Modigliani* (1884-1920)

*"He wanted to meet in the real world the unsubstantial image which his soul so constantly beheld."*
JAMES JOYCE

*" . . . . arriére L'oubli qu'on cherche en des breuvages éxécrés"* PAUL VERLAINE

THERE IS MUCH that can be said about those unfortunate men whom life does not treat properly and to whom only death gives the glory they had so wanted to know. Fated people naturally belong to all social levels. One finds them on thrones, in society, among artists, among the bourgeoisie, and in the lower classes. Modigliani has his place on this list of grief. His name follows hard upon those tragic ones, Van Gogh and Gauguin.

A convergence of unhappy circumstances, one external, the other internal, compelled Modigliani to live poorly and to die miserably. The injustice of democracies towards painters is the external reason of his unhappiness, alcoholism the internal reason.

He was born in that strange period, 1815 to 1915; the period that was especially dense toward art. The kings and the popes of the Renaissance knew how to protect their painters. France of the 17th and 18th century also knew how to furnish them patrons. One can even amuse oneself re-reading the tales of Watteau or of Latour. They were paid for a painting a price equivalent to that which a picture dealer of Fifty-Seventh Street would pay today for a Picasso or a Matisse. But painters have been fated from the end of the reign of Napoleon the Great up to the Great War.

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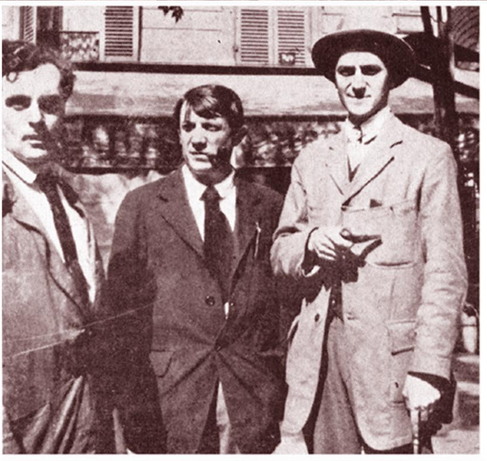
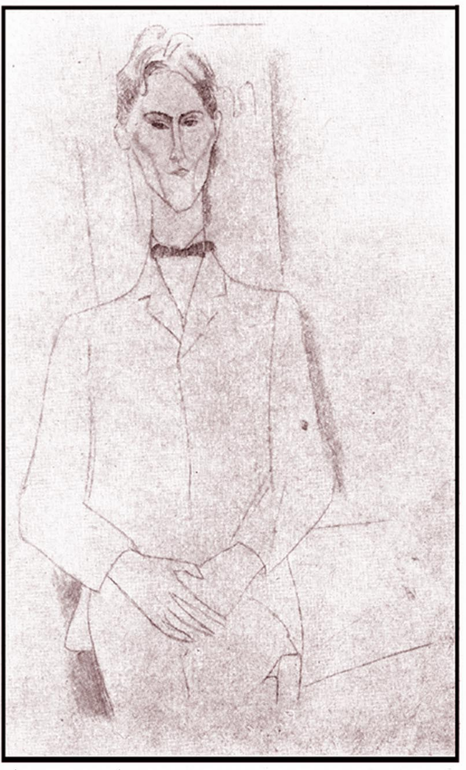
# Modigliani

If glory lies in being loved "and in leaving something of one's self here below" when death has molded our statue, Modigliani may be said to have been happy, but if glory is desirable because it brings to the living both homage and wealth, Modigliani died doubly wretched.





*The two photographs, taken by Jean Cocteau in 1913, show Modigliani, Picasso and André Salmon (in that order from left to right) standing before the "Rotonde" in Paris. The drawing, by Modigliani, is of Cocteau. Both drawing and photographs are from the private collection of the author.*

He was twenty-two when he came up from Italy to Paris. He was delicate, born of a family of Jews who had been ruined in the year of his birth, 1884. His features were as regular as those of a Greek statue and certainly he had an air more Venetian than truly Jewish.

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His eyes shone with that special brightness lent by tuberculosis. There was a smile on his lips which later turned to wryness under so much bitterness. He habitually wore a coat of chestnut velvet, a wide-brimmed felt hat and, tied around his neck, a loud scarf. When he had just arrived in Paris, the sorrow of leaving his mother made him cry on receipt of a letter from her. His taste for philosophy was innate but also probably because of a tradition in his family that the Modiglianis were descended from Spinoza on the distaff side. He showed a predilection for poetry and often talked of D'Annunzio, Shelley and Oscar Wilde. Those who visited his poor atelier in the Cité Falguiere remember having seen him among many books, Petrarch's *Sonnets, Vita Nuova,* the poems of Ronsard, Baudelaire and Mallarmé. One day after having drunk too much, and being chased out of the Café du Dôme, in Montparnasse, there dropped from his pocket, in the scuffle with the waiter, *Chants de Maldoror,* the celebrated work of the Count de Lautréamont. This book is better known today on account of the surréalists André Breton and Louis Aragon who have given us a relish for it.

On reaching Paris, Modigliani retained three memories of his childhood; his maternal grandfather who had taught him so much, thanks to whom he spoke several languages at the age of twelve; and his mother, who had always shown him so much tenderness and so much devotion, so much indulgence, so much understanding when he had evinced his desire to paint, who had sent him in his fight against tuberculosis to Amalfi, Capri, Rome, and Venice, who had finally allowed him to leave for France where he was going to make his name and where he died. But above all he kept the memory of that Italian sky, under whose light objects are silhouetted rather than enshrouded as in Paris, the sky which is really, like that of New York. He first rented a studio in Montmartre where he made the acquaintance of those hardbitten and poor men, warm hearted but cruel, who were preparing for the new revolution in the art world: Max Jacob, Maurice Utrillo, Pierre Reverdy, Juan Gris, Pablo Picasso, Andre Salmon. (You will observe that the only painters of whom Modigliani was heard to speak well were the "douanier" Rousseau and Picasso.)

He commenced wandering from studio to studio, from café to café, thrown out of one on account of not being able to pay his rent, of the other for having drunk too much. As he was pleased in saying, he had only one client: "I have only one client and he is blind." It was true. He had met a fine fellow, la pere Angély who although blind bought paintings to aid young artists. Sometimes Modigliani slept out-of-doors, sometimes with a friend, sometimes one found him in the morning stretched out on the table of a café. Before taking up his residence in the Rue Falguiere

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he spent some time in a ruined house in the Rue de Delta which was the property of the State, and where several other poor artists lived. To gain admittance he had to persuade the officious laundress who was hanging up her wash that he was a lessee of the State. This was about the time he met Brancusi who advised him to take up sculpture. Modigliani began to draw his large caryatid figures. His first works in stone are strange. He knew the lesson of Michelangelo; "Each painter should sculpt as much as paint, each sculptor should paint as much as sculpt. By sculpture I understand that which is carved from *la masse;* that which is added is only a kind of painting." But the poor health of Modigliani did not allow him to bestow as much physical effort as sculpture required.

He had recommenced that life of drinking which unstrings the nervous system, The habit of cognac and absinthe had caught him. If he had not enough to buy liquor, he would beg from door to door until he found a friend to give him something with which to buy a drink. Drunk, he had to leave his café and find a bed, and then in the morning would come that bodily dizziness, that spiritual restlessness, that instability of being that calls for some drug. Sometimes he would paint a canvas for the price of a bottle of cognac. Sometimes Zborowsky, who, more than anybody else kept alive the glory of Modigliani, would first shut him up in his studio until he had painted something new and then would give him something to drink.

Once again, and for the last time, Modigliani tried to flee from intoxication, returning to Italy to be near his mother. She cared for him and kept up his appearance, but the effect of his Bohemianism had been too much for him. He could no longer endure a settled life. Back he came to Paris, bringing with him only one canvas.

His love affairs were numerous—he was very handsome—from Miss Hastings (whose portrait he painted frequently) to Madame Hébuterne, companion of his latter days. His one child, a daughter, lives today in quiet seclusion with his sister in Italy.

In Montparnasse he took up his new abode with a group that comprised Picasso, Kisling (his most faithful friend), Zborowsky and Vlaminck, who tells this story: "One morning in the winter of 1917 on the Boulevard Raspail, proud, aloof, Modigliani was looking at the cabs going by with the attitude of a general at manoeuver. An icy breeze was making him shiver. As soon as he saw me he came up and quite simply, as if it were something very casual said, 'I shall sell you my overcoat. It is too large for me and it will look well on you.' "

Three more years of poverty, of struggles with laziness, of crises, and then one day found him consumed with fever. He was taken to a hospital but it was too late. Several days he lingered and died saying: "My dear, dear Italy."

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Kisling and several friends took up a collection for his funeral. The cortege that followed his remains was astonishingly long, composed of artists of course, but also of dealers, women, unknowns and fashionables. "Were they," wrote Maud Dale, "in this respectful gesture trying to make amends, or were they only trying to borrow a little reflected glory?"

But he was coming into his own. Coming back from the cemetery his friends learned that his companion, from whom they were trying to keep news of his death, had just found it out and had thrown herself from a window, impressing even upon the death of the painter an additional and terrible grief. The parents of this noble woman refused to bury her beside a Jew. It was only in 1928 that the two bodies were at last placed together.



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