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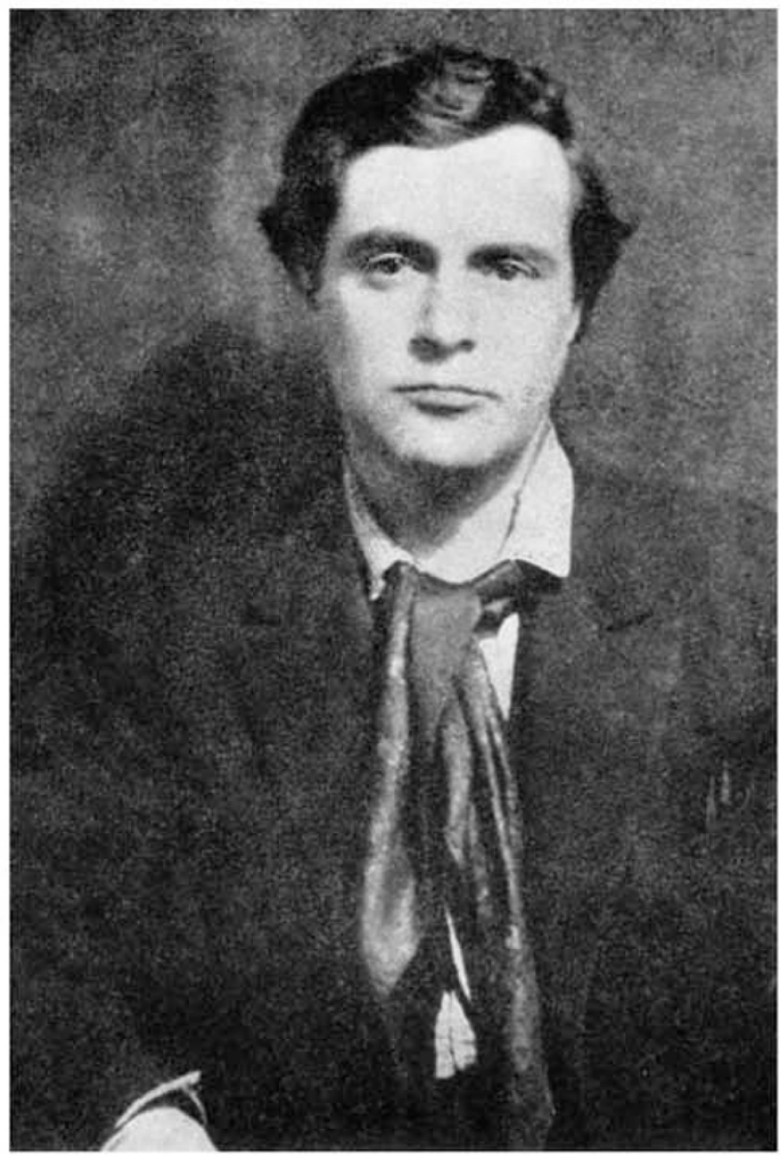
PSYCHIATRY LOOKS AT MODIGLIANI

BY FELIX MARTI IBANEZ



Dr. Ibañez is Editorial Director of the Washington Institute of Medicine, which publishes the Journal of Clinical and Experimental Psychopathology and other professional journals. He was formerly Under-Secretary of Public Health in Republican Spain.

We should no longer regard works of art as isolated objects with a mysterious life of their own in space. A painting is a psychological projection of the soul of a man who happens to be an artist. Each stroke of the brush, each color, each curve and line acquires its true meaning from the mood of the artist when he applied more pigment here, less pigment there, when he selected black and white in preference to colors, when he decided to do a landscape instead of a human figure. An artist's moods, his selection of tools, subject, technique, lines, colors, are all significant in the study of the intimate texture of his spirit.

Because we know little about these factors, our attitude while standing before the work of a great artist is not one of admiration for the artist himself but for his paintings, as if they were totally independent of the man behind them. Why not look at the paintings as if they were still in the hands of the man who did them? Only then — through the living artist — can we understand his work.

What follows is an experiment in interpreting psychologically the life of one of the most mysterious of the modern painters — Amedeo Modigliani — through his art, and his art through his tortured life.

Modigliani was born in Leghorn, Italy, on July 12, 1884. His childhood was spent coughing and ailing, which shortened his school days. At sixteen, when a boy is barely entering life through the biologically explosive door of adolescence, Amedeo, spitting out fragments of lung, had already signed his away. Only his visits to the art school in Rome where his mother sent him succeeded in making him see in art another world, stronger than that of death.

In 1906 he went to Paris. He was dazzled by Cézanne who even after death continued to win battles, and by Picasso whose genius was ascending like an impatient comet over the French skies. He exhibited his work first in small galleries and finally at the *Salon des Indépendents,* bulwark of those immortals not yet recognized by mortals. But the police closed the exhibition, for even in Paris

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Modigliani's nudes were considered indecent.

This was the heroic period in Modigliani's life. A man who knows he is going to die as Modigliani did, knows also that there is only one way to defeat death — to live fast. What is lost in duration must be made up in intensity. Modigliani tried to compress several lives into one. He painted constantly, and between fits of coughing, bouts of drinking, and experiments with drugs, tried to satisfy his insatiable sexual desire with an endless series of women who, naked and immodest, now look down upon us from his paintings with long, narrow eyes.

Every day of Modigliani's fourteen years of struggle, orgy, and tragedy in Paris, under the triple curse of sickness, failure and poverty, was like every other. He woke late. The sun, when it shone, was the only clean thing to enter his room. His head ached each morning; he was cold, he coughed, and he shivered as though quicksilver were running through his veins. Everything in his room was gray: the covers of the bed and the towels over the cracked washing bowl, the walls into which humidity had eaten its way like leprosy, even the face reflected in the mirror from which the mercury had almost disappeared.

Let us reconstruct a single day in Modigliani's life, following him as he leaves his sordid room and steps out onto the pavements . . .

Slowly he makes his way through the narrow streets. His head is reeling. He vaguely remembers that the night before he drank too much, as he had done the night before that and all the other nights, and that he had again taken that drug with music in its name and death in its wake; that his friend Utrillo, an even greater drunkard, had stolen his coat and that he had had to chase after it through half of Paris; that together they had painted, in drunken revelry, a mural on the walls of a lavatory in a a café. Utrillo had done the little streets with white walls, and he the figures. And when the proprietress of the café saw it, she had made them wash the walls and had thrown them out into the street. There is a vague scent of flesh about his clothes; he remembers with a tremor the few minutes of passion with some woman during the night.

He arrives at the house of the art dealer in whose cellar he is allowed to pose his models and work. He takes a long draught from the bottle and the liquid burns. He coughs painfully and the cough seems to tear off strips of lung. He spits and is horrified. He takes another swig and begins to paint. The rain outside is forgotten and so is his disease. Pausing only for another swallow from the bottle, or to wait for a coughing attack to subside, Modigliani paints a woman, her neck like a swan's, her eyes like jade, her mouth set in infinite sadness.

It is late at night when Modigliani finishes his bottle and his painting. He collects the francs the dealer advances for the day's work. Half-drunk already, trembling with cold, hunger, and fatigue, he goes out through the blue night of Paris and starts over again the endless search — for fortune, a woman, a friend, God — himself?

In 1918, with the scanty proceeds from fifteen of his paintings sold by a friend, Modigiliani went to the south of France. When he returned some months later to Paris, he entered a hospital. In January 1920 he died. A few hours after his death, his neighbors heard a scream; Modigliani's mistress, in a supreme romantic gesture, had jumped out of the window of his room.

When the man died, the legend began. Fauvism and Cubism stepped aside to make place for the newcomer who, like Utrillo, was his own school — the school of the painter of swan-necked women.

How can psychological projection techniques throw light on Modigliani's complex personality? Can the symbolism of his painting serve as a clue to his phantasies and emotional drives?

One of the most widely used of these techniques is the drawing of a human figure, a method taking as its premise that our personality is revealed through our thoughts words, gestures, movements, and actions. Ask someone to draw a person, and he will draw a figure which he unconsciously identifies with himself. Such self-identification represents what in psychiatry is called the projection of the *body image* — the image of himself which exists in every person's unconscious. The figure drawn is as intimately related to the artist as handwriting is to the writer.

It is possible to understand something of the psychology of an artist by the symbolism of his drawing. Exceptions are rare. Picasso in his period of introversion turned his back on the human figure and painted still life. There are those who all their lives kept their backs turned to human intercourse and preferred to face the still life; witness Braque's mandolins and Morandi's bottles. But Modigliani was too human to be interested in objects of mineral immobility. He loved life as only a tubercular condemned to premature death can love it.

If Picasso made of the world a watch factory and appointed himself celestial watchmaker, anticipating in his pictures the atomic bomb and the disintegration of the universe, Modigliani turned it into an album of the artistic personalities of his time and the little people around him. He painted sculptors — Brancusi and Laurens; poets — Cendrars and Cocteau; painters — Soutine and Kisling; the dancer Nijinsky; the fashionable men and women he saw coming out of the opera; he painted *concierges*, maids, musicians, neighborhood children, and particularly his mistresses. He was possessed of a deep desire to immortalize everybody around him.

And there are Modigliani's nudes, the most naked nudes in the history of art. Modigliani's nudes are shamelessly carnal, unreservedly erotic; they are panoramas of that complete abandon and cynical serenity of satisfied flesh.

Almost always he painted single figures; his backgrounds are mere decoration intended to emphasize technically some special quality of the subject. He limited his art through the restricted radius he voluntarily imposed on his technique, yet he attained an unlimited variety by investing each subject with a powerful individual characterization, for he was expressing in each portrait the objective truths of his own compulsions.

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Modigliani's figures always give an impression of loneliness, isolation, nostalgia, reflecting the introvertive attitude of the artist himself. Their postures suggest recoil, withdrawal within themselves, as if on guard against their environments. Their hands are crossed over their laps in an attitude that might be called maternal, yet seems to be protecting the reproductive organs. Recoil, withdrawal, self-defense: these are impulses of a person who feels himself surrounded by hostile forces. The bare, smoky, rusty backgrounds symbolize the nebulous world of alcohol, drugs, and the undefined nostalgias in which the artist lived.

His women are proud, majestic; they possess the stolid dignity of a stone, jade-eyed idol that, abandoned in an Asiatic desert, impassively withstands the attacks of the elements and the passing of the centuries. His men are like Aztec gods — aloof, immutable, eternal.

Psychologically, this is a revealing clue to the complexes in Modigliani's personality: he saw others in the light children see adults — powerful giants untouched by the storms in a child's world. Modigliani, who never ceased being a child, symbolized in his women the maternal archetype; he made of every woman in his paintings the woman-mother-goddess type, to be simultaneously loved and respected. For them death does not, cannot, exist.

The neck. The most striking feature in most of Modigliani's pictures is the neck. Long, thin necks have been observed in the drawings of psychosexually undeveloped schizophrenics. When a subject shows an obsessive interest in necks in his projective drawings, he usually reveals the fact that he is preoccupied with the conflict between his physical impulses and the restraint his mind exercises over them. The neck is the organ that divides his intellectual life (centered in his head) from the instinctive life-impulses of his body.

The fact that Modigliani elongated the necks of his models out of all normal proportion reflects distinctly the conflict between his overpowering sexual impulses and his desire to dominate them through asceticism.

The head. Modigliani's heads are distorted. The head in projective techniques is the symbol of the ego, of all our social and intellectual power, and of our control of physical impulses. When a subject loses control over himself, he usually compensates for this loss by enlarging the size of the head in his drawings.

The mouth. Modigliani's mouths are shaped like a Cupid's bow. The recurrence of this type of mouth in his paintings indicates a morbid interest in the oral region, a characteristic of oversexed, alcoholic individuals, and of people suffering from psychosexual infantilism. Subjects of this type usually have a compulsive need to concentrate on the mouth as a pleasure-giving organ.

The eyes. The half-closed eyes Modigliani paints again indicate emotional immaturity; they are the eyes of one looking at the world without seeing it, except perhaps as a stimulus-producing, nebulous mass. Through the half-closed eyes of his figures, the artist himself, without too much interest, stares out at the world from the distance imposed by his sickness and his alcoholism. On the other hand, those same half-closed eyes express a desire to keep the world out, to concentrate solely on himself and on his obsession with his sick body.

The nose. The nose is also highly significant in drawings made under projective techniques. In most western countries, a flat nose has always been a symbol of sexual impotence and of a somewhat tortuous personality. A small nose is considered attractive in a woman; it is not so in a man. Actually, in Spanish countries the word *chata* (literally, *flat nose*) applied to a woman is an endearing term; but to insult a man, one calls him *chato*, implying that he lacks virility.

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Modigliani's art reflects the psychological secret of his personality as a man, which in turn determines the characteristics of his art. This longing for intellectual and spiritual self-discipline was constantly struggling with the demands of his overflowing sensual nature; his dreams of physical and sexual vigor were at odds with the failings of his body, his ailments, and his psychosexual infantilism; his desire for glory rebelled against the frustrations and poverty of reality.

Modigliani gave free reign to his instincts until he burned himself out in his own fire, although he never allowed the sordidness of his life to intrude into his art. His choice of the human figure as his only medium reveals his terror of loneliness. His nudes reveal his escape through the flesh. The attempt to immortalize his subjects by imparting to them a semblance of ageless idols reveals his desire to transcend the limitations of ordinary mortals like himself. Modigliani's figures seem beyond death because he has transformed them into sculptured ideals by a process of artistic mineralization. And that unique serenity, that melancholy calm which he imparted to his figures is an attempt to realize the dream of peace which he never attained in his tortured life. **END**

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