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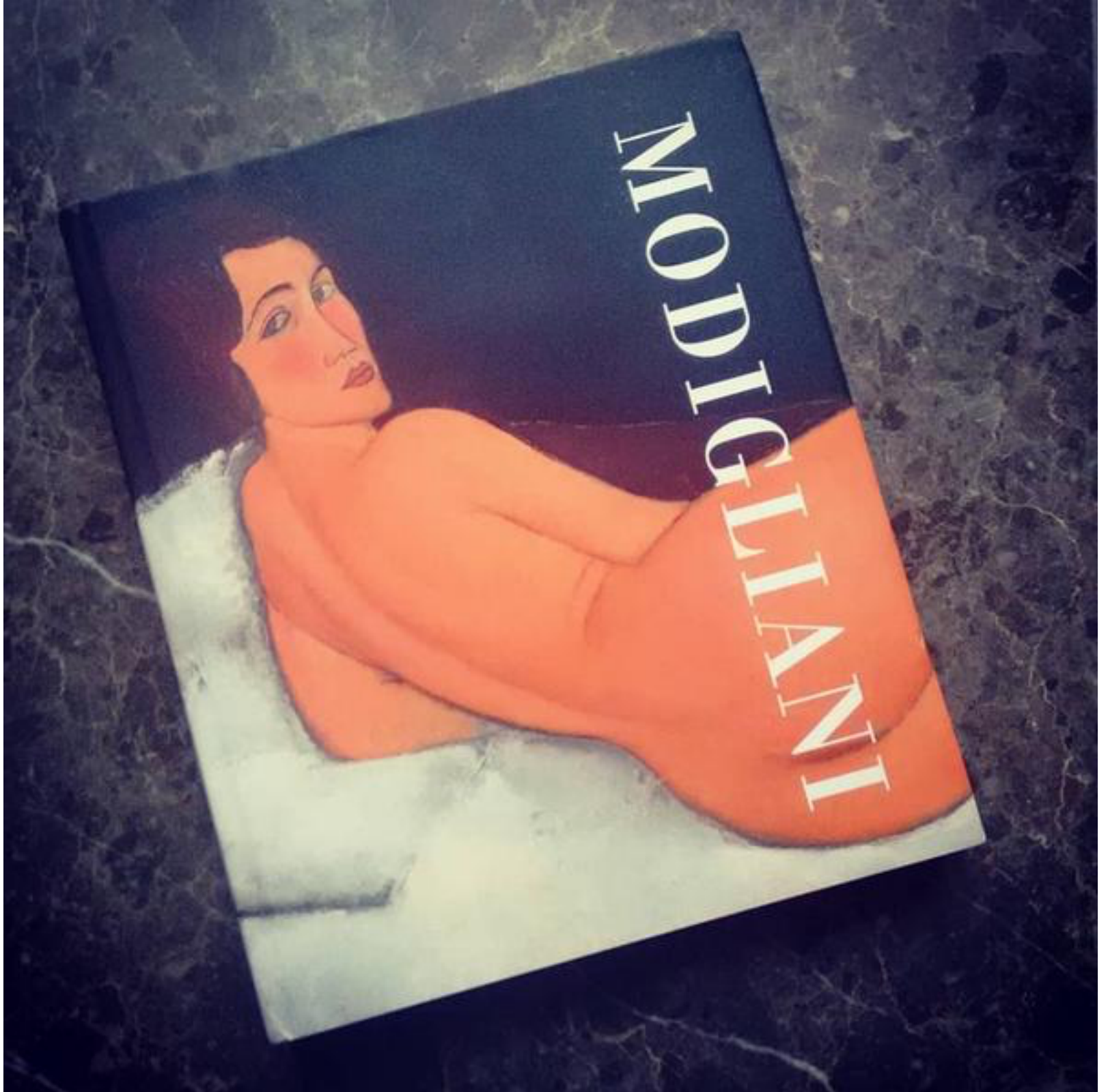
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## Book Review: Modigliani

January 07, 2018

**Art historian Jean Marie Carey reviews the Tate's Modigliani catalogue and is impressed by the range of rich colour reproductions and the thought-provoking essays within the volume.**

Edited by Nancy Ireson and Simonetta Fraquelli with essays by Cathy Corbett, Sophie Krebs, Vincent Gille, and Kenneth Wayne (Tate Modern Publishing: London, 2017). This catalogue accompanies the eponymous exhibition held at the Tate Modern London, 23 November 2017-2 April 2018. 224 pages with 150 colour reproductions.



“Could Modigliani have been the same without Paris?” asks Sophie Krebs in the chapter “Modigliani and Paris,” one of the opening essays in the catalogue accompanying the retrospective at the Tate Modern [19]. Krebs and her colleagues lay out the case why the answer is a resounding non in this wonderful volume. In addition to presenting a mind-opening trove of works far less well-known but surpassingly more fascinating than Modigliani’s nudes, the catalog contains carefully crafted theoretical and expository essays that offer completely new approaches, and appreciations, to this uncategorizable artist who is nonetheless a consummate modernist master.

By creating work that appeared both out of time and unmistakably of his era, Amedeo Modigliani (1884-1920) deserves a commanding re-evaluation, and gets it in this catalogue. In addition to rich colour reproductions this book is replete with many historical photographs, primary source quotes from letters and documents, a comprehensive chronology, and thorough index.

Bafflingly, [one critic for a prominent British publication](#) called Modigliani a “gorgeous show about a slightly silly artist,” concentrating upon “the opulently rounded breasts, narrow waist and

curvaceous hips” of the painter’s ubiquitous studies of women. In fact the Tate’s careful curation, supported by this thoughtful catalogue, demonstrates precisely the opposite. Modigliani, like Henri Rousseau, is defiantly serious and original, and his body of work consists of much more than the luscious bodies which obscure his oeuvre, though these works are also important.

The catalogue is arranged thematically, with an introduction (“Modigliani and Modernity”) by Anna King and the curators Nancy Ireson and Simonetta Fraquelli followed by Krebs’ scene-setting opening. Subsequent chapters investigate Modigliani’s social and professional circles and the overlapping factions of Parisian painters and their patrons (“Modigliani and the Salon D’Automne,” “Modigliani’s Inner Circle,” and “Modigliani’s Modern Women”).

Certainly the act of figurative imagery in the first decades of the in the 20th Century was in a state of upheaval, and Modigliani was well aware of this through observation and direct contact with painters, poets, and critics, including Guillaume Apollinaire, Pablo Picasso, and Robert Delaunay. More surprising is Modigliani’s deep engagement with Henri Bergson’s theories regarding the cinema as a model for understanding motion as a sequence of snapshots in time, which Emma Lewis describes in the fascinating chapter “Modigliani & the Age of Cinema:” “One of the very few insights he left on his work is distinctly Bergsonian conceit: ‘What I am seeing is not the real and not the unreal but rather the unconscious, the mystery of the instinctive in the human race.’” [80]



Modigliani also had a close and complicated relationship with his art dealer Léopold Zborowski, who both supported and guided the artist’s career, even looking after him during Modigliani’s bouts

with chronic tuberculosis. At the same time Zborowski's indulgent attitude did little to curb Modigliani's problems with alcohol and drug abuse. One of the great revelations of the exhibition and the catalogue is Modigliani's prowess as a sculptor. [66-74] Cathy Corbett's careful research shows that the artist had in fact intended initially to sculpt rather than paint, and that only the cost of materials pushed Modigliani toward the canvas. [47-51] Viewed with this information, Modigliani's reinvigoration of sculptural busts appears a radical and even a subversive gesture, reigniting a medium that seemed to be a lost cause in the contemporary Parisian art world in the years immediately before and following World War I. By placing his simplified, elongated heads in galleries filled with traditional forms, Modigliani not only highlighted links between antiquity and the contemporary world, he also destabilized the monolithic reverence for classical sculpture which was just loosening its hold on European galleries and museums.

The catalogue's overarching theme, as made clear throughout and particularly in Fraquelli's "Modigliani & the Impact of the Midi," is the artist's perception of himself as an immigrant and an intentional outsider, first as an Italian Jew in France, and second as a dweller in the peripheries of the major artistic currents of the time. Modigliani lived in then-unfashionable Montparnasse during his years in Paris and later left the city altogether for the Côte d'Azur. Modigliani's unlikely identification or, possibly, dis-identification with his art historical peers certainly can be understood now as an error of anachronism: Modigliani, while publicly admired, has been virtually rejected stylistically by critics and scholars – until now. Looking at Modigliani's work today, and connecting it with centuries of art (as well as the contemporary state of figurative painting) allows us to question the value of progress as it relates not only to art historical & 'isms' but also how such work can be considered advanced while eschewing references to cultural and political occurrences.

Reviewed by [Jean Marie Carey, PhD](#)