

Modigliani's Late Portraits



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THE MODIGLIANI TECHNICAL RESEARCH STUDY

Modigliani's late portraits

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To illustrate Modigliani's mature style and painting techniques, the final article in the current study focuses on three of his late portraits, from Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and the Museum of Contemporary Art of the University of São Paulo.

THREE PORTRAITS PAINTED during the last two years of Amedeo Modigliani's life seems to reflect a broader return to the classical tradition in his *œuvre*. As discussed in the accompanying article in this issue, his sojourn in the South of France in 1918–19 triggered a lighter palette and free, open brushwork, but these works also mark a turning point in terms of composition that seems to have been inspired by the art of the Italian Renaissance. The near-profile view of *Portrait of a young woman* (C224; Fig.1), for example, recalls fifteenth-century Renaissance portraits, such as those by Domenico Ghirlandaio or Sandro Botticelli, while the woman's elongated features, also present in the artist's *Jeanne Hébuterne* (C326; Fig.8), evoke Mannerist painting.¹ Modigliani would have had the opportunity to see such works on his visits to Florence, where he had begun his studies in 1902 at the Scuola Libera di Nudo dell'Accademia di Belle Arti.² The influence of Florentine quattrocento painters is likewise tangible in his *Self-portrait* (C337; Fig.9), in which he appears as an artist, holding his palette in front of his easel, an

garde.⁴ Italian art critics, however, began to highlight his place within the tradition of Italian painting, not for nationalistic reasons but to emphasise his great mastery as a modern painter.⁵ The technical analysis of these three works has identified further similarities to quattrocento painting with regard to brushwork, pigments and grounds, as the following case studies demonstrate.⁶

Portrait of a young woman was first shown in 1925 at the exhibition of Modigliani's works held at the Galerie Bing & Cie in Paris. The sitter's identification as Jeanne Hébuterne – Modigliani's last partner from spring 1917 – has been disputed by some scholars, largely because of the figure's very youthful features and dark eyes, which have fully defined irises.⁷ Hébuterne, who was twenty years old at the time, had blue eyes and fair skin,⁸ and in most of Modigliani's portrayals of her she is shown with blank eyes. Yet the figure in this portrait has the same abundant reddish-brown hair found in other portraits of Hébuterne from the same period. Moreover, physical resemblance is of limited use in identifying sitters, as Modigliani was less interested in a naturalistic depiction of his subjects than in capturing, elongating and distorting their physical features.⁹ The small scale and intimacy of this portrait certainly suggest a personal relationship between artist and sitter, and the almost pure profile view – reminiscent of quattrocento portraits such as those by Botticelli or Antonio Pollaiuolo – gives the portrait a distinct place in Modigliani's *œuvre*. The composition bears striking similarity to the *Head of Jeanne Hébuterne* in a private collection (C223; Fig.2). This frontal view of Hébuterne shares the non-standard measurements of the Yale painting, supporting the idea that these are two versions of Hébuterne, probably

iconography that dates back to the Renaissance.

As early as 1925 the Italian art critics Lionello Venturi and Giovanni Scheiwiller compared Modigliani's paintings with those of Botticelli, largely on the basis of their shared use of elegant black outlines.⁷ Such comparisons would resurface in the aftermath of the Second World War, albeit in the context of new appropriations of his work: because of Modigliani's Jewish heritage, conservatives and fascists in Italy in the inter-war years accused him of abandoning his Mediterranean origins, his *Italianità*, and to have been 'corrupted' by the Parisian avant-

garde painted during the same sitting.¹⁰

In the Yale portrait Modigliani used a brush loaded with oil-rich paint, carefully smoothing the surface after its application in directional strokes that emphasise the contours of the face.¹¹ In contrast, thinner paint was used for the background and the sitter's hair and clothing, applied with a stiffer, drier brush in active and multi-directional strokes. Modigliani's characteristic use of black line is apparent on careful examination and in infra-red imaging (Fig. 4). He began his composition with a dry black medium, likely charcoal. Some of these drawn lines

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⁷ Throughout this series paintings are given the catalogue number supplied in A. Ceroni: *I dipinti di Modigliani* (Classici dell'arte 40), Milan 1970.

⁸ See R. Franchi: *Modigliani*, Florence 1944, p. 8.

⁹ G. Scheiwiller: 'Amedeo Modigliani', *Arte moderna italiana* 8, Milan 1927, p. 8; and L. Venturi: 'Mostra individuale di Amedeo Modigliani, sala 31', *Catalogo illustrato del XVII Esposizione Biennale di Venezia*, Venice 1930, pp. 116–21.

¹⁰ See R. Franchi, *op. cit.* (note 2); and G. di San Lazzaro: *Modigliani, peintures. Introduction*, Paris 1947; see also E. Braun: 'The faces of Modigliani, identity politics under fascism', in M. Klein ed.: *exh. cat. Modigliani: Beyond the Myth*, New York (Jewish Museum), pp. 25–42.

¹¹ See, for example, A. Barr and J. Thrall Soby: *Twentieth Century Italian Art*, New York 1949, p. 24.

¹² Some of the ongoing analyses also suggest that Modigliani used tempera, which might support his embrace of an Italian painting tradition.

MODIGLIANI'S LATE PORTRAITS



1. *Portrait of a young woman*, by Amedeo Modigliani. Here dated 1918–19. Canvas, 45.7 by 28 cm. (Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven).



2. *Head of Jeanne Hébuterne*, by Amedeo Modigliani. 1918. Canvas, 46 by 29 cm. (Private collection).

were subsequently reinforced with black paint in order to define and reinforce his forms, as is evident by the appearance of the lines both above and below several layers of the painting's construction. Although the lines are fluid in the finished paint-

ing, Modigliani began by drawing short, straight, vector-like lines. Bold black outlines were also used wet-on-dry for contour blending: the nostrils and the cleft of the lip, for example, were outlined with black lines that were then blended with a brush into the surrounding paint. Elsewhere, on the top of the head, for example, bold black contours were painted wet-on-dry to define forms, and towards the back of the head Modigliani applied daubs of brown paint to soften the line. Black lines continued to be added until late in the painting's execution, as

can be seen in the line that defines the outer edge of the sitter's profile, which was applied over her right eyebrow.

The infra-red image reveals that the composition changed somewhat from the initial drawing: the right eye is conceived quite differently to the left eye, indicating a non-symmetrical change that transformed the face into a new composition, turned one, and the artist modified the hairline to match. On the bridge of the nose the drawing lines visible in infra-red images curve inwards more than would be the case for a side view; this earlier profile is also marked by a more radio-opaque edge of paint visible in the X-radiograph (Fig. 3).¹²

Modigliani used a limited palette of common pigments for *Portrait of a young woman*,¹³ with the exception of what appears

⁷ See, for example, J. Lanthemann: *Modigliani 1884–1920: Catalogue raisonné*, Barcelona 1970, no. 333.

⁸ J. Modigliani: *Modigliani: Man and Myth*, New York 1958, pp. 87–88.

⁹ T. Garb: 'Making and masking: Modigliani and the problematic of portraiture', in M. Klein, ed.: *exh. cat. Modigliani: Beyond the Myth*, New York (Jewish Museum) 2004, pp. 43–53, esp. pp. 43–44.

¹⁰ A third portrait of Hébuterne (private collection; C222) has the same dimensions and is painted in three-quarter view, with Jeanne's head turned to the right.

¹¹ Analysis with Fourier-transform infra-red spectroscopy indicates that the binding medium is primarily drying oil, with the possible inclusion of a protein-

aceous component, but further analysis is required.

¹² The paint used for the outline appears light in the X-radiograph, which indicates the use of radio-opaque pigments such as lead white.

¹³ A multi-analytical approach was used for characterisation of the painting materials' chemical composition at the Yale Institute for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage, techniques included: Large-area scanning micro x-ray fluorescence spectroscopy (Scanning XRF); point-based XRF analysis; scanning electron microscopy (tube. SEM) coupled with energy-dispersive x-ray spectroscopy (EDS) analysis of scrapings and cross-sections; and raman spectrometry operating at a laser wavelength of 785 nanometres.

to be chrome orange (see Appendix). This was used in the cheeks and in the lips as a base colour, on which three small strokes of vermilion were applied wet-on-wet.¹⁴ A subtle tonal variation in the eyes is due to the use of two very dark, almost black, hues: one a cool colour composed almost entirely of

While the shades of brown provided the addition of red oxide iron-oxide paint, there are two medium-rich areas of paint applied thickly, the hair near the sitter's temple and that at her neck. The use of ochre highlights to define the edges of a sitter's face is somewhat typical of Modigliani's work. In these areas the yellower hue has been achieved through the addition of cadmium yellow paint.

The canvas and ground preparation share several distinctive features with the Metropolitan Museum's *Jeanne Hébuterne* (Fig. 8), suggesting that these canvases were prepared by the same workshop or colourmen,¹⁵ and that Modigliani sourced the materials for them at the same time. Thus these works

they share a double both on the same short time scale and in any fine linen thread with an open weave, and they were prepared by applying a double ground over a thick layer of glue sizing that prevented the ground from squeezing through the weave interstices.¹⁷ A highly unusual pattern of fine diagonal striations seen in the X-radiographs and the lead distribution maps of both paintings suggest that the ground application method resulted in an uneven layering, with lead white in the upper ground layer while the lower ground layer contains lithopone and distinctively large barium sulphate particles.¹⁸

The painting is stretched onto an adapted strainer probably constructed from a French standard *marine* size 8 strainer that had a one centimetre-wide wooden strip attached to one side.¹⁹ There is one incomplete set of old tack holes, indicating that some holes were reused or that the painting was not attached overall to a former strainer. The current stretching must have occurred early, as the cusping suggests, and records indicate that it has not been restretched since its acquisition by Yale in 1948.²⁰ Brushstrokes continue uninterrupted to the lower tacking edge.²¹ This, combined with the incomplete set of tacking holes, suggests that the painting may have been created while tacked onto a wall or other flat support and subsequently stretched. Dark outlines along the edges of the composition also support this interpretation, which, in turn, gives substance to the hypothesis that Modigliani painted this portrait in the South of France between April 1918 and May 1919. Moving between Nice and Haut-de-Cagnes, he had no studio and thus might have been obliged to improvise in terms of an easel. In a letter sent in early 1919 to his dealer in Paris, Léopold

Zborowski, Modigliani explained that he was 'waiting for a small head that I did of my wife to be dry in order to send',²² which could be a reference to Yale's small portrait.

There has long been debate as to whether Hébuterne was pregnant with the couple's first or second child when Modigli-

liani painted the Metropolitan Museum's portrait of her. Of the portraits the artist produced in the South of France and those he made after his return to Paris in May 1919. What is clear however, is that this tender portrait of Jeanne – posed like a Madonna enthroned – with its elongated forms and softly glowing palette, evokes Mannerist works of the sixteenth century, such as those by Jacopo da Pontormo.

This influence is also evident in the underdrawing, which is partially visible through the thin paint layer and revealed more conclusively by infra-red reflectography (Fig. 5).²³ It shows both Modigliani's draughting process and the fluidity with which he sketched his model. The long, fine pencil or charcoal lines are

heavily drawn and the final position of Modigliani's head is that of the nose was originally a little further to the left, and the face was also lower on the canvas: the original chin line and mouth are clearly legible in the infra-red image. Hébuterne's posture was also slightly adjusted: the position of her right arm shifted twice, and fine lines across her belly and lap indicate alternative positions draughted for her arm and hand. Her distinctive and highly mannered left hand, however, was never altered. Modigliani did not erase his underdrawing, supporting the reported speed with which he painted.²⁵

The thinness of the paint layer enables the very diluted black paint that Modigliani used to outline compositional features to show through. Viewed under the microscope, these lines are pale-grey and watery, finely applied to the white ground. As in the Yale portrait, Modigliani blended these lines into the painted surface in places to create shadows in the flesh tones, as beautifully illustrated in Hébuterne's right eyebrow. In the final stages of the painting Modigliani often reinforced these diluted lines with black ones, using a fine brush to outline features such as eyelids, eyebrows and nose, a technique observed in earlier works.²⁶

Like many of his late works, the Metropolitan portrait was quickly and freely executed. A transmitted light photograph reveals how thin the paint is, as much of the white ground is visible (Fig. 6). It also clearly reveals the variation in Modigliani's brushwork, from the finely blended paint application of the flesh tones characteristic of a classically trained artist to the looser brushwork used for clothing and some of the background. Modigliani methodically filled in his

¹⁴ MA-XRF supports the identification of the pigment distribution in the lips.
¹⁵ This use of two tones of black is a device that Modigliani also uses, for example, in *The Italian woman* (1917; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; C268). For this painting see the article by Annette King *et al.* in this issue, pp. 394–99.

¹⁶ Automated canvas weave counting performed by Don Johnson has suggested that the paintings are not from the same canvas roll. However, visible observation and the analytical findings described leave this question open. A third painting, *Portrait of Germaine Surugue* (1918; Musée des Beaux-arts de Nancy; C277) may share the striated ground based on an X-radiograph published in S. Delbourg and L. Faillant-Dumas: 'L'étude du Laboratoire de Recherche des Musées de France', in B. Contenson and D. Marchessau, eds.: exh. cat. *Amedeo Modigliani*, Paris (Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris) 1981.

¹⁷ A microscope sample from the tacking margin of the painting was removed and prepared as a polished cross-section. The buildup of layers was studied using

optical microscopy, SEM-EDS and Raman spectroscopy.

¹⁸ Elemental distribution maps were obtained with Bruker M6 Jetstream large-area micro X-ray fluorescence spectrometer. The diagonal striated pattern visible in the X-radiographs is positively correlated with the distribution of lead and anti-correlated to the distribution of zinc.

¹⁹ The Yale portrait is on a modified commercially prepared stretcher with half lap joints secured by three tacks, and has similar measurements to the *marine* standard size 8, which is listed as 46 by 27 cm. in A. Hoenigswald: 'Standard stretcher sizes' in American Institute for Conservation Paintings Specialty Group: 'Stretchers and Strainers III' [2007], *AIC Wiki*, <http://www.conservation-wiki.com/wiki/PSG Stretchers and Strainers - III. Materials and Equipment>, accessed 12th April 2018. For Modigliani's extensive employ of *marine* canvases, often used vertically, during his time in the South of France, see S. Fraquelli: 'Modigliani and the impact of the Midi', in S. Fraquelli and N. Ireson, eds.: exh. cat. *Modigliani*,



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