

Amadeo Modigliani (1884 -1920)

FAME V, Lesson 3 (November 2008)

When you first come to school each morning what do you do? (*You line up to enter the classroom*) Can anybody think of other lines that help define our daily lives? (*lines of the crosswalk, marked edges of the playing field and playground, maps, lines in stores, line in the cafeteria*)

Lines work in different ways to add structure to our lives. In fact, they are even used in some wedding ceremonies. American slaves, British railway workers and gypsies historically used a broom in their wedding ceremonies. Can I get a few volunteers for this “Jumping the Broom” exercise? (*Two can hold the broomstick a few inches off the floor and then have one or a few jump over the broomstick.*) If you jump over successfully you will have a happy marriage. If you trip then it may mean bad luck.

Another wedding ceremony using lines made with arms comes from Morocco. Have volunteers clasp hands and recite these wedding lines: “You have captured my liver.” If you don't want to marry, drop hands, breaking the line, before saying the words.

The painting we are going to talk about today is called “Bride and Groom”. This was painted by an Italian artist named Amadeo Modigliani (ah-muh-day-oh mo-dee-lee-ah-nee).

Can anybody remind us of the four elements of composition? (*Color, light, line and texture*) What is one of the dominant elements of composition that we see in this picture? (*Line*)

In paintings, lines add structure and define spaces. The use of vertical lines was one of the most forceful elements in Modigliani's work. Let's look for the lines in this particular painting. Notice how they divide the composition. Another characteristic of his portraits are the lengthened silhouettes (the outline or shape of something) and long necks. We can easily identify his paintings because of these long oval faces, long necks, and because in most of his paintings the eyes did not have pupils. They usually had very defined eyebrows with noses that were long and stylized. (*Show pictures from folder for examples*) He was inspired by African masks and liked simplifying his shapes. With very few exceptions Modigliani limited his work to heads, portraits and figures. He never painted a still life and only painted two landscapes in his lifetime.

Who remembers the lines in Winslow Homer's “Breezing Up”? How were they different? (*horizontal versus vertical*) What else strikes you about this picture? (*representational versus abstract*) Do you like it? Why or why not?

Biography

Amedeo Modigliani was born in Leghorn (Livorno), Italy on July 12, 1884, the fourth and youngest child of Fleminio Modigliani and Eugénie Garsin. His father was an unsuccessful entrepreneur who had a small money-changing business, and his mother, who had the stronger personality by far, ran an experimental school. Amedeo, whose childhood nickname was “Dedo”, wasn't a good student, but developed an early interest in art, drawing and reciting classical poetry.

When he turned 14, Modigliani got typhoid and was so delirious that he started ranting about never being able to see the art in Florence. After he recovered his mother took him to visit Florence and also got him lessons with the best art teacher in the city of Livorno. Early into the 1900's he kept studying

art in the Italian cities of Florence and Venice. He was exposed to Italian renaissance art, including the paintings and sculpture of Michelangelo and others.

It was during this same time that he contracted tuberculosis (a serious disease of the lungs) which he suffered from on and off for the rest of his life.

In 1906 he went to Paris, France and decided to settle in the Montmartre (mawn-mar-truh) section which was popular with a lot of artists. It was here that his nickname changed from the childish “Dedo” to “Modi”. Most of the artists living there followed a “bohemian” lifestyle. This means they were very free spirited, talked about philosophy and art, and ignored many of the rules and customs of ordinary society. This was very different from his ordinary and conventional upbringing. He soon adopted the bohemian lifestyle too, but for him it also included abuse of alcohol and drugs. These, when combined with the long-term effects of his tuberculosis, led to his early death at the age of 35.

It was a very exciting time to be in Paris because the age of modern art was just emerging. He met many famous, and some soon-to-be famous, artists like Picasso, Cezanne, Chagall, Toulouse-Lautrec, Rodin and Manet. He was inspired and influenced by a variety of art forms -- from Florentine portraiture to cubist art, from African masks to Cambodian sculpture – but developed his own unique style, one that can't be adequately categorized with other artists.

He stayed in Paris from 1906 to 1909. He painted but did not achieve much success during this period. He did excellent portraits and would sketch people in cafes or bars for pennies or a drink. He was also very impulsive and would sometimes destroy his work or just give it away. He was a handsome man who enjoyed women friends and parties.

In 1909 he returned home to Livorno, exhausted and sick. After a year at home he returned to Paris where from 1909 to 1915 he devoted himself to sculpture and did not paint at all. He had many relationships in his short life – some of them rather scandalous with married women – but it was the relationship with a 19-year-old beautiful art student named Jeanne Hébuterne that produced his one and only child – a daughter, Jeanne.

In 1915 dejected and unsuccessful at sculpting, he returned to painting and did some of his best work until he died in 1920 of tuberculosis. Sadly, Jeanne, who was pregnant with their second child at the time, was so distraught that she jumped from a fifth floor window killing her herself and their unborn child.

Like all artists Modigliani struggled to create his own style and to obtain recognition and acceptance. During his lifetime he sold a number of his works, but never for any great amount of money. What funds he did receive soon vanished because of his drug and alcohol problems. He achieved a unique style but was only truly recognized and appreciated after his death. He became the epitome of the tragic artists, creating an posthumous legend almost as well-known as our last FAME artist, Vincent Van Gogh.

Since his death his reputation has soared. Nine novels, a play, a documentary and three feature films have been devoted to his life, including one made in 1994 starring Andy Garcia titled “Modigliani”.

Written on the wall of one of Modigliani's studios was “*You are not alive unless you know you are living.*” He once said it was his desire to live a life that was brief but intense, and it seems he certainly achieved his goal.