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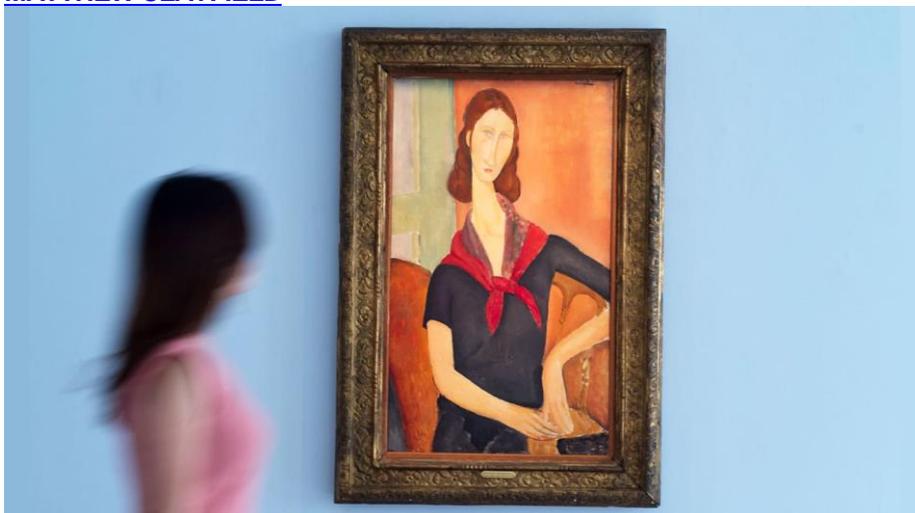
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DAILY BEAST

Art Fakes Loom Over Modigliani Madness

As the Tate Modern in London gets ready to open a spectacular collection of the artist's work, the sorry record of phony canvases exposed in Italy last summer raises questions.

[MATTHEW CLAYFIELD](#)



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It has been a big year for [Amedeo Modigliani](#).

At least three exhibitions of the Italian painter and sculptor's work are currently underway or about to open around the world. In New York City, "[Modigliani Unmasked](#)" opened at the Jewish Museum in September, highlighting the artist's early years in Paris, with a special emphasis on his drawings. In Saint Petersburg, Russia, "Modigliani, Soutine, and Other Legends of Montparnasse," curated by French expert Marc Restellini, [opens at the renowned Fabergé Museum](#) later this month, featuring 18 of what Restellini calls the artist's "most important" works.

But the [biggest show by far is that of London's Tate Modern](#), which opens on Nov. 23. The exhibition will feature 12 Modigliani nudes—the largest collection of such paintings to ever appear in the U.K.—which proved so controversial when they were first shown in Paris, a century ago this year, that the police wound up censoring the only solo exhibition the artist ever enjoyed in his lifetime.

But an incident in Genoa last summer looms over all these exhibitions like a pall.

In July, Italian police closed an exhibition at the northern city's Palazzo Ducale following allegations that up to 21 of the paintings on show were fakes.

Indeed, to the extent that it's been a big year for Modigliani, it's not been just because he's been enjoying a run of shows, but rather because he's found himself smack-bang in the middle of the latest [large-scale forgery scandal](#) to rock the art world.

Pisa-based expert and collector Carlo Pepi was the first to sound the alarm.

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"In February, I was sent an image on Facebook of one of the exhibition's reclining nudes, which I immediately recognized as a fake," he says. "Then another painting appeared online and I saw that it was fake as well. Later I was shown the complete exhibition catalogue and realised there were few authentic works in the show at all."

Even before he'd seen the catalogue, Pepi had harbored suspicions about the show: The exhibition's curator, Rudy Chiappini, has long been associated with the controversial Modigliani scholar Christian Parisot, who claims he was granted the droit moral over Modigliani's work by the artist's daughter before her death in the 1980s.

“I was stunned by the number of fakes.”

— Marc Restellini

In 2010, a French appeals court handed Parisot a two-year suspended sentence and fined him €50,000 after he falsely attributed 77 images to Jeanne Hébuterne, Modigliani’s mistress and model. Two years later, he was in the courts again following a two-year investigation by the Italian fraud squad, which accused him of erroneously certifying 41 sketches, 13 graphic designs, four sculptures, and an oil painting, all of which he attributed to Modigliani.

“Chiappini has never distanced himself from Parisot,” Pepi says. “Which is why, when I heard about the show in Genoa, I was alarmed.” (Chiappini didn’t respond to interview requests.)

Pepi took to Facebook to denounce the exhibition, focusing on what he considered the 13 most obvious forgeries. He was immediately met with attempts to discredit him and threatened with legal action.

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He contacted Restellini, the founder of Institut Restellini, who is working on a new catalogue raisonné of the artist’s work. It will be the first such catalogue since Ambrogio Ceroni’s 1958 effort, which was last updated in 1972 and remains the gold standard, not least because works listed in it can command three to four times as much as those that aren’t.

Restellini ordered a copy of the exhibition catalogue himself “to judge the extent of the problem.”

“I was stunned by the number of fakes,” Restellini says. “It was almost impressive.”

He notified Italy’s Ministry of Culture and set about defending Pepi online and in the press.

“When Pepi began to be attacked by the organizers of the exhibition with defamation threats, I intervened. Given my legal rights over Modigliani’s work”—Restellini was granted sweeping powers to denounce forgeries by a French appeals court in a 2005

judgement—”the organizers were much more uncomfortable about threatening me with legal action.” (Not that legal threats would have deterred him much: Restellini has received death threats for his work in the past.)

Everything came to a head in mid-July, after an independent expert backed up Pepi and Restellini’s claims. The latter has requested that the offending artworks, which have been seized by the authorities, be destroyed.

I was in Genoa at the time: with little fanfare, the banners were brought down from the Palazzo Ducale, an apologetic message was posted on the gallery’s website (staunchly defending Chiappini as “a partner of a remarkable international experience” whose exhibitions have “never been called into question by the scientific community”), and the shutters were drawn three days ahead of schedule. But the exhibition had been open since March and more than 100,000 visitors had already passed through. It remains one of the most popular shows to have taken place in Italy this year.

It’s not the first time Modigliani’s work has found itself at the center of controversy. But unlike in the old days, when it was the content of that work that raised eyebrows, today it’s the extent to which copies of it are getting passed off as the genuine article.

“In 2015, Christie’s in New York sold a Modigliani nude to a Chinese collector for \$170.4 million.”

In 2011, Moscow’s State Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts was accused of displaying a fake Modigliani in its exhibition “Paris School: 1905-32,” with a collector once again calling the curators out. (The painting in question, “Portrait of Marevna,” had previously been shown in both Paris and Prague without incident.) Serbia and Germany have been similarly hit with Modigliani scandals. Earlier this year, *Vanity Fair* described the situation as a “forgery epidemic.”

Forgers are attracted to the artist for multiple reasons. For one thing, his work has become increasingly valuable, with prices climbing to Picasso-like levels after lying stubbornly dormant for decades. In 2015, Christie’s in New York sold a Modigliani

nude to a Chinese collector for \$170.4 million, breaking the previous record for his work by nearly \$100 million. Five years earlier, according to the *Vanity Fair* piece, a Modigliani sculpture, expected to sell for between \$5 million and \$7 million, went for \$52 million at another Christie's sale in Paris.

It also helps that Modigliani is seen—in Restellini's view incorrectly—as particularly easy to imitate.

“That's not true,” Restellini says. “He gives an impression of ease, but that's deceptive.”

Among other things, he says, it's simply too difficult to source the materials Modigliani would have used a hundred years ago. Indeed, it was a scientific test, commissioned by the anonymous Russian collector, that revealed “Portrait of Marevna” to be a forgery.

“After 40 days, I got the evaluation back from the institute, which indicated that some of the pigments used in this painting were synthetic, produced after 1940,” the collector told *Artlystat* the time. Which is pretty impressive given Modigliani died in 1920.

But British faker John Myatt—“I don't forge art. I fake it”—tells me such materials aren't difficult to come by. “All you need is a canvas, a stretcher and paints from 1918,” he says. “Modigliani is very easy to fake.”

To prove his point, he sends me a photograph of his own crack at the artist, “The Schoolteacher,” which he painted using precisely those materials. It certainly looks like a Modigliani, albeit to my untrained eye. (Myatt goes to great lengths to ensure that people know his works are indeed his, often to the point of writing on the back of his canvasses in indelible ink and installing computer chips in the same place.)

“Lack of expertise, paired with ‘the always immutable idea that one might come across a hidden treasure,’ plays an important role.”

Restellini says he hasn't seen “The Schoolteacher” and asked me not to send it to him. There's only so much the man can handle.

The last thing the art world needed was another forgery scandal. The Genoa incident follows hot on the heels of last year's Old Masters affair—by some accounts the largest forgery scandal in a century—which revealed that unwitting collectors may have spent more than €200 million on fakes attributed to Frans Hals, Lucas Cranach the Elder, Orazio Gentileschi, and others.

Is there a crisis of expertise under way? Are forgers simply getting better at what they do? Or are dealers, collectors and curators letting their willingness to believe in a wellspring of previously unknown works get in the way of their judgment?

Pepi believes it's a combination of all these things.

“These fakes are appearing in major exhibitions due to a complete lack of critical judgment,” he says. “Curators need to be competent and honest, two qualities that are all too rare, especially when taken together.”

“But there are also professors, critics and other insiders—people with good eyes—who don't care so long as they can sell the work,” he says.

Restellini agrees that lack of expertise, paired with “the always immutable idea that one might come across a hidden treasure,” plays an important role in such scandals. “Unfortunately, there are a lot of dumbbell judgments that lead people to lose all reason and persuade themselves that infamous crusts may be authentic Modiglianis,” he says.

But he also believes that the Genoa case was something more sinister, almost “mafia-like” in the way it was organised, deliberately, he says, to mislead.

“The sheer number of fakes tells you everything you need to know,” he says. “We were no longer in the territory of pardonable mistake.”

“These people have organized exhibitions with quite a few proven fakes in them in the past and nothing happened to them. This made them think they were above any consequences, but they crossed a red line this time,” he says. “Greed was absolutely central to it.”

For their part, curators at both the Jewish Museum and the Tate Modern feel they’re on solid ground with their line-ups. The curator of “Modigliani Unmasked,” Mason Klein, told me by email that all the drawings in the show were acquired by Paul Alexandre, Modigliani’s friend and patron, directly from the artist himself. “The other works in the Jewish Museum’s exhibition, either borrowed from institutions or collections, have known provenance,” he says.

Nancy Ireson curated the Tate Modern exhibition and says the gallery has only sought out works listed in the 1972 Ceroni catalogue. “Our project has developed independently of any other Modigliani exhibition and we have no concerns about the works it will feature,” she says. Ireson didn’t attend the Genoa show.

Restellini says he still can’t understand what motivates forgers and their enablers in the first place. Pushing forgeries to make money and build a reputation is—when you get caught, which people like Pepi and Restellini are out to make sure you do—a sure-fire way to ensure you make nothing and destroy whatever credibility you had in the first place. “It remains an enigma to me,” he says.

He believes his forthcoming catalogue raisonné will mark a turning point in Modigliani scholarship and the artist’s posthumous travails.

“The Parisot conviction had me naïvely hoping that the fakes would disappear from circulation,” he says. “It didn’t, but I’m certain the catalogue will put an end to this madness.”

John Myatt isn’t so sure. He says that no such definitive catalogue will ever really be possible. After all, the very best fakes will actually be in it, hidden in broad daylight, unquestioned.

“Having your work accepted as authentic and unchallenged by all authorities is the entire point,” he says.