

Frieze Special: Fraud and fakery are no surprise in the art world - just ask Modigliani

IT'S BEEN AN interesting time in the art world. The past few months have seen the Rauschenberg Foundation locked in a battle with three of the late artist's closer friends, his appointed trustees, over their claim for \$60 million in fees.

By Abdus Shuman
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Ralph Lerner, a high-profile art-world lawyer -- he has worked with Steven A Cohen, the Gagosian Gallery and the Sonnabend Foundation -- and the co-author of *Art Law: The Guide for Collectors, Investors, Dealers and Artists*, stands accused of misappropriating \$750,000 from the Cy Twombly Foundation. And James Meyer, an assistant to Jasper Johns for 27 years, has been charged with stealing 22 works from Johns and selling them for \$6.5 million.

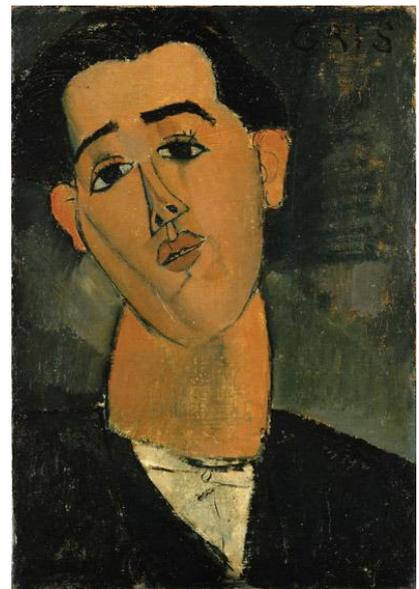
Nobody in the art world has expressed much surprise at such goings-on, at the high disclosure rate of scandals or at the galactic numerals. And the behaviour patterns? Well, I have watched individuals I would trust implicitly in any mundane transaction segue gleefully from Jekyll to Hyde when they enter the arcane undergrowth of the art world.

But I'll play ethicist some other time; it's more seductive to be a chronicler. So here's another characteristic tale of the art world. It is convoluted but juicy, and this also came to some kind of resolution earlier this year.

Running story

The story begins several years back, when a Manhattan dealer was approached by a runner. Runners are an important, below-the-radar presence in the art world -- they earn their living by supplying dealers with information on work that is available, usually from other dealers. This runner, acting on behalf of a lawyer in Florida, was offering a collection of paintings that were hanging in a mansion on Rhode Island.

The dealer examined colour reproductions of twelve paintings, which included a Van Gogh, a Monet, a Matisse and three Renoirs. The ownership history of each was given on a separate sheet. For instance, one of the Renoirs -- *La Coiffure*, which had an asking price of \$5.5 million -- was described as having belonged to both the great dealer Ambroise Vollard and the Shah of Iran. Wow! A Monet had been sold by Wildenstein & Co to Somerset Maugham. And so, scrumptiously, on and on.





The last painting they looked at was described as a collaboration between Amedeo Modigliani and Moïse Kisling, a painter friend but decidedly a B-lister back then and now barely that. The canvas depicts Kisling's studio but a couple of nudes on the wall had supposedly been added by Modigliani. This was a surprise, as this is their only collaboration known to art history.

It was listed as having once belonged to Kazimir Malevich, the great Suprematist. Interested parties were advised that it was to go with a travelling exhibition to seven museums, including some in Japan, that it was to be on the cover of the catalogue, even that it was to appear on a souvenir scarf. A single sheet of paper observed that the painting had also appeared on the cover of a book by the Modigliani expert Christian Parisot. The price of this plum? A trifling \$1.9 million.

The runner explained that the dealer was being offered this rare shot only because the secretive owner didn't want his Rhode Island collection exposed to unseemly attention at a public auction. 'The scheme was to sell the whole collection at once -- probably to some Japanese, some foreigner, some Saudi, something like that,' the dealer told me. He had called in another Manhattan-based dealer, Lord Colin Campbell, who then called in yet another dealer, Ron Cayen -- who wised them up.

'They had been seen all over the place,' Campbell told me. 'They were way overpriced. They'd been burnt all over New York; everybody knew them.' Also, there was to be no museum tour, no fancy scarf. They never did bother to see the 'collection' of copies, which was to have been quickly assembled on consignment and hung in a borrowed mansion. The gem here just had to be a Modigliani -- one of the 20th century's most faked artists.

Slow burner

The trajectory of Modigliani's reputation somewhat resembled that of Vincent van Gogh a generation before. In each case a hard life, scant recognition and an early death were followed by a heady updraft into blue-chip heaven. He was 35 and nearly destitute when he died of TB in a Montparnasse hospital in 1920. His mistress, Jeanne, who was pregnant with their second child, committed suicide the next day.

Leopold Zborowski, his dealer, had various other artists -- Kisling included -- work on several unfinished canvases for a show to help the orphan daughter, Jeanne. It opened the day of the funeral.

Soon the prices were going up and Zborowski is suspected of himself feeding the market with early fakes, prelude to many more. Ambrogio Ceroni, who died in 1970, produced the only universally accepted catalogue of Modigliani's works, but it is known that he failed to locate a few genuine pieces.

Just how few is the issue. Marc Restellini, who was then working on separate catalogues raisonnés of the artist's paintings and drawings for the Wildenstein Foundation, told the magazine *Art & Auction* in 2001 that there were three fake paintings to every legitimate one -- and nine fake drawings.

Clearly policing was called for. I attended the coming of 'The Modigliani Committee' to Manhattan, which was announced at a press conference at the Carlyle Hotel in January 2000. A press release read 'The Modigliani Committee: A Blue-Ribbon Panel of Leading Experts Establishes New York Headquarters to Safeguard Legacy of Amedeo Modigliani.' Committee members included Parisot and Moïse Kisling's son, Jean.

Death by committee

The art world's opinions of the Modigliani Committee were blunt. 'This committee is a complete joke,' the Paris mega-dealer Daniel Malingue told *Art & Auction*. Marc Blondeau, the former chairman of Sotheby's Paris, said: 'It's a nonsense for me -- it's a non-event.' *Art & Auction* did elicit a rare contrary opinion from one Joseph Guttmann, who was described as a 'friend' of Parisot. He said: 'While Marc



Restellini is at the moment the darling of the auction houses, it won't be much longer before he is going to run out of favour with them.'

Indeed, in September 2000 Wildenstein announced that it was dropping plans to publish the drawings catalogue. Observers noted that the Wildenstein Foundation had been twice sued by owners after Restellini refused to accept works, and it had lost both times. Its release stated that Restellini had been getting 'death threats'. There was scuttlebutt that Wildenstein would also drop the catalogue raisonné on the paintings.

So was Parisot ahead of the game in not trusting Restellini? Just hold on. In 2010 the Italian police raided Modigliani: From Classicism to Cubism, a show that Parisot, as head of the Modigliani Institute in Rome, had organised in Palestrina, 22 miles east of the capital. They seized 22 works, including four bronze sculptures, a painting and a batch of authentication certificates.

The following year, Laure Modigliani asserted her droit morale over her grandfather's work, which she had been allowing Parisot to control. He was quoted to the effect that he acknowledged her rights, adding hopefully/plaintively: 'That does not mean I cannot be the recipient of the Modigliani Archive, due to my deep knowledge and expertise.' In January this year, after a two-year investigation, the forgery unit of the Italian police put him under house arrest.

Restellini, meanwhile, is pressing on with his catalogue raisonné of Modigliani's paintings.