

The Object podcast

Transcript of Bonus Valentine's Day episode: Love Among the Ruins
Originally broadcast February 2021

A few years ago, I was editing labels for an exhibition at the museum where I work, the Minneapolis Institute of Art, when I noticed some capitalized words that, in my view, had no business being capitalized. Words like art and love.

I thought of myself as a sober journalist, someone who describes the world as it is, a place where art and love carry no more emphasis than breakfast or socks. Leave the preciousness to the poets, I thought.

I changed the words to lowercase, and sent the labels back to the curator who wrote them.

Suddenly, she was in my office. "I meant art as in Art!" she said, waving her arms as if encircling something grandiose and ineffable. "Love as in Love!"

I was unmoved. Dug in, actually. The idea that art and love are such powerful forces as to be almost divine, accorded the respect of deities – well, I'm not sure it's helping museums seem in touch with the real world.

Art and love, I was almost sorry to say, are lower-case concepts.

A year or so later, she was back in my office. She had drafted an article about Amedeo Modigliani, the famously bohemian painter and sculptor who made his mark in Paris in the early 1900s. Specifically, she wrote about his lovers.

There were many lovers. Poets and writers and artists. Women who inspired him and vice versa, and the world – in some way – would never be quite the same.

Here, she seemed to be saying, is Art and Love in capital letters.

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This is The Object podcast, produced by the Minneapolis Institute of Art. Today, another bonus episode between seasons. About the power of love and art, and what happens when you mix them together. I'm Tim Gihring.

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Before the curator gave me that story to edit, about the many loves of Modigliani, I hadn't thought much about the details of his life. I suppose I thought of him as a cliché, the talented loser, the louche genius, the Mickey Rourke of painting.

I had a sense that if Van Gogh was like, I'm going to become the ultimate bohemian, Modigliani came along a few decades later and was like "Hold my absinthe."

But now, I really had to find out: what was true . What was legend. And what was actually just Mickey Rourke in Barfly.

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As it happens, Modigliani was born into legend.

His Jewish family had moved to Livorno, Italy, on the coast near Florence, to escape persecution. Jews had more rights and opportunity there. And Modigliani's father was quite successful. But they couldn't escape an economic depression.

When Amedeo was about to be born, in 1884, the family was about to lose everything – literally, the repo man was coming for their furniture and everything else. And then, the story goes, the family realized that an ancient custom prohibited the repossession of a pregnant woman's bed and, apparently, anything on it.

So, they piled everything they could onto the bed with Modigliani's mother. The boy came into the world onto a bed full of everything worth saving. He saved his family from ruin, the story goes, just by showing up.

His father died soon after, and Modigliani seemed to catch every bug out there: pleurisy and typhoid fever and eventually, at 16, tuberculosis. His mother built up their fortunes again, at least enough to indulge her son's feverish desire to see the great art of Italy, and while he was recovering from TB she took him to Florence and later to Naples, Rome, Amalfi, and Capri.

She paid for art lessons, too, and while in Capri, possibly still coughing up blood, Modigliani wrote to a fellow art student about his budding artistic philosophy: quote "the only true route to true creativity is through defiance and disorder."

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Modigliani arrived in Paris in 1906. A 22-year-old dandy in a corduroy suit. He decorated his studio in Montmartre with Renaissance reproductions and plush draperies. He thought Picasso was amazing but a slob.

He was reportedly about 5 foot three – about as tall as Prince. But he too made his presence felt – he was charming and handsome, and he knew it.

He met Anna Akhmatova in 1910. The last year, she would later say, that the world was normal. Before the collapse of empires into war and work camps and genocide.

He was 26. She was 20... and married. In fact, she was on her honeymoon.

Ahkmatova was from Russian nobility, none of whom wrote poetry. But she did. And when she met a young Russian poet – a man named Gumilev -- who encouraged her work, and brought her into the circle of artists in St. Petersburg, and was in love with her ... she fell a little bit in love, too. A little bit.

“I believe that it is my fate to be his wife,” she wrote to a friend, when she was still a teenager. “Whether or not I love him, I do not know, but it seems to me that I do.”

It was a lowercase love.

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Ahkmatova married Gumilev with none of her family present, and went to Paris for the summer.

She would later say that she met Modigliani just a few times in 1910. And she claimed not to have known him deeply, that she couldn't have known him deeply because – as she put it – “I was just a stranger, probably a not easily understood 20-year-old woman, a foreigner.”

And yet, at the same time, she would claim he was astonished by her ability to quote “guess rightly his thoughts, to know his dreams and other small things.”

She knew him, perhaps, better than he knew himself. Which can be a very attractive thing.

She said he didn't drink then, not much anyway. He didn't brag, didn't talk about his famous friends. He seemed to be, she later wrote, “encircled by a girdle of loneliness.” Except, he was not alone in his thoughts: He was falling in love with her.

After she returned to Russia with her husband, Modigliani began to write her. “You are my obsession,” he wrote. And she wrote poems about him, in Russian, no less obsessive—poems he was unable to understand.

He continued to write the rest of 1910 and all winter, when Gumilev got restless and left for Africa.

When he returned, in the spring, Ahkmatova left for Paris.

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She rented a studio in the same building as Modigliani.

He took her around the city, to the Louvre to see Egyptian art. To the Pantheon in the moonlight. He carried around an enormous, decrepit black umbrella, she said, and they sat in the park under it, reciting poetry.

She would read her own poetry, too, and what he couldn't understand he would assume was something mysterious and incredible, and there was no telling him otherwise.

Once, she says, she came to his door with a bouquet of red roses. But he wasn't at home, so she decided to toss the roses through his open window, one at a time. He couldn't figure out how they'd come to be there, in his studio, when she didn't have a key. It was another mystery, like the poetry, that made her incredible in his eyes.

He made, supposedly, 16 nudes of her.

She would later say they were not made from life -- that she was not in the same room with him as he drew, Titanic style. That he made him later, alone in his studio.

Though she would also say that once, when they were talking about the Venus de Milo, Modigliani insisted that women of quote "graceful temperament, the ones worth modelling and painting, always look clumsy with their clothes on."

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Modigliani had begun making sculpture a few years after arriving in Paris, inspired by his friend Brancusi. And he was working at this, chiseling away in a little courtyard outside his studio, when Ahkmatova was there with him.

The most famous of these sculptures are his heads. There are a lot of them, some 27 that have survived. One recently sold for more than 52 million dollars. These tall, slim busts of women with long necks and noses.

There is one at the Minneapolis Institute of Art that is undoubtedly of Ana Ahkmatova, made around the spring that she was there, in Paris, though it's really only in the severe bangs that we see her.

He talked of making great columns of these heads in a kind of temple of beauty. An idea that, like so many things with Modigliani, never came to pass.

Sometime that year, when Ahkmatova came to stay, Modigliani had begun to change.

In a memoir written shortly before she died, in the 1960s, Ahkmatova described the change in Modi – as his friends and lovers knew him. He had grown quite “dark and haggard,” she wrote. In another translation, it reads as “dimmer and slier.”

The dapper reserve was disappearing. The studio was becoming a mess.

He began to drink more, take more cocaine and hashish and absinthe. And it would only get worse after Ahkmatova left.

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She had stayed in Paris perhaps a couple months in all, before returning to St. Petersburg and her husband, who was increasingly distant.

She went on to become one of Russia’s finest poets, even if the Soviets managed to keep that fact mostly to themselves. Much of her writing didn’t show up in the West until the 1960s. In 1963, when Khrushchev was in the Kremlin and the Cold War briefly thawed, a compilation of her poetry came out in English – 50 years of her finest work. A book called *The Flight of Time*. It would make her famous in the West, a cult figure.

She would later write, of her time with Amedeo, that everything that happened between them was part of “the prehistory of our life,” as she put it. “his, very short, mine, very long. The breath of art had yet to kindle, to transform these two existences.”

This must have been, she wrote, “a luminous, weightless, predawn hour.”

And yet, this was the hour she chose to remember.

She had had many lovers by the end. Her first husband, the poet Gumilev, who was with her in Paris on their honeymoon when she first met Modigliani, had been murdered by the Bolsheviks before a firing squad back in 1921.

The 16 nude drawings that Modigliani had given her, in 1911, had supposedly burned long ago. None of the letters he wrote her apparently survived either.

But, when *The Flight of Time* came out, the little book of her life’s work, the dust jacket featured a drawing of her by Modi. She had kept this one, at least, and insisted that it be on the cover.

Art and love in capital letters.

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When I asked the curator who had written about the many lovers of Modigliani, what happened to him – wouldn’t readers want to know how his story ends – she said it was too depressing to tell.

After Ahkmatova, Modigliani moved on to an English writer who posed for some of his finest work but also fought with him constantly, and drank nearly as much as he did. She called him a “craving, violent bad boy, overturning tables, never paying his score and insulting his best friends,” as though he were some kind of tabloid fodder for her work.

Modi died in 1920, age 35. And his final love, who became his common-law wife and bore his first child, ended up killing herself soon after, along with their unborn second child.

In her 2011 biography “Modigliani: A Life,” the writer Meryle Secrest suggests that Modi acted out in response to his health issues—he still had tuberculosis, after all, and at some point he must have known he wasn’t going to get better.

Of course, as other writers have pointed out, he could well have been both self-destructive and a serious artist. It takes nothing away from his art to say that there might have been more of it -- he might have had more time -- if his choices had been different.

And it seems he was a serious artist. As chaotic as his life was, his art is thoughtful and tender. The sculpture at Mia, the abstracted head of Ana Ahkmatova, is carved from limestone. The sedimentary rock that formed from the skeletons of ancient sea creatures. And among the most common fossils found in limestone are starfish.

Look closely at the left cheek of the sculpture, the cheek of Ahkmatova, and you’ll see one. A starfish, just a little smaller than a dime.

Modigliani must have seen it, too. Perhaps he even structured the face around it, so it landed front and center, like a beauty mark or a kiss. A kiss, as it turns out, goodbye.

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This has been a bonus episode of The Object podcast, produced by the Minneapolis Institute of Art. I’m Tim Gihring. Join us for the next season, later this year. Subscribe and you’ll be the first to know when it happens. Be safe, be happy, and thank you very much for listening.