

What's Hot Now

## Fake Modiglianis Poison Art Market

Georgina Adam for The Art Newspaper

The anxiously awaited catalogue raisonné in preparation at thetete, due out this year, has been postponed for "at least another year," according to its author **Marc Restellini**. The news is a serious blow for all those working in the field, dealers, museum curators and auction houses. They were hoping the new work would bring some order into what is a hugely contentious field.



Courtesy: Phillips de Pury

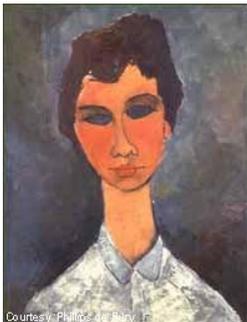
Genuine: "Almaïsa" made over \$7 million at Phillips de Pury in November 2001.

"It's a nightmare," says leading dealer **James Roundell**, talking about the difficulties he has with authentication of paintings and particularly drawings by Modigliani. "This is a major minefield," laments **Roberta Cremoncini** of the Estorick Collection. "Our plans for an exhibition had to be shelved. No one wanted to exhibit." "This is a bedeviled question," says **Phillip Hook**, senior Impressionist and Modern art specialist at **Sotheby's** (nyse: [BID](#) - news - people ).

So highly charged is the subject that some researchers claim they have received death threats and two have abandoned work on monographs. Things are not helped by a plethora of fakes on the market and bitter quarrels between the experts. Why is Modigliani so particularly targeted? The drug-taking alcoholic artist—who died at the age of just 36 in 1920—had a classic Bohemian lifestyle, constantly moving from house to house and handing out drawings to pay his debts. His mistress **Jeanne Hebuterne** committed suicide the day after the artist's funeral, at which dealers were, according to Modigliani's biographer **June Rose**, already bartering with the mourners for paintings and drawings. "The family situation was a disaster; he became a myth, then there were problems with his daughter. The disaster continued," says Marc Restellini of the Wildenstein Institute in Paris.

As a result, there is a historical and documentary void, an open invitation to fakers, particularly as the drawings—often consisting of just a few lines—are easy to copy. In the '50s, '60s and '70s the notorious faker **Elmyr de Hory** was knocking out "Modiglianis" in the U.S., and they and forgeries from other sources continue to infest the market. "I rejected many works, well over 100, from pastiches to excellent forgeries," says Mr. Restellini of the drawings, although he adds there are no more Modigliani fakes than Corot fakes (hardly a reference, since Corot is the heavyweight champion of forgeries). **Christian Parisot**, an expert and a friend of the artist's daughter Jeanne, claims, "I have seen 50 or 60 people who brought me these things." He founded the Modigliani Committee in New York last year to "resolve existing controversies" (other members are **Jean Kisling**, son of the painter, **Claude Mollard** of the Pompidou Centre, art historian **Marie Claire Mansencal** and a Japanese museum director, **Masaaki Iseki**).

Raising the stakes are the huge prices now achieved by some of Modigliani's works—over \$11 million for a painting and over \$500,000 for a drawing.



Courtesy: Phillips de Pury

Fake: one of the many works submitted to the Modigliani committee

Into this equation comes another problem, a plethora of experts and monographs. There are no less than five different reference works on the artist. The most respected is that by **Ambrogio Ceroni**, whose 1958, 1970 and 1972 tomes remain the only reliable works, according to leading dealers and auction houses. **Arthur Pfannstiel** (1929 and 1956) and **Joseph Lanthemann's** (1970) books are dismissed today. The Milanese scholar **Oswaldo Patani** has produced three volumes: paintings (1991), drawings (1992) and one on the Paul Alexandre period (1994), while Christian Parisot has published Vols I, II and IV (in 1970, 1971 and 1996) of a catalogue raisonné.

Enter the Wildenstein Institute, which asked Marc Restellini to prepare the definitive monograph, both for drawings and paintings. "Mr. Restellini opened a can of worms; he has rejected certain works previously accepted by Ceroni and a number of people are not very happy with this," says Phillip Hook.

Further bedeviling the question is Wildenstein's undoubted clout in the marketplace: Not being included in the catalogue raisonné is the kiss of death for a piece. Many dealers feel that the famed Institute has too much power—and resent it.

Three years ago, Oswaldo Patani announced that he was not continuing with the fourth volume of his work. "I am disappointed, demoralized and also annoyed," he explained at the time. "I am an honest man and nowadays I have to reckon with too many vested interests and too many fakes in circulation." He reveals that the Wildenstein Institute sent him a lawyer's letter warning him against publishing an article (at the time unwritten) in which he was apparently going to disagree with some of Mr. Restellini's attributions.

Last year in Paris, Marc Restellini abandoned his catalogue raisonné of Modigliani drawings, claiming that he had had death threats and that other sorts of pressure had been put on him, including an attempt to bribe his

parents.

He says he was receiving up to 20 calls a day: "Some owners of drawings," he says, "were prepared to do anything" to get their drawings included in the catalogue. First they write to Daniel Wildenstein, then they put pressure on my assistant. It is extremely tiring. I met a lawyer at the Basel fair; he said to me, 'My drawing is authentic, I am going to take you to court.' I told Daniel, he said we will stop work [on the drawings], I agreed."

There is a rather different version of this story from Christian Parisot, who once worked with Mr. Restellini. In 2000, two owners of drawings took Wildenstein to court in France because Mr. Restellini had rejected the works for his drawings catalogue. Wildenstein lost and was ordered to include them; Mr. Restellini then abandoned his work. This, claims Mr. Parisot, is the real reason for his withdrawal.

*The Art Newspaper* asked Mr. Parisot why he and Mr. Restellini cannot work together. "I proposed this, but to date have had no response," he said. Mr. Restellini says that the contact, some years ago now, was for a different matter.

Christian Parisot says he has also received threats. "I had to go to court in an armored car for my own protection!" he says, talking about his appearance as a witness in an Italian case involving fake Modigliani heads that were produced by students as a gag in 1985 (the ensuing lawsuit has dragged on for 17 years). He is working on an update to his catalogue raisonné and explains that Jeanne Modigliani invested him with the "moral rights to and worldwide responsibility for the archives and their use." Speaking from the Modigliani Committee's offices in



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Drawings have been particularly targeted by fakers, who generally create new compositions "in the style of."

Paris, Mr. Parisot claims that by virtue of this, he alone has the right to produce Modigliani's catalogue raisonné. "If Mr. Restellini and Wildenstein publish one under that name, I will sue them!" he swears. Further criticism comes from Dr. Patani who claims Mr. Restellini, "has authenticated drawings which I do not accept as genuine. Of course, every scholar has a right to his own opinion."

No wonder dealers and auction houses are in despair, particularly for drawings. In the absence of any acknowledged recent expertise, they still fall back on the Ceroni catalogues, even though they are known to contain some omissions. "If a painting is not in Ceroni or if it does not have an old provenance, then I would give it the barge pole," says Mr. Roundell, while Philip Hook says, "Ceroni is head and shoulders above the others. If the picture was in Ceroni, then that is a good guarantee. For the last five to ten years we at Sotheby's have only accepted things in Ceroni." A major Italian dealer has said that authenticating Modigliani is "worse than gambling in Las Vegas," with what appeared a sure bet a few years ago becoming obsolete today.

"Marc Restellini is working very hard on his catalogue raisonné of paintings, and he has put together a lot of exhibitions, but I can't prejudge the work. We shall have to wait and see when it appears," says James Roundell. "Unfortunately, there is nothing on the horizon for drawings; you just have to believe in the provenance." Mr. Restellini concludes, "I am just so sorry for Modigliani."



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