



VCU

Art Inquiries

Volume 18 | Issue 4

Article 9

12-31-2023

Suzanne Valadon: Model, Painter, Rebel; and Modigliani Up Close

K. A. McFadden
kmcfadden@idsva.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/artinquiries_secacart



Part of the [Architectural History and Criticism Commons](#), [Art and Design Commons](#), [Art Practice Commons](#), [Fine Arts Commons](#), [Museum Studies Commons](#), and the [Theory and Criticism Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McFadden, K. A.. "Suzanne Valadon: Model, Painter, Rebel; and Modigliani Up Close." 18, 4 (2023).
https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/artinquiries_secacart/vol18/iss4/9

This Exhibition Review is brought to you for free and open access by VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Art Inquiries by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.

Suzanne Valadon: Model, Painter, Rebel

The Barnes Foundation

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

October 21, 2021–
January 9, 2022

Modigliani Up Close

The Barnes Foundation

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

October 16, 2022–
January 29, 2023

Two recent exhibitions at the Barnes Foundation featured artists working in Paris who formed a fond friendship a century ago. Suzanne Valadon faced poverty, lack of education, and a misogynistic art scene; Amadeo Modigliani was an Italian immigrant, Jewish, and chronically ill. Existential hardships may have been the common ground that drew them to each other. This review considers two individuals who created original and compelling artworks, each holding key places in art history despite obstacles and suffering.

Virtually unknown in the United States, Suzanne Valadon's first North American exhibition included



paintings, drawings, and prints that spanned her long and creative career.¹ The subject of the nude was a particular focus for the artist, along with landscape, portraits and still life. Context is key for insight into why her work is relevant today. Valadon

Figure 1. Suzanne Valadon, *Marie Coca and Her Daughter Gilberte*, 1913, oil on canvas, 63 3/8" x 51 3/16" Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon, purchased from the artist 1937. Photograph: ©2021 Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York / Image ©DeA Picture Library / Art Resource, NY.

(1865-1938) was a post-Impressionist painter, who grew up dirt-poor during the Belle Epoch in Montmartre. She began working at age twelve, eventually joining a circus until, as legend has it, a fall from a trapeze ended her acrobatic career. She then found her way to the “model market” in Place Pigalle, where she landed work in the studios of such painters as Puvis de Chavannes, Renoir, and others.² Valadon’s vivacious personality, striking appearance, and ability to hold difficult poses established her as a popular model. By eighteen, she became an unmarried parent—yet continued to model as well as draw.³ All these difficulties make her professional trajectory astonishing at a time women were denied access to formal art education. Also remarkable, her low-class status provided social leeway—since bourgeoisie women were held to rigid patriarchal rules restricting public comportment and bodily autonomy. Valadon learned to paint from the artists for whom she modelled. Degas mentored and taught her printmaking. In 1894 she participated in her first Paris exhibition with the *Société Nationale des beaux-Arts* and was the inaugural woman admitted to the group. Her reputation as an artist flourished; by the 1920s, robust international sales of her paintings made her financially independent.

The first gallery enlightened the visitor on Valadon’s work as an artist’s model, reproducing wall photographs along with paintings by the artists who hired her. These included portraits by Toulouse-Lautrec and Jean Eugène Clary, Santiago Rusiñol’s *Laughing Girl* (1894), and Gustav Wertheimer’s monumental *Kiss of the Siren* (1882). The latter depicts Valadon as a

mythological seductress luring a sailor to his death. Her idealized life-size naked figure immersed in a turbulent sea was strikingly the most contradictory painting in the exhibit, given that the other nudes—painted by Valadon—were not created with a sexist narrative.

A second gallery, generally intimate in scale and subject, displayed her early works on paper. This allowed for close inspection of Valadon’s decisive and supple contour lines, produced in observation of her domestic coterie. There were drawings of her child, a self-portrait at age eighteen, a tiny profile of lover Miguel Utrillo, and a few “keyhole nudes”—early prints heavily influenced by Degas.

Valadon began seriously painting in 1909.⁴ Hanging in a third gallery were a life-size *Self-Portrait* (1911) at age forty-six; large landscapes; a portrait of the artist’s niece, *Marie Coca and her daughter Gilberte* (1913) (fig. 1), and *Family Portrait* (1912). The latter is just under life-sized, with Valadon encircled by son, mother, and lover Andre Utter. In this compelling arrangement, the artist at the center of this little tribe of personalities, right hand over her heart, gazes directly out at the viewer. Hanging nearby was a double portrait of her mother, son, and family dog, *Grandmother and Grandson* (1910). A kind of psychological disconnect in these familial compositions gives the impression that, while physically together, everyone—except Valadon—is mentally absent, absorbed in some private interiority. *Marie Coca and Her Daughter Gilberte* is especially discordant, with the seated mother physically twisting away, gazing off in the

distance, and, heedless of the child at her feet, ironically cradling a doll. A small Degas ballerina painting on the wall behind the upholstered chair mutely connects the painter to her early mentor.

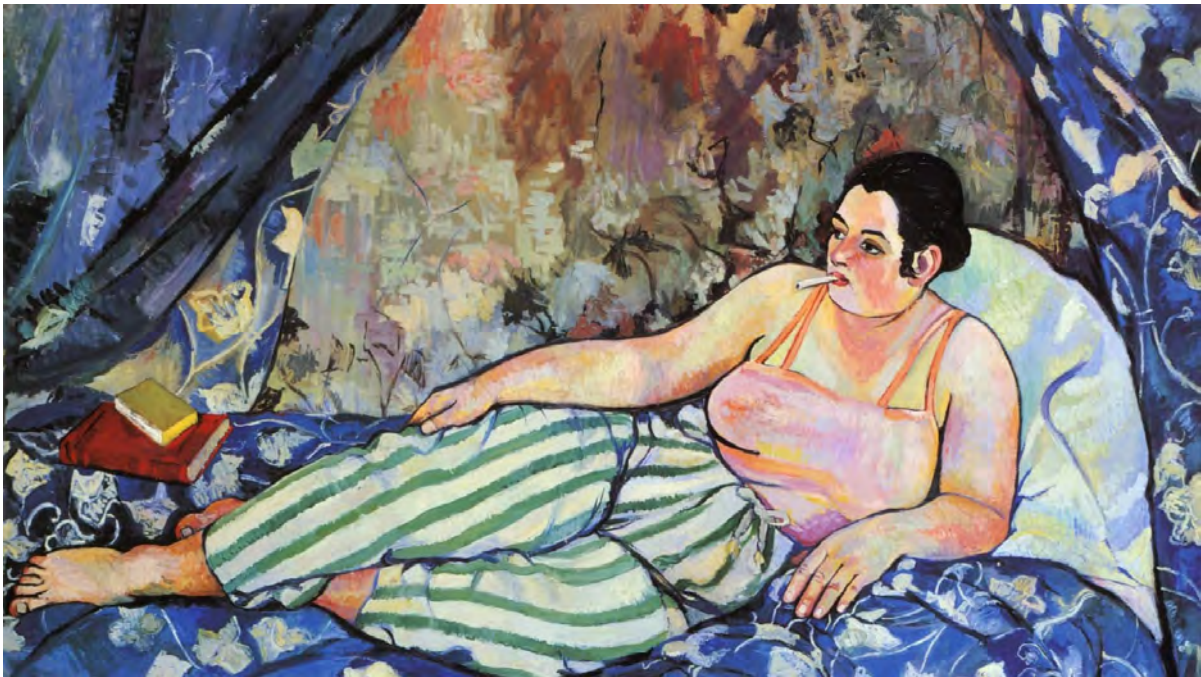
Large oils dominated the next two galleries of mostly nudes. The fact they were painted by a woman is truly noteworthy. Women rarely painted nude figures in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, or, if they had, their nudes were censored from exhibition. Valadon’s representations communicate an understanding of *bodies*: how they move and take up space with confidence. This ability is likely connected to her origins as model and subsequent empathy she brought to her studio. Standouts were *Adam and Eve* (1909), *The Blue Room* (1923) (fig. 2), and *Nude with Striped Blanket* (1922). Valadon’s palette often feels boldly exuberant in the use of prismatic colors to render flesh, and a heavy use of outline that appears black but, looking more closely, is blue.

Blue is the predominant hue of *The Blue Room* in which a semi-reclining woman in green-striped pajama pants and pink tank-top lounges on a bed, cigarette dangling from her lips, books stacked at feet. Enveloped in bold abstracted floral patterns, her dark eyes gaze at something outside of the picture frame. The work feels fresh and timeless, yet it was painted one hundred years ago; it renders Manet’s *Olympia* (1863) old-fashioned, as Valadon turned the tables on how women are viewed in paintings. Also remarkable are *Seated Woman Holding an Apple* (1919) and *Black Venus* (1919) (fig. 3). Both feature an unidentified

Black model, another pronounced deviation from conventional studio practice, with some unambiguous shock value that expanded the canon of representation. This year followed the end of World War I: issues of French Empire and colonization were newsworthy and W.E.B. DuBois held the first Pan-

is thin and brushy. Yet the mirror's reflection brings apples, vase, and artist's features into focus with thick paint. She gazes in serious resolve, seemingly daring herself to keep going. Though Valadon did not subscribe to any art movements, she was certainly aware of contemporary approaches. Uncomfortable with

Figure 2. Suzanne Valadon, *The Blue Room*, 1923, oil on canvas, 35 7/16" x 45 11/16" Centre Pompidou-Musée National d'Art Moderne/CCI, Paris on deposit to the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Limoges, State Purchase, 1924. Photograph: © 2021 Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo by Jacqueline Hyde / Image © CNAC/MNAM, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY.



African Congress. While perhaps a political statement, Valadon also renders the Black female body as one with mythological connotations, including those related to the archetype of Eve in a primeval forest.

The final gallery held many still life and portraits, including a compelling late *Self-Portrait* (1927). Painted in the tradition of *vanitas*, Valadon captures her sixty-two-year-old face reflected in a tabletop mirror. Closest to the picture plane between mirror and viewer is a loosely painted still life in which the paint

art manifestos, she believed art was driven by emotion or passion.⁵ *Model, Painter, Rebel* served up Valadon's uncompromising philosophy. She relished the visual world populated with bodies, flowers, pets, decorative objects, and hillsides. That love was communicated via pigment and brushes; death claimed her at seventy-two in the act of painting.

Valadon's son became a drinking buddy with the young painter Amedeo Modigliani. When the Montmartre bars closed, Valadon would care for the two inebriated

artists, developing a tender friendship with "Modi." He called her "my elected mother" and she offered encouragement as he sat at her feet while she painted.⁶ Appreciative, he bought her flowers, sang Italian songs, and read Dante aloud while camping in her studio.⁷ In 1919, they both exhibited in a London group show of contemporary French art.⁸

Modigliani (1884-1920) is affiliated with a post-Cubist style as a member of Picasso's circle. He is well-represented in many museums,

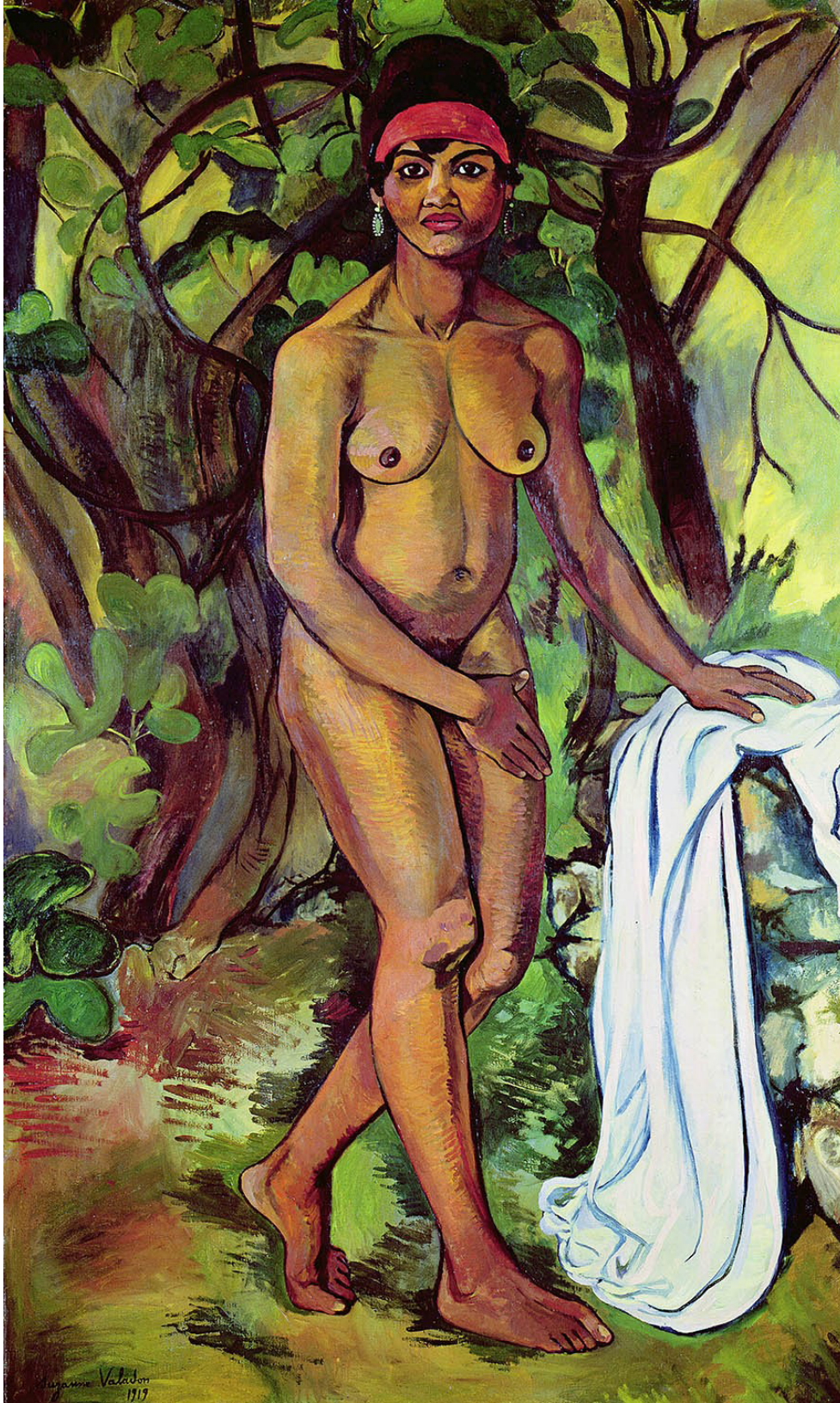


Figure 3. Suzanne Valadon, *Black Venus*, 1919, oil on canvas, 63" x 38 3/16." Centre Pompidou-Musée National d'Art Moderne/CCI, Paris on deposit to the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Menton, Gift of M. Charles Wakefield-Mori, 1939. Photograph: © 2021 Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York / Image © credit: Musée des Beaux-Arts, Menton, France/Bridgeman Images.

including the Barnes' permanent collection.⁹ A sickly child, he was raised in Italy by supportive intellectual Jewish middle-class parents. Versed in literature and obsessed with Renaissance paintings as a teen, he studied classical art in Italy for eight years, moved to Montmartre in 1906, then Montparnasse, finally settling in the south of France. Handsome and stylish, with the "emotional drive of a satyr,"¹⁰ Modigliani had a reputation for alcohol and hashish-enhanced capers, an abundance of lovers, and a chronic cough due to tuberculosis.¹¹ He painted prolifically until his demise at thirty-five of tubercular meningitis.

Modigliani Up Close emphasized his working methods, with various approaches to conservatorship and detailed didactics, including photographs of X-rays or infrared reflectography revealing underlying images with revisions.¹² Early on, Modigliani used second-hand canvases to exploit the preexisting paint surface for new works, scraping off freshly applied paint to reveal dried pigment underneath. He also experimented with different color grounds to achieve visual effects.¹³ While the exhibit mostly featured oil portraits on canvas, a second gallery included carved limestone heads; another showed female nudes. Many gallery walls were painted in cool blue tones to amplify Modigliani's use of unpainted blue-grey ground areas.

Visitors were greeted by explanatory wall text with an accompanying 1919 self-portrait. The first gallery featured some of Modigliani's early portrait paintings, in which evidence of his academic training as well

as influence by Cézanne and Toulouse-Lautrec proves visible. Generally, his highly stylized oeuvre captures a humanist interiority, rendering the body a flattened static vessel for the mystery of an individual life. There were no double or group portraits.

Modigliani's portraiture is not mimetic—or what we might describe as an "emotional read"—and there is a sense of personality and engagement. His subjects tend toward elongated oval heads that rhyme with long thin necks. Almond-shaped eyes are frequently blank like ancient stone faces that have shed their pigment. Some fill with pale blue, some are colorless; occasionally, there is an indication of irises and reflections of light; sometimes the entire eye is simply dark and mask-like. Lips are typically pressed together under an articulated philtrum; when a mouth is painted slightly open, it is as if the subject is inhaling.

For all his redundant stylization there are variations. For example, in *Self Portrait as Pierrot* (1915), the sad-clown persona offers a common theatrical trope symbolic of hiding one's feelings. This diminutive work depicts his head in three-quarter view, the long neck framed by white ruff. A dark shape on the back of his head may be a yarmulke. P-I-E-R-R-O-T is spelled out prominently below the collar and delicate contour lines denote facial features. Blue-green paint dabbed over the face and neck lie next to modulated pinkish flesh tones obscuring the left eye, giving the effect of skin lesions. Various approaches to manipulating wet pigment exemplify Modigliani's experimental methodologies.

Like Picasso, Modigliani was influenced by Iberian, ancient Greek, and African artifacts, as well as Egyptian and Khmer carvings owned by Paris dealers. Lacking formal training, he began sculpting after 1909 for approximately three years, probably stopping because of physical exertion and dust. His circle of eight carved limestone androgynous heads¹⁴ were encased in plexiglass boxes in the second gallery. Apparently, in his studio, at night, Modigliani staged the heads with candles, proffering a spectacle of shadows and light.¹⁵ Seen alongside his paintings, these sculptures give off an arresting presence while expanding an aesthetic discourse. For example, *Head of a Woman* (1912) features an architectonic elongated face and nose, arched brows, pursed round lips, and slightly curled hair atop a long neck, over a square base embellished with an arch. Carved from a single block of warm white-gray limestone containing fossil fragments, chisel and rasp marks on its surface offer a beguiling textural quality.¹⁶ Unseen drips of candle wax are confirmed by ultraviolet light used in analysis.¹⁷

Modigliani's beautifully painted nude women articulate a male gaze/sexist vibe that is hard to dismiss now. They seem to oppose the portraits that speak to non-objectifying notions of a sitter's psyche. Yet Modigliani loved women (lots of them) and the nude-y genre was highly marketable. The echo of Italian Renaissance masters he adored is evident without landscapes or mythological narratives. *Reclining Nude* (1917) pushes the slender model up against the picture plane,



cropping limbs as she twists forward with arched torso; armpit hair aligned with open lips (fig. 4). Her face is mask-like. Modigliani used a heavy application of paint and worked dark to light; fiber analysis indicates he polished the paint surface and used a brush-handle tip to score the hair.¹⁸

Brushwork remarkable for its painterly vocabulary is also visible in *Jeanne Hébuterne, Seated* (1918) (fig. 5). His last partner, the pregnant Hébuterne is rendered half-length, standing in front of a white-covered bed with a carved headboard and nightstand. Her stylized figure is frontal with long reddish-brown hair, pale, blue-filled eyes, red lips, long slender neck, hands folded in her lap. A turquoise-colored blouse and vertically striped sash tops a blue-

black skirt. Analysis determined the work is thinly painted, using a wet-on-wet approach with areas of dark outline. The bedroom setting, loosely choreographed brushwork, and limited palette impart a sense of domestic sweetness as the couple prepare for the birth of their daughter. Sadly, the following year both Modigliani and Hébuterne perished while expecting their second child.

While Valadon's familiarity with philosophy, literature and poetry is undocumented, Modigliani was versed in all three. His study of Nietzsche, and his theory of "the will to power," is an important takeaway for Valadon and Modigliani's legacy.¹⁹ Nietzsche claimed that artists create to overcome human suffering. In part, the will to power insists that

Figure 4. Amedeo Modigliani, *Reclining Nude*, 1917, oil on canvas, 23 7/8" x 36 1/2." The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls Collection, 1997, 1997.149.9

an individual empowers the self—not by dominating the other—but by saying "yes" to life through overcoming personal hurdles. Both artists left a trove of images marking their triumph over misfortune. For Modigliani, the challenge was terminal illness; for Valadon it was sexism and poverty. Viewing their work allows us to hold time still for a bit, closely contemplate their striving, and perhaps say "yes" to the benevolence it offers.

K.A. McFadden
Independent Scholar



Figure 5. Amedeo Modigliani, *Jeanne Hébuterne, Seated*, 1918, oil on canvas, 21 5/8" x 14 15/16." The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Gift of Stella Fischbach, New York, to American Friends of the Israel Museum in memory of Harry Fischbach, B01.0855.

Endnote

1. *Suzanne Valadon: Model, Painter, Rebel* was curated by Nancy Ireson, Gund Family Chief Curator and Deputy Director for Collections and Exhibitions at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia, PA; Ireson, ed., *Suzanne Valadon: Model, Painter, Rebel* (London: Paul Holberton Publishing, 2021). There were fifty-four works created between 1890 and 1937 on view.

2. Valadon neither kept a journal nor wrote things down as general practice. Later in life she was known to have burned letters. Lacking documentation, what is known about her life is largely based on inconsistent verbal accounts.

3. Valadon's only child grew up to become landscape painter Maurice Utrillo. His paternity was officially acknowledged by Miguel Utrillo. Valadon refused to confirm or deny the authenticity of Miguel's claim.

4. Ireson, op cit., 78.

5. John Storm, *The Valadon Drama* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1959), 175.

6. *Ibid.*, 168 - 169.

7. *Ibid.*, 169.

8. Kenneth Wayne, *Modigliani & The Artists of Montparnasse* (New York, NY: Harry Abrams, Inc., 2002), 69.

9. The Barnes Foundation has a dozen Modigliani works in their collection but lacks any artwork by Valadon.

10. Storm, *The Valadon Drama*, 165.

11. Modigliani refused treatment for his tuberculosis and knew he had a contagious condition. He hid his diagnosis from his friends due to its social stigma. This raises questions about his moral obligation to those in his circle.

12. *Modigliani Up Close* was curated by an international team of art historians and conservators: Barbara Buckley, Senior Director of Conservation and Chief Conservator of Paintings at the Barnes Foundation; Simonetta Fraquelli, independent curator, and consulting curator for the Barnes; Nancy Ireson, Deputy Director for Collections and Exhibitions, and Gund Family Chief Curator, at the Barnes; Annette King, Paintings Conservator at Tate, London. The exhibit held fifty works and was thematically arranged.

13. Barbara Buckley, Simonetta Fraquelli, Nancy Ireson, and Annette King, ed., *Modigliani Up Close* (Philadelphia: The Barnes Foundation, distributed by Yale University Press New Haven and London, 2022), 3. The catalog contains exhaustive information about technical analysis of materials Modigliani used, including his canvases (noting stretcher types, thread counts, and grounds), carving tools, limestone blocks, and pigment analysis. More than fifty curators and conservators were involved in the research.

14. Modigliani's stones were sometimes sourced from building sites in Paris.

15. Buckley, Fraquelli, Ireson, and King, *Modigliani Up Close*, 16.

16. *Ibid.*, 100. Oolitic limestone, originally formed in shallow marine seas, is noteworthy for spherical grains and skeletal fossil fragments.

17. Buckley, Fraquelli, Ireson, and King, 102.

18. *Ibid.*, 138.

19. Wayne, *Modigliani & The Artists of Montparnasse*, 45.