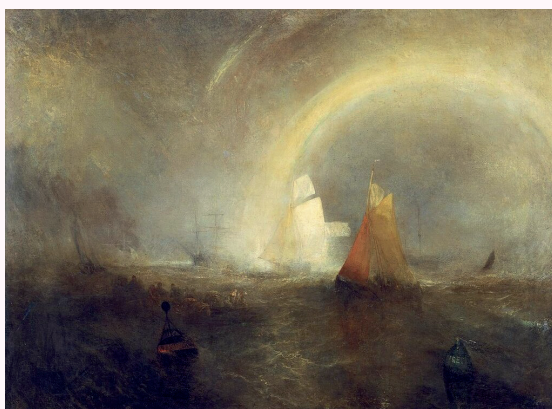


The



Final

The Last Works
of the Great Masters



Painting

■ LUDION

The Final Painting

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The Last Works of
the Great Masters

Patrick De Rynck

Ludion

Giotto 1266/1267–1337
Jan van Eyck c. 1385/1390–1441
Andrea Mantegna c. 1431–1506
Giovanni Bellini 1430–1516
Raphael 1483–1520
Albrecht Dürer 1471–1528
Michelangelo Buonarroti 1475–1564
Titian c. 1490–1576
Tintoretto 1518–1594
Caravaggio 1571–1610
El Greco 1541–1614
Peter Paul Rubens 1577–1640
Anthony Van Dyck 1599–1641
Artemisia Gentileschi 1593–1654
Diego Velázquez 1599–1660
Nicolas Pousin 1594–1665
Frans Hals 1582–1666
Rembrandt 1606–1669
Jean-Antoine Watteau 1684–1721
Francisco Goya 1746–1828
John Constable 1776–1837
William Turner 1775–1851

Gustave Courbet 1819–1877
Édouard Manet 1832–1883
Vincent Van Gogh 1853–1890
Berthe Morisot 1841–1895
Paul Gauguin 1848–1903
Paul Cézanne 1839–1906
Gustav Klimt 1862–1918
Egon Schiele 1890–1918
Pierre-Auguste Renoir 1841–1919
Amedeo Modigliani 1884–1920
Claude Monet 1840–1926
Edvard Munch 1863–1944
Vasily Kandinsky 1866–1944
Piet Mondriaan 1872–1944
Henri Matisse 1869–1954
Frida Kahlo 1907–1954
Jackson Pollock 1912–1956
Edward Hopper 1882–1967
Pablo Picasso 1881–1973

Titian

The ceaseless self-reinvention of an Old Master

'When Vasari, the author of this history, was at Venice in 1566 he went to visit his dear friend Titian, and found him, despite his great age, busy about his painting, with his brushes in his hand. On that occasion Vasari took great pleasure in conversing with Titian and looking at his works.' So writes Vasari himself towards the end of the second edition of his *Vite (Lives)*, the series of biographies of Italian artists he published in 1568, which concludes with Titian of Cadore. Titian outlived Vasari, dying on 27 August 1576 after the historian's own death in 1574.

We do not know exactly how old Titian was when Vasari visited him: According to the artists' biographer himself, his 'dear friend' was born in 1480 in the village of Pieve di Cadore in the Dolomites. In the absence of supporting documents, estimates of Titian's birth year vary widely from 1476/77 to as late as 1490 – dates that seem to have been widely accepted until recently. One source even claims that he was 103 years old when he died. Whatever the case, it is certain that Titian lived to an old age and also that he was already collaborating with his teacher, Giorgione, in 1508. He worked as an independent master in Venice from 1511 onwards.

The final period of Titian's life actually began as early as 1550 or so. He rarely left Venice after that date, except to pay brief visits to

'The method used by Titian for painting these last pictures is very different from the way he worked in his youth. For the early works are executed with incredible delicacy and diligence, and they may be viewed either at a distance or close at hand; on the other hand, these last works are executed with bold sweeping strokes and in patches of colour, with the result that they cannot be viewed from near by, but appear perfect at a distance. [...] Titian has retouched his pictures, going over them with his colours several times, so that he must obviously have taken great pains.'

—
Giorgio Vasari *The Lives of the Greatest Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, 1568

'Venice, 27 February 1576
I am confident that, through my long-standing and devoted service, I have kept a place in your royal memory. I therefore beg that memory for this favour: some twenty-five years have now passed in which I have received nothing at all for the many paintings I sent to Your Majesty on various occasions. [...] I am now advanced in years and live in great poverty. I humbly beg you, therefore, out of the sense of duty for which you are always admired, to give your servants what seems to you most appropriate to remedy my need.'

—
Letter to Philip II

Cadore, and he devoted his life fully to painting but also to his social commitments: he was a celebrated painter at the time, even if Tintoretto and Veronese were gradually superseding him in Venice and receiving larger public commissions. All the same, there was never any shortage of interest in Titian and he continued to work for the highest circles. When the 'fake news' spread in 1553 that the great painter had died, a concerned Emperor Charles V sent a letter to Venice enquiring whether the paintings he had ordered had been left unfinished.

Titian and his workshop could tackle more or less any genre, from portraits to religious scenes and mythological paintings. He enjoyed great success throughout his seventy-year career, with commissions from local dignitaries, the Venetian authorities and the Italian nobility, as well as prestigious international clients including the Pope, the Holy Roman Emperor and the King of Spain – Charles V and later Philip II. Titian was Europe's most successful painter. His style and technique evolved in the final quarter century of his life, in which he made much freer use of the brush and also his fingers, together with new and different colour combinations and compositions. His very last works have even been described – anachronistically – as 'abstract' and 'impressionistic'.

Philip was Titian's most important client in the final twenty years of his life and the 'court painter' remained in contact with the prince's entourage until the year of his death. If there is a single thread running through these letters, it is Titian pleading to be paid for the substantial amount of work he produced for the king. The painter frequently suggests that he was living on the brink of destitution, although this is an exaggeration to put it mildly. Nor was it true that Philip was his only patron: Titian and his workshop continued to work for both local and international clients.

Titian died on 27 August 1576 in his comfortable house in Biri Grande, part of the parish of San Canciano in north Venice. Plague had broken out in the city at the time, most likely carried by a sick passenger on a ship that had docked there from Constantinople. It is not known whether Titian succumbed to old age or to the epidemic, which carried off thousands of victims. Either way, his son and assistant Orazio had died of plague two months previously. The extent to which several of his late works were finished at the time is another intriguing question related to Titian's death.

Self-Portrait

c. 1562
oil on canvas, 86 × 65 cm
Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado

Two of Titian's self-portraits have survived, including this one showing the elderly, bearded painter in profile. Vasari might have seen it when he visited Titian in 1566, where he describes seeing 'a self-portrait finished four years ago, a very lifelike and beautiful painting'. The canvas presents a man in his seventies and some were already doubting at that time whether he was still capable of completing his commissions. In the end, Titian continued to paint for another fourteen years or so. His black velvet cloak is sober and costly, he wears the gold chain of the Order of the Golden Fleece, awarded to him by Charles V, and he holds his paintbrush in his right hand. This is a man who has been raised to the nobility, as indicated by the chain, but also one keen to show that it was as a painter that he had achieved social success. It was entirely unusual in Titian's time for a painter to advertise his status as such in a self-portrait. The skull-cap he wears disguises his loss of hair. Peter Paul Rubens, a great admirer of Titian, owned this portrait, which he kept in Antwerp until his death in 1640.



The Flaying of Marsyas

'And as he screamed Apollo stripped his skin; the whole of him was one huge wound, blood streaming everywhere, Sinews laid bare, veins naked, quivering and pulsing. You could count his witching guts, And the tissues as the light shone through his ribs.'

—
Ovidius *Metamorphoses*, VI, 387–91



1576
oil on canvas, 212 × 207 cm
Kroměříž Archdiocesan Museum
(Czech Republic)

We don't know who commissioned this cruel, agonizing and nervous work, which was in Titian's studio at the time of his death. The canvas is signed, indicating that it was considered finished. Titian presents the violent end of the satyr Marsyas, as the Roman poet Ovid recounts in his *Metamorphoses*, Marsyas lost a musical contest to the god Apollo who then skinned him alive, assisted in Titian's version by a second person. Some have interpreted the pensive figure on the right as a portrait of the artist himself. Titian used his fingers to paint much of this canvas, as he often did in his later work. The lapdog licking up the blood in the foreground is an addition to the story as told by Ovid, as is the satyr holding out a bucket.

Pietà

c. 1570–76
oil on canvas, 389 × 351 cm
Galleria dell'Accademia, Venice



Titian was in the habit of working on several canvases at once. He must have begun this large and compelling work with its oppressive nocturnal atmosphere and sparse flashes of light around 1570. The painting was unfinished on his death in 1576 and was completed, as the Latin inscription at the bottom states, by his pupil, Palma il Giovane. It was traditionally believed that Titian painted this particular work and theme to hang above his own tomb in the Church of Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari in Venice. We recently learned, however, that he enlarged an existing, smaller composition and that the result was intended for the principal altar of the church in his birthplace, Pieve di Cadore. The artist's death meant, however, that the project was not completed. From left to right, the depicted figures are Moses, Mary Magdalene, Mary, the deathly pale Christ, the elderly Jerome, who clasps Jesus's dead hand (a portrait of the artist?), and the Sibyl who was said to have prophesied Christ's death. The painting-within-a-painting below the lion's head in the lower right shows Titian praying with his son Orazio. Was this work a gigantic ex voto painted in the hope that the artist and his son might be spared the plague?

William Turner

The painter who kept looking for the sun

From the age of sixty (1835) until his death on 19 December 1851, Joseph Mallord William Turner lived in growing isolation, at odds with the art world of his time, the beginning of the Victorian period. This process of withdrawal might even be traced back to the death in 1829 of his father, who was also his assistant. A grumpy old man, shabby and eccentric, Turner suffered increasingly from all sorts of ailments, both passing and chronic, and became mentally ill towards the end. His relationship with the poorly educated Sylvia Booth, with whom he had lived since 1846, though he had known her for much longer, did him no good and was unseemly, encouraging him to conceal this aspect of his life. The critics attacked Turner's new work – which they didn't understand and took as evidence of his failing powers – with increasing vehemence. But the real reason, we now know, was that this innovator and visionary was far ahead of his time. His later work, also his best, paved the way towards impressionism and even the abstract art of the twentieth century. This reflected the fact that Turner was able to work for himself, no longer having to take any notice of customers or commentators.

What you have read up this point is the cliché image of the elderly Turner as a 'timeless' painter – an image that was thoroughly corrected by the exhibition *Late Turner – Painting Set Free* in 2014

Self-Portrait
c. 1799
oil on canvas, 98,5 × 82 cm
Tate, London



and 2015. In his sixties and even seventies, Turner continued to play a full part in public and social life, both artistic and generally, until the late 1840s. He was viewed as a father figure in Royal Academy circles, in which he dispensed advice to young artists. This continued until just before his death, and his reputation remained immense, even as colleagues and contemporaries fell increasingly out of favour. Turner's work displays continuity rather than rupture, as the painter himself demonstrated by engaging in a dialogue with his younger self, in which he adapted earlier works and then exhibited them in their new form. His celebrated and gigantic bequest to the nation likewise included work from every period of his life.

It is true that Turner's health deteriorated and that this also gradually took its toll on his public presence and his output. A lack of reliable sources means it is hard to say precisely what ailed him, but we do know that by the end of his life, a corpulent Turner had lost all his teeth and had to rely on a liquid diet. He needed spectacles for close working, but his eyesight otherwise seems to have been fine, despite the painter's known penchant for gazing at the sun. As late as 1849, he rejected the proposal of the Society of Arts to organize a retrospective exhibition of his work, possibly

because it felt unduly 'posthumous'. Right until the end, Turner was keen to be associated with the current art world. He exhibited his work for the last time in 1850. 'I always dreaded it with horror', he wrote that year of the physical decay brought on by old age.

By the 1840s, the British art world – not to say the world in general – had changed radically compared to Turner's early years. Patrons were now primarily merchants, entrepreneurs and industrialists and no longer simply the aristocracy, and these private collectors showed an increasing interest in contemporary British art and hence also for Turner. In his later work, he introduced the technical innovations of his turbulent and rapidly evolving age. New movements were arising in art, such as the Pre-Raphaelites, who focused on the revival of Christian themes and drew inspiration from the early Renaissance. Their artistry and bright, finely finished works enjoyed growing success. A new aesthetic emerged in the 1840s.

The erudite Turner spent up to six decades seeking how to translate visual experiences – first and foremost natural phenomena and the historical place of human beings within them – onto canvas in all their dynamism and complexity. This is the essence of Turner's work: observation and its assimilation on canvas and paper. The texture and spatial character of a work, forms and their mutual ordering, the orchestration of adapted colours, and especially the dynamism and mutability he observed in the world and in nature, in which human beings have to make their way: these are the questions that Turner addressed, his quest for 'truth'. To call him a 'modernist', interested only in formal renewal, does him an injustice. Turner was too involved with his time and his society for that, even by the middle of the nineteenth century.

Turner died on 19 December 1851 in Sylvia Booth's house, having been confined to bed by illness for several months. Mrs Booth subsequently burned many of the painter's letters to her. Turner himself left the funds for a grandiose funeral and a monument in St Paul's Cathedral, where he was buried.

'Just before 9 a.m., the sun burst forth and shone directly on him with that brilliancy which he loved to gaze on [...] He died at 10 a.m. without a groan.

—
Dr William Bartlett



Genoa, Italy

c. 1851
watercolour on paper, 37 × 54.3 cm
Manchester City Galleries

Turner also worked intensively until the final year of his life in watercolour on paper. The inspiration was frequently provided in this case by sketches he made during previous journeys across Europe. He ceased to exhibit his watercolours in 1830, which merely served to intensify the aura surrounding them. Turner painted these works for a limited number of collectors or for his own pleasure.

His 'Final Set' of watercolours, of which this is one, was done between 1846 and 1851, with Swiss and Italian views. (Care needs to be taken with the titles, which are not Turner's own: this one, for instance, was traditionally called 'Geneva'.) It is open to debate which landscape we are looking at here, with what appear to be British soldiers in the foreground. Wherever this is, it is clear that Turner continued to seek ways of suggestively conveying an atmosphere on paper until the end of his life. He did so with an exceptionally loose touch and almost always with figurative details in the foreground.



The Wreck Buoy

c. 1807
reworked and exhibited in 1849
oil on canvas, 92.7 × 123.2 cm
National Museums Liverpool,
Walker Art Gallery

The art historian and 'Turner fan' John Ruskin called this canvas 'the last oil he painted before his noble hand forgot its cunning'. It was one of the works that Turner showed in 1849 at the annual exhibition of the Royal Academy, at which his presence had steadily diminished in the course of the decade. The Wreck Buoy is a work of 1807 that Turner spent six days reworking for the occasion. He added details and intensified the contrast of light and shade. Sunlight breaks through a fog bank and we see a double but pale rainbow. The light changes with the atmospheric conditions – the theme in a sense of Turner's life, together with the sea and its stormy forces, in which human beings, such as the oarsmen shown here, are insignificant. There is symbolism too: the hope represented by the rainbow contrasts with the loss suggested by the buoy, which marks the position of a wrecked ship. In 1849, The Art Journal called the canvas 'the best of Turner's late productions'. Elsewhere, it was described as 'a marvellous example of his coloristic gifts'.

The Departure of the Fleet

This work was accompanied by the following lines from Turner's poem *Fallacies of Hope*:

The orient moon shone
on the departing fleet,
Nemesis invoked,
the priest held
the poisoned cup.



1850
oil on canvas, 89.9 × 120.3 cm
Tate Gallery, London

When Turner took part in the annual Royal Academy exhibition for the last time, he showed a quartet of canvases that formed a single ensemble. Three of them have survived. He took his inspiration from Virgil's *Aeneid* and the story of Dido, Queen of Carthage, who fell in love with the Trojan Aeneas. But the hero was unable to remain with her, as the gods required him to leave so he could found the city of Rome. This canvas shows Aeneas setting sail with his fleet, as the wronged, despairing Dido looks on in the lower left with her retinue. Turner painted historical and mythological themes throughout his life, not so much to convey a moral message as to comment on his own era and as a pretext for 'his' landscapes. The French painter Claude was his great example.

According to Sylvia Booth, Turner painted his four final works in her home: 'The paintings were set out in a row and he went from one to the other, working one and touching up another, and so on, in turn.' Turner normally didn't finish his paintings entirely until they were already in the exhibition gallery, during the celebrated 'Varnishing Days', which evolved into public demonstrations of his virtuosity. By 1850, however, his health had become too fragile for this and so the four paintings were finished at home.

Amedeo Modigliani

A brief, intense life on the edge

Amedeo Modigliani marked the new year of 1920 by inscribing a drawing in one of his sketchbooks with the following words in Italian and Latin: *Il Novo Anno. Hic incipit Vita Nova. (The New Year. Here begins the New Life.)* It must have been the gallows humour of a very sick man, who probably realized that the end was near. Modigliani died of tubercular meningitis on 24 January that same year at the Hôpital de la Charité – the hospital for the poor in Paris. He was thirty-five. A day and a half later, his twenty-one-year-old, heavily pregnant girlfriend Jeanne Hébuterne jumped from the fifth-floor window of an apartment building. She is said to have done so backwards, so she would not have to look death in the eye. Jeanne and her unborn baby died on the spot. The couple's first child, also called Jeanne, was just one year old at the time.

Modi, as the womanizing Modigliani was known to his friends, was a Tuscan with Jewish roots. He led the intense and turbulent life he said he wanted. From 1906 onwards, that life was focused primarily in the Parisian artistic circles of Montmartre and Montparnasse. Modigliani lived mostly in poverty in a series of rented rooms, doused in alcohol and other mind-expanding substances. It is no coincidence that 'Modi' is a pun on *maudit* – French for 'cursed', which was also applied to the Bohemian artist

on the fringes of society. Modigliani paid little heed to his tuberculosis, the silent assassin that had been stalking him since he was sixteen.

The artist received little recognition during his lifetime, either for his paintings or for the sculptures he produced between 1909 and 1914, before the dust became too much for him. This would change swiftly after his death. Towards the end of his life, he was selling his canvases for 150 francs at most, with one exception at 300 francs – still a pitiful amount compared to the 500,000 francs his works would command a mere ten years later. The prices for a Modigliani today, in the twenty-first-century, are exorbitant, prompting an accordingly large number of forgeries. These too didn't take long to materialize.

Amedeo Modigliani's turbulent life swiftly fuelled his artistic legend in a way that long hindered an unbiased, serene consideration of the importance of his work. As far as the drawings and paintings are concerned, his oeuvre consists substantially of portraits of friends and acquaintances, and of his celebrated female nudes. Modigliani doesn't fit any of the 'isms' of his time: 'When an artist has need to stick on a label, he's lost!' he himself once said. His inspirations ranged from the Italian Renaissance, through Graeco-Roman and African art to Brancusi, Cézanne and other contemporaries.

What turned out to be the final period of Modigliani's life began in 1917. The previous year, he had befriended the amateur artist and poet Leopold Zborowski, who provided him with a room, materials, food and a modest monthly allowance in return for paintings. Thanks to the coal that his friend also supplied, Modigliani was able to heat the room in which his models – Zborowski paid their fees too – posed for him in the winter of 1917. However, when one of these painted nudes was used to promote Modigliani's only ever solo exhibition in Paris in December 1917, the police closed the show down before it had really even begun. It was also in 1917 that the artist made the acquaintance of the nineteen-year-old Jeanne Hébuterne, a promising student and his last love. Jeanne moved in with him straight away in a dilapidated flat, despite her family's fierce opposition. Her love for Modigliani was unconditional, despite his heavy drinking, frequent brothel visits and deteriorating health. When Paris came under German bombardment in 1918, Zborowski arranged for the couple to spend almost a year living in Provence, together with his own family and several other artists. It was here that their daughter Jeanne was born.

By the summer of 1919 – by which time Jeanne senior was

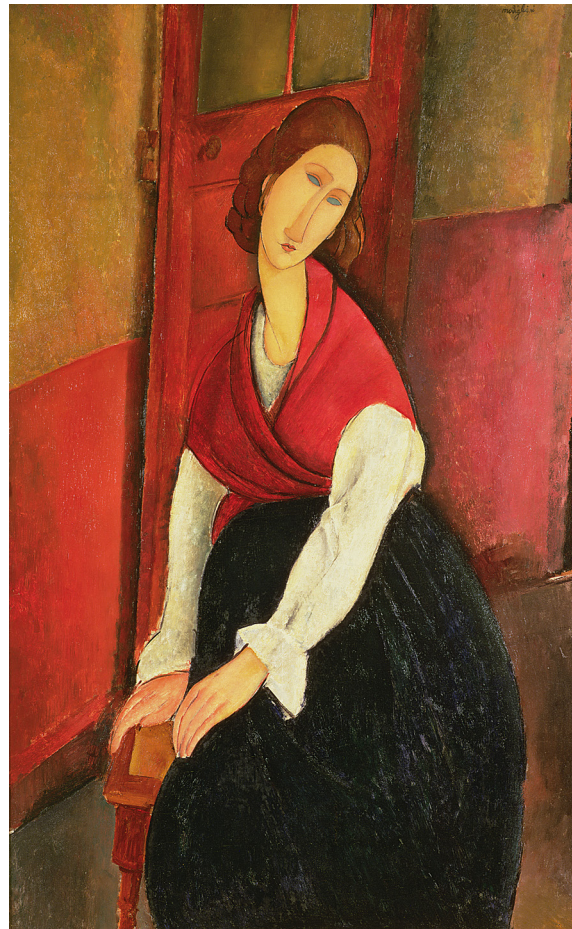
'Now I leave the mud behind. I know all there is to know, and soon I will be just a handful of dust. I have kissed my wife. Please take her back to her parents. This is the right moment. We're certain at any rate of eternal happiness, she and I, whatever may happen.'

—
Modigliani is said to have spoken these words in his final moments to 'Zbo', Leopold Zborowski.

pregnant again – Modigliani seemed to be on the brink of success: along with Marcel Utrillo, he was the focus of a major exhibition in London, the catalogue of which stated that his portraits ‘have a suspicious resemblance to masterpieces’. A few months later, the Paris art world would turn out *en masse* to attend his funeral. The mourners were reportedly approached by art dealers already asking them to sell their Modiglianis.

Jeanne Hébuterne in Front of a Door

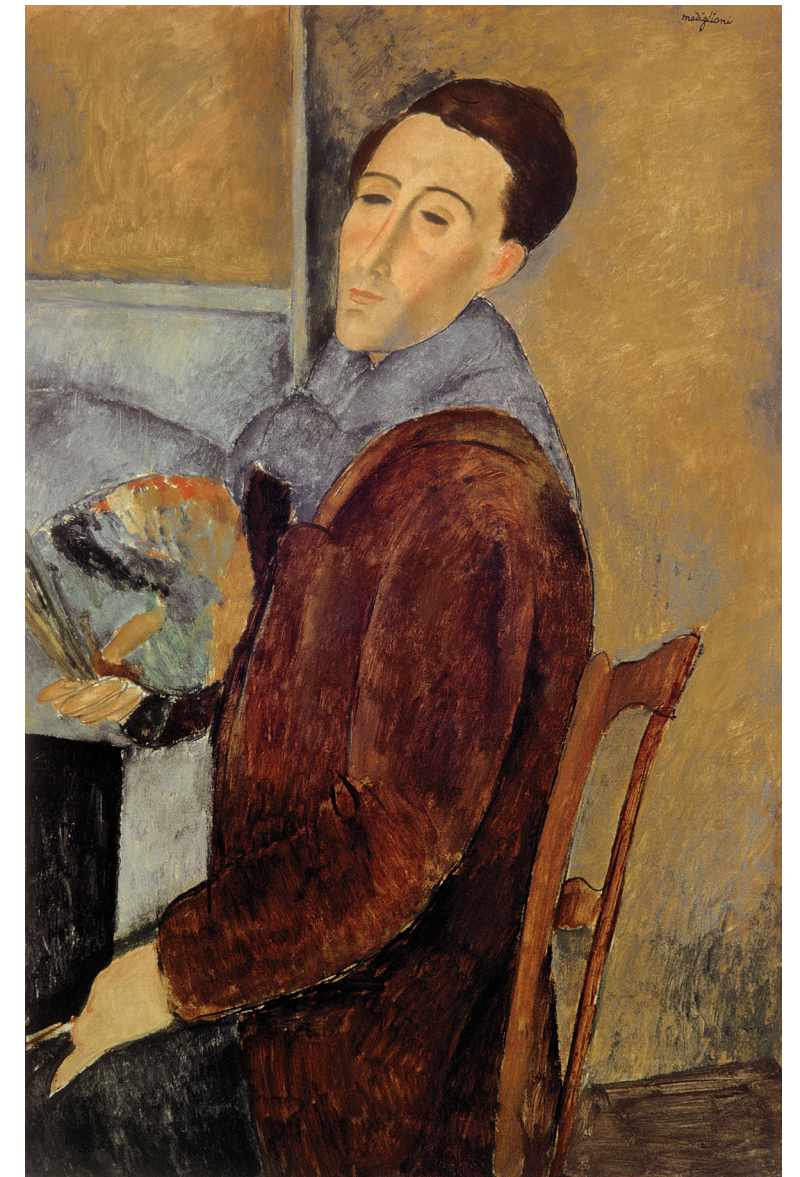
1919
oil on canvas, 129.5 × 81.5 cm,
private collection



This is the last of the many portraits that Modigliani painted of his girlfriend posing and is a large work by his standards. Jeanne was pregnant at the time with their second child. As with many of his nudes, her face is oval and the details sparse like those of a mask: striking stylized eyes, a pronounced nose and an economical mouth. The body forms an S-shape and the neck is elongated. This colour palette too, with its ochre, orange and red tones, is one we often find in Modigliani.

Self-Portrait with Palette

1920
oil on canvas, 100 × 64.5 cm
Museu de Arte Contemporânea da
Universidade de São Paulo (mac)



We know of only one painted self-portrait by Modigliani: this canvas from the final year of his life, which presents a three-quarter view, with the body in profile and the face shown frontally. The artist holds his palette at the ready. By portraying himself as a painter, Modigliani placed himself in a tradition stretching back to the great Titian. We know from contemporary accounts that he always set great store by his appearance, despite his limited finances. There has been considerable speculation regarding this canvas, as to whether his pale face, his posture and the conspicuous eyes allude to his worsening tuberculosis.

Portrait of Marios Varvoglis

1920
oil on canvas, 116 × 73 cm
private collection

The Greek musician and composer Marios Varvoglis (1885–1967) was born in Brussels and studied at the conservatory and Schola Cantorum in Paris, where he remained until 1922. While there, he moved mainly in artists' circles. Modigliani's last painting – *Le beau Marius* was apparently standing on his easel when he died – is a portrait of Varvoglis, who went on to teach at the Athens conservatory and also worked as a critic and conductor. He was awarded various honours by the Greek government. Varvoglis too has been given the 'Modigliani treatment' in this portrait, with its characteristic colours, stylized face and sober background.

