

The affair of the fake Modigliani heads

# A HOAX

## That Embarrassed The Experts

**T** Michele Gherlarducci (l) and Pietro Luridiana, popular heroes of Italy's Modigliani celebration last year, turn to photos of the "discovery" that shook the art world (see inset).

THIS IS THE STORY of a hoax. As with all great humor, it made many people laugh precisely because the background was serious. It happened in Italy—that country of great museums filled with fabulous works of art—and, as a result, the often complacent and sometimes corrupt world of Italian art experts, museum moguls and intellectual tastemakers will probably never be the same.

Last July, the city of Livorno (Leghorn) celebrated the centennial of the birth of one of its most famous sons, the sculptor and painter Amedeo Modigliani (1884-1920). To mark the occasion, the city organized an exhibition of Modigliani sculptures, on loan from collectors in Italy and abroad.

The high point of the commemoration was a much-publicized attempt to dredge an old canal in downtown Livorno in the hope of finding some long lost fragments of sculpture by the young Amedeo. Legend has it that in 1909, in a fit of depression, the 25-year-old Modigliani had rushed out of his house in the middle of the night and tossed two or three unfinished heads into the nearby Fosso Reale (Royal Moat).

On July 24, at 8:50 a.m., a flat piece of rock measuring 25x10x8 inches was dredged up opposite the spot where Modigliani had had his studio. The stone was almost completely encrusted with mud and weeds. Upon examination, it was discovered to be a piece of granite roughly chiseled on one side to form the oval outline of a woman's head. On the same day, at 4:56 p.m., only a few feet farther downstream, a similar head,

this time chiseled in local sandstone, came up. Both heads (subsequently dubbed "Modi 1" and "Modi 2") had the narrow eyes and straight, elongated noses characteristic of other portraits by Modigliani.

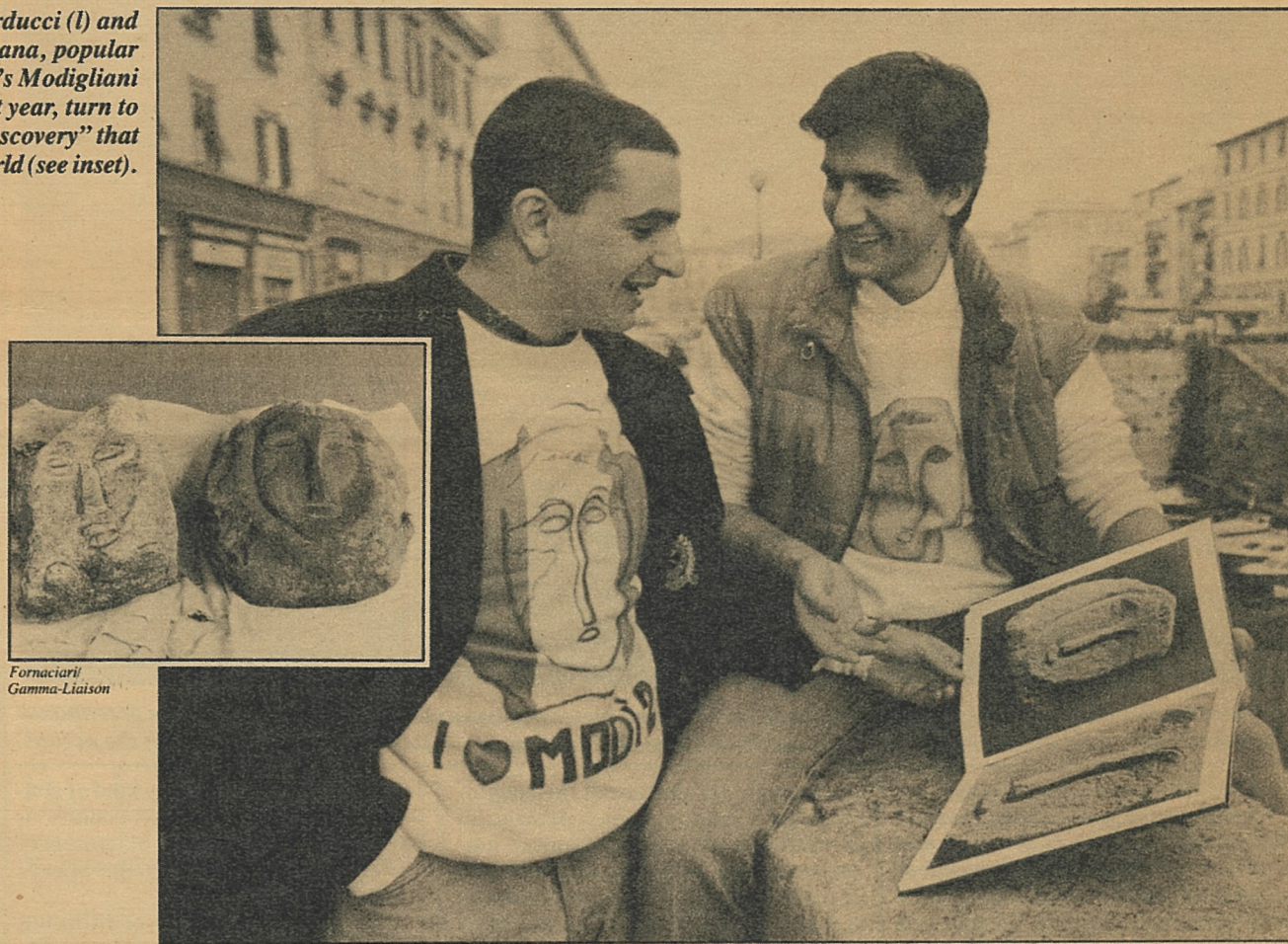
Amid much excitement, the heads were transported to the city museum. Almost immediately, both were declared authentic early works by Modigliani. Within two weeks, this judgment was confirmed by some of the most illustrious names in Italian art criticism.

Giulio Carlo Argan, perhaps Italy's most prominent art historian (and a former mayor of Rome), pronounced the two heads "authentic" beyond any doubt, fundamental for an understanding not merely of Modigliani but also of modern art itself. Maurizio Calvesi, director of the Venice Biennale (one of Europe's leading showcases of modern art), said the finds were "a feast for Livorno and for our country." Rino Giannini, an authority on Michelangelo and on techniques of sculpture, defined

the chisel work as "typically Modigliani."

Cesare Brandi, another leading critic, wrote: "In these two scabrous stones there is the Annunciation, there is the Presence . . . sketched out so roughly yet so illuminatingly and [with] an inner radiance, like a pilot light in the night." Enzo Carli, curator of the great Modigliani show at the Rome Quadriennale, wrote: "Modigliani did not betray the material. These stones have a soul."

Nor were the critics and historians alone. *Time* magazine referred to a



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BY AMOS ELON

"historic" scoop, and a phalanx of distinguished minerologists and paleontologists, who put the two heads to a series of scientific tests, concluded that the heads had been immersed in the mud for a period "measurable in decades."

When, on Aug. 9, a third head ("Modi 3") was fished out of the canal, the euphoria reached a peak.

There were few dissenting voices. One was that of a Milanese publisher and editor named Mario Spagnol. Writing in the Turin daily *La Stampa*, he declared that the two heads were so appallingly ugly and flat that they could not possibly be by Modigliani. His argument was ignored as the opinion of a mere dilettante. Another dissenter was Jeanne Modigliani, the artist's daughter. She told newspapermen in Paris that the story of the lost heads was nothing but legend—her father had never thrown away any heads. Her warnings were dismissed as the meanderings of an ignorant old woman, then were stopped for good when, before she could see the heads for herself, she fell down the stairs of her house and died of a brain hemorrhage.

On Sept. 2, a new, luxuriously illustrated catalog, *Two Recovered Stones by Amedeo Modigliani*, edited by Dario Durbè of the Rome National Gallery of Modern Art, was presented to the press. The reporters had barely returned to their desks when the tickers began to carry a sensational piece of news: Three young college students in Livorno were insisting that they were the real sculptors of "Modi 2." None of them was an artist or even an art student; they studied economics and engineering. They had sculpted the head in a few hours out of a chunk of sandstone uprooted from a city sidewalk, they said, and had thrown it into the canal less than eight hours before it was found. As proof, they had photos of themselves with "Modi 2."

"These gentlemen were all searching in the canal," one of the boys explained, "so we asked ourselves, 'Why not let them find something?' We did it for fun. We were sure they'd find out immediately that it was false. But instead... So now we decided to come out, for the sake of the truth."

The art critics and historians stuck to their guns. The heads—even if not major works—were authentic, they insisted. The boys were guilty of "a joke in the worst possible taste," said Giulio Carlo Argan. Dario Durbè hinted darkly at a conspiracy against art and against Livorno's city administration (which is Communist) by sons of the rich (right-wing) bourgeoisie. Rino Giannini, who had "recognized" Modigliani's own hand, challenged the students to prove their preposterous claims by doing another head.

He would soon regret this suggestion. On Sept. 10, the boys appeared live on TV with their original tools: a hammer,

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## A HOAX/continued

a small piece of chalk to sketch the outline, a mallet, two chisels, a screwdriver and a steel brush attached to a Black and Decker power drill. As millions watched, the boys—dressed in jeans, open shirts and sneakers—produced another “Modigliani,” all the while chatting in three languages with reporters.

The near-solid phalanx of critics and historians now began to weaken. Durbè and Argan continued to insist that the heads were authentic. Durbè: “These boys are puppets in the service of my enemies.” Argan: “The television show was a wretched exhibition . . . [the heads are] unequivocally by Modi.”

Some experts clung to the hope that—even if “Modi 2,” which the boys had claimed as their hoax, was false—“Modi 1” and “Modi 3” were still real.

But this hope was soon to be dashed as well. After the television exposé, the Communist mayor of Livorno was quoted as saying that he might have more easily accepted the boys’ tale had they been longshoremen (Livorno is one of

Italy’s largest port cities) and not *figli di papa* (rich kids). Three days after this impetuous assertion, a 29-year-old longshoreman—and Sunday painter—named Angelo Froggia called a press conference in Livorno and announced that he had sculpted the granite “Modi 1” and the sandstone “Modi 3” and had thrown both into the Fosso Reale a few days before they were fished out.

To prove his claim, Froggia showed reporters a 20-minute videotape taken by his girlfriend, titled *Cherchez Modi*. To the sound of background music by Stockhausen, the bare-chested Froggia could be seen chiseling away at his two “Modiglianis,” their rough features by now almost too familiar.

Froggia, it turned out, was an anarchist, a former terrorist who had spent three years in prison for throwing a bomb into an office in 1979. A thickset, dark-haired man with a gold earring in his right earlobe, Froggia explained to the assembled press corps that, unlike the three students, he had not tossed his “Modiglianis” in the canal as a hoax. They had wanted to amuse; his motive was “to

provoke debate.” He added, “It was my challenge to the art market . . . to society. All images of art are illusory.” He had made his heads with only a chisel, one of them in less than half an hour, he said, then given them a bath of acids and detergents to make them look old.


By the summer’s end, the affair had become the “Hoax of the Century.” While hundreds of art forgeries are exposed every year, this was the first time, it seems, that one was perpetrated *not* for gain—hence its popular appeal. “*Bravo ragazzi!*” cheered *La Stampa*. The *ragazzi* (boys) had successfully exposed the shallowness and arrogance of the so-called “experts” and dictators of modern taste. The glee over this humiliation was so general as to suggest a larger frustration, a discomfort with an art that no longer speaks for itself but needs the theorists, the gurus, to “interpret” it for a bewildered and docile public.

Last autumn, I visited Michele Gherlarducci, Francesco Ferucci and Pietro Luridiana, the students whose lighthearted hoax had started the whole affair. They are soft-spoken, slightly shy young

men. They all grew up in Livorno and have been friends for years. Francesco’s father is a doctor at the municipal hospital, Pietro’s is a lawyer and Michele’s runs a transportation company.

“It started as a hoax, an adventure,” said Pietro, “but it ended as an object lesson. The value of a work of art is determined in the first place by the critics and curators of museums. It turned out that their judgment is very dubious.

“And we were stunned at the superficiality of the technical expertise. One expert discovered what he called ‘crusts of mire’ on the stone’s surface. It was really grass from our back lawn.” From now on, Pietro added, he would make up his own mind about what was art.

A final note: The boys’ forged “Modi 2” is now said to be worth a small fortune—a natural result, it seems, of the knots that tie art, money and showbiz together these days. There already have been several offers to buy it. 

Amos Elon is the author of “*Flight Into Egypt*” and “*The Israelis: Founders and Sons*.”

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