

PRESS RELEASE

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GALLERY HOURS:
Tue-Fri: 10:00-18:00
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TÊTE

21 February — 28 April 2023

Ordovas presents *Tête*, an exhibition of three rarely seen works on loan from private collections, centred around an exceptional limestone sculpture carved by Amedeo Modigliani (1884-1920).

The exhibition explores the myriad cultural influences that Modigliani encountered in Paris in the early twentieth century and focuses on two which had an especially profound impact on his art: Cycladic sculptures and African masks. Alongside the head carved by Modigliani – one of the most refined examples from a legendary series created by the artist – are a Cycladic marble head of the Spedos variety, similar to the example in the Louvre likely seen by Modigliani on his visits to the museum; and a Guro mask which was formerly in the private collection of Paul Guillaume, the artist's dealer, and which was also almost certainly known by the artist. Each of the three works is exhibited in the UK for the first time.

Amedeo Modigliani moved to bohemian Paris in 1906 and soon became fascinated with the diverse array of artworks and objects from non-western cultures which he frequently encountered and admired at the city's museums, including the Louvre and the Trocadéro Museum of Ethnography. While best known for his paintings, he regarded sculpture as his true *métier*. After meeting Constantin Brancusi around 1909, he moved into a neighbouring studio in Montparnasse and until 1914 he devoted himself almost entirely to sculpture, creating a renowned series of approximately two dozen heads, now regarded as among the most coveted works of western modern art. While stone could be expensive and hard to source, he was resourceful and made friends with local stonemasons who could often provide him with surplus material from building sites across the neighbourhood.

Modigliani wished to create a 'Temple of Beauty' in which the heads would stand as majestic 'columns of tenderness'. He believed that true sculptors carved straight into stone, rather than moulding from clay; his friend and patron Paul Alexandre recalled that: 'When a figure haunted his mind, he would draw feverishly with unbelievable speed... He sculpted the same way. He drew for a long time, then he attacked the block directly.'

At night in his studio, under the influence of hashish, he would often light the sculptures by placing candles on the top of each head, creating the effect of a primitive temple; rumour said he would also embrace them.

Images: Guro Mask, attributed to the Master of Bouaflé (circa 1880-1930), Ivory Coast;
Amedeo Modigliani (1884-1920), *Tête*, circa 1911-1912;
Early Spedos Variety, Early Cycladic II (circa 2600-2500 BCE), Head of a Cycladic Figure.

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The series first came to prominence when seven heads were shown at the infamous Salon d'Automne in 1912 as part of a room of Cubist paintings; the majority are now found in major museum collections including those of the Centre G. Pompidou, Paris; Minneapolis Institute of Art; MoMA, New York; National Gallery of Art, Washington; and Tate, London. Modigliani abandoned sculpting in 1914, likely due to poor health related to childhood tuberculosis and the dust which aggravated his breathing.

The influences on his art have been traced across a vast geographical range: from Khmer objects and Etruscan goddesses, to Fang masks from Gabon and Egyptian head-capitals. For Modigliani, as well as his Parisian contemporaries Brancusi and Pablo Picasso, these creations were revered as works of art and not merely ethnographic specimens. Their uncompromising willingness to reduce the human form – and above all the head – to its essentials allowed artists like Modigliani to turn their backs on the European tradition and pioneer a new art movement.

Modigliani was evidently deeply responsive to a particular group of works of the Spedos type from the Spedos-Keros Culture, which date from the so-called Early Cycladic II period around 2700-2300 BCE. He plainly relished the almost abstract simplification of the extremely fine example in the Louvre, where the long thin nose is the only feature that interrupts the unbroken expanse of the face. The Louvre's example, donated in 1873, is eminently comparable to the marble head in the present exhibition, which is on loan from a private collection, and was last exhibited in New York in the 1980s.

The taste for African art was highly developed among avant-garde artists and collectors in Paris in the early twentieth century. As well as encountering African artworks at the ethnographic museum, Modigliani knew the collections of his patron, Dr. Paul Alexandre; his neighbour, Frank Burty Haviland; and his dealer and friend Paul Guillaume. It is widely acknowledged that he was influenced by Fang pieces from Gabon, and Baule and Guro ones from the Ivory Coast. A fine Guro mask attributed to the artist known as the Master of Bouaflé (*circa* 1880-1930) is included in this exhibition: formerly owned by Paul Guillaume, and photographed in his apartment, it must have been known to Modigliani. It is on loan from a private collection and has been exhibited only once in the last sixty-five years, at Lille Métropole Musée d'art moderne, d'art contemporain et d'art brut in 2016.

The Modigliani head included in this exhibition – *Tête XVIII* – was carved from limestone *circa* 1911-1912. It is exemplary of the artist's distinctive sculptural vision, and his search for ideal beauty in the simplest of forms. One of the finest of this celebrated series, it brings together many of the most recognisable characteristics and motifs seen in other examples; the elongated face features a long, trapezoidal nose, a small smiling mouth, elongated ear lobes, and a pointed chin, with a forehead framed by a curving hairline. Having long resided in a private French collection, it was acquired by Sir Edward and Lady Hulton in 1964 and was exhibited in the following four years as part of their collection at institutions across Europe and the United States. It subsequently featured in *Modigliani et l'école de Paris* held at the Fondation Pierre Gianadda in 2013, in collaboration with the Centre G. Pompidou. The sculpture was published and illustrated in Ambrogio Ceroni's catalogue raisonnés of the artist's sculptures and drawings (1965) and paintings (1970) and has kindly been loaned from a private collection.

The exhibition is accompanied by an illustrated catalogue with an essay written by David Ekserdjian, Professor of History of Art and Film at the University of Leicester. A Trustee of Art UK and of Sir John Soane's Museum, and a former Trustee of the National Gallery and of Tate, he has curated numerous exhibitions including *Bronze* at the Royal Academy in 2012, a landmark show which brought together over 150 sculptures spanning 5,000 years from across Asia, Africa and Europe.

Further details are available on request.

PRESS ENQUIRIES

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