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Oral history interview with Enrico Donati,  
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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Enrico Donati on September 9, 1968. The interview was conducted in the artist's studio in New York City by Forrest Selvig for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

## Interview

FS: FORREST SELVIG

ED: ENRICO DONATI

FS: This is the first tape of an interview with Enrico Donati in his New York studio on Monday, the 9th of September, 1968. The interviewer is Forrest Selvig. We're sitting in Mr. Donati's studio overlooking Central Park. Now we can just converse as though this tape somehow doesn't exist. Mr. Donati, you told me that you came here for the first time when you were 27.

ED: No. I came in 1934. I was 25. And I spent three months visiting the country, particularly I came because I was interested in Indian art. So when I landed in New York by boat naturally I went directly to New Mexico and Arizona. And I started to visit the different Indian villages and tried to get acquainted with their ways of living, their habits, their art, their tools. I spent about a month with them. And I collected already at that time . . . I exchanged all sorts of gadgets that I had brought from Europe to try to collect some Hopi Indian cachina dolls and other Indian objects.

FS: May I ask you, Mr. Donati, how is it that you who are a native of Milan would have this great interest in American Indian art?

ED: There is a museum in Milan . . . there is a Natural History Museum, not in the park but in the gardens of Milan near the Cosa Venezia and I used to visit it. There were a few examples there, but just examples, maybe 3 or 4 pieces of Indian art and masks and objects and maybe one or two Eskimo objects. Then I went to Paris and in the Trocadero -- in the Musee de Trocadero -- there was a larger collection of the same things. I was mostly interested in the idea behind the objects; why they made these masks and these cachina dolls; what they were used for. And then the idea of the painting on the wood, not only the carving but the painting on the wood and the painting on their masks, on the faces, and what it meant started to puzzle me. And I couldn't find anything else in Europe with the exception of a number of books in Germany that had been published, but neither France nor Italy had anything published in Indian art. So it was -- how would I say it? It was just a crazy interest of mine to get involved in Indian art. There were two things that I was mostly interested in: one was the Indian art and the other was Eskimo art. I tried during the three months' period that I was in America for the first time in 1934 to cover this as much as I could. I traveled extensively. And I went up to Canada, to British Columbia, and up to Hudson Bay. I tried to find where Eskimo art was. I didn't really find it personally but I found traces of it. And in Montreal I found collectors that had objects, particularly ivory objects and wooden masks that came mostly from the Baffin Islands. And I started to be apassionate of this type of art. First of all, being a youngster, I didn't have the money to buy it. I only had to money to come and I had probably enough objects that I had brought along to exchange. So it was really a trade.

FS: I'm very curious about the particular appeal of North American Indian art to you other than, say, primitive art of other areas, African and so on. Why was it specifically North American Indian art or Eskimo?

ED: Well, for one thing, the North American cachina dolls are very highly painted and they're very eloquent as objects and they're very human. For me they were more human than the African masks or sculpture that were sad in a certain way. And being Italian and liking color, I found that the American art that was painted on wood had much more appeal than plain objects coming from Africa that normally were painted probably black and white or brown and white, or something, but not highly painted like the American Indian's.

FS: I see. This is, of course, after you'd been at the Accademia? You were at the Accademia in Milan, weren't you?

ED: I was not. I started with music. And I got a doctor's degree in science at the University of Pavia to make the family happy. And that was about that. But particularly I wanted to be a musician, a composer. I started to work with 2 or 3 very famous teachers in Milan. One was Amfossi and the other one was Apiani, both from the Conservatory. I was fairly good at piano. But particularly I was interested in composing. Also, since I was born in 1909, during the period in which I started to become a man and understand about the facts of life, the Fascist regime was there and everything was guided in such a manner that even the most advanced composers were not recognized by the Italian regime. They were not allowed to be played. I'm talking now about composers like

Prokofiev, Honegger, Francis Poulenc of France, and others that you probably know. At the same time as music was not allowed, let's face it, surrealism that existed in France was not allowed in Italy and was not considered art. So in consequence, the more something is forbidden, the more you are attracted to it.

FS: Yes.

ED: So as a composer I wanted naturally to get involved in that type of music that was not allowed in Italy. So I was naturally thrown out by every music school because I was composing things that were probably considered as crazy as John Cage was considered crazy here 20 years ago and who is no longer considered crazy. You know what I mean. Like Varese. He composed all his life and he had little recognition at the end of his life. The same thing! So in consequence I was so antagonized by the music teachers as well as by my family that my mother ended up by selling the piano and not allowing me to work anymore. I kept on stubbornly working and I went abroad when I was 15 years old. I went to Germany. I went to England. I went to Czecho-Slovakia. I went all over Europe. So I was aware of what was happening outside. But then when I came back I didn't have the opportunity to develop anything constructive because it was always taken apart. So in consequence I was a frustrated musician, I would say. And I was trying to create in music somehow what I tried to do later in painting -- express my emotions and put them into sound. And, unfortunately, I was completely torn apart by the regime plus the family plus Italy at that time. So it was kind of an escape for me to go abroad. I went to the Germans and to the English and to the French to try to learn something and read into them. My first opportunity to come to America was ideal because I was getting out and breaking with what was a regime.

FS: Had you already decided then . . . were you already a painter when you came to America the first time?

ED: I was always interested in painting. I had several friends that were painters. I had gone to school and learned about painting and drawing but I had never taken it seriously. I took it seriously when I went back to France from America in 1934. I stayed in France for a few years, then came back here. I went up and down with America. But basically I took it up when I went back to France. In France I joined a group of friends, musicians and composers and we all had a studio in Montmartre, up on the ninth floor with no elevator, a walkup. And in this studio that was way up on the top of this building, the name of the type of floor is mansard, just smack under the roof. We had two little bitsy rooms there and we were, I think, nine artists working together.

FS: Who were the artists? Were they Italians or Americans?

ED: No, they were everybody. There was an Italian called Cesare Brero, a composer that was fairly successful. He went to South America afterwards.

[Telephone ringing -- FS: "I'll get it." Tape runs silently for about 9 minutes]

ED: One of my teachers was Robert Hale who was teaching anatomy. I took a couple of years with him in anatomy. Then I wanted to learn about designing and I wanted to learn about script and lettering, and I worked with Trafton who was a very famous teacher at that time. He even invented the Trafton script. I wanted to experiment. I wanted to try different things. And I got involved in that.

FS: By this time you felt completely committed to the visual arts, I take it?

ED: Yes. Completely. I was involved not only a hundred percent but I'd even tried to get a job. First of all, I wasn't ready to have a show yet. Secondly, I was in the process of thinking and trying to create an idea in my head and not just to paint a painting. I didn't want to paint a painting. I wanted to paint an idea, to express an idea on canvas. I had to be ready physically to be able to paint anything so that I could paint an idea. So I went through the entire routine of school with Egas, is it, to be ready to express an idea on canvas. It took a long time before I was able to create an idea. It was a long struggle. And it was not only the technique that counted. It's not really the painting per se that counted for me. It was what am I going to express on the canvas? What am I going to put on the canvas? I started to read a lot. I started to absorb a lot of what the Surrealists were doing. And I started to meet a few artists. And I started to, let's say, develop a little library in my own head. It's by the thinking more than the working that I started to build an idea. I came across some books in which the Legend of Mandragora was for me the opening of a new world. You probably know what it's all about. Mandragora is a root . . .

FS: Mandrake root we call it.

ED: . . . that was found under the gallows nourished by the sperm of the hanged man. And this thought about the root that had a physical human connotation, let's say, born by the sperm of the dying man was like a continuation of life in a different form. Right?

FS: Yes.

ED: So, in consequence, it started to build with me the idea of life and rebirth. On one side there's the destruction of life and on the other side there's rebirth in a different form. So this started to become my metaphor: the destruction and the rebirth. I started to build a world of Mandragora. Instead of being just a world of the Mandragora, the root of the legend, mine became a more universal Mandragora, by being in other forms that I could find, perhaps maybe animals had created another form of rebirth. You walk into the forest and you pick up a root of any kind, maybe it hasn't got human features but maybe it has another type of features, maybe animal features. Maybe it's a rebirth of another type of situation.

FS: Did this interest lead you to a study of the Hindu philosophies at all?

ED: The Hindu philosophy came so much later it isn't even funny. No, I didn't make any connection with it at all. I really studied the problem of the destruction and the rebirth. It has been a part of my life for maybe 20 years. It starts by, let's say, the shell of an animal that is alive, and it dies and it petrifies, and then you find it in the form of a stone, fossil, and you break the stone and you find it's alive again. It has a spirit that continues.

FS: Also, it seems to . . . it has a great similarity to the Christian doctrine about, you know, you have to be born again in the . . .

ED: It would be a rebirth.

FS: Rebirth! The old evil man dies and you are born again as the sinning man dies.

ED: Yes. So consequently, let's say philosophically, my point of departure for creation of an idea was destruction and rebirth. And it was the Mandragora that started it all. I kept on working until I was successful in making a series of paintings that had the Mandragora as a world. At that time there . . . I don't think you're interested in knowing my historical background in my shows and what happened, but I'll tell you an interesting moment of my life. Lionello Venturi, the famous art critic, came to one of my shows, to my first show to be more specific, and he said, "You must meet Andre Breton," He sent me to Breton with a note saying, "I think this guy belongs more to you than to me," because he was a specialist in Cezanne and the Impressionists. And I met Breton and I started to tell him all about what I was thinking. Then he came up to see some of my paintings and he was interested. He was convincing in the respect that he thought it was valid. I was uncertain of what I was doing. Let's face it, I was much too young and I was not cocky enough to say this is it. He advised me to continue and to get involved more to really stay with it. I did stay with it for a number of years, and he made a preface later to my first show in a gallery. He liked my colors; he liked my blues. At that time I was doing a lot of paintings in blues. And he liked the idea of Mandragora. He liked the spirit back of it. I will say this, he was a wonderful pusher. He really pushed me to work and to produce. He came around -- I don't know -- practically once or twice a week. And we used to have lunch together practically every day. Through him I started to meet the boys. I knew a few but I didn't know them that well. I really started to get involved. I became a Surrealist with the Surrealist group for a number of years. And that was a fabulous experience because I don't know if you realize what it was for a young kid to one day walk into a restaurant and see such a gentleman like him, lean and very -- a man. He didn't look like a genius, he just looked like a man. I was having luncheon with Matta and Max Ernst and Breton and the wife of Breton, at that time Jacqueline. And Breton jumped from his seat as if he had a spring under the seat and he went over to this man who was coming in to the restaurant. The restaurant was Larre here on West 56th Street. And he bowed in front of him like it was God appearing. That man was Marcel Duchamp. He had just arrived in America. And everybody went there and -- it's Marcel Duchamp. Naturally I found myself surrounded by a bunch of geniuses, a bunch of fellows who knew it all. Between them there were, let's say, three young men, three kids; and the three naughty boys were at that time Matta, and another one with me was David Hare. David Hare at that time was a photographer; he was getting a little bit involved with sculpture. So we were the three young boys of the crowd, let's say. All the others were masters. So you just shut up and sat down and let the boys talk and try to absorb as much as you could. I want to go back to one point now that I think is something that every student in the world should know now that I'm an old man because I will be sixty in four or five months, so I'm an old man. Now I can talk. And I've told this to every student in every class in which I was a speaker or lecturer or a visiting critic or God knows what. And when a kid asks me what should I do next? How can I develop my work? my first approach to him is this: do what I did and start to become the valet of a painter. You go in in the morning and clean up his brushes and wash his dishes and empty his garbage and just stay there and watch him work and try to absorb from the beginning to the end, and learn, and shut up, and sit down, and do nothing else. But just stay there with him and listen to him and discuss with him when he wants to open up his mouth. Otherwise you just shut up. But you watch and you see how he works and what he does and how he stretches his canvas, and what happens later. How he thinks and how he puts something on canvas and then he erases it, and then he starts again and then he destroys it. And what the processes of thinking are and what the processes of painting are. For me, if I had to start again, I'd start like that. And that's what I did with Camilo Egas. That's what I did with other artists with which I was just a servant. And there I learned more than going to school in any class, even of a genius. You wouldn't learn a damn thing in school. You only learn with a guy sitting and living and eating and sleeping with him and absorbing. That's the only way.

FS: Because it's so informal, so close.

ED: Exactly. So the same thing that I would say happened to me a few years before in trying to learn how to paint, what to do, and how to express a thought on canvas. My presence in this kingdom of great personalities was just to sit there and absorb and let them talk and learn and be part of the scene like that indirectly. Because it's by helping them and by participating with them in their functions and in their exhibitions and God knows what that you were learning and getting things done. And it's in their discussions and particularly their fights, because they were fighting steadily about this or that. And it was part of the game. I mean you had to absorb what was going on. The only way really to, let's say, make a dent with them was to shut up and absorb enough so you could talk a little later. And we did a lot of things together when they were all here. Tanguy was alive. And Kurt Seligmann was alive. And everybody was always together. Kiesler was alive. And Maria Martins from Brazil was here and she was a great animator and we were always together. I have to admit that an artist has to live with artists a lot at certain times of his life; I don't say all the time but at the beginning and for number of years. It's very important that he live in an atmosphere of artists.

FS: Would you say this would be during the time when he's finding himself or evolving? Would you say that's . . . ?

ED: Evolving -- not only that but he has to converse, he has to discuss, he has to open up and he can only open up with another artist. He can't open up with a collector or a critic or a museum director or a gallery. It doesn't exist. Even today if I am in trouble, if I am confronted with a problem, I'll call up an artist friend and I'll start to discuss with him and will beg him to open up, and he will do the same with me. He'll call me and say, "I'd like to discuss this problem with you. What do you think about it, good or bad, I mean?" It's very difficult to be open with a fellow artist because you are afraid to -- not to offend him -- but to move him out into a different track and to give him ideas that don't belong and probably get him off balance. But if one knows how to talk to another artist I think there's nothing more successful than a meeting between two fellows who understand one another.

FS: But, Mr. Donati, for the young artist, the one who is just learning his way, the one who is supposed to live with the developed artist, with a great artist, and learn from him, you don't feel that that would thwart his own personal development?

ED: Let's put it this way. When you're young you participate. I think one should participate in the life of the accomplished artist by being around him, by surrounding him, by listening, by seeing what he does, and watching. At the same time you read, you participate in your own way, you express certain things when you are allowed to open up your mouth. Otherwise you shut up. Later when you feel that you are strong enough to open up your mouth then you start to create something. First of all, let's say, a professional artist who is already involved, a man who has had shows, even if he didn't have shows but is an artist, will talk to any kind of student if he feels that there is a response of intelligence and understanding. But when he will really start to open up and become a friend of that student is when he will see an accomplishment, when he will see a painting, when he will see something that has an idea, that is developed into a third dimension. How can I say it? The moment that he can present a piece of work that is even more or less valid but valid enough to start a conversation and a discussion. At that moment the artist will get involved. Is it clear or not?

FS: Sure. It is clear. I'd like to ask you another question about your interest in expressing ideas. Now was this something that made . . . was this one of the things behind your changeover from music to painting, because you could express the ideas better through painting? Did the mandrake root, for instance come after your decision to paint?

ED: Yes. That came after, but I don't think that the connection of music to painting . . . They were practically independent, I would say, at a certain moment because I was considering myself a perfect flop in music. Probably it would have been all right if I would have been given a chance, but I was kind of broken down. I didn't have the opportunity, let's say, in music, I didn't have a chance.

FS: And could I also ask you this, and this sounds rather personal, but could your interest in death and rebirth, the symbolism of the mandrake root, be tied up with some personal experience in your own life? Or why is this symbol so meaningful to you?

ED: I really don't know. I don't know what before in my life, if anything, particularly pushed me toward that. I was always questioning what's going to happen, like anybody would, in the future and the day that one dies. And basically I believe that there is a continuation in one form or another in spirit. There is a continuation. The spirit stays alive in one way or other. Now this has nothing to do with religion. I will say this: when I walk in a woods or I walk on a beach, I am just thinking about anything, it has nothing to do with what I'm looking at. It happened very often that I was just captivated suddenly by a particular stone or a particular piece of wood, a particular something that caught my attention while I was thinking about something else. Consequently it meant I would stop, I would take it, look at it, get involved with it right away, and discover something extremely

interesting that would recall certain other things. Now how can I be attracted by that particular thing in the middle of thousands of stones, or thousands of pieces of wood at least, God knows. No sir; I just stop and grab that object and look at it and my head starts thinking and working and I discover something in the back of it. So it means that there is an intangible, there's a fluid, there's a sparkle, there's something alive that called my attention to it. I happen to have found this object one day [getting an object] and this looks like a stone.

FS: Yes.

ED: It couldn't look more like a stone. The only thing that doesn't look like a stone is this ridge here that shows to me, just because I know it, and I know it now, that this is a fossil. But when I picked it up, believe me, this looked like a rock. It didn't look like anything else. Then I started to think about it and ask and later I knew that this was a fossil. Then I broke it by hitting it all around with a hammer very slowly until it broke open.

FS: It's beautiful.

ED: It's fantastic!

FS: It's just beautiful.

ED: Now this has been the inspiration of my work for twenty years of my life. And what is it? It's destruction and rebirth.

FS: Yes.

ED: It's again my metaphor, in a different way. It's no longer the Mandragora but it's alive. In consequence you go around on a beach and you find a stone between a thousand stones and you pick it up and it's alive.

FS: Why did you pick up this from all the others? This is a thing that was calling you somehow?

ED: Fluid. I would say it's fluid. Particularly it means that there is life here. There is life of some kind. I don't say you have to be religious around a stone.

FS: No, no.

ED: And I don't want to be a pagan either. But there is life here. The moment you open it you see it's alive. The damn thing is more alive than anything you've seen. Right?

FS: It's a magical thing.

ED: So this gives you a little bit of the background of the idea and basically all my life as an artist I have been trying to build, let's say, within the idea a world. My world gets started by the idea and then I create my own way. That's all. I was so involved with the idea of destruction and with the idea of rebirth that, after I started to work on the series of Mandragora paintings, I made a series of paintings that I've never shown to the public. There are probably only two paintings that I didn't sell, that I gave away; one was to Nicholas Callas, he has one; and one to somebody else who got married. At that time instead of giving a drawing I was giving a painting. My paintings were worth so little that I could give them away. And I worked for two years again on the creation of the artificial egg. I wanted to create life artificially. So I created the chambers and the metamorphosis of creation and what happens until the egg is built. I never broke that egg but I created the process of the creation of the egg. And if you like, some day I'll show you some photographs of that.

FS: I'd like it very much.

ED: Because it is a series of paintings that I never showed. I will probably show them one day in a retrospective.

FS: Why haven't you shown them before?

ED: I only showed them to Breton and to Duchamp. Breton reproduced a few in a Surrealist paper in Paris that he was editing at that time. I don't know, I wasn't ready to show something like that to the public or to the dealers or to anybody, and I only showed it to a couple of friends, that's all. I wanted to create not only the original egg but I wanted to create the twin egg. Because if I could create one, I could create the duplicate of that one. Correct?

FS: Right.

ED: So I wanted to create life artificially in a certain way. So I was involved with the . . . this was a period in which my paintings were absolutely geometrical. It was machinery and it was a real process; practically an astronomical process of creation instead of being a laboratory process of the chemist or the alchemist. But it was

like creating the philosophical stone.

FS: Yes.

ED: It was always with that kind of thinking, you see. Like the alchemist was trying to create the philosophical stone, I was trying to create the egg that would give life. So I was always involved with birth? Or is it destruction? Or is it rebirth? This has been going on in one form or another in the process of my painting for the last twenty-five, thirty years.

FS: As I say, it would be interesting to know why this theme has . . . ?

ED: Been knocking my head?

FS: Yes.

ED: I don't know. I can't tell you. I'll tell you one thing that really has been striking my imagination. For instance, when I went to New Mexico and Arizona as well as when I went to other countries -- Chichen Itza, when I went to Machu Picchu in Peru -- I always noticed, for instance, if you go to Peru, to the Museum of Lima, Santa Maria, if I'm not wrong, you will see that they created chambers of the life of each Inca god -- has his chamber -- with all that happened during his kingdom plus what will happen later. God knows, but it's there; he is still living. If you go to the Egyptians, their tombs are filled with everything necessary to live and to continue to live. If you look at the Etruscans, you find a little bit the same spirit. So I mean this is practically normal to believe in this kind of thinking. And it's not because now we accept jet planes and machines and computers and God knows what we can't be dreamers. We have to be able to live beyond that in a certain way and let our imagination grow and be sentimental about things. In other words, it's always cut and dried. There's nothing left. We'll end up with a pill. And I used to like spaghetti, believe it or not. You can cut this out.

FS: No, no. But that is a preoccupation. It is a theme that has existed apparently forever. Certainly in our so-called Christian civilization it is probably one of the basic cores for Christianity's existence.

ED: No don't forget one thing. I was born Italian. So I was born under a hood of all these legends, of all these, how could you say, facts; because that's the way it is. It's a fact even if it is a legend. Correct?

FS: Right.

ED: And even if you don't want to, you get involved in looking at things even if you don't accept them as a religion but you accept them artistically as a fact that they are there. You adore them, you love them. In front of an Etruscan tomb you are just flabbergasted by the spirit more than the art. Correct? And with the Egyptians it's the same thing. And then you jump to South America and you find it in Machu Picchu. You find it all over the world. I mean this is a . . . how could we say? I think it's a universal kind of thing.

FS: Do you think it comes from the fact that we don't want life to end for ourselves or for people we love? It's a natural thing I suppose for everybody?

ED: I think that for me as a person I am not at all involved in what is going to happen to me. Is it because I'm an artist? Is it because I know that there is some work around that probably will be there even afterwards? I don't know. But I'm not interested in me as a person. I know a lot of artists are interested in themselves and what's going to happen after they're dead. But for me "apres moi le Deluge." But I cherish the memories of certain people and I see them around me even if they don't exist anymore. I feel their presence. The moral presence, and the moral life, or God knows what it is, there are certain people that I think will never die. And I happen to have had in my life this kind of feeling for probably three or four persons. I'm not talking now . . . I went to the funeral of one of them and I didn't cry. But that person is still living. I mean it's not a question of sentimental and emotional or childish feeling like, you know, when you start to cry for the loss of something and then after that when you've cried well enough you forget about it. Whereas in this particular case I felt there was no need for crying because it was still there in me. So I think it's philosophy that you grow in yourself. I don't think you can teach that. I don't know if it's good or bad. It's what it is.

FS: I don't think good and bad are concerned with this.

ED: What?

FS: I don't think it's a concern of good or bad. These people exist in you. But they do not exist . . . you don't feel that they might return again in some other form?

ED: No. No. Whereas that object that I showed you will return in another form. The fossil that I showed you, that will come back. I will say something; if that fossil doesn't bring anything sentimental to me in the respect that I have known nothing about that fossil, it has opened a new vision.

[Telephone rings]

FS: No, I wouldn't say that it's confusing. I would say it's a difficulty in maybe making precise something which doesn't necessarily need to be made precise in meaning.

ED: Yes.

FS: It's more of a feeling than anything anyway.

ED: Yes.

FS: But then your relationship to objects around you, particularly objects such as the fossil, is quite mystical it would seem to me.

ED: Probably. I don't think about it that way. Don't forget one thing; that as an artist, as a painter, it ends up on a canvas. It ends up in a different form. It ends up in something that is probably . . . completely unrelated with the start. It develops later with the complement of color, with the dimension of the canvas that will limit you to this or that. So I mean there is a number of elements that will limit you or let you expand your thinking.

FS: Well, what you're expressing on canvas is the result of something that was stimulated by, let us say in the case of the fossil, that it was developed out of this?

ED: Yes, it was developed out of that but it goes through such an important process of . . . it's not just plain fossil, period. It develops into something more complex than that. I studied my fossil in different phases. I studied it as a closed object without opening it. So consequently I started to create the outside of the fossil. I cut the fossil in imaginary ways. I sliced it in an imaginary way and then I created again another . . . . For a number of years I would imagine what would be in that fossil. And then when I broke it open ten years after I had discovered the fossil, I made a double image of the fossil. So this went through a tremendous amount of evolution. It didn't stay there with the fossil itself.

For instance, when I started to slice my fossil I created a world that at that time was strictly like the conscience.

I made a series of paintings that I called conscapes. And this was in early 1950 and I made a complete show of conscapes. At that time nobody thought anybody would get even close to the moon. Everybody thought I was nuts. If I show you photographs of these paintings, you will see that, believe it or not, it looks like I had . . . little bit of terra cotta to these paintings. At that time I had taken the fossil and imaginarily sliced it and I had stratas of earth, stratas of moon, stratas of this thing. And maybe because I am archaeologically involved, I adore the digging; I adore the antiquity. I'm involved with that. But it started to become an antique. It started to become something of thousands and thousands of years. It was something that existed and doesn't exist anymore practically. You can only discover it up there, let's say. But we can't see it. We don't slice the earth. And we don't go down to magma. We can't. We just can't. We haven't done it. We probably never will do it. We're afraid we're going to break the earth. So we won't do it. But if you go down and down and down, like in the Grand Canyon, you can see the layers and layers and layers. So consequently I worked on my fossil to create -- how can I say this -- an interest, no, it's not even an interest, to create a situation. I started to create situations around the fossil so that I could get involved with these situations and would be part of them. Later, when I took the fossil and worked on the outside of the fossil there I was interested in reproducing the bas reliefs, the early bas reliefs that were ever made in the world. I made a series of paintings at that time that I dedicated in a certain way to Sargon, the king of the Mesopotamians who was the first king that ever had the idea to make bas reliefs on the mountains following the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. And he was the first one that was dedicated to art. So I started to build a world of bas reliefs with those types of men, those types of tools, that kind of living, but in an abstract form. So that it definitely gives you the feeling of antiquity and of thousands and thousands of years. Then later when I split the fossil I started to find an image in there. So I created a new world of the double image of the fossil that is split. And there it became script, as well as became graphite, as well as became imprints, footprints, animal prints, God knows what. I mean it started to be a world of its own again. So all of this took an evolution of thinking and developing. Let's say the fossil is the starting idea and from there you just continue to build. And it's a slow process because at times you advance with the design, or the creativeness of the design, and at other times it's only the color that advances. Is it a color that becomes stronger? Is it a color that changes completely? Or the color becomes very simple and very uniform and very -- how could we say it? Sometimes the two things don't go together. I'd been working, let's say, for several years in black and white and at that time my forms were a mixture of geometrical and abstract at the same time. I started to introduce color and I kept the geometrical form. Then I started to change from geometrical to more abstract and metaphysical. And then this relation will move little by little and you can only move out of it when you have produced so many ideas that you don't feel that you have to say anything more. You have to then change. I mean when you've had enough for your dinner, you can't eat any more; you can't gulp it down. The next thing, you don't want to eat the same thing. You have to eat something else. You're just fed up with what you've been eating maybe every day for a month. So you have to change. And it's a natural change. It comes instinctively and you move into it.



FS: Then the finding of the fossil was a kind of moment from which your whole life changed, would you say? Your artistic life?

ED: The finding of the fossil was definitely an opening. A non-opening because it started at the end of the 40's and I'm still attached to this problem. It developed in different manners. One of my problems is that, at the beginning when I am tackling a problem, an idea, it's a little confused, but then it's confused for a lot of people. Then this idea will clear up in your mind and will little by little become more a fact. The only way for me to do it is to draw it. So in the development of a thought -- of a problem -- I will not go to paint; I will go to drawing. And I will start to make fifty drawings, a hundred drawings, or two hundred drawings. I will draw it and dig into that drawing and develop that idea into the drawing. It is only at a certain moment when I really have a complete dictionary of that idea that I will be able to stop drawing. At that moment I will make a selection of some of these ideas and I will start to put them onto canvas. At the beginning there are so many ideas that will come to mind that it is very difficult for me to make a selection. The selection will come only by the drawing. And sometimes even the drawing will be complicated at the beginning. At certain moments of my different periods working on fossils or on other subjects I have been very complicated in my presenting the idea on canvas. It's only when I stay with it for a certain amount of time that I simplify that and then it's the time, the living with it, staying with it that will give me the opportunity to absorb it enough and to know exactly how I want to express that idea, that's all. But I will go from a period of complexity to a period of simplicity. And now I believe that I have, let's say, understood this process and I am probably capable of mastering it a little bit better than I had in the past.

FS: Does this mean that now you are drawing more, making more preparatory drawings than you have in the past?

ED: No, I think I do just as many as before. It isn't that. It's the thinking in the back of the drawings that I can see clearly, or more clearly with a simple drawing than with a drawing that has a complexity to it. That means in the past I wanted to put everything in it. Now I realize that I don't have to put everything in it; that the less I put the more I say. So consequently I'm reducing in a certain way the amount of expression that I put on the canvas and I try to convey the same amount of thinking.

FS: Would you say you were reducing the amount of expression? Or would you say also that you were making stronger the expression that you do use?

ED: I think that the expression I put in now is bolder and it's more valid than it was probably in certain things that I did in the past where I put much more.

FS: Mr. Donati, why don't we return to this? Would you like to break now and I can come down again and go on with the others?

ED: We can keep on for another little while while we are at it.

FS: At one point you mentioned that you had come to America and you were very interested in American Indian art and the art of the Eskimos and the Northwest Coast Indians. I was just curious when you mentioned this. Did you know Rene D'Harnoncourt then at that time?

ED: No, not at all. I didn't know him. I met him only in the 40's when I came back to America. No, I don't think I met anybody when I came to America at that time. I came as a tourist and I left as a tourist. I didn't meet an artist. I didn't meet anybody. When I went to Paris later in 1938, I was very much impressed by the Totem Pole of Kurt Seligmann and the plaster Trocadero in front of the Musee de l'Homme, and I realized that he had come before me and I was jealous. That's all. And there is a museum that probably you have visited that I became very acquainted with because all of us at that time were madly involved in trying to buy a few pieces. And this was the ...

FS: Where was this?

ED: 155th Street and Broadway.

FS: Call Heye (H-e-y-e). It's up near the Hispanic Society of whatever it was called.

ED: Yes.

FS: Heye.

ED: This man had a tremendous collection of American Indian art and Eskimo things. He had a warehouse that doesn't exist anymore. I don't know where the warehouse has gone, on the Brooklyn Boulevard going out to the island. We were going regularly at least once a week and trying to be very friendly with the superintendent of

the warehouse and trying to make some bids to obtain certain things from the Foundation because at that time in the early 40's the Foundation had so many pieces that they were willing to sell at their cost. And those two cachina dolls that are there on the right and left I probably paid \$3.21 or \$3.57 for because that is the price that it cost the Foundation to get them. So I continued in my explorations, let's say, for a number of years. At a certain moment the foundation stopped selling everything. There wasn't a chance to get any more. And now instead you find them at Calderbark and you find them around town at several hundred dollars, and not as good as that one.

FS: You know the Hebnig Museum at Harvard?

ED: Yes.

FS: Have you been in there and seen the Northwest Coast Indian art?

ED: No, unfortunately I haven't. But I've seen some catalogues that came out of there.

FS: They have some excellent things.

ED: Excellent things, yes.

FS: Then, in other words, this interest in American Indian art has been with you all of these years, hasn't it?

ED: No, it just kept on growing for a number of years and then I added to this an interest in stones and fossils and rocks that I have collected from all over the world. Everywhere I went I tried to get some pieces. You will find them around in my library as well as upstairs and anywhere. Don't forget that rocks, stones, fossils is the same world in a certain way and it's part of what I've been trying to put into my work in one form or another. I even added to my work the feeling of texture of the last fifteen or more years. And in certain paintings you really have the feeling of the stone and the engraved stone as you may find it and for me to be able to collect some of these pieces is not just to copy them because I couldn't care less. I don't just copy them but I get the feeling of how nature has created these stones and the stratification of it. And the color is very important to me naturally. But I will say that it's not mainly the color. It's the texture that interests me more than the color.

FS: Have you been conscious of the influence of the American Indian things in your work? Or inspiring your work, perhaps I should say?

ED: No, I don't think so. Maybe just a few times in the colors, but I really don't think so. No, I don't think it has anything to do with my work; there's no connection at all. I think there's much more connection in Capogrossi that lives in Rome and never came to America than me that am interested in American Indian.

FS: Speaking of Capogrossi, what about relationships with Italian artists as Italians? For instance, Catuso and people of his type.

ED: I'll tell you who my friends are. My closest friend has been Eury. I was very close to him and am close to him today because we are both involved in matier. We are both involved in a form of Abstract creation. He will cut the burlap and cut it and sew it and put it in plus God knows what on his painting and he'll make a painting out of it. I will construct it. I will make that burlap, let's say. I will do it. I will paint it. I will make it as a texture if I have to do a burlap. It's a different concept. He will find it and paste it in and sew it and use it. Not as I would but as paint in colors. And he doesn't even make it as a collage. He will make it as part of a painting. Whereas I will create my texture completely. Another fellow that I am very fond of is Lucio Fontana, who is an imaginative artist. I was very close to him at the beginning of spatzarismo. And he added my name to the list of his friends at the moment in which he started to launch the idea of spatzarismo in Italy. I exhibited with him in several shows. Another fellow artist that you have probably met is Afro. He's been to America very often and he is a very creative Abstract painter who has a large success. I would say these three probably are as painters the ones I am closest to. I know several more but these are probably the ones which I have closer friendship with.

FS: But your ties are, I would say, far more American now than they are Italian?

ED: I would say they have been more American since I came to America. I have been back to Italy exclusively as a tourist and not to work and not to exhibit, although I have shown in Italy. But my country is America. It's not my country of adoption but it's my country, I would say, more than Italy. Italy is in my blood in a certain way but America is the country that I have selected; that's all.

FS: But do you think that there are any national schools anymore in painting?

ED: I have gone through a few schools. As I told you, I was connected with a Surrealist group in Paris. And then I became part of the Abstract Expressionist school in New York. And after that I just went on my own. There is Pop art and there is Op art and there is every art that you want. I don't believe too much in schools. I believe they

are very good at the beginning to launch something and then people will go on their own. There will always be schools and people that will start an idea and people that will follow it. Is it kinetics? There'll always be a movement, let's say, that people will follow. And there's nothing wrong with that. I personally believe more in being an individualist than being a follower. And also when I participated in the Abstract school of New York and when I participated in the Surrealist school I wanted to have my own style, my own idea. I was trying to be an individualist. I don't know if I succeeded but at least I tried.

FS: Of course the emphasis on individualism is particularly strong I think among the very young artists, beginning artists, who often feel they don't need to know anything about what has been done before.

ED: It depends, because if you go to some art classes, like, for instance, if you go to Yale Art School, you will see that there are a lot of influences. There are a lot of influences including all these constructions now, all these painted constructions. Everybody makes painted constructions. If you go to Berkeley, California, you'll see exactly the same thing. And they don't have the same teachers but they see it in magazines and they think that they can do it better than anybody else and they try to get involved. Is it because it's something new and they like it? Now America has probably I would say one fault, and I blame the public more than the artist; the public always would like something new. They're never happy. They think that as they buy a new car every year they can buy a new type of painting by that artist every year. And this is typical of American life. I talk about a car but you can say anything. It's in this style. Now with art you just can't push a button and get something new every year. It doesn't exist. But in the American spirit there is this desire to look always for something new. I don't know if you agree. But this is a feeling that I have and I think in a certain way it's not right because, let's say, it influences some artists that are scared to have another show or a third show or a fourth show in a certain style because they'll be criticized. We have seen it.

FS: I do agree with you because it seems that novelty has been over-valued very often.

ED: I'll add something more. I happen to go to Europe quite often. My mother is still living in Italy. When I go to Europe people will say bring me something new from America, some new gadgets, some new things. What are the new things that have come out in America in the last six months?

FS: True.

ED: I will say that the world recognizes that America is geared for new things all the time. I don't know if it's good or bad. But in art I think that the artist should do what the hell he wants and he shouldn't have to make something new because it's asked by the public or by the dealers or by God knows who to see something new. If it's good, it's good.

FS: Mr. Donati, it has sometimes been said that the serious artist, and the dedicated artist does just what you say: goes on his own way, but the people want to cash in on the new movement or be accepted or something will change their style.

ED: That's right.

FS: I've heard this said. I also wonder whether the cachet of being at the top of the new wave is not something that is of great interest to a certain type of collector who wishes to have the newest thing.

ED: Well, I'll tell you. Having been part of the Surrealist group, I participated in the Dada movement. And I was part of the team with Duchamp and Kiesler when they built the 1947 show in Paris at Maeght. It was "Thirty Years of Retrospective Surrealism." At that show every kind of Dada gimmick that you could ever imagine was presented. We had a superstition room. I made the Evil Eye. Tanguy made something else. And Max Ernst made something else, I don't remember what specifically they did. But I made the Evil eye. I sent that Totem Pole that you see in the back there that I did with ladies' hat blocks. I presented this item to Mr. Carlebach when he was alive. I told him that I had discovered this fabulous totem pole and he was ready to buy it from me for \$1,000 and after that I started to laugh so much that he understood it was a joke. So I did all sorts of other things. For instance, those shoes that you see there painted; they are the reproduction of the Magritte shoes in the Surrealist book by Andre Breton *Le Surrealisme Et La Peinture*. On the cover there is the painting of Magritte. So I went on Tenth Avenue. I picked up a pair of old shoes. I painted the toes. And then I arrived at Brentano's for the opening of the show with my shoes. Matta arrived with a mannikin without the head. And Duchamp put the mannikin on the top of the shoes and then we had a faucet on the side with running water, and we put the book in his hands and he was reading the book without a head, I want you to know. Well, the show stayed in for about an hour. And then some people from the Salvation Army or God knows who started to complain that a figure reading a book without a head does not exist. So consequently they went up to Mr. Brentano. They raised hell and we had to move the show out. I'm telling you this not to give you the history of this show -- by the way it was put in at The Gotham Book Market half an hour later and nobody complained -- but I am telling you because I was ready to create again the same type of things when Pop art started here. Let's say it would have been simple for me to go back to that kind of thinking. But it would have been not only a repetition of what I had been

doing in the past but it would look as if I was cashing in on a movement in which I didn't belong. So I preferred to abstain by moving into something that I had done twenty years before in this part of history because you will find it in Surrealist textbooks always and stop right there. I prefer to continue in my own style of painting and don't divert and get captured by movements that may live or die. That is a question mark.

FS: How do you feel about the asserted parenthood of Dada for Pop art? So many Pop artists have claimed that Dada was the parent of it.

ED: I agree.

FS: You do?

ED: I definitely agree that the basics come from Dada, particularly the presence of Duchamp in America and the myth of his work has influenced tremendously this young generation in trying to continue something that they thought had stopped with Duchamp and to bring it back and continue something that can go on forever. I don't think it can go on forever. I think we've had it. We've seen it. We know about it. Now let's proceed in another direction.

FS: Why would it have come now, do you think?

ED: Oh, I think we needed a diversion, Abstract Expression was becoming too serious in a certain way. I don't think there was any more sense of humor. The sense of humor of the Surrealists was the Dada movement and the philosophy of the Surrealists had a tremendous imagination and they could amuse themselves and paint anything. And the freedom, the anarchism, I will say, in thinking of the Surrealists was not equalled by the Abstract Expressionists. They were more serious about it, I would say. They were more conscious of their position to capture a world that had to be conquered because at that time the art world was very limited. And I think that if Jackson or Franz Kline or God knows who would have started the formula a la Pop, that was the moment. It was right. The American artist had to show that he had enough guts to be recognized and to create a world of his own. And I think it was done very successfully. I will say one thing: I think that probably ninety percent of the Abstract Expressionists, the good names, the best names of American art, have followed a process of thinking that comes from the Surrealists and they have created in a very Surrealist way. Although they have never admitted it officially or even to themselves but they were captured by the Surrealist way of thinking. I'm thinking now about the subconscious working independently, the automation of the Surrealists. Now all this you find in the world of the Abstract Expressionists. It's called in a different manner. It's another type of world. But the methods with which it has been done is definitely a Surrealist way of basic thinking, I will say.

FS: And yet they don't recognize it and never did really.

ED: No, they were even antagonistic to the Surrealist movement in a certain way. They not only didn't recognize it but they didn't want to have any part of it. With this I would say they were morally involved in part of it. I'll give you a couple of examples. Let's say twenty years ago, Marca-Pelli had a show that was a metaphysical show a la Chirico and this, of course, was a hundred percent Marca-Pelli show and not a Chirico show. But it had a Surrealist kind of thinking. The automatism of Jackson Pollock, his automatic gesture, was certainly part of a typical thinking of a Surrealist. Even Masson when he was a Surrealist was taking the tubes and he was working with them directly on the canvas. There were paintings of his like that. And instead of tubes Jackson Pollock took cans and threw them in and threw them out and then he started to create something with it because his subconscious was getting him involved into shapes and things that became his own.

FS: How did this blossom so suddenly right after the war, though? Sort of like an injection or whatever you want to call it of a seed planted before the war. In America there were no great examples of it before the war. Yet suddenly at the end of the war in 1946-1948, this began to be done, this great Abstract Expressionist movement developed apparently out of seed sown from Surrealism.

ED: Well, the Surrealists were in America at that time during the war. There was a big confusion there because the Surrealists were all together in a group.

[INTERRUPTION]

FS: Well, we were talking about the Surrealists' presence, shall we say, in New York, in America, during the war.

ED: Yes. There was a group of foreigners, let's call them.

FS: Yes.

ED: No Americans. Probably the only one that was an American at that time was Gorky and he participated in

this group, and Matta who was a South American, not a North American. And nobody else. Motherwell I think was close to the group because he I think studied with Hart Seligmann. He worked with him for a few years. But otherwise there was no connection whatsoever between the American artist and the European Surrealist artist living here. Now I personally started to make a lot of friends while I was in New York and I felt really kind of an attraction to the American artist. I thought they were very interesting and their work was new. I started to meet quite a few and I got involved with the American boys and participated with them. I was one of the first ones to participate in The Club downtown. I organized the first annual Stable show. At that time there were Maraca-Pelli and Nikkoroni and Philip Pavia, always the same. We understood one another and had fun together. It was a young movement, very alive, with a group of very intelligent boys. It was fun to participate in it, I would say, and I enjoyed it very much.

FS: You were here all through the war then?

ED: Yes, I was here all through the war. I came back in 1940 and I have been here ever since. So with the intermission of three years that I spent in France I was here since 1934 up to now. So I've been here more than I've been in Italy in my life if you figure out my age.

FS: I was thinking of some of the other artists who were here from Europe during the war. For instance, Mondrian was here but seems not to have had a great deal of effect on American artists.

ED: Well, no, but he had a lot of effect, let's say on Fritz Glarner.

FS: Yes.

ED: Practically every major artist of the Surrealist world was in America during the war or right after the war. We had Leger. We had Tanguy. We had Max Ernst. We had Dali, and Duchamp, Matta, Gorky; a tremendous amount of talent, I can say.

FS: So that really the influence of the Surrealist movement is expressed and has been expressing itself in America in two different ways; through the Abstract Expressionists and then later on through the Pop artists, would you say?

ED: Through the Pop artists via Dada.

FS: Via Dada, yes. And then sort of feeding back to Europe.

ED: Yes. You know what I'm amazed about is that the American artists did not pick up Cubism in one way or another.

FS: The closest I can think of is Charles Sheeler and people like this.

ED: Yes, but there is no really post-Cubism adaptation of Cubism in another form officially in America.

FS: Not really, no.

ED: There may be people that have been influenced by Cubism but I don't think you can read it into a movement.

FS: You can't say that there was an American Cubist movement, then?

ED: I don't remember any.

FS: I can't think of any. It's curious because there have been American Impressionists and there have been all kinds of others.

ED: Yes.

FS: May I come back again and do another tape with you?

ED: Certainly.

[END OF SIDE ONE]  
[SIDE TWO]

FS: This is the second side of the taped interview with Enrico Donati in his New York studio. This is being done on the 11th of September. 1968, by Forrest Selvig. Mr. Donati, you said that you felt that we ought to discuss your matiere -- or would you say in Italian mestier?

ED: No. Not the metiere but la material.

FS: The material, yes.

ED: I think it has been very important in my work, in the development of my work. As I told you, I started in a Surrealist world. At that time I was painting like anybody in colors, oil paints, regular paints. Then I went to a geometrical world that was very much of a wash in black. After that I started to build an antipathy for the routine of painting. I started to want to create something -- probably the connection with the Surrealist, the connection with the Dada feeling, the Artbrücke. And it pushed me in search of a material that would be anti-painting. I have to admit that it just happened by accident that I discovered a material that started to become the base of my work for about 15 to 20 years now, but in a developed sense at the beginning. I was in search of something. And in 1948 I did a series of molecular paintings that I showed at the Iolas Gallery. I call them molecular because I used to dilute the oil paint in turpentine and pour it on the canvas flat and then I would direct the flow of the paint on the canvas allowing anything to happen. One who has done a lot of work in this direction and very successfully later was Paul Jenkins. And he still does. I did it in about 1948-1949. At that moment I started to add some coffee grains and some sand and while the paint was drying I would apply these and I also added enamels to the oils. And I used to dilute the enamels and obtain very marvelous effects with them. All this was very accidental and I had lost track completely of, let's say, any intellectual feeling in back of what I wanted to create. It was a diversion. It was just a momentary period in which I let myself go. By accident I found one day when I was cleaning my vacuum cleaner that the bag of my vacuum cleaner had dirt and dust and wool that had been collected and instead of throwing it away I took it and I mixed it with oil paints and with enamels and God knows what. I made a paste of it and I put it on a canvas, and it started to open up a new world of texture for me. I kept on using the vacuum cleaner dirt for a number of years. I naturally had difficulty at the beginning mastering the new material that I had found, and in addition I was madly fascinated by the effects that were coming out of it. And I was losing track of the main thing that was the idea. This kept on for about a couple of years until I started to be able to use the material in a more professional way, let's say, and know how to handle it. At that moment I started to make some paintings. My first painting of this type was shown at the first annual of the Stable Gallery. The title of that painting was Black Ice. And it created quite a commotion with the artists; and some of the critics picked it up right away. I was criticized as well as questioned. But it was considered valid although it was not the regular type of painting. I continued working with this material for a number of years. But then, little by little, I perfected it. At the beginning I was using only black and white; later I added pigment, color, to it in liquid form or in regular oil colors plus a binder. And then later I realized that I could put in other colors. I showed a very large canvas at the Guggenheim Museum. Sweeney picked me up in the 32 Younger American Artists at that time. There was a show. And I also showed a large black and white canvas that everybody wanted to pick at, and Sweeney had to put a guard in front because he was scared that I would sue the Museum because I would get back a painting minus a few pieces. That's all right. That also created a large commotion in the respect that it was something new that a lot of people hadn't seen. I abandoned the black after a few years and I introduced some terra cotta to the black and white. At that moment there I added to my material some sand that I colored. And then while the material was still tacky I would add some dry pigment. All this was really search and experiment. It took probably, I would say, five or six years before I could master the different techniques. After that I more or less abandoned the vacuum cleaner dirt and I replaced it with other material that I found similar, easier, less dirty. I could replace it and I could somehow still obtain the same effect. I perfected a technique of being able to make a piece of rock or a wall by using regular sand or pigment in color, color in liquid form, and then applying it to my canvas and then while it was drying I would add another pigment but in dry form that would sink in and create a kind of mural effect of wall or rock or stone that was part of my fossil image. Naturally a lot of people tried to copy me. I always worked on canvas. Other boys were doing something similar. One was Dubuffet in Paris. We had no rapport of how we were working. And when we met we compared notes. He was working on masonite and I was always working on canvas. He was working with plastics and other materials that I never used. And I was, I would say, at least successful in one direction: my paintings have never cracked. I have continued experimenting in the material and simplifying it as much as I could. And today, after so many years of working with material, I think that I have created a style around my work that means idea plus material in such a manner that now you don't look at the material anymore. At the beginning I was obsessed by the material. And my feeling is, if I have to criticize my work of that time, it is that the material was too important compared to the idea. Later the idea came back and you would see the idea done in a specific new manner, let's say, in a new way. There have been a lot of people that have used materials. And a few Japanese that have copied us.

FS: Tapes.

ED: Mr. Tapes who followed our pattern a few years later very successfully. He has done it very well. I am sure that he had seen some of my work because I could find in some of his early paintings certain traces because they had been reproduced in color in two separate books. A series of my paintings had been reproduced in... Italy, the official book that Lucio Fontana had done, in which I had seven or eight reproductions in color. And then a book done in Italy by a man called \_\_\_\_\_ with at least twenty reproductions in black and white and color. And so what I was doing was known. But it didn't bother me at all. I mean so much the better if somebody is

successful and works in the same type of medium. Again I have a feeling that the type of material that I've used was entirely different from the one used by Tapes. And I have seen several of his canvases in which the material didn't hold up as well as in my paintings. This is no criticism of the quality of his painting or the idea of his paintings. What I'm talking about is strictly technical. His is as valid as anybody else's. I have actually abandoned the original material -- not the pigments but the material with which I started, and have replaced it with others that are not just secret. It's just plain sand and quartz. Anybody can use it. I think it belongs to everybody to know how this is done. I have taught a few students that wanted to learn how to do it. I don't make a secret of it anymore. Also, because my feeling is that today, when a painting of mine goes out in front of the public that knows about my type of work, they will recognize it automatically. And it would probably not be the material as much as the image that he will recognize, although my image has probably changed and evolved within the years, let's say. The combination between the image and the material is such that I have a feeling that it's personal enough to be recognized.

FS: You apparently adopted this new material in the first place because you felt that the standard forms of painting were not . . . ?

ED: I think it was a need for my work to have a radical change. I was attracted by the idea of the anti-painting, the artbrut, or Artz, call it the way you want. I thought it was an interesting challenge, let's put it this way. And there are other artists that moved into other forms of painting, such as collage. For instance, Marca-Pelli moved from regular painting like I was doing into a collage-type of painting. So I would say that that type of painting is just as valid as mine was with other types of materials. I never used the coffees and the regular sand like it was used, let's say, by the master -- is it Picasso? Or is it during the Cubist time?

FS: Braque did.

ED: Sure, Braque. And even Tchelitchev used some in some of his paintings.

FS: That's right. And Masson.

ED: Yes, Masson. Quite a bit. I used some coffee and some sand while I was doing some of the molecular paintings but it was for just a limited time. Then it became completely another kind of texture.

FS: Masson must have made this development about the same time that you did?

ED: No, I think Masson was way before. And I have to admit my ignorance, I never saw the paintings of Masson done this way. Never. Masson if I am right also took tubes of paint and poured them on canvas.

FS: Yes.

ED: Jackson Pollock took enamel and poured it on canvas. I mean I don't say that we invented something. Everything has probably been done in a different manner. We made it our own. I have a feeling that what Dubuffet did and what I did are entirely different and they're both the same concept of texture.

FS: Now did Paul Jenkins work with you at any point?

ED: No. Not at all.

FS: Is he a great friend of yours?

ED: Yes, we are very good friends. And we discussed this. I even showed him some paintings that I made in this style. I have a little book that came out by the Pocket Museum in Paris a few years ago. In this book I'll show you there are couple of these paintings done with the molecular paintings, you see. Very, very fluid.

FS: Oh, yes.

ED: At that time when I was doing those molecular paintings there was something else I was experimenting on. I was experimenting on paper with liquid tar that is used to pave the streets. I made a series of letters that I kept and that also were never shown to the public. I've given several away to friends of mine as gifts, but never sold any. I made a large book that I still have and on every page is a different letter. And every letter is addressed to a different friend. I wrote a letter to Matta, as well as to Jackson Pollock, to Duchamp, and to other friends. And by the character and the style of the calligraphy one can recognize the person to whom I wrote the letter that I never sent. But I showed it to these boys and we had fun commenting about it. I took just regular melted tar and then poured it on canvas and then airbrushed it on the top and obtained some very strange effects. Now this type of calligraphy -- not the one that meant the work of the friends to whom I was writing a letter but the one that I made for myself, the letter that I was addressing to myself, had my own calligraphy. Correct? That type of calligraphy helped me to introduce a certain amount of calligraphy into the textures of the work when I started to work on big walls of fossils. I added part of that calligraphy. I didn't go out and look at those letters but I had it

in me because I had done enough to feel it and not to just go out and copy a page that I had done ten years before. I feel that my work has been, and still is, based upon experimenting and the experience that I have put in now is years of work. Very often somebody will ask me how long it takes me to make a painting. I'll tell them thirty years it took me to do this painting. Even if I made a painting overnight, it's a mixture of all sorts of things within you that you get out all probably in one lump at a certain moment, or certain things come out.

FS: Do you know what is coming out while you're doing it?

ED: I told you in our last meeting that I do a lot of drawing. And I study my drawings after I make them. I create, let's say, all these drawings. Partly they are very much thought out. But part of them are very much automatic. And then I will study them and maybe do new drawings using certain elements of one and putting it into another. At the end of it I will try to make the composition that I think is just right in the drawing itself. And it's only after I have done a lot of drawings that I'll go back to work and paint. I will not just take canvas to go to work on. Consequently, I don't copy the drawing on the canvas, but I will take the feeling of the drawing, that is if I feel it. Or it may happen even that I will blow up my drawing into a canvas. That may happen, too. The colors will be entirely different. The texture on the paper doesn't exist. But it will turn out to be something that you will recognize as part of that drawing. At some other time while I work it may move out completely into another world.

FS: What makes you decide you've reached the point where you are through with the drawing?

ED: I don't say I'm through with drawing. While I paint I keep on drawing separately as practically a routine of my work. Like a pianist will do the scales every day, I think that an artist has to keep on drawing.

FS: So drawing you feel is important to a painter?

ED: I feel it is the key of the ideas and is the key of the painting. I think any painter can paint well or badly; that if he paints badly he can learn to paint well. And sometimes he paints badly and you can see that it's badly painted but it's probably very good painting, too. Even if it's badly painted and the idea is there that gives you the feeling of an important piece -- it can create a great impact I think, even if it's not very well painted. A man like Picasso could sometimes do better than he did. Knowing his draftsmanship and what he can perform, you probably expect from him perfection of quality in paint. Sometimes he just leaves something unfinished that gives a special quality to the painting that is sometimes what makes that painting. I'm scared very often that I will fatigue a painting because I continue working too long and then it loses a certain amount of freshness.

FS: When you say "fatigue" you mean over work it?

ED: Yes, overwork it, and I'll tell you one thing. It is very dramatic and very difficult to decide when to stop working on a painting. Sometimes instinctively you know you shouldn't touch it anymore. And you put it away. Sometimes you go back to it later. Sometimes you ask a friend to look at a painting and he'll influence you and tell you, oh, this is plenty; don't touch it anymore; you're going to ruin it. It's just right. There are certain things that you would like to add, that you would like to take off that are absolutely unimportant at a certain moment, that nobody will see but yourself. And they're not going to add anything to the painting. They'll probably destroy the freshness of the painting.

FS: Do you ever put a painting aside and then go back and look at it again with the idea that you might continue on with it?

ED: Well, half an hour before you came I was destroying a painting that I made three months ago.

FS: You were doing what?

ED: I was destroying a painting.

FS: Destroying it!

ED: Yes. I took everything off of that painting. And it was quite a good painting. But my mood is different today. I looked at it about two hours before you came and I just couldn't live with it anymore, so I decided to scrape off. If I can do that probably I will be able one day to turn out good painting. But, if I don't do it, I think I'll turn out lousy work.

FS: If you don't destroy something?

ED: If I don't destroy something. If I consider that every painting I make is a masterpiece I should stop working because it doesn't exist. I mean it's not right. You have good things and you have to select, you have to be sure that you're doing something valid that you can sign. Too many times when you're younger you feel that everything you do is a masterpiece. When you get older you become more selective. You criticize your own



work.

FS: I haven't seen this painting, Mr. Donati, but you felt it was a good painting but it wasn't right with your mood now?

ED: Yes.

FS: By this "mood," you mean . . . ?

ED: It was colors more than shapes. It was just that it didn't go. I didn't feel that it was valid. There are other paintings that I made three months ago, four months ago, that I have there that I am very happy with and I am not going to change. But this particular one I just wouldn't have sent out.

FS: Now what about, say, a painting that was bought ten years ago by a collector or a museum which you might see now and feel was not right? Does this happen?

ED: It has happened but not so frequently. I have to admit I've probably been more impressed, I will say, believe it or not, with certain things that I twenty, twenty-five and more years ago that I forgot completely. I'll give you an example. About three months ago a detective called me up and he said, "I'm from the Criminal Department of the Police in New York and I'd like to come to interview you for a painting that we have discovered in the house of a lady. She had disappeared and we don't know where she is or how she got your painting and we believe that this painting has been stolen because there's something phony about it. The frame has one title on it written in pencil and we don't know how come the painting has a different title. The frame had a title and the painting had a different title and was signed 'Donati,' done in 1947-1948." So they brought me my painting as well as other paintings to ask me if I could recognize who had done the other paintings -- if they were friends of mine, or if I knew anything about those paintings. I didn't recognize anybody in those paintings. They were just anonymous individuals. Nothing. But when I saw my painting I not only recognized it but I fell in love with it again. I was fascinated by this painting that I had done at that time. And I asked this detective if I could buy it back. He told me, "No, because we don't know to whom it really belongs, we don't know if this person has disappeared, or is dead, or what happened." In any case, I was in a certain way shocked by this painting. I was shocked at the idea that I was painting that way at that time with glazes, with impastos entirely, authentic of that time and very much in the style of that period, let's say. But I liked that painting tremendously and I would have liked to have had it back and was very sorry not to be able to buy it. It so happens that later I read in the newspapers that the woman was found dead and it seems that she had a boy friend that was a gangster of some kind. I have never succeeded in finding out, nor did the detectives, how the hell she got my painting because neither her name nor anybody's name that they submitted to me registered in my mind. And now the painting is gone. I have a vision of the painting today, but that's about it. And I regret not having it. So even if my style has changed, even if my thinking has changed and I have evolved, I may still appreciate something that I did twenty years ago and that I struggled to do and with certain other things probably I would have a different type of reaction. I can't tell you.

FS: Has it all been a relatively consistent progression, would you say?

ED: Yes, I would say so. I moved out fast when I was young and I had a fairly fast success. But then I realized that if I was going to be an artist, a professional, I was going to think more and take it easy and move with my work and try to have my work move up my name even if it went slowly. But the idea to suddenly become a master and then afterwards create monstrosities was scaring me to death. I prefer to grow very slowly and probably never die a master, but at least do the things I want and be happy.

FS: I suppose there would have been pressure on you to produce as much as you could at that point?

ED: At that point I had a dealer which was Durand-Ruel, a French dealer here on 57th Street, with whom I stayed for about eight or nine years until they closed the gallery and went back to France. They had Milton Avery and they had, oh, what's the name of the English printmaker? Bill Hayter. I brought in Bill Hayter, but I went in there when they had Milton Avery. Milton Avery was there before me. I joined Durand-Ruel in the early 40's and left in about 1947-48. They weren't interested in anything else naturally than just selling. And if I had done a series of paintings that were blue and that were saleable, "Enrico why won't you do six more paintings that are blue?" And the first time that I was told this I was a little bit impressed by the idea because I had practically no money and I was struggling along. So, all right, I'll go ahead and make another blue painting. I made the blue paintings and I remember telling Herbert Alpers who was at that time the director of the Durand-Ruel Gallery that I had no more blue paint; I'm through with the blue paint and now they're going to be red. He was very furious with me and he invited me to lunch to make me understand that if the Gallery wants blue, they want blue. So I said "Listen, the Gallery may want blue but I just have no more blue colors in the studio, and I'm going to make red paintings now. And that's that." And we had quite a bit of struggle then. But I realized that if I let myself be taken in by the desire of selling a pleasing and easy color, I would definitely be used by the Gallery and I wanted instead to use the Gallery myself as a way to convey my work to the public. Because I was under contract was

no reason why I had to do a, b, c. I have to admit that this is a tendency of dealers in general. They think that they can sell this type of painting and that they cannot sell that type of painting. Even today I will make a certain type of painting in colors that will probably sell and they have sold and the dealer will tell me, "Mark, why don't you do more in this style?" Basically that's the moment at which I feel a restriction and I feel like going backwards and doing something else. Just like a child when you tell them not to touch this but he wants to touch it so it's exactly the opposite.

FS: Isn't this because the dealer knows what he can sell?

ED: Yes, I think the dealer knows what he can sell.

FS: That's the merchandising aspect of it.

ED: Although my dealer of today is very intelligent. He was a painter himself so he realizes this and there is a close relation of friendship and understanding. And I have to admit that at times I have asked him to come and look at certain paintings and asked his advice. But very often the painting that he doesn't like is the first one that he sells, you know. And fortunately, when I have a show with my actual dealer, he has never limited me to send up the paintings that I want to show.

FS: He has never limited you to what?

ED: With the number of paintings or the type of paintings to send up for the show. He lets me send what I want to show.

FS: I see.

ED: And he will probably say that this painting cannot be hung because there's no more space or it doesn't fit or something. But he doesn't say, "I don't like this painting; take it out." I mean it's very seldom that I hear something like that.

FS: In other words, his approach you feel is more an aesthetic approach than a merchandising approach.

ED: Absolutely, yes. He is that way. Staempfli was an artist and he was a museum director.

FS: Staempfli?

ED: Yes, George Staempfli. And basically he has been connected with art all his life. And now he is a dealer but he has the knowledge of how the artist responds and how he creates because he has been an artist himself. So this is very helpful.

FS: Yes. I've heard this said and it brings up the question in my mind. Do you feel that dealers do exert a strong influence on the development of art?

ED: It depends on the dealer, but very few.

FS: Very few you feel do?

ED: Yes. Very few.

FS: What kind of a dealer would?

ED: I think a man like Curt Valentin was a great dealer. Curt Valentin was a master dealer. Although I don't think he influenced anybody. But he was of the caliber to be able to help an artist.

FS: You mean because of his critical abilities?

ED: Yes. His critical abilities. I think George Staempfli in his own way is capable to help and criticize an artist. And George has tremendous knowledge about sculpture. He has very good sculptors.

FS: He's had quite a number of good sculpture exhibitions.

ED: Yes, he has. He has a limited number of painters. I have a feeling that he's been successful with most of his artists. I would say he is successful.

FS: He showed a lot of California artists, Bay area.

ED: In the past, but not so much anymore.

FS: What about museums and museum directors and so on? They often seem to influence the development of art. Or it is said that they do.

ED: Some museum directors. I think that the museum directors are too involved with the mechanics of the museum. I hate to say this to you with your background.

FS: I couldn't agree with you more.

ED: But they have problems that are absolutely of an elephant magnitude, such as in one direction they have to create a show, a solid show that stands valid to artists first and to collectors later. Correct? Then, number two, they have to get this work together. At the same time they are requested by the trustees or God knows who at the museum to go out and get the monies to put up the show, or to get some paintings as gifts. And they have a tremendous burden that comes in from all directions. How can you do both things at the same time? We have a dealer who goes out and sells. But the museum director should be relieved of the duties or the effort that he has to put in in going out and securing gifts of money and paintings or God knows what for the museum. A man of integrity and the quality of Alfred Barr, with all that he has to do at the museum, has to go out and look at paintings from this trustee or that trustee or this collector or that collector because it's part of his duties. And they have to find somebody to buy that painting to give to the museum. Otherwise they don't have the allocation there. Now I think that's too much to ask of an intellectual because basically the curator of a museum is somebody very close to being an artist himself in a different manner. It's like us going out and digging for a sponsor. It's the same thing. It's not the role of the artist. It's the role of the dealer or God knows who.

FS: You certainly have very clear idea of some of the problems of museums.

ED: I do in the respect that I see the difficulties with which some of these boys have to struggle to be able to put things together. An example is a very good friend of mine. I can name him because he is a great person, a great historian and he was a professor. It's Peter Sells. Peter Sells today has a tremendous job to accomplish at Berkeley in California. They're going to build a museum. I think the monies are in the bank to build the museum but Peter Sells has to put paintings into the museum. And that is quite an achievement if you can do it. He is running around the country while the building is being built to try and get the monies, the gifts of paintings, the sculpture, to create a museum. And that's very difficult. And I think he does it very successfully.

FS: This little book that he wrote the preface for, or did he do the whole book?

ED: Yes.

FS: Was this based on an exhibition here?

ED: No, no. It was based strictly on an historical . . . . It's a little book telling the story of my work. We worked together for months and months to try to dig up all the dates and the elements of what I did in the past when I was very young. I kept very few records of my work and it was very hard to put together certain dates and certain facts. Later on you feel that there are certain things that are very important and that you have to write down. But at that time I just didn't care. And Peter was excellent because he didn't make a preface to this book that is a philosophical or intellectual dissertation but is really an analytical historical preface. So that if people are interested in knowing certain facts, they can find them there. And the photographs are there to explain part of his text. Now we all know perfectly well that people don't read. They just look at photographs in a book. And it's a shame; it's a pity. But that's the way of it.

FS: Of course, many people feel you can learn the important things about an artist by looking at his work, going from one painting to another.

ED: Yes, but it's very important to know why he did it, why it came at that time, why he changed, what happened. I mean it relates you more to the individual by knowing the background of his life at that time. I traveled around the world and went to India and Japan and the Orient. And then later I started to make a series of paintings in which there are certain colors that definitely came out of my trip. And they came out instinctively without being forced by anybody.

FS: Simply that when you started to use your palette you chose some others instinctively?

ED: Instinctively. I had seen certain colors that were just fascinating to me and they came out again; and that's that. I remember a particular green that came out in certain paintings after I went to Cambodia that was just sensational. I mean greens that I had never seen before in my life. Or that probably I had seen but that didn't strike my imagination as much as they should have. And then suddenly I saw them in Cambodia and I fell in love with green, with that type of a green. It must be, you know, something sensational.

FS: Yes. Cambodia is tropical, isn't it?

ED: Yes, very much so.

FS: It would be very lush, I suppose?

ED: It's very tropical and it's very wild. I went to Angkor Wat. Tom and I stayed there a few days. You get to Angkor Wat by plane from Phnom-Penh. It seems that if you come by car you may stop around certain lakes where there are wild animals of every sort, every sort, from elephants to snakes to -- oh, I don't know if there are tigers or lions, but I am sure there are animals of that type. So it's really wild.

FS: You with your great interest in nature, your particular affinity for nature, I would think would find this especially moving.

ED: Oh, I was extremely moved by the visit to Cambodia, much more than by Thailand, much more so than by Japan. My wish is that I can go back to Cambodia one day. I think it's absolutely sensational. I think every artist should go there.

FS: I think I'd like to ask you whether . . . . As we were talking yesterday you mentioned your sense of relatedness to the fossil you discovered on the beach, all of this to the world around you. How do you feel painting in New York City which is very much a man-made environment?

ED: As you see, this studio . . . . First of all, if you look out of the window, you can see just grass and trees and the end of the world.

FS: You see Central Park.

ED: Yes. So I mean I don't hear noise. I like to work at night in this studio. And I'm in another world. Then I have surrounded myself, as you see, by my stones and masks and objects and things so that I'm absolutely distant from what goes on. I believe it's another world. This is my world and the one outside I don't even think about when I work. I don't recognize it.

FS: Have you ever felt moved to make any social comments in your paintings on events of today as to the times?

ED: No. No. I feel that it . . . . You're talking now about what happens with these artists who are doing Op art or the machines or the kinetics?

FS: Yes.

ED: No. I will say this: that I prefer to remain in my world and not to be influenced by what other artists are actually doing successfully or what the world is asking for. Today, of all the galleries in New York, there are very few galleries that will show a painting. They'll show an object. They'll show something that moves or screams or plays or lights or makes a noise of some kind. And I still believe that there is a place in the world for painting. And I think I should stay within my world, and that's that.

FS: Why would you say that it's so rare that galleries would show paintings?

ED: If you look around today . . . is it the Sidney Janes? Is it the Castrelli's? Is it the Stable Gallery? Is it God knows who else? I mean they are all involved in all sorts of other directions. They want to be, let's say, up to date. And they're probably perfectly right. And I consider that valid. I go to see those shows. I'm interested, But I don't want to be involved personally in my work. I have in these last two years moved into sculpture. I moved into bronze. I moved into stone and plastic and I will go along with the newness of the type of material to be used. Is it that plastic today is something that can be used for sculpture? I've been trying. I've done two pieces in plastic and I think I'll do some more. But I still will do a few in bronze. I still will carve some stone. And this gives me enough to be happy and to be busy. And, while I do some painting, I like to do some sculpture at the same time.

FS: You also do drawings for the sculptures as you do for your paintings?

ED: No, not so much. I have done some, but not so much. I work in a very unorthodox way. You can see a few pieces here, and I have quite a few other ones. I work in Plastilene. I don't work with an armature. I make my own armature in my own way, maybe with cardboard or pieces of wood. I don't construct it probably like the authentic sculptor does. I don't want to. I'm not interested in learning that method. I want to do it my instinctive way. And I think I have enough courage to tackle the problem. I don't know if you will see by these pieces of sculpture that basically there is a feeling of my paintings in it.

FS: In this one certainly, yes.

ED: In this one particularly. And I have several like that, different motifs. So I mean I am within my own world in another ground. I have done some lithographs as well as etchings. But I'm not fascinated too much by lithographs.

FS: When did you first begin sculpture?

ED: Oh, I made that piece of sculpture that you can see up there -- it's that fist with the eyes -- for the show of Maeght in Paris in 1947 for "Thirty Years of Surrealism" And then I made a number of objects. Then I made a bronze that I never got back from Maeght, and I'm very sorry I never got it back. It just disappeared after the show. I didn't do anything from 1946 to 1965, and then in 1965 I went back to do some sculpture. I started to make several pieces. Now I work in both ways. I haven't shown my sculpture. Yes, I showed it once in Detroit at the J. L. Hudson Gallery. And I showed a piece at the Whitney Museum at a sculpture show annual last year. And that's about all. I have seldom shown my sculpture. I like to do it and I have done maybe twenty, thirty pieces, now more probably. I have them all. I haven't given them to the Gallery. I'll probably give one or two or three when I feel ready. For the time being I'm just experimenting.

FS: You've never had any desire to reach the sort of middle ground between painting and sculpture, I don't know what you call it, but construction or whatever it is?

ED: The constructions of painting?

FS: Yes.

ED: The wood painted and so forth?

FS: Yes.

ED: No. That doesn't attract me at all. I consider that something that is neither fish nor meat. It's not painting; it's not sculpture. Maybe I'm entirely wrong, but I don't have any affinity for it, let's put it that way. I don't feel like doing it. There are a few pieces I've seen that I enjoyed very much. Is it Stella, or is it Kelly -- Ellsworth Kelly has done. But I don't have it in me to do that. You see, in my work you find on the canvas the bas relief. So my natural in sculpture is to do the bas relief. I add to it other pieces that are not bas reliefs. But basically I feel very close to the bas relief because it's a part of my regular work. It's not an effort. It's part of what I'm doing on a canvas.

FS: You can't explain why you went back to sculpture then?

ED: Oh, I think I went back as a natural exclusively on account of the-- because when I do a painting a lot of people say this is a piece of sculpture. It has a sculptural feeling, texture. So consequently it was a little bit of a natural. But altogether I think that I am a painter. I've never been a sculptor. And I will do it like a lot of painters do sculpture. But I don't think that I will be a sculptor that will do paintings.

FS: I understand.

ED: I have seen more painters who have done good sculpture than sculptors who have done good paintings.

FS: I wonder why that would be.

ED: With the exception of Giacometti who was unique even as a painter.

FS: I wonder why this would be, though?

ED: I really don't know. Probably it's because of the dimension that they're working with that they don't find on the canvas. The flatness of the canvas

END OF INTERVIEW

kills certain things that they have as an instinct as a sculptor. But if you look around in the past, too, there are very few sculptors -- there's a man, Marino Marini, who makes a painting, certainly not of great class. He may do a marvelous drawing but it won't be a masterpiece of a painting, whereas in sculpture he is something else.

FS: Superb.

ED: The only case I think that I know of, or that I remember now -- maybe I forget someone -- is Giacometti. To me Giacometti was ambidextrous.

FS: Yes.

ED: He could use both hands, let's say. He could write with both hands. Picasso can write with both hands, but he is a painter.

FS: Yes. What did you think of that Sculpture Show at the Modern?

ED: I think it's sensational. Absolutely sensational.

FS: Fantastic.

ED: I'm sorry I'm not Picasso.

END OF INTERVIEW