



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview with Alfeo Faggi, 1963  
Aug. 1

**Contact Information**

Reference Department  
Archives of American Art  
Smithsonian Institution  
Washington, D.C. 20560  
[www.aaa.si.edu/askus](http://www.aaa.si.edu/askus)

# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Alfeo Faggi on August 1, 1963. The interview took place in Woodstock, NY, and was conducted by Dorothy Seckler for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

## Interview

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is Dorothy Seckler interviewing Mr. Alfeo Faggi in Woodstock, August 1st, 1963. Mr. Faggi, I wondered if you might begin by telling me something about your earliest memories of your childhood in Florence and what there was in your background that attracted you toward art, which I assume began in your childhood.

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes. Yes. Well, first on my mother's side of it. There they are 1200 Florentines - 1200, they are registered ...

DOROTHY SECKLER: Since 1200?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes, since 1200. And the name was Tarquinia. You know a few years ago there was an ambassador in Washington with the same name - it is very rare. Even in Florence there are only a few left.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And "Faggi" was your father's name then?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes, Faggi, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Your father was an artist himself, wasn't he?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes, he was a fresco painter, yes; a good one too. He gave me my first instruction, I think. I went to school, day school and in the afternoon Daddy bought some crayons and said, "Alfeo, you ought to do this and do that." He gave me a few instructions and after a while I began to work by myself.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How old were you when you had your first art instruction there?

ALFEO FAGGI: I was about five years.

DOROTHY SECKLER: When you were five years old!

ALFEO FAGGI: Oh, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Then you didn't have to go to an ordinary school? I mean you didn't go to a regular public school at all?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes. I went for four years and after that I was so bored I said, "Mother, I can't go there any more."

DOROTHY SECKLER: You were interested only in your drawing?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes, and sculpture, yes. Well, the school there at the time was much more simple. There were only 30 students and they pick out the best and they sent the others out of public school; they don't keep them. Just the same as in the Academy, they don't keep them.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. What was the name of the school that you went to, the first one?

ALFEO FAGGI: It was near Florence, it was called Sesta Fiorentino, five miles from Florence.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mr. Faggi, do you remember seeing works of art there around you in Florence or at the school where you studied that were important to you?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes, oh, yes. Sure. And naturally my - first I walked five miles, I'd get up at five, like I'm doing now, I walked five miles to go to the Academy and after working all day long - Mother prepared a little lunch and came back five miles again and went right straight to bed - naturally I was worn out working all day long and that ten miles. It was a good discipline.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Is that school still there? The Accademia Belle Arti?

ALFEO FAGGI: Oh, my goodness, yes. I know many people from Woodstock that went there for a little while, but

they don't want to begin from the ground, they want to go to the life class right away. They will not do that; you had to be remarkable. As I told you, Modigliani was there, one of the best artists of today, of the 20th century. I mean they are not jokers there. They take things very seriously.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Modigliani was studying drawing at the time, wasn't he?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: In the life class?

ALFEO FAGGI: Life class with me, there were about 200.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How old were both of you at the time?

ALFEO FAGGI: Well, I was about 16, 15, something like that. He was 18, he was two years older, yes. And after that he went to Paris. As a matter of fact, one day at life class - in the life class every hour the model rested for an hour - and I went outside and there were beautiful gardens around there and I saw a man who really made an impression on me. I asked somebody, "Who is that man, that young man," - in Italy they don't discriminate age, they discriminate this is a woman or this is a man. And they said, "Modigliani." Oh my, how young, but he looked like he would be a great artist.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You liked his drawing?

ALFEO FAGGI: Oh, yes, oh, yes. Right away he was an artist, there was no question about it. You could see from the life class. I dropped in to see him many times at the life class. I studied for five years anatomy and I got the first prize under the great anatomist Keerugi.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

ALFEO FAGGI: And one day -- I tell you a very funny thing -- a friend of mine made a little, an exact little tiny noise, it was not a very offensive noise, but anyhow the professor stopped, studied him. I said to this friend of mine, "Be careful. Do you know what he does, this Professor?" "No, I don't." "During the examination he will ask you a question and you will fail." And he did it; exactly six months after, he asked the question in the place in which he was disturbed. Isn't it extraordinary? I mean an amazing capacity to retain.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. I understood from your article I was reading that you had during your study of anatomy gone to a hospital there.

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes, absolutely. Every week, every Friday, yes. There were medical students too in the same room.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. Was that something that you went into rather early or at a more advanced stage of your studies?

ALFEO FAGGI: Well, I thought it was important to know, as I said, the machinery of every magnificent organ. You've got to know it, you've got to know osteology, the study of the bones and muscle applied over the muscle. And you have to know the mechanism of all these wonderful things. To me, today, it is really a very great tragedy because everyone wants to begin from the top but they will never get to the top until they know the base.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. So you studied drawing and anatomy?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Your sense of composition, as we were saying before, must have come from seeing the works around you?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes. I went every day practically to the Museum; the thing that especially impressed me was Giotto. Even today.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Today he's still your great ...

ALFEO FAGGI: Oh, yes. There isn't any better artist. Giotto and Dante they were the same mentality in composition, in design, and in imaginative force, to my mind. The people that came after, they were great draftsmen, - I don't mean anything derogatory - but they have not the purity of their approach. Even Leonardo hasn't got it. Leonardo got a great deal of things but they are not art.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Science.

ALFEO FAGGI: Science. Art is a different thing. As a matter of fact the early drawings in Florence are better than all the work put together, to my taste. They are very tiny but have great purity, a great plastic sense; tremendous plastic sense. More than Michaelangelo. Or anybody.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Since you admired Giotto so much when did you decide not to be a painter but to turn towards sculpture?

ALFEO FAGGI: Well, I don't know, I don't know. There's a place in the Academy, you see, there's a point, during the first three years we studied the general things, geometry, architecture and some science and after three years -- and I got all the prizes there -- and they asked you, they said, "Specialize, what are you going to be: are you going to study painting or sculpture or architecture?" "No, I want to be a sculptor." And I was the only one who passed the examination.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So then did you begin to work under a master sculptor there?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes. Well, he was not a master but he was a good technician; yes, very good technician. Well, another thing, the impression I got was this: naturally, he knew my work had already made a little impression and he saw I got the prize there. Well, there was a fellow who wanted to come and the Professor began to pick on him. I said, "Professor, you will not do that in front of me. He is a friend of mine and you will not do it. If you don't like his work, correct it, but don't poke fun at him." "Well, what do you think I ought to do," he said, "with that face he will never be an artist." "Well, I don't know. How do you know that?" Giotto went to the mountains to find strange people. Well, anyhow, he said to this friend of mine, I'll give you a chance for this year for a month. A month. Okay. Okay. My friend drew a life size half of a figure, half of a subject. Well, after a month the Professor came over and he said, "Faggi, you see I was right. I gave him a chance and he wasn't able to do it." And after I had to begin all by myself, there was no other student.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You were the only sculpture student at that time?

ALFEO FAGGI: At that time, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What was the name of your teacher there?

ALFEO FAGGI: Well, you don't know it. He's not well known. He was a good man in his field, you know. You know they do those terrible monuments in the piazza, those terrible things? I always turn my face from some of them when I go by, I don't look at them. They make me sick. They look like a billboard in hard material. Well, they're ridiculous. He never asked me what I thought about his work then but later, one day he said. "Faggi, I want you to come and see my work." I told him exactly what I thought of them. I never mince words. I never will say anything that is not correct.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Where did you go after your study with this man?

ALFEO FAGGI: I took my studio, I worked by myself.

DOROTHY SECKLER: In Florence?

ALFEO FAGGI: In Florence, yes, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And did you get some commissions there?

ALFEO FAGGI: No. I began to exhibit in national shows, I showed in Belgium, I showed in Venice, I showed in all ...

DOROTHY SECKLER: Do you recall what year it was when you had your first show there, or anywhere?

ALFEO FAGGI: I think it was in 1920 or something like that, approximately -I don't know exactly.

DOROTHY SECKLER: By the way, while we're on dates we haven't your birth date yet. Would you like to ... ?

ALFEO FAGGI: No, because people pick on those things first and after they don't read the article. I'll go ahead if you don't mind.

DOROTHY SECKLER: No, it's all right. So you had your first shows then in the 20s?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And you were established in a studio in Florence?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes, by myself.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How long did you work there? What were the next important events in your career there?

ALFEO FAGGI: Well, one important event; Mrs. Faggi came to visit, at the time she was Miss Butler.

DOROTHY SECKLER: She was from this country?

ALFEO FAGGI: Oh, yes. This is her picture.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, I wanted to look at that photograph again. What was her first name?

ALFEO FAGGI: Beatrice Butler Faggi. Beatrice, like in Dante's "Beatrice."

DOROTHY SECKLER: And she came to Florence as a tourist or as an art student?

ALFEO FAGGI: No. She visited her sister. The sister and her husband came from Holland and they wanted to stay in Florence. Dr. Stuart was a court dentist in Italy and in Holland. They like to stay in Florence and Beatrice every spring came to see her sister. One day Mrs. Stuart told me "my sister arrived from America and she wanted very much to meet you, very much."

DOROTHY SECKLER: So that then your romance began and you were married in Florence?

ALFEO FAGGI: No, we married in America, in '16.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Then we have to find out how you happened to come to America.

ALFEO FAGGI: Oh, yes! Commissions. I got commissions, you know.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How did that happen? And from who did the commissions come?

ALFEO FAGGI: They liked my work.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It came from Chicago, of course ...

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: ... from the Chicago Institute of Fine Arts?

ALFEO FAGGI: Probably. I don't know. I got the commission, I came over here to do it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

ALFEO FAGGI: Instead of doing it in Florence they advanced me the money to come over here

DOROTHY SECKLER: Do you know who was the person who contacted you to do the commission from this country?

ALFEO FAGGI: Well, Mrs. Stuart.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Who was a relative of your wife?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes. She was her sister.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What year did you come over. You told me, I think it was in 1916?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes. Oh, no, no. In '20. '20.

DOROTHY SECKLER: 1920? You came to Chicago first?

ALFEO FAGGI: First, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And when you came did you expect to stay here?

ALFEO FAGGI: Oh, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And your wife, of course, came with you and you settled in Chicago, I assume?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes, I did.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And the commission - was that first commission for the 14 Stations of the Cross?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes. And that's why somebody from Woodstock - Mrs. Schutze -she was a wonderful photographer; and Professor Schutze was Professor of German in Chicago University.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And they saw your work in Chicago?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And they invited you to come to Woodstock at that time?

ALFEO FAGGI: She said, "I think you'd work better up there." She told me, she told Mrs. Faggi, "It's more quiet, and more simple." And so we did.

DOROTHY SECKLER: When did you come here permanently? I suppose it was in the early '20s?

ALFEO FAGGI: In the early '20s, '21 or '22.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So you must have spent about a year in Chicago possibly, before you came here?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes. yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Would you like to talk a little about the commission itself, the way you imagined the 14 Stations and how your work compared with the work of other sculptors at that time? I imagine it must have seemed very revolutionary.

ALFEO FAGGI: It was. They were afraid to open the church. I mean after they realized they were a work of art they did.

DOROTHY SECKLER: At first they felt it was so modern and ...

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes. Absolutely! They don't know what to make of it. Those people are dumb, no brain at all - no visual brain - nothing there. Anyhow, it didn't make any difference to me and I never asked any sympathy from anybody.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. Your work then from the time you had your studio in Florence ...

ALFEO FAGGI: You ought to read Hoffner, it will give you some instruction.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. Well, perhaps I can bring in - incorporate some of the material from Hoffner at the end of the tape.

ALFEO FAGGI: Okay.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But your work had already been inspired, as we noted, by the primitives in Italy and had this quality of extreme simplification ...

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: ... and strong emphasis on rhythms and a somewhat symbolic quality.

ALFEO FAGGI: Everything is -- with artists everything is symbolic.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And this was what upset the Chicago people?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were the art critics also against it?

ALFEO FAGGI: No, no. The art critics - Bulliet is marvelous.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Bulliet appreciated it.

ALFEO FAGGI: Oh, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How about critics from New York? Did any of them see it at this time?

ALFEO FAGGI: Not at that time, no. They saw the things when they were exhibited later on.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

ALFEO FAGGI: In the Bourgeois Gallery, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But the church - what was the name of the church where these were installed?

ALFEO FAGGI: St. Thomas Church in Chicago.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And they're still there?

ALFEO FAGGI: Oh, yes! Yes, sure.

DOROTHY SECKLER: When was it opened? Do you recall the date roughly?

ALFEO FAGGI: I don't remember exactly - I don't want to make any mistake.

DOROTHY SECKLER: All right. Well, we can add that at the end of the tape from some of the documents that you have given me.

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But in any case it was opened and then you left for Woodstock?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And you settled here. Did you build your own house when you arrived or did you live somewhere else for a while?

ALFEO FAGGI: I built the studio first and by a local man here and very good and afterward we built this two years after, I think, something like that. Yes. Yes. The house is beautifully built.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It certainly is.

ALFEO FAGGI: It isn't all shot or anything like that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you have any help in coming here from the founders of the Woodstock colony - Mr. Hervey White or ... ?

ALFEO FAGGI: Oh, he was a good friend of mine. His portrait is in the Whitney Museum.

DA Yes, by you? Your portrait of Mr. White is in the Whitney Museum?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And they helped you, did they, in some way or did you not need any help at that time?

ALFEO FAGGI: No, I never - no.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I thought perhaps they had secured certain tracts of land for artists ...

ALFEO FAGGI: No.

DOROTHY SECKLER: ... but I suppose it was more in the other area of Woodstock.

ALFEO FAGGI: Probably. I don't know. This little nook up here - somebody used to own it and they said, "Now I'll give it to you for \$230, it's only half an acre."

DOROTHY SECKLER: Do you remember some of the artists who were prominent when you first arrived in Woodstock? With who maybe you were associated with later?

ALFEO FAGGI: Dasburg and McFee. They were good artists, both very good.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

ALFEO FAGGI: There was another man up here, but those two, to me they were more prominent, to me they were good people, good artists both. Very good.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So they remained friends for many years.

ALFEO FAGGI: Oh, absolutely! Absolutely! Friends all the time, yes. No, I never lost any friends I'm sure of that. I don't know Hague very well, I mean the one that lives in the mountains, he really lives far away.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Who is that? Raoul Hague?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes. Oh, I met him once in a while but not very often.

DOROTHY SECKLER: He has a love of the archaic very much.

ALFEO FAGGI: Oh, yes. I saw some of them. But I don't think his work later is just as good as what he was before. He went too far. He'd take the bark of the tree and he'd say this is a work of art. It is not true; it's the bark of a tree. Well, you could say anything if you put something in it, put a little salt in it; otherwise, well, I'll take a piece of bark from my oak tree and exhibit that. He did once up here in Woodstock just for fun, you know. You will not do things like that too often or people will think you are a faker, be careful about that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: He was the only sculptor that you were associated with here?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes. There was a man called Wheelock, he was very talented.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You didn't show in Woodstock, though - you didn't show your work here, did you?

ALFEO FAGGI: I showed in the early years - three or four years.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Where? At the Art Association?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes. Yes. Oh, I exhibited more than that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: When did you go with the Weyhe Gallery? Let me put it a different way: which gallery in New York first showed your work? Was it Bourgeois?

ALFEO FAGGI: Bourgeois first. It was a one-man show, that big show. I mean the general trend of the press took an interest in the things. Oh, it was a really great show.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What year would you think that was roughly? Late '20s somewhere?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes. Late '20s.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And then how many years did you remain with the Bourgeois Gallery?

ALFEO FAGGI: Until he closed up, you see.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Do you remember when he closed? Was it in the '30s? Early '30s?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes. Maybe '32.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And then you went with Weyhe afterwards?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes. Well, she came over here herself, she admired my work.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Miss Dickinson, you mean?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes. She came over here and she said, I wish you would exhibit with us, I love your work. I said, sure, I'd love to do that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Splendid. Now let's stop for a moment.

[Machine turned off]

ALFEO FAGGI: Now in the Academy I won quite a large prize and instead of giving me money, they sent me to Turin, a city in North Italy to see our first international show. I went up there and for the first time I saw a bronze by Rodin; and there were some good German artists, Lehmbruck was there. And it was interesting to see the things I knew only by reproduction, and it was interesting to compare. The statue by Rodin was the man - do you remember - with the broken arm, do you remember? Has half of the arm?

DOROTHY SECKLER: I don't know that.



ALFEO FAGGI: Probably you don't remember. Anyhow, I was not really very interested in his work, he was a terrifically clever, he did terrifically able things, but there was a lack of, a great deal of lack of simplicity and lack of repose. Michelangelo used to have movement but he had repose in movement.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You felt that Lehmbruck lacked that repose?

ALFEO FAGGI: No, no, no! Rodin.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, Rodin! I'm sorry.

ALFEO FAGGI: No. Don't make any mistake on that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But Rodin you thought lacked repose?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Lacked a feeling of repose, yes.

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes. Lehmbruck was my first really - I say, this is a real artist up there. He has a sense of composition, sense of design and great simplicity and great feeling.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, I thought so.

ALFEO FAGGI: Oh, yes. (Ernst) Barlach is very good, a good carver, is a very, very excellent artist, there's no question; but you cannot compare him with Lehmbruck from my point of view. But he is an important artist, there is no question about it. Lehmbruck and Barlach they are the two German artists.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So you felt some affinity with both Lehmbruck and Barlach?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But in the case of Rodin there was this lack of repose. That bothered you?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes. And, oh, another thing that bothered me was too many works. An artist cannot overproduce. Now you see Modigliani never overproduced. Sometimes he produced one work in 3 or 4 years. There's a great deal of commerciality to produce too much; anxiety to be noticed again. A real artist doesn't want to be noticed; he wants to do the best he knows how to do. That's my point of view.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's a very important thing to keep in mind today, when so many artists are distracted by this need to be noticed certainly.

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes. Well, it's a mania, it's a childish - a childish thing. I think the basis is lack of cultural background.

DOROTHY SECKLER: In this country particularly.

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, there's not the understanding of the artist's role.

ALFEO FAGGI: You see, for instance, even when I was young I was studying the history of the arts and only the best, and I went to the Museum practically every day - especially Michelangelo. You have been to Florence - you went to see the little house of Michelangelo?

DOROTHY SECKLER: No, I don't think so.

ALFEO FAGGI: It's in the Via Ghibellina. It's the original house and some of the early things he did are there and they are much better than the later work, much better. Some beautiful drawings. And there was a charming old gentleman who took care of that little museum and I let him talk and he was perfectly charming. The whole environment - really you felt the home of a great giant.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I may have been there on my first trip.

ALFEO FAGGI: Probably you did. Oh, yes. Probably you did. The street was the Via Ghibellina, they are all princely houses, 12th or 13th century work.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So you responded much more to the early work?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes. Right away. Right away. Right away.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Later it became very dramatic.

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes. Well, it was a question of great craftsmanship to my point of view. Even the painting too. But, after Giotto, painting went to life class, went to imitate the things he saw in life, you know. That is nothing, nothing of any importance. They destroy the imaginative power, the sense of great composition and so on; and a certain mystic quality of the early painters, the early poets in Italy, probably in Germany too, I don't know. They used to have it in Italy and they lost it. Yes. Those things go together, always, you'll never divide them, never. Now my reading was the same thing. I prefer the early Italian writers - even before Dante.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Really, before Dante?

ALFEO FAGGI: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. They were much more simple.

DOROTHY SECKLER: At what stage in your career were you sure that you wanted to emphasize religious subject matter above all others?

ALFEO FAGGI: I don't know. The only one thing that -- this is a very funny thing that one day happened to me, I think it was important. I told my mother - I was sitting by my mother and I saw a strange creature all in white come near us. She looked like she was floating. "Mother, don't you see that?" And she looked like an angel. That to me was the first lesson in mystical approach in life.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You were just a child then?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes. Yes. A very strange ...

DOROTHY SECKLER: A vision?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes. I still could draw it today. Yes. Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And this confirmed your feeling for, I mean would you like to say any more about the religious, mystical philosophy that lies behind your work?

ALFEO FAGGI: Well, it is not exactly anything a person sees ...

DOROTHY SECKLER: It was entirely personal.

ALFEO FAGGI: Absolutely!

DOROTHY SECKLER: It was not a matter of your reading the literature of any writers in a more formal approach?

ALFEO FAGGI: No. No. No. Nothing. No. It was instant in feeling. That's why my work in the Academy was thorough but it was disaffected for the reason I had to begin, you know, those things. Only after five years I had to begin to work by myself. But the same feeling was there. The feeling comes from the inner life and the other from the external life, which is a different thing, a different thing.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Had your family been extremely religious in their background?

ALFEO FAGGI: I think they were. My grandmother was an extraordinarily religious person, Fortunata Tarquini - one of the oldest names in the Florentine annals. You'll find a little tablet if you go to Florence someday, there is their name, they were the 12th century. She was, oh yes. And the extraordinary thing: I used to say, "Grandmother, why do people come and see you?" She never answered that. They went there to ask for help, moral help, let us call it that. I mean understanding -something like that. But I sensed that. You see everything inward has to be sensed. You cannot reason either. You can't reason. Reason is a thing of the intellect; the other has nothing to do with it. That's my point of view.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It must have been strange for you to come to a country like this where so much of the life of people is directed outward to material things.

ALFEO FAGGI: I didn't pay attention. I never saw -- It really didn't affect me that way.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You lived to yourself.

ALFEO FAGGI: I lived to myself and my family; work.

DOROTHY SECKLER: We had left you back there in Turin where you had an award from the Academy to go to Turin and this was what? In the early '30s roughly?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes, a little before.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Or the end of the '20s possibly, yes.

ALFEO FAGGI: It was a big international exhibition. As I told you, it was the first time I saw Rodin and I saw Lehmbruck and I saw other good German artists, not important but with a kind of decorative quality.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How long did you stay there?

ALFEO FAGGI: About one week. Just one week. I had to make some report on the various things to the Academy.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Have you been back and forth to Europe a number of times?

ALFEO FAGGI: No.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Or was that your last trip back?

ALFEO FAGGI: No. I went to the war in '15.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You fought for this country?

ALFEO FAGGI: No. At that time I was still an Italian citizen. You see, I took the first papers out and I could stay in our country, in my country, let us say, but I had to go to do my duty. After all, I was born there.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You had been in this country and then went back to be a soldier in the Italian army?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How long did you serve there?

ALFEO FAGGI: Three years.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were you wounded or ... ?

ALFEO FAGGI: No. Thank God, no. My son was badly wounded in the last war.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Then you returned after the war to this country?

ALFEO FAGGI: Oh, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You were married at this time, of course?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes. Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And then you came here to Woodstock after the war? Is that right?

ALFEO FAGGI: After the war.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I'm sure there must have been a long series of commissions from various places for your sculpture. But I think we ought to try to put them a little bit into the right sequence if you can recall how it happened. Or shows, important shows that advanced your work? I know it's very difficult to remember. Is there anything that occurs to you in - the '30s, of course, was a period of depression in this country.

ALFEO FAGGI: Oh, yes - no, but I got a commission by Mrs. William ...

[Machine turned off]

DOROTHY SECKLER: ... Juliana Force? Whitney?

ALFEO FAGGI: No, no, no, Not the Whitney, though they were fond of my work, they bought the portrait of Hervey White.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. When did you do that portrait of Hervey White?

ALFEO FAGGI: I did it in my studio.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Soon after you came here?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes, yes, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: In the '20s some time?

ALFEO FAGGI: A little later probably. He posed two times.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And did the Whitney buy it right away?

ALFEO FAGGI: They bought it, yes, right away. The one who used to be the head, you know, she was very smart.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

ALFEO FAGGI: As soon as she saw that she bought it for the museum.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. But you were saying somebody else, a woman, had helped in some way during the '30s, during these depression years. You weren't on WPA then, I take it, at any point?

ALFEO FAGGI: Never! No. No. No. I got a commission from ... to do the life of St. Francis, I think I showed you.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, I saw it. Now where did that come from?

ALFEO FAGGI: Mrs. Lille (Lille of Chicago)

DOROTHY SECKLER: What was she connected with? What organization or what church or ... ?

ALFEO FAGGI: Well, she was Catholic; she was not born Catholic but she became Catholic.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was this for a Catholic Church?

ALFEO FAGGI: No, no, no. She did it for herself and after she gave it to the Art Institute.

DOROTHY SECKLER: To the Art Institute of Chicago?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes. She never kept anything for herself.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So this was in the '30s that she commissioned the life of St. Francis. When you did the life of St. Francis there must have been a number of different episodes.

ALFEO FAGGI: Oh, yes! Oh, sure!

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mr. Faggi, I wondered if there is something that you would like to say about your technique as a sculptor and to what extent your way of working either in modeling or carving may have changed during the past decades?

ALFEO FAGGI: I think that probably in the last decade I am conscious of becoming more simplified, you know, not diluted but simplified.

DOROTHY SECKLER: There's quite a difference between being diluted and being simplified.

ALFEO FAGGI: Oh, yes. Oh, there's a great deal of difference.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Could I ask you this: when you begin to work on a figure, for instance, such a figure as the St. Francis ...

ALFEO FAGGI: I did no sketch at all.

DOROTHY SECKLER: No sketch?

ALFEO FAGGI: No. Not even a drawing.

DOROTHY SECKLER: From the very beginning does this exist in a highly simplified form or does simplification arrive at the end?

ALFEO FAGGI: No, no, it's the movement that has to be simplified first, you see. It's very funny the work, my work doesn't exhaust me at all, there is no problem. I begin and I see the thing already finished.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You see it complete from the beginning?

ALFEO FAGGI: Absolutely!

DOROTHY SECKLER: The concept is there. But you don't draw it? You don't sketch ... ?

ALFEO FAGGI: I don't draw it but I completely finish it. If it isn't finished inward you will never complete it outward.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And you don't change it once you're working on it?

ALFEO FAGGI: No, never change it, never change it. Never change it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Never at all?

ALFEO FAGGI: Never at all. No. No.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's very interesting.

ALFEO FAGGI: Well, this is my method you know. When artists change their work it shows that they came to turmoil which means that the vision was not clear. See the point? If the vision is clear you do not make any change.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And the vision is something arrived at intuitively?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It comes almost, it would seem as in a vision, or I mean that you have an interior vision.

ALFEO FAGGI: Well, I think - I don't want to be too Catholic about anything, but I never begin to work until the thing is complete inwardly, mentally and visually and so on and so on, I never change anything.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Do you ever have to give up anything or is everything always completed?

ALFEO FAGGI: I never give up anything. I have all the work I have done. The shack is full of my things but they are completely complete things.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Do you usually work on more than one piece or only on one thing at a time?

ALFEO FAGGI: I have two things sometimes, two things. Now I have only one.

END OF TAPE 1

TAPE 2

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is Dorothy Seckler interviewing Alfeo Faggi in Woodstock on August 1st, 1963. Mr. Faggi, when our previous tape ended we had been discussing your feelings about the technique of sculpture as it has developed in your own work and we had not had a chance yet to talk about the differences in approach that maybe involved between full round sculpture and the relief sculpture. Is there anything that you'd like to add to that right now?

ALFEO FAGGI: No. The only things I have to add is this: if my work is complete in the round it must come from inside; if it's complete in a bas relief technique, it's the same; the process is the same.

DOROTHY SECKLER: From your first conception of the work are you sure then in which form it will be?

ALFEO FAGGI: Oh, yes. I never begin otherwise. Oh, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Have you ever had periods in your work when you were involved more with carving than with modeling?

ALFEO FAGGI: No, it depends on the subject matter.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Could you give me an example of a subject that seemed to you to call for carving rather than for modeling?

ALFEO FAGGI: Well, the difference is this: the point is very, very simple, if the form is needed a stately point of view, I will carve it directly from that point of view. If it needs a more roundness I will use - I could use terra cotta, I have done several terra cottas; and in bronze I use the other, the other ...

DOROTHY SECKLER: Your monumental sculptures have generally been in bronze, is that right?

ALFEO FAGGI: Bronze, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. I had wanted to ask you about some of the important commissions that you carried out. For instance, there's the very important Dante door. I believe it was in the early '20s you did that?

ALFEO FAGGI: In Worcester, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: In the Worcester Art Museum?

ALFEO FAGGI: No, it's in a building, it's the door for a building. It's beautiful architectonic thing, I think it was a Boston architect; and this is a real door and on the inside all the Stations of the Cross in small dimensions.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mmhmm. That you did too?

ALFEO FAGGI: Oh, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. So that you had - there was Dante on one side of the door and then inside was the Stations of the Cross. Is that the way it worked?

ALFEO FAGGI: No, no. The Dante door is in Chicago.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But then ...

ALFEO FAGGI: The statue of Dante, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: The statue of Dante is in Worcester, is that it?

ALFEO FAGGI: No.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I'm sorry I've got you mixed up there.

ALFEO FAGGI: No.

DOROTHY SECKLER: The Dante door is in Chicago?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And it's in relief, of course?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes, bas-relief.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. Then there's also, of course, the door that has the life of St. Francis?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes. And this is in Chicago Art Institute.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It's there now, of course?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes. On the main floor.

DOROTHY SECKLER: In bronze, of course?

ALFEO FAGGI: In bronze, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And was that about the same time as the Dante door? Was it in the early '20s or did that come later?

ALFEO FAGGI: Well, it's just a question of a couple of years' difference.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Really? I have here a note about a Doubting St. Thomas for the University of Chicago.

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes. In a chapel there.

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is all in the 20s then, pretty much?

ALFEO FAGGI: All in the '20s. In '22 or '23.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Now there's The Pieta ...

ALFEO FAGGI: It's lifesize, it's in St. Thomas Church, in the place I have the Stations of the Cross.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

ALFEO FAGGI: And the small size is in the Art Institute, and one is in Princeton.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So there are three then?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Splendid. And that was a later work, wasn't it?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes. '28 or '29.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Then, of course, there's the St. Francis that was commissioned by Mrs. Frank R. Lillie.

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And that, of course - there's the one in Illinois, is that right?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And one in Buffalo?

ALFEO FAGGI: In Buffalo too.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That was a very late work, wasn't it? In the '40s possibly?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes. '40.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And then we have the Stations of the Cross. That is the one in the Church of St. Thomas the Apostle in Chicago?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes. And the big Pieta is there, life size Pieta.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. Life size Pieta is in the same church of St. Thomas?

ALFEO FAGGI: Same church, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Now some of the portraits that I have seen ... I think it's important for them to get into the record. That wonderful one of the head of Noguchi.

ALFEO FAGGI: The one of Noguchi is in three museums now.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. In Chicago, and Minneapolis ...

ALFEO FAGGI: And Minneapolis, and another museum lately, a gallery - I can't recall - Pennsylvania or something like that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And that was done in the early '30s, wasn't it?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes. Yes. And Frost - I did the head of - two reproductions of Robert Frost.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, the poet Robert Frost. Now let's see, there was also that beautiful head of your friend, the lady - you just showed it to me over here.

[Machine turned off]

ALFEO FAGGI: Of course the answer could be fresh.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Good. Then the head that you were talking about before obviously was the one of Margaret Sanger.

ALFEO FAGGI: Margaret Sanger. It was bronze.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were these heads then all in bronze? The head of Noguchi?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes, bronze.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And the other one that we mentioned - the Frost - all three of them then were in bronze. Have you ever done a portrait head in stone?

ALFEO FAGGI: No, I don't like the feeling of stone. I like the molding of the face. The great difference between stone and myself, I mean I don't like that fight; I prefer to fight in a different way.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

ALFEO FAGGI: See the point?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, tell me a little more about it.

ALFEO FAGGI: The Florentine portraits, they are all in terra cotta or bronze, they are never in stone; you see, even the Rapello. The Rapello things are the best, they are molded with the hands, the vibration of the hand responds to the mind. The stone is between your hand and your brain. That's my point of view. You study, for instance, the Florentine, just like Nicola del Gano, for instance, by Donatello. That is a terra cotta. And I could mention Verrocchio, for instance, all the best things that he had are in bronze. Those people have a bronze mind.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Then under what conditions would you choose stone for a work?

ALFEO FAGGI: I would not do it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You only do it when you must?

ALFEO FAGGI: No, I will not do it. I like the other - the medium which demands more from me but they have more immediacy. To me stone is something between you, the artist, and the stone.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

ALFEO FAGGI: That's the feeling.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But you have used it in a few cases.

ALFEO FAGGI: In a few. A few cases.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was it because the person had commissioned something in stone?

ALFEO FAGGI: No. For the reason that at the time I felt it, yes. But very rarely.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

ALFEO FAGGI: Bronze is my medium, and terra cotta as well. As I say, my molding quality. For instance, if I had to choose a piece of Greek sculpture I would take the early terra cottas, hardly ever bronze; much better than the stone work they have done.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Of course, that was pretty much the material of the Etruscans too. You were telling me before how much you admired the Etruscan sculpture.

ALFEO FAGGI: Well, I'm Etruscan, that's the trouble. That's the trouble. See Etruria is a Tuscan city. It's not 25 miles from Florence.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. So you were saturated in ...

ALFEO FAGGI: Well, they have the same mind.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You're almost a descendant of Etruscan culture.

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes. Etruria. Oh, yes. Well, your mind reacts to those things you understand. Naturally, when I was young I never understood that. I understand now the reason for why the Florentine. Now take Ghiberti, why he never left one stone. The bronze door, you know, the Baptistery door.

ALFEO FAGGI: Well, there's 24 years of work - practically all his life long.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And Donatello too, of course.

ALFEO FAGGI: Oh, yes.



DOROTHY SECKLER: Having grown up in a country where you were surrounded by great works of art and very spiritual expressions always as you were a boy, it interested me very much that you said that you thought that the United States was nevertheless a good place for art at this time.

ALFEO FAGGI: Oh, it's a great place.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Could you explain why you think so in view of the fact that we don't have that kind of background for art?

ALFEO FAGGI: Well, there is more freedom.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It's the freedom of the spirit then.

ALFEO FAGGI: The freedom of the spirit being trained by a good mind naturally, expressed by it. I think America has more chance to produce fine artists than all Europe put together. Who are they? Who are they? The French today they are very impoverished. As I told you the great French painter wasn't a Frenchman - he was born ...

DOROTHY SECKLER: It was Cezanne.

ALFEO FAGGI: ... he was born in Italy.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That was a very interesting point.

ALFEO FAGGI: But it's absolutely correct. The father went to the south of France and they had a little coffee shop first and the boy began to draw, like to draw, with another fellow. Then after a certain age he left, his daddy supplied a monthly money and he went to Paris to work there, started there.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And you were saying that you felt his sense of form and his sense of the grandeur of all over design was something that is Italian rather than French.

ALFEO FAGGI: Absolutely! Absolutely! You see that's why they invented Impressionism, broke the form.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It was a dissolving of form.

ALFEO FAGGI: A dissolving of form. For Cezanne form is never the result, it is always to integrate, always to purify.

DOROTHY SECKLER: To come back to the future of this country as an art-producing country, you were saying that you thought that if the younger artist could see enough to educate himself - well, even perhaps through reproductions but in other ways too.

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes. You see this country has many museums; they have everything. Duncan Phillips and the other small museums - what do you call it? - You mentioned before ...

DOROTHY SECKLER: In New York? Oh, the Frick!

ALFEO FAGGI: The Frick! A beautiful museum. Oh, and so quiet, you go there and you study there, even the library they have is magnificent. You find all the documents there at the Frick Museum. They collect everything. Every time I exhibit they send special people to collect data and so forth.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. That's splendid. We have to work very closely with them sometimes.

ALFEO FAGGI: I think they are important. I don't think people give them enough credit.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's true. So you think then that the younger American artist, in spite of the general materialism of outlook in this country that ...

ALFEO FAGGI: I don't see that - I don't think that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: ... he can find himself.

ALFEO FAGGI: I don't see that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You don't see the materialism?

ALFEO FAGGI: The materialism, no.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You don't think it's greater here than in Europe?

ALFEO FAGGI: No. I think it's much less.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Really? I'd be interested in your feeling about that.

ALFEO FAGGI: It's much less.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It's an exceptional opinion.

ALFEO FAGGI: Well, much less. I would not live in Europe if you gave me a million dollars.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You wouldn't?

DOROTHY SECKLER: What is it that you would find that would restrain you or give you the feeling of being less free if you were living, for instance, in Florence or in Paris?

ALFEO FAGGI: Well, the Europeans try to imitate us. I don't want to be imitated. I'm in the real place.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You'd rather have the original.

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes. I don't - all they do in Europe is imitate the Americans; imitate their painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But you don't feel that's a bad thing that they should imitate Americans because certain - some Europeans, for instance, de Gaulle ...

ALFEO FAGGI: No.

ds ... are very, you know, very distressed by the imitation of American machines and American advertising and so on?

ALFEO FAGGI: De Gaulle is a cuckoo Frenchman I think, he exaggerates his power anyhow, to my mind.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Is it partly the political situation that would bother you in living in Europe? For instance, I've been told that Marcel Duchamp said that he would not like to live in Paris permanently because the minute he's in France he's involved with politics.

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Is that part of the feeling...

ALFEO FAGGI: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: ... that here you are more free of politics?

ALFEO FAGGI: Well, nobody bothers you about politics. But I think he lives in New York - Duchamp.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, he does live in New York. Yes.

ALFEO FAGGI: How does he live? I don't know how he sells those things he does - some potboilers?

DOROTHY SECKLER: I think he works as a dealer but I don't know - and he is very unwilling to discuss it. He was asked in an interview recently and he said that he didn't think it was anybody's business except his own.

ALFEO FAGGI: I remember during my first exhibition he was there and he loved my work, he enjoyed it very much. A very charming personality.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. Certainly.

ALFEO FAGGI: Very charming, a lot of charm. I love French men. But he has a lot of character too. No, I think he is strong. I think one of his brothers died lately.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. Villon.

ALFEO FAGGI: Villon, I don't know how good a painter he was; I don't know.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, he was a typically French painter in many ways. In a way that we are discussing. But I don't want to get too far off the track here.

ALFEO FAGGI: No. No.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I was interested though very much in exploring anything that you have to say about the American environment as it affects the artist because I think there's a great deal of discussion about it and in some cases a certain amount of despair.

ALFEO FAGGI: I don't see that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: The feeling that the artist is too much affected by changing fashion ...

ALFEO FAGGI: No.

DOROTHY SECKLER: ... by the pressures of the art market.

ALFEO FAGGI: They don't impress me.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You've managed somehow to keep detached from it.

ALFEO FAGGI: I never have any of that feeling, never have. I always work honestly and I send work to my dealer, sometimes I have a commission, not very often. And that's all.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Would you like to say anything about the direction that you're pursuing at this time in your sculpture or anything that is developing or has developed recently in your work that it would be in the way of a change or a further development?

ALFEO FAGGI: No, I will not do that. I don't see it, no, no.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It seems to you to be a very serene continuity always?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes. The subject matter inspired my form too.

DOROTHY SECKLER: The subject matter?

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: If you don't have a commission and you simply work out of your own feeling the subject matter is usually nevertheless religious, is that right?

ALFEO FAGGI: In general, yes. Not always.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What would be some of the other subjects that have appealed to you?

ALFEO FAGGI: I have done some nudes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mhmm. In that case were you working from a model or ...

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes, but from my memory that I store in my brain - knowledge of many, many years. I told you I studied surgery in life ...

DOROTHY SECKLER: But you don't use the model?

ALFEO FAGGI: Never, never used ...

DOROTHY SECKLER: You don't work from a model in a direct way?

ALFEO FAGGI: No, no. I don't call that direct.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well -- so you might do a nude? Do you ever work from just a poetic idea of something from literature possibly ...

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: ... poetry? I know you admire poets and read poetry a great deal.

ALFEO FAGGI: Yes, I do. Yes. Yes, I do.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, I feel that this has been very rich material.

ALFEO FAGGI: I hope you got everything you wanted.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, thank you very, very much for giving so much of your time.

ALFEO FAGGI: No, no, no. Oh, it was a great pleasure to have you up here. I hope the experience was rewarding to you.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It certainly is rewarding to me and something that I will not easily forget.

END OF INTERVIEW

Last updated... September 19, 2002