

Rare Yup'ik masks (and their Surrealist pedigree) on view (and sale) this week in New York City

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[The “Donati Studio Mask,” from [CNN online](#)]

Occasionally, certain key objects come to light that encapsulate the imbricated history of Primitivism, Modern art, and museums. In Spring 2010, Sotheby's in New York auctioned off an important collection of Native American and Eskimo art formerly owned by artist Enrico Donati (1909-2008). Donati was one of the last living Surrealists, a colleague of André Breton, Max Ernst and the other exiled artists who lived in New York during WW II. Like his friends, he was an enthusiastic collector of Native American art. Here is an excerpt from the [Sotheby's press release](#) about that sale:

The sale comprised works from Surrealist painter Enrico Donati's studio in the landmark Gainsborough Building on Central Park South. In his studio, Donati mixed Eskimo masks and kachina figures with his own work, works of his contemporaries, found objects, stones, fossils, and the mystical mandragora root to create an entirely new world, and a fountain of inspiration. The session's top price was achieved by An Important and Rare Eskimo Polychrome Wood Mask, Yup'ik or Anvik, which totaled \$362,500 (est. \$300/500,000). The mask would likely have been used for both festival dancing and shamanistic activities, however its specific meaning remains an enigma, the mystery of which is part of the strong attraction Donati and his Surrealist compatriots had for Eskimo art during the middle of the 20th century.

In the mid-1940's, Donati purchased two remarkable Yup'ik masks from the New York dealer Julius Carlebach, the man who supplied many of the exiled Surrealists residing in the city with the indigenous arts that so ignited their imaginations. He obtained most of his choice specimens from the collection of George Gustav Heye's private Museum of the American Indian—the progenitor of the Smithsonian's current National Museum of the American Indian. Like other museum directors at the time, Heye frequently deaccessioned items for financial reasons or exchanged objects deemed to be multiples. While Heye sometimes collected objects from their indigenous owners—he made several trips to Vancouver Island during the twenties and thirties, for instance—more often than not he purchased them from regional dealers or travelers to Indian Country.

A few days ago, with much fanfare because of their potential for record prices, two of Donati's "Important and Rare" Yup'ik masks were offered up for sale at New York's [Winter Antiques Show](#). The [Donald Ellis Gallery](#) is offering an interesting selection of Alaskan, Inuit and Northwest Coast art as well as the Yup'ik masks from the former Donati collection, with their fascinating provenance prominently displayed. Referred to now as the "Donati Studio Mask," the one pictured above is a type of mask representing the weather, and is apparently known to the Yup'ik as "The Mask that Brought the South Winds" (the other is known as the "Donati Fifth Avenue Mask"). It was collected in the early 20th century by Alaskan trader Adams Hollis Twitchell, who sold it along with many others to Heye in 1916. Around 1944, Heye sold it to Carlebach, who in turn sold it to Donati in 1945. Surrealist poet André Breton once owned a mask, also purchased from Carlebach and now at the Louvre, which may have been made by the same carver as this one; George Duthuit, the son-in-law of Henri Matisse, owned another. [Info from the [Donald Ellis 2011 catalogue](#)]

Two other masks Twitchell collected ended up in landmark exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art in New York: one in "Indian Art of the United States" (1941), the other in "Primitivism in 20th Century Art" (1984). In 2006, in Paris, Donald Ellis acquired a different set of Yup'ik masks at auction, each of which was purchased from Julius Carlebach by Robert Lebel, an art historian, the first biographer of Marcel Duchamp and a friend of André Breton. For anyone who has read James Clifford's account of Surrealist interest in Native American art, these few pieces provide an object lesson in the vicissitudes of value surrounding indigenous arts. According to CNN Online, the Donati Studio Mask just sold to a private collector for more than \$2.5 million, breaking the record for indigenous art from the United States sold at public auction.

The Winter Antiques Show runs from January 21- 30 at the Park Avenue Armory. See the masks while you can.

For some Internet art world chatter:

<http://www.cnn.com/2011/US/01/19/surreal.yupik.masks/index.html>

<http://lindsayapollock.com/news/2m-eskimo-masks-debut-at-winter-show/>

http://www.artdaily.com/index.asp?int_new=43695&int_sec=2

For some perspectives from Alaska:

<http://community.adn.com/?q=adn/node/155187>

For Ellis's earlier acquisition:

<http://newsgrist.typepad.com/robertgoldwaterlibrary/auctions/>