A Friend Fondly Remembered – Enrico Donati on Marcel Duchamp

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Marcel Duchamp and Enrico Donati (from left to right) at Yves Tanguy's house in Woodbury, CT, 1945

(Enrico Donati was a close friend of Marcel Duchamp's, as well as a fellow surrealist painter. I called Enrico Donati with the hopes that he could give me a glimpse of who Marcel Duchamp was as both a friend and an artist. After a short telephone conversation, Mr. Donati was kind enough to agree to meet with me to talk about his friendship, as well as his artistic collaborations with Marcel Duchamp. On December 2, 2000, I met Enrico Donati in his Manhattan studio where he took a break from painting to talk to me about a friend whom

he fondly remembered.)

1942: Donati was sitting in the Larré Restaurant in New York City with about a dozen friends, when he saw a well-dressed gentleman approach the restaurant. The man came inside and headed towards their table as André Breton stood to greet him. To Donati's surprise, Breton bowed to the man, expressing his reverence. Donati wondered who this great man must be that the founder of surrealism, or the "pope" as Donati calls him, would bow down at his feet. The gentleman soon satisfied Donati's curiosity, saying "Call me Marcel. Who are you?" As Donati responded to his inquiry, simply by stating that he was "Enrico," a great friendship began. This friendly discourse resulted in a life-long friendship that Donati fondly reflects upon.

Their relationship was hardly dependent on their mutual love for art. They rarely even discussed their artwork and Donati defines their collaborations simply as "friends working together." He says that on their regular lunches together, they would "talk about things of the day," rather than painting. He insists that in "no way" did they influence each other's artwork. Their artistic ideas and projects were strictly independent of each other. Donati would often play chess with Duchamp. He says that the game of chess was not necessarily reflective of Duchamp's character, but that he definitely loved the game.

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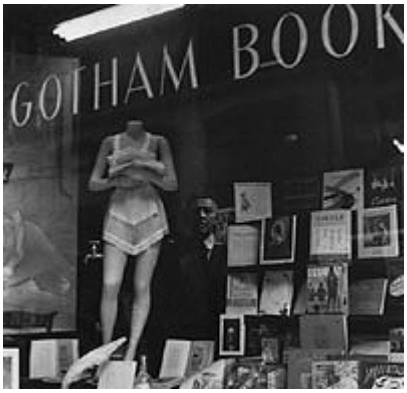


Marcel Duchamp, *Window for "Le Surréalisme et la peinture," by André Breton*, 1945 © 2000 Succession Marcel Duchamp, ARS, N.Y./ADAGP, Paris



Enrico Donati, *Shoes*, 1945 (private collection)and Breton's "Le Surréalisme et la Peinture" of the same year

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Marcel Duchamp, Lazy Hardware, 1945 © 2000 Succession Marcel Duchamp, ARS, N.Y./ADAGP, Paris

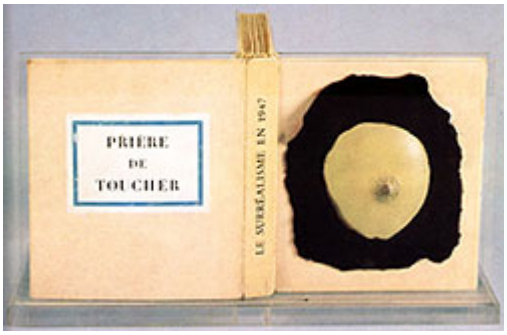
Donati insists that the 1945 window display at Brentano's promoting André Breton's book Le Surréalisme et la Peinture was not premeditated by Duchamp. Donati and Duchamp each brought some pieces and decided how they would assemble the display while they actually assembled it. He also says that the chicken wire mannequin that Duchamp provided was an actual ready-made, saying "Duchamp didn't make anything." Donati was the only one of the two to actually create his object, the infamous shoes. Another display that was done earlier that year to promote Breton's Arcane 17 was only shown for a couple of hours at Brentano's when some people from the Salvation Army came into the store to tell Mr. Brentano to "go to Hell." They found the window display to be very insulting, with Duchamp's headless mannequin holding Breton's book, while piss flowed through a faucet attached to her upper thigh (Duchamp's Lazy Hardware). Donati remembers the whole ordeal with Le Surréalisme et la Peinture to have been equally "embarrassing" to Mr. Brentano. He was so embarrassed by their comments, in fact, that he kicked Duchamp and Donati out of the store. The men were still eager to show their window-design so they moved it to the Gotham Book Mart which was only about a block away. Donati describes the woman who ran this store to be "very nice" and he remembers that "she loved their work."

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Marcel Duchamp, View of interior
installation of *Given:*
1. The Waterfall
/ 2. The Illuminating Gas,

1946-66 © 2000 Succession Marcel Duchamp, ARS, N.Y./ADAGP, Paris



Marcel Duchamp, Cover for the deluxe edition of *Le Surréalisme en 1947, 1947* © 2000 Succession Marcel Duchamp, ARS, N.Y./ADAGP, Paris



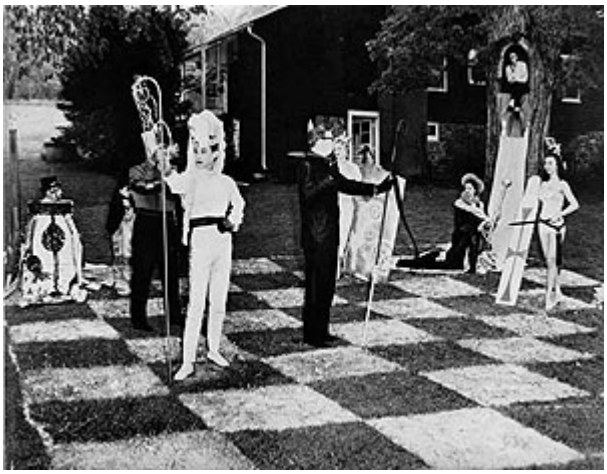
Man Ray, Photograph of Duchamp's cover for *Le Surréalisme en 1947*, 1947

Donati does not see any significance in the similarity between the wire figure (provided for by Isabelle Waldberg) under Duchamp's "paperfall" in the window display and the torso in Etant Donnes. While it was being created, Duchamp did not tell Donati that he was working on Etant Donnes and left him to find out about the project with the rest of the world when it went on display at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Donati and Duchamp also collaborated to make 999 original covers for the Paris exhibition catalogue, Le Surréalisme en 1947. Each cover was decorated with a "falsie," a foam-rubber

breast, over a piece of black velvet. Donati bought the 999 “falsies” from a warehouse in Brooklyn, and then painted each one by hand with Duchamp. Man Ray took a photograph of what he claimed to be the cover of Le Surréalisme en 1947, but the breast in this photograph looks much more real than the “falsies” that adorn the covers of the originals. Donati had never seen this photograph of Man Ray’s, but after looking at it, he said that the “falsie” in this photograph was definitely not a real breast. At the same time that Donati and Duchamp were working on this project, Duchamp was having an affair with Maria Martins, the wife of the Brazilian ambassasor in New York. It has been suggested in other texts that the “falsies” were modeled after Maria Martins. Donati also says that this is not true. Although he admits that Duchamp and Martins were having an affair, he says that she had “nothing to do with the project.”

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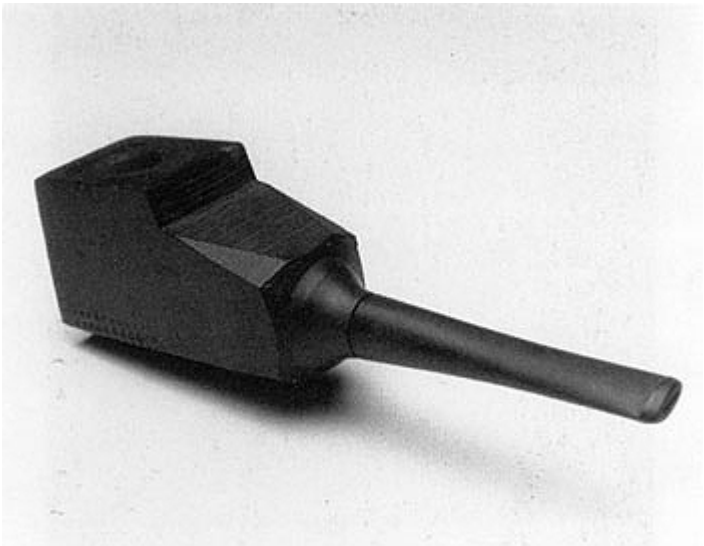


from: Hans Richter, 8 x 8, 1955-58.
Photo taken on the set by Arnold Eagle in Southbury, CT.

The window displays and the cover of Le Surréalisme en 1947 were not the only projects that Duchamp and Donati worked on together- they also collaborated in the creation of the 1953 edition of the Rotoreliefs (1935). Donati constructed the actual Rotoreliefs based on detailed notes and diagrams that

Duchamp made. He also worked on a sequence for the Hans Richter film, 8×8, with Duchamp and some of their other friends. For the sequence, they each dressed up as chess pieces and assembled on a life-size chess board. His daughter dressed up as the queen, Marcel as the king, and Donati as a pawn. Teeny, Duchamp's wife since 1953, and her daughter Jacqueline Matisse were also there. Donati reminisces about another time in Woodbury, Connecticut, when Duchamp dressed up as a monkey and climbed up into a tree. Duchamp's serious, quiet demeanor disappeared when he was isolated with just his closest friends. Donati says that "he was a funny man." On Donati's wall is a note that Duchamp gave to him. To most people, including Donati, the collection of words makes very little sense. Donati translated a few words on the note from French to English for me, reading "fossils…eyelids." He said that Duchamp would often write obscure things like this note that only made sense to him. Donati said that "he liked puns."

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Marcel Duchamp, *Pipe for Donati*,
1946. Collection Enrico Donati,
New York © 2000 Succession
Marcel Duchamp, ARS, N.Y./ADAGP, Paris

Duchamp carved a wooden pipe for Donati and gave it to him in

1946. Donati says that there is no story behind this pipe and that it was given to him by Duchamp as a token of their friendship. Carved on the front of the bowl is “Marcel à Enrico.” The inscription of these few simple words is what really exposes the intimate side of Marcel Duchamp.

Last but not least, here are two of my favorite paintings by Enrico
Donati:



click to enlarge
Enrico Donati, *Exodus*, 1946

click to enlarge



Enrico Donati, Farther, Nearer, 1947