

# Two aboriginal masks could set sales record

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**JAMES ADAMS**  
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**E**nrico Donati doesn't seem to have been in it for the money. If he had, he would have been rolling in the do-re-mi from a couple of art transactions completed decades before his death, at the age of 99, in 2008.

Instead, it's Donati's heirs – and the Canadian art dealer working for them – who stand to be showered by a cascade of cash, perhaps as early as this weekend, when two ceremonial Yup'ik native masks from western Alaska are put up for sale at the 57th annual Winter Antiques Show starting on Friday in Manhattan. The asking price? A little more than \$2.1-million (U.S.) for one and “in the region of \$2-million” for the other. Expectations are high that each will earn more. If so, it will set a sales record for a North American aboriginal artwork.

Donati, an Italian-American surrealist whose paintings and sculpture are included in the collections of New York's Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum, bought the masks in early 1945, paying \$325 for one and \$160 for the other.

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## Masks: Alaskan artworks were collected at the turn of the 20th century

» What make the masks so valuable are their provenance and historic import, their museum-like quality and relative rarity and, oh yes, their beauty.

Also, the Canadian selling them, 53-year-old Donald Ellis of Dundas, Ont., has been the go-to dealer for fine antique North American aboriginal art for at least 30 years. It was Ellis who represented Canada's pre-eminent art collectors, the Thomson family, at the 2006 Sotheby's New York auction that resulted in the repatriation to Canada from Britain of the most important artifacts in the so-called Dundas collection. A few years ago, he sold an antique basket at the Winter Antiques Show for an astonishing \$1.2-million.

Ellis's initial encounter with the Donati masks occurred in 1988, when, while waiting in an airport lounge, he spotted "a very, very small postage stamp photograph [of one of them] in an Architectural Digest magazine." Intrigued, he tracked down Donati and struck up what turned into a lifelong friendship. "He became a mentor, a father figure to me," Ellis said recently. "He watched me astutely for many years and came to realize that I was not only the

most passionate man about these things but the best man for the job [of handling his collection after his death]."

Donati got his masks from a New York dealer who had purchased them in 1944 from the U.S. National Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, in New York when the museum, strapped for cash, began to deaccession some of its collection. Included in the selloff were more than two dozen Yup'ik ceremonial masks collected at the turn of the 20th century by an Alaskan trader named Adams Hollis Twitchell.

The New York dealer, who numbered such surrealists as André Breton, Yves Tanguy, Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst and Enrico Donati as friends, knew of their fascination with the fantastical, dream-like imagery in native art and cannily sold them several Yup'ik masks for what now seems a relative pittance. The mask that Breton bought is now in the permanent collection in the Louvre; another is at the Beyeler Foundation, the famous private museum in Switzerland. Writing in his catalogue for the New York show, Ellis notes: "The influence of these masks on the



Donati Studio Mask, left, and Fifth Avenue Mask are expected to be sold for millions.

evolution of Western art must not be underestimated."

Donati kept one of the masks above the fireplace in his studio on Central Park South, hence its identification as the Studio Mask. The second is called the Fifth Avenue Mask because it resided in his bedroom in his Fifth Avenue apartment. Almost 87 centimetres tall and made of wood,

sinew, vegetal fibre, sinew and feathers, the Studio Mask, representing the Yup'ik "rain spirit that brings warm weather," has never been moved or publicly displayed - until now. The second, about 89 cm in height and described as the realization of a Yup'ik shaman's visit to the spirit world, was included in a Donati retrospective at the de Young

Museum in San Francisco in spring, 2007.

Ellis says he is willing to accept offers on the masks in advance of the antique show opening. Already, "there have been numerous inquiries ... but nobody's stepped up to the plate yet." But he is convinced that his wares will sell. "The fair does act as a sort of catalyst for people to act."