Deborah Rosenthal. Interview with André Masson. In: Arts Magazine, LV/3 (1980), S. 88-94.

Walking down sunny rue de la Perle towards the street where André Masson lives, I saw, hanging off the curb in front of me, a very small Parisian dog with little wheels attached to his hind legs. It does not surprise me to find that the neighborhood of Masson, the painter of bird-furniture, is furnished with a creature of metamorphosis. Masson's quarter, the *Marais,* is the old, quiet heart of Paris. Masson was born 84 years ago in the Ile-de-France; now, as he says, he prefers to live mostly in Paris. Not far from where he lives, the Musée Carnavalet houses the chronicle of the city's growth.

The room where Masson is sitting is the entrance to the apartment. For the next few hours I sit directly opposite him. Next to his chair are some journals, a copy of Proust, a catalogue of the Monet show from the Metropolitan, and a book by him; on the walls are prints, some of his paintings, a Japanese drawing; to one side stands a totem pole. Masson's eyes are a transparent blue and he wears a light blue sweater. Madame Rose Masson puts the three purple irises I brought into a vase and injects her pure, French soprano occasionally into the conversation, sometimes sardonic, sometimes knowledgeable, sometimes to supply my lack of a French word.

Our talk zigzags through the next four hours; Masson's blue eyes are sometimes animated, laughing; sometimes abstracted; often he uses his hands to gesture the movement in a painting. Much of what is said is recorded here in translation. As Masson said at one point, "I've done so many things, finally ..."

Later, I am taken into the two rooms of Masson's studio: in the drawing room, where a bookcase is filled with his illustrated books, crystals and agates are displayed; in the room where he paints, a Bonnard book lies on a table, Masson's paintings are stacked against walls; on the easel is a painting finished about ten days before. It is, Madame Masson says, "the fall of an angel." Tacked up next to it is a drawing with color notations.

DR: Do you work here or in the country? (Masson has for years maintained a home in Provence.)

AM: Half-and-half ... I'm afraid of the country. The silence of the country makes me sick. In the summer, I have children who come to see me, I see friends, I work a little, but in the winter, I don't see anyone; my house is very isolated. There's no farm noise, no animal noises - just total silence. It's terrifying; *terrifying.* When we used to spend the whole winter there, until the spring, I was almost sick with anguish.

DR: I wanted to ask you some questions about your relation to the School of Paris. I've just seen the Centre Pompidou (the collection of the Museum of Modern Art of Paris); and there, it seems to me, one can seen the coherence of the School of Paris; you see Bonnards next to Derains, for instance, whereas at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, it is the ruptures and breaks in the tradition that are emphasized.

AM: The Museum of Modern Art was the first museum to buy a picture from me, twenty years before any French museum did; it's a sand painting. The painting which was done in Paris has been very influential, its true, since Impressionism; but it was done by many foreigners. If you look at the great masters of the School of Paris, you find the names of Picasso, Chagall, Soutine - all of whom were far from being Frenchmen.

DR: But they came to Paris ...

AM: They came to Paris, but I think now that has stopped. There were too many inventions, some good, some bad; people come to Paris ... Paris still attracts the entire world, but there was for example the New York School, which had a very big reputation in Europe.

RM: But that was later than the School of Paris, André.

AM: Yes, it was at the time when the School of Paris ran out of steam, and the American painters proved that painting could be done outside Paris. I think that what is called the New York School - Pollock, and the others - did painting outside of Paris which had an enormous importance - much larger than is thought - and then, Paris no longer had a total monopoly. *That* has ended. But traces remain. And so I was happy that I had *a* hand - according to the critics and the American painters - in the birth of the New York School. I was in exile; but right away I found over there painters, like Arshile Gorky, who had great talent and owed nothing to the School of Paris; that is, they had seen Cézanne, of course, and Van Gogh - but they weren't *formed* by Paris.
DR: But Paris came to them, that is, during the war, when artists from Europe were in exile in America.
AM: I think that's an event whose importance has been underestimated - the arrival in New York of the most adventurous painters of the School of Paris. But most of them were foreigners.
DR: Fernand Léger had been in America before, in the 1930s. AM: Yes, Léger made a trip to America in the '30s, but he wasn't of my generation. In short, there was a sort of fraternity between the painting done in Paris and the painting which had just developed in New York. And *that* was unforeseeable. DR: Do you think the American painters, then, understood what you and the other European painters were doing?
AM: To speak of myself, only ... here, in my youth, the French found my painting crazy - crazy, the work of a madman! You can't imagine! Because I upset the French idea of composition; that is to say, painting constructed like this [here Masson

gestured with his hand to indicate an architectonic composition], while I did *this* instead [gesture to show a zigzagging path through a composition], and then I did automatic drawings, and so they thought I was crazy. But when I arrived in New York, I realized that the young American painters of the next generation had seen my first shows in New York, before my arrival in America. Pollock and Sam Francis, among others, said that they had been very impressed by my first American shows: according to what they said - it's not just my vanity - I had an influence *before* I got to New York. But it's also that my way of thinking had more in common with that of the young American painters who, for instance, had not come too directly under the influence of Cubism. Cubism is too - of necessity, it is too - scientific - everything is calculated, geometric, and so forth. Against the geometric. that is to say, the supposedly geometric, spirit of French painting posited in large part by Cubism, you find a madman like me. who finds that there are lyric possibilities that are greater. And so my automatic drawings, which were totally free drawings where one pays no attention to the rectangle - the drawing takes its own course - interested the young American painters, who were younger than I; which meant that as soon as I got to New York. I already had friends in the art world.
DR: Did you have more of a rapport with the painters of the New York School than with the Surrealists of your circle in the '20s in Paris? For instance, Miró?
AM: Miró's not terribly Surrealist. Max Ernst, yes.
DR: You said once that you loved Chardin too much ever to be a real Surrealist.
AM: I don't remember that.
RM: He has said so many things ...
AM: Yes, I've never considered that there was only one way, but rather that it was necessary to change all the time. I've been criticized for this, much criticized; it's been said that I didn't know my own mind, but I knew perfectly well what I was after: I didn't want a prison, didn't want to lock myself into a formula. And in the Surrealist circles of Paris, they found it odd

that sometimes I took "vacations" from Surrealism, and sometimes did things that had nothing to do with Surrealism; but it was because Surrealism would bore me, and then I would have to do something else. Basically, for me, what counts the most is freedom. To be in constant fear of losing my personality - I don't care at all about that. Above all it's necessary to feel free, not to be chained to a formula. and not to feel accountable to anyone, even one's admirers; if they're disappointed, too bad. So, I was badly received here ... my work still is. As for *me,* I'm so old, they're ending up by accepting me - no one wants to pick fights any more with an old man like me. But in America, I was readily understood. The American galleries and museums have pictures of mine from my youth.

DR: Do you consider your work abstraction? Are you interested at all in the question, much discussed nowadays in America, of the differences between an art with a norm of representation and one that is abstract? And what do you think of abstraction arising from geometry?

AM: Geometry, for me, is prison. It's confining. One must *break* geometry. You can construct a picture geometrically, but it must be broken up. All of this brought me closer to the American painters who are now old, but were quite young when I arrived in America ... and there, there wasn't a quarrel between abstraction and figuration; because I think - I've written it - that, since Impressionism, all painting goes toward abstraction; that Monet is more abstract than the landscape painter of the Romantic epoch. There was a very nice exhibit of Monet [Masson here took out the catalogue of the Metropolitan Museum's *Monet's Years at Giverny* show]. This was, as it were, an "abstracted" figuration.

As for me, I've always more or less *touched* on abstraction. That painting over there - at first glance it's an abstract thing; but actually it's based on sketches done at the Peking Opera when it was in Paris, its Chinese actors. I'm against works of complete abstraction.

DR: What do you think of Mondrian's work?

AM: Ah, him, I'm against him.

DR: Absolutely?

AM: Absolutely against him. I was more interested in Kandinsky; his beginnings, of course, his Paris period is a bit cold.

But in any event, this is not the art that attracts me; I'm willing to go up to the frontier, but not beyond.

DR: It's fifty years since you encountered the work of Paul Klee for the first time, I think, and forty since you wrote your *Eulogy of Paul Klee;* what do you think about him now? How did he influence you, and do you think the basis of your work is parallel to that of his?

AM: No, I don't think so. I was more influenced by Braque and Picasso - their Cubist works, which I denounce as an error! But before breaking it up, one had to be grounded in it; so Picasso and Braque helped me to understand the composing of a picture when I was quite young, when I was a student, before the 1914 war. As for Klee's influence on me, that I can't calculate. But his work certainly interested me.

DR: But do you find a parallel between the way you developed out of Cubism and the way Klee did?

AM: Klee was a *bit* influenced by Cubism. [And as for my being influenced by him]: probably. You know, one is influenced so much it's hard to tell by whom: basically, I was influenced by all the painters who interested me.

DR: But one doesn't write about all the painters in whom one is interested; that seems a special case.

AM: I don't recant my article on Klee! Only, Klee did nothing but small things.

DR: You've said they were like chamber music

AM: There, that's right, it's like chamber music, while for me. Braque and Picasso are symphonies. That's quite right. But find great quality in the work of Klee; he's an artist whom I respect greatly.
DR: Klee brings to mind another aspect of your career: your use - different from his, of course - of non-Western art as a source. I know that you have been influenced by Oriental painting, but you've also said that it's not possible for a European painter to enter into this tradition.
AM: I think that the methods of the Far East - China, and Japan - for example, there's a painting on the wall opposite you, the branches, done under the influence of Zen - it's done with very quick passages - at a moment when I was very much affected by Zen; I had a Japanese friend who initiated me a bit into the doctrine of Zen, and I read a lot, but, I realized, after having devoted a number of years to painting executed as rapidly as possible - more rapidly, even, than automatic writing (and drawing) which I would do in my sand pictures, for example, when I worked on the ground, throwing sand and glue - that was a long time ago, in 1926 or '27, and I wasn't familiar yet with Zen doctrine. When I encountered the Zen doctrines, and the works of the Zen monks, I was quite interested. And for a number of years I did paintings truly under the influence of the Far East. But of course it's not the first time ... the Impressionists had been very interested in Japanese prints ... I would say that this theory of Asia - Asian art (the extreme quickness of its execution) - brings a *lightness* to the Western mind. The Western mind is always a bit warlike, a bit militaristic, while with them (Asians) it's not this way. They search for harmony with the universe; in fact, the doctrines interested me, not only the aesthetic doctrines, but the metaphysical doctrines as well. And then, after seven or eight years of direct influence, I realized that the Westerner cannot have that mentality. It's something - well, *here,* I believe in race.
RM: You're a racist?
AM: Yes, in matters of art, I am racist, because the makers of these totem poles [Masson pointed here to a totem pole in the room] were not at all people like Michelangelo, for example. There are things within our heredity that prevent us from realizing what Zen calls the "non-mental" - saying "no" to intellect. But to replace it with what? We don't know; they *do* know, but *we* don't. The "non-mental" is not accessible to Europeans. There is a German who, thirty or forty years ago, wanted to become initiated into the doctrine of Zen. He entered a Zen monastery near Tokyo where, during the six or seven years he spent there, he practiced archery. And, at first, he could not be a Zen archer. Then they explained to him that he must not think about the bow, about the arrow, or about the target! So, he tried for several years - he wrote a very nice book about it, translated long ago into French - and then, at the end of two more years, he managed to do *Zen* archery. He was delighted! Then the Zen

master said, "Everything is lost, because you're satisfied. You're satisfied, so you have lost everything and you'll have to start all over again." Now, for a Western mind, even a very admiring one, there's something here that's incomprehensible. So I realized, through my readings and conversations with Japanese people who were also familiar with the doctrine (one Japanese I knew in Paris said to me that I was the only European he knew who understood a little bit about the notion of the Void), to get rid of all your cares, not to have too many preoccupations - that's not it at all. The Void - emptiness - is *fullness;* that which *we* call emptiness for them is fullness, that is to say, the fullness of being. You aren't preoccupied with shopping, purchases, anything, but you are filled with the plenitude of existence. And that's also hard to comprehend. So, finally, I understood that despite serious studies, I had failed. Some of the pictures weren't bad, but my mental experience was a failure.
DR: So you don't advise young painters to try it?

AM: No. I don't advise it to anyone. But during this period when I was studying Zen, I had a great calm, a very great calm. No more anxieties over little things, but then, afterwards, I realized that it had made me *too* calm! - that's not good for an Occidental! So that's my Eastern experience. But, a few years ago, a small gallery in Paris put on a show of my paintings and gouaches inspired by Zen; it was one of my shows which had great success with collectors. No, I'm not an Oriental painter, there's nothing I could do about it.
DR: I have a question for you on behalf of the American painter Leland Bell, who is known in America to be a champion of André Derain.
AM: Derain was a man who went wrong - and *he* knew it, too.He was very talented, Derain, enormously talented. When I wasvery young, fifteen or sixteen years old, I admired him the most of all the painters; of my elders, it was Derain's work I liked the

best. And the Fauve pictures - the ones he did in London - are for example, things that even now hold great interest. I talked about him with Matisse; and Matisse said to me, "He is too vulgar," because Matisse had worked alongside Derain in their youth. Derain *knew* that he was vulgar, because, in fact, he said so to Matisse: "We are two opposite poles: you are refined, and I am coarse." That shows intelligence, to say that he *knew* so; Matisse continued, "He was vulgar, what's more, he knew he was, and to struggle against this vulgarity, he got involved with the Italians of the Quattrocento - Ghirlandaio, Masaccio, etc.... But he went off to war ... and, back from the war, the veneer cracked." (In French that's a formulation that means that one takes on a borrowed aspect, the veneer of character, and when it cracks, one perceives what is behind it.) "Well, behind the veneer remained this vulgarity. And he was finished." That's true. When Derain [left off] borrowing from Italian art of the Quattrocento, which is very refined, very noble, he fell into a vulgar painting; he believed he possessed the tradition, but just as I couldn't be a serious Zen painter, one can't seriously be a Masaccio at this time. There's just no question of it - no question. The influence of the Italians led him to do some nice things - some, not many - and then afterwards, he condemned Cézanne, for instance, and he condemned Monet; he condemned all the Impressionists.
DR: What about the influence of Pompeii?
AM: The influence of Roman painting, manifest at the end of his life, led him todo some very nice things; small works inspired by Pompeiian painting, by Roman painting. If he hadn't died in that car accident, he would perhaps have done some very, very interesting work. Derain is a tragedy for me, because when I was very, very young, still almost a child, Derain was for me the great painter. But Derain was very important for me; the critics haven't wanted to acknowledge it.
DR: I read something that Malraux said about Picasso, and wondered what you thought about it. Malraux said that Picasso made use of African sculpture more or less for its quality as *fetish per se,* rather than for the plastic quality of the sculpture. AM: Well, but that's true. Michel Leiris, my old friend, who spent three years traveling throughout Africa for the Ethnographic Museum, told me that the fetishes in Africa lose their aura after about a year, to be replaced by others, so there's no *aesthetic* rationale to African art, only religious rationales. Well, Picasso could be a "religious-African" painter; I want to be a "Montmarte-religious" painter! - not African!
DR: What do you think about Picasso? The show at the Museum of Modern Art has been the center of everyone's attention in New York.
AM: Well, I think that Picasso is a phenomenon, just as I hope that one day it will be seen that I also am a phenomenon. But I think more and more that the importance of Matisse is very great; because Matisse was a man who had a sort of *discipline - very* great self-discipline. He never separated color from drawing; once, Picasso said to André Breton,

who wrote it down, "For me, drawing alone is of interest. When I am working on a painting, if I don't have any blue, I put down a red." Well, this is completely antithetical to Matisse, because if he had put a blue in place of a red, Matisse wouldn't have been able to sleep! The influence of Matisse is great; he had collectors who bought *everything* - *the* Russians Shchukin and Morosov; and further, the Scandinavians - the museum in Copenhagen - and in France, they didn't like Matisse! And so you see, the French aren't serious; they have a great artist who was born right here, and they scorn him. A Spaniard arrives from Barcelona, and they go crazy over him! But I'm just kidding.
DR: So they're not chauvinists?
AM: They ought to be more so!
DR: But the French have a reputation for being quite chauvinistic.
AM: But not in art; no, there, they are not at all chauvinistic. In fact, they have a sort of irrational love for anything as long as it isn't done by Frenchmen. They were very hard on Claude Monet, they were very hard on Cézanne; but if you were born at Salamanca, or at the North Pole - ! This is a peculiarity of the French, the dislike they have for painters, for artists. Rodin, for instance, was very unhappy, he had a lot of troubles; if foreigners hadn't admired Rodin, he wouldn't be anything.
90
DR: But the Grande Salle of the Louvre inpresses upon the visitor the central place here of French painting, but of course the painters represented are all dead.
AM: And dead for a *long time* at that!
DR: I've just seen the ceiling of the Odéon Theater which you decorated. How was it received here when it was done?
AM: The initial announcement of the commissioning of the ceiling by Malraux started a campaign in the press against me; they even went so far as to get artists to protest against me. That was absolutely disgraceful: to ask artists to talk against another artist, who's been commissioned by the government. It didn't bother me, I was immune, I was even amused. But one day, there was an attack on Malraux because of the ceiling, which was so disgraceful that I telegraphed to Malraux, "Should I respond?" Malraux sent me back a telegram by return messenger: "Let them get excited as usual." And when the ceiling was finished, it had a good press.
DR: What was the initial opposition really about?
AM: It was because I had a bad reputation. I was known as *a* madman, and to commission a madman to do a government project, well, that's immoral! When the ceiling was done, even the critics sent me excuses. Of course at that point I was already seventy years old, and the hatreds were beginning to die down; I was getting to be too old, many of my contemporaries had died - I always say, now, I can really have some peace, no one can do anything to me, they're all dead (that's what George Bernard Shaw said, I don't have any more enemies, they're all dead). Of course, it's because one's enemies are always among one's contemporaries - I don't see a young man of twenty-five being my enemy; that would be idiotic.
DR: It is only a few blocks walk from the Odéon Theater, for which you did your ceiling, to the Church of St.-Sulpice, for which Delacroix did some wall and ceiling paintings. What happened to the copy you painted of one of those?
AM: Oh, that was destroyed. That was right before I left for the war (the First World War) - I was only seventeen years old, but I had a lot of admiration for Delacroix. You know the church? On one wall there is Jacob struggling with the angel, and on the
91
facing wall, Heliodorus driven from the temple. I came with my easel, and my big canvas, intending to paint the panel of Jacob and the angel. But it scared me! And instead I copied the

Heliodorus. I admired Delacroix a lot in my youth; when I was very young he was the painter who interested me the most.
DR: Are there younger painters today who interest you particularly?
AM: No, because I don't get around any more, so I don't see shows; I only get catalogues. I have friends who paint who are younger than I, who keep me up to date; but they all say that there is confusion, that there isn't any direction any more.
DR: Do you still admire Redon?
AM: *Always.* Redon is a really unusual case, because he was born at the same time as Claude Monet and the other Impressionists, at the same time as Rodin, and he did painting which was completely personal and in which there was the unconscious. French painting has always been conscious - there aren't many Hieronymous Bosches among the French; it's just not in their line, the irrational isn't in their line.
DR: Poussin is more like it, I guess.
AM: Poussin? Poussin *has* a touch of the irrational. You find the classical idea there, but in his own fashion. Well, I saw my first Redons reproduced in a magazine when I was a student in Belgium, and I was incredibly affected by his painting - I was thunderstruck, filled with admiration; and when I got to Paris, you couldn't see Redons, there weren't any in the museums.
got completely absorbed in Impressionism. But little by littleRedon's influence was continuous. I think he had great importance in Surrealism; even though Breton didn't like him, the other Surrealists *did.* He was important, Redon.They had some nice things of his - pastels - in New York; here, there's very little.
DR: I know you worked with Stanley William Hayter in his Atelier 17; did you actually work *with* other artists there - collaborate, share ideas, etc.'?
AM: I have a lot of respect for what Hayter does. All the painters who did etching were with him, for instance, Pollock. Hayter's was the only [graphic workshop] where I worked alongside other artists. Color etching, that's a whole other story: it's done by

graphics specialists, and all the artist does is *sign* the print. It's a big fraud, but it's accepted, so it's no longer considered a fraud: from the moment a fraud is accepted, it's the one who *doesn't* swindle who is the con man. I always say, when the rule of the game is to cheat, he who *doesn't* cheat becomes the trickster. In the workshops, I was all alone, I was all alone at Mourlot's, at Lacourière's, and I wondered why, but I was with artisans who *made* the prints, and color etching is a job for an artisan. One day, I was talking to a big print dealer who bought my prints because he knew I really made them - I didn't just sign, I had really made them - and I said, "I don't know why I go to so much trouble: because later on, nobody will know whether it was done by me or by an artisan." And so he said to me, "They'll know if you did it, because when painters do their own [print work], its always screwed up!" But now, I've finished. I don't do gravure any more.
DR: After the war (the Second World War), when you returned to Paris, did you find things different? Did you find any significant changes?
AM: At first, I was very badly received. They all thought they were great patriots because they'd stayed in Paris - and collaborated with Hitler and Pétain, but *that* didn't matter, they still considered themselves great patriots. So, a Frenchman who left, when he returned, was badly received; but I'd been so disliked before leaving that this didn't change a thing! I understand perfectly well someone who doesn't want to go to war: but what I hold against the French in the last war is their having put on uniforms and then turned tail to run from the Nazis. While I was still in Paris, I was so critical that they almost put me in prison: and so it seemed better that I go off to America.

DR: Were you interested in *l'art autre, l'art informel,* in postwar Paris?
AM: No, I'm not interested in the different forms of art. I was too old. You know, Goethe said a very true thing: "When you're over sixty years old, don't judge those younger than you: whether you like them or not, you'll only talk nonsense about them!" And it's true. So since I've been over sixty, I haven't said anything about various movements; my last interest was the New York School.
DR: You considered them an extension of what you did? AM: Well, of course I haven't seen the latter works.
DR: But their work of the 1940s did interest you a lot? AM: They always interested me ..
DR: Especially Pollock?
AM: Yes, especially Pollock.
DR: Did you know him?
AM: No; it's odd, because he went and asked to see my pic-tures at my dealer's, at Curt Valentin's gallery; Valentin said to92 me immediately, "There's a young American painter who likes

you a lot, maybe you'd like to get to know him." I said, "No, don't want to meet anyone. I want to go back to the country." There were the Surrealists who came to see me, but the only young American painter whom I was friends with was Arshile Gorky.
DR: You've worked from time to time, but through most parts of your career, from nature, haven't you?
AM: From time to time, yes, but for twenty or thirty years I haven't worked from nature.
DR: You have said that every picture must have something of the world in it.
AM: I don't think you can escape it. The French philosopher Descartes in his *Metaphysical Meditations* said that human imagination is limited, because the most imaginative painter can't invent nature that is entirely new. Entirely new - it's impossible, it already exists. When I was in New York, I had an album of photographs (microphotographs) - there was one that showed a drop of milk falling onto a copper plate. To work from a microphotograph is like working from nature, because a crystal or a drop of milk that falls onto a copper plate is natural, too. Well, the drop of milk was magnified a thousand times; a drop of milk magnified a thousand times is like a terrible explosion. Descartes was right; one can't invent natures - in the plural - that are entirely new. Everything is already in the world. The work of creation consists in making new *rapprochements - to* marry a cow and a flower.
DR: To make metamorphoses?
AM: Yes, metamorphosis; I've called many of my pictures metamorphoses. For me, metamorphosis is the conjunction of all the [natural] kingdoms.
DR: And the basis of romanticism?
AM: Yes, and the basis of romanticism.
DR: Apropos a comment you made on *classicism,* would you clarify what you meant by saying Poussin was "mad" or "irrational"?
AM: I said, *a little* mad. He composed in his own way. I think that, compared to the other French painters of his time, like Le Sueur, like Le Brun, he was a bit mad. He went to Rome - you have to remember that he was living at a time when Rome was like Paris - Roman painting was being done by Frenchmen, in large part.
DR: Do the Italian painters interest you?
AM: But of course; I admire all of them, even Raphael! DR: But most of all the Venetians?
AM: Yes, because they're more romantic. Tintoretto was more romantic than Raphael.
DR: Do you like, or feel any affinity for, the work of Raoul Dufy? AM: No, he doesn't interest me at all, absolutely not at all. DR: Another absolute negative?

AM: No, not even! I always say to be against something is already to be a bit for it.
DR: Why are you interested in Matisse and not Dufy?
AM: It's that I find Matisse a very great artist. I lived at Matisse's a bit; I did have many conversations with Matisse. I had many with Picasso, too, but Matisse was more philosophical.
DR: You didn't find him bourgeois, then? That's sometimes held against him as a painter.
AM: Bourgeois? Matisse? Oh, he was very bourgeois. Very. very, very bourgeois. Picasso wasn't.
DR: And you?
AM: I don't know; I've had a very undisciplined life. I did all sorts of work when I was young; I had more than twenty jobs. I had a lot because I kept getting fired. The odd job I liked the best was smuggling [across the border with Spain]. I needed money; I did have a military pension. but it was small, and my parents didn't have a lot of money. So I did this job, which paid well: my favorite job was smuggling.
DR: Not painting?
AM: Smuggler and Painter: that would be nice in a biography! There's Customs-Inspector [translation of Le Douanier] Rousseau, but there hasn't been a Smuggler Masson!
DR: Are you interested in Le Douanier Rousseau?
AM: Sympathy; I'm sympathetic to him. I had a conversation about Le Douanier Rousseau with a German philosopher who's interested in art. I said to him that for me, Le Douanier Rous-

seau is the greatest of the popular painters, but I don't see that he belongs in the Louvre alongside Van Gogh and Gauguin; think he's a folk painter. But I've taken that back a bit - he's a good painter; oh, yes, all the naive painters - the Sunday painters - paint this way [Masson gestured to indicate small, tight brushstrokes]; but *he* painted boldly. He's a real painter. His subjects are sometimes ridiculous; but the landscapes are quite beautiful.
DR: Which subjects do you find ridiculous; and why?
AM: For instance, when he represents all the heads of state - this is in a picture that belonged to Picasso - all the European heads of state assembled to fête the angel of Liberty - well, you could hardly get more idiotic! But his portraits of women are very impressive. The last time I was at the Louvre, four or five years ago, they had bought or received by donation a large portrait of a woman by him. It was his housekeeper; she was so tall one would have thought her an empress. It was extraordinary. Oh, he's a very curious painter; he was unique. It's one of the strangest cases in the history of art; I'm partial to him, but I still wouldn't put him next to Van Gogh and Gauguin. There are certain of his pictures that I like a lot, others I don't; at the Louvre there's a painting of his called *War* that I don't like at all; there he's quite naive. But the large portrait of a woman is magnificent.
DR: [Having noticed a copy of Proust's *A La Recherche* lying on the windowsill] Are you reading Proust?
AM: He's an author I *cannot* read. I know that it's very good; but I smother! - I can't breathe! I've tackled it from every angle; actually, I've read the whole thing, but in small pieces over a number of years. I've never followed it completely through. I'm picking it up again.
DR: On a totally different topic, but apropos things that you return to, how did you originally begin making automatic drawings?
AM: It was in 1922; what influenced my art then was yet another odd job. I was the proofreader for the *Journal Officiel* (I was protected by the anarchists - the anarchist union - and I made *awful* mistakes!). Well, there were pauses in the work - when one waited for the communiqués from the chambers of the government - so, on the sheets of paper I had - the

newspaper sheets - I drew with pen and ink. These were the first of my automatic drawings. I realized that there was something very odd in this: the bizarre association of automatic drawing done on the sheets of the official newspaper of the French Republic! I remained there one year.
DR: You mentioned Max Ernst before, as a Surrealist. AM: Max Ernst was very cultivated, very intelligent.
DR: Was he a true Surrealist? And what does true Surrealism consist of?
AM: Ah, the true Surrealism is what I *like!*
DR: Ah, but you've said you weren't a real Surrealist at times. AM: I am so a Surrealist, all the same.
DR: Well, then, why isn't Miró a Surrealist?
AM: Miró is not so much a Surrealist, because real Surrealism depends on the image, the subconscious image, but Surrealist painting is an art.
RM: That isn't an art.
AM: That's another question. The Surrealist painters said that they didn't like painting, the poets said they didn't like poetry, and when they did politics, they ought to have said the truth, that they didn't like politics! They didn't like anything. As for me, I refused to get involved in politics.
RM: He got involved in politics when people were being persecuted; then, he's on the left; otherwise, he's on the right. When people are persecuted, he's a leftist: he has a Jewish wife, you understand?
AM: No, except for when Hitler started his madness and you couldn't help being involved - other than that, I didn't want to be involved in politics; I'd much rather reread Proust!
DR: I wanted to ask you about the landscape in America, which it seems to me you talk about (I think you said this once) in terms more or less based on Chateaubriand. You lived in the country; was it different than France?
AM: Not much where we were, in Connecticut. The countryside is full of rocks - hills, beautiful hills and rocks; and on the tops of the rocks, there's a crystallization that is very beautiful. Nat-

ure is very beautiful there. There are red lilies, day lilies. We were on a lake.
DR: Were you influenced by the American landscape in a way that parallels any other particular painter who went and painted another country's landscape?
AM: No, I was influenced by the force of the climate; the terrible storms. In Connecticut, there are weather changes. Mark Twain wrote a very nice essay on the variations of weather in Connecticut, it's quite apt - it is *very* cold - sub-zero - so that made a big impression on me: the force of nature, of the seasons, the cold, the heat, the storms; and all of it influenced my painting.
DR: Your painting *Meditation on an Oak Leaf,* which I know from the Museum of Modern Art, and which I admire greatly, obviously has something to do with this. What were its origins exactly? Were you drawing directly from nature at that point?
AM: Yes, it does have a connection with nature in America. But it's a Surrealist picture (in my manner, though, not in the manner of Magritte, but in the manner of Masson!). There were some oaks, larger than in Europe, with very large leaves; also maples. It's because the climate is so strong, everything grows more quickly, and larger than it does in Europe; all this excited my imagination. In the picture there's also a wildcat. It's good that it's in New York at the Museum of Modern Art, because it was inspired by nature in America.
DR: You participated in the revolutionary times toward the beginning of the century, and I wondered if, at this end of the century, you perceive a motif, or a particular path through the

century, which you find significant?
AM: When I was quite young, nobody talked about the unconscious; the unconscious didn't exist. With Freud, it was understood that the human being was not what one had thought it before, that it was different. That was an enormous revolution. So, some Surrealists rented a little private hotel. In the big reception room, they first of all put a nude woman on the ceiling; and on the cornice, a dummy of that woman; and on the main wall, there were three books, surrounded by forks: *Introduction to Psychoanalysis,* by Freud; *Les Chants de Maldoror,* by Lautréamont; and *Fantômas.* This was to prove to young people the difference between us and our fathers, our elders.
DR: So you find Surrealism more central to the age - to our century - than Cubism?
AM: Oh, yes.
DR: Then how do you see their relation?
AM: Between the Cubists and Surrealists? The Surrealists admired the Cubists because they had changed the aesthetic. DR: But the Surrealists wanted to break Cubism, didn't they? AM: Yes. Miró and I said, Cubism must be broken. Mind said, "I'll break their guitar." And I said, "I will make their birds bleed," because whenever I painted birds, they were dead: this was a declaration of war. But the Cubists didn't like the Surrealists. Picasso said, before there were the *pompier* painters who specialized; there were the specialists in seascapes, in military exploits, and *you,* Surrealists, you're the specialists in the dream. So, it's *pompier* painting. The Cubists painted everyday subjects, things found on a table in a café, subjects of little importance; so, obviously, the fanciful aspect of Surrealism didn't please them. Picasso took a long time to accept Cubism, but finally he did Surrealist drawings.
DR: Do you think psychoanalysis is a philosophy or a therapy? AM: It's both, but it's obviously the philosophy which attracted the Surrealists; because, when André Breton went to see Freud, they didn't get along at all. Freud said to Breton, not in these exact words but this was the gist of it: that which I want to cure, you, on the contrary, wish to expand. So they couldn't have gotten along.
DR: You once said Breton was quite puritanical?
RM: He was! Even on Martinique, he never took off his jacket! DR: Should a Surrealist not be psychoanalyzed?
AM: Some Surrealists went to be analyzed; it was a disaster. It's a paradox, but the paradoxes are continual. If you don't understand that life is paradoxical, you don't understand a thing about life! The first thing the Surrealists should have detested was psychoanalysis. It's as if Freud said to draw roses instead of drawing monsters. But for us, what was important was that a scientist had discovered that there is a secret life in each in-

dividual; that there isn't just communal life, but also a secret life. The Surrealists thought that there was a source for creation: if one created not what one saw, but what one felt. DR: In what ways have you been interested in Goethe? AM: I've been very interested in him; I did an imaginary portrait of him. I think Goethe was exactly the man described by Emerson. He called Goethe "the man of the world." And that's what I think of Goethe.
DR: Do you think there is progress in art? I don't.
AM: Oh, no! No, it's mysterious. You can have progress in the sciences, naturally, that's fine; but how could you have it in art? It's not true, it's not possible.
DR: Do you think a painter has to have a catholic taste? AM: No, I'm not very strongly for that.
DR: Does art criticism interest you?
AM: Oh, yes, there are some good critics. There are many who aren't interesting, but I consider criticism important; it's part of art. Berenson interested me, he's a great critic. He

went no further than Cézanne, but he wrote important books. I knew Venturi pretty well - he was in exile with me in America. Venturi said to me at the end of his life, "In principle a true critic shouldn't have personal taste. He must be able to make abstractions, and apart from his personal taste to be able to judge works of art which are necessarily not to his taste. It's necessary to be able to judge Cézanne as well as David; to try to do justice." Then he said, "Now that I am old, and after having practiced this formula all my life," one must pass over one's taste, "there are some things which say something to me, and others which say nothing." So, basically, he was saying it's no use saying you have to do justice; you can't do it. And that's true.

DR: Have you collected the work of other painters?

AM: No, never, because I was always ready to run off. When I was young, I had a very eventful life, and sometimes had to take off without my own work; it wasn't worth having other people's work if I were only going to abandon it with my own. My principle was to be able to get going as quickly as possible! It was my morality!

About the Italians, again - basically, I love the great painters of the past: Titian, Michelangelo. In that, I'm not a Surrealist, because one of the fundamental ideas of Surrealism, formulated by André Breton, was that we oughtn't to concern ourselves with anything before the 19th century. There's some truth in this: that, in short, before Romanticism, there was nothing we could retain. Our Knowledge - with a capital - must have started with Romanticism. Everyone shared this opinion. So I said, yes, yes, although I didn't *think* this way, because I wanted to be in fashion. If I had said that I liked Michelangelo! - dreadful! You weren't supposed to like music, either, but I always had music.

DR: Have you written poetry?

AM: A little, hasn't everybody? But I'm careful; I make sure not to publish it!

DR: Do you see the free-floating strokes of color - the "tâches" of red and blue that you have. spoken of - as a counterbalance to the inclination to draw, or an effort to find color and line together?

AM: When I did a painting like this, for me, it was the wind in the branches [Masson was pointing to a painting in the room]; I wasn't thinking about drawing, I was thinking about the gesture that imitated the tempest. I was living in a house which stood near a small pine forest; and in Provence, there are very strong storms, with rain and wind - the East winds - much worse than the *mistral;* terrible. So it was done under the influence of these East winds. In the storm, I didn't think any more about drawing. Basically, I've tried to make it harder for myself all my life. I wonder why; I suppose I have always had a fear of facility. And when I've had enough of something, I have had to do something else.

DR: Is that the true Surrealist attitude?

AM: Whether it is or not, they did the opposite!

DR: Well, maybe you're the only real Surrealist. What do you think about the huge scale on which the American painters of the New York School painted, given that your own paintings - which make use of the "gesture" within a space smaller than arms' breadth - are not oversized?

AM: In the history of art you find this simple fact: that until the Romantic era, painters made large paintings because they had a destination - to decorate a church, an official building - and when they did a picture outside of their large decorative pictures, they did something on this scale [gesturing at a small easel-scale painting], no bigger. The *real* pictures of Rubens are the studies, which are small; in general the sketches are no bigger; it was the workshop that afterwards executed the big painting. Then, in the Romantic era, painters, whether it was Delacroix or Ingres, did the same thing - their big pictures had a destination, to decorate a

church or a monument. When they did a painting for themselves as a study, it wasn't large.
DR: That's the sort of thing I was asking your opinion about on the New York School. Americans have done paintings that are tremendously oversized without such a destination.
AM: That I don't understand; sometimes I think it's because America is so large!
DR: But I meant the Abstract Expressionists, whom you admired.
AM: But this is something alien to me. Why such big pictures if they don't have a destination?
DR: Was it you who introduced automatic drawing into the Surrealist circle?
AM: *They* didn't practice it. There's an American critic who made the remark that when one opens an issue of the Surrealist publication, *La Revolution Surréaliste,* with automatic drawings, one sees Massons. That's all, no one else - no Mirés, no Max Ernsts, no Tanguys - and that, too, is a paradox. The two things that / consider most Surrealist that I've done are automatic drawing and sand paintings. Which interested my comrades *not at all,* not one bit; whether poet or painter, this wasn't interesting. It's odd.
DR: How did you begin painting with sand?
AM: In 1926, I was at the seaside and I didn't have any oil paints; to get them you had to take the train to Toulon (I'd left my paints in Paris). So I didn't have anything to do. I was sitting on the beach and I looked at the sand. The sand - which I'd looked at often, since I liked the beach - instead of the single color, one color overall, which I thought it had, was instead made up of all the colors imaginable. There were brilliant grains of sand and dull ones; and I saw that it was a dazzling material. So I went back to my place. I had some glue and a canvas, I'd brought some of the sand with me, and I started to add the sand; when it was dry and I saw the forms, either I would stop there and draw in something inspired by these forms or I would start again with more sand. Meyer Schapiro, the critic from Columbia University, said to me, "You have redone the wall of Leonardo da Vinci." For me, this was a truly Surrealist experience, but for the Surrealists it was nothing - what a paradox!
DR: What is the origin of the *Migrations* paintings? Did they arise out of automatic drawing?
AM: When I did the *Migrations,* I was conscious of the fact that in our time we have had many migrations, so it's a good subject. DR: You've been asked before about the different stimuli of city and country on your work, on your state of mind. And the country mostly seems to have won out - until now?
AM: Now I like the city better. I am doing the opposite of what most painters do: painters first live in cities, and when they are secure, around fifty or sixty years old, they end up in the country. I am doing the opposite. I started out by getting out of the city as quickly as possible; when Kahnweiler gave me a little contract [in the early 1920s], I ran off to live in the country. And now that I'm old, I need the city. It's a mystery to me. I need even the noise of the city - when I hear cars passing....

A National Endowment for the Arts Art Critic's Traveling Fellowship made my trip to Paris - thus my visit to Masson - possible, for which I am grateful to the NEA.
Special thanks to Madame Louise Leiris, of the Galerie Louise Leiris in Paris: her very kind assistance and enthusiastic reception were essential in arranging my contact with André Masson. And thanks to her staff and to the staff of the Saidenberg Gallery in New York for various sorts of help, with reproductions and with correspondence.
Catherine Bodard Silver has been both generous and patient with my demands upon her time for help with translating this interview, which took place in French.
Finally - to the artist. André Masson, and his wife, Rose Masson, with whom I spent memorable hours in Paris - I am indebted beyond specific words here.