

EAGAN CHRONICLE

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Bringing you the news of the people, the neighborhoods and business of Eagan

Eagan sculptor focuses on the basics of life

by Linda Hanson

To sculptor Tony Caponi, the countryside is alive with works of art.

He's the sort of person who can look at a long, low hill on his property and imagine it to be whale. And someday, motorists driving by his home at 1215 Diffley Road will probably see it, too.

People driving by can already see a few sculptures peeking over the fence bordering his hilly sculpture garden. For the past two years Caponi has been shaping the grounds into a work of art.

"All the art in this place is born of

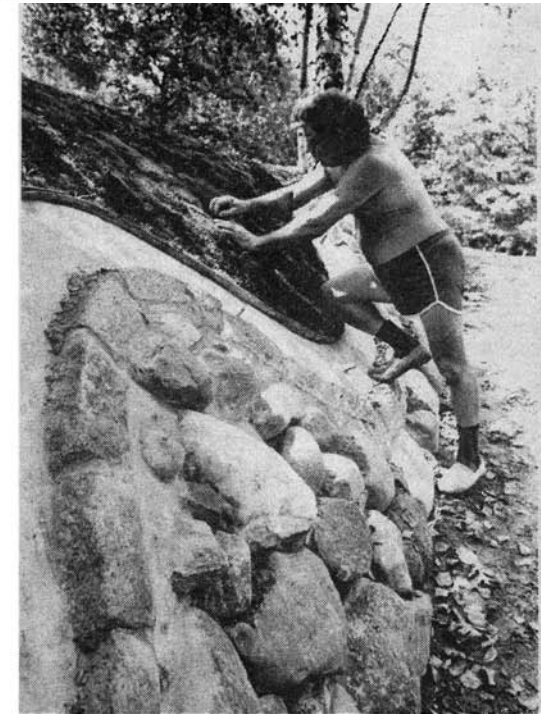
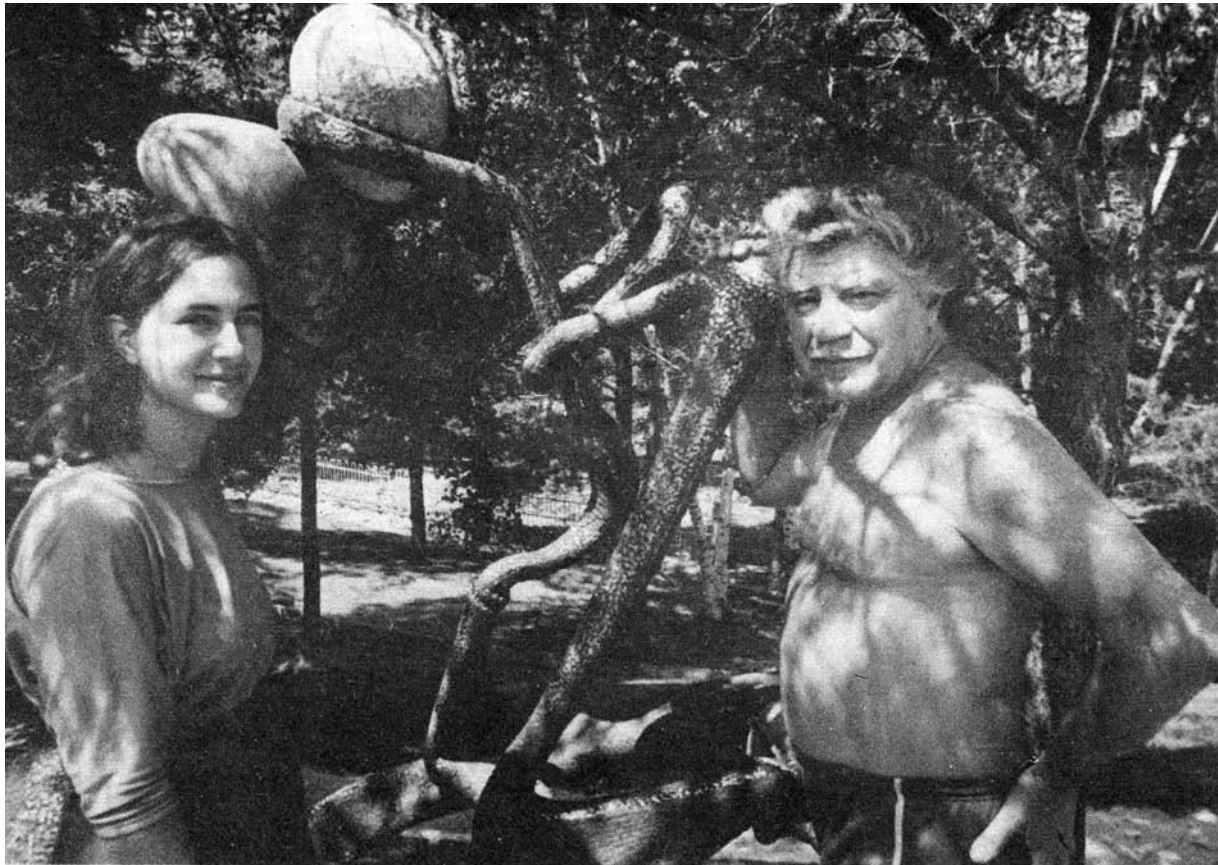
its own environment," he said. "It might take 10 years to finish."

But the years of work ahead doesn't concern Caponi; he seems to relish every task connected with the project.

"I hope this will be a major art place in Eagan someday This is where I'm building my monument. Now I'm doing it for me. But later on, I hope, Eagan will consider it its own."

As Caponi gave a tour of the garden on a warm afternoon last week, he was dressed for work: blue shorts,

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Above, Tony Caponi caresses a "moss sculpture." Below, a path lined with his work along Diffley Road. At left, Caponi and his wife, Cheryl. (Photo below is by Caponi.)

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green plaid socks, comfortable shoes and no shirt.

His enthusiasm for his work shows in his face, which lights up when he talks about his philosophy of art and life, and in his hands, which stop and caress his works.

Even the moss covering the hills is art to him. He stooped to stroke it and called it "living fur."

The paths in the garden curve gently, and someday, he hopes, it will be a place children will like to run through.

Stones are set into patterns along the hill, serving simultaneously as art and a retaining wall for the hill, which slopes toward the house he built more than 30 years ago. A sculpture of "winter creatures" is set into the side of a slope.

Toward the bottom of the sculpture garden is a series of panels he calls "Pompeii" after the ancient city in Italy which was buried and preserved by a volcanic eruption.

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The hum of a fan sounded in the background as Caponi put his feet up on a bench in his kitchen and talked about art, philosophy and his life.

This fall he will return to his job as chairman of the art department at

Macalester College, after spending the past year on sabbatical leave.

During his sabbatical he got married, went to Mexico to research Mayan works of art, worked on a book of philosophy and a book of photography of his sculptures, in addition to working on his sculpture garden.

He has worked at Macalester since 1949 and has been chairman of his department since 1954. His sculptures are on display at Normandale Lutheran Church in Edina, at the Kenosha Building at 12th and Harmon Street in Minneapolis, and in Abilene, Texas, Rochester and St. Cloud. He also has sculptures in area museum collections.

Caponi's Italian ancestry is noticeable in his accent and in the way he punctuates his words with gestures.

He was born 61-years-ago in Pretare ("the place of rocks"), Italy.

"I had the good fortune to be born in a small town in a different culture where people were simple enough to be honest and easily understood.

When you have a basic understanding of human nature and belief in your fellow man, then you've got the basis for security and a clear insight to life."

Caponi came to the United States during the Depression at the age of 15 and settled in Akron, Ohio, which he



didn't like because it was so dirty from industry.

"I thought all America was that way."

He didn't speak English when he began school and consequently had difficulty understanding his teacher. On the first day of art class, the teacher passed out blocks of wood. As near as he could make out, the teacher wanted them to take it home, carve something, and bring it back the next day.

"Boy, I thought this was going to be a hard class," he said. "When I came back the next day with a carving of a horse, I found out it was supposed to be a semester project."

He said the teacher then took him to the wood shop and made sure he got a big block of wood for his next

project so that it would take him a long time.

"I thought she had faith in me to give me such a big block of wood. Later I found out that she was worried what to do with me—it took her time to think up projects for the class—she was trying to free herself of me."

A few years later, Caponi went into the Army and was sent to Italy in World War II. He plans to write about what it felt like to go back to his homeland as a "conquering force."

After the war he returned to the United States and studied art in Cleveland. While on a visit to the Twin Cities, he fell in love with the "clean, orderliness of the Nordic people with their well-kept lawns."

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Caponi is 'specialist in life'

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He believes there can only be freedom where there is a degree of orderliness: "People here take it for granted—but it's not that way everywhere."

He was also drawn to the Twin Cities because it was a cultural center.

"Here I could have the city and the country at the same time," he said. "I went to Macalester and never left it. I built this home and never left it. I can say, 'this is home' in a time it's difficult to say that. So many people follow jobs around the country the way the Indians followed the buffalo."

Caponi said he's never let go of the basics of life. "I don't believe in the separation of physical labor and the intellect."

He says those who suggest that people who use their bodies are not using their intellect are arrogant and snobbish.

"As a sculptor I do very hard work I extend my intellect into the very fibre of my body, my physical being."

"Creative work starts with the most menial That to me adds meaning rather than detracting," he said.

Caponi calls himself a "specialist in life" to get away from other people categorizing him as an administrator, a teacher, and the other things he does.

He believes art has a close relationship to everyday life: "one slides into the other."

Caponi is one of the few sculptors who does direct carving, sculpting without first making a model of a sculpture or using an intermediate step.

In other words, he cuts directly into the stone. And he doesn't necessarily know what the end product will be when he starts. It evolves as he works.

He likes the spontaneity of the creative process and doesn't mind taking risks.

When his students experiment with a work of art and aren't pleased with the outcome, he said he tells them, "That's not ruined—it's just not finished."

"They're too impressed with every

idea. There are a lot of ideas," he said and spread out his arms. "What doesn't work out, it's incomplete. If I didn't feel that way, I'd be afraid to touch anything."

Caponi also believes that frustration is a positive force. "The greater the potential for frustration the greater the potential for satisfaction.

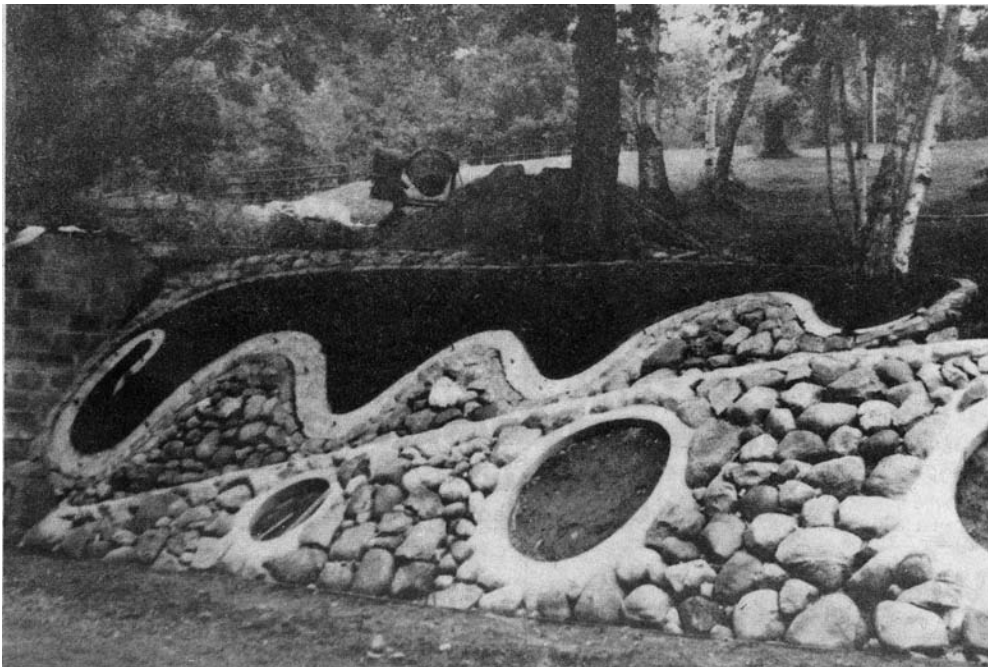
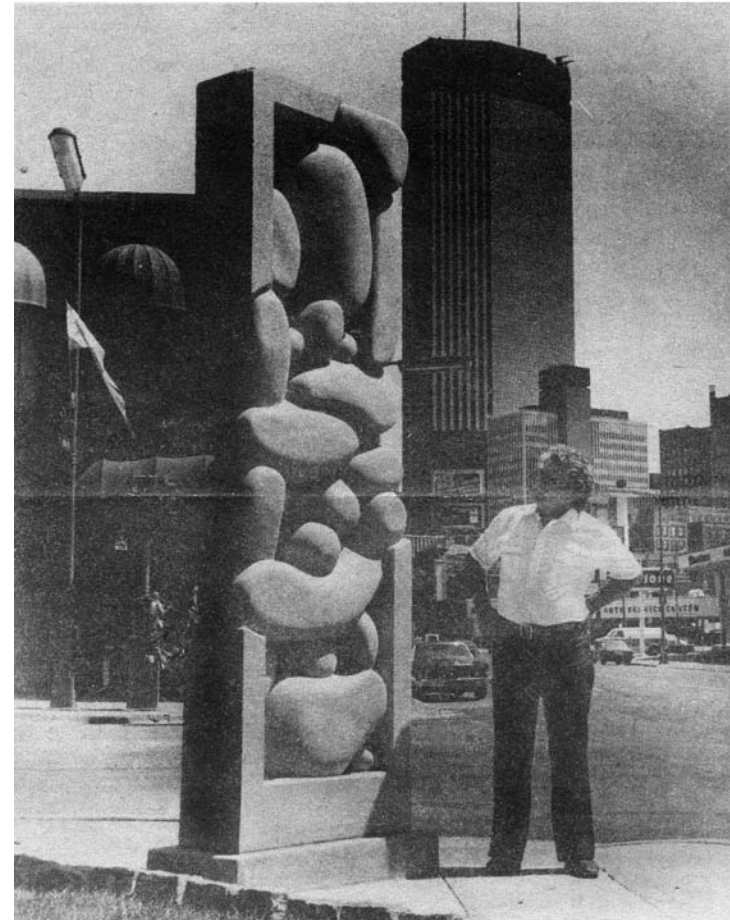
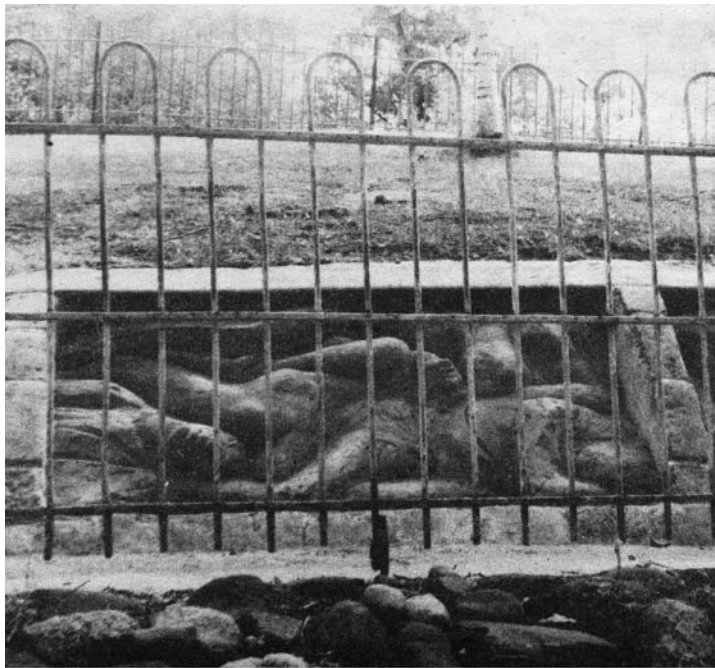
"Rather than subdue frustrations with narcotics, people should utilize it—you generate a lot of energy."

Caponi said he likes to do everything with a degree of obsession. "I have a very hard time loving more than one thing at a time. Otherwise, I feel like I'm broken up."

He said he doesn't think he's unique, nor is his philosophy unique to art.

As he paused to think of the words to articulate a thought, his eyes looked upward and scanned the ceiling.

"I look at artists to better understand what takes place in every individual. What keeps people working? It hurts not to."



Counterclockwise, starting above left, one of Caponi's sketches of a work called "Pompeii"; Caponi stands with a recent work, "Boulders on Boulders: Homage to the Minnesota North Shore," in downtown Minneapolis; a snake form lining a path; close-up of a wall in Caponi's sculpture garden.

(Photos at top left, below, and below left are by Caponi.)

