Doucet-Saito: Utilitarian pottery with a soul

by Jacques Lecureux

"To appreciate a ceramic object, I must return to its source. I find the earth from which it is made, I turn it on the wheel, I embellish it with its enamel and I bake it at its maturation temperature. I then see the object because I perceive it in the process of creation. I appreciate it spontaneously and I see it with the hand of the artist who created it. Then there are only external criteria; it is no longer a matter of style. I see the object for what it is. I call this approach a natural way of appreciating ceramics."

The author of these words is Satōshi Saito, a potter and ceramist. He and Louise Doucet, another potter and ceramist, form an active, dynamic and aware couple. The multiple facets of their daily life blend so well together that their existence as rural dwellers, parents, craftsmen and lovers is woven entirely from the same thread of harmonious logic that forms their appreciation of ceramics.

"Our first, essential purpose is harmony," Louise Doucet declares. "We try to stay as open and receptive as possible, to learn continually, so that we can benefit from each experience. Thus everything can find its place and its reflection in our work." Louise was born in Montréal in 1938, and Saitō Saito was born in Tokyo in 1936. They met in Montréal in 1961, and four years later they went to Japan so Louise could study and teach pottery there.

One hundred acres of land on an undulating hill behind the small town of Way's Mills in the Eastern Townships of Quebec is the site of this almost fourieristic harmony where the couple's three beautiful children are growing up and where the couple's life, work and love are assiduously developing into numerous pieces of pottery, each as beautiful and important as its predecessor because it is part of a creative process. "It is not necessary for each of our pieces to be a masterpiece," Louise says, because they are not copies; it is ourselves we are expressing. They don't represent adherence to a model, but are the result of our experience." The experience is in question is simply all aspects of the daily life of these two exceptional people. This is because they actually use the pieces they make - plates, casseroles, cups, glasses, pitchers and bottles - so they must be properly made and their shapes changed periodically, as the ceramics themselves change. By looking at their work we can deduce the measure of their growth and the age of the children, the eldest of whom is thirteen.

The basic, recurring ingredient of the pottery signed "Doucet-Saito" is success, constantly renewed marriage, together with westness and function. Satōshi says quite plainly: "A ceramic object is not there for contemplation. It must be used. It took me many years to understand this simple principle. The objective belongs to the table where you are sitting, to the meal you are eating, to the action you are performing, to the space in which you are moving. It is part of the environment. It creates the environment."

For Louise and Satōshi, living in the country does not constitute a flight or even a removal from the turbulence of the city, but the choice of simple, harmonious surroundings within which everyday creation can be comfortable and easily integrated into the rhythm of nature. In addition to the forty to sixty hours they devote every week to their artistic work, they find time to spend in activity with their children, to cultivate a large vegetable garden, to keep layers, raise chickens, and entertain friends in a tradition of Quebec hospitality learned to them in part thanks to the influence of Satōshi, who is an accomplished host.

"Craftsman of the year" as far back as 1962, Louise Doucet has lavishly created her functional ceramics for a good twenty years. Second in Quebec's artistic contest of 1963, she carried off the first prize in 1967, complementing it with winning a half dozen other prizes and major works over the years, as a large number of prizes from private and corporate firms. She received the latest of these grants in 1975 and 1976 from the Canada Council of Crafts. They were awarded to her jointly with her husband. Her participation in the annual Quebec exhibition "Les Arts du Vase" and her recent participation in the first biennial of ceramics held in the past fourteen years until it has become almost a full-time activity for him too, although he is an economist by education.

From June to September 1978, twenty of their works were exhibited at the Cultural Centre in Paris along with works of nine other ceramists, through the auspices of the Canadian Council of Crafts. In July and August of the same year, they participated in an exhibition entitled "American Masters," held at the Canadian Guild of Crafts, of which they have exhibited regularly since 1972. In October 1978, the renowned Matsumura gallery of Tokyo exhibited two or three thousand years of Japanese ceramics, presented a solo exhibition of their best works. But the simple fundamental beauty of their creation transcends this international recognition, and their work was acclaimed in 1978 when they were represented in two travelling exhibitions - one in Europe under the auspices of the Quebec province of the aforementioned organization.

However, they feel that their finest official recognition of all came when one of their pieces was chosen for the great exhibition entitled "Shiga Kyo," 800 years of the glaze of Shiga Kyo, which was held at Tokyo's Isenpur Museum in November 1978. The work of Doucet-Saito, which was the exhibition's only object bearing a non-Japanese signature, was displayed alongside the best pieces of the greatest Japanese pottery-makers over the last eight centuries, such as Soson, Kato and Arakawa.

The Doucet-Saito couple live in their pottery. The couple says that the key to a deep reflection on the direction they will take. They know all the properties of the material they use - earth, clay, sandstone, rock - and they respect them. They strive to create an object that is both beautiful and functional. Saito's sensibility dominates. Everything is thought out, reflected upon. However, the heat of the kiln into which all the objects are placed is the factor most difficult to control, and it results in something being found in the finished art that is not the same as it was foreseen. To understand all the suspense involved in the firing of pottery, one would have to attend the moving ritual of Satōshi opening the simple kiln, gas-heated and marshalled in a transparent form that he built himself. Equally moving is the sight of Louise's hands moulding clay on the wheel with a contented fervor which succeeds in masking neither the effort that goes to her naturally from habit nor the apparent facility with which in a few moments she constructs the shapes that will become beautiful everyday projects.

The honest integrated effort behind this creative work must be grasped to understand why Satōshi says: "As our understanding of the materials we use increases, so does our understanding of human relations: they become more flexible and we believe that the way we live is very important. Our way of working is based on our way of life. I believe that we have gone beyond style."

The joy of beautifying our surroundings is recorded daily, every day, by drinking from a beautiful clay vessel that was skillfully oxidized in the oven to bring out the grain of the soil's metallic deposits and filled with a strong pouring pitcher whose simple, natural shape evokes thousand years of development, without the artificial of an eye-catching glaze.

How rare and difficult it is to view an object and grasp it in its entirety. The May 1972 issue of the Quebec magazine Littérature, Satōshi Saito gave us this lesson in the observation and appreciation of his art: "Here's a beautiful goblet, made from good earth, with an attractive shape and shiny glaze fired to perfection. Few of us notice it. If we do, it's to ask what made it or where it was bought. That's all. No one carresses the goblet. Few will look at it for a minute, quietly savouring its beauty. In fact it's difficult to silence the sensations that well up with our eyes without being disturbed by words. And in one minute an object can reveal so much. It's astonishing how much we can learn in a minute. But seeing is not talking, knowing and loving ceramics mean helping to express silences."

Louise and Satōshi do not concern themselves about whether their pottery qualifies as art or handicraft, a mere quibbling over words. "It is work done with clay. A ceramic object is nothing more or less than a piece ofCanada. It has been like that for many years - the beauty of clay and glaze. We express ourselves, it's true, but it is not really a matter of pleasing ourselves. Our work brings out the best qualities of the materials."

In the presence of an exhibition of Doucet-Saito works, one lacks vocabulary if not steeped in the stylistic roots of an old tradition culture in daily contact with this form of expression. How can people of our time sense the force of the fire responsible for the darker part of some ceramic plates, when we eat from standard molded plastic? How can we appreciate the mass of the piece, the union of clay and china earthenware, when we drink from a bottle or Duralex glass? How can we perceive the exuberant movement of certain plates, the transparency that is the hallmark of Chinese porcelain, when we look at each of his objects." Louise-Doucet-Saito has said, "a ceramist must ask himself if the object can change people's sensitivity or their way of viewing life." That is an expression of the spirit of absolute generosity in which the extraordinary Quebec artisan couple live, work and love.

But we should not conclude that their life is entirely dedicated to their art, that they sacrifice the concrete pleasure of joyful living to their creative work, for their radiant serenity does not lead them into mysticism. Satōshi Saito is first of all a prodigiously eclectic tinker, a lively storyteller whose wide gesticulations and sparkling ideas are imbued with a linguistic code that borrows widely from the three cultures of which he is the product: Japanese, Québecois and Anglo-Saxon. Louise Doucet, for her part, is far from being placed, and her Mona Lisa smile turns into a delicate but forceful laugh when she says: "Don't think that we live here like hermits; I like pretty dresses and visiting the city from time to time."

(Translated by Genoveva Cabana)