Louise and Satoshi Doucet-Saito

by D. G. Jones

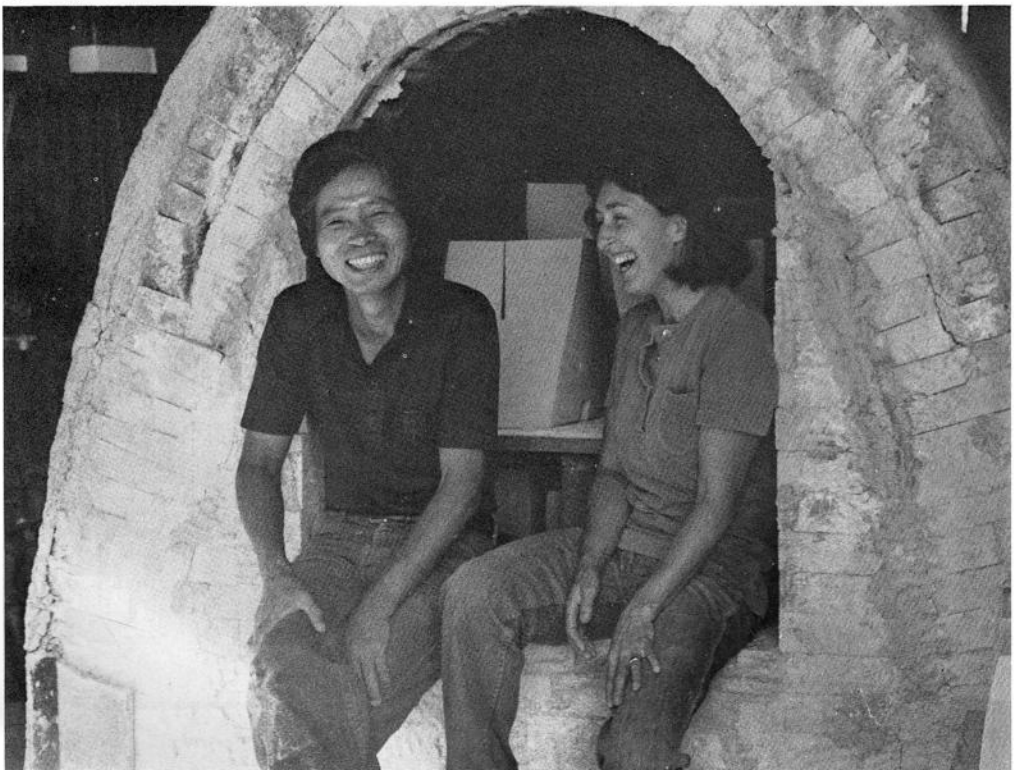
Step through the door of Louise and Satoshi Doucet-Saito's Canadian studio these days and you may be surrounded by the ghostly elements of some unborn city. Bisqued and waiting to be high fired, the pots along the shelves and benches may evoke structures in a Pueblo village or a chapel by Le Corbusier. They betray their origins in the slab; occasional thrown sections serve merely to display or test the asymmetrical balance of the forms—warped polyhedrons—pierced by slits, by wedge-shaped openings or by square apertures like the roof hatch on a skyscraper. Here is geometry under stress, an architecture partially liberated from the right angle. When fired, they will take on the distinctive tints and textures of the clays and glazes, and go separate ways. Yet, for a moment, it seems a shame. One likes to think of them assembled there like some pristine and slightly exotic idea of a town taking shape in the moonlight.

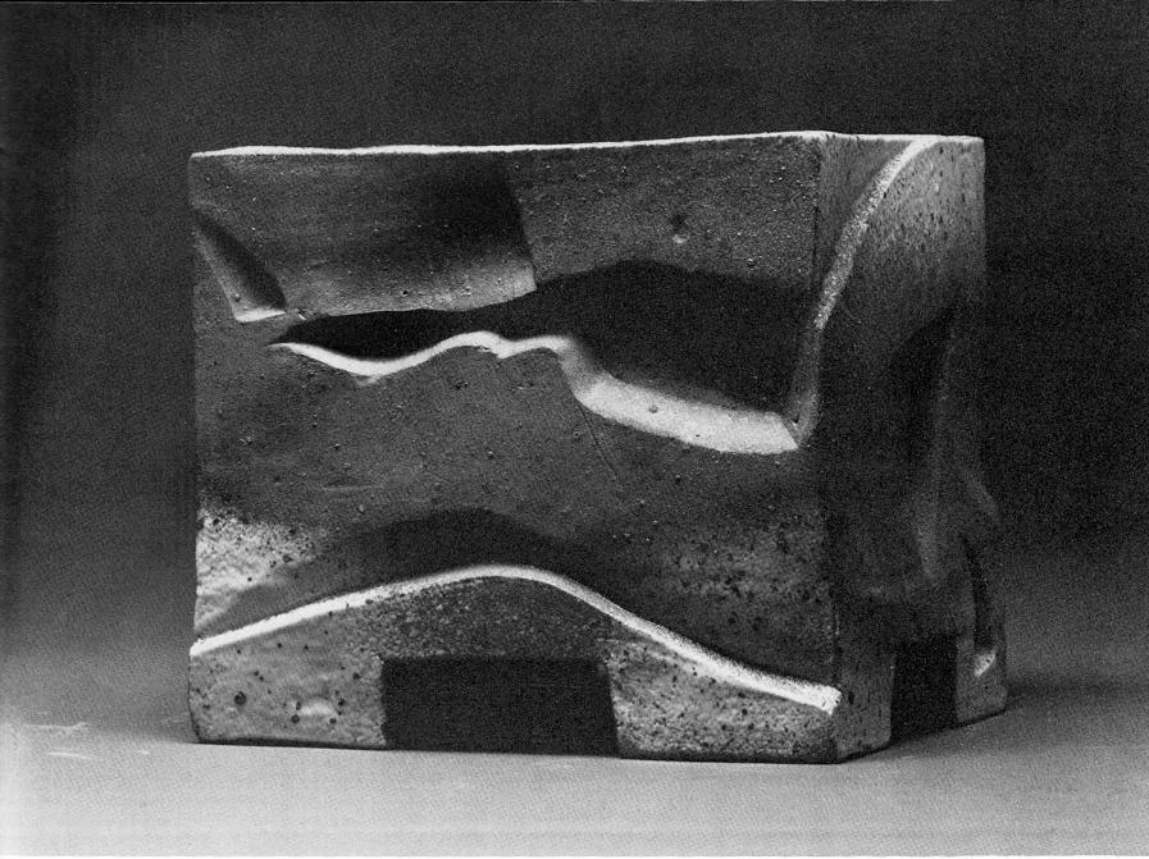
All is calm and tidy at their typical white farmhouse with its vegetable garden, barn and gray weathered shed, overlooking the village of Way's Mills in eastern Quebec. The wind pours through the valley, animating the old trees around the house. The sun pours through the uncurtained windows, lighting up the pale gray walls and orange tints in the pine furniture, so that two or three pots seem to merge with the decor. On certain days, you may be treated to seaweed-wrapped squid, rice and sake or to Gaspé salmon and French wine. And this center of the Doucet-Saito enterprise may grow untidy with pottery magazines and with pots themselves.

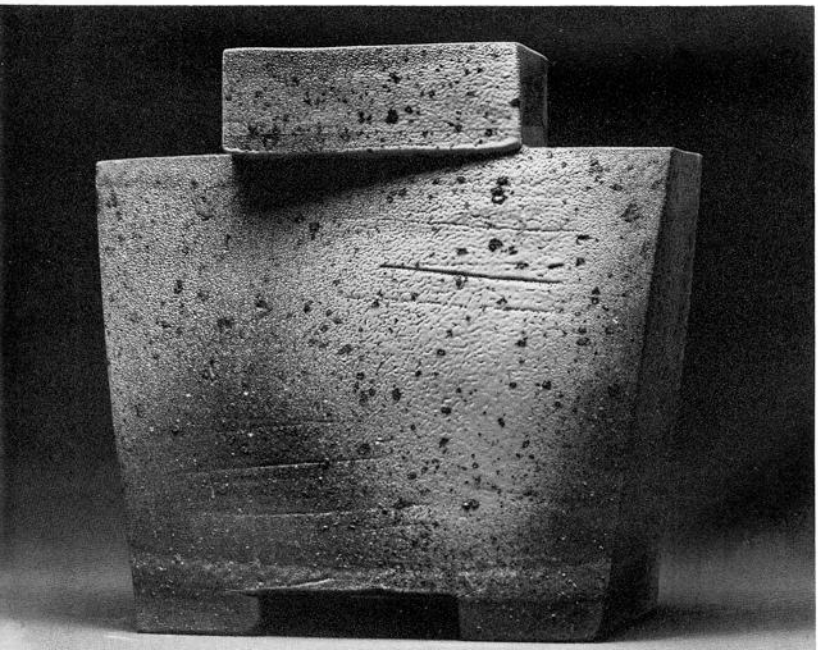
When Satoshi Saito came from Tokyo to do graduate work in economics at McGill University, no one would have predicted his future as a potter in the Appalachian hills. Even for Louise Doucet, who studied sculpture at the Montreal Museum of Fine Art, the future must have been something of a surprise. A summer course in pottery led to their working together for a year, marriage, and a two-year working honeymoon in Japan. On returning, they abandoned all sense of economics to buy the farm in Way's Mills and devote themselves wholly to ceramics. Since first working together in 1964, they have functioned as a team; the sense of dialogue, of integration and balance that is implied in such a collaboration is central to their art.

For Louise, the trip to Japan constituted a kind of

Quebec potters Satoshi and Louise Doucet-Saito.



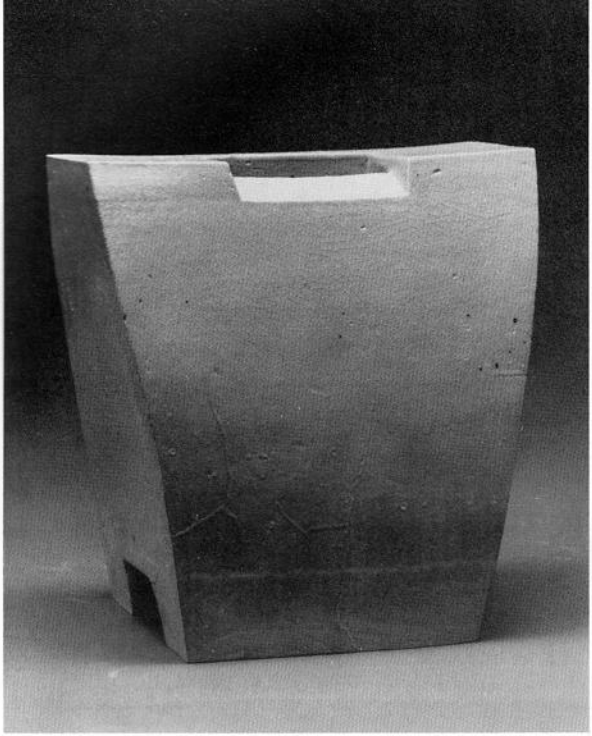




Above *Handbuilt, deeply carved slab form, approximately 9 inches in height, partially glazed.*

Left *Slab form, 1 foot in height, handbuilt from indigenous clays, partially glazed by spraying; shades of "architecture brute."*

Photos: Raymond Martinot, J. F. Ozoux



Louise and Satoshi select pots for firing. Forms are slab built from combinations of native clays, often with differing shrinkage rates that may stress the object. The character of the clays, largely from Nova Scotia, encourage leaving areas unglazed on many works.

Left *Handbuilt form, approximately 1 foot in height.*

Right *Slab form, 15 inches in height, by Louise and Satoshi Doucet-Saito.*

crash course in Japanese culture. For both, it provided an introduction to Japanese pottery. While preparing their ware for two exhibitions in Japan, the Doucet-Saitos worked at Tatsuzo Shimaoka's studio in Mashiko. They also visited his neighbor, the late Shoji Hamada, and met younger artists and critics who introduced them to other facets of Japanese art. Working in such a context, they learned a great deal. Yet the real influence during this period was not that of individuals, but of the Japanese view of pottery as a high art with an ancient tradition.

Satoshi and Louise feel a slab pot can command the same kind of interest as a Picasso painting or a Michelangelo sculpture. A work may be judged for its individual integrity, warmth and vitality. It may also be judged for its power to articulate a sense of the contemporary world. Finally, it may be judged for its enduring stature, its capacity to hold its own within a collection of pre-Columbian, Etruscan or Chinese ceramics spanning more than 2000 years.

Their slab work balances tradition and individual ideas, the utilitarian and the aesthetic, the intellectual and the sensuous, the abstract conception of form and the concrete properties of clays and glazes under different firing conditions. The challenge of balancing more and more extreme tensions provides much of the excitement in their recent sculptural forms.

As the shapes gradually developed, the vases became taller and heavier, rounded like torsos, with large necks or collars. Some have celadon glaze striped across the chest with shimmering bands of richer color; others have a pebbled, almost pearly glaze. Open boxes or urns, often with feet, have deeply carved side panels and the whole is heavily glazed. Large-scale mosaics are partially or lightly glazed and mounted on panels.

Enthusiasm for the material emerges in Satoshi's account of their last trip to Nova Scotia to obtain particular clays. He had been working in the pit all day, and was tired and soaked by the rain. Yet he dislodged one more choice deposit and found a clay that glistened like a dark strip of tenderloin. Interesting on its own, this clay was not to be hidden under heavy glaze, but led to the combination of slabs from different clays, thus complicating the visual design and creating more material tensions in the work. Since the shrinkage varies among the clays—a fact that entails further planning, wedging and mixing of clays at the seams—the process remains a gamble. Only one of five pots may emerge acceptable.

Risking more, practically and aesthetically, Louise and Satoshi have introduced something of the harshness of *architecture brute* (an architectural movement emphasizing stark forms and raw surfaces). Yet the very honesty with which they reveal the elements of the construction adds interest. The tensions set up between different planes, graceful curves and acute angles, open and closed spaces, glazing and untreated clay, seem appropriate to an age which has itself explored the extremes of technological violence and refinement. They are both modern and ancient, for they speak of materials under stress, whether it is the shearing and stratification of rock, or the effects of temperature and pressure on a nose cone re-entering earth's atmosphere.

The author *D. G. Jones teaches at l'Université de Sherbrooke in the Eastern Townships of Quebec.*