

## Doucet-Saito: Utilitarian pottery with a soul

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"To appreciate a ceramic object, I must return to its source. I find the earth from which it is made, I turn its shape 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 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 Satoshi 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 Doucet was born in Montréal in 1938, and Satoshi Saito was born in Tokyo in 1935. They met in Québec in 1961, and four years later they went to Japan so that Louise could have a period of study and research in oriental ceramics.

One hundred acres of land on an undulating hill behind the small town of Way's Mills in the Eastern Townships of Québec 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 do not represent adherence to a model, but are the result of our experience. The experience 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 ceramists 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 successful, constantly renewed marriage, together with aesthetics and functionalism. Satoshi 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 object 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 Satoshi, living in the country does not constitute a flight or even a removal from the hubbub 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 laying hens, raise chickens, and entertain friends in a tradition of Québec hospitality carried to its ultimate, thanks to the Japanese influence of Satoshi, who is an accomplished host.

"Craftsman of the year" as far back as 1962, Louise Doucet has lovingly created her functional ceramics for a good twenty years. Second in Québec's artistic contest of 1963, she carried off the first prize in the 1967 competition, in addition to winning a half dozen other prizes and mentions over the years, as well as various grants from private enterprise. She received the latest of these grants in 1975 and 1976 from the Canadian Guild of Crafts. They were awarded to her jointly with her husband. His participation in the creation of ceramics has gradually increased 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 1975, twenty of their works were exhibited at the Canadian Cultural Centre in Paris along with works of nine other craftsmen, through the auspices of the Canadian Council of Crafts. In July and August of the same year, they participated in an exhibit entitled "Faces of Canada," held at the Montreal showrooms of the Canadian Guild of Crafts, where they have exhibited regularly since 1972. In October 1976, the renowned Matsuya gallery of Tokyo, which mounts exhibits illustrating two or three thousand years of Japanese ceramics, presented a solo exhibition of their best works. But the simple fundamental beauty of their creations transcends this international recognition.

Their work was acclaimed again in 1978 when they were represented in two travelling exhibitions — one in Europe under the auspices of the Québec ministry of intergovernmental affairs, the other in Canada under the sponsorship of the Canadian Council of Crafts.

However, they feel that their finest official recognition of all came when one of their pieces was chosen for the great exhibition entitled "Shiguraki, 800 years of earth and fire," which was held at Tokyo's Isetan 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 Rosangin, Kato and Arakawa.

The Doucet-Saito couple live in their pottery. Their heart and soul go into 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 happily to create an object that is both beautiful and functional. Simplicity dominates. Everything is thought out, reflected upon. However, the heat of the two kilns into which all the objects are placed is the factor most difficult to control, and it results in something being found in the finished article that cannot entirely be foreseen. To understand all the suspense involved in the firing of pottery, one would have to attend the moving ritual of Satoshi opening the simple, brick, gas-heated kiln that he built himself. Equally moving is the sight of Louise's hands modelling clay on the wheel with a contented fervor which succeeds in masking neither the speed that comes 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 Satoshi says: "As our understanding of the materials we use increases, so does our understanding of human relations; they become more direct." And why Louise says: "I 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 routine activities is recaptured by using pottery 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 from a stoneware pitcher whose simple, natural shape evokes thousands of years of development, without the artifice of an eye-catching glaze.

How rare and difficult it is to really see an object and grasp it in its entirety. In the May 1975 issue of the magazine *Critère*, Satoshi 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 who made it or where it was bought. That's all. No one caresses the goblet. Few will look at it for a minute, quietly savoring its beauty. In fact it's difficult to silently see an object with our eyes without being disturbed by words. And in only a 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 means participating in the fullness of silences."

Louise and Satoshi 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 than that, a ceramic object — it has been like that for ten thousand years — the beauty of clay and glaze. We express ourselves, it's true, but it is not really a matter of pleasing ourselves. Our job is to bring 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 etymological roots of an old traditional 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 transparency of a willow-green finish with china craquelures, when we drink from a bottle or Duralex glass? How can we perceive the exuberant movement of certain plates, the transparency clouded with a beautiful glaze that is both simple and natural, the generous shape of a stout pitcher, or the opaque depth that results from a successful firing, without stopping to look at the objects, feeling them lovingly, as they were felt when they were made? "In looking 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 this extraordinary Québec 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. Satoshi Saito is first of all a prodigious and eclectic talker, a lively storyteller whose wide gesticulations and sparkling eyes punctuate the incessant talk in a linguistic code that borrows widely from the three cultures of which he is the product: Japanese, Québécois and Anglo-Saxon. Louise Doucet, for her part, is far from being placid, and her Mona Lisa smile turns into a discrete but definite 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 Geneviève Cabana)