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Kitaōji Rosanjin--A Few Words for Aspiring Potters, or Concerning the Relation of the Person to the Work of Art

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“A Few Words for Aspiring Potters, or Concerning the Relation of the Person to the Work of Art,” Kitaōji Rosanjin
Alfred University, Alfred, NY, April, 1954, Translated from the Japanese by Christopher Southward
「陶芸家を志す者のために—芸術における人と作品の関係について」、北大路魯山人著
昭和二十九年四月、ニューヨーク州立アルフレッド工芸大学に於いて

You’ve invited me here to speak about pottery, but I find myself at a loss for words. I hesitate because the vast differences between our nations’ cultures, customs, and practices makes speaking to the hopes and expectations of your school and student body a daunting task. My work is so idiosyncratic in style and comes about in such peculiar ways that, even within Japan, one can hardly compare it to the work of other potters, and since even my apprentices take great pains to make sense of my methods, I worry that the meaning of anything I might say under vastly different conditions here in the United States will be lost. What I mean by this is that, because I largely shun mechanical processes, my pots emerge as a matter of sentiment and from my complete deference to a sense of beauty, and even though the contemporary art world sees only caprice in my approach, I rely on it all the more and learn from it at the expense of producing unmarketable ware. Machines, after all, produce machinic work, and I think it a mark of near-madness that one should expect to create art with them.

Be that as it may, as with any art form, an essential function of pottery is to touch and speak to the heart of the user, and I hold that works which fail to do this are worthless. Whether painting or sculpture, when we behold highly regarded works of art by famous artists, we invariably find that they move us and somehow change us, and such is also the case with pottery. If we were to take a look at any of the classical works produced worldwide, say, five or six hundred years ago, we would find that each has an artistic vitality about it. And yet, with the exception of works made in Japan by great artists during the three or four centuries following the classical age—say, the tea bowls of Ogata Kenzan, Honnami Kōetsu, and Tanaka Chōjirō or the works of such artists as Nonomura Ninsei and Aoki Mokubei—the bulk of this output was created by the laity, and it is treated not as art but as craftwork.

China and Korea are similar in this respect. When it comes to works produced there over the past three hundred years, among which we grant that there may have numbered a few second-rate pieces, it is certain that the popular majority counted for nothing even those works that struck the sentiments of the user and which moved them and brought them joy.

The situation appears much the same in the countries of the West, but I think the difference here is that artists tend to treat the machine as though it were indispensable to speaking a deep, heartfelt sense of beauty. Consider your functional ware, which never compromises quality. Your prevailing methods of producing such work specifically for daily use certainly doesn’t reduce its stature; in fact, it is only fitting that you should continue advancing in this area. However, I think you would do well to serve goals other than that of pandering to the whims of wealthy dilettantes and collectors, and while I urge you to elevate your craft with a touch of naïveté, I think that, in order to do this, you must ignore the dictates of the machine. To state this position more clearly, we can say without reservation that so-called “technological society” contributes nothing to the spirit of art that is our concern. Thus, because art is thoroughly for us a working of the soul, we must free it from the idea that it emerges solely as a matter of intellectual or rational development.

If we were to consider the pottery being made in Japan today, we would find that, it’s delicate formal precision notwithstanding, the entire lot of it amounts to simple, low-grade dinner- and kitchenware. Potters there are committed exclusively to mass-producing such ware only because it is in high demand, and they are basically content with this because they view service to the spirit of commerce as their highest calling.

The recent exhibition of Japanese classical art that toured the United States received exceptionally favorable reviews, but I think that this was to be expected. This is so because, in the absence of distortions in points of view and taste, that which is good invariably appears somewhat good to the beholder, and anyone who looks upon a beautiful thing will find it somewhat beautiful. And yet,

one who is unaccustomed to considering goodness and beauty must take great pains to discover these qualities in things. The same is the case with pottery. If we were to scrutinize renowned and exclusive works or those that command extraordinary value as classical works of art, then we would find this much to be self-evident. I understand that your nation began to develop at roughly the time of the decline and fall of the Japanese arts three hundred years ago, so that, given your nation's relative youth, its fresh vision, spirit, and ways of thinking, pottery and other art forms here should, like the beauty of spring vegetation, develop rapidly. Considered a hundred years from now from the standpoint of the history of art or, perhaps, from that of the emergent nation of Japan, I think that we can expect American artistic culture to have developed to an astonishing degree and that great and invaluable works will have been produced here.

I've heard it said that the aforementioned exhibition included only austere, obscure, and esoteric works in which the vibrant palette of primary colors that universally appeals to the taste of the amateur was conspicuously absent, and I think that it is the Japanese tendency to look condescendingly upon the use of such colors that made this absence so obvious to the keen intuitions of many American patrons. Consider painting. The Japanese people were surprised to hear of the honor bestowed upon the several monochromatic black ink wash works by Sesshū Toyo exhibited there. Even in Japan, only a small cadre of connoisseurs with refined tastes appreciate his work, so we were pleased to discover that American tastes for our art extend beyond the paintings of the Floating World.

Given this set of circumstances, I think that there is little chance that art pottery will be properly understood. If the majority of people will come to understand the work of artists who reject the aesthetic standards of technological society and also come to appreciate the refined aesthetic sense that incorporates the natural force of fire, then we truly will have discovered a basis for peaceful and happy human living. But this will be possible only if both those who create such works and those who appreciate them elevate humanistic scholarship. Because Japan currently lacks such people, production of valuable and praiseworthy art pottery there is stagnant.