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Kitaōji Rosanjin—Why I Became a Potter (1933)

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People often ask me why I became a potter, and I simply tell them that my foray into the craft happened as a natural extension of my work as a chef.

I'd been enraptured with the world of food since childhood, and as my culinary sense developed through the years, I was increasingly dissatisfied with cooking alone. I needed aesthetically pleasing tableware worthy of the splendid dishes I'd been preparing, and I realized that, in order to find it, I must make it myself. Having so decided, I naturally began concentrating my efforts on ceramics, lacquerware, and other objects suitable for presenting food and, before I knew it and having made no such plans, I'd founded The Gourmet's Club; I believe the year was 1920, or so.

As the director of the Club, I inevitably encountered the same problems that had led me to pottery, but the mass-produced work available then didn't suit my tastes, so I turned for inspiration to the ancient styles of Japan's Old Seto ware, China's red-brushed porcelain, and Dutch pottery, producing imitations of teacups, platters, bowls, and other such objects for daily use. I'd spent three years this way, researching pottery and running the Club to favorable public reception, when a calamitous earthquake¹ struck and reduced our headquarters to dust, destroying our entire circulating stock of service ware and sparing not even our ancient pottery collection.

I managed to recover from the disaster and opened Restaurant Hoshigaoka, which boasted even more floor space than the Club and seated over a hundred diners. Given this level of demand, I knew that I couldn't quite rely as earlier on the use of ancient ware, and turning even to the pottery of Gojōzaka was out of the question, so I decided to commission work from a number of preeminent Kyoto potters. Among them were Miyanaga Tōzan, Kawamura Seizan, Miura Chikusen, Kutani-style artist Suda Seika of Yamashiro Onsen-machi lineage, Yaguchi Nagatoshi of Yamanaka Onsen-machi, Nakamura Shūtō of Daishōji, Owari- and Akatsu-style artist Katō Sakusuke and others, each of whom I asked to produce an exclusive selection of pieces expressive of his signature style. As the next order of business, I embellished, glazed, and fired this body of work for immediate use as our maiden tableware at Restaurant Hoshigaoka, which rose phoenix-like from the rubble of the Great Kantō Quake.

Still a complete amateur of the craft, I passed time reading great potters' monographs, including Okuda Seiichi's *100 Pieces*, lost in another world as I gazed at the images of their work. I was yet content simply to commission others' work and finish it as I saw fit, as this was the currently accepted way of honoring master craftsmanship within the world of pottery. But I soon realized that, because the work of the master potter emerges as a matter of life itself, I could enter into its mysteries only through direct practice and that, though technically immaculate, the works I'd seen pictured in all those pages were by no means beautiful. One might look at photographs depicting pottery of, say, the Sung Dynasty and Old Seto and reproduce those artifacts with perfect formal precision, but such things are bound to be devoid of spiritual content. With this in mind, I resolved to throw myself headlong into clay, realizing that this was the only possible way to enter its silent depths and, through it, my own.

Working with clay taught me the unassailable truth that I could claim authorship of a work only on the condition that I created it, bringing it into being by seeing it through from concept to object, and it pains me now to think that I had the gall to present other potters' work as my own, signing their hard-wrought pieces "Made by Rosanjin" simply because I happened to finish them. At best, these were collaborations, not self-motivated and -sustained creative acts, and, besides, a pot's surface treatments are of only secondary concern with respect to *the work of the clay* of which it is made. But, because he naturally misunderstands the true nature of the link between clay and potter, the amateur thinks only of *finishing* pieces, going to every length to consider such trifles as glaze combinations, markings, and what-not, oblivious to *the spirit of the work of the clay*. Don't get me wrong; I'm all for collaborations,

¹ The Great Kantō Earthquake of September 1, 1923

but I hold that they should happen between more or less equally matched agents if they are to be productive. Just consider the synergy of mountain and sky in Mokubei's paintings or, say, the sacred quality of Ninsei's pots, and you'll get a sense of what I mean by "collaboration." And yet, aware that such arbitrary distinctions as "amateur" and "master" fly in the face of what is for me true collaborative spirit, I set out on a journey into clay, undaunted by the many obstacles that lay ahead.

The potter's wheel is one of the craft's most difficult tools to master, and even dedicated apprentices can expect to spend an average of three years building recognizable proficiency on it. Even so, I confidently embraced the challenge and, realizing now that I needed kiln and studio, left for Ōfuna, Yamazaki to build them ground-up, and it was here that my true work began. Once the kiln was in operation, I took control of all the technical aspects of running the studio, from throwing and glazing pots to loading and firing the kiln, and I can proudly say that every piece of dining ware currently in use at Restaurant Hoshigaoka is the work of my own hands. Dutch-inspired celadons, Shigaraki- and Karatsu-style stonewares, Korean-style slip-brushed bowls, Old Seto earth-tones, and T'ang Dynasty-inspired cobalt porcelains all have places at my tables. Just as a researcher of dusty texts works by condensing and interpreting information culled from tens of thousands of sources, the potter channels into a spinning lump of clay a sense of the most salient features of tens of thousands of pots.

Thus began the slow process of producing a body of work to showcase at the Restaurant, and while it began as only a pretext for completing this very project, it happens that the result of having interacted with so many ancient pots was that I developed something of an obsession with them. Through it all, I managed to open Hoshigaoka Kiln just a few years ago, in 1928, and while I've finally finished researching and producing ware for the restaurant, my work continues, as each firing of the kiln is a unique situation that demands constant technical and aesthetic innovation and growth.

Of course, I understand how unconventional it is to have become a potter as a passing member of an epicurean club, but, masterless, mercurial autodidact that I am, I happily greet each new day filled with wonder as I think back to that once-distant horizon of the world of pottery and my journey to its shores, head in the clouds as I imagine the adventures to come.