KITAOJI ROSANJIN – (1883 – 1959)

Recognized as one of the most important Japanese potters of the 20th century, Kitaoji Rosanjin was a man of many diverse talents. In addition to ceramics, he was a noted calligrapher, seal-carver, chef, producer of lacquer ware, writer and scholar. Largely self-taught he pursued all these careers, sometimes several simultaneously, changing directions in his life as often as he changed his name. In all of them he strove for perfection, and while his passion frequently led to rudeness and tumultuous relationships, he never compromised his standards. Rosanjin’s pottery paid tribute to traditional Japanese pottery in his adoption of the master/apprentice model, his compound where he lived and worked, and his faithfulness to the artistic concepts of ancient Japanese style. Honored for his achievements both in Japan and the western world, Rosanjin was twice offered the prestigious honor of “Living National Treasure” and twice he turned it down.

ARTIST’S STATEMENT – KITAIOJI ROSANJIN

“Born alone, will die alone; come alone, will be gone alone; study alone, walk alone.”


RESUME – KITAIOJI ROSANJIN

1883  Born in Kamigamo, Kyoto, Japan; given name: Kitaioji Fusajirô
1889  Registered as adopted son of Takezô Fukuda
1893  Apprenticed to Chisaka Pharmacy (Chinese herbal medicines)
1899  Signboard painter; studied calligraphy
1904  Moved to Tokyo
       First prize, Nitten Art Exhibition for calligraphy
1905  Apprentice of commercial calligrapher Katei Okamoto
1907  Calligrapher; taught calligraphy under name Ôtei Fukuda
1910-1913 Printing Bureau, Korean Administrative Agency, Seoul, Korea
1913  Toured as woodcarver under name Fukuda Taikan
1915  Took Kitaoji name; became involved in pottery making
1916  Seal engraver under name Kitaoji Rokei (Rokyô)
1917  Began antique appraisal business
1919  Opened antique shop at Kyobashi, Tokyo
1921  Began membership-based Gourmets’ Club
1922  Changed name to Kitaoji Rosanjin
1924  Produced dishes for Gourmets’ Club
1925-1936  Manager and Chief Chef, Hoshigaoka-saryo Restaurant
1927  Established Rosanjin Ceramic Arts Institute
1936  Began pottery production
1938  Launched bimonthly magazine *Gabi Seikatsu* (Life of Elegance and Beauty)
1940  Painter, potter
1943  Producer of lacquer wares
1945  Restaurants in Tokyo and Osaka destroyed by fire in air raids
1946  Established ceramic shop in Ginza, Tokyo
1951  Exhibition of Modern Japanese Pottery at Musee Cernuschi, Paris, France
1954  Visited New York at invitation of the Rockefeller Foundation to hold exhibition at MOMA
1955, 1956  Offered designation Living National Treasure; declined
1959  Died, Kanagawa, Japan

**BIOGRAPHY – KITAOJI ROSANJIN**

Born Fusajiro Kitaoji in Kamigamo, north of Kyoto, the son of a Shinto priest, Rosanjin (he changed his name several times, finally adopting the name Kitaoji Rosanjin, meaning “foolish mountain man,” in 1922) was adopted at a very young age by a police officer and a few years later by a woodblock carver. He taught himself calligraphy and seal-carving, winning first prize for his calligraphy in 1904 when just a young man. For a time he made his living carving seals, making shop signs, and dealing in antiques which was also an early passion. Over the next few years he continued to work as a calligrapher, traveling to Korea, Manchuria and China to further his skills. In 1915 he began making pottery, studying with porcelain artist Seika Suda and also studied cooking, but his main occupation was still carving seals and dealing in antiques. In
1921 he shifted his focus to cooking, founding the Bishoku Club (Gourmet’s Club), a private restaurant on the second floor of his antique and art shop, where he served food in some of the traditional dishes he had been collecting. In 1923 both the art shop and the restaurant were destroyed by fires during the Great Kanto Earthquake, and much of Rosanjin’s large collection of antique ware was destroyed as well. A few years later he opened the Gourmet’s Club Hoshigaoka Saryo membership restaurant in Tokyo, a very well-known and popular restaurant. “Dishware is clothing to cuisine,” Rosanjin said,¹ and unable to find tableware that equaled what he had lost, he began making his own, using the traditional pottery he had owned and studied as his inspiration. “Rosanjin believed that inferior food led to inferior people,” Ben Wilson, stated. “He extended this rule to the manner of food presentation.”² A year later Rosanjin established a studio to make his ware and soon became as well-known for his pottery as he was for his cooking.

Rosanjin’s passion for perfection often resulted in legendary rudeness to his patrons, and in 1936 he was fired from the restaurant. As one door closed, another opened, for the firing allowed him to devote full time to his ceramic work. “Around you are mentors and comrades,” Rosanjin said,³ referring to the many works of art he had accumulated, his studies of ancient ceramics and other art, and the world around him, all of which served as both inspiration and training. Continuing on he said, “I do not try to imitate them [antiques] in any superficial way. I try to go straight to their inner value, their essence and spirit.”⁴ He worked in the master/apprentice model, using apprentices to make the work under his supervision, living and working in a compound of traditional buildings with six kilns. Unlike other Japanese artists of his time he was not interested in incorporating western ideas into his work or in embracing the artistic concepts arising in postwar Japan. He remained committed to fine functional ware in the classical and traditional styles of ancient Japan, including the blue-and-white ware and colored porcelain of the Ming period (1368-1444). His designs were simple and drew on nature and his surroundings. His work was featured in a number of exhibitions during the 1950s, and in 1954 he was invited by the Rockefeller Foundation to hold an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, followed by a tour of Europe.

In any account of the life of Rosanjin, his tumultuous and difficult personal life always figures prominently. While all the details are not known, it is clear that he did not have a stable childhood and his relationships as an adult were equally unsuccessful, in business and in five attempts at marriage. He was more successful in his relationships with other artists, including a close friendship with Isamu Noguchi, but in these as well he was demanding and often difficult. That he achieved the recognition that he did in a number of fields – with little formal schooling or training – is a testament to his innate talent and his refusal to compromise his standards of excellence.

Kitaoji Rosanjin was a man of many abilities. In addition to his skills in calligraphy, seal-carving, pottery, and cooking, he produced lacquer ware; wrote extensively on ceramics, calligraphy and food; published a newspaper and magazine; and was a noted scholar of ancient Japanese ceramics. Twice he was offered the prestigious honor of “Living National Treasure” and twice he refused. Kitaoji Rosanjin died in Kyoto in 1959.

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http://www.kahitsukan.or.jp/ros_e.html


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November 2009