

THE PATH TO BLISS

AIMLESS PURSUIT

A meditation on the point of archery.

Writer — Laura Rysman



About the writer: Rysman is one of 'Konfekt's' most indispensable contributing editors and Monocle's central Italy correspondent, as well as a writer for 'The New York Times'.

Have you ever shot an arrow? If not, I invite you to come over and join me. Let's go down to the small farmhouse in the olive grove where I keep my novice's set and hang the woven straw target on a nubby branch of an olive tree.

Stand in the long grass with one foot forward, your other foot back and turned outward, your hips open. Draw the bowstring, the arrow balanced in the viewfinder. Close one eye to focus on the bull's-eye. Aim a little lower because my viewfinder is off. With three fingers, release the string and launch the arrow with a thwack, perhaps to the bull's-eye, perhaps not. It doesn't matter. This is not shooting. This is a short cut to meditation.

I once saw a man riding horseback, cantering around a target as he took arrow after arrow from the quiver on his back, aimed his bow and hit the straw bull's-eye with every shot. I want to do that, I thought. It was like witnessing a Greek myth. I have come to accept that I will never gain enough proficiency in either riding or archery to pull it off but there is sufficient satisfaction in my pursuit that the goal has become irrelevant.

German philosopher Eugen Herrigel shot arrows in Japan and brought home revelations that he turned into *Zen in the Art of Archery*, a 1948 book that helped to introduce Zen to the Western world. His writings sought to interrogate the notions of success, skill and precision. "The right art," cried the Master, 'is purposeless, aimless! The more obstinately you try to learn how to shoot the arrow for

the sake of hitting the goal, the less you will succeed in the one and the further the other will recede. What stands in your way is that you have a much too willful will. You think that what you do not do yourself does not happen."

I live on a hilltop in Florence in the midst of acres of olive trees – a good fortune I might chalk up equally to will and luck. Summer means I can move my office outside to sit in the trees' amiable shade, surrounded with delicate greenery that allows the sunlight to dapple my worktable. There are pheasants – fat red-plumed males waddling after silt-coloured female love interests – and deer that bound by, a procession of cottony white tails on spindle-thin legs. The context lends itself to serenity and contemplation but our own minds are often the noisiest voices we have to deal with.

Usually, I shoot alone, heading down to the farmhouse to set up the target when an article draft is done or when the weft of my thoughts becomes too compressed and chaotic. By the 10th arrow, my mind has slackened into a loose mesh.

"We know that these moments when, delivered from the fierce pressure of the will, we emerge, as it were, from the heavy atmosphere of the earth, are the most blissful that we experience," wrote Arthur Schopenhauer, another philosopher, and a famed misanthrope who might have found more bliss if he had picked up a bow and arrow. As summer bring us outside, I invite you to give it a try. ————— κ

'Konfekt' comment: Practising a different art can engage another side of your creativity. And remember, even if you miss your target (in life and archery), it's better to live with flair.