

Ken Matsuzaki:

A Yohen Kiln

BEGINNINGS

I was an apprentice to Mr. Tatsuzo Shimaoka for five years, and after that I spent about fifteen years working in the same genre as Mr. Shimaoka. Finally I decided to do something completely different. Within the tradition of Japanese ceramics, when you depart from the style or the way in which you were trained, you are actually turning your back on your teacher in some sense, so it usually does not happen. For about two years Mr. Shimaoka did not understand why I had departed from the traditional Mingei style in which I had been trained. After those two years, Mr. Shimaoka came to understand what I was trying to do and why I needed to work with such glazes as Oribe and Shino. We were then able to reconnect with no ill-will on either side. Normally there would be hard feelings, but his reconciliation demonstrates his large-heartedness.

When I started working on my own, I decided to build my own kiln and name it Yu u shin Gama, which means "Playful Heart Kiln."

Mine is a special type of kiln. Some may be familiar with the climbing kiln that is multi-chambered and goes up the side of a hill. This is not my type of kiln. You may also know of the historical type of kiln that came to Japan from Korea that is called Anagama kiln and is dug into the side of a mountain. This is not my type of kiln either. My kiln has two fireboxes, which is quite unusual if not unique. There are kilns that have two firing entrances, but mine has an especially large firing entrance, which is not found anywhere else in Japan. This is done for the purpose of getting a lot of ash to cover the pots in the course of the firing.

My kiln is made to get two firings for one effort – double firing a single kiln or chamber. That was the intention, but it turned out to be very hard to do and used up twice the usual amount of wood. I did not find another kiln like that anywhere in Japan because everyone was smart enough to know that you do better firing from one side. I wanted to be successful firing a kiln that was my own, and so I have been experimenting for the past ten years. In twenty firings I have tried to change certain things to improve the firing.

The reason I chose the Oribe style goes back to what I learned about historical ceramics and the Momoyama period which was from the sixteenth century to the early seventeenth century. At that time there was an influx of technological developments from continental Asia, mainly from Korea, that enabled potters to make different types of ceramics. They were able to make unglazed, ash-covered pieces. They were also able to make glazed pieces, Shino ware and other different types.

I wanted to capture the spirit of that time in which there were also changes in political and societal arenas, with the warrior class being challenged by the merchant class in areas such as the Tea Ceremony. There was a lot of competition, with samurai on top and farmers, craftsmen and merchants below. There was a tea master named Oribe who was a part of that sort of active deformation of utensil shapes and incorporation of various elements to make new ceramics. My work is like that, being made in the spirit of creativity and daring abandon.

A YOHEN KILN

Shino pottery, in its authentic style from the Momoyama period (1573-1603 AD), has a scarlet color on its surface, somewhat like rouge brushed over white skin. Creating pottery in the Shino style in a gas kiln naturally limits its possibilities. The gas itself is the limitation. But then, I wanted to see how far I could take the possibility of making Shino pottery in a gas-fired atmosphere. So far, I have been able to make Shino in the *Suou* (ancient purple red) and *Sien* (light purple) styles.

For a long time, I have wanted to challenge myself and to fire Shino ware in my climbing kiln fired with wood. This kiln has a very special form. Its first chamber has large fire mouths on both right and left sides so that wood can be fed into the kiln from both sides. It is as if the first chamber exists between these two fire mouths. I have dreamed of making Shino pottery in the first chamber of this kiln for a long time. For the past seven years, I have been firing other types of work in the *yohen* style and trying to find the appropriate temperature within that chamber for the Shino ware. After a long and deliberate consideration, I decided to try firing Shino ware using all the experience I had accumulated making the light purple Shino in the gas kiln.

My climbing kiln is especially designed to make ash-covered *yohen* (literally meaning changed by the fire/flame) pottery. The Shino work fired in this kiln will definitely be affected by the way the kiln is fired. Therefore, I wanted to focus on making my own *yohen* Shino rather than making it in the typical Shino style. I wanted to make the most of my climbing kiln with the two large fire mouths.

While loading the kiln and trying to place the work to get a good Shino, I couldn't help but feel uneasy. I couldn't stop worrying. I filled both the fire mouths with a lot of wood as if to clear away my anxiety. I stopped the firing after confirming that the work near the fire mouths were well covered with ash.

FIRING MY KILN

The floor is cleared of ash and in certain parts of the fire mouths shelves are put up. An enormous amount of wood is fed into the fire mouths and, as a result, there is a lot of ash pulling through them. Fly ash rains down on the work while the heavier ash flows through the kiln with the flame.



Natural Ash Glaze Yohen Vase, stoneware. Photograph by Max Coniglio.



Natural Ash Glaze Yohen Vase, stoneware. Photograph by Max Coniglio.



Natural Ash Glaze Yohen Vase, stoneware. Photograph by Max Coniglio.



Oribe Bowl. Photograph by Max Coniglio.

The lighter, very high quality ash shoots up and reaches the work on the highest shelves. From one fire mouth I can produce work that is roughly and heavily covered with ash and work that has a very fine coating of ash.

The middle chamber of my kiln which is between the two large fire mouths, can be used to fire many kinds of work. Anything from unglazed ware to *yohen* Shino to Oribe, all have their own way of being fired in this chamber. For this firing, I decided to fire *yohen* Shino in the true way of firing a Shino. The numerous failures I have had trying to get a good Shino by firing it in my own way come to mind.

With the loading of the kiln now finished, the fire is finally lit. A firing of seven days and six nights will begin. I start by warming up the kiln with a small fire, wood being fed through the lower stoking ports of the main fire mouths. This goes on for 24 hours. After that, I change to firing aggressively from the upper stoking ports of the fire mouths.

Going into the third day of firing, the inside of the kiln begins to show some color. It is then that I change from split pine to split chestnut. Chestnut doesn't generate as much heat or burn as intensely as pine. Therefore, the melting point of the ash from the chestnut is lower and layers it up well on the work at this point. To get a good coating of ash from the chestnut, I continue to use it for the next 36 hours.

On the evening of the fifth day of firing I take out a test piece to see how the ash is building up. Then, in order to effect change in the work not stacked on shelves in the fire mouths, I intentionally knock over some of the pieces. As the kiln is loaded, I think of this point in the firing and how and where I will make the pieces fall. I use a long stainless steel rod. Knocking the pieces over will allow the work to be completely covered with ash. It can be covered from behind and all over. I put charcoal around the work that has been knocked over and continue to do this every hour. From the middle chamber it is time to take out the black tea bowls. They are taken out of the hot kiln and immediately immersed in cold water. This very quick cooling helps to develop the rich black color.

On the sixth day of the firing I go back to the work that has been knocked over. I change wood again and go back to using pine. It is now down to the last day of firing. I start to put charcoal around the work in the fire mouths every 30 minutes now. The charcoal is painstakingly placed around the work and this leads to the final stages of the firing. Five 15-kilo (33 lbs.) bags of charcoal are used in each fire mouth. In doing this, the *yohen* work has been given a three- to four-day covering of ash and is finally finished.

On the morning of the seventh day we begin the last stages of the firing. I put between eight to ten 15-kilo bags of charcoal into the middle chamber. This is done all at once, stuffing the charcoal through the stoking ports on both sides of the kiln. This is the last big job of the firing.

In the design of my kiln, the usual connecting tunnel between the middle chamber and the two large fire mouths has been eliminated. In its place is a long, narrow space, 30cm deep and 1m 70cm long. This is where the *yohen* ash-covered work is fired. The amount of charcoal burned in this space determines how well the work will turn out.

All in all, the kiln has fired for seven days and consumed 2700 bundles of wood and 28 bags of charcoal. It is like some kind of monster. A fight to the finish, and then the firing is done.

After this, there is a five day period of very slow cooling. I am the most anxious when starting to unbrick the kiln. But in taking the bricks down one by one I regain my composure. I first see the *yohen* and ash-covered work and have no objection to it. It seems this was a good firing. I feel somewhat relieved.

The Shino from the middle chamber was disappointing at first glance, but after looking at it for a while, I thought it was acceptable. The *yohen* Shino turned out much better than I had imagined and I was very happy about this. And from this I feel like I can see which direction to go.

GLAZE NOTES

Shino glaze is basically a feldspathic glaze, sometimes with a little kaolin mixed in. Depending on where they are mined, feldspars differ between being sodium-based or potassium-based. The feldspars I use are Hiratsu feldspar, Yagumo feldspar, an Indian feldspar and a naturally-weathered, not industrially purified feldspar. The melting point of the different feldspars may vary, but the character and role it plays in the glaze remain constant.

I ladle a hard feldspar over one with a lower melting point. This creates variation in the glaze surface. I sometimes use a finely-ground iron slip on the work and then glaze with the feldspars. I use my fingers to draw through the glaze, which allows the iron to be seen.

(Text and photographs provided by the Pucker Gallery, Boston.)

Ken Matsuzaki
4090-2 Mashiko Machi
Haga Gun Tochigi-Ken
321-42 Japan

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