JEFF SHAPIRO

As a ceramic artist educated in Japan, I have an indelible love and reverence for the Japanese aesthetic. I use what I have learned from a thousand year old tradition of wood fired unglazed ware to express my own ideas and concepts.

In my non-sculptural work, I relate the anagama firing technique with the deliberate use of soft, fluid and irregular shapes. My sculptural work depicts an archaic quality through the effect of ash and coals upon the raw form. To this I add a contemporary dimension with the use of incised lines upon the surface as well as the spontaneous treatment of the rough natural edges.

I consider a piece successful when the clay, form, color and texture all work together and convey a sensitivity to the imperfections and asymmetry that exist within the beauty of Nature.

Jeff Shapiro

"Among the newest generation of potters with enormous, Japanese style wood-fired hill kilns, Jeff Shapiro stands as one to watch. The fire marked nuances of his strong forms are always a pleasure, often a delight. If his work is rooted in tradition, his wide-ranging applications have a forward slant."

Jack Lenor Larsen

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Accepting Nature's Imperfections

by Jeff Shapiro

I sit in front of my tunnel kiln the first day of an eight-day firing. Two pieces of wood crackle outside the newly mudded door. I cherish this part of the cycle. After an intense ten-day loading period, this is the treasured time when I get to sit back and breathe the smells, both from the red cedar burning and from the moist woods, and to listen to the sounds of birds and insects accompanying my innermost thoughts.

Ten years have passed since I returned from Japan, but only in the past few years have I felt confident about the direction my life and work have taken. I consider myself an American ceramic artist making work that comes from within me but drawing strongly on a Japanese aesthetic. I do not feel allegiance or alliance to any particular person or single style of work. I do use certain techniques that I learned while in Bizen and other areas. Living nearly ten years in Japan has certainly widened my experience and my capacity to appreciate the Japanese aesthetic, not only toward ceramics but more generally as it permeates life on a daily basis.

Going to Japan opened my eyes to the world of ceramics. Fortunately, my first teacher, Shichiri-*sensei*, encouraged me to visit the national and contemporary museums as well as ceramic exhibits and to visit well known pottery villages around Japan. As my understanding of ceramics grew, so did my appetite for working with and learning even more about clay.

While taking ceramics classes at a Shimpo center (coincidentally supervised by Yabe Makoto), I found out about an opening for an apprenticeship at the Takatori kiln in Kyushu. Looking back now some eighteen or nineteen years later, I realize the pottery (ware) had little influence on my present work—almost the antithesis of what I now do. My work leans toward thick, rough-textured surfaces, whereas Takatori ware is thin with shiny surfaces. *Process* intrigued me, though I did not realize it then. Process and a respect and sensitivity to nature have influenced what I do.

My teacher was Takatori Seizan, a woman sixty-nine years of age at the time, descended from a Korean ancestor. A woman in such a position in the Japanese world of ceramics was unique. Though she was well known and well established, she was like a child, untainted in her approach to Nature. To watch her picking flowers or walking through the bamboo forest, dressed in her farmer's clothes, was a joy. She had tremendous respect for Nature as well as for materials and food. She never took more than necessary and never wasted anything. Part of my job before beginning the daily work at the kiln was to go with the two women helpers and dig for bamboo shoots or collect fern fronds or other mountain vegetables that would contribute to our meals.

The clay at Takatori came from nearby mountains and was crushed by a waterpowered timber crusher (*karausu*). Glaze materials were iron ore, feldspar, rice straw ash and wood ash. These were crushed by a small foot-powered version of the *karausu*. The kiln was a multichambered, climbing kiln (*noborigama*) fired by wood.

After leaving Takatori (one of my regrets is that I never got to tell Takatori Seizan how much the experience meant to me), I spent more than a year at the kiln of Yamauchi Tatsuo in the countryside of Shikoku, studying gas- and wood-fired techniques.

The next part of my experience in Japan was an important yet difficult stage of development. I was offered an opportunity to go to the Japan sea coast to a small town called Hamasaka. Kabumoto Nobuo became my patron. He was a patron in the true sense. He hoped to bring cultural awareness through clay to his town, and offered me the opportunity to work, build and fire a kiln there.

I began searching for a piece of land on which to do this. I found a suitable site—two upper levels of abandoned, terraced rice fields owned by his father before the war. The land was purchased and a bridge and road built to reach it.

At this point I was told to draw up plans for a small house and workshop. Both were promptly erected, and I built a tunnel (*anagama*) kiln with the help of a Japanese friend. The next two-and-a-half years proved to be rewarding and yet frustrating. I considered my patron to be part monk: he wrote sutras every morning before breakfast and envisioned the kiln as a temple with clay as the spiritual path. Part *samurai*, he had a code of ethics and a strict sense of right and wrong, although his ideas seemed more relevant to a time hundreds of years ago.

I decided to make Hamasaka my home. It was idyllic. Out of my workshop window I could see the whole valley below. I saw a fishing society to the west and a farming society below. Life was reasonably comfortable as I was supported by the patron. But that was the beginning of the end of our relationship as Kabumoto-*san* and I grew apart. One day I was abruptly requested to leave, without a clear reason why. I was devastated and told he would turn a deaf ear to any suggestion of reconciliation. The only recourse was to go my own way and someday show what I had done with my life.

I decided to return to the States, find land, build a kiln and be responsible to myself for whatever the consequences or outcome. First, I decided to spend one more year in Japan furthering my understanding of clay and firing. Since I had an affinity for the work and people of Bizen, that's where I went.

Actually, my relationship with my patron did not end there. During the next year, and subsequent years in the States, I could not completely free myself of the ill feelings between the patron and me. I had stopped trying to correspond with him but felt there was an albatross around my neck. Six years later, back in the States, my wife Hinako (who has given me much support as well as being able to fire the kiln diligently) suggested I write to Kabumoto-*san* and say, "This is who I am and this is what I have done!" Feeling confident, I put together a long letter with pictures of my house, kiln, family and ceramic works. I stated in the letter that I hoped a friendship could be rekindled but if it could not, I would accept that.

So I sent the letter to him, indicating I could be reached at a hotel in Kyoto during a program called Summer Six I was leading for Skidmore College. Not expecting a reply, I arrived at the hotel to find a letter one inch thick awaiting me. It was a twelve-page letter in Japanese and English translation from the patron, expressing his delight at what had transpired. He said he had followed my progress over the past seven years—unbeknownst to me—and knew all the major events of my life from marriage to building the kiln. He was thrilled over the pictures of our recently born son, Ryan. Thus the relationship came full circle, and we have a good friendship now.

My last year in Japan was spent in Bizen working at the kiln of my friend Yamashita Joji, with whom I discussed clay, form, utility and philosophy. Other mentors whom I admired and visited were Isezaki Jun, who had a strong leaning toward sculptural work; Takahara Shoji, whose forms were strong yet soft and quiet; and Kaneshige Michiaki, who continued in the tradition of his father, National Living Treasure, Kaneshige Toyo, whose clay was a rich, black, waxy material with irregular stones, and whose reverence for clay was inspiring.

Bizen was then a town with over two hundred kilns (now there are four hundred!) Almost everyone in the town was working in ceramics. I experienced total immersion in the world of wood-fired ceramics. One could stand on a hillside and see the smoking chimneys of kilns being fired evrywhere.

The organic quality of Bizen work touched me deeply. It had a coarse, irregular, asymmetric quality that communicated harmony with Nature. It was not deliberately conceived nor of a contrived asymmetry but spontaneous and fluid, the kind of sensitivity and aesthetic sensibility that exists in Japan. It relates to an appreciation and acceptance of the imperfections of Nature—a twisted branch or a torn leaf floating on a pond.

I have had two solo shows of my work in Japan during the past two years, and two more are scheduled for department store galleries during the next year. I also have private clients who purchase utilitarian as well as sculptural work. I think the interest in my work in Japan comes from an appreciation of easily identifiable techniques combined with new forms with which the Japanese are not yet familiar.

I will be building a smaller *anagama* this year, and hope to share work with visiting friends, artists and potters from Japan, as well as to go there and work.

Jeff Shapiro was born in New York City. He has work/studied in Kyoto, Fukuoka, Ehime, Hamasaka and Bizen, Japan. Now he is a studio potter firing his anagama *kiln at R.D. #2, Box 185-4, Accord, NY 12404.*