

On the 4th and 5th October 2008 the 1st International Ceramics Symposium of Giroussens was held at Giroussens (Tarn, France) on the theme of “ Shino and Wabicha”, organized by the Association Terre et Terres.

With the help of private funding, we were able to bring together the best experts on contemporary Shino for conferences, diaporama and demonstrations: Jean-Pierre Chollet (France), Ray Cavill (Australia), Pascal Geoffroy (France), Lisa Hammond (UK), Gary Hootman (USA), Randy Johnston (USA), Hein Janssen (Holland), Tateki Kawaguchi (Japan), Shozo Michikawa (Japan), Jeff Shapiro (USA) and Rizu Takahashi (Japan).

The concomitant exhibition with the event, “Shino, of snow and fire” brought together work of these ceramists as well as the work of Chris Gustin (USA) and Takahiro Kato (Japan). The evening of the private view, Murette Renaudin, Ikebana Master from Toulouse gave us a demonstration of this art in the work presented in the exhibition.

This meeting was a great moment of exchange, friendship and conviviality. We would like to thank warmly our sponsors, Pierre Fabre Laboratories (France) and James Kasper, a widely known ceramics collector (USA), without whom none of this would have been possible and also the Association “Art et Poterie de Giroussens”, particularly Mr. Claude Canonica it's president, as well as the town and the inhabitants of Giroussens, the company Ceradel and finally to all those who came, often from very far away, to participate in this great ceramics festival.

As promised and in reply to the request from many people, we have put online the conference texts which were written by Randy Johnson, Shozo Michikawa and Jeff Shapiro (in English and French).... And to prolong the pleasure and the souvenir of these two days some photos as well.

Association Terre et Terres.

Randy Johnston's talk

Shino

It may have started with the switch from the old kiln technology of primitive narrow passage Anagamas to the division of the chambers and the rise of the new chamber kilns. Or may have been some longing of the ruling classes to step away from the unglazed utilitarian ware produced for centuries and an attempt to imitate the white Chinese wares that were starting to emerge in the world's consciousness. Feldspars and newly found deposits of white clays and the development of glaze techniques soon led to pots referred to as White Temmoku at the Early Mino kiln site of Mutabora. This glaze and ware would become known as Shino.

Although the origin of the word Shino is uncertain, most of the famous Shino wares associated with the word would be made within the narrow 35-year confine (1568-1603) that would constitute the Momayama period. Perhaps the working lifetime of one productive potter or group of kiln sites. Shino was left in the ceramic consciousness at a certain stage of completion and potency. We are still enamored with this mystery and these beautiful pots. The pots seem so easy and friendly. There is simplicity, combined with a peculiar naturalness and spontaneity in the shapes and movements that at once reassures our spirits. This ease and naturalness combined with an abundance of vitality with seemingly no need to force the mind or soul in any direction is the underlying quality of Shino.

The rise and fall of Kilns in ancient Japan were closely interwoven with the political and economic conditions of the provinces. Philosophical underpinnings of the tea ceremony were strengthened by the input of religious thought. The ideals of Zen, simplicity and coarseness, became valued attributes and these ideas were supported by the cultural advisors appointed to assist the leaders in matters of taste in the arts. This happens in our contemporary cultural context, and then, as now there was sufficient complexity and intellectual richness in the work coupled with an emotional attraction to move the interest in Shino to a new level arriving at a new synthesis. When considering Shino within our contemporary context, the fact that it remains elusive after nearly six hundred years is quite refreshing. The mysteries, facts, philosophies and storytelling have passed through countless generations of teamasters, Shoguns, potters and artists poking and exploring the concepts and processes of Shino.

Concerning American Shino:

One can trace the development of Shino amongst potters in the 20th century from the reemerging interest in Japanese folk ceramics and tea traditions

coupled with the art world's embrace of the broad gestures and marks of abstract expressionism

My personal interest in the process began in the late 1960's. This exposure was at the University of Minnesota with Warren MacKenzie. Warren liked the sensual feldspar rich glazes that would allow the bleed of iron through the opaque glazes during firing. Irregularities in the kiln atmosphere during the firing contributed to the simple gestures made with a brush or iron wash.

We mixed feldspar or Nepheline Syenite rich glazes about 85% feldspar to 15% various clays. Warren was trapping carbon in his fire belching, over reducing oil fuel kiln. It would be later that observations of fast temperature rise after an early period of reduction is what produced the carbon trap.

Personally, I have never liked sweet or pretty glazes. It has never been the wizardry foment of glaze composition that has been of interest, but the constant challenge to conventional perceptions of surface textures and hues of color. The encrustation, pinholing, crawling and iron-bleeds are all part of my conversations with a complex and elusive glaze. I might admit to some attraction for the technical side of the glaze, but it has been a constant curiosity and affinity for the more aberrant and willful surfaces and the extensive interactions of a few basic materials that continues to hold my interest.

I am most curious about the combinations of materials that contain alumina, sodium, traces of iron and titania and the range of color that can be developed from the use of these materials in the different atmospheres of the kiln. There is an emotional and intellectual reaction to the richly colored skin-like textured surfaces that give the pieces a sensual quality and direct a heightened attention to the broad range of mark-making left in the soft clay during the making.

I am not only curious, but drawn to the strange potency and beauty in the Shino glazes storming with eternal contradictions and oppositions, the distortions and idiosyncrasies, and a sense of vigorous, strongbodied liveliness that has strong physicality in the irregular thickness of the glaze. For me there are contradictory aspects to the use of Shino on my work, such as the sensitivity to subtle aesthetic nuances that coexist with aspects of determination, austere directness and aggressiveness. The specific tensions and challenges that are set up on each piece make the work vulnerable yet vital often creating an awkward sense of humanity. The glaze at its best is not for the faint of heart. I believe there is a new Americanness in the use of Shino that has been informed by the larger history of Japanese ceramics, although notions of an increase in sophistication and complexity in the contemporary work may be misguided.

The whole great idea of Shino is alive in American ceramics today. Shino has resisted insipid standardization and has its own stylistic eclecticism. We

each have our own peculiar consciousness in the use of the process, but there is strong evidence of one underlying idea -Shino, is the treasure, the reward, the experience. For us to work with the process, the glaze and the connecting philosophies of Shino is to continue a complex dialog between a multitude of subtle contradictions into the future.

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Randy J Johnston

Jeff Shapiro's talk.

Japanese inspiration and influence: An alternative perspective

My initial love for Japan and wood firing in particular was an infatuation that grew into a romance with the culture of Japan; a country that seemed so foreign to my own. It was not as much the tangible objects that peaked my interest, but rather, the sensibility of a different aesthetic, and the sensitivity to the beauty that exists in the “imperfections” of Nature that caught my imagination. At times I felt as though I was living in an historical novel. My planned 6 month adventure turned into 9 years and it was this period that helped form the basis for my artistic development.

I have moved from being the romanticist to the pragmatist over the years. My personal challenge has been to find the essence of what I respond to in Japanese culture and aesthetics without replicating or producing facsimiles of objects that are inherently Japanese.

I am relatively new to the field of Shino, and glazing in general and so I treat the use of glaze more as painting on 3 dimensional form. I have also been working on a series that I refer to as the Resurrection series. These are pieces that have been fired once, usually in the tunnel kiln, and then fired again 1 or more times with glaze application. I have become intrigued with the idea of taking existing work and sometimes thereafter giving it new life by changing the surface.

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This conference is not about raku!! Shino is not raku!! And wood fired pottery is not raku!! I just had a need to express my response to some of the questions I hear!!!!

I believe this conference has the ability and the need to address the evolution of shino in particular and perhaps wood firing in general for the 21st century. Whether we are makers of utilitarian ware or sculpture, writers, or collectors, it is our challenge to find a new way to use glazes or wood firing as tools in order to break the mold, to think out of the box. This does not mean to make work for the sake of being unique, for that in itself is a shallow goal, but rather to define the future of tradition in finding our own voice. Often workshops and symposium are about showing a technique or spoon feeding a bit of information. My hope is that people leave this symposium with more questions than answers. This conference should be food for thought, a way to jump start and inspire the attendees to return to their respective work places and challenge themselves to find that new direction.

Western perception of beauty has historically been about symmetry and perfection rather than abstraction. This is surely one set of parameters that can define beauty, but beauty exists in other forms. In the east, Japan in particular, there is an appreciation for THE beauty that is inspired by the ‘imperfections’ of nature. This form of beauty exists, and it is ‘perfect’ in its own right. We make choices to see or not to see. *It is all about perspective*

As I have become somewhat of a story teller over the years, I will use anecdotes to express my thoughts on the Japanese influence and inspiration upon contemporary ceramics.

Concerning shino

There was a very good exhibition and subsequent book written by a good friend Les Richter on Contemporary Shino. The exhibition was curated by Les at the Babcock Gallery in NY in 2001. There was a great range of work produced in terms of surface effect.

Shino has been produced for centuries with little change, a very simple recipe sometimes overly worked and sometimes comprised of a single ingredient; 100% feldspar. One large difference between Japanese feldspar and western feldspar is the way it is processed. just as a good cup of espresso is determined by the grinding process, so is a good feldspar dependent upon a method of pounding to create crystals that are not rounded and smooth.

A story I hope will help to explain the difference of eastern and western perspective is from an article I wrote for “Ceramics: art and perception”

Perception and Perspective

This brings to mind a poignant lesson I learned some 25 years ago. While I was in Switzerland, I was invited to visit a Japanese woman fiber artist. She was married to a wealthy Swiss industrialist. When we arrived at their palatial home, we came through the garden. There were 3 large pine trees. In the top of one of the trees, perched on a branch, was a Japanese man with traditional 2 toed shoes and pruning shears. When I greeted him in Japanese, he came half way down the tree to hold a conversation. He related that he was visiting from the countryside of Japan and that he was overwhelmed to be in such a beautiful place as this. He felt very grateful for being invited but he had no way to return the favor, except, that he was a gardener. He realized that the pine trees were badly in need of some pruning and this would be his gift to the Swiss banker husband of his friend. He then excused himself and climbed back up the tree. I went inside to meet the fiber artist and she took us down to her studio. It was a wonderful space with one whole wall of sliding windows facing out to the garden. A short while later, the husband came home. With a friendly handshake and a smile, he welcomed us. He was facing the windows and as I watched his expression, I saw it go from a friendly smile to a look of uncertainty to a look of intense anger as the color of his face went from rosy to ashen. He was looking past us through the windows at which time he blurted out something to the effect of, [“What the hell is that guy doing in my tree!”] I came to find out that these 3 pine trees had been considered family heirlooms and nurtured for almost 200 years. They were highly regarded for their size and volume. When I turned to see for myself what had happened, at the base of the 3 trees where there once was only grass, were piles of branches on the ground. Moving closer to the windows I could make out the tops of the trees and could clearly see what was so shocking. The Japanese gardener had proceeded to prune the giant pines which now looked like large bonsai, with only a few branches remaining on each tree! He considered it to be a work of art. The industrialist considered it to be, shall we say, less than successful!

Two perceptions of the same thing. The tree as an object was beautiful in both ways, but unfortunately, it was now totally out of context with it's surroundings.

Next, I would like to speak about romanticism and pragmatism.

Romanticism and Pragmatism

Romanticism has a place in that it can attract, inspire, LEAD TO infatuation and perhaps, for the lucky few, HELP US TO DISCOVER passion. As artists and craftspeople, we must be responsible and realize that whether it be a shino glaze or a wood firing technique, these are purely tools at our command. An inferior ceramic form thrust into the romantic environment of a wood firing with the smell of the wood, the crackle of the fire, AND the flame shooting from the chimney, will, even in the best of firing circumstances, remain an inferior work with a GREAT surface! Whether it is wood firing or not becomes merely an exercise in semantics.

In the end, it is the work that must speak. To paraphrase a famous Jazz musician. "If it sounds good it is good". In this case, "if it looks good and feels good it is good". I believe, the end justifies the means. The product is the manifestation of the philosophy.

Arakawa story

Next, I would like to relate a story that addresses the issues of tea and tea bowls. I have an article on tea bowls that will be published in "Ceramics monthly" in November. This story will be part of that article.

While visiting with a friend in the Mino valley of Japan, his sensei Toyoba san told us that we could rise early the next morning and walk to his teacher's studio compound. This would be the studio and home of Arakawa Toyozo, the famous Living National Treasure! We would be able to visit the venerated old man's kiln site and feel the presence of his old style studio, climbing wood kiln and water wheel. We were also made very aware that we were to be back for work by 8:30 sharp, with no excuses! And that we were by no means to bother the old man. "He needs his privacy and rest!" Spoken with the wrath of God upon his lips..... But what an opportunity. Arakawa san was quite old by this time, and kept to himself. He was not working in the studio anymore. So, the following morning, we got up early. I was excited at the prospect of visiting the compound that I had seen on public television, a series on Living National Treasures of Japan. It was a beautiful morning in summer. We walked down the long driveway and there I caught sight of the thatched roof farm house, right in the middle of the forest, as though it had sprung out of the ground. It was not an intrusion on Nature, but rather an integral part of it. We made our way over to the old Anagama tunnel kiln and water wheel, and saw the studio where Arakawa san made his famous tea bowls. Satisfied having breathed the forest air and spiritually satiated with images and inspiration, we started on our way out the dirt road. As we passed the farm house, Arakawa san's daughter, wearing a kimono, stepped out on to the veranda and beckoned to us. "Don't rush off. If you wait a few minutes, my father will have tea with you!" Mike and I looked at each other, both of us hearing the words of Toyoba san ringing in our ears, "Whatever you do don't bother the old man!" At that moment, it was like having a devil and angel sitting on your shoulders. "Ahhh, go ahead, what have you got to lose" "No, don't listen. You must get back to work" "Thank you", we replied, "but we really must be going". The words were hard to push out from our mouths, half biting our tongues while the burning desire to accept the offer was ever present. "You won't be bothering him. Why don't you stay for tea?" came the reply. Now, there is a custom in Japan that one does not readily accept an offering. It would be rude. Often there will be 3 or 4 attempts before an offer is accepted. With my hands behind my back, I realized that I was unconsciously counting! We declined the second and third offer. I think it was at this point that both of us, without conferring, hoped there would be one more offer. And there was! Before Arakawa san's daughter could finish the next sentence, "Why don't you have tea..." We bowed and accepted as humbly as possible for two young and excited guys who were already racing to the back of the farmhouse where we would, in a matter of minutes, be meeting with the master.

It was like walking onto the set of some Japanese folk tale. We were told to leave our shoes and come up onto the *tatami* rice straw floor. It was a large room with nothing in it, except one low lacquer table. The sliding wooden wall panels had been removed, and from our vantage point, sitting on our knees, looking out into the depths of the forest, it was like looking at a stage set, a perfectly framed rectangular space waiting for the actors to begin their performance. Just then, from stage left, a figure appeared. He had long yellowish white hair and high cheek bones, giving the appearance of a Native American Indian. Wearing hand dyed indigo farmer's pants and top, he took careful steps, leaning forward on his walking stick. With each deliberate step he took, his dog kept the same pace and took a step as well. "I wonder if they have rehearsed this" I said to myself. We watched in silence as Arakawa san made his way into the frame of the forest and methodically moved towards the middle of the veranda, where there was a raised stone with a well-worn flat surface on top that measured maybe twenty five inches high. He maneuvered himself in front of the stone. Leaning on his stick for support, he lowered himself down to sit. So now, he sat facing away from us, looking out into the distance, and his dog sat facing out into the distance and we sat, looking out in to the distance and it was the right thing to do. It was meditation. It was the moment of serenity that I so desperately needed to find.

After what seemed like an hour, but in actuality was probably more like a couple of minutes, Arakawa san sighed. Not a sigh of remorse or overwork, but rather a sigh of appreciation, perhaps for being alive or maybe he was just thinking to himself. At any rate, he sighed and without turning to us said, "JYAH!" or "WELL!". We were taken by surprise. "Well...what?" KYOO DOIU HANASHI NI SHIMASHOOKA?" "Well, what shall we speak about today?" came his reply. "Oh. Anything you would care to discuss would be fine" we answered. At this, Arakawa san came up into the room. We were still aware of the words spoken by Toyoba san, but that inner voice was getting smaller and smaller. We were actually sitting with a Living National Treasure, and having discussions and tea in his own home! We continued with conversations about which side of the mountain the trees for wood firing should be cut from, and spoke about clay deposits. We passed the time with enjoyable conversation, but suddenly realized that we had become quite late as it was well past 9:30 and that there was going to be hell to pay for this. So we decided, though regretfully, to head back.

We excused ourselves and were in the middle of saying good bye to Arakawa san when suddenly two men in suits came around the corner of the house. Coincidentally, I knew one of them. He was a publisher. We were trying so hard to be courteous but at the same time to make our way out of the room. We would have to hurry back as quickly as humanly possible, when the one fellow said, "Wow! You guys are so lucky". With my curiosity peaked, I asked "Why?" "Well, we are producing the definitive book on Arakawa san's life and work. He isn't throwing on the wheel anymore, but for the book, we have asked him to come back into the studio and make tea bowls. And since you are here, you are both welcome to join us!" Once again, the devil and angel appeared, pulling and prodding. What could we do? This was certainly an opportunity not to be missed. We looked at each other and agreed. We could not turn this down. So, off we went to the studio.

The experience was just what I would have imagined. The dirt floor and the potter's hand wheel; a large wooden wheel with four angled holes, top, bottom, left, and right. A stick was used to catch in one of the holes and to spin the wheel until there was enough momentum to keep it turning.

Arakawa san was quite old and perhaps a little senile, but he sure had the touch. First of all, he had magnificent clay. It was light pink in color, creamy in its character but light in weight. When it was trimmed with a metal tool on the wheel, the resulting surface looked like slightly softened strawberry ice cream after a scoop had been run through it, or like the soft ripples on a pink sand beach after a wave had retreated. I had been looking at Arakawa san's

tea bowls since I arrived in Japan. They were gorgeous.

Arakawa san's apprentice wedged the clay into a small hump and placed it on the wheel head. Arakawa san walked over and took his place at the wheel. As he put the stick in the hole and began to spin, it was obvious that this wheel in particular had been used for many years. It was lopsided, undulating up and down as it turned. As the wheel slowed down, so did the undulation. Arakawa san had been doing this for so long that he was in perfect synch with the undulation, and his head moved up and down in harmony with the wheel and the clay. I could feel my own head start to move up and down as I watched. It was very exciting to be only a few feet from this Living National Treasure as he was about to make one of those magnificent tea bowls. I was determined to learn what the steps in making a truly great tea bowl are. I figured there must be at least 10 steps. Well, he patted the lump of clay down on the wheel, wet his hands, centered the clay, and as he stuck his fingers in the middle of the mound to begin the forming process, I was ready to take note; step one, step two etc. He stuck in his thumbs and made some simple gesture with his hands....and stopped the wheel. It was a tea bowl! "Wait a minute" I thought to myself, "I must have blinked or been distracted". I was all the more determined to catch the different steps in the making of the next tea bowl, but to my astonishment, the same thing happened. He went right from step one to step ten, with no steps in between!

It was an epiphany, that making a truly great tea bowl was not a technical exercise, but rather an exercise in harmony.

Finally, I would like to tell 3 short stories that will illustrate the manifestation of the artist's spirit. These stories though very different on the surface all embody the same spirit that artists possess. They all have a mastery of their craft, and a confidence of how to perform their art. Once again, the making of the art is the manifestation of that spirit.

Martial artist

While I was apprenticing in Kyushu, Japan I was able to attend a party for the American Consulate General who was returning to the U.S. Throughout the day there were various events: (* image of monks) monks playing large shakuhachi flutes, tea ceremony and in one area of the gardens, a master of the martial arts was preparing to demonstrate. He was a master of swordsmanship. For a couple of hours, he stayed perfectly still, wearing an indigo dyed hakama flowing skirt and indigo dye top, kneeling on the ground, meditating on the 3 thick, bamboo poles wrapped in rice straw that were in front of him, 2 meters apart from each other. At 2:00 an announcement was made to come for the demonstration. We all gathered around the area but not too close as to enter this place of meditation. It was quiet, no one spoke and then at some point, it was apparent that he was ready. His eyes became intense and he broke into a cold sweat. He clicked loose the sword with its sharp blade and first rising to one knee and then standing up, ever mindful of the 3 bamboo poles and what he was about to do, he swung the sword upwards. At this point there was a momentary pause as though time was standing still. And then as if sped up to fast motion, he cut through the area in the direction of the bamboo poles, slicing through the air as if he were dancing, one completely fluid motion.

It was an impressive movement, so fast that my eyes could not be sure where the movement went. I thought that the master was practicing to actually cut the poles on the next

stroke, and then I saw the poles as if in slow motion fall one after the other. He had cut clear through all 3 poles!

Calligrapher

I was invited to watch calligraphy demonstrations by a master and his students. We were shown different styles of calligraphy, ink drawings on paper with fragrant smelling ink. Without realizing it, the students were preparing a large space by gluing pieces of paper together into a sheet about 2 meters by 1.5 meters. We were told to move back away from the area to be painted. A “bucket” of ink was brought in front of the master, and a brush that was the size of a mop was handed to the calligrapher. As with the master martial artist, the calligrapher meditated on the paper and what he was about to do, all the while, stirring the brush methodically in the bucket of ink. And also like with the martial artist, he was suddenly prepared. He also broke into a cold sweat, and in slow motion raised the brush from the ink up into the air, again a momentary pause and “swish”, boldly ‘attacked’ the paper, ink flying off in all directions and then he put the brush back in the bucket, one single stroke that moved across the paper like a dancer (we later found out that the meaning of this particular character was *dance!*)

Flower arranger

The third story is about a famous flower arranger named Kawase san. A group was assembled to watch the artists approach to flower arranging. He looked like a movie star dressed in a white hakama and top. He first went with 2 attendants of the temple where the performance was taking place and selected a tall bamboo pole. The attendants brought it into the large room with tall ceiling. The bamboo was a great specimen with an abundance of branches filling out the space. The bamboo pole was set before him. He held it straight up and studied its form and balance. On the floor were 4 tools, a knife, a saw and 2 sizes of clippers, laid out with in perfect reach for the demonstration. Again the room went silent, he reached the point of readiness and never taking his eyes off the bamboo, picked up the cutting knife broke into a frenzied dance of cutting and clipping with branches falling everywhere, too fast to keep track of, but within a few short moments the floor was covered with bamboo branches and leaves. The stalk had only 3 remaining branches that were in perfect balance. He saw this as a sculptor sees the finished piece within the rough stone. All he had to do was take away the rest.

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