

A Tale of Two Potters: Kikuchi Kazuyoshi and Willi Singleton

By *Jacqueline Ruyak*

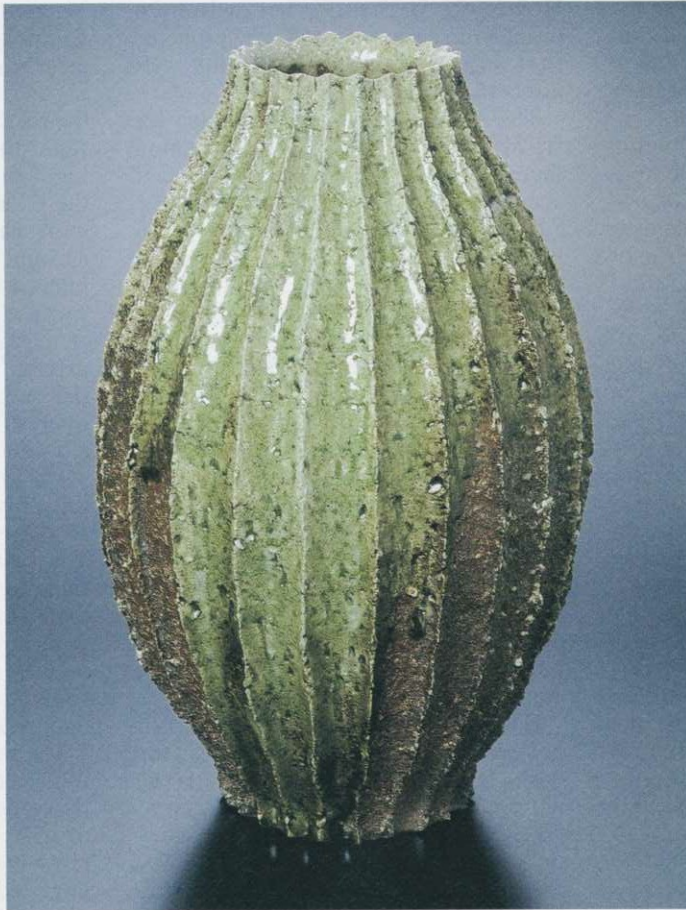
My real education in ceramics began while I was living in Kyoto. As an undergraduate in the United States, I had acquired an assortment of sturdy bowls, dishes and such from potter friends and salivated over Chinese porcelains in museum collections. But it all came together in Kyoto, where for seven years I lived in the ward famed for producing *Kiyomizu-yaki* (ware), the elegant, highly-colored porcelain often used with Kyoto cuisine. By then the old wood-burning kilns had been banished to the outskirts of the city, but many of the potters and decorators still worked in the neighborhood.

Each August a week-long pottery festival overflowed Gojo Avenue, known for its many shops selling Kiyomizu-ware. A minute from my house, the Kawai Kanjiro Museum showcased the beautiful home and kiln, and of course the work of Kawai Kanjiro, one of the pioneers of Japan's *mingei* (folk craft) movement. A downtown shop featured folk pottery from around the country. Tanba, or Tachikui (Hyogo Prefecture) and Shigaraki (Shiga Prefecture), among Japan's oldest and most famed pottery centers, were a day-trip away, and others were within easy reach. Much of my appreciation for ceramics came, however, through everyday exposure to Kyoto's famed cuisine and the tea ceremony. Though I studied neither, both permeate the social and cultural milieu of Kyoto and both have an intrinsic relation with Japanese

ceramics.

Years later, after moving to Tono, Iwate Prefecture, I earned insight into the workaday worlds of two independent potters who, by great luck for me, live in my two backyards. One, Kikuchi Kazuyoshi, is from Tono, the other, Willi Singleton, from my native Pennsylvania. Both live and work in places which, though rich in natural beauty, are not known for pottery. For both potters, however, their work has an intimate connection to their environment.

Photo: Kikuchi Kazuyoshi



A jar (Shizen-yu Shinogi Tsubo) produced by Kikuchi Kazuyoshi (H: 38.0 cm, W: 25.0 cm, 2001)

Born in Tono, Kikuchi got a job in Tokyo after leaving high school, with the idea of attending university. Along the way, however, he decided to learn a Japanese traditional craft. Sheer chance took him to a six-year apprenticeship with Onimaru Setsuzan of Takatori, a Kyushu kiln known for its tea ceremony ware. When Kikuchi left, at 28, he returned to Tono to set up his own kiln. After several years of using a gas kiln and making glazed pieces, he decided to go in a different direction, using a wood-fired kiln and making *yakishime*, the unglazed ware that typifies much of Japanese traditional pottery. To do that he moved into a hilltop thatched farmhouse in nearby Miyamori and there built a single-chamber *anagama* kiln, 20 meters long, which takes a week of near-constant stoking to fire. Though Kikuchi still maintains a gas kiln in Tono, his yakishime-ware is now his

main work.

Willi Singleton, who studied art and ceramics in college, went to Japan in 1981 and apprenticed for a year with Ichino Shigeyoshi in Tanba Tachikui. Somewhat daunted, he left to hone his Japanese language skills, then went again to Japan in 1985 to study with Narui Tappo in Mashiko, Tochigi Prefecture. In 1987, he returned to eastern Pennsylvania to set up a pottery at the frame farmhouse that was once a summer home for his grandparents. Singleton uses glazes and wood-fires

his work in a four-chambered *noborigama* (climbing kiln), which he built behind his home. Located at the foot of Hawk Mountain, a world-famous center for raptor research, Pine Creek Pottery is now making a name for itself.

Both potters believe their work is very much a product of place. Take the clay each uses. For Kikuchi that is a coarse red clay which he digs himself at construction sites in Tono and elsewhere in Iwate. This local clay, "rich in iron and character," says Kikuchi, is what makes his work special. Though Singleton uses a blend of clays to achieve the plasticity he requires, about two-thirds is a coarse clay which he gets from atop Hawk Mountain; the other third is an industrially-mined clay from the Pennsylvania-Maryland border. He likes natural materials because "they already have something to say on their own" and gets about 75% of his materials from the immediate valley, including the creek clay, cornstalk ash and wood ash he uses for glazes.

Kikuchi uses Japanese red pine, still abundant in the Iwate mountains, to fire his kiln and to produce the ash build-up required for *yakishime* work. Depending on the degree of ash deposit and where the pot is placed in the kiln, the texture of the finished piece may vary wildly, from unadorned grey and brown to burn-scorched red and pink to thick with vitreous blue and green. Though the potter chooses the clay, makes the pot, positions it in the kiln, and fires it, the end result is in large part up to the chance interaction of fire and clay. That, says Kikuchi, is much of the appeal of *yakishime* work.

Most American potters who use wood-fired kilns do not use glazes. Singleton, however, believes that wood-firing gives his natural glazes a richness and subtlety which may not be immediately apparent. He prefers work that reveals itself slowly, rather than shouting everything out at once. Both Singleton and Kikuchi make bowls, dishes, cups and other vessels for everyday use.

That their work is used is important not only to their livelihoods but also to

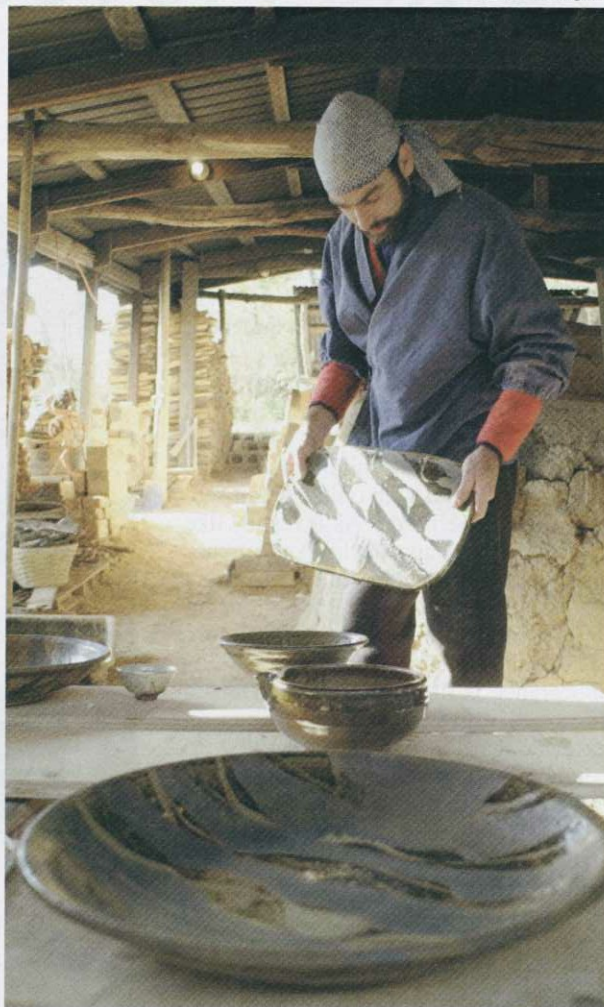
learning if and how the pieces fulfill their purpose. As Singleton puts it, the user is the one to tell the final story of the piece.

One at the Yakushi kiln in Iwate, the other at the Kempton kiln in Pennsylvania, each potter is creating tradition where none exists. Because there is no real history of *yakishime* in Iwate, says Kikuchi, people often assume he is merely imitating potters at Bizen, Shigaraki, Iga, or Echizen, the four traditional pottery centers known for such ware. Or, because the work is simple and unadorned, they think anyone can do it, even a child. Singleton, however, has to deal again and again with basic assumptions about ceramics. In Japan there is a centuries-old tradition of functional ceramics and an informed appreciation for its products, but in the United States ceramics are much more design-oriented.

They are expected to be art and to make a statement.

Kikuchi fires his big kiln twice a year; Singleton fires his several times more. Both rely on family and friends to help with the consuming task of stoking the fire 24 hours a day for days at a time. Such is the power and attraction of a firing, however, that friends from across the country routinely show up to help Singleton with his. I recall a rare Christmas eve in Iwate with Kikuchi and a handful of friends at a firing. Outside the long kiln shed, snow lay on the ground and stars sparkled in the dark sky. Inside, ghostly flames danced from the vents in the kiln. Eating, drinking

Photo: Willi Singleton



Singleton uses glazes and wood-fires his work in a four-chambered *noborigama* (climbing kiln)

and talking, we clustered at the base of the kiln, taking turns every 10 minutes to thrust chunks of Japanese red pine into the fire. Even heavy insulated gloves did not keep my hands from turning pink. **JJT**

Jacqueline Ruyak is a writer and translator of Japanese literature. She lived in Kyoto for eight years and Tokyo for three and a half and now divides her time between Pennsylvania and Iwate. One of the main contributors to the Eyewitness Guide to Japan, she frequently writes about travel and arts in Japan, the United States and Central Europe.