

Welcome to Japan -

STEFAN JAKOB

Evelyne Schoenmann

It is a spectacular sight to see a row of these dustbin kilns lined up side by side, in the red sand of the expanses of Australia, on dollies being pushed to a seminar by instructors or even in a typical Japanese landscape, the home of raku.

It all started twenty years ago in the Zurich studio of the well-known ceramist, Stefan Jakob, when he was still an arts and crafts teacher and he kept wondering how it would be possible to keep all

his students busy during raku firings. This proves to be pretty difficult when there is only one kiln available. So he thought up a "peoples" raku kiln. After a lengthy phase of trial and error and continual improvements, he developed the now widely known dustbin raku kiln. This kiln can be built quite simply and cheaply. The parts and the instructions can either be purchased from ceramics suppliers or you can attend one of the numerous workshops run by Stefan Jakob and build your own kiln under his guidance. Stefan has built over 2,000 of these kilns up to now, either to fulfil orders or at workshops. The main body of the kiln, i.e. the dustbin, is made of galvanised sheet metal. A piece of stovepipe is fitted to the lid. There is a small firebox at the bottom of the kiln,

which has a usable firing chamber of approximately 27 cm in height and diameter and is fired with wood. For one firing, about two shoe boxes full of finely split firewood are needed. 1000°C can be reached in half an hour. Stefan Jakob's latest development is a high temperature wood kiln that can be fired to 1300°C!

News of Stefan's kiln idea, simple but impressive, has spread far and wide, so that well-known Japanese ceramist Shozo Michikawa was one of the people who had heard of it. Shozo organises the highly respected International Ceramics Festival in Sasama, Japan (ICAF) which has taken place every two years since 2011. In 2014, Shozo invited Stefan to demonstrate his special raku kilns in the land of raku. Stefan was happy to take up

The successful Japanese kiln builders





The images above show the construction and transport of the kilns opposite page - the kilns in operation and (bottom) on display

photos - Minoru Nyuya and Stefan Jakob

the invitation. On 4 November 2014, he flew to Japan to spend a month in the land of the rising sun. The culture shock was not long in coming: not only the insights into the culture and society of the country and the intense experience of living at close quarters with a Japanese family for nearly four weeks, but also the rituals, language and the cuisine took some getting used to, but Japanese friends offered their support and assistance. Right on the day after his arrival, all of the parts and materials to build the kilns had to be sourced and purchased. Together with Watami, the interpreter, and a further helper, Stefan made his way to various “home centers” in Shimada, and to the ones in Seto together with Shozo. It was not easy to find the

correct materials so that the treasure hunters could often be seen standing helplessly in front of the shelves. However, they finally managed to find everything on their shopping list. That was reason enough for Stefan to take a short trip before the workshop proper began, so he took a train to Fukushima, where he was awaited by Masakazu Kusakabe. Masakazu is a kiln builder and potter whom Stefan had met at a woodfiring conference in Germany. Stefan relates, “Masakazu took me straight on a tour lasting several days, introducing me to his friend Yashitshi Watanabe, a calligrapher who paints his letters exclusively with frogs. On the Tuesday morning, Masakazu could no longer restrain himself; he wanted to build a small wood

kiln with me made of lightweight insulating bricks based on my high-temperature kiln made from a stainless steel bucket. Of course we went right ahead and fired it too, reaching 1280°C in only three hours.” After spending five days with Masakazu San, he had to take his leave to return in time for the planned workshop in Sasama.

Before this, however, a series of workshops at Japanese schools was scheduled. Stefan describes the workshops with Japanese schoolchildren like this: “On two days, Shozo, Masa, Watami and I, with a number of helpers, drove to three schools in the prefecture of Shizuoka. We ran small workshops with a total of six classes. First I gave a brief illustrated presentation about Switzerland

and my work with children. After that, each student was able to make a small bowl of their own. We took all the work with us to have it fired in Sasama. I was very excited to gain an insight into the Japanese school system in this way. I was astonished that in a highly technological country like Japan the classrooms were still heated with paraffin". A report about the workshops for schoolchildren was published the very next day in the Shizuoka News.

On 19 November, the participants in Sasama arrived and the workshop could begin in earnest. After a brief introduction, eleven women and five men, including ten professional ceramists, immediately set to work, all working very autonomously. The first pieces were finished on the first day. The following day was reserved for kiln building. With ardour and enthusiasm, drawing, drilling, cutting and joining got under way. By evening, all of the participants could present their finished kilns. For fun, and because it was raining outside, the participants made a weatherproof "rain kiln". The evening began with a performance, "Dance with flute music and drums, combined with a ceramic demonstration by Shozo".

This was followed by a meal of Japanese delicacies prepared by some of the women from the village, with beer and sake to drink. This is all part of the event, because the participants had to fortify themselves for firing day. This is what Stefan has to say about the unusual firing day: "In the morning, everyone set up their kiln and placed their work in the kiln for the bisque firing. Suddenly we heard a helicopter that was approaching to land right in front of the kilns. It turned out to be the "flying doctor". The large area where we were getting ready to start firing was a helipad for emergencies in the valley. Only after the helicopter had taken off again could we start the firing. In the afternoon, we did the glaze firing too. By the evening, all the participants were delighted with the workshop, the firing and especially with the new kilns. Parallel to the workshop, Shozo had fired the anagama, and in the evening I had the chance to sit by the kiln and catch up with friends. I should add that our Western style of raku differs vastly from original Japanese raku. It is also called 'American style raku' here because it was especially Paul Soldner who invented this style of firing."

After this, Stefan Jakob travelled on to Bizen to meet the so-called Bizen Boys, Taiga, Syo, Toshiaki and Takhiro to run one last dustbin firing. As it was supposed to be in a special location, Tobi Port right by the sea had been chosen. Stefan has been back in Switzerland for some time now, but in quiet moments, he dreams of taking part again in the Sasama Festival in 2017.

Stefan Jakob, Switzerland: www.raku.ch
 Trip to Japan in 2014:
www.stefaninJapan.jimdo.com

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