

Maeona Mendelson on “Firing Clay in Roaring Flame”

“Firing clay in roaring flame, making pots as in olden times – then we know the blessings of nature and the joy of life” –Mitsuo Murayama

For many years, my friend, Susie Cohen, and I have talked about a trip to Japan to visit the six ancient pottery kilns (Bizen, Echizen, Seto, Shigaraki, Tanba and Tokoname). Susie is an accomplished potter who exhibits at the Torpedo Factory in Old Town Alexandria, Virginia and in Washington D.C. We made the trip in March 2007. Susie’s goal was to find contemporary potters in each of the towns who would talk with her as a fellow artist-craftsperson. My goal was to find a blend of experiences that could also be enjoyed by our husbands and my daughter, Erin. With the help of friends and **Esprit Travel and Tours**, we traveled by train, van and private car from Tokyo to Machiko, Kyoto, Shigaraki (also Miho Museum), Tanba, Miyama-cho, Kurashiki, Bizen, Naoshima Island, Tokoname, and Tajimi. We made the decision to skip Karatsu, Hagi and Echizen because we wanted time to reflect, eat, shop and play as well.

Our focus was on the contemporary stoneware potters who were still building and firing in traditional wood burning kilns; excavating their clay from the mountains or from beneath rice fields. These craftsmen were working in towns known for centuries for their pottery. They were using traditional methods in a timeless aesthetic (wabi-sabi) to make dynamic 21st century art. Some lived in thatched roof houses; one in a mansion he was in the midst of building. All had their kilns, studio and gallery on site. Our love for *mingei* made each home an inviting work of art. We shared sake, tea and sweets and savored the joy they expressed in the livelihood they had chosen. For some it was a personal calling. For others, they were the descendents of a long line of family potters working in the tradition of their town or region. We did visit one artist who specialized in porcelain. He was perfecting a celadon of extraordinary depth and translucency. It was the color of a robin’s egg.



The enormity of the task meant that some potters fired only once a year. Participating in this annual process must have been the state of mind desired by Zen students – the total absorption of mind, spirit and body in the job of the moment. The noborigama or multi-chambered kilns were fired continuously for five to eight days around the clock. With every potter, we found sheds filled with cut and bundled red pine branches, piles of clay, and the essential feldspar. Each pot when it emerged from the kiln would be unique, organic, and tactile.

We did not set out on a quest to experience the aesthetic known as *wabi-sabi*. It simply happened. On our last day, the cherry blossoms burst forth in the middle of a windy and cold day. The

blossoms came down like snow on everyone who braved the cold to drink under the trees as Japanese have done for centuries. We left Japan with that fleeting sadness that is so much a part of the aesthetic we had observed on our journey.

In the event, you would like to take this trip, here are the names of some of the world-renown artists and some of the museums and galleries visited. Many can be found on the web.

Tokyo: Japan Folk Craft Museum, Mingeikan Museum, Gallery Mitate, Gallery Savoir Vivre, Kuroda Toen, Aso Art, Inax Gallery, Bizen Ceramics Gallery. **Machiko:** studio of Matsuzaki Ken and museum of Hamada Shoji. **Kyoto:** studio of Sarah Brayer who is a washi and printmaker. Shigaraki: Shiro Otani. **Miyama-cho:** Murayama Mitsuo. **Tanba:** Shimizu Keiichi and Ichino Masahiko. **Bizen:** Isezaki Mitsuru, Harada Shuroku and Wakimoto Hiroyuki. **Tokonome** and **Tajimi:** Mino Ceramic History Museum, Kobu Sakai, Tsukamoto Haruhiko. Tsukamoto-san works in both Shino and Oribe.

My favorite museum was the Raku Museum in Kyoto. Here were the tea bowls and utensils created by the dynasty of potters founded by Chojiro. One room displayed tea bowls made by each raku sensei over a 400 year period.

My favorite walk was one we took at the end of the day as we visited shrines in the lower Higashiyama. We arrived in Kyoto on the last day of a lantern festival. As we climbed to Kiyomizudera, I "pushed" our little group to make it to the top in time for sunset. The Japanese sun was the color of the sun on the flag of Japan. As it set, the lanterns were lit along the road home to our hotel. We determined that we walked up hill and down for about seven miles.

