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# First Fire

by Richard Bresnahan

For a moment recall your first fire. It is the fire that reaches all your deepest emotions, awakening the call of spiritual fire. It is a campfire of love. It is the incense lying on glowing charcoals, filling the air with sweet memory of breath. It is the fire of community, feeding a central flame and bonding humans to the planet in overlapping and diverse patterns. For every person, the first fire is like no other.

It is a moment in a potter's life when there is no desire for control and all expectations are gone. The first firing is like a wedding, the threshold of marriage, when previous relationships can only cloud the clarity of the moment.

For the past seventeen years I have had the help of an incredible community of friends and family at St. John's. It continued me on a path started long before of using earth's indigenous materials for sustainable patterns. My teachers and community are indistinguishable from who I am.

An example of this relationship: In 1979 I proposed to Saint John's University that they allow clay that ran across a closed road making it impassable in spring and fall, to be dug and removed



to another site. The Benedictine Abbey and the university thus agreed to move 18,000 tons of stoneware clay onto their grounds, where it will now be used for a hundred years of making pots instead of uselessly discarded along the roadside by the contractor.

Another pivotal commitment made by the Abbey monastery and the university president was an agreement to construct a new clay studio and to build kilns. In 1992 St. Joseph Hall, a turn-of-the-century brick building, was moved off its foundation and relocated on a new site. In the process the old clay studio was destroyed, but a new, more comprehensive studio came into being in its place.

The new studio is designed to work as an environmental learning model. The water—used in washing clay and ashes for the glazes—is recycled. Every step in working with natural, indigenous materials is done with as much energy efficiency as possible.

Building the “Johanna Kiln” provided an opportunity to construct a firing instrument that would primarily fit the needs of the clay. Recycled materials were used in most of the construction. Programming the needs for the pottery as well as for visiting artists required a kiln of greater size. Finally, there was a need to resolve a number of theories about woodfiring that had been accumulating during the past twenty-two years.

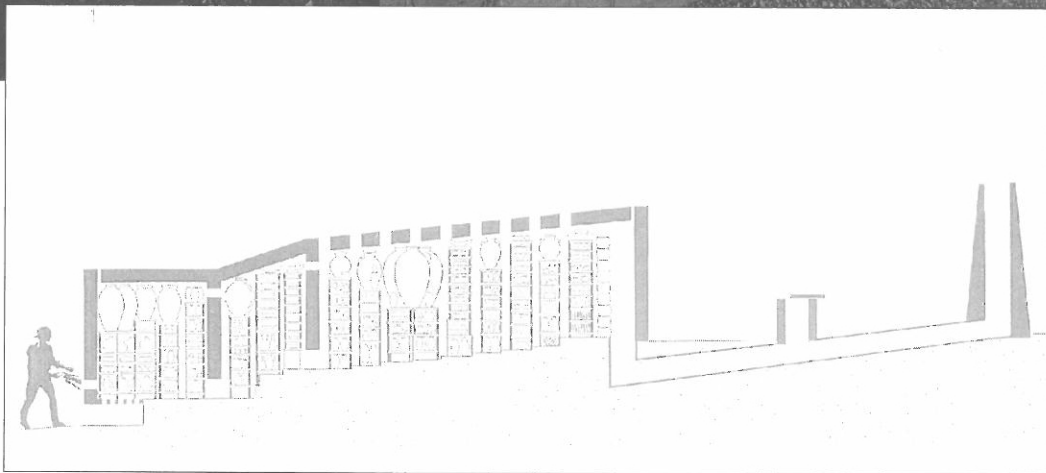
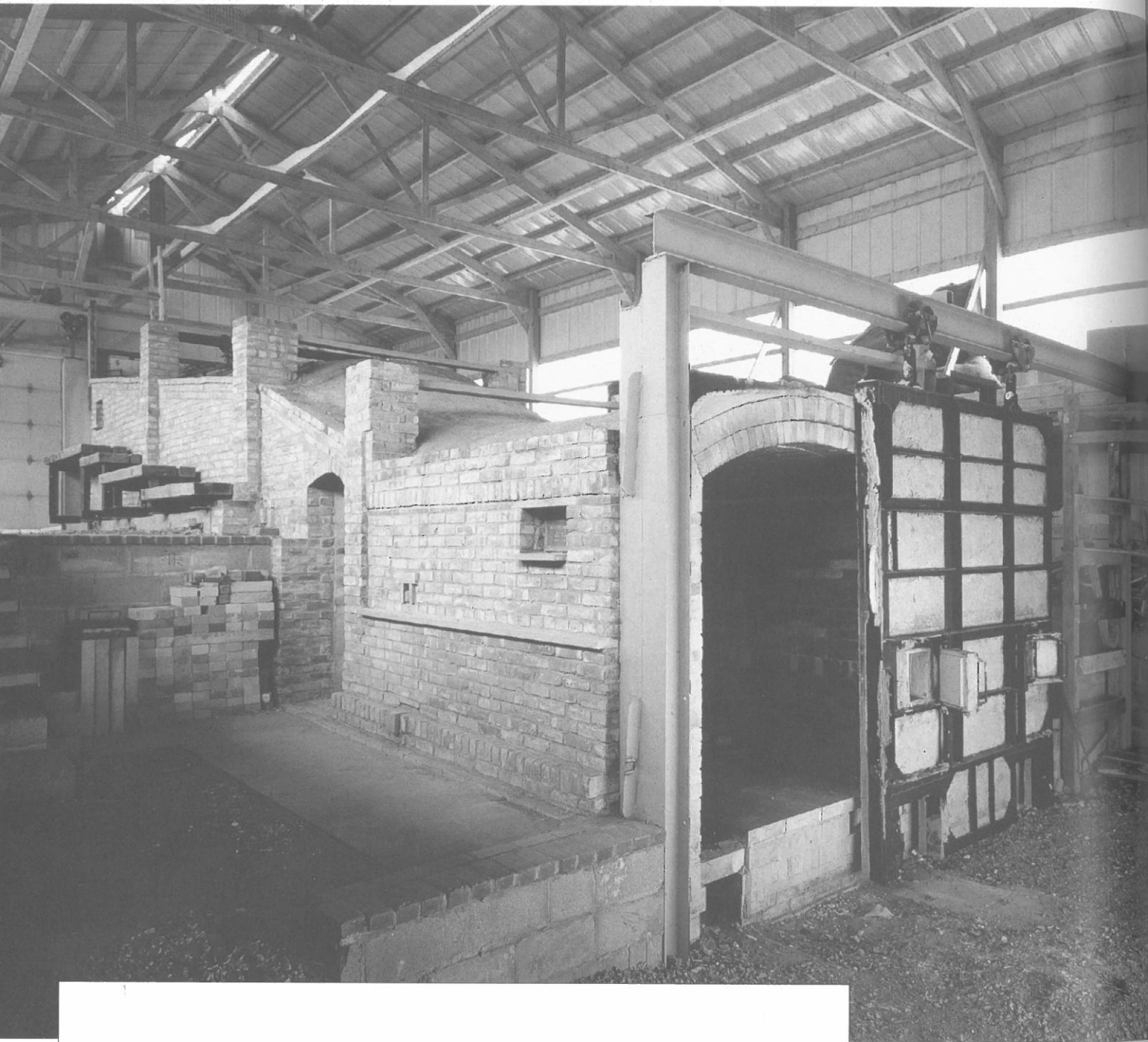
I had set my course early on pathways which contributed to these theories. There was an apprenticeship I undertook with Nakazato Takashi, from 1975 to 1979, during which I made and fired two distinctly different types of pottery. The first type resulted from discoveries in 1969 on Tanegashima Island by Koyama Fujio and Nakazato Takashi of unglazed pots fired in a 12th-century Korean style *teppo-gamma* (gun-kiln or tunnel kiln), which initiated a distinctive Tanegashima style of pottery. The second was the traditional Karatsu glazeware that the Nakazato family had been making for over thirteen generations and were producing in all three Nakazato studios in the Karatsu area.

Certain individuals added to my store of information at that time, specifically Doug Lawrie of rural Kyoto, Kaneko Jun and Suzuki Goro of Seto, and Ryoji Koie of Tokoname. Their guidance, as well as introductions they provided me to other potters, helped my understanding of woodfiring to an even greater extent, I believe, than did my apprenticeship.

I remember one conversation with a Shigaraki potter that was particularly critical. After a long period of patient discussion concerning his clay and kiln (which was a two-chamber Shigaraki-style kiln), he finally looked at me and said, “Do you really want to know how to fire wood kilns?” Stunned by the shift from the polite and vague to the direct and sincere, I responded, “Yes!” He then said, “Those young Japanese woodfire potters” (he was referring to those in their 40s and 50s) “are only worried about where the pots are in the kiln. The truth of woodfiring is where the pots are *not*.” Then he walked over to the second chamber of his kiln, equal in size to the first chamber, and said, “No pots go in here. This chamber creates the first chamber's pieces.” Like a good American apprentice, I dutifully wrote that precious information down in my journal, in front of the potter and to his satisfaction. Then I promptly forgot what he said, and for the next fourteen years worried instead about where the pots were placed in the firing.

The idea where the pots are not resurfaced in 1986 when Ryoji Koie, Oizumi San and I visited the archeological site of four fourteenth-century anagama kilns in Tokoname. There was great excitement over their discovery because of a rivalry among the





*Richard Bresnahan's kiln and diagram of the kiln's cross-section showing typical loading position for various pot groupings*

Six Old Kilns. This controversy centered on which kiln was the link between twelfth-century anagama types and the first use of a damper, flue and chimney for more efficient use of precious wood energy. Now it seemed clear that the Tokoname kilns were the link—that rolled clay tubes mixed with straw had been lowered into the ends of the anagamas as moveable dampers to keep heat and ash inside the kiln, and to form a back-pressure chamber.

These four differently shaped Tokoname anagamas, with damper, flue and chimney built side by side, were made specifically to fire a certain size and shape of clay vessel and were true eco-architecture, fitting the needs of the kiln to the pots. Today it is the reverse: we pick a particular style and size of anagama, build it, then buy commercial clay from hundreds of miles away and make the pieces to fill it.

It's *where the pots are not* became the foundation for providing me with an answer to the following problems in woodfiring:

1. To build a front fire-mouth chamber different from previous first chambers I had built, and to create surfaces and fly ash movement over a wider area than in the previous anagama style kilns.

2. To prove that the dramatic range of the earthen color palette found on Tanegashima Island's pottery is from a firing process rather than from the distinct type of clay found on the island. Japanese potters having problems getting Tanegashima effects believed that the essential factor was the clay of the island.

3. To combine three distinctly different styles of firing into a larger kiln for energy efficiency, using recycled wood products and dead-fall trees. And that these chambers should work as effectively as if independently fired, with a fourth chamber having no pots in it at all that will enable the other three chambers to work successfully together.

The Johanna Kiln is designed as follows:

The front fire-mouth chamber has a fire grate on each side wall, with an island of pottery between the two fire grates. This creates a rolling and lifting motion to the flame. During the firing, cone 11 is reached using only 4x6" diameter or larger logs, four feet long. When each door is stoked, the flames roll up and across to the opposite side flue holes. This rolling and lifting motion deposits fly ash all over pieces in different positions. The surface of the canister is facing away from the fire. Many pieces were glazed in areas that would give the effect of having been fired in an anagama kiln, and facing into the flame. Larger jars are placed at the top of the arch and forward to the fire grates, receiving heavy ashing. Pots of all sizes will be placed forward to the door at the top of the arch to receive heavy ashing. Flue holes going to the second glaze chamber are placed in the arch and floor, the floor ones being larger. The arch form is a sprung-arch. What is exciting is the movement of flame and fly ash into areas protected by compact loading. This protection results in pieces that appear to come from a more open anagama-style firing.

*The First Firing:* After four days of firing the first chamber, the glazes are already soft in the second chamber. The second glaze chamber is fired to cone 12 in about nine hours, and the object is to hold back the flame movement through the chamber. The majority of fly ash stays in the first chamber, so glazes have only slight ashing. The straw and wood ash glazes develop a lovely movement (as in tenmoku "hare's-fur") from the slow cooling of the kiln.

The Tanegashima or third chamber is the largest of the three chambers, with eighteen stoking windows (nine on each side) and 850 cubic feet of loading space. Three water channels are built

under alternating fire grates in the floor to allow water into the kiln at high temperatures. This changes the environments of reduction and oxidation and produces patterns of wide ranging colors. From soft black, reds and blues the Tanegashima chamber provides firing results with equal range in color to that on Tanegashima Island. The rich color in this third chamber is the direct result of the use of the seven atmospheric dampers placed at the halfway mark in the 37-foot back-pressure tunnel.

I look upon the Johanna Kiln's back-pressure chamber as a musical instrument: the atmospheric dampers set the tonality of firing, like playing a flute. Now I understand the joy of creating a tonality of ancient sound *where the pots are not*.

To explain Tanegashima color in another manner: When astrophysicist Luke Keller from the University of Texas, Austin received a piece sent by his parents from the Tanegashima chamber in the first firing, he asked to visit the studio. After seeing the kiln and examining the firing charts and finished pieces, Keller began describing, as one artist to another, his research on the Orion nebula. He explained that large oxygen clouds in colors that were green and light-orange (similar to the oxidizing patterns of Tanegashima) press past hydrogen-blue and reddish clouds, creating environments where new stars are born. These glowing atoms get their energy from collisions. The darkness around the nebula environment is carbon and other matter through which light cannot pass. Using infrared spectrums, however, light can be seen coming from the nebula.

The colors of the pots in the Tanegashima chamber of the Johanna Kiln are very like those from pots at Tanegashima Island, close even to the color of the inter-stellar gas clouds. Here we are offered a view of a firing chamber today that echoes what is happening in the universe thousands of light years away. *Where the pots are not* creates the pots; *where the stars are not* creates the stars.

#### FOOTNOTE

1. The kiln at Saint John's Pottery is named after Johanna Becker, O.S.B., who was Richard Bresnahan's teacher from 1972-75, and was instrumental in his obtaining an apprenticeship at the Nakazato Takashi Pottery in Japan. She is the author of a definitive text on Japanese pottery entitled *Karatsu Ware: A Tradition of Diversity*, published by Kodansha.

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