



# Keepers of the Kiln

by Steven C. Wilson

Santatsugama was speaking.

A dearth of words hung in the contemplative silence. Ken Lundemo, Rick Mahaffey and Steve Sauer, the keepers of the kiln listen before speaking. “Give the kiln what it needs, throw sticks in constantly, six cords of mixed splits: maple,

alder, fir, cedar, seven species of wood in this firing. With so many pieces of wood going in you must listen to the experience and learn...work as a team to fire this kiln. Whether we side stoke early or late helps gain a little bit of influence—not a lot of control.” “Get it hot—2400 degrees—and

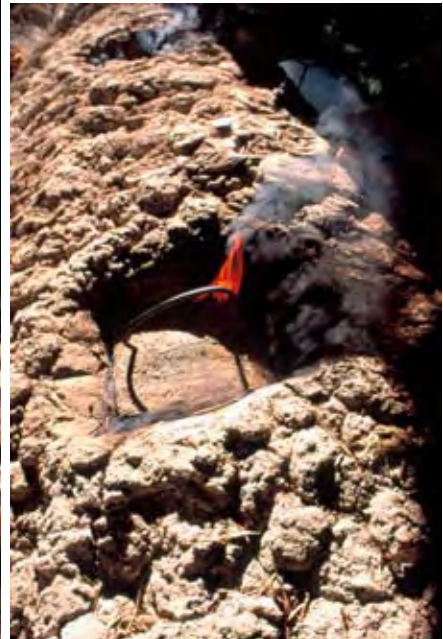
keep it hot, with subtle changes in draft or more wood, to keep a reduction/oxidation atmosphere.”

“Think of this as a spider web. Making pots and things with the kiln drawing us in. We put our hopes and dreams into the kiln, feed the kiln and, like a birth fraught





it: community...and there was some spirituality in it too—and magic. After the kiln's creation I went into the kiln and sat there. I wanted to be part of it. That was the epiphany, reverence by association. Ken had these bricks here and had studied styles, shapes, functionality and built the kiln of tradition: Santatsugama.”



with anticipation, clay becomes harmonious with form, with glaze, with function.” “As the earth was formed and eroded into clay, man has taken fire and clay and transformed them back into stone. And what we have here in this kiln is a reflection of that.”

Steve continues, “I learned a lot about people and community, but mostly about myself. I knew potters were trucking bricks to Ken’s place near Seabeck for some reason.” Rick remembers and notes, “Our electric kilns and gas kilns deliver production predictability.” They were to learn wood fire has more to say about it than they knew. “There was something about that fire that was putting way more into









Santatsugama again spoke. Learning to know what The Three Dragons kiln wants requires patience...concentration and patience. The kiln takes a deep breath, then exhales and the temperature rises. Going so sweet, then all of a sudden it changes: maybe the barometric pressure, maybe the humidity, maybe the wind...too much air and the ash goes out the chimney, maybe the wood...pay attention to what the flame is doing, maybe the kiln itself is absorbing the heat but it will respond in its own time. "We rise to understand our privilege and our responsibility."

Steve, with protective gear looks into the kiln and *reads* the continuity of heat from the language of the cones. This is real-time information of the firing decipherable by cone posture. There is a sensed awareness of connection with the unbroken line of people who, for thousands of years, fired with gathered fuel.





Ken's soft words carry the burden of experience from four firings a year for a dozen years: "At firing, people come together; how nicely things may go. You gain much more than a pot coming out of the fire. Once in a while a major miracle comes out, but always, something soft is put in and something solid comes out." Rick adds, "Trial by fire—people coming together—neither logical nor economical,

but beautiful. And the look you get from anagama (high temperature wood firing) is unique to each kiln, its flow and draft—and front placement is very different from back."

The traditionally performed ritual at the kiln loading: closing the door, ringing a bell three times, throwing salt for purification, clapping one to three times, bowing and dedicating the firing helps leave

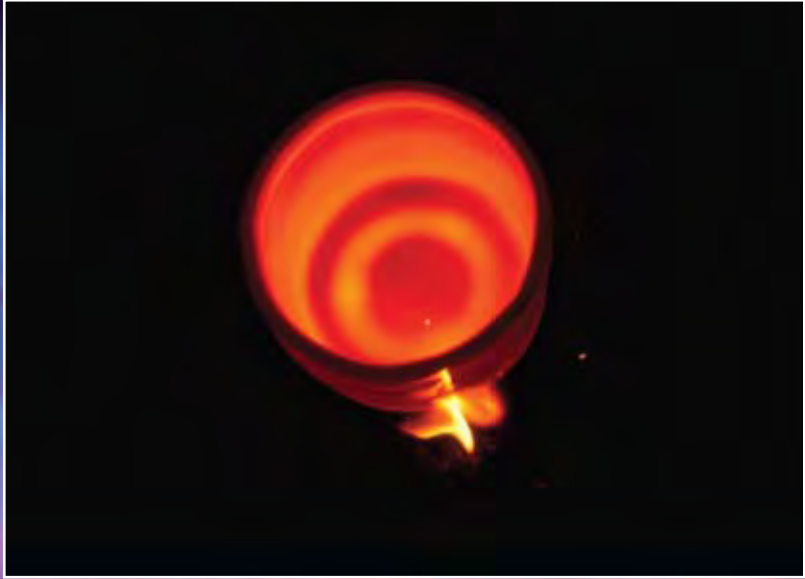
the outside world behind. "You are there to be there. Perhaps fire rituals date from the primal spiritual force when Man first *found* fire before he could *make* fire." Steve continues, "In this kiln we use fire to go far away and bring something back, like the tea bowl you see in process here."

"Man's earliest changing of something in the environment is arguably a 13,000 year old pot." Rick adds.



"You can't make the fire do exactly what you want. It's easy to expect the kiln to do too much, to lean too heavily on the kiln. The tea cup must have good form before it is subjected to fire. The miracle is glaze, done entirely by the fire." Steve continues, invoking the Japanese master Hiroshi, giving himself 10 years to learn each kiln has a life of its own. And the kiln is not going to last forever, for it is in the delicate balance of life itself. Here one day, but could be gone any time. Cherish it.







Rick and Steve's excitement energizes the opening of Three Dragons, culminating five days of continuous attention assisted by the firing crew and the patience required for the week long kiln cooling. Both firing and cooling are extended moments in a sequence of Steve's "decisive recognitions: recognizing just the right shape with just the right thickness. Recognizing just the right time to bisque fire, just the right time to low-temperature fire and the right time to glaze your piece, recognizing the right moment to fire" and Ken added, "Recognizing—this is enough."





“There is always something new to master to capture the feeling in my mind when I start the idea.” “...and apprehension when calling decisively, ‘Yes, it’s done’.” “To recognize the idea from sleep or dreams—and ideas from quiet times may birth a core essence.” “...and understanding what’s unique, for once I understand that, I can get on with it.” “When I see the process in my mind, I can build it in my mind’s eye. One of the intriguing things here is serendipity. Clay forms don’t like to lie down. They are good in compression. I go toward objects that become containers for traditions.” The talk exemplified the sense of community, the sharing, the intense cooperative aspects of individual creative acts. In a moment with quiet attention Steve speaks: “Welcome to the opening of the 41st firing of Santatsugama, The Three Dragons Kiln.”







Ken (top) views a piece, responding, “The fire has made more of this than I could have ever hoped.” Rick intones, “Ichi go ichi e,” for its many Japanese meanings: “Just this one time”; “Now is the time”; “Once in a lifetime.”



And Steve (bottom) explains about “sabi,” the authentic seal time leaves on objects; about “wabi,” the beauty of balance, the ability to be content with something simple; about “shibui,” the beauty of maximum aesthetics with minimum processing; and “jugen,” the beauty of artistic omission, to hear something unvoiced, to see something invisible. Working in Santatsugama, we unload this latest edition of the *Rebirth of Earth*. ▶