

Anagama?

"Why do you do this?" asked a student passing through the yard full of pieces just unloaded from the Golden Bridge anagama this August—pieces dripping with melted ash or encrusted with sinter, pieces stuck together, chipped and scarred, cracked, misshapen, or even molten.

Anagama is a Japanese word meaning "hole" or "cave" (ana) "kiln" (gama). In *The Kiln Book* Fred Olsen tells that 1500 years ago potters in East Asia hollowed out sloping caves in hillsides of clayey soil and shaped them into firing chambers with tapered "chimneys" to the surface. They stacked raw clay pots inside and stoked from the bottom with enough wood to waterproof the ware. The caves became fired along with the wares, and over time the wood ash built up on the ceilings of these kilns dripped down onto the pots. Wood ash at high temperature is a natural glaze. Eventually an anagama became a kiln with a single deep sloping chamber made of refractories. Tea masters in China and Japan greatly admired the subtle palette of ash effects yielded by anagama, ensuring the life of this aesthetic into the twenty-first century. The anagama continues to evolve in Japan and in the West, where a coterie of "wood-firers" has adopted the tradition.

Before coming to India I spent a year in Japan learning with a master potter of Bizen, where wood is stoked for up to ten days to achieve the varied result of ash—melted or crusted—on unglazed stoneware vessels destined mainly for the tearoom. But in 1971, when the Golden Bridge Pottery was little more than an idea, building an anagama in Pondicherry was inconceivable. Though Ray and I both loved this natural-ash aesthetic, it seemed antithetic to Indian tastes in 1971. Is it more relevant now in 2009? At the very least, one can say that a passion for the process and the product has developed in India among ceramic artists themselves.

"My single best firing result-wise ever," says Adil Writer of his pieces from the August anagama. Adil speaks after eight years working with clay at Mandala Pottery in Auroville. Says Ashwini Bhat, artist-in-residence at Golden Bridge on the threshold of her career, "I like the process itself, the rhythm of the firing, the team work. It was a great team. I would love to participate in the next firing even if I do not have work in the kiln."

"Oh, the glow! The melt of the ash on the pots was beautiful. It was amazing to see," says Antra Sinha, who equally delights in the results on her pieces after cooling. After five years working on her own at Golden Bridge, Antra loves the teamwork essential to success in a three-day anagama firing. "I am on a high, being able to get where I intended to go."

The anagama at Golden Bridge Pottery was built in 2007 by Ray Meeker and Australian wood-firer Peter Thompson, GBP resident artist for three months in the spring of that year. Ray and Peter took down our tired old three-chambered climbing kiln and, using the same bricks on the same foundations, built a single climbing chamber with roughly 200 cft of firing space. In addition to a broad opening at the front, there is a door for access and for stoking on the side of the chamber and a second side-stokehole closer to the chimney. August 2009 saw the fourth firing of the GBP anagama.

Rakhee Kane Jadeja joined the team from her Aavartan Studio in Auroville. "My favorite part of the anagama experience was working together." Mutual respect and affection carried the five team members through the sensitive process of planning the kiln load. "There were no resentments," says Ashwini. The way pieces are set in the anagama determines their outcome to a great extent. One must imagine the fire itself as the paint brush that will apply glaze in the anagama's highly-charged environment of heat and ash.

Application of glazes and slips (liquid clays) before firing can broaden this ash-toned palette. Ashwini was thrilled to witness Rakhee's painting on the broad facets of "Memory Plaques"—her deliberation, then her swift, unerring strokes and pours, singing as she worked. All were eager to try out three types of a glaze called "Shino," loved by wood-firers for its range of surface quality and colour. Antra swathed "coil-thrown" jars with broad sweeps of a slip-laden brush. Ashwini poured slip up and down the contours of her sculptures—that flaring "Headdress" inspired by a figure from Harappa.

Further extending the palette, Adil formed pieces by layering different coloured clays. "Southern Ice" porcelain from Australia, impervious to the ash, remained stark white adjacent to the rich browns that developed in his local groggy stoneware. Ray used liberal pours of slip and Shino on his rugged clay massings, which seem geological, as if torn from the earth itself.

Loading the anagama is a tedious work and more so in August in south India. Adil gifted the pottery a pedestal fan to cool down the team members inside the kiln. Each piece in the setting is mounted on wads of fireclay, cushioning it, in effect, in a cradle of space that will protect it from getting stuck to its shelf or to its neighbors by the melting ash and, at the same time, expose it to the ash-bearing currents traveling the kiln's depth. Wads may be positioned on seashells, which will leave their impressions on the pots.

With a short puja, the fire begins in the front firebox at 6 pm. Twenty-four hours later cone 10 is down, telling the stokers it is 1300 degrees C on the top of the first stack of kiln shelves. Then stoking begins in the first side-firebox. The side-fireboxes—two of them—are the prized positions in the kiln. Here, pieces are tumble-loaded on top of each other directly on the floor of the

firebox, and from here some of the most remarkable ash effects of an anagama firing emerge.

Beginning with very light wood in order not to damage the still-fragile pots, stoking continues in Side-firebox 1 for eight hours until the ware is completely covered with burning embers.

Temperature rises here, but falls in the front firebox, where light stoking continues to maintain about 1200 degrees C. Side-firebox 1 is then allowed to "re-oxidize," and in Side-firebox 2 the eight-hour build-up of embers begins. The stoke is increased in the front firebox, raising the temperature there and contributing to the burn-off of the embers in Side-firebox 1.

The melt of a two-foot-deep mass of ash and ember takes about eight hours to complete. When this is finished, the visible layer of pot surface shows a dazzling run of ash glaze. Beginning a second cycle in Side-firebox 1, the burn-off begins in Side-firebox 2. The cycle can be repeated until the desired glaze run is achieved. During the course of the firing, test rings of clay are pulled out of "spy holes" in the kiln wall in order to judge the maturity of the ash melt at different points in the chamber. Sounds simple? It isn't.

Seventy-five hours of continuous stoking in twelve-hour shifts was another test of team work. The crackle of the logs igniting—eleven and a half tonnes of casuarina and garden wood—and bursts of laughter, with story-telling and snacking, kept the team energized. And there was the sheer beauty of the fire itself, seen through the fireboxes where the wood is stoked. As heat penetrates, the logs open up into luminous blooms that fall off into the rising sea of ash. As the crackle dies down, silent veils of flame caress the clay objects that several days later will be exposed at the unloading.

The coordinator of the anagama team was Ray Meeker. Ask Ray, "Why anagama?" His reason, unequivocal: "Purely aesthetic." It is all for that bitter-sweet moment when the kiln is opened, and the result is finally clear.

Flakes of ash fall away from pieces picked out of the firebox, revealing areas of foam-like sinter that repel the touch or the occasional haloed patch of clay untouched by ash at all, where pot surfaces have lain close together in the bed of fire. Beyond, higher in the setting, waves of heat carried ash on their race towards the chimney flues, dusting the surface of everything in their path. Now ashen pools gloss the flat surfaces. Rivulets of glaze flow down the vertical contours. At peak temperature in the back of the kiln, small packages of salt were dropped into the fire along with sprayed soda ash and water. When volatilized, the sodium in the salts combined with the silica in the clay body, creating the unique pebbly surface known as salt glaze.

The anagama firing this August was the longest and hottest at GBP so far. "Too hot, probably," says Ray. "The front setting was leaning seriously. We had to stop." As discovered on unloading, it was Ray's massive 40-inch-high sculpture that stopped the fall of five stacks of shelves in the front behind the firebox. "Over-firing was very good for ash run. But we missed some of the more subtle expressions of anagama. Rakhee's wonderfully painted surfaces were obliterated. The Shinos went dark and runny. The fourth anagama was good, but lacked the variety of a truly great anagama firing. This is a work in progress. Each firing gets better. We look forward to the next round."

Finally, the clean-up. Sorting out the wasters, grinding down the ashen burs, separating stuck pieces, mending scars, sanding, soaking, saving, savouring, until what remains is what you see in the exhibition.

"All parts of the setting had disasters waiting to happen, and yet all delivered great pieces," says Adil. "Someone was watching over us."

This is the ceramic process at its most elemental, mimicking, through human agency, nature's own transformations.

Deborah Smith

Pondicherry

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In 1968-69 Deborah Smith apprenticed with master potter Yamamoto Toshu, later to be designated Living National Treasure of Bizen. In 1970 Deborah came to India and in 1971 co-founded with Ray Meeker the Golden Bridge Pottery in Pondicherry. Today she runs the production side of the pottery's activities, making a flexible line of functional stoneware with local employees.