The Expanding Community of Wood-Fired Ceramics *by Lindsay Oesterritter*

In 2012, at Western Kentucky University (WKU) in Bowling Green where I teach, Ted Neal, associate professor at Ball State University, led a group in building a train kiln. I was among the group, which included ceramics students from several Midwest universities and interested members of the community.

This was WKU's first wood kiln, and I was struck by how quickly my students wanted to make it their home. They brought in couches during the first firing and were ready to move in. Most of them had never fired with wood before and were intrigued by the process. Each student signed up for more shifts than they were asked to. We had been prepping wood for hours when one student declared, "I love wood!" She had just split a beautiful purple and yellow piece of cedar.

For beginner wood-fire enthusiasts, learning the process and building a community around it are more integral to their careers than the resulting wares. As novices become professional artists and wood firing aligns with their concepts of creative work, the results become more important to them.

This idea leads to the question, What is the future of wood-fired ceramics? This question motivated Australian wood-fire potter Owen Rye to organize a panel for the Second Annual European Wood-Fire Conference. Guldagergaard International Ceramic Research Center in Skælskør, Denmark, hosted the conference, which consisted of an intimate group of roughly 150 wood-fire artists. Organized by Priscilla Mourtizen, the conference focused on the development and challenges of the future of wood firing.

When Owen posed this question, as a member of the panel, I immediately asked myself, Why do we wood fire? and What is it about modern-day wood firing that is gaining traction? We may gain some insight by looking at how wood firing's uniquely demanding process and its distinct camaraderie-building nature are drawing in new artists, and how artists are using technology to expand their communities.

FINDING FLOW

In June 2014, I led a two-week summer workshop at the Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. There was a broad mix of ages in the group of students; about half the class was over fifty years old and had established careers outside of ceramics; they used their vacation time to sweat in front of a wood kiln.

We fired the *manabigama* twice. Manabigama is a Japanese word that can be loosely translated as *learning kiln*; it's a shorter cross-draft kiln; its fire box, with grate bars, is set below the ware chamber. Between prepping the kiln, making pots, and firing, we never had a moment to rest. In fact, it became an honor to stay up all night and get to the local doughnut shop when it opened at 4 a.m., buying fresh pastries for the overnight crew. One of the older students, a retired surgeon, commented that for him one of the attractions of firing a wood kiln was the intensity

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THE MOBILE
ANAG.AMA

and focus each shift required. It was the closest he got to the feeling he had experienced while performing surgery, and he loved it.

Although performing surgery and firing a wood kiln are very different, they both offer the ability to lose oneself in the action. I think, too, of my friend who is an intense mountain biker. Flying down hills, jumping off rocks, making quick turns, and reacting in the moment – he rides on the edge of control. To succeed at each activity requires a refined level of skill and knowledge. People are often happiest when they experience this kind of intensity and connection to the moment. Positive psychologist and professor at the University of Chicago Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (*MEE-hy CHEEK-sent-mə-HY-ee*) has interviewed many artists, composers, and scientists and asked them what compels them to spend their days creating when they have little expectation of becoming rich or famous from what they do. What makes the work meaningful? One composer responded by describing what it feels like when the work is going well: "You are in an ecstatic state to such a point that you feel as though you almost don't exist.

My hand seems devoid of myself, and I have nothing to do with what is happening. . . And [the music] just flows out of itself."

Interviewees from many countries referred to this state of "flow," leading Dr. Csikszentmihalyi to describe this state of happiness or presence as "finding flow." He concluded that there are seven components to finding flow:

Complete involvement in what we are doing: being focused, concentrated

A sense of ecstasy: being outside everyday reality

Great inner clarity: knowing what needs to be done and how well we are doing it

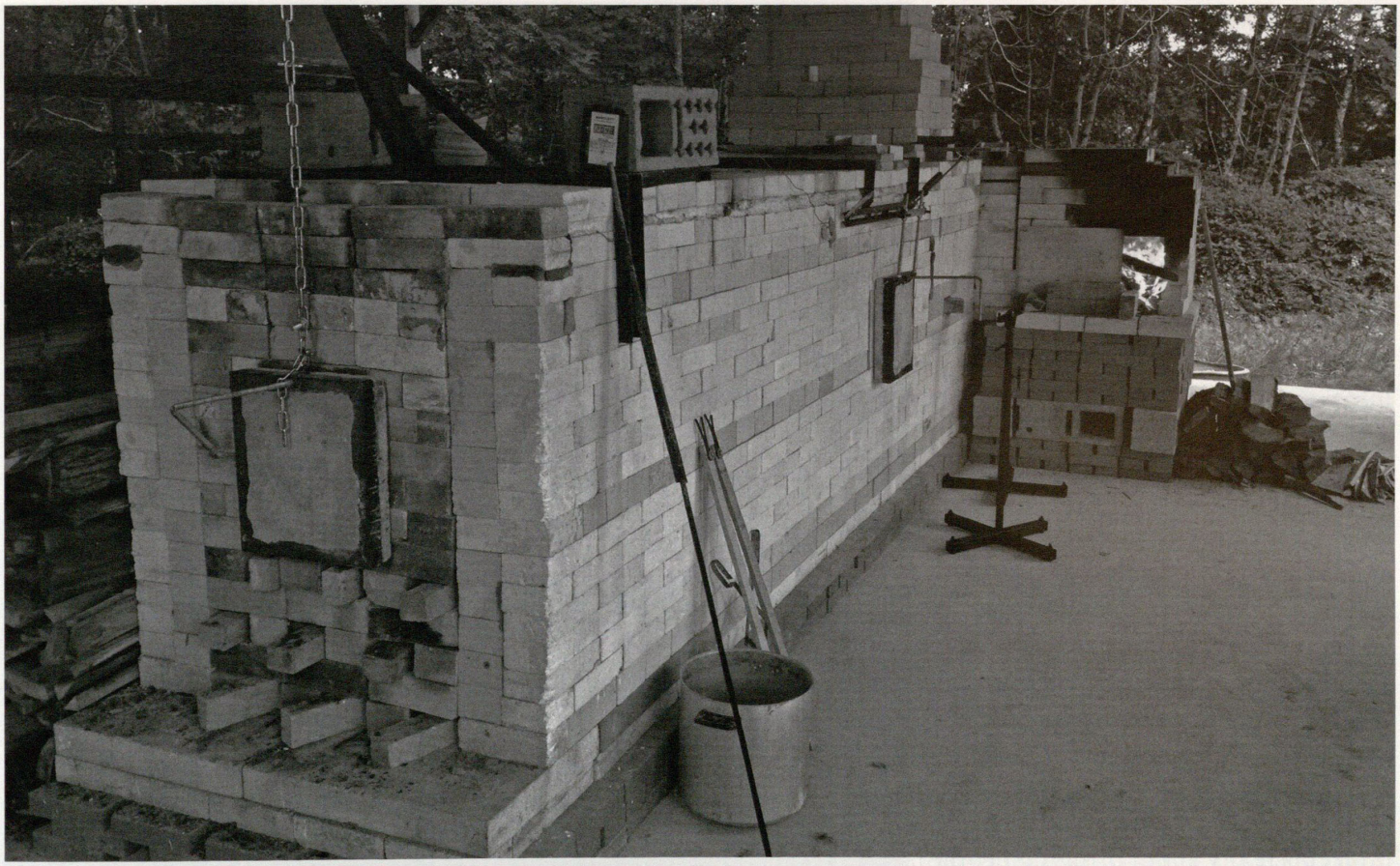
The knowledge that our skills are adequate to the task: the activity is doable

A sense of serenity: having no worries about oneself and a feeling of growing beyond the boundaries of the ego

Timelessness: being thoroughly focused on the present; hours seem to pass by in minutes

Intrinsic motivation: whatever produces flow becomes its own reward

Wood firing brings these seven components of flow together within a community working towards a com-



mon goal. The intensity of working closely with fire and with each other demands selflessness, respect, and generosity.

EXPANDING COMMUNITY: The Mobile Anagama

The intrinsic motivation produced by the camaraderie of wood firing inspired Henry Crissman, a current graduate student at Alfred University in New York, to start the Mobile Anagama Project. During the summer of 2014, Crissman traveled the United States leading firings in New York, Indiana, Minnesota, and Montana. He set out to visit larger, established ceramic organizations like Amaco in Indianapolis, Northern Clay Center in Minneapolis, and the Archie Bray Foundation in Helena, Montana, because he sees the past summer's firing schedule as the first phase of a larger project.

Phase One's goal was to enhance the visibility of established communities to draw attention to and support the mobile anagama. At each site, bisque ware was readily available, and the kiln was assembled, loaded, fired, and unloaded, all within about two days. After unloading, Crissman organized a donation sale: nothing was priced, people could pay what they wanted for various pieces. Community members were not charged for participating in the firings but were asked for a donation, either of a pot for the sale or money. The sales were set up in highly visible locations, making it easy for passers-by to stop and learn more about ceramics and purchase a pot. Some people paid as little as a dollar for a cup, while others, inspired by what Henry was doing, contributed upward of sixty dollars for one. These sales paid for gas for his vehicle and wood for the kiln.

In the next phase of the project, Henry plans to release the kiln design online, publicly. Ideally, a community will use the plans to build and manage a kiln without his involvement, and a high school, for example, that cannot afford on its own to build a kiln might

ABOVE: *Glass-agama at Domaine de Boisbuchet, Lessec, France.*

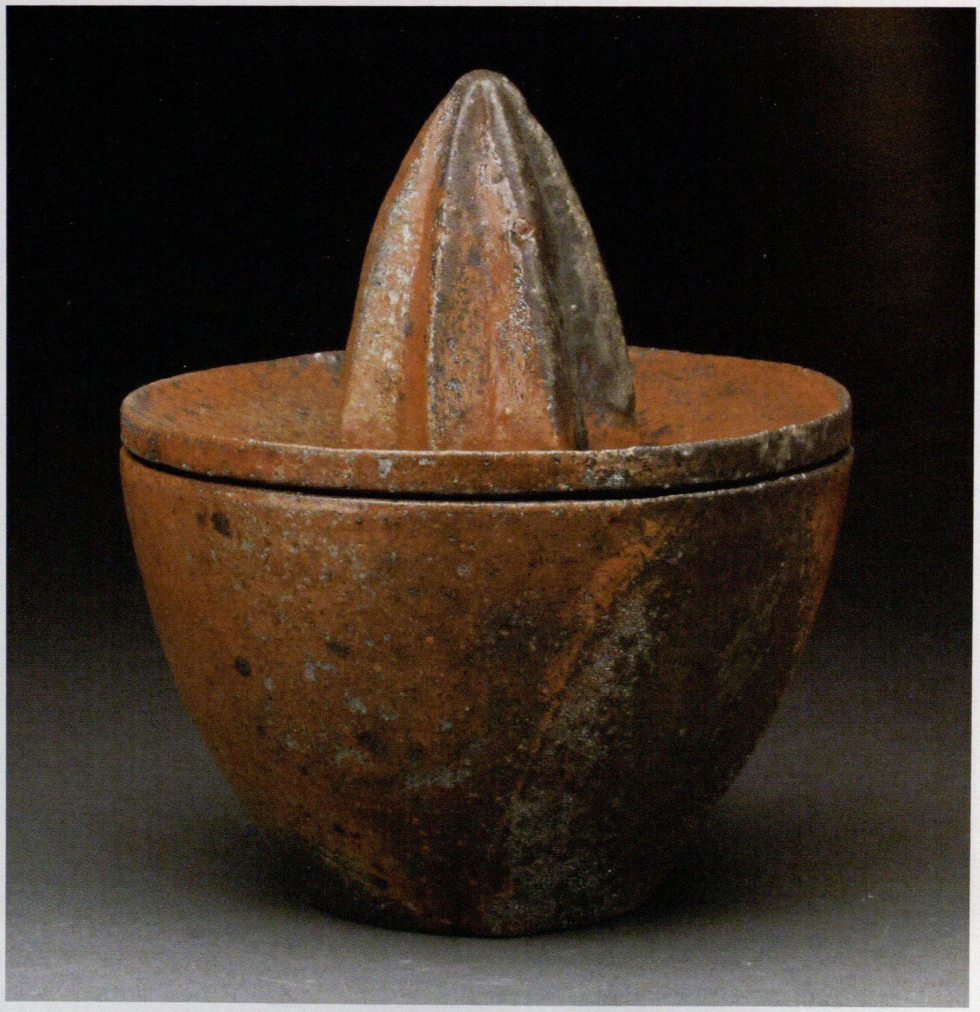
OPPOSITE PAGE: *Loading the manabigama during the 2014 summer workshop at Arrowmont. Workshop student Caitlyn Miller, left.*

OPENING SPREAD TOP: *The couches in front of the brand new kiln at WKU during the first firing.*

OPENING SPREAD BOTTOM: *The mobile anagama on the road.*

THIS PAGE: Juicer, *2014, Iron rich stoneware, press mold and wheel thrown, wood-fired reduction cool. 5 x 4.5 x 4.5 in.*

RIGHT: Pair of Pourers, *2014, Iron rich stoneware, press mold with slab built spout, wood-fired reduction cool. 6.5 x 2.75 x 2.75 in. ea.*



share the expense with other high schools in the district. The district pays for the materials, and the kiln is driven between these high school locations and can easily be stored when not in use.

Henry refers to his mobile anagama as activist demonstration, economic experiment, and collaborative machine. He is bringing into an urban setting what we have historically thought of as belonging to the hills of the countryside. Instead of the community going to the kiln, the kiln comes to the community. He is using social media to advertise and expand access to wood firing, but Henry's project is really about bringing people together in person.

Glass-agama

Fred Herbst, Professor of Art at Corning Community College in New York, has expanded the community of wood firing in another way. Fred collaborated with the Corning Glass Museum in 2008 to build the Glass-agama, a hybrid kiln that includes a backside annealing chamber for slow-cooling glass work. The kiln simultaneously fires ceramic wares and heats a crucible of glass that is used for glassblowing.

Fred and the Corning Glass Museum built a second Glass-agama at Domaine de Boisbuchet in Lessec, France, in 2009. Boisbuchet hosts summer workshops that explore the sustainable relationship between the natural and the manmade through architecture and design – a perfect setting for this hybrid kiln. The students who participate in the firings come from all over the world and typically have little or no ceramic or glass experience, but rather, have backgrounds in industrial and product design. The firing workshop is an intense ten days; the firing itself lasts thirty hours. While historically glass was heated in wood-fueled furnaces, it is not a contemporary glassblowing practice, as it is in ceramics, and the students enjoy this rare opportunity.

The pairing and collaboration of these two media were exploratory for all three groups (glass, ceramics and design), helping each to see material and process in a new light. After the experience of firing with wood, the industrial design students had a better understanding of how to incorporate less regulated surfaces, and the clay and glass artists had begun to experiment with how the materials can be used inconcert, broadening the potential for creative development of their respective fields.

Manabigama

Wood firing in smaller kilns, like the manabigama that I mentioned at the beginning of this article, is an example of how the process can be expanded into urban settings. I first learned about this kiln design in 2008 at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, when I helped to build one alongside the designer of the kiln, John

Thies. In 2010, John opened the Manabigama Pottery Center in Ohio and has since sold more than eighty sets of kiln plans to clients in the United States, Canada, Europe, New Zealand, Central America, and India. The kiln can be loaded, fired, and unloaded in a cycle as short as three days. This is what initially interested Arrowmont in building it, and it worked well with their one-week workshop cycle.

In planning the two-week workshop I taught at Arrowmont, I had the option of either firing the manabigama or the anagama they also have on campus. I chose to fire the manabigama because we could fire it twice during the workshop, incorporating what we learned from the first firing into the second. And given that the students who typically sign up for summer classes are interested in incorporating new techniques into their existing studio practice, the manabigama was the better choice. The manabigama is smaller in scale, requires fewer bricks to build, and is built above ground. It could also be ideal for small programs or independent artists because fewer wares are needed to fill it, allowing for quicker turnover.

Since learning about the manabigama at Arrowmont, leaders at several other institutions in urban settings have facilitated building a manabigama. In Kentucky, the University of Louisville and Paducah School of Art and Design have both incorporated this kiln into their programs and are set in the downtown area of each city.

Through the years of firing various kilns countless times, I am still captivated by the process of wood firing. I truly enjoy the physicality of wood prep, the responsive interaction of being in the moment during the firing, the engagement of working with a crew, and the reward of unloading the wares. Being immersed in the experience affects all participants in similar ways and does not change with a smaller kiln and shorter firing cycles. Smaller kilns, mobile kilns, and hybrid kilns simply allow more communities accessibility. The resulting wares are still very much evocative of a shared flowexperience; they express that time and intensity of process on their finished surfaces.

So what is the future of wood-fired ceramics? Without trying to predict the future, I imagine that as technology advances, so will the wood-firing process. Now it means being outside and working with fire, which is a rather primal activity. As more of everything becomes available at the click of a button, interest in communal, creative, engaged, physical experiences like this might increase. Sophistication in kiln design, experimentation with materials, and the ability to share and collaborate globally within our community will continue. I look forward to seeing what's next.