

Shigaraki jar

しが らき つぼ
信 楽 壺
Shigaraki tsubo
Shigaraki jar

あな がま
穴 窯
anagama
cave kiln

しん とう
神 道
Shintō
Shinto (literally meaning
'way of the gods')

わび さび
侘 寂
wabi-sabi
quiet elegance and
humble simplicity

Looking at the Shigaraki jar, we can feel the hand-crafted elegance of its form, the great energy and power it experienced during firing and the natural spirit gained through the process of its creation. Viewing this simple object, we gain great insight into Japanese culture and the unique Japanese spirit of *wabi-sabi*. *Wabi*, the aesthetic of beauty found in imperfection, and *sabi*, a love for the old and worn, are underlying aspects of Japanese culture and play a fundamental role in the philosophies of the tea ceremony, Zen Buddhism and Shintō nature worship.

The origins of ceramics

In Japan, ancient ceramic pieces are called *Jomon* ware, which is the same name as the period in Japanese history that gives reference to the decorative rope patterns that appear on *Jomon* ceramics. Due to Japan's geographically isolated island status, low temperature unglazed stoneware ceramic production continued for centuries after high temperature glazed wares had been developed in other Asian countries. This long familiarity with such earthy looking ceramic wares, combined with Japan's indigenous Shintō religion of nature worship, help to explain Japanese admiration for rustic ceramics, and the demand for their ongoing production well after more refined production techniques were introduced from China and Korea, in the thirteenth century.

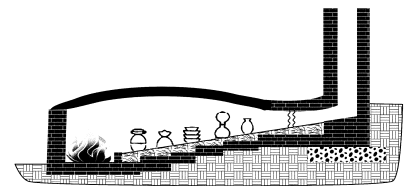
Ancient Japanese kilns

During the Kamakura period (1185–1333) and Muromachi period (1333–1573), the so-called Six Ancient Kilns flourished as areas of primary ceramic production in Japan. These kilns were named after the places where suitable clays were found and production took place: Seto, Tokoname, Echizen, Tamba, Bizen and Shigaraki. All six practiced the recently introduced technique of high temperature firing, however, with the exception of Seto, none of the kilns used the deliberate hand glazing techniques that had become so popular on the Asian mainland. Instead, they preserved the ancient rustic aesthetic of Japanese pottery, with unglazed rough surfaces and incidental glazing.

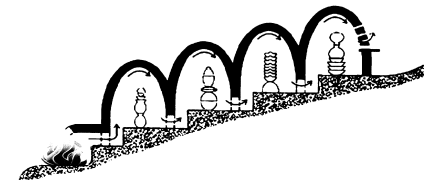
This period was also a time in Japanese history when the strength and vitality of the newly risen military classes were being reflected in the arts and production of ceramics. Craftsmen took great pains to use clay of a special strength and purity. Refined traditional coiling techniques and lengthened firing times at a heightened temperature produced very durable, rodent resistant and cool vessels suitable for holding water and storing grain. The magnificent and robust forms created are an embodiment of Japanese rural life – simple, unpretentious and yet strong.

Kilns and fire

The NGV's Shigaraki jar is constructed of the traditional coil pot technique, the same technique used for most Neolithic *Jomon* ceramics. The firing technique is equally as ancient. An *ana-gama* (literally meaning 'hole' or 'cave' kiln) is a simple kiln, consisting of a single hole made in a hillside or a mud-constructed igloo shape into which the crafted clay objects are placed and fired. At the entrance to the kiln, which is sealed before firing, there is a small hole through which wood is fed to the fire, and at the opposite end of the kiln there is a flue that creates an airflow. Having the fire in the same chamber as the ceramic pieces preserved a rudimentary process of firing, which the more advanced design of dragon or climbing kilns (*nobori-gama*), used at the same time in China and Korea, had discarded centuries before. In a dragon kiln, the fire is in a separate chamber from the clay pieces. The heating process is gradual, controlled with flames that don't affect the objects. This results in a smooth glazed or unglazed object similar to celadon or porcelain ware. In the case of an *ana-gama*, the fire is in the same chamber as the objects, producing a radically different result.



Ana-gama



Nobori-gama

The fire storm and liquefying ash

Imagine a raging fire fuelled with hard red pine wood, flames billowing and ash flying from the fire to the surface of the jar. As temperatures rise, quartz granules embedded in the Shigaraki clay melt and other particles in the clay erupt to the surface. Flying ash sprays from the fire to the jar, liquefies and cascades down in random dribbles of natural translucent green glaze. The surface of the vessel facing the fire is exposed to flames that darken the clay. On the opposite side, where flames cannot reach, orange and soft peach colourings appear. This uncontrolled process can be seen as collaboration between humans – the potter, and the natural elements – the clay, fire and wind, which results in dramatic 'one off' ceramic works that embody Japan's long history and the intimate relationship between spirituality and nature.

JAPANESE

Jar 壺
Muromachi period 室町時代 (15th – 16th century) Shigaraki, Kyoto, Japan stoneware (*Shigaraki ware* 信楽焼)
46.0 x 42.8 cm diameter
Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of CRA Limited, Fellow, 1984 (AS1-1984)

