CLAYLAND: THE SHIGARAKI CERAMIC CULTURAL PARK

Published in *American Craft*, 51(6), Dec 1991/Jan 1992.

When I first went to Shigaraki in 1974, I was a student at Kyoto University of Fine Art. The bus ride through the mountains along the picturesque Daido River was breathtaking and gave me the feeling that I was leaving behind one way of thinking about pottery and entering another. As the bus approached the valley that holds the villages that now constitute the town of Shigaraki, I caught my first glimpses of the large climbing kilns that dotted the hillsides, some abandoned but others spewing plumes of black smoke. Even in the town itself, I would stumble on these enormous kilns, tucked behind courtyards filled with drying pottery and the unassuming workshops that produced it. As I walked the narrow winding streets, the sense of history was pervasive, powerful and impossible to ignore.

A few months later I moved to Domura, a small, rural village near Shigaraki. One of the first to welcome me was the Shigaraki potter Shiro Otani. When I started to design my kiln, Otani took me to visit potters who had *anagama*, among them Seiho Ogawa, who offered not only to give me the bricks I needed, but also to deliver them. It was this sort of kindness, I learned over my four-year stay, that was typical of the people of Shigaraki. I always felt welcome.

When I heard about the plans and scope of the Ceramic Cultural Park, I was excited about the potential it held for the town. As explained to me, the idea was to create a place where people from all over the world could come to study, live and work. The ultimate goal, it appeared, was to make Shigaraki famous globally as a center for ceramic art and industry.

The park is a by-product of Japan's economic success. It was made possible by a program that the national government instituted to distribute money from its trade surplus to the prefectural (state) governments. A number of prefectures used their grants to build museums; one opted to create a kind of social security fund to insure that all the elderly from the prefecture would have adequate care. Shiga Prefecture decided to spend its money on building an educational complex centered around its most famous attraction, Shigaraki pottery.

The opening of the park was celebrated by a festival with a distinctly international flavor that began on April 19 and ran until May 26. The theme was "Discuss, Create and Stimulate – Towards a Ceramics Renaissance." It started with a meeting of the International Academy of Ceramics, coupled with an IAC symposium sponsored by the park. A few weeks later, a second, daylong symposium organized by Otani was held, in which Louise Cort, a curator at the Smithsonian's Freer Gallery and Sackler Gallery in Washington, DC (and the author of Shigaraki, Potters' Valley, the most definitive history in any language yet written on the subject), Val Cushing, professor of ceramic art at Alfred University, and I participated. Besides the symposia the festival included demonstrations by potters from Indonesia as well as Shigaraki, by a group of 10 ceramists from Michigan (Shiga Prefecture's sister state), and by the ceramics world superstars Viola Frey, Jun Kaneko and Federico Bonaldi. There were also exhibitions of "International Contemporary Ceramics," tableware by famed Shigaraki ceramists of the past, and works made by the mentally handicapped. This had all sounded wonderfully progressive to me, and I was excited to see how the experiment was proceeding. I was totally unprepared, though, for what I found.

>>

CLAYLAND: THE SHIGARAKI CERAMIC CULTURAL PARK

On our first evening in Kyoto, Louise and I chanced upon a bar named *Tanuki*. The sculptural caricature of the *tanuki* – often referred to as a badger, but literally translated “raccoon dog” – was made popular by the Shigaraki potter Fujiwara Tetsuzo in the early 1900s and has come to symbolize the town. The sculptures vary in size from about one inch to ten feet and are seen outside drinking establishments all over Japan. The owner of this bar told us he often traveled to Shigaraki to buy pottery, and in fact had just returned the day before from the festival. The normal 90-minute drive, he recounted, had taken twice as long; once there, the wait for a parking space and the shuttle bus to the park was almost an hour. Finally, he said, he had to wait five hours to see the six or so exhibitions at the various halls. Louise and I were amazed. We could not quite picture how the secluded, friendly village we both thought of as a second home could possibly withstand an onslaught of this sort.

When we arrived at Kyoto Station with Val for the trip to Shigaraki, the barkeeper’s story took on real meaning. Track One was lined with hundreds of passengers. We thought this must be a tour group waiting for a special train, because neither Louise nor I could recall ever seeing more than a handful of passengers waiting for the train to Shigaraki. It was with disbelief that we boarded the two-car train for the hour-and-a-half journey. We ended up standing in the coupling between the cars, squeezed in between our luggage and other travelers.

At the Shigaraki station to greet the train were young guides, looking like roadies at a rock concert in their shiny silver jackets with the park logo on the back. They were gathered around a 15-foot-high *tanuki*, directing everyone to the route for the one-mile trek to the shuttle buses. Fortunately we were able to find one of the few taxis, and because of that, were mistaken at the gate for a band that was to perform that afternoon, and allowed to drive into the park instead of fighting our way up the hill through the crowds with our luggage.

There were people everywhere. It was like a giant theme park you might encounter here in the U.S., only the theme was ceramic art. There was a “food-of-the-world” pavilion, and row upon row of booths selling not only Shigaraki pottery, but also crafts from around the globe. I was overwhelmed as I strolled around this park that had been hacked out of a mountainside and watched the crowds standing in huge lines, not for the chance to ride the world's largest roller coaster, but to see an exhibition of European dinnerware. I should have felt heartened and reassured by this show of interest in ceramic art, but something held me back.

I do not know the exact moment when disillusionment overcame me. Perhaps it was as I strolled by the pristine noborigama with a shape I had never seen before in Shigaraki. This was explained later by some perturbed Shigaraki potters, who said someone from Seto had been hired to build it. It might have been the noisy entertainment at the large amphitheater that could be heard all over the park. Or maybe it was the fact that the performance was surrounded by more “roadies,” whose purpose was to keep you from photographing the spectacle.

There just seemed to be so little of the real Shigaraki there. None of my friends or acquaintances from the area had a nice thing to say about the park. Some, as soon as you brought up the subject, would

>>

insist that they had nothing to do with the place, while others talked about how they had been made to feel like outsiders by the park staff. I tried to imagine how I would react if, in the middle of the small town in Virginia where I live, the state government decided to erect a multimillion-dollar park based on an attraction with which my town's name had been synonymous for hundreds of years, and then proceeded to staff that facility with people from Washington and Richmond who had little if any interest in either the history of the town's endeavor or its future.

Even the idea of what would constitute the park's success appeared to have nothing in common with Shigaraki's long-term interests. Success, evidently, was going to be measured by whether or not the park would be able to attract half a million people over the month-long festival. Daily attendance figures were posted in the public relations office, and every introduction by the staff seemed to be prefaced with how well the "numbers" were progressing. This bureaucratic concept of success struck me as not only shortsighted but unconcerned with the question of whether people came away from the park with a valid impression of the history of Shigaraki's pottery and its people.

There is a tragic postscript to all of this. On May 14, thirteen days before the festival was to conclude, the same train we had taken from Kyoto five days earlier collided head-on with the train from Shigaraki. The Kyoto train carried more than 500 people in its two cars, twice its registered capacity. Forty-two deaths resulted. I had left Shigaraki two days before and was in Bizen when I learned of the accident from television. The image of the Shigaraki Workers Gymnasium, which had earlier held an exhibition of ceramics with flower arrangements, now filled with coffins draped in white, with candles and burning incense placed on them and ringed by distraught family members keeping a vigil, is something I will never forget.

When I returned to Japan this past July, I went back to Shigaraki to visit friends and drove by the park. The lines were gone. In fact, I could see no one at all walking up to the park. Also gone were the guards who had directed traffic during the festival. The parking lots were empty and the process to reconvert them to rice fields had begun. Perhaps now, I thought, the real work at the Ceramic Cultural Park could begin. One can only hope that the Shiga prefectural government will adopt a more enlightened view of the project at this stage, and seek advice from those who have shown and proven their commitment to the history and people of Shigaraki.