

John Dix

An American Tango in Tamba

Article by Peter Ujlaki

THE EASIEST ROAD TO SUCCESS IN JAPAN, AND SOME say the only one, is to cater to the time-honoured preferences of its hugely homogeneous culture. Because of heavy competition, foreign potters trying to make it in the Land of Harmony are advised to stick to the classics: those items sanctified by the tea ceremony, and those that satisfy the needs of flower arranging (a huge market of women), sake drinking (a huge market of men) and Japanese cuisine (everyone). Of course, a hint of 'foreignness' should be built into one's pieces – perhaps an unorthodox handle or a novel rim – but not enough to force the public, bred on received ideas, to have to re-think questions of form and utility.

This is what the survival manual says, and nearly all clay artists from abroad who stay long-term opt to go by the book. But every now and then a potter comes along like John Dix, a 39 year-old American who, after a decade in Japan is still resisting the pressure to 'go native'. To begin with, many of the pieces

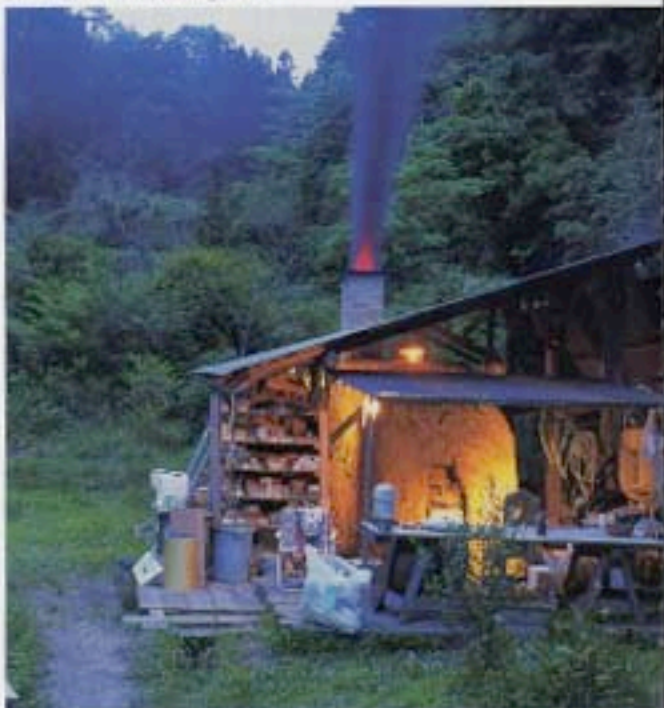
which Dix creates, and which he considers his *shōki* (everyday utilitarian) line, have no clear connection with daily life as practised in this archipelago. Large pitchers, creamers, beer mugs, nesting bowls, Western-size dinner plates and other seemingly misdirected wares come flying off of his wheel as if he still worked near his hometown of Flint, Michigan, in the vicinity of Warren Mackenzie country, instead of in the heart of Tamba, one of the tradition-laden Six Ancient Kiln areas.

To be sure, the large containers for iced tea and milk and gravy – items his Japanese patrons are hard-pressed to think of anything to do with besides stick a flower in – are complemented by an equally large array of teapots, sake flasks and vases. But even these pots betray resonances of Flint and its General Motors plant: muffler-shaped vases, industrial-strength cups resembling grooved pistons, and teabowls with feet that look for all the world like the triangular Wankel engine – in other words, ceramic shapes heretofore

John Dix, January 1999.



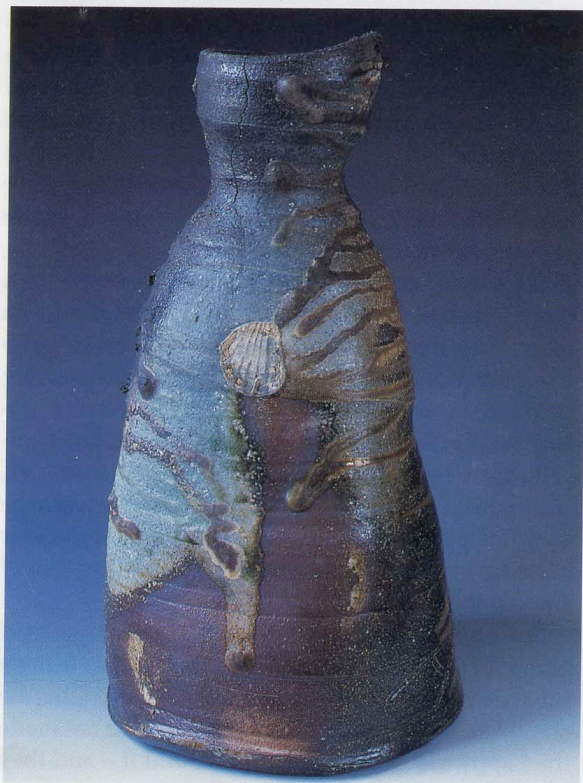
John Dix's Kiln, January 1999.



unknown on these shores. "In Japan we don't have teapots like that," people are apt to tell Dix at his exhibitions, in tones that are more of a warning than a compliment. This attitude of the Japanese is a source of amusement for Dix. "Is there clay in your country?" they ask Dix. "Is it imported from Japan?" Dix says: "In the West there is great respect for the person who travels off the beaten path, loses him or herself in the woods for a while, and then finds a new way. But most Japanese learn and develop through mastering established methods, carrying on a tradition. I value tradition, and theirs is a never-ending source of inspiration for me, too – that's why I came here, to draw energy from Bizen and Shigaraki, the apex of world pottery. But my basic training was in the West, the place where I first understood beauty, and I cannot control what emerges from my hands and heart... nor do I want to. When I make pots I listen to music, and if I can get into a trance-like dance with the clay – when the music touches me right to the bones and the body generates a natural intense rhythm – then good things can happen. At that point, there is no governor inside me saying, 'Wait a minute, you're in Japan now'."

Also 'peculiar' about Dix is his fixation with salt-glazing. Shoji Hamada's success with the technique notwithstanding, firing with salt is not well understood by the Japanese pottery world. Though the first chamber of Dix's catenary climbing kiln (he predictably built one unlike any other in Japan) is fired six days purely for ash effects, like an anagama, the equally large second chamber is a salt

Yohen Vase. 1999. 52 x 29 cm. Fired on its side, resting on a shell near the mouth of the first chamber.

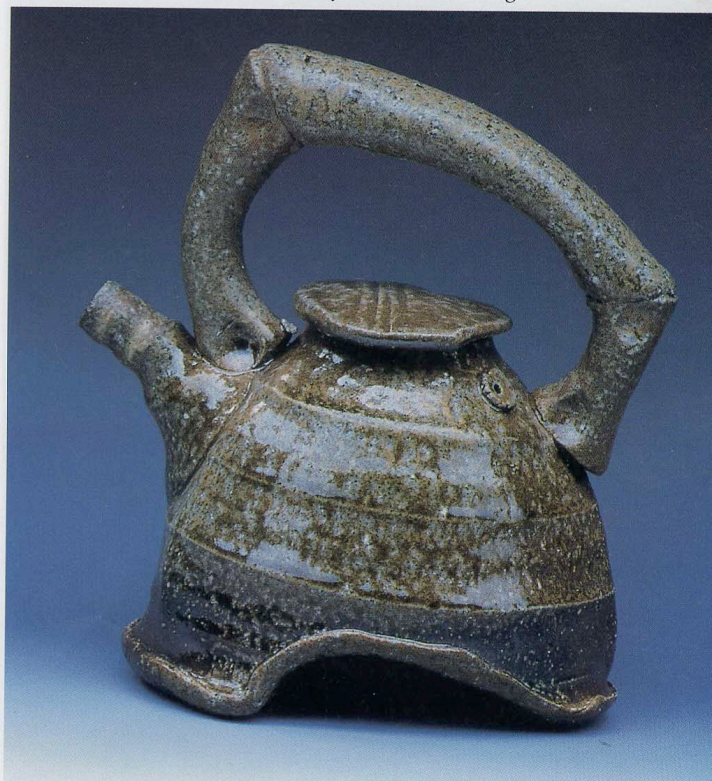


environment from which he routinely unloads scores of unglazed pieces as well as works treated with iron slip and shino glaze.

Is Dix on some kind of mission? "I like the idea of introducing a little-understood style to the Japanese. Salt is a traditional method of firing in the West and it carries with it that element of chance that is really at the heart of woodfiring in the East. But salt-glaze is also a perfect match for my Western functional forms, and it allows me the freedom to experiment and develop a unique style with my own personal signature. I am still an American, after all, and the need to 'do it my way' is strong. When someone tells me 'Japanese don't have such and such a shape', I say, 'Well, you do now'."

Dix's born-in-the-USA approach sounds like a recipe for critical and financial disaster but, in fact, his work has met with a good measure of acceptance. The expatriates in Kyoto, Osaka and Kobe are attracted to his work, of course, but so are numerous Japanese, so many in fact that a major Osaka department store, the most prestigious venue in the region, recently added him to their stable of artists. This success has a bit to do with changing tastes and the internationalisation of Japan. Odd shapes and novel techniques are suddenly being given a chance, if not exactly considered in vogue, and Dix's free-spirited idiosyncratic take on their pottery traditions certainly intrigues the Japanese. But there seems to be another factor at work here, as well. Japanese often buy on the feeling engendered by their encounter with the artist, and Dix is that rarest of

Teapot. 1999. 23 x 19cm. Wood-fired. Natural ash glaze.



breeds in Japan, a welcoming, congenial artist who revels in building community. With powerfully attractive resources at his disposal – pottery workshops and kilns – he does not seclude himself in the countryside like a potter is supposed to. Instead, he shares the potting experience with others, maintaining work spaces in four different locales, two of which are conveniently situated near urban train stations. In one he offers pottery-making classes to hobbyists a couple of days a week, and to the other – he shuttles between them on a motorcycle – Dix invites more serious students and potters from overseas. This second spot also has a gallery where ceramists can show their work.

Likewise, Dix's woodfire kiln is a community centre to some extent. The more ambitious among his circle of students and acquaintances can join in the loading and unloading, and from this group is chosen a serious core team which tends the kiln for the intense no-nonsense week-long firings. Firings are the one time Dix is neither relaxed nor hospitable. At other times even children are welcome to the bucolic site – replete with an orchard, pond and hoary Shinto shrine – their interest intensified by play-with-clay sessions held a few weekends each year.

Japanese potters are horrified when they hear of Dix's work habits and community involvement. "How can you stay focused?" they ask, and "What about the secrets of the trade?" Clearly, many are affronted by his lack of respect for the potter's aloof

Yohen Tsubo. 1999. 40 x 35 cm. Fired at the mouth of the first chamber.



mystique in Japan. However, Dix seems to be restored, not diminished, by all his social intercourse. "I am a social animal and I like people around almost all the time. Especially when I'm exhausted after the ordeal of a firing, I don't want to touch clay for days because making pieces triggers the whole cycle all over again. So instead I go out with friends. Then I teach a class or two, and before I know it I'm back at the wheel. Once there, of course, I imagine new shapes, my energy returns and the joy of creation kicks in. But the key for me is people." Dix's extensive network of friends works well for him in other ways as well. By allowing his potter lifestyle to exert its natural attractive force, he is also providing for woodfiring's greatest need: helping hands. This is a perennial issue for Dix because there are a couple more crucial differences between him and other foreign potters in Japan. First, his streak of independence ("I admit it. I have problems with authority figures") precluded him from doing a full-blown apprenticeship with a traditional master. This infamous rite of passage – preferably with a well-connected artist attached to a famous lineage – is notoriously feudalistic and demeaning according to Dix, but what it does is pave the way to membership in a family-guild which helps one later in countless ways. In the intensely crowded ceramic scene here, even highly gifted potters can be overlooked without such help. This assistance can be as straightforward as steering you to good clay, land for a house, wood and so on, or it can open doors to dealers, galleries and patrons. At the least, the family does not let you down when you need help to build a kiln, or fire one.

Dix, however, was uninterested in serving under some paternalistic master. In fact, he had already potted for a decade in Michigan and Europe after a two-year Stateside apprenticeship. Instead, he signed up to work part-time under a low-key production potter near Bizen. Sure enough, this *sensei* (master) did not try to suppress Dix's ego, but on the other hand when the American broke away after a couple of years, he was entirely on his own.

Considered equally critical to success is marrying a local. Japanese society confers many good things on those who marry into it, and the right wife, Dix's Japanese friends never tire of saying, would possibly be able to make up for his lack of affiliation with a pottery family. She and her relatives would automatically try to forge connections for him in the complex, hierarchical ceramic world, and such assistance could help distinguish him from thousands of other aspiring potters. And, naturally, she and her family could provide manpower as well.

But Dix has not gone down the marriage road either, at least not yet, and this makes him a *ronin* (unattached samurai) twice over. By all rights he should be facing his kiln work alone, but he has made the happy discovery that "If you build it – and they

like you – they will come... and help fire. There is nothing so primal as firing a kiln and one need never really stoke alone."

In fact, as it turns out, everything having to do with the kiln – the incessant repairs, wood chopping and cord stacking, cooking for the crew, sanding down pots – has become attractive sought-after labour among Dix's acquaintances. The word is out and Dix can almost name his price when he gathers loyal retainers for each firing, the volunteers escaping from offices, kitchens and classrooms, from the city and the neighbouring hamlets, and even from other kilns. More, the crew consists of young and old, men and women, Japanese and Westerners – a melange that is the envy of social utopian planners and one normally impossible to find in Japan. "I think people appreciate that I reveal the whole process and don't try to mystify it. I initiate them into a rite that is revered in this country but usually unattainable. Also, I don't pretend to be some august, all-knowing *sensei*, the kind who parcels out tidbits of information like rare jewels. I feel I am on the learning road, just like my helpers, though perhaps a little further down. Together, for example, we have discovered that temperature is not the whole story to getting good pots out of my current kiln. There's reduction, mixing types of wood, keeping the ash pile at the right level, and so on."

In the end, rather than stressing Dix's Yankee distinctness, his relationship to Japan might be better described by going back to his notion of music and

dance. "I continue to live here not just because potters hold a high place in Japanese society but because this is the one place in the world where your peers and the buying public continually challenge you to work at the highest level. You don't have to worry about producing potpourri and piggy banks in order to make a living; that tired old 'Craft vs Art' debate doesn't even exist here. But that doesn't mean I'm trying to pass as a Japanese. I am capable of dancing to this island's tune but only up to a point. I am an American of a certain time and place, and I'll continue to wear T-shirts and a leather jacket instead of the *samue* (the Japanese craftsman's indigo uniform), follow the NBA instead of sumo and, most importantly, continue to make pots the way I like best." In effect, the dance Dix appears to be performing is a tango: three steps toward the rising sun followed by a quick reversal in the opposite direction when the Japanese way starts getting to him. Ultimately, he looks forward to becoming a bi-continental potter, spending part of each year in the Midwest – that is the type of cadence that feels most natural to him – and invite young Japanese potters to join him in the land of free-wheeling forms. If they can experience the different kind of beauty rooted there, some day the area of the dance floor should start to expand exponentially.

Peter Ujlaki is an art dealer living in Kobe, Japan. He is regular contributor to art journals.

Four Bottles. 1998. 21 x 10 cm. The two on the right were fired in the first chamber; the two on the left in the salt chamber.

