

Shigaraki Pottery

by Louise Allison Cort

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The typical early Shigaraki-ware storage jar had a versatile shape that could be put to many uses. Unglazed Shigaraki jars are identified by the distinctive color and texture of their clay. This jar dates to the first half of the 15th century. Photo courtesy Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution



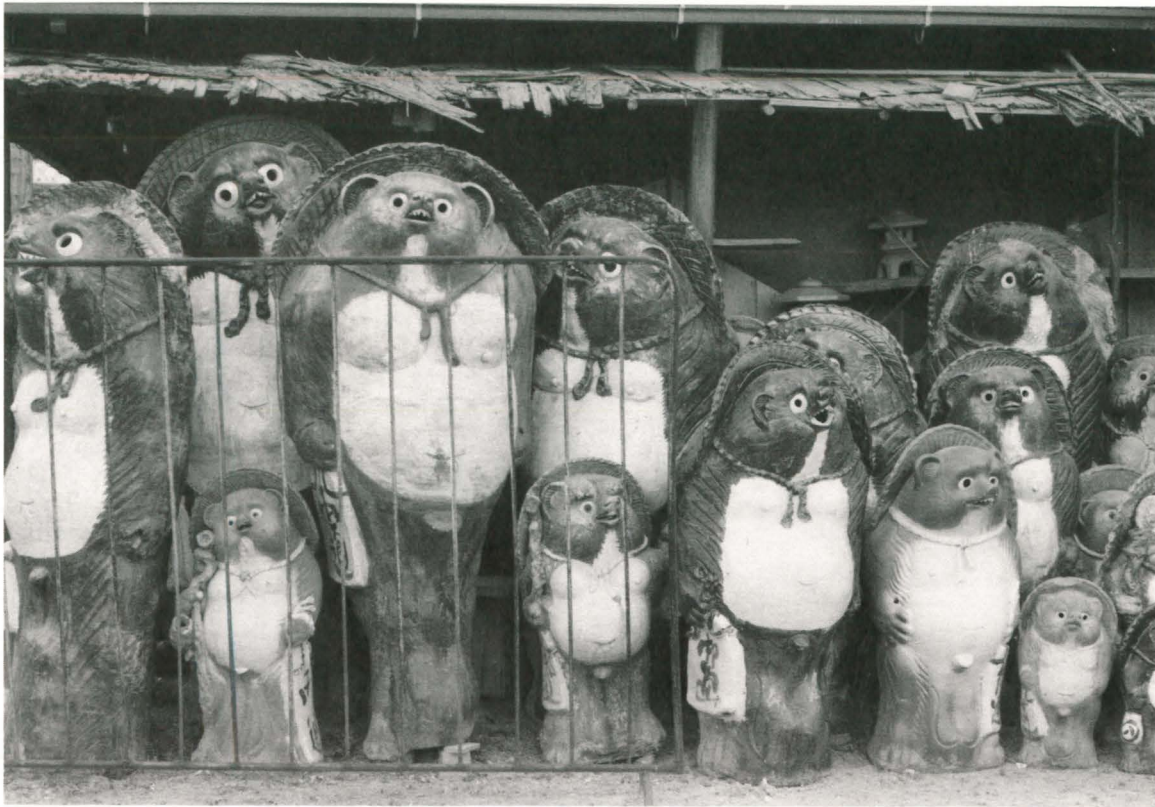
Pottery has been made continuously in the Shigaraki valley from the 13th century to the present day, but the name “Shigaraki” connotes different products to different Japanese. Many connoisseurs know the Shigaraki-ware vases and water-jars made in the 16th and 17th centuries for use in the tea ceremony, *chanoyu*. Other collectors covet the large unglazed storage jars of an earlier era. To most Japanese, however, the name “Shigaraki” brings to mind modern clay sculptures of the *tanuki*, the portly, grinning raccoon-like animal from Japanese folklore admired for his cunning ability to eat and drink forever on credit. Shigaraki *tanuki* welcome customers to countless bars and snack shops throughout Japan.

When seen as a whole, the backbone of Shigaraki’s 800-year-old tradition has always been the utilitarian vessel. The forms have changed over time, and glazes of increasing refinement have been applied in recent centuries, but most Shigaraki products have shared a common characteristic: they are large, sturdy containers meant for storage or other practical functions.

The predominance of such forms has been determined not by human choice so much as by the nature of Shigaraki clay, a coarse-grained stoneware that lends itself to large, simple shapes, whether coiled storage jars or molded *tanuki*. Beyond its practical limitations, Shigaraki clay is visually appealing: when fired without glaze, it turns a range of shades from golden-orange to ruddy brown, its tawny surface flecked with white grains of feldspar. Wood ash melting on the vessels during firing may create irregular patches of leaf-green glaze. The distinctive appearance of Shigaraki clay has been a key element in aesthetic appreciation of storage jars and tea-ceremony utensils by urban connoisseurs, who speak of the total effect of clay, ash, and glaze — never exactly the same on any two pieces — as the “landscape” of the vessel’s surface.

For the inhabitants of the Shigaraki valley, the abundance of clay in the surrounding mountains — an accident of local natural resources — determined that they would become potters. Pottery-making in what has since become one of Japan’s major ceramics centers began during intervals between the farming and foresting seasons. The earliest kiln was a simple tunnel excavated into a slope, with a firebox at the base and a chimney opening at the top. No glaze was applied to the ware. The potters used the jars themselves for storage of foodstuffs and seed, sold the surplus in local markets, and sent a certain number as annual tribute to the lord of their land, the head of a noble family in the capital, Kyoto.

As the pot-makers became more proficient and prolific, their market expanded to include Kyoto, the great center of culture and style. It was there that Shigaraki pots became caught up in the urban fashions of tea-drinking, first in the form of jars adapted for storage of tea leaves, and later as smaller vessels made specifically as tea utensils. The arrival of Shigaraki jars in the Kyoto market coincided with the emergence of a new aesthetic that located tea-drinking



within a carefully-constructed “rustic” setting and preached the use of native (rather than Chinese) utensils, however rough and unrefined. Unglazed Shigaraki jars with their subtle “landscapes” fit perfectly into this environment.

Meanwhile, however, by the late 16th century Shigaraki potters had mastered the use of simple glazes that were becoming common at all Japanese kilns. The Shigaraki valley changed hands, becoming a direct holding of the Tokugawa government that came to power in 1603. During nearly three centuries of Tokugawa rule, Shigaraki’s most important products were glazed tea-leaf storage jars made to order for the government. The “official tea jar” conformed to exacting specifications of shape and design, using a dark iron glaze on the upper body and a clear glaze around the foot. Each spring a supply of such jars was sent to the nearby Uji tea plantations to be filled with leaves for the government’s use. The filled jars were carried along the highway to the capital at Edo with all the pomp due a high-ranking warrior.

The “official tea jars” were made by a select group of potters who also occupied important positions within local society. The workshops of those “official potters” clustered in the village of Nagano, which became, and remains, the physical and cultural center among the 18 villages in the Shigaraki valley.

Other workshops in Nagano continued to make the mainstay utilitarian wares. The varieties of shapes and sizes multiplied as uses became more precisely specified. Most wares were glazed; simple iron and ash glazes were joined by brighter glazes in cobalt-blue, copper-green, “mirror black,” or white striped with blue and green. Together with the “official tea jars,” the ordinary wares were fired in a new sort of kiln built as a series of separate chambers, connected

Sightseers in modern Shigaraki are often surprised by the crowds of ceramic *tanuki* staring back at them.

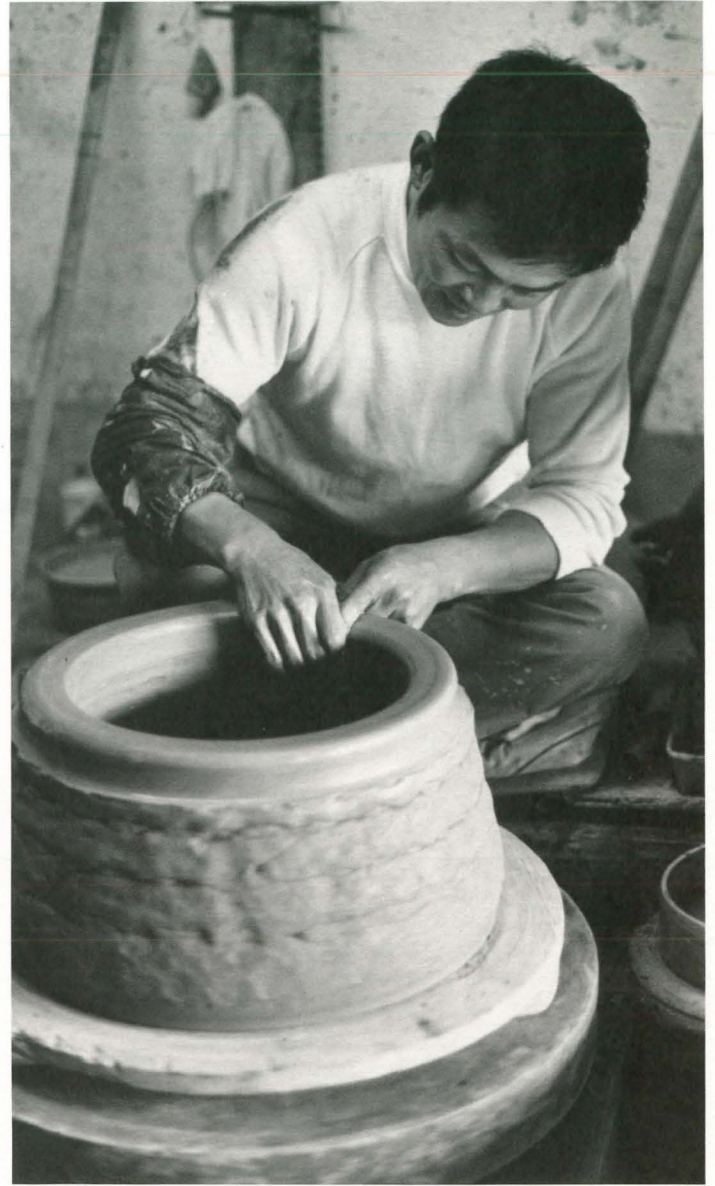
Photo by Louise Cort, Smithsonian Institution



An 1872 drawing of a potter forming a large jar. His assistant, probably his wife, turns the large wooden wheel.

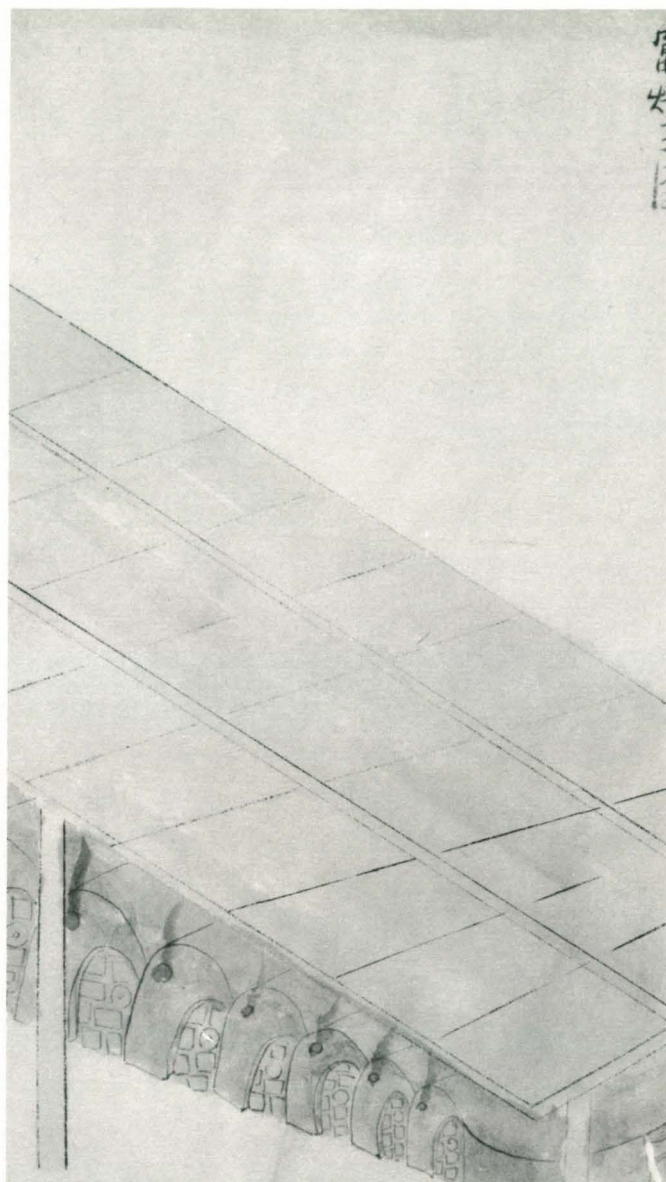
Photo by Louise Cort, Smithsonian Institution

Makers of large wares still use the same technique, a combination of coiling and throwing. Fat coils of clay are attached to a clay base and then stretched and shaped. The potter's throwing tools are strips of moistened cloth and several shapes of wooden ribs. (3 photographs)
Photos by Louise Cort, Smithsonian Institution



by flues, that rose up a slope. The giant “climbing kilns” allowed hundreds of pieces, with varying glazes, to be fired at one time. At the beginning of this century, over 100 such kilns operated in Shigaraki, spreading a continuous pall of woodsmoke across the valley.

While Nagano potters responded to an expanding market for “large wares,” potters working in several outlying villages began making glazed and simply decorated “small wares,” using refined clay. Their models were the tablewares and other household ceramics being made in Kyoto. The most distinctive Shigaraki “small ware” was a teapot with a quickly-brushed landscape design. Of all Shigaraki ceramics, this teapot alone was of interest to the 20th century “folkcraft” (*mingei*) movement that, under the guidance of philosopher and critic Yanagi Soetsu, sought to raise awareness of the beauty of rural crafts. The folkcraft movement, which had a profound impact on smaller and more isolated pottery-making communities, aroused little interest among the hundreds of potters in Shigaraki; they concentrated instead on the practical strategy of changing their products in response to changes in the market.



Firing the kiln, 1872. Starting at the bottom, each chamber has been fired separately to temperature and sealed. The stoker visible in this sketch is working in tandem with another man on the other side of the kiln. A child fans the flames away from the man's face. Illustrations from *Shigaraki-yaki Zukai*, manuscript owned by the Shiga Prefectural Library, Otsu, Japan. Photos by Louise Cort, Smithsonian Institution

Stirring the white-hot coals in the firebox of one of the last surviving wood-burning kilns, 1977. Photo by Louise Cort, Smithsonian Institution



The collapse of the Tokugawa government meant the end of special patronage for Shigaraki pottery. Japan's reopening to external trade also caused fundamental changes in patterns of living, including uses of ceramics. In the late 19th century, potters in Shigaraki groped toward new products, experimenting with novelty glazes and untried forms. Eventually a ceramic version of the standard household heating device, the charcoal-burning brazier, or *hibachi*, emerged as the new staple product for "large ware" potters. The most characteristic glaze was a dark mottled blue colored by cobalt and manganese. Shigaraki *hibachi* were distributed throughout Japan and exported as "flowerpot covers." The period from 1918 through the late 1950s is known to Shigaraki people as "the *hibachi* era." The Shigaraki *tanuki* also made his appearance at that time.

Some 30 years ago, as other forms of heating replaced the *hibachi* in postwar Japanese homes, blue-glazed flowerpots, ceramic garden furniture, and architectural tiles succeeded *hibachi* as the staple products of the large commercial enterprises. Around the same time, the wood-fired climbing kilns began to be replaced by gas-fired car-kilns constructed inside modern workshops. Certain Shigaraki potters chose, however, to move in a contrary direction. Aided by the information provided by postwar archaeology of ceramic sites, they set up individual studios and experimented with replicas of the earliest Shigaraki kiln in order to fire unglazed tea-ceremony ceramics and sculptural pieces. Shigaraki-born potters trained to inherit the family trade were joined by increasing numbers of outsiders, often graduates of urban art schools, who came to Shigaraki for the convenience of working within a town wholly devoted to all aspects of ceramic production.

Shigaraki today is more diverse than it has ever been in its past. The large utilitarian vessels that formerly were made of Shigaraki clay are now produced in metal, glass, or plastic, and Shigaraki workshops once again seek new products to sustain their industry. Studio potters also redefine their roles in an economy where pottery is less necessity than luxury. There seems to be no question, however, that Shigaraki's clay will continue to define the valley's destiny.

Suggested reading

Cort, Louise Allison. *Shigaraki, Potters' Valley*. Tokyo, New York and San Francisco: Kodansha International, 1979.