



Oval Platter. 2005.
Woodfired stoneware, slips, ash glaze.
10 x 43 x 30.5 cm.

A Japan Story

Ange Sabine Peter spent a six-month residency in Japan

WHEN I RETURNED FROM JAPAN, IN SEPTEMBER 2005, after a six-month apprenticeship with master Masaaki Shibata, I was not sure I hadn't wasted my time and all my money. I was aching all over, and in mental pain from having spent most of my time being frustrated at weeding master's vegetable garden. I had spent months weeding, gardening, sweeping, stacking wood, washing ash for the glazes, breaking, soaking and sifting clay, and generally being assistant to the present apprentice Seichi San.

After a warm welcome, that reinforced the feeling that destiny had brought me to the right place, the unspoken lessons started. Pottery in Japan, has traditionally been a man's job. So I faced (in my mind) the double disadvantage of being a woman, and a foreigner. The third disadvantage soon became apparent, when I understood the futility of trying to squeeze a four year apprenticeship into six months. However, it became clear, that the six months had been the condition under which Shibata had agreed to take me. Somehow, with the encouragement of my partner Paul, I kept the faith alive, that Shibata knew what he was doing, and I just had to keep trying.

I left Japan with no recipes, having watched Shibata at work, and drinking in those precious moments like rare gulps of water in the desert. I was moved by his work, and wanted to continue the tradition for which he had given me a taste. In 2005, Shibata Masaaki brought out a book called *The Beauty of*



Green Bamboo.
Square Serving Bowl. 2005.
Woodfired stoneware, slips with
ash glaze. 8 x 21 x 21 cm.



Large Square Platter. 2005.
Woodfired stoneware, slips with ash glaze. 10 x 45.5 x 45.5 cm.



Oval Platter. 2005.
Woodfired stoneware, slips with ash glaze. 9 x 43 x 30.5 cm.

The Shibatas live in a beautiful yet simple traditional Japanese house at the foot of a densely wooded hill range, and no matter in which direction I would raise my eyes (from the weeding) there was the ever-changing canopy of forests over mountains, rice fields and occasional farmhouse.

English Slipware, featuring 30 years of his work. His pots seem to breathe and to live with the spirit of nature that surrounds his pottery. The old English slipware technique, as I understood it, was revived by the Japanese, and adapted to stoneware, using decorations in slips and ash glazes.

Through my days of frustration, vital information seeped in without my awareness. I had asked Shibata, after three months if I could practise a bit of throwing during lunch break. But the 'no' was categorical.

"If you want to stay with me, you will not touch clay. Then you will go home and make something new. If you want to touch clay, you are welcome to go elsewhere." He was right. There were 100s of potteries in the area offering easy access to the clay experience, and with no master to care about what you did. I was afraid never to get a feel of the amazing yellow clay that Shibata dug out of some rice fields, and that was ready to throw after rinsing. And what would my friends say... "It is good for you to tell your friends that you made nothing here," Shibata said. So I shut up, and accepted the lesson with a heavy heart. During one of our lunches with the family, Shibata's wife Sawako told me: "When you came to us, you were like a fully grown tree with big branches. We have to cut those branches for something new to be able to grow..." but all I felt was the cutting.

For months later, only after I opened my kiln for the third and final firing for the *Elements*¹ show to be held in Delhi, that I saw the growth that had happened. I had put my head down, and started working in my studio the day after we came back home. I was driven to make moulds, one oval and one square, and then follow to make clay slabs, and develop the slip trailing technique that I had seen my master do. A fire inside me was driving me on, to develop the ash glazes that would look like the glazes on my master's pots. My first tests didn't even melt. But with the support of a fellow potter who fired the wood kiln for his production every 10 days or so, I continued the tests. And finally, much to my own surprise I came up with three glazes with 30 to 50 per cent ash from the forest trees around my studio. In the meantime I had made around 27 large bowls and platters for the Delhi Elements show, and decided to jump from test tile to platter with my new glazes. Due to a series of learning mistakes, it was only after the third and final firing that I could count some 10 platters that were fit to show.

By that time my heart began singing at the sight of the new work, singing a song of gratitude to my Japanese master, who had taught me so much without teaching me.

The same day I received a letter from the elderly gentleman who had introduced me to the Shibatas. It said, in part: "...Traditionally masters in Japan have been said never to tell anything important to their students, so that apprentices have been said they need to steal the master's skills secretly. In every occasion as hard as possible. I hope the master's skills stolen by Ange Peter may be beginning to flower little by little by her earnest daily efforts in Auroville." So the need to make pots that resemble my master's work, suddenly made sense to me. I felt I was on the right path.



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Woodfired stoneware, slips with ash glaze. 10 x 43 x 30.5 cm.

Ange Sabine Peter was born in Hamburg in 1962. Her parents moved to Pondicherry, India, in the early '60s to join the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. She grew up in the Ashram and in Auroville. After completing her education with a double major in organic chemistry and philosophy, she worked in the Ashram for several years. In 1993 she joined Ray Meeker's course in pottery at the Golden Bridge Pottery in Pondicherry. She then went to Taiwan where she worked as an ESL teacher and studied Chinese for two years. Returning to Auroville, she designed and built her home and pottery studio in Samridhi, a forest community. Ange Peter fires an updraught wood kiln. Unlike the surrounding production potteries, she works alone to prepare her materials, and fire her work. It is a way of life, expressing the aspiration to manifest consciousness in matter.

Seeking for a master to deepen her understanding of her chosen craft, she went into apprenticeship with Shibata Masaaki and his family. Shibata is a member of the Mingei movement that was started in the '30s by figures such as Yanagi, Shoji Hamada and Bernard Leach. He is responsible for the Osaka Museum of Japanese Crafts. Shibata also follows a strong philosophy of union with nature. He grows organic vegetables, and the family enjoys many edible plants from the forest behind the house. Ange Peter and partner Paul Blanchflower, returned from Japan in September 2005. Her master's words still ring in her ears: "you cannot separate life from work. The way you do the most insignificant activity in your daily life will reflect in your work."

Ange Sabine Peter is a ceramic artist living in Auroville, India. Photography: Ireno Guerci.

REFERENCE:

1. The Elements was an international ceramics exhibition held in the New Delhi Habitat Centre, January 2006.



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