



1

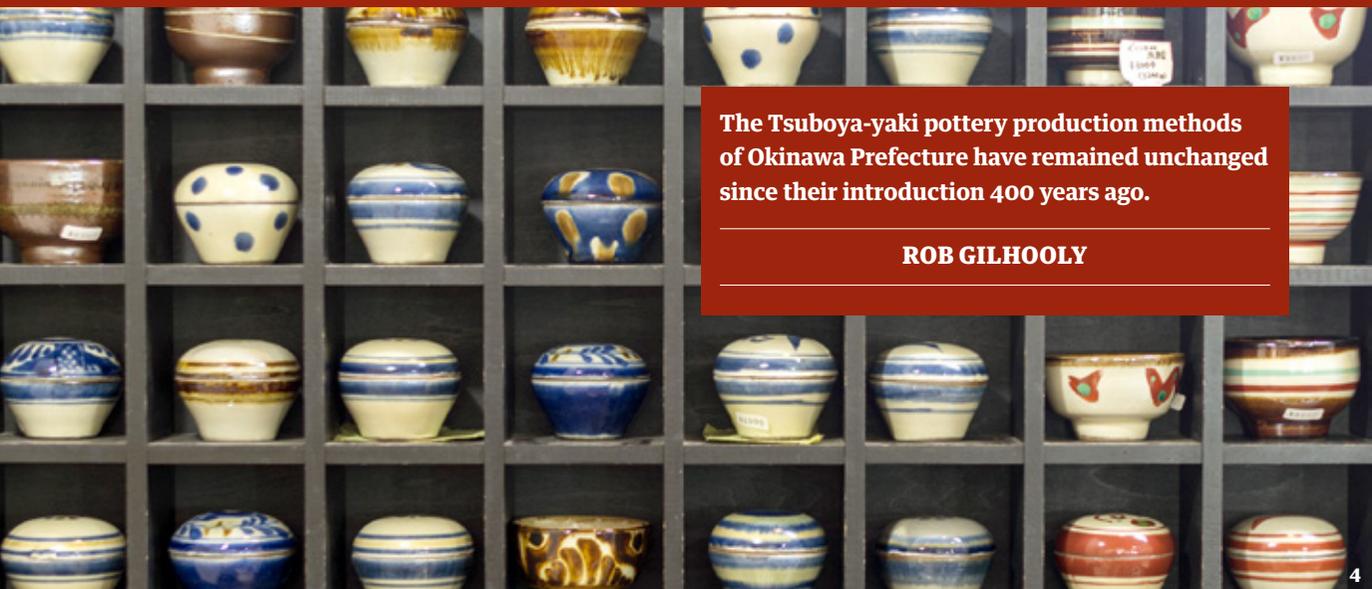


2



3

YOMITAN WHEELS KEEP TURNING



The Tsuboya-yaki pottery production methods of Okinawa Prefecture have remained unchanged since their introduction 400 years ago.

ROB GILHOOLY

4

TSUNEHIDE Shimabukuro's fingers look too sturdy for the delicate operation he is performing. In a matter of seconds, however, they have adroitly transformed a dollop of red-brown clay into the pleasingly symmetrical body of a teapot like a magician conjuring up bank notes from a sheet of newspaper.

With his bare feet, Shimabukuro spins the base of his potter's wheel, the speed and frequency of the revolutions in perfect concert with his pulling of the clay on the wheel head above.

"Each piece is made using my whole body, from my toes to my finger tips," says Shimabukuro, 68 at his studio in Yomitan, Okinawa. "The objects are produced with the natural rhythms of the body."

Shimabukuro has been using the same Ryukyu pine kickwheel since he began making pottery forty-five years ago, when his workshop was in a district of the Okinawa capital, Naha, that is the birthplace of the celebrated pottery style known as Tsuboya-yaki.

Its roots can be found in the early seventeenth century, when Okinawa, which was then an independent kingdom known as Ryukyu, developed into an earthenware production center after three potters of Korean descent were dispatched there by the daimyo of the Satsuma domain in Kyushu. In 1616, those potters built kilns in Wakuta, though in 1682 they were relocated to the downtown Naha district of Tsuboya. Soon, hundreds of craftsmen gathered there, building dozens of *noborigama* "climbing kilns" housing multiple firing chambers.

As Naha expanded in the 1960s and 70s, the volume of smoke emitting from the kilns began to be considered a health hazard, forcing Tsuboya's potters to move to less populous parts of Okinawa. These included Yomitan, around 30 km northeast of Naha, where Shimabukuro himself relocated,

initially joining Jiro Kinjo's common kiln.

While pottery designs and styles have adapted to the times, the Tsuboya-yaki production process practiced by Shimabukuro and his six workshop colleagues has remained unchanged for 400 years.

"What distinguishes Tsuboya ware is that while other earthenware is biscuit-fired before it is glazed, in Tsuboya-yaki the glaze is applied directly to the raw clay," explains Shimabukuro, a former pottery teacher at Okinawa Prefectural University of Arts who is currently serving as chair of the association of Tsuboya-yaki craftsmen. "Because there is no time lost to biscuit firing, the overall production process is relatively quick," he says. "On the other hand, it's very easy for slight blemishes to appear."

Generally, Tsuboya ware is divided into *arayachi* (unglazed) and *joyachi* (glazed) varieties. Products most readily associated with the former include sake urns and the ubiquitous *shisa*, guardian ornaments shaped in the form of the mythical lion-dogs that adorn the entranceways and rooftops of many Okinawan buildings. Examples of the latter include everyday colorful tableware, *dachi-bin* hip flasks, *zushigame* cinerary urns and *dobin* teapots.

Shimabukuro says it is the preparation of the noborigama kilns that affords the biggest challenge for the Tsuboya-yaki potter.

First the fire box is stoked with firewood, a process taking around 20 hours to build up a constant temperature of around 1,000°C. Then each compartment is stoked in sequence, from bottom to top, via narrow stoking ports to raise the temperature a further 250°C or so. Loading the kilns is an art unto itself.

"You have to visualize the path of the flame as it moves through the kiln, and how it will affect each piece depending on where it is placed," says Shimabukuro, whose son, Koya, and daughter, Kanako, are among the potters at his atelier. "That's something that can't be easily taught. Successors are crucial, but equally important is to accurately pass on the techniques of the art to ensure that the quality of Tsuboya-yaki never declines." 

1 Potter Tsunehide Shimabukuro turns *dobin* teapots at his atelier in Yomitan, Okinawa Prefecture.

2 The Fuenukama *noborigama* "climbing kiln" in the Tsuboya district of Naha is an important cultural property.

3 Potter Koya Shimabukuro works on a *shisa* lion-dog ornament at his father's atelier.

4 Cups and bowls made from Tsuboya-yaki pottery