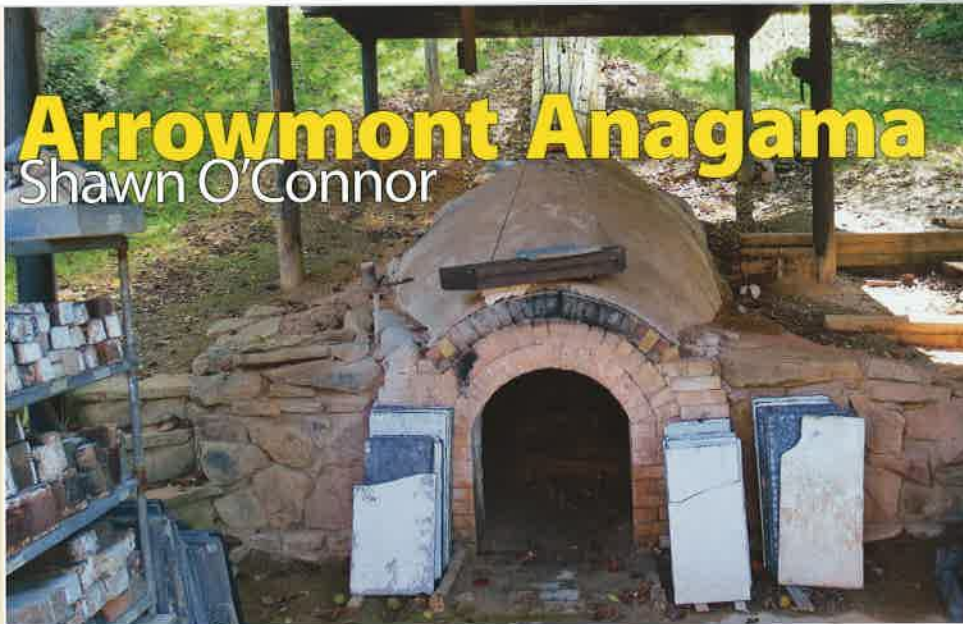


Arrowmont Anagama

Shawn O'Connor



Just over a mile from the entrance to the Great Smoky Mountain National Park, tucked quietly behind the busy Parkway in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, lies one of the oldest anagama in North America. This kiln is built on the grounds of the internationally known Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts. Originally founded as a settlement school by the all women *Pi Beta Phi* fraternity in 1912, the national philanthropic group's school provided education and health facilities to a once remote community, where no formal schooling had been available. Offering its first craft workshops in the summer of 1945, Arrowmont has since developed into one of North America's best craft schools. It now provides hands-on, one- and two-week workshops to over 1,300 students, from May to October each year. This year its highly successful Artists in Residency Programme celebrated 20 years. The school has also been a leader in international conferences, which have culminated in the founding of several craft organizations.

Arrowmont's anagama was designed and built in 1981 by Shiro Otani, a renowned potter from Shigaraki, Japan. Otani was in the United States on an exchange fellowship from the Japanese Ministry of Culture and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Few anagama existed in the USA at this time. The heavily ash encrusted surface did not emerge as a widely recognized aesthetic until a few years later. A number of factors brought about the introduction of this aesthetic, but one driving force was the December 1982 issue of the *Studio Potter* magazine. This was a special issue on woodfiring, and 'the cover photograph displayed the new glamour of anagama woodfiring by showing ceramics 'superstar' Peter Voulkos' ash-crusted plates in the firebox of Peter Callas' anagama'.¹ Voulkos' prominent position within the ceramics community contributed to interest in this Japanese aesthetic. The groundwork had already

been laid by a number of potters who had travelled to Japan to study with Japanese potters. Additionally, Louise Allison Cort's comprehensive book, *Shigaraki Potters' Valley*, published in 1979, was a mainstay, educating the ceramics community at large about the beauty of the unglazed wood-fired surface.

Shiro Otani's stay in the USA resulted from a chance meeting between himself and an American ceramic artist Rosa Kennedy, during the 1978 World Craft Council Conference in Kyoto, Japan. Kennedy, who had recently observed a noborigama firing was interested in the woodfire process, and Otani was seeking an official US sponsor. Kennedy was able to find a house for Otani and his family during their stay, and also studio space at the University of Tennessee (UT), Knoxville, where she taught evening education programming in the ceramics department. Sandra Blain, the then director of Arrowmont (1979-2001) was also teaching at the University at that time. Blain recalls, 'I had been interested in expanding our ceramic offerings and when I heard about Shiro, I thought that would fulfil that desire. UT also did not have woodfiring capabilities and I felt the grads and advanced undergrads would benefit from Arrowmont having one,

Right: Building the Arrowmont anagama at a workshop led by Shiro Otani in 1981, Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, Gatlinburg, Tennessee, USA.

Photographs: Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts Archive.

Opposite page: The Arrowmont anagama following repairs carried out in 2011.

Photograph: Shawn O'Connor.





Constructing the exit flue and chimney of the Arrowmont anagama, 1981.

they could be students, assistants, or just viewers'.² Blain organised a three-week workshop led by Otani, to construct and fire an anagama at Arrowmont.

The quarterly journal of the *Pi Beta Phi* fraternity ran an article about the workshop stating 'Arrowmont was only the second public space in the US to sponsor such an involvement [meaning the second woodfire kiln built for public use, the first being the

Peters Valley anagama built in 1980]. The kiln was built as part of a two-week class, which emphasized design, site preparation and construction techniques as they related to traditional woodfire Japanese [kiln] structures. This was followed by a one-week firing session which involved all of the students rotating the 24 hour a day kiln stoking aspects of the firing. ... through the kiln building and firing involvements, Shiro Otani shared with his students his feelings, and those of his culture in relation to aesthetics, materials, processes evolution, and change'.³

Thirty years later after numerous firings by many different workshop leaders, and damage caused by heavy mountain rain, the kiln was in desperate need of repair. In 2011 the chimney was entirely rebuilt and the four side-stoke ports were redesigned. The door covering the firebox mouth and the damper were both replaced.

The Arrowmont anagama has been a valuable teaching tool and many great instructors have led firing workshops. Further to its recent repairs, it is poised to last another 30 years. A kiln with such history deserves a visit from any woodfire enthusiast. Taking a workshop at Arrowmont, like other craft schools, provides an environment in which to immerse oneself, learning new techniques or working with new materials. It also offers a stage for critical discussion, and brings together like-minded people who may become lifelong friends.

1. Louise Allison Cort, A Short History of Woodfiring in America, Part 3, *The Log Book*, issue 11, 2002, p.12.
2. E-mail correspondence with the author, 1st February 2012.
3. The Arrow, publication of the *Pi Beta Phi* fraternity, Winter 1981.

Shawn O'Connor completed his MFA at Syracuse University (NY) in 2010. He subsequently undertook a one year residency at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, TN, USA.

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