

Presentation on the subject of

Woodfiring in Ceramics Education in an Australian Context

by Robert Sanderson, at the Sturt Woodfire Conference, April 2008.

Far be it from me to tell you about woodfiring in education in an Australian context. I would though be interested to find out about this subject.

Last year I moderated a panel discussion about woodfiring in contemporary ceramic education in the USA at the NCECA conference held in Louisville, Kentucky. It was interesting to hear the panellists (John Neely, Department Head and Professor of Ceramics at Utah State University; Karen Terpstra, Associate Professor at University of Wisconsin-La-Crosse, and Casey Clark, a BFA candidate at Sierra Nevada College), give their points of view. However it was not in any way a survey of educational institutions that offer woodfiring as part of the syllabus.

I myself am not directly connected with full-time education. My involvement is more intermittent in nature and centres around demonstrations and workshops, where I am working with students of all age groups. I have been involved with woodfiring for over 30 years as a professional potter, workshop leader, lecturer and more recently as author and publisher. My own introduction to the process of woodfiring was whilst I was a student at college in England. In 1974 I spent the summer working with Ray Finch at Winchcombe, where he had just finished building a large single chambered Bourry-box kiln.

I remember I was fascinated by the fact that a waste product from the local sawmills could be used to fire a kiln to high temperature. The realisation that it was possible to fire with wood intrigued me. I remember the tranquillity of the early stages being in sharp contrast to the rhythm of stoking and incredible energy of the fire, as the temperature inside the kiln increased. And then having to wait while the kiln cooled down to see the results of our labour. The involvement and responsibility of working as a member of a team gave me – I realise now – my first real opportunity to be truly involved with the whole creative process. It gave me a direction and a sense of belonging, and I will always be grateful to Ray Finch for that opportunity.

The contrast between the non-event character of firings back at my college and the experience of woodfiring at Winchcombe, I suppose highlighted the value of this experience. But it was only when I left college and started working in another woodfire workshop, that I began to realise and appreciate the challenge of the unpredictability of the process.

Much later, when my wife Coll Minogue and I had our own studio in Scotland, some full-time ceramics students from Edinburgh College of Art came to participate in a couple of firings. It was during these events that it became apparent to me for the first time, that the process of woodfiring was indeed a valuable educational tool, helping to develop life skills that would be of use in the wider community. This became an aspect of the process which subsequently inspired me when involved with kiln building and firing workshops.

After my panellists at the NCECA conference had introduced themselves I asked them the following question:

For a long time it seemed as though woodfiring was playing a major role within ceramic education in the USA, with many colleges and universities having extensive facilities for woodfiring – at least that's how it looked from my perspective, where very few colleges particularly in the UK and Ireland, offer woodfiring facilities. I am wondering is it still as important today, or with the retirement in recent years of some of the more influential figures within woodfiring in the USA, has the popularity of woodfiring declined within the context of education. Did it in fact reach a peak some 10-15 years ago?

You will be interested to hear that the response from all three panellists was that woodfiring in educational institutions in the USA is as prevalent today, if not more so, than it was 10 – 15 years ago. John Neely is convinced that wood as a renewable fuel will also have a positive impact on its popularity in the future. 'There are more wood kilns out there than ever before'. Also, its application to fire glazed work offers many possibilities for learning. 'The more I got involved with woodfiring the more I heard about it' was the response from undergraduate Casey Clarke. 'Maybe not as concentrated as before, but its out there... Everywhere I go I meet five more people with five more kilns, willing to let me split some wood. Karen Terpstra's concern was however with any subsequent change of administration, and how this might impact on the continued use of the wood kiln as an educational tool in urban situations. Other points to emerge from the discussion included: smaller kiln design concepts that take into account fuel efficiency; faster firings and non-visible exhaust emissions are also influencing faculty and college administration in decision making.

I then asked for a show of hands in answer to two questions I put to those in the audience:

1. How many ceramics students who do not have woodfire facilities at their institution, have actually gone out and introduced themselves to a woodfire potter in order to gain experience of the process?
2. How many ceramics students in the audience have woodfire facilities at their institution?

In an audience of approx 500-600 people there was quite a significant show of hands in response to my first question, and an overwhelming show of hands for the second. The number of people who raised their hand was quite astonishing, given the number of people in the audience.

In the USA, within the context of woodfiring there is further support for graduates in the network of Ceramics Centres such as Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts in Tennessee; the Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts in Montana, and the Anderson Ranch Arts Center in Colorado – to name but three, where it is possible to apply for a residency to further develop work and skills.

As I see it, these residencies play a very important role for students in that they have continued opportunities for woodfiring, and this experience leads many to build woodfire kilns when they establish studios of their own. Judging from the students who have come to talk to us at *The Log Book* table at the NCECA conferences over the past four years, there would appear to be many enthusiastic and dedicated young woodfirers in the USA. So to sum up, woodfiring in the USA in an educational context is alive and doing very well.

In preparation for this presentation, I carried out research into the current state of woodfiring within education in Australia by contacting some of the key figures involved over many years. The message conveyed in the responses that I received would indicate that all is not well – compared to the situation that existed – say 10 – 15 years ago. Three of those who got in touch no longer have woodfire facilities at their colleges, and instead provide opportunities where interested students can come to their studios to gain experience of woodfiring.

But why is it so different here in Australia now compared to the USA? I always considered ceramics students in Australia privileged to have such good woodfire facilities available to them.

One response to my enquiry reads: ‘At the moment here in Perth there is no longer really any woodfiring as part of the ceramics education. While I could organise something with my kiln at my workshop, it has been actively discouraged by the college when I attempted it, and furthermore we have very few students that are achieving a level that it would be at all practical.’

Another response – from Victoria, reads: ‘As with many institutions within Australia, we are experiencing both declining numbers and an increase in part-time enrolments. This fact, combined with an older student demographic (who have competing demands on their time) makes scheduling firings increasingly problematic. With the addition of encroaching Occupational Health and Safety compliances, hazard assessments, and excursion protocols, the bureaucracy is becoming overbearing and a deterrent to some degree. ... I have managed to complete at least two firings a year with degree students in my anagama situated at my home outside of the city. Whilst the logistics are taxing and much pre-planning and preparation is necessary, the students all gratefully acknowledge the worthiness of the exercise.’

On a personal note I had always felt that if I were to be a student again, I would certainly have wanted to study ceramics at an Australian institution, where I would have had ample opportunity to woodfire. This opinion was formed as a result of my first visit to Australia in 1984; again for the Woodfire’89 conference; to Perth in 1990, and in 1997 whilst carrying out research for our book on wood-fired ceramics.

So my questions to this audience are:

1. What has happened to woodfiring within ceramics education in Australia in recent years and how has this situation arisen?
2. What should we as a group do, to try and improve this situation?

My correspondent in Victoria raises a number of other considerations that we as a group may wish to discuss:

1. The establishment of a national Centre of Ceramics with an emphasis on woodfiring.
2. A national register or data base that lists when firings are being held and who would welcome students to attend and participate.
3. A mentor programme that could be facilitated by e-mail or video links.

4. A number of scholarships to be specifically directed to younger people, to encourage their continued involvement in woodfiring.
5. Actively promote the younger woodfirers who are currently working.
6. Establish some form of woodfiring network with potters in Europe, the UK and the USA.

On the last point I would like to bring your attention to a new association IYWA – the International Young Woodfirers Association, which so far has contacts in NZ, Norway and France. (For more information on this see an article published in issue 32 of *The Log Book*.)

What followed was a worthwhile debate with contributions from many of the significant figures within ceramics education in Australia in recent years. As the presenter I found this discussion enlightening and now have a much greater understanding of woodfiring in education in an Australian context, both historically and as regards the current situation.