

# Elemental journeys

After attending a ceramics residency in Japan last year, British artist *Amanda Chambers* shares her experience and investigates the effects a residency had on her work and that of three other makers



*'I went with a spirit of openness and adventure and Japan rewarded me with an unforgettable legacy'*  
**Amanda Chambers**

Japan is one of the oldest ceramic centres in the world, with its renowned Jomon Period pottery dating back to c. 14,000 BC. With its deeply embedded cultural appreciation of traditional crafts and a wide range of residency opportunities across its diverse islands, it represents an aesthetic pilgrimage for many creative practitioners.

I returned from Japan last March having undergone a transformational artist residency at Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park. I wanted to share my own experience of living in rural Shiga Prefecture and how my subsequent conversations with three international ceramic artists – Anne Mette Hjortshøj, Christopher McHugh and Jennifer Lee – revealed the deep significance Japanese residencies have had on their practices.

## AMANDA CHAMBERS – Studio Artist, Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park, March 2017

My first attempt at making a teabowl (pictured above right) tells me a lot about my residency at Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park (SCCP) and indeed my first trip to Japan. I remember the day it was made. A crisp March wind was blowing around the mountains as local people arrived at the Park for the teabowl workshop. I was halfway into my residency at SCCP and I recall a deep sense of rootedness and quiet joy. My jet lag was gone, studio life was established, new materials – coloured clays, natural textures, gritty white stoneware – were proving successful, and above all, I was surrounded by wonderful people who would make my stay a success.

The teabowl workshop was conducted in Japanese by tea master Okuda Eizan. However, the language barrier was not a problem – words were unnecessary as we watched him eloquently transform his ball of raku clay on a hand wheel.

Now, holding the vessel I made that day, I recall the construction: the undulating rim in particular, applied separately, adds a transient note to the whole piece, illustrating the art of *wabi sabi* – the Japanese aesthetic philosophy – that increasingly influenced me.

I took the teabowl home in my luggage in its leatherhard state, and decorated it simply with a brush from a back street art shop in Kyoto and wood ash that I had brought

back with me from Shigaraki. I then fired it in an Anglo-Japanese anagama kiln in Oxford. To me it symbolises collaboration and a celebration of the group ethos I found in Japan. Other projects included throwing teapots small enough to rest on the tip of a finger in the white Shigaraki stoneware (pictured above).

The author and travel writer Pico Iyer said: 'Japan has a great gift for being the place that you're hoping to see.' I felt this many times during my stay: at the quiet Shinto shrine before work, riding my bike through bamboo groves, at the kiln site on the mountain and with friends viewing *ume* (plum) trees in bloom. I went with a spirit of openness and adventure, and Japan rewarded me with an unforgettable legacy.

*Amanda's residency was funded by the Daiwa Foundation and Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation. She was later awarded an Arts Council England grant to develop her continuing work in clay.*

*To find out more about Amanda and her work visit [amandachambers.co.uk](http://amandachambers.co.uk)*

*For further information about residencies at Shigaraki visit [sccp.jp/artist-in-r/application/studio-artist](http://sccp.jp/artist-in-r/application/studio-artist)*

## ANNE METTE HJORTSHØJ – Mashiko Residency, March 2017

One of Denmark's leading potters, Anne Mette Hjortshøj, is renowned for transforming the wild clay of her coastal home, Bornholm Island, into beautiful wood-fired ceramics.

She nurtured a love of traditional Japanese pottery and the works of Shōji Hamada in particular from an early stage in her career, while studying with Phil Rogers. But it was through her friendship with Japanese potter Iwami Shinsuke, who she met while exhibiting in South Korea, that she was introduced to the Mashiko Residency. Finally, in the spring of 2017, she realised her dream and arrived at the historic home of the Hamada family for a two and a half month stay.

Until recently, Mashiko ran invite-only residencies primarily for UK potters with a Leach/Hamada connection. It now offers an open application inviting potters from around the world. Tomoo Hamada, Shōji's grandson, also works on-site, making Mashiko wares and his own sculptural ceramics.

Anne Mette's main objectives centred on researching local clay bodies, stoneware glaze production techniques (a growing area of her practice – especially nuka glazes) and exploring the wide range of wood-firing kilns at Mashiko, resulting in pieces such as this teapot (right).

Early on, she was inspired by a white glaze used by Tatsuzō Shimaoka on a bottle she described as 'quiet and strong'. Her quest to reproduce this effect led to test firing in Hamada's own climbing kiln. Another major highlight was

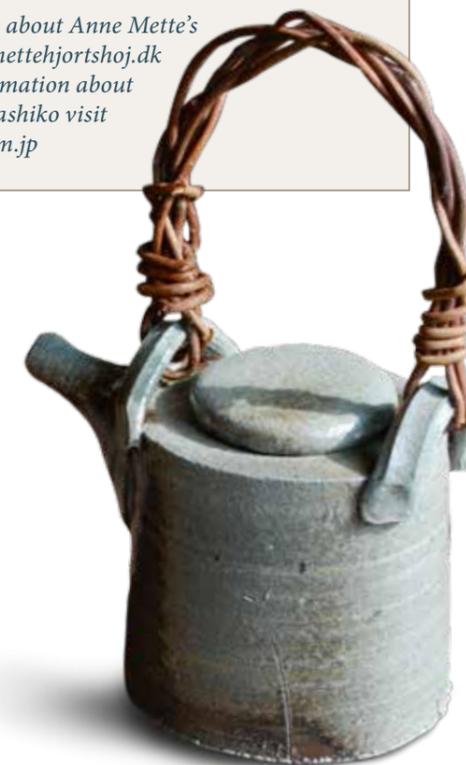


working with Ken Matsuzaki, who shared his own materials and what she calls 'the gift of his time' on many occasions.

The Mashiko Residency offered a complete immersion in Japanese life: a 400-strong local community of potters, shared meals and excursions with new friends, giving public workshops – all only a couple of hours away from Tokyo. It was an experience she summarised as 'beyond all dreams'.

*Funding for the trip came from a grant celebrating 150 years of Japanese–Danish relations and operated as an exchange.*

*To find out more about Anne Mette's work visit [annemettehjortshoj.dk](http://annemettehjortshoj.dk)  
For further information about residencies at Mashiko visit [mashiko-museum.jp](http://mashiko-museum.jp)*





**Dr CHRISTOPHER McHUGH**  
– Seto International Ceramics and Glass Art Exchange Programme, 2015

Ceramist and academic Christopher McHugh has a long association with Japan and is equally fascinated by its archaeological and urban environments. He has travelled extensively in the country, speaks Japanese and regards Osaka as his second home.

In 2015, he embarked on the Seto exchange programme to develop his doctoral research into the relationship between communities and heritage and was drawn to both the city's recent pottery production and its ancient past (pre-13th century with the remains of 500 Muromachi period kiln sites). His subsequent body of work, *Setomonogatari* – roughly meaning, the story of Seto's pottery history – was the result of his two-month stay there.

Christopher's original plan was to develop a socially engaged project with the community, but upon arrival he adapted this idea and looked beneath the surface of his local surroundings for inspiration. 'I soon became fascinated by the crumbling materiality of the city, where abandoned factories exist alongside going concerns and broken sherds of pottery can be found underfoot almost everywhere you go,' he explains.

He began producing work using digital decals applied to locally sourced porcelain and red clay (pictured right) and combined his making schedule with giving family workshops, open studio events and talks.

Highlights of his stay included meeting ceramist Nagae Shigekazu and making lasting connections with fellow artists and professionals. On one memorable occasion, he visited the site of the Muromachi-era Konagaso kiln in the Seto hills, and picked up a kiln support imprinted with the 500-year-old fingerprints of its maker.

*The Seto Art Exchange Programme offers ceramic and glass-making facilities. It supports artists with air fares, accommodation, subsistence costs and a materials budget of 100,000 Yen.*

*To find out more about Christopher and his work, head to [communityinclay.org.uk](http://communityinclay.org.uk)  
For more about the Seto International Ceramics and Glass Art Exchange Programme, visit [seto-cul.jp](http://seto-cul.jp)*



**JENNIFER LEE** – Guest Artist, Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park, 2014–2015

Jennifer Lee's career has taken her all over the world, but it wasn't until the Scottish potter worked in Japan that a major shift occurred in her practice.

When Gallery Koyanagi invited her to Tokyo in 1994, it sowed the seed for a special relationship with Japan that would slowly evolve over the next 20 years. In 2009, fashion designer Issey Miyake asked her to exhibit at the Miyake Issey Foundation's gallery for the *U-Tsu-Wa* exhibition. The installation of her 'floating' vessels (pictured above) alongside ceramics by Lucie Rie caught the public imagination and helped give Jennifer a profound connection to the country.

In 2013 she attended an international biennale in rural Sasama, followed by a quick succession of guest artist residencies at Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park (SCCP), which confirmed the importance of Japan not only as a unique ceramic centre, but as a place for her to think differently. At Shigaraki she was able to detach, focus on experimentation and new materials and push her practice – almost to the point of complete disruption.

The residency experience proved that, even after 30 years, and now at the pinnacle of her career, it was still



possible to change. Significantly, her use of white stoneware, a signature of her practice, was now complemented by a new Shigaraki red. Overall, the different pace of life, the memorable people, the Japanese attention to detail and exceptional use of natural materials all helped to heighten her aesthetic senses.

The residency also opened up major opportunities, including her first solo show in Kyoto and new gallery representation from Sokyō Gallery, followed by museum acquisitions, including Mashiko.

*Inaugural residencies for Guest Artists at SCCP are paid for by the centre; return residencies are funded by the artist.*

*To find out more about Jennifer and her work visit [jenniferlee.co.uk](http://jenniferlee.co.uk)  
For further information about residencies at Shigaraki visit [sccp.jp/artist-in-r/application/guest-artist](http://sccp.jp/artist-in-r/application/guest-artist)*

Images: Amanda Chambers, Max McClure, Anne Mette Hjortshøj, Mayumi Tsukimura, Colin Davison, Jo Howell, Jake Tilson, Hiroshi Iwasaki



**RESIDENCY TOP TIPS**

- Check out the online database of artist-in-residence programmes in Japan at: [en.air-j.info](http://en.air-j.info)
- Allow 12 months preparation – speak to funders and residencies before applying
- Budget upwards of £2k – residencies may offer funded (guest) or unfunded places
- Learn polite phrases and take thank-you gifts and slippers for indoors
- Be adventurous during your residency – make sure you learn something new
- Useful train timetables can be found at: [hyperdia.com](http://hyperdia.com)
- Use a bike to get around locally
- Call home using wifi apps such as WhatsApp and Skype or buy a local SIM card
- Consider a luggage courier; try Kuroneko Yamato: [kuronekoyamato.co.jp/en/](http://kuronekoyamato.co.jp/en/)