

Sailing, Jazz and the Pear Shape

David Smith

In 1983, as a graduate student at the University of Montana, I had the opportunity to build my first anagama kiln. This kiln was a straight tube placed on a slope of 15 degrees with a modest interior dimension of 15' x 5 1/2'. Since that first kiln building experience, I have built three other anagamas loosely based on the "pear-shape" design. The early "pear-shaped" Chinese porcelain kilns had piqued my interest primarily because the front portion of these kilns was wide and offered, in a contemporary context, the potential for significant firebox exposure.

My current kiln, the Kegonsa Anagama, was designed to maximize the front stacking area in which numerous pieces are in direct contact with the embers. About 1/3 of the total amount of the work stacked in the kiln is essentially in the front firebox. Firings typically are 7-8 days in duration. My primary goal with this kiln is to develop complex firebox surfaces that compliment my sculptural works. I apply layers of slip and glaze to my pieces and subject their surfaces to the effect of the embers over an extended period of time at high temperature. Using slip and glaze in this manner serves to broaden the palette of the natural ash glaze. Pieces throughout the entire kiln collect a significant amount of fly ash as a result of the wide front, low arch, and the minimal overall slope of less than 10 degrees. The kiln's tapered back lends itself to a more reduced atmosphere, increased flame velocity, and significant local flashing creating surfaces that compliment those produced in the front of the kiln. Six stoke holes along each side provide numerous options depending on the firing strategy. Some of these stoke holes serve only as spy holes for checking cones and surfaces.

The most important features of this kiln that I have found to be very exciting and useful are the three stoke holes in the front of the kiln. Much of my focus, in terms of object making, has involved sculptural work placed between the channels extending into the kiln from these stoke holes. I slowly heat the kiln for the first 3-4 days using the center primary air hole and then I move to the center top hole starting at about 1200 F. As temperature is gained and embers fill this middle channel, I begin to stoke the right and left holes. The right and left holes help to heat the sides of the kiln and efficiently move the temperature, in the front of the kiln, up to the point of ash melt. Of course, the right and left channels also begin to fill with embers. I can maintain the embers in all three channels, at ideal levels, by stoking the middle or sides holes as necessary. Once "meltdown" has been achieved, I back the temperature off and I can hold the front indefinitely. As far as aesthetics are concerned, the sculptural pieces that are stacked on the floor between the narrow channels are surrounded by ember. This provides a beautiful full-round effect. These channels are intimate spaces and I am able to adjust the level of the embers with great control and strike desired "crust" or transitional lines on each piece.

As we move through life we accumulate expertise through hard work, experience and time. I have reached a point in my life where I understand the value of decades of experience and practice in my chosen discipline. The art of wood-firing has offered me opportunities to travel and work with some incredible people. It has been an experience of total immersion in which I have found tremendous personal satisfaction. I have developed a certain degree of mastery in the process of wood-firing and I am beginning to find ways of relating this experience to other passions in my life, i.e. sailing and jazz improvisation. These endeavors require ones full attention mentally and physically much like the process of wood-firing and these activities, in return, have influence my work in clay.

Sailing and playing the trumpet (jazz improvisation) are two relatively recent pursuits with which I have much less experience, yet I have found that these activities closely parallel wood-firing. The equipment, the process, and the close teamwork that is necessary to successfully sail, improvise, or fire a kiln relate in a number of ways. We choose a particular kiln design, hull design or instrument for various reasons that reflect our personal preferences and needs. The feel and function of our tools are closely knit to our experience and they are ultimately reflected in the end result of the process. Sailing, playing the trumpet and wood-firing involve air pressure, flow, and finding the path of least resistance. Strength, endurance, focus and experience are required of the individual who wishes to produce something of merit when engaged in these activities. The collaborative and coordinated effort of a team, however large or small, is essential to the attainment of a common goal whether it is sailing the course, producing beautiful music or reaching temperature. We work with various structures, adhere to the basic laws of physics and strive to understand the inherent limitations of our medium. At the same time, we must be willing and able to respond intuitively as conditions change and take their natural course. Spontaneity, cooperation and humility are great virtues to apply when contending with the forces of nature.

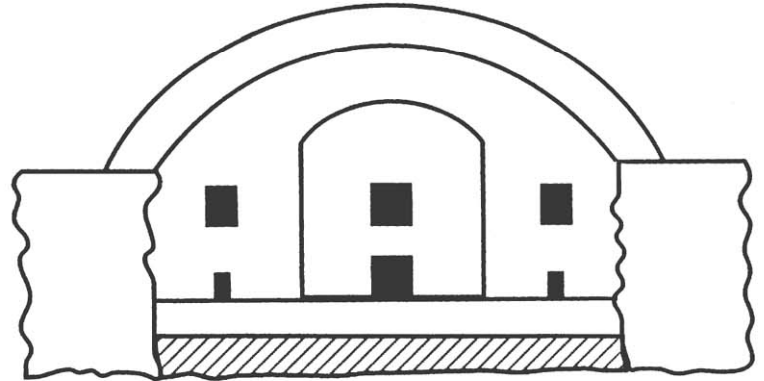
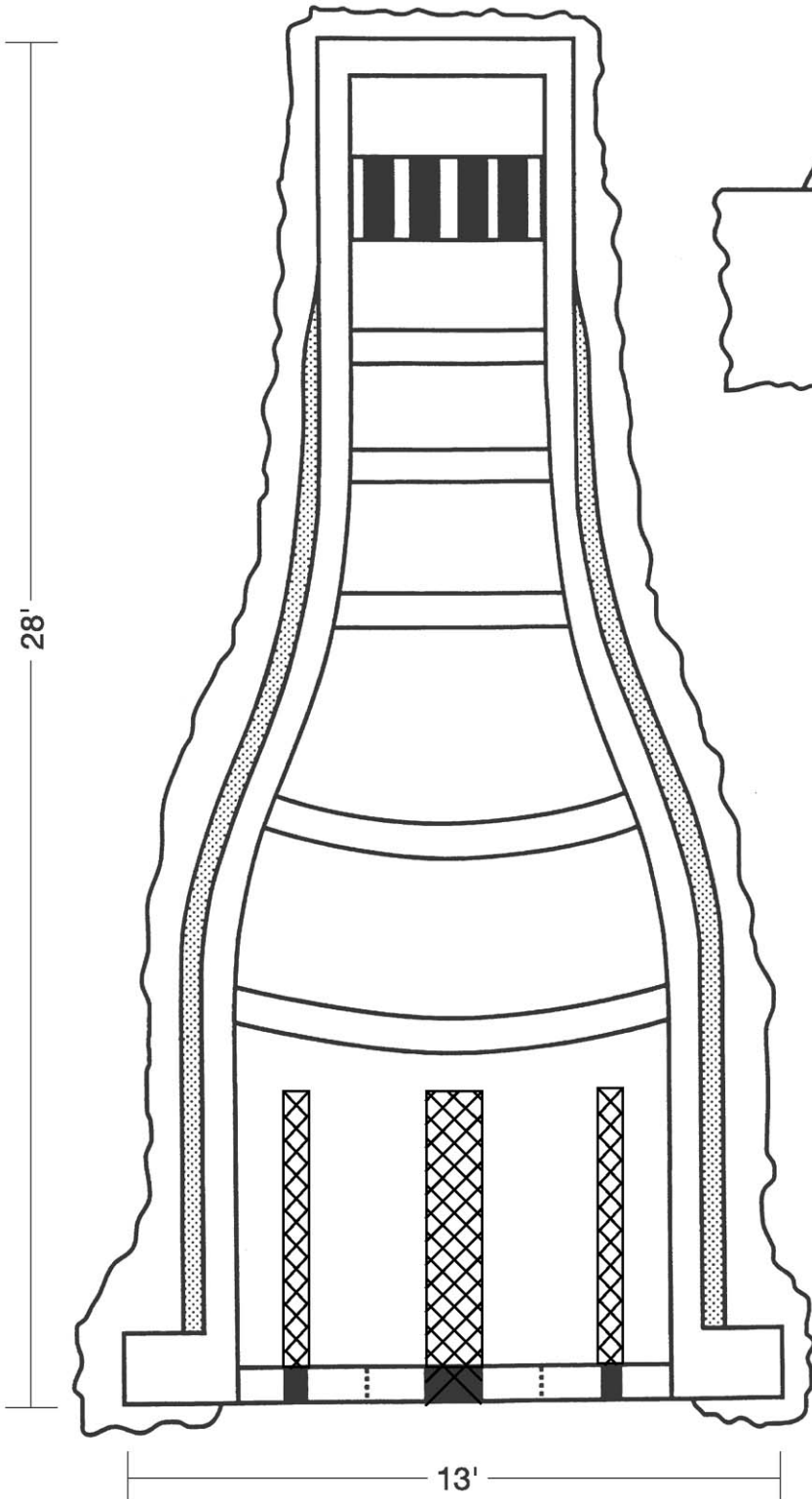
It is my hope that this life process will return full-circle and my next kiln will be inspired by a brass mouthpiece. At the moment, I'm intrigued by the Bach Model #336.....

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KEGONSA ANAGAMA KILN
STOUGHTON, WI

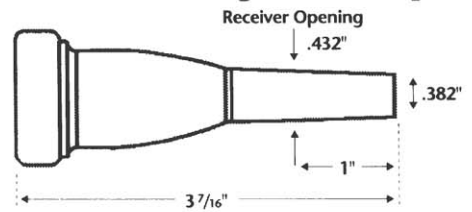
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TOP VIEW

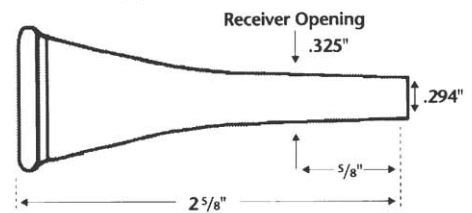


FRONT VIEW

Model #K351 Mega Tone Trumpet



Model #336 Horn



Model #K335 Mega Tone Tuba · Sousaphone

