Bird Song
Woodfiring at the Golden Bridge Pottery
by Aarti Vir

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A bird does not sing because it has an answer. It sings because it has a song. Chinese proverb.

Ray Meeker and Deborah Smith have been living, working and teaching in Pondicherry, a small coastal town in southern India, for almost 40 years. They have, over the years, responded to circumstances and needs, theirs as well as those of people around them. With adventurous, open minds, they have always been willing to embrace opportunities and people coming their way, unstintingly sharing their passion and knowledge, nurturing in apprentices and students a love for clay, training local workers to throw, glaze and fire, and in the process, they have given impetus to a veritable pottery movement, not only in Pondicherry, but throughout the country.

I never tire of hearing the story of how they first met in the ceramics department of the University of Southern California in 1969 and of their subsequent adventures and rites of passage.

Ray had spent several years studying art on a basketball scholarship, then architecture and finally ceramics. Deb had studied Japanese language at Stanford University, then spent two years in Japan, mostly interested in – as she puts it 'not being me', but also in learning a craft. She returned to California after apprenticing for a year with Yamamoto Toshu in Bizen. In 1970, Deb was back in Japan, helping Susan Peterson research her book on Shoji Hamada, and in December that year arrived in Pondicherry to visit the Aurobindo Ashram. There she was asked if she would set up a pottery. 'I'll try', she said, 'if my friend will build the kiln'. The friend, Ray, was travelling in Europe at the time and happily agreed to come for two months to build the kiln. They are both still in Pondicherry, making pots and sculpture in clay, and for those of us whose lives have been forever changed by the encounter with both Ray and Deb, clay and woodfiring, the universe had conspired to make it happen!

The genesis of the Golden Bridge Pottery (GBP) from a small shed thatched with coconut leaves took several years to unfold. The first kiln Ray built, intended for reduction-fired glazed functional stoneware, was a 0.85 m^3 (30 cu.ft) cross-draught catenary arch 'the prettiest design in Rhodes' kiln book', with plans for the drip-feed oil burners from Paul Soldner.

The Japanese aesthetic of wood-fired stoneware held a special allure for both Ray and Deb, but it seemed to have little resonance with their new environment. 'They would've come for us in white coats if they'd seen us unload a kiln like we did yesterday', said Deb, of the anagama they had just opened the day before.

They also tell the story of an old woman, a goatherd on the property that was assigned to them for the studio. Each day she picked up every little twig in the compound to fuel her cooking fire. Seeing that convinced them that wood could not be their fuel of choice for the pottery, and they began with an oil kiln all those years ago.

They grappled with the reality of living in tropical India, suffering bouts of fever and infection. Ray tried to decide whether he wanted to be a sarod-playing musician or a potter. Meanwhile, the farmers from the neighbouring rice and banana fields presumed the unused kiln to be a shrine, and they (Ray and Deb), the temple priests! They first fired the kiln in 1974 and they have never stopped working since. Making functional stoneware, both of them throwing, glazing and firing, with a couple of apprentices who turned up at

their doorstep interested in learning ceramics, they were soon selling their ware in Pondicherry and, by the late 1970s, in Bangalore and Delhi.

The first big expansion came in 1979, when a 8.5 m^3 (300 cu.ft) noborigama was built, with two glaze chambers and one for bisque. The '3C', as it was called, was fired with drip-fed oil up to 900°C, then, when reduction began, side-stoked with wood. When I first arrived at GBP as a student in 1996, this kiln was still being fired. I can recall the huge sense of anticipation it generated amongst us. It was a major event, with a thousand pots being glazed, all the decorated ones hand-painted by Deb. The '3C' offered up the most delicious fruits as well as the bitterest disappointments.

'One day you just started building a kiln', Deb said to Ray, as they tried to recall for me, why the next kilns – down-draught twin kilns – were built in 1981. These two kilns – one wood-fired and the other, oil-fired salt-glaze – shared a chimney. This was the first time that GBP had a kiln that was exclusively wood-fired. The reason for building this was ostensibly the fact that getting kerosene for the '3C' was becoming difficult, but it could just as well have been Ray's innate need to 'build' something. Wood had been used at GBP to create heat rather than for the

aesthetic of wood ash on the pots. That it resulted in an effect, that the work got better thanks to that ash, was an unplanned consequence rather than a planned development. But a lot of people would agree with Ray when he says, 'Once you've gone wood, you never go back'.

As they started using wood fuel, they realised that the coastal region of southern India was in fact set up for woodfiring. The casuarina they use is grown as a fuel crop in sandy, saline soil all along the Coromandel Coast. A pine-like tree, native to Australasia, it has a very high calorific value. The wood is usually sold wet, but already cut to size – 60-90 cm (2-3ft) in length, the diameter varying between 2.5-10 cm (1-4 inches), it rarely requires splitting. Bought by the tonne, the wet wood is arranged in drying stacks around the pottery compound and later restacked around the kilns, where it is easily accessible to stokers.

Besieged by importunate students des-perate to learn pottery, Ray instituted an annual seven-month course for them in 1983. This course continues today, with an ever-growing waiting list.

At this time, although Ray was still involved in planning all the production and firing the kilns, he had gradually begun stepping back from the production process, to concentrate on more individual work. In university his work had been large, tongue-in-cheek, sculptures. Just as anagama firing didn't seem appropriate in India in the 1970s, this work also seemed incongruous here.

It was around this time, that Ceramics Monthly published an article about an experiment by Iranian architect Nader Khalili. That and his love for the work of Egyptian architect Hassan Fat'hy spurred Ray on to what can probably be described as the ultimate venture in ceramic sculpture, the Fired House Project.

Collaborating on the very first experiment with Dutch ceramic artist Jan de Rooden, Ray built a Nubian vault of green brick and mud mortar, filled it with green 'product' – brick and tile – and fired it in toto with wood to 960°C. Thus commenced a 13-year exploration of fired-building as a process, and upwards of 35 houses, from single vaults to large structures comprising several chambers were built. Vaults and domes, built using local material and local labour, each stacked as a kiln with terracotta product that could later be sold, or used in the finishing of the structure, the whole fired with casuarina – on paper fired-building looked great. It promised energy-efficient, eco-friendly, environmentally sustainable architecture. In fact, energy saving remained elusive until 1997 when he began to add fuel – a mixture of coal and coke dust – directly into the brick clay. While he succeeded in demonstrating moderate energy savings, the risks were huge, and the entire exercise required the organisational capacities of running a half-dozen small-scale

industries making bricks, tiles, sinks and other product that filled these ‘kilns’. Eventually, Ray decided he’d accomplished what he could with fired-building and went back to his studio. However there is still the occasional student of architecture, who, fired with imagination, writes in asking to work on firing houses!

Meanwhile, Deb took over planning the production at GBP. A car kiln was built at the studio in 1985. Today, Deb and this kiln called ‘Carla’, continue to work in concert. A 2 m^3 (70 cu.ft) kiln with a modified Bourry-box on either side, it is fired every three weeks with 1.8 tonnes of dry wood used for a glaze firing. Rebuilt earlier this year after 150 high temperature firings, ‘Carla’ in its third generation, fires to cone-10-down in about 17 hours. Deb assigns forms to the throwers and makes detailed plans for every shelf in the kiln before the glazing process begins. These plans instruct the team which pieces to glaze and where to place them in the kiln. Deb herself does all the painting on the pots. GBP currently employs two throwers; the core glaze team comprising of five people; two people make clay; an office assistant; a man for errands; two watchmen and a ‘wood moving and sweeping the yard guy’! The glaze team fires the kiln under Deb’s supervision.

Around 1996, Ray went back to working with clay on what he calls, a more modest scale. This necessitated the building of a 4 m^3 (140 cu.ft)

woodfire car kiln, which often accommodates only one or two of his pieces at a time. He has always had an affinity for kiln design and continues to design kilns to suit the evolving needs of GBP, as well as several of their students. One of his best kiln designs is a 0.5 m^3 (20 cu.ft)

student kiln. An extremely efficient down-draught, with a single firebox stoked from the front, it can easily be fired by one person. About one tonne of wood is used to do a bisque and a glaze firing.

The most radical development at GBP in recent years has been the remodelling of the old 3-chamber noborigama, which was rarely fired in recent times, into a long tube, a sort of anagama, by Australian resident artist Peter Thompson, in 2007. It was fired for the fourth time in August this year. Just having seen the results of this firing, I cannot help but think, ‘This is it. This is that primordial, elemental song of the bird.’

Each one of the four firings has been shared by Ray and a few of his students and former students. Every firing they learn more. This latest firing was the longest and hottest, perhaps even too hot, fired for 75 hours, using approximately 10 tonnes of dry casuarina, and 4.5 tonnes of tree prunings from the GBP property. Already, Ray is talking of building a smaller anagama. Certainly, the visual language of long woodfiring adds new exciting possibilities to the GBP palette. A smaller kiln will make this more accessible.

In writing this article, I have tried to keep to the brief of a history of woodfiring at GBP. Ray and Deb the potters, the teachers, the people, their immense contribution to ceramics in India, their association with village potters and just about every other potter in this country, their individual trajectories, their shared history with the students who never leave, are all remarkable stories of the talent and passion of two generous, spirited people who simply sing their song.