

# Journey to the Albarello

Duncan Shearer, New Zealand

This is a journey about a form, a shape that had undoubtedly crossed my eyes as I looked through various ceramic books over the years—a silhouette that never registered to any extent until recently when a curious combination of travel and need of a new direction resulted in a discovery.

It is this shape - an Albarello.

How I have come to be fascinated by this object and where it's taking me is the subject of this paper.

Over the years my exploration of shapes had occasionally strayed near to the Albarello form, A series of bottles in 2006 meant as possible whiskey bottles had some of the elements. But the key reason that caused the synapses to fire was travel and lots of it.

From 2000 to 2007 I worked as the Co-director of the Auckland Studio Potters—a position with a varied job description and a chance to hang out with pottery-inclined people. I also had my own studio there where I learnt most of what I know about kiln designs and the various types of firings. This included constructing and firing wood-fired salt, soda and anagama kilns. But in April 2007 I needed a break and to scratch my itchy feet again, so I took a year off to wander around bits of the world with very few dates to worry about. Much of this time was spent in Europe with France figuring high on my agenda as I had been invited to a wood-firing festival in La Borne.

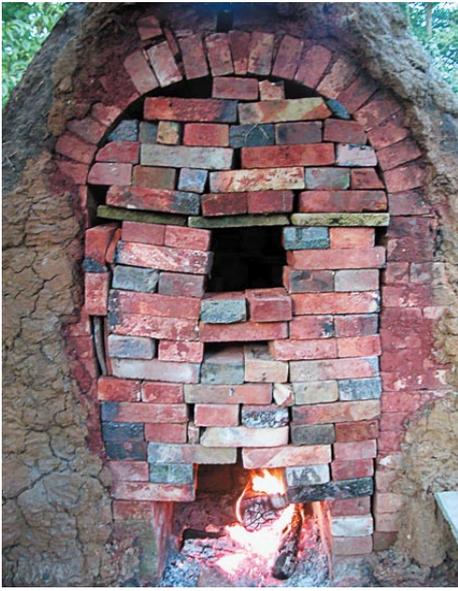
One of the advantages of taking part in this kind of festival is the sense of freedom. No one knows who you are really, or the kind of work you normally make. Also the clay and working conditions are all novel. These circumstances are initially a bit daunting and most potters' start with making something they know well—a sculpture or a bowl or a bottle, etc. But once settled in you realise that you have an opportunity to experiment and play, and to try out ideas and see if incorporating new influences would improve your work.

The La Borne event kicked off about the 1<sup>st</sup> of July and is best summarised as an indulgence of wood firing. Various potters around the area (and there are a lot of them) organise themselves to fire their kilns all within a three-week period and invite all manner of friends to help them out. I was involved with a firing organised by my French friend Philippe Langlois, and there were also some French, Kiwi and American potters taking part in the same firing. They all pitched their tents in the back garden of the pottery and started making pots in the studio.

Over the next two weeks we dug clay from various fields, built and fired an experimental test kiln bolted onto the back of the main kiln, mixed up all sorts of clay mixtures, threw or hand built as many pots as possible and had a brilliant time. We feasted on shared meals, and the number of left over wine bottles and beer bottles were enough to build a bottle kiln. We also visited the city of Bourges as well as Baillet, the local clay and crucible making factory.



Albarello - Valencia, Spain 1435



Wicket - La Borne, France

All this hectic activity culminated in a four day firing. The American contingent was left in charge of constructing the wicket and getting the kiln going. Somehow they got the order wrong and started with the fire-confident that a wicket would fall into place when needed. By the time we finally convinced them that maybe a door would be a good idea the small fire had grown. Undeterred they placed a large log in the middle of the fire to support the wall and reckoned by the time it burnt through they would have built a wicket. This did turn out to be the case-but it was remarkable to everyone there that it stayed put for four days. The firing coincided with the only fine period of the French summer. While the kiln cooled, it gave us an ideal opportunity to meet the other participants of La Borne S'enflamme and see their kilns firing. It was a time of wandering through a tiny French village in the middle of the night clutching wine bottles and hunting for the glint of a chimney flame through the trees.

One festival leads to another as is the nature of wood firing and the generous nature of potters. So I was invited to another wood firing event in St Amand en Puisaye and was again confronted with a half empty kiln, two days to make pots and a studio that had the strangest pottery wheels I have ever encountered. I had no time to settle in, there was a hole to fill and tall pots were needed. So again the opportunity to explore and create under tight time frames led to interesting forms. Exposure to the French provincial ceramic scene was an eye opener. To see pots that had been made the same way for centuries and the way they fitted into the French lifestyle and environment was hugely satisfying. Coming from a country with little clay history to speak of, and what has been made in the past has been a result of imported traditions and cultures; the ideas behind tradition and continuity of practice in a location are somewhat foreign. It somehow validates a view that making pots is an important art activity, vital to a culture's notions of self worth, and counters the view of the art world that innovation at all costs is the only goal worth aiming for.

After France I ended up in Istanbul and it was here, in the Isnik Museum attached to the National Museum, that the Albarello form finally started to emerge from the molasses of swirling thoughts about forms and shapes and made it self known to whatever higher brain cells that mattered. However, it would be another three months of travelling through Eastern Europe before I arrived in another town, this time Polish, and another kiln needing pots.

The focus of this event was to encourage dialogue between the Polish potters and the international potters, achieved by making pots and firing them in a large Tokagama kiln (similar to an Anagama). The international contingent included potters from Ireland, United Kingdom, Germany, Switzerland, Korea and New Zealand. The Polish potters included a number of



Pots - St Amand, France

students, ex-students and tutors from the Wroclaw Academy of Fine Arts.

Once settled, sobered up and adjusted to the delights of the Polish countryside we were let loose on about four tons of clay. We poked, prodded and generally squeezed the three varieties of clays trying to decide which suited us best. Then followed frantic mixing, wetting and experimentation. Within a day or so a rhythm emerged that would see more than enough work completed in about a week.

Every morning a feast for breakfast was wheeled down the road from the local farmer. Meats, cheeses, salads, breads, pastries all helped to soak up the residual vodka from the night before. Then it was back to the tent (a giant marquee studio specially erected on a wooden platform and generously heated by electric fan heaters) to continue making, finishing, or whatever your pots needed. Lunch was a simple affair, a repeat of breakfast. More potting. Dinner at 5:00p.m. was a Polish gourmet experience. Mashed potatoes were a constant accompaniment to delicious meats and salads, again all cooked and wheeled to our door by the friendly farmer and his wife. We heard that two pigs were sacrificed to make our stay nourishing, to say the least.

Then started the laborious job of loading this large kiln. Our Polish compatriots had the privilege of being more familiar with the clay and so were more ambitious with their scale—and made larger pieces. These required careful manoeuvring to fit inside the kiln, and then every nook and cranny was filled with all manner of other objects. It was a tight load, with spaces left for the flames to circulate through, with the end result that very few pieces had been left out.

The drama of firing the kiln, watching the stacks of pots move slowly as the heat does its work, the lick of flame erupting from the side stoke ports all needed to be seen and felt against the backdrop of the quiet Polish countryside in the still autumn air, with the trees all turned a sympathetic golden colour. The closing ceremony echoed the lighting up ceremony apart from the amount of lethal vodka being drunk. I've never finished a kiln at 6:00a.m. and toasted the wicket being sealed with a bottle of Absinthe, but Poland was providing me with a number of firsts.

A week later (and finally sober) I was back in the Polish boondocks and nervously picking the wicket apart. It was the moment of truth and, as the kiln disgorged its secrets, we were in turns, enraptured, satisfied and horrified. Some of my experiments had worked, others had not, the natural result of trying new forms and clays in a foreign kiln.

More countries were visited including a foray into Norway in winter and India in spring before I arrived back in New Zealand. A job and somewhere to live featured high on my priorities, and my partner and I ended up in Hamilton, a city infamous for its cultural vacuum. This turned out to be misleading as it does have a lot of interesting stuff going on, but hates to let the rest of the country know about it.

My new job as the manager for the Waikato Society of Potters has the advantage of being only part time and comes with a studio. So, after a period of settling in, I was approached to take part in an exhibition with another potter friend in a gallery in Christchurch. Here was the impetus I needed. An exhibition with deadlines always helps me to keep focus. I remembered the forms I was making overseas and the thread from Istanbul and linked the two. My theme of the Albarello was settled on and I began the process of making.

This is the history according to Wikipedia, the source of so much averaged knowledge.

An Albarello is a type of majolica earthenware jar originally designed to hold apothecaries' ointments and dry drugs. The development of this type of pharmacy jar had its roots in the Middle East during the time of the Islamic conquests. Brought to Italy by Hispano-Moresque traders, the earliest Italian examples were produced in Florence in the 15th century. Albarelli were made in Italy from the first half of the 15th century through to the late 18th century and beyond. Based on Persian designs said to emulate bamboo (the traditional manufacturing material), the jars are usually cylindrical with a slightly concave waist. Variations in size and style can be seen

from region to region, ranging from 10cm to 40cm in height. Such jars served both functional and decorative purposes in traditional apothecaries and pharmacies, and represented status and wealth. The jars were generally sealed with a piece of parchment or leather tied with a piece of cord.

Potters in Europe also use this form as a starting point for explorations in design, decoration and form - a little like the way American potter's picked up on the Japanese tea bowl as a starting point for personal interpretation. My take on the form was to wood fire it-, and use a looser throwing style.

The kinds of decisions I make during the forming process aren't linear, rather they are instinctual. A mental image that never quite comes into focus directs the overall form. But I also try to be aware of how my application of force deforms the clay and constantly consider whether the marks, shapes and contours are adding layers of interest or merely retreating into affectation.

I rely on the production-throwers mantra of repetition to explore permutations in shape. The slowly-filling ware racks of Albarelli provide a map of the territory, a bit like a Google earth map of the land of Albarelli.

My self-imposed boundaries were related to the form and firing. The forms had to have concave sides, a strong shoulder and neck, a defined foot and a rim that could conceivably have a piece of leather tied over it. Lugs and handles, feet and rims, height and width were all elements to explore.

My background as a wood firer and salt/soda glazer influenced my decision to utilise these kiln technologies to impart individuality to the work. I am also pretty useless at painting fish, fruit and flowers in the majolica style. Once settled on the firing methods that I was most comfortable using, this also fed back into the making process. Wood firing highlights the qualities of the soft clay - the freshness of a newly thrown pot. So I utilised the wheel as one of my decorating tools and the potter's rib became my brush. Imparting a line on the pot was a considered affair and always needed to be balanced with areas of softness.



Albarello, Duncan Shearer, 2010



Albarello, Duncan Shearer, 2010

I found that it was because of the self-imposed restrictions that I could explore more permutations in form and firing. I was also lucky that during the start of this process a local ceramic supplier wanted me to test a range of clays from Australia and so that added another layer of variation.

I am finding that the more I make this form, the more I find it fascinating. The balance and proportions of the shape, the qualities of line and ribbing and the impact of the firing process all allow so many possibilities that it could

take me a long time to run dry. It feels like I'm on a path and all I've managed so far is to crest the first little rise to reveal a ribbon stretching out in the distance. One of my favourite areas of each piece is when I apply the lugs or handles. The piece transforms and gains character as the eye is drawn to this area of detail.

The use of the wood kiln as a decorating tool is quite common amongst wood firers - the flash of a flame, the scar of a wad mark and the ash-glaze drip, all contribute an aesthetic to the work. Contrary to popular belief it is no't a random process (or, rather, shouldn't be if you've fired enough times), and the most useful tool for a wood-firing potter is the hammer and a hole to fill. I utilise the firing and the ability of the sprayed soda ash to create a varied ceramic surface. I also employ a range of slips and washes that will work in concert with the body clay to bring about a depth and richness lacking in the original clay. The firing enhances the marks left by the making methods and brings out qualities of the materials that can be obscured by glaze. I am also a firm believer that refiring a good pot only makes it better and am increasingly recycling my pots from one firing into the next.



Albarello, Duncan Shearer, 2010

Another and non-trivial aspect is the sheer physicality of the firing; gathering wood, stacking the kiln, the heat of firing and the way the kiln responds to the stoking all give me pleasure. This aspect of my work necessarily remains hidden from people who buy my work, they must read the nature of my love of fire in the subtle markings on the pots.

Placing my work in the broader contexts of the craft or art world is a job I leave to critics. But I like to see these Albarelli as part of a continuum of vessel making, like a current that weaves in and out of a river that encompasses all manner of vessels. Part of a vital history that links all people in a concrete and visceral way, the personal connection we have to the vessel is strong and rewarding.

In this manner I also hope that my Albarelli tell a story, a narrative that explains the way I handle clay and fire, and also the way I consider parts of a vessel. These forms have become more personal the more I make them and consequently able to tell more stories, a development that excites me and offers huge potential.