

# The Joy of Kiln Ownership

by Michael Harbridge

I was 9 years old when I purchased my first kiln. I had worked hard mowing lawns and doing other odd jobs to save up the \$150 I needed to buy a used kiln from a local studio. At that time, not many in the industry took me seriously. I was just some kid. Nearly every time I walked into a studio, I got the same line: “Do you know what greenware is? Do you know how easily it breaks?” Fortunately, my determination and the encouragement of a few studio owners and artists kept me going. So many people treated me like I had no business in a ceramics studio.

Over the past 30-plus years, I’ve purchased and sold thousands of kilns to people young and old. Many kilns were for my use, but most were sold to other artists and studio owners. What I discovered rather quickly was the fact that people who invested in a kiln were likely to become some of the best customers. I never looked at the money I would lose from firing fees. Don’t get

me wrong — those fees added up. But in the long run, a customer with a kiln was much more likely to keep doing fired arts because of the investment they’d made. The more people we could encourage to purchase a kiln, the better the odds were that they’d be buying from us for years to come.

So, for those studio owners out there reading this article, please encourage the young and work with artists interested in purchasing kilns. They are the future! And for the artists reading this, think about getting your own kiln if you don’t already own one. Being educated and informed will make the selection and firing process much easier.

Many misconceptions about kilns exist. To set the record straight, electric kilns don’t blow up, they don’t send your power bill through the roof, and they are pretty simple to operate. Here are some basic considerations and things to know about owning a kiln.



## What do you plan to fire?

Determine what you plan to fire. Will you be working with ceramics, glass, or both? Some kilns are designed for ceramics, with elements in the sides, while others are made exclusively for glass, with elements primarily in the lid. Some kilns are constructed to go back and forth between the two firing options with the flip of a switch. If you think you may ever cross over between the two mediums, consider one of these kilns. If you are going to be exclusive to one medium, select the appropriate option. If you're doing ceramic firing, it's best to determine how hot you plan to fire, referred to as cone temperatures. Kilns have temperature restrictions, so if you're planning to work with high-fire materials, make certain the kiln is rated properly. Also keep in mind some kilns can go to higher temperatures but are not designed to do it consistently.

What about firing raku or horsehair? These methods can be done with electric or gas kilns. Some small electric kilns are ideal because they can plug into standard outlets, making it easy to use them outdoors. Larger electric kilns usually require special wiring. Some kilns have a door on the top, some are on the front, and others lift apart at the base, allowing the heat to stay in the main chamber. Gas kilns are common because they require no wiring and are easy to use outdoors. But I personally use both large and small electric kilns outdoors for all of my work. Many options exist, so explore all the opportunities until you find what's best suited to your needs.

Metal clay can be fired in small kilns that cost less than a couple hundred dollars. Most of these kilns plug into standard outlets and can be fired on the kitchen counter. Creating and selling only a couple pieces of metal-clay jewelry can pay for one of these kilns quickly.

## How big do you plan to go?

The size of the kiln will be determined by the size of the ware you plan to make. Don't buy a kiln larger than you'll ever use. If you plan to make large items only occasionally, you may be better off having those few items fired by someone with a larger kiln. Also make sure the area where you plan to place the kiln is large enough to accommodate the unit. Check the surroundings — will it fit through the doorways or down stairs to reach that area? Tall kilns can also be a challenge for shorter artists when trying to reach the bottom.

## How much power do you have?

Check your power supply to be sure you have enough juice. Large kilns can draw around 50 amps. Some older homes only have 100 amp service for the entire home. Even if you have the required power, be sure to have a qualified person run the wiring to the kiln. Skimping on the wiring can create issues later on.



## Manual or digital kiln?

Digital kilns outsell manual kilns because of all the programming options. For glass, digital is the best choice because many glass methods require firing to specific temperatures with holds. Some ceramic methods also require similar firing schedules. Manual kilns usually have a device called a kiln sitter that turns the kiln off when it reaches the correct temperature. The kiln sitter holds a small piece of clay, called a cone, and when the correct temperature is reached, the cone bends and shuts off the kiln. Digital kilns have a device called a pyrometer that monitors the temperature from a probe called a thermocouple inside.





Wholesale and Retail

# CERAMICS, POTTERY AND ART SUPPLIES



EVERYTHING YOU NEED UNDER ONE ROOF! COMPETITIVE PRICING ~ EXCELLENT CUSTOMER SERVICE

7495 SW 38th St. Ocala, FL 34474

352-861-7007

www.CandRCeramics.com



## New or used kiln?

New kilns are probably be the preferred option, because they come with a warranty. However, many used kilns are out there looking for homes. Just be aware that you could be acquiring a unit with issues. Be sure to check it over and find out how it was stored and used. If it's been sitting in a basement or shed for years, that may not necessarily be a good thing. Rusting kiln parts, digital or manual, can create problems.

## What brand is best?

Every artist you talk with will give their opinion on kilns they've owned, and that could be the best way to find out what may work best for you. Pretty much all the kiln companies make good quality units. You'll discover each manufacturer has unique features and options — that will help you with the decision. One thing to really talk to other artists about is the service they received from the company. Did they help if there were problems? Did they return calls promptly? All the little things make a difference.

## Where do I buy the kiln?

Most kiln companies work through distributors or dealers, so you won't usually be working with the manufacturer directly. Look for a reputable supplier who can answer your questions and who can service the kiln if needed. Most manufacturer warranties require the kiln be shipped back to the factory for service.

## Who can service my kiln if needed?

It's rare that anything goes wrong with a kiln, and they are pretty easy to maintain. But who will you call if that day does come? This goes right back to who you buy from. Sometimes ordering over the Internet can yield a little better price, but do you know who you're ordering from, and how helpful will they be after the sale?

## How do I use the kiln?

It's impossible to put directions for every kiln within this article. If you purchase a new or used kiln, make sure you get the instruction manual and read it from cover to cover. There are usually important steps regarding the first firing and details on everything you



need to know. Most manuals will cover troubleshooting, loading, and the actual firing process. You should also find details on simple maintenance items. It's very important that you follow the recommendations to keep the kiln running like new.

## How do I load the kiln?

The basic concept of firing a kiln is to load layers of ware inside the kiln. Kilns have optional furniture kits that come with shelves and posts, so you load one layer, add shelves, add another layer, and continue until you can't go any higher. It's normally recommended that you leave some space on the sides and top of the kiln to allow for expansion during the firing process.

## How much will it cost to run the kiln?

Many artists who install a kiln in their home hardly notice a difference in electrical costs unless they fire the kiln every day. A kiln fired once or twice a week won't have much of an affect. Some digital controllers can tell you exactly what it costs to fire the kiln. You can also check with a kiln supplier and they can give you an estimate based on your kilowatt-per-hour fee. In some areas there are lower fees to fire at night or at non-peak times.

## Is it safe to fire a kiln?

Kilns are safe to use when used properly. But kilns can't control what humans do! Reading and following the kiln instructions and making certain to keep flammable items away from a hot, firing kiln are just a start. Kilns are ovens that go to higher temperatures and have been in homes, studios and schools for years without issue.

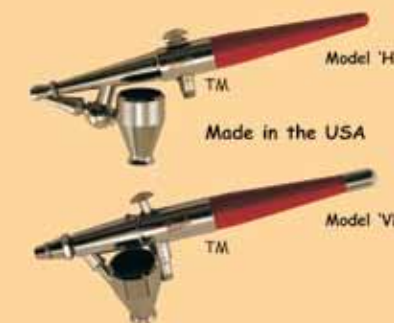
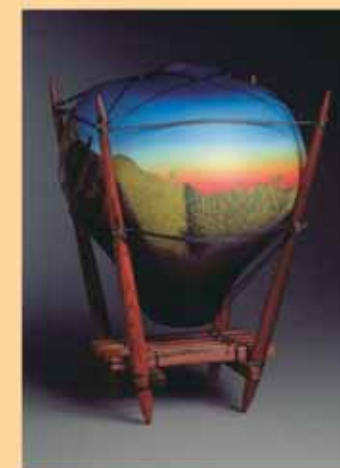
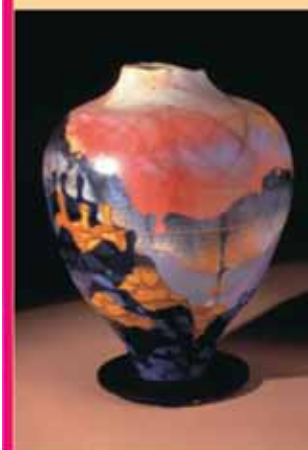
By knowing who you are buying from, understanding the process and the kiln, and using common sense, owning your own kiln will give you years of enjoyment.

*Fired Arts & Crafts* has a great resource on its website of past articles on firing kilns. Go to [www.firedartsandcrafts.com](http://www.firedartsandcrafts.com) and click on the lesson plan tab, which will take you to a categorized page of useful information. *FAC*

**About the Artist:** *Michael Harbridge has been teaching fired-arts workshops for more than 35 years and is the Educational Arts Manager for Royal & Langnickel Brush and creator of clay puzzling. He can be contacted by mail at P.O. Box 108, Iola, WI 54945, by phone at (715) 281-6450, or by e-mail at [info@claypuzzling.com](mailto:info@claypuzzling.com). Visit his website at [www.claypuzzling.com](http://www.claypuzzling.com).*

### Tom Krueger

*"My explanation of my work is idea-oriented. Some of it is phenomenality. It's like an afterthought, a revelation. Maybe at a later point, you realize what it is." His process is one that blends the favorable properties of three techniques: high fire salt glaze; raku; and pit firing. It's his single-fired process which uses combustibles to produce marks and shading on clay surfaces. The technique encourages "accents and accidents that become very much a part of the finished piece," says Tom. My Airbrush has always been the Paasche® Model 'H'.*



**PAASCHE AIRBRUSH COMPANY**  
4311 North Normandy Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60634-1395  
Phone: 773-867-9191 • E-Mail: [paascheair@aol.com](mailto:paascheair@aol.com) • [www.paascheairbrush.com](http://www.paascheairbrush.com)