The massive magnitude-9.0 earthquake struck northeastern Japan at 2:46pm on March 11, 2011. It caused a devastating tsunami, which swept away the homes and the lives of thousands of people. Soon night fell, but over the following days, we found out the amount of damage that this tragedy caused. With the panic over the ongoing nuclear power plant emergency and the aftershocks that continue to occur every day, the Japanese media fixed on the areas suffering most, the Tohoku region as a whole and Fukushima Prefecture, located in Tohoku, where the damaged nuclear plant is located.

Just to the south of Fukushima, and located inland, is the Tochigi Prefecture where the pottery town of Mashiko, home to Shoji Hamada's kiln, among many others, is located. It is perhaps the most known Japanese pottery production center among foreigners due to the Mingei connections overseas. "On the surface, the town seems calm, and it does not look like anything happened," Akihiro Nikaido, a leader of a young Mashiko potters group, Toism (http://touism.p1.bindsite.jp), said in a phone conversation. "It is mainly the potters who suffered."

The stories of Mashiko potters gradually unfolded, but it was not until three weeks after the earthquake that Japanese media first reported on Mashiko damage, which was estimated to be $9 million. Nearly all climbing kilns in the town fell down, and 40 percent of the Shoji Hamada collection was destroyed.

Soon after the earthquake hit, Ken Matsuzaki, whose climbing kiln was also destroyed, called out to the mayor of Mashiko village and established the Mashiko Pottery Fund (MPF) in order to raise money for rebuilding the kilns. "It is my personal connection to Pucker Gallery and Mudflat Studio in Boston that made me realize the need for such a foundation," he explained. Similar movement quickly happened between the Leach pottery in the UK and St. Ives Gallery in Tokyo, which launched the Mashiko Earthquake Appeal.

The Leach Pottery has raised $32,000 so far, and the fund will be exclusively donated to MPF. Mashiko and the Mingei Association had supported their rebuilding of the Leach Pottery in 2008, and they wished to offer support in light of this friendship. Koichiro Isaka, the director of St. Ives Gallery also organized a special exhibition with the same title that opened April 16, 2011, and features Mashiko potters who suffered losses in the earthquake.

By April 1, the Mashiko Support Center was established under the same public domain with the MPF and has now begun recruiting volunteers every day to clean up the broken rubble of what remained by Naomi Tsukamoto

For many potters, the road to recovery after the devastating March 11 earthquake in Japan begins with kilns.

Pots destroyed in the earthquake in the studio of Masakatsu Kuriya.
at each kiln site. It will take years to rebuild Mashiko. There are only a few professional kiln builders in town today, and rebuilding one climbing kiln could cost US$25,000–$35,000, Matsuzaki said.

“I was preparing for an exhibit, and all of the greenware I had, which would have filled five kiln loads, broke,” Nikaido said. Others suffered more, he said. Some were in the middle of a firing. Roofs fell, and even electric and gas kilns shifted, which cut off wiring. Some already have been forced out of their familiar home and studios, like Euan Craig (http://euancraig.blogspot.com) and his family. Nikaido explained that the foundations for homes in Mashiko are made of Ohyaishi, stone bricks from the area, which obviously is not earthquake-resistant construction. “My wife and our baby had to move temporarily because we are not far from the Fukushima nuclear plant,” he continued.

“Mashiko is not so united as a pottery village, as many people move here from elsewhere, just like I did.” He says he is worried about older potters because they may not be able to gather up their spirit to build kilns again. “Young potters are okay because we can build kilns again on our own, but we must work together to rebuild kilns in town.”

“Climbing kilns are the souls of Mashiko potters,” Matsuzaki said. “Saving the fire of the kilns is preserving our tradition of Mashiko as the sacred place of Mingei. We must keep the smoke coming out of chimneys in Mashiko. Right now, what is most important is that the potters have the hearts to want to rebuild kilns,” he explained.

Mashiko did not cancel this year’s spring pottery festival which was held April 29–May 5, 2011. By titling it “Persevere and Revive Mashiko,” they have already taken the first steps on the road to their recovery.

The photos included here were shared by various Mashiko potters and were collected by Masakatsu Kuriya, also a potter in Mashiko. You can view all the photos on Facebook at www.facebook.com/Rebuild.Mashiko.

Relief Organization Contact Information

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Email: mashiko_shien@yahoo.co.jp
Blog: http://mashikopf.exblog.jp/
You can donate through Mudflat Studio, which is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization and is the fiscal sponsor for the Mashiko Pottery Fund (MPF).
http://potters.blogspot.com/p/relief.html

**Mashiko Earthquake Appeal**
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1 Anagama (cave kiln) of Shikamaru Takeshita. 2 Noborigama Kiln (climbing kiln) of Iwashita Seito (Iwashima Ceramics Company, a small manufacturer). Photo: Masakatsu Kuriya 3 Studio of Akihiro Nikaido. The artist was preparing to move to a new studio, and was apparently throwing a pot when the earthquake hit.