

Buying a Used Kiln – a Deal or a Disaster?

From time to time we have customers and students ask us for advice on purchasing a used kiln. We liken this to asking whether it's a good idea to purchase a used car ... it will depend to a large extent on how well the kiln was maintained by the original owner and whether the kiln was manufactured by a reputable company. If you are considering a used kiln, we do have some helpful suggestions that may help you ascertain whether to make the purchase or give it a pass.

Before you waste your time (or the seller's) makes sure you will be inspecting a kiln that has ALL the features you really want. In other words, if you want a fully programmable kiln, DON'T settle for a manual kiln by telling yourself you'll add a controller later – you won't be saving any money, as add-on programmable controllers can run anywhere from \$250.00 and UP!!

The first thing you will want to do is ask the owner whether there is still a warranty in place on the kiln and if so, ask whether the warranty is transferable. Next, inspect the kiln. We cannot recommend purchasing a used kiln sight unseen. You would not buy a used car without driving it and/or having your mechanic inspect it would you?? The same common sense would apply to the purchase of a used kiln. You want to see it in person, and examine it thoroughly, INSIDE and OUT!

When looking over the interior of the kiln, the kiln shelf should be removed so that you have a clear, unobstructed view of the kiln floor. Did the previous owner coat the kiln floor with kiln wash thereby protecting the floor from any "accidents" (like small glass pieces that wound up on the kiln floor during the course of a firing) or can you see exposed kiln brick, and if so, can you see any evidence that small bits of glass have become lodged in the brick? If glass has become lodged in the brick, this can be problematic as each time the kiln is fired, the same piece of glass becomes molten again, and continues eating it's way further and further into the kiln brick. A large enough piece of glass, lodged in the kiln brick can, over time and repeated firings, eat its way through the brick causing a hole through the brick!

Next, examine the rest of the kiln brick, especially the brick surrounding the elements/heating coils. The electrical elements of the kiln are set into a groove or channel that has been specially cut into the kiln brick. If the brick surrounding the groove has been damaged, the coil/element can begin to sag (This is especially true when the elements are located in the lid of the kiln – those of us over 40 can appreciate the effects of gravity!). Now, remember kiln brick by its very nature has LOTS of tiny holes (sometimes they can be as big as ½ inch), so be sure you are making a distinction between a normal kiln brick and one that is crumbling!

Having mentioned the groove/channel into which the heating coils/elements have been placed, the next item to examine would be those coils/elements. It would be impossible to predict the “life” remaining in the elements/coils without some cooperation from the seller. You need to ask them how LONG they have had the kiln, and about how OFTEN they fire it? A heavy user (daily) might expect the elements to last about two years (providing they are not holding high temperatures for long periods of time). A light user (once or twice a week or less) might expect the elements to last even longer. Knowing how the kiln has been used and how old it is, may give you a clue as to the life remaining on the elements/coils. Replacing elements/coils is a job that most folks can do quite easily with a little instruction. Replacing the elements/coils can cost anywhere from \$25.00 (for a small table-top kiln) and up.

Next, have a good look at the EXTERIOR of the kiln. Again, examine the brick closely and look for dings or cracks in the brick. Is the metal jacket nice and snug or is it loose? Lift and lower the lid. Are the hinges sturdy or does the lid wobble and shift when raised and lowered? A loose lid is not fatal, it can be easily fixed, though this can be an indicator that the owner has not paid enough attention when it comes to maintaining their kiln. Be sure to have a good look on the UNDERSIDE of the kiln. Make sure the exterior floor of the kiln is without any cracks or gouges.

If you like what you are seeing thus far, then the next logical step would be to ask the owner to turn the kiln on. You want to see how efficiently/effectively the kiln heats, and in the case of a programmable kiln, you will want the owner to demonstrate the capabilities of the programmable controller. Ask the seller to walk you through programming the controller. Does it make sense to you? It is fairly easy to operate and will the controller meet your needs? In other words, if you are making six very different items in glass, and you have six very different firing schedules for each of these items, and the controller can only save FOUR programs, you will need to decide whether you can make peace with this, or keep looking.

Ask what items are being included with the kiln sale. You NEED a stand, a kiln shelf and kiln posts to support the shelf, so it makes sense to check and ensure that these items are available and included in the sale. The absence of any one or more of these items can cost you anywhere from \$25.00 (a small shelf) and up!!

Another important consideration is HOW you will transport the kiln from the seller’s location to yours. We don’t recommend shipping a used kiln unless the seller is able and willing to have the kiln professionally packed. Packing and shipping a kiln can be a costly proposition and may be more than the purchase price of the used kiln itself, which is why we recommend that IF you are considering a used kiln, that you look for one within a comfortable distance of your home/studio.

Lastly, we are frequently asked, “How much IS a used kiln worth?” We wish there was a mathematical formula or a Kelly Blue Book for kilns, but alas there is not, which is why your careful assessment of the kiln’s condition is the most helpful factor in determining whether you are wanting/willing to consummate the sale. We also recommend that you do a little homework on line first, and find at least two NEW kilns that are similar in size and features to the used kiln that you are interested in buying. A well maintained used kiln with some remaining term on the manufacturer’s warranty could be worth between 25 and 50% (or more) of the value of its brand new counterpart. Your careful observations can help you negotiate the best possible deal!