



# A Special Place

## The International Ceramics Studio in Kecskemét, Hungary

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### *Debra Sloan visits the International Ceramics Studio in Kecskemét, Hungary*

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**T**HE WIDE FRONT DOOR OF THE International Ceramics Studio [*Nemzetközi Kerámia Stúdió*] is set into a wall that extends around the entire facility. Upon entering, there is evidence that this institution is dedicated to ceramics. Guest artists, for decades, have left sculptures in this courtyard and around all the other five courtyards. The ICS is clearly a place of sanctuary and purpose and has become a cultural repository.

When first thinking of a residency, the attractions may be access to unique materials, a specialized instructor or focused working time. This institution represents more than that. Janet Mansfield calls it a 'special place'. The ICS has a long and complex history affected by the tide of political change and the social upheaval of Eastern Europe during the last century. Perhaps this is why there is a refreshing absence of bureaucracy and rules; restrictions instead are guided by practical limitations and courtesy. There are no off hours, most interior doors are unlocked and it is possible to wander freely through the compound at any time of the day or night. What you make, how you work and when you work is a private matter. Some artists have been known to think and not work during their entire residencies at the ICS.

In 1975 János Probstner established the International Ceramics Studio

*Entry way, first courtyard.  
Photo by Debra Sloan.*



in the city of Kecskemét, Hungary. Another 14 years would pass before the Soviet regime would end. Probstner had belonged to an informally organized group of young Hungarian artists now called the 'Nomadic Generation'. They were seeking artistic and ideological freedom from a dictatorship whose policies has been stifling Hungarian artists and controlling the work of those who had become renowned. In the early 1970s the members of this group travelled throughout the country seeking to identify and invigorate the Hungarian crafts, arts and music. During Probstner's travels, a group of political leaders from the county and city of Kecskemét, were tragically killed in a plane crash. They were unexpectedly

replaced by townspeople who were excited by the idea of bringing arts and culture to their city. With the support of the Bács-Kiskun County and the Kecskemét Town Council, Probstner was able to realize his dream of establishing a recognized and sponsored international ceramics residency. This residency would rebuild a Hungarian vision, provide a place where Eastern Bloc artists could work in freedom and would also allow these artists to work alongside invited international guest artists. Upon the dissolution of the USSR in 1989, great changes in freedom were also accompanied by great changes in the economic situation. Fortunately the county and city councils continued to generously sponsor the studio and provide complete funds for all of the artists up until 1998. As world economies have declined, however, (and especially since the recent recession) monetary support has become greatly reduced. Every year Probstner has had to work harder to locate other sponsorships and is always seeking interested connections. The ICS has been a member of the International Academy of Ceramics for over 30 years and is involved in an European Union sponsored research project called Project KNOWHOW that connects the Reykjavik School of Visual Art, Icelandic Academy of Art, Estonian Academy of Art, Glasgow School of Art and Cumbria Institute of Art and Design. (<http://www.knowhow.is>) ([www.knowhow.is](http://www.knowhow.is)). The ICS has opened the door to international students and has connections with universities worldwide, as well as Hungarian students from the University of Western Hungary, NYME in Sopron, where Probstner founded the Department of the Silicate Arts in 2001 and the Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design in Budapest. At the ICS, students are exposed to all manner of ceramics practices, in contrast to the design-oriented programs that are offered at many of these schools. In Probstner's words, the elements of the institute are "openness, versatility and comprehensiveness", "in the educational style of the renaissance, where master and apprentice live together". He believes that the ICS could be a model for artist education in the future. Probstner has remained true to his original intention of creating a facility where expression and expertise are sustained through experimentation and international exchange. He has been consistent in protecting

*Top left: Central courtyard, two wood-fire Fred Olsen kilns.*

*Photo by Debra Sloan.*

*Top right: Historic area in the back courtyard. Photo by Mary Daniel.*

*Above centre: One of the old wood piles in the old courtyard.*

*Above: Soviet era wiring for electric kilns. Photo by Debra Sloan.*



artistic expression at the ICS, keeping it politically disengaged, a challenging position to uphold in a politicized country like Hungary. The International Ceramics Studio is now the oldest year-long operating artist residency in Hungary.

When the ICS was founded, only traditional earthenware materials or open clay and glazes were available in Hungary. The large manufactories such as Herend and Zsolnay had a monopoly on the porcelains. The ICS started to locate alternate materials and equipment for a greater variety of technologies, temperatures and firing methods. Jóna Guðvarðardóttir, the art adviser of the ICS, made new glazes for a new stoneware body sponsored and developed by the studio. Stoneware was, at that time, a novel clay type in Hungary. A ceramic supply and retail shop, Interkeram Ltd, was established by ICS on site to serve Hungarian potters as well as resident artists. Eventually Interkeram Ltd. was privatized, has become an independent and successful business and is now situated off site. The ICS has also been given the right by the Herend manufactory to supply the wonderful Herend porcelain, the 'White Gold of Hungary', for the resident ceramists. Creaton, an excellent series of midrange German clays, are also available for the artists.

There are two galleries managed by the ICS; Museion No. 1, situated in central Budapest near the Applied Arts Museum and Museion, a handsome new gallery at the ICS serving the local community. As mentioned, until 1998 the county and municipality had generously sponsored Eastern European and International artists, with the proviso that each artist would leave an art work for the ICS Collection. Consequently the ICS Collection has become a repository and a visual history of contemporary [post World War II] Hungarian and Eastern European ceramics and is now one of the largest collections of modern ceramics in the world. The Collection is housed in the enormous cold cellars underneath the ICS and it is being recorded and catalogued. The collection is utilized for a rotating display housed in the Loft Gallery at the ICS and for travelling exhibitions. This impressive collection, however, should be removed from storage and be maintained in an appropriate museum/gallery setting. The ICS directors and other interested parties are actively seeking interest and support for this ambitious project. The existence of the ICS and its extraordinary continuity, has demonstrated that Probstner, the directors and the ICS staff can take an idea and make it become a reality.

Kecskemét is a fine old market town in the centre of the Great Hungarian Plain, 80 kilometres south of Budapest. As mentioned previously, the 1970s town council that replaced the lost souls from the plane accident was keen to enhance the city's cultural life. Consequently Kecskemét boasts an unusual number of galleries, artistic residencies and schools for a population of



*Top left: The plaster room.*

*Photo by Debra Sloan.*

*Top right: Jóna Guðvarðardóttir in one of the many underground cellars with the ICS Collection.*

*Photo by Terry Yip.*

*Above centre: Kiln area in the old courtyard. Photo by Debra Sloan.*

*Above: Klára Király and Jakab Kis, ICS technicians.*

*Photo by Mary Daniel.*



*Top left: Raku at the ICS: A method for big reduction.*

*Photo by Terry Yip.*

*Top right: Wood-fire Salt kiln in the central courtyard.*

*Photo by Debra Sloan.*

*Above: Lesco and Palinka midnight feast courtesy of the Sopron University students.*

*Photo by Debra Sloan.*

100,000. In addition to the ICS residency, The Kodály Pedagogical Institute of Music was opened in 1975, in honour of the internationally renowned Kecskemét musician and teacher, Zoltán Kodály, [born in 1888], educating young musicians from all over the world. Kecskemét Films is a famed Hungarian animation studio and residency. They host international animation festivals bi-annually, the next will be in 2011, the same year as the ICS's next Triennial exhibition and there is an annual symposium for metal enamelling. There is also a painting 'art colony' in the town. Other cultural sites are the Naïve Art Museum, the Museum of Folkart, the Toy Museum and the Museum of Photography.

In Kecskemét the ICS is situated by a small park (a cemetery in medieval times) and is contained within a walled enclosure. The older buildings on the north side of the complex were part of an historic and now protected group of grain merchant shops, wagon scale and a market square. There are modern structures as well: the Museion Gallery, an administrative building and a lecture hall. All of the buildings are grouped around several large courtyards, one leading to another, through a labyrinth of walkways, hallways, studios, supply closets, indoor and out door kiln areas, glass facilities, plaster rooms, a laundry room, a substantial library, kitchens and offices. Beneath all of this is yet another extensive labyrinth of old underground cellars, where the ICS Collection is sheltered. The ICS is built in the traditional method of thick adobe walls and brick floors with double windows and double doors to preserve the heat in winter and to keep the rooms cool in summer. The courtyards, shaded by old trees, are encircled with large outdoor ceramic sculptures and the air is filled with birdsong and distant church bells. Though enclosed and removed, the ICS is near the city centre of Kecskemét; museums, churches, theatres, restaurants, markets and shopping are all easily within walking distance.

The facilities are expansive, with gas kilns of varying size and style: two Fred Olsen wood kilns (one designated to salt), nine electric kilns, Raku kilns, glaze rooms, a large plaster room, a room for photography and silk screening, an area with grinders and spray booths, a separate building with glass facilities and a variety of studio areas. There are many guest rooms, three kitchens and a library with computer and Internet. It is a large complex and maintained by a small and hard working staff. The facility is not in perfect condition, as funding is always short. Things go wrong occasionally, language/ communication is always an interesting challenge but in its entirety, the ICS is an impressive, complete and fully functional facility that offers a resourceful ceramist all the tools, support and space required.

During my 11 week residency, there were five international artists, three international students and a group of 20 Hungarian students from the Sopron University completing their third and fourth years, all in resi-

*The 3rd International Silicate Arts Triennial will again take place in Kecskemét, Hungary in May 2011 building on the success of previous competitions. It is becoming a major part of the international exhibition forum. Information and application forms for the 3rd Triennial will be available on our web site from July 2010 and the application deadline will be 15 JANUARY 2011.*



Top left: Studio after seven weeks.  
Photo by Debra Sloan.

Top right: Some of Klara Király's kiln-angel collection.  
Photo by Terry Yip.

Above: Kecskemet town square on a winter morning.  
Photo by Debra Sloan.

dence. Three renowned Hungarian artists, Imre Schrammel, Mária Geszler and Sándor Kecskeméti, visited and rented studios and kilns. Ed Bentley from Bentley-Stoll Design Company, Cumbria, UK, held an excellent and intensive week long plaster mould design workshop. The guests and residents got to know each other well and every Sunday night we rotated hosting group dinners and gave presentations. The students treated us to a midnight feast of *lecsó* (a traditional soup prepared over an open fire) and smaller groups of us would often eat together at the excellent restaurants nearby. My Facebook network has increased considerably. In March there was a series of exhibitions held in various galleries around Kecskemét arranged jointly by the Danish and Hungarian governments. In particular, at the Museion Gallery, was an excellent travelling Danish exhibition, *GlassGoldRubber&Recycling*. In April there is an annual three-week *Tavaszi* (Spring) festival featuring many international performances and events. In May the ICS hosted a multi-national delegation planning to establish an international ceramics-glass workshop and exhibition in Europe. In June students from the Kansas City Art Institute arrived for their annual one-month residency. During the summer, the ICS runs most of its short workshops featuring internationally renowned instructors.

One of the intriguing aspects of the ICS is the shadowy presence of the old Soviet regime. The staff members, most having worked at the ICS for at least one or more decades, remember the affect of living under a dictatorship. They are protective of this institution where artistic freedom is celebrated and never taken for granted. Their dedication, generosity and knowledge enriched my residency tremendously. It is so rare to find a place in this world where artistic endeavour is deeply valued and the artists are supported and respected for their efforts.

A residency could be considered a collaborative experience. Artists bring only their knowledge, ideas and skills and these are challenged by unfamiliar materials and circumstances. What is produced will reflect the artist's response to the other residents, the members of staff and the nature of the facility. It certainly is a demanding and potentially a life-altering experience. Participating in a residency is also a privilege, being able to step away from day-to-day demands and to be given time for exclusive focus on one's own practice.

Debra Sloan is a sculptor and potter from Vancouver, BC, Canada. She has initiated a Registry of Marks, to represent all BC potters, present and past and is also collecting historic materials for the Potters Guild of British Columbia Archive, the oldest potters guild in Canada. ([www.debrasloan.com](http://www.debrasloan.com))

More information on guests and events can be found on the ICS Facebook site.

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