

A Resident's Diary

International Ceramics Studio

Kecskemet, Hungary

June–August 2107

Written by John Tuckwell



Tuckwell detail.

Coming to somewhere like this during summer is a way of breaking out of the kind of work-to-a-deadline mentality. It gives you an opportunity to play.

It's the morning after a large storm and even though I know there are lots of dented cars and damaged crops outside, inside the walls there is a freshly washed calm.

This is my second week at the International Ceramics Studio (ICS) at Kecskemet in Hungary and I am on this residential adventure without really stopping to ask the big question: *Why I am doing it?*

I have a perfectly good workshop full of everything I need to make any thing I want. I tell myself that I need to be somewhere else without day to day pressures. There is a list of options drawn up to work through and two months to work through them. Only at the end do I expect that I will have an answer to my question.

Kecskemet is an easy one-hour south of Budapest airport and a little further from Budapest itself. This is an apparently prosperous city of more than 100,000 people. It is easy to like – for my summer trip it seems that there is a festival of some sort every other week.

For my two months I think I might go from new boy to grizzled veteran, so I will try to disregard any external distractions and keep working.

When I arrive there is group of students from an American university. I ask Alex Hibbitts, an associate professor at Ohio University who is leading the group, why she has returned with several groups in the last few years.

Hibbitts: I have brought students here to the ICS and have come once myself for a month's residency because the ICS is a really special place.

You walk in and you feel this amazing atmosphere of focus and positivity to really try new ideas and for the students I think this is an incredible opportunity to work alongside artists from all over the world.

For myself I think that one big reason for coming here is the materials we get to use ... like the porcelain.

So this question becomes: Why attend a residency when you already have workshop?

Tuckwell: I'm interested in that, can you elaborate?

Hibbitts: It's a good question because, as someone who teaches full time (I was a graduate chair for four years) a huge amount of time is spent on administration and, basically, I can only get into my studio maybe at the weekend, maybe some time after 7 or 8pm. In summer, coming to somewhere like this is a way of breaking out of the kind of work-to-a-deadline mentality. It gives you an opportunity to play."



Tuckwell detail.

The studio is very well resourced. There is a team of technical staff who seem to be never flustered. Modern kilns and studio equipment. The office and management staff are helpful and it feels like the place is committed to the task of making the visiting artists' lives easy and, by extension, making the future of the studio sound.

There is a substantial collection of works collected from over 40 years. It is a wonder to have the opportunity to see so many wonderful pieces but equally it is sad that only a small part is publicly available. Welsh-born Steve Mattinson is the long-time coordinator and manager of the Studio. We spoke about the collection.

In the last 12 months there is something like 100 artists waiting to be juried into the collection. Our storage problem is huge. We don't have the space to keep adding to it unless we do something about how we display the collection. It doesn't have a permanent museum which I think it deserves. Over the years we have tried to get funding towards it and there have been lots of plans. The original idea of the museum building, where we have the gallery, was going to be a museum for the collection. In the end there wasn't enough money. There was just enough money to build the building and no more so it became something else.

We still have plans for developing a museum in Kecskemet because the collection is officially owned by the town council anyway ... ish.

I'm here for two months and I am well into my second. There is a little call from the back of my head that says "panic".

Tuckwell: I look at the collection and it's right up there for range and quality with almost any other in the world, yet it doesn't have a home. I understand money doesn't grow on trees.

Mattinson: It is, I think, a difficult problem for every museum which has a collection of work. It's not possible to display it all.

Our collection is over 3600 pieces. We are still adding to the collection every year. In the old days, until about 1996, every artist who came here was by invitation and they were fully supported. The quid pro quo of that was that they had to leave so many pieces for our collection. As times have changed and more people come here as artists in residence, and who are paying to come here, it is different, if you like. We don't have that same requirement. We can't demand that they leave some of their work.

So it is a personal choice by the artist – if they wish to donate or not. But we are still in the position to invite; for example, this year there are twenty artists to come, and whose work we want in the collection. They usually have a month here to work. Accommodation is provided free. They have a materials budget and of the finished work we can select so many pieces. So our collection is constantly being added to.

We have a small gallery space where we show, I suppose, 200 pieces which get changed every few months. We have lots of exhibitions from the collection go out. Not just in Hungary but also abroad. This year there have been nine exhibitions go out from here, with the largest about 300 pieces. So it does get seen; it's just that we don't have the space to display it all at any one time.

I don't think any museum would anyway. But our main problem is conservation of the collection. It needs better looking after, but that is financial restraints.

Tuckwell: It is amazing what does get done here considering, obviously, money is not being thrown at you.

Mattinson: Some of the works in our collection are quite iconic in world ceramics. I remember when I was a student seeing work in books and coming here and then: Christ!! There it is. I remember seeing that when I was a student!!

There are lots of works in our collection which don't have the credit they deserve – and I think that was a problem when I was a student. We learned about Leach; we learned about Japan, and about Asia; and we learned nothing about the Soviet bloc. When I first came here to see the works it was eye-opening.

American ceramic artist Dianne Kempler is a serial visitor and for this trip she is working for an upcoming exhibition. She described the way the studios work for her.

Tuckwell: *You've been to multiple different residencies and also several times returned here. Why here?*

Kempler: I come back here after being at others because the atmosphere is so supportive, so conducive to work. I get a large comfortable studio which I have had for several years; my living facility is fine. I come here and it is as if anything goes. No one is asking you to do anything except to feel comfortable and work. Do what one wishes to do without a need to produce and to satisfy no-ones demand except your own.

I think the reason I love being here is the seamlessness of living, working, and sleeping. Like the other night I worked late, 2 o'clock, 3 o'clock in the morning. It's very quiet and it's very safe here because there's a locked door and you can't get in unless you have a key.

New Zealand ceramicist Tammy Kuypers arrived on a tandem cycle.

She says that she had a long European trip planned with her husband Darcy and decided to look for somewhere that she may be able to undertake a course and learn something she may be able to use in her practice. For her, choosing to come to Kecskemet followed easily after seeing an outline for a multi week course with Latvian Ilona Romule.

I asked her if she would come back.

Kuypers: I would definitely come back here because the school is first class and providing international artists. I had been looking at courses, looking for something that interests me. I would also look at other schools, if the course is attractive and we can manage it then absolutely I would go somewhere else as well. Just to check it out

Tuckwell: *Is this your first time travelling abroad to learn something?*

Kuypers: Yes

Tuckwell: *Have you developed a taste for it?*

Kuypers: Yes. Although we had been in Hungary before and enjoyed our stay here - so it was kind of familiar, and a bonus is that the courses and workshops are run in English.

Without planning I have arrived in Hungary at a junction point for the International Ceramics Studio. My finishing point coincides with the start of a symposium celebrating the first 40 years of the studio's existence. There are potters arriving from all over Europe and the world for the one-month symposium with associated exhibitions and lectures. Almost my last meal is the spectacular goulash lunch to welcome the participants. I think I would like to stay.

What did I get out of it? Being out of my own country around artists who have developed in an entirely different way has allowed me to have a bigger view. The International Ceramics Studio grew from a very different culture to the Asian/Western Europe/American way of seeing things, which is dominant. The studio still has the Eastern European influence which values strong training and high technical skills. That culture is still strong.

The list of options I started with has been worked through and now I am going home with a new set.

The idea of being somewhere else to refocus on my work without the need to mow the lawn or wash the dog is a good one. That extra concentration is worth it. For me at least.

John Tuckwell, 2017 ■



Far Left: Tammy Kuypers and Kata Sumegi.

Left top: The collection is often shown at external exhibitions.

Left bottom: My workshop.

Opposite: Tuckwell vessel.

More information

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