

Edinburgh College of Art – Kookmin University Exchange Programme

Rhona McCallum Jewellery and Silversmithing



Kookmin University Campus Day 1: 27 February 2010

From the 27th February to 2nd July 2010 I undertook an exchange programme at Kookmin University, Seoul, South Korea. The experience as a whole was challenging but so rewarding. I learnt new skills in metalwork as well as learning about the culture and traditions of Korea, a country I had little knowledge of before my arrival.

Kookmin University is situated in the north of Seoul, beside Bukhansan National Park. This location, surrounded by mountains and beautiful scenery, made it a really enjoyable and relaxing environment to study in. The school of design at Kookmin is famous in Korea and the students are extremely talented. I admit I was terrified about working there with them as their skills in metalwork are phenomenal.

Exchange students were recommended to take three classes; I chose Craft Design, Art Jewellery and Stone Cutting. On Mondays I had stone cutting class which I found really interesting as it was a brand new discipline for me. We began by learning basic cutting and polishing techniques. At first it was quite scary as the class was taught in Korean and I had to rely on students to translate for me. I did not have to worry for long as even though the teacher did not speak English, she tried her best to help the exchange students and was incredibly kind and patient with us.



Examples of stonecutting work from first project

Craft Design was taught on Tuesdays by Heather Bayless, an American jewellery artist. The whole class was taught in English which, while it made it much easier for me, made it difficult for some of the students in the class whose English was not as good as the rest. In this class I really saw for the first time how good the students were at metalwork. This class was difficult as Heather gave us a very full timetable and a lot of work, so I had to organise my time well (something I have struggled with in the past!) At the end of our first project I discovered 'Yajak', the word for when students work all night. Many of the students did this before a deadline.



Work from my first Craft Design Project to make a comb/hair piece

My other class was Art Jewellery, taught on a Thursday which was probably the most difficult out of the three. We did two projects in this class over the semester. In this class I was free to work with any materials I wanted so I took it as a good opportunity to be experimental. I tried digital printing on metal which was a really interesting process to learn. At the end of the semester we had a group exhibition in the gallery space in the college of design building which was a great chance to see everyone's work together.

Although it was difficult settling into a new department, I found that my classmates were incredibly kind to me, especially those who had been on exchange before and knew how it felt to be a stranger in someone else's class. In addition to translating some parts of lessons for me, some of the students helped me a lot with things such

as buying bedding for my dormitory, buying food, applying for my student card and library card etc. Without their help I think I would really have struggled.



Some examples of my classmates and my work at our exhibition

The students at Kookmin work in a very different way to those at Edinburgh College of Art. I found that their metal work skills were of an incredibly high quality as their first two years on the course are purely focusing on technical skills rather than design. I felt under a lot of pressure to begin making a final piece right away as I was used to spending time developing my design and making test pieces and samples first. While I wasn't particularly comfortable working in this way, it was a good experience to see how other schools teach design and to force myself to start working in metal earlier in a project.

Unlike in Edinburgh, we couldn't buy metals, tools or materials from the department so I had to travel into Jongno, an area of the city centre, whenever I needed anything. At first this was really challenging as I had to find my way there, and know how to ask for what I needed. The jewellery quarter in Seoul is a really fantastic area. There you can do casting, laser cutting and gold and silver plating, and there are

numerous shops selling metals and tools. This is something I definitely miss now that I'm back in Edinburgh!

I lived on campus in the student dormitory, which houses Korean students as well as international students. The dormitory rooms can take up to four students. There are two bunk beds, and a desk and wardrobe each. It was basic but had everything we needed.



Student Dormitory



Some of my classmates at the barbeque

Outside of class I spent a lot of time with the other exchange students from Sheffield, Kansas and Heidelberg as well as some of the Korean students from my

class. We ate out for almost every meal as there was no kitchen in the dormitory, and the food in restaurants was very cheap! I really enjoyed the Korean food, although it took me a little while to get used to how spicy it was. I loved trying all of the different foods that my classmates liked and in my first week they invited me to try Korean barbeque, where you cook all of the meat yourself and cut it with scissors before wrapping it in lettuce leaves. Unfortunately I did not really like kimchi, the national dish of Korea, which proved difficult as it comes with absolutely everything you order!



The City of Seoul

Seoul is one of the most densely populated cities in the world, which is easy to see when you travel into the city centre. On my first day I was completely gobsmacked by how busy it was, and how much I didn't fit in! To put it into perspective, Seoul has over twice the population of the whole of Scotland. There is a constant buzz of energy around the place and there are things to see and do 24 hours a day.

Seoul is an incredible city. One thing I found really fascinating was that there is such a contrast between the ultramodern and traditional. There are five ancient palaces in the city, which have been beautifully restored following the Korean War in 1950-53 when some of them were badly damaged. Visiting the palaces was a strange

experience as you feel like you are a million miles away from the city centre as they are so peaceful. However, right next to them are huge skyscrapers and construction sites. Seoul is also one of the most technologically advanced cities and Korea boasts the fastest internet speeds in the world so mobile phones, computers and gadgets in general seem far superior to anything I have at home. The transport system is so efficient and cheap and is so easy to use that it took little time for me to feel comfortable travelling around by myself.



My class following the opening of our end of semester exhibition

After finishing my projects at Kookmin University I chose to take part in a 3 day traditional iron forging workshop at the Korean National University of Cultural Heritage. I was really glad to have the opportunity to do something completely new to me and thoroughly enjoyed taking part. It was really hard work but the teachers there were brilliant and helped me so much. As well as forging we were shown techniques in how to colour and weld iron.



Iron forging workshop

My stay in Korea really was a once in a lifetime experience given the events that occurred while I was staying in the country. An amazing and exciting experience was watching and supporting South Korea in the 2010 World Cup with thousands of other people at Seoul's City Hall. I watched all of South Korea's matches and although the time difference meant it often turned into a late night, I loved being a part of that atmosphere and excitement.

Going to Korea was the scariest thing I have ever done, and I can't express how frightened I was as I left my family in the airport back in February. I am so proud of myself for going there and achieving what I did. I learned so much from my classmates and teachers and feel like I have come home more ready than ever to take on my final year at Edinburgh College of Art. I would really like to thank the Incorporation of Hammermen for sponsoring me, as none of this would have been possible without their help. I also want to thank Edinburgh College of Art and Kookmin University for allowing me to have this incredible opportunity. I really had the time of my life in Seoul.