

EXCHANGE WITH KOOKMIN UNIVERSITY, SEOUL, SOUTH KOREA

Thanks to the support that I received from the Incorporation of Hammermen of Edinburgh and the ACJ (Association for Contemporary Jewellery), from February to June 2011 I was able to take part in an exchange programme with Kookmin University in Seoul. I can say that, despite all the hard work, they have been the greatest four months of my student life so far. From the personal point of view it was an incredible and very rewarding experience.

SEOUL

Korea is so different from any other country I ever lived in that it made it really challenging. Seoul is a huge metropolis, full of bright neon lights, shops, food stalls, restaurants and colourful markets. If New York is the city that never sleeps, Seoul is most definitely the city that never fasts! Food is everywhere and plays a big role in their culture (there is even a museum dedicated to *kimchi*, Korea's best known food, consisting of fermented cabbage and spicy chilli). Thousands of restaurants, bars, cafés and street food vendors fill the city, wherever you go. It is virtually impossible not to think about food!



Food stall in Namdaemun Market, Seoul

When I had some free time, I loved getting lost in one of the many markets selling all sorts of products. My favourite market was Dongdaemun (Great East Gate); there is a huge building on 5 levels where I used to go to find silks, fabric, trimmings and lots of different threads.



Dongdaemun Market, Seoul.

Another fascinating district, which I visited quite regularly, was Jongno, Seoul's jewellery district. I used to go there almost every week to buy metals, tools and stones or to have some of my pieces etched or gold plated.

Seoul is not a particularly beautiful city in itself; most of the buildings are new and grey condominium-style blocks, quite anonymous, but there are some wonderful Buddhist temples and ancient palaces surrounded by gardens, where one can retreat to escape the noise and the buzz of the city. The colours of the palaces are very bright and vibrant, and provide a constant source of inspiration.



Geungjeong-jeon the throne hall
Gyeongbokgung Palace, Seoul



Gyotae-jeon the residence of the queen
Gyeongbokgung Palace, Seoul

Seoul is also a fantastic place in terms of exhibitions. Every week at least one new jewellery exhibition was opening in town. I had the opportunity to see great work and I often met and talked to the artists, which was very interesting. Besides going to jewellery exhibitions I went to visit museums, arts and crafts exhibitions, galleries and also an artist village two hours north of Seoul. The area is called Heyri Art Valley. It is an arts and culture community established by artists (writers, painters, architects, musicians and artists from various fields) and it has many interesting residential buildings, galleries, workshops and other purposely-built spaces.



With my classmates and teacher at the National Museum of Korea, Seoul

The biggest obstacle that I found when I arrived in Seoul was the language. Not very many people speak English, which makes even basic things like catching a bus or shopping at the supermarket rather difficult. However, people are generally so nice that they go out of their way to help, so I never found myself stuck and I was

able to get around fairly easily on my own. After the initial culture shock I managed to learn how to read *hangul* (the Korean alphabet) and that helped a lot.



Bus stop outside Kookmin University, Seoul

STUDYING

I guess the hardest thing to get used to about university life was living in the dorm. I never lived in a dorm before and having to share a room was not always easy. The midnight curfew was also difficult to adapt to.



My bed and desk in the dorm

The dorm was brand new, which was good on the one hand as everything was clean and unused, but on the other hand we did not have any cooking facilities, so I had to eat out all the time. Food is fairly inexpensive in Korea, but after a while I have to admit that I was craving a simple salad!



Traditional Korean meal with some classmates!

When I arrived at University I was assigned a helper, a girl in my class who spoke very good English and helped me a lot during my four months there. She also became one of my best friends and came to visit me in Edinburgh when I returned.

Life as a student in Korea is fairly different from Britain or Europe for that matter. Korean students spend many hours in the workshop (they often eat and even sleep there!), something that we are not really used to. On a couple of occasions I also spent the night in the studio, in order to finish some of the pieces that I was working on. Despite the tiredness we were always in a good mood, because the

atmosphere was very friendly. Fellow students were very nice to me and tried to help me in whatever way they could. Even if the conversation was not always flowing, because of the language barrier, we managed to communicate and had a good time together.



Preparing *mandu* (Korean dumplings) in the workshop

Besides working in the studio, I attended two classes, Metal and New Materials & Techniques. Both classes were taught in Korean, which made it a bit hard (especially at the beginning), but they were both very stimulating for me. I especially enjoyed working with new materials and was very satisfied with the work that I produced.



Necklace and brooch that I made using rice paper, thread and oxidised copper

The four months that I spent in Seoul were very special and enriching. I met nice people, learnt new skills and techniques, made new friends and experienced a culture that I would have not had come into contact with otherwise. It was a fantastic opportunity and I am very grateful to my sponsors for allowing me to participate in this exchange.