

Römhild 2008 - Phoenix from the ashes

The 8th International Ceramics Symposium

Heidi Preus-Grew



The International Ceramics Symposium in Römhild was a legend in the GDR since 1978. It was one of the few events at which an international cultural exchange took place during the partition of Germany. After unification, the last symposium took place in 1993. In April 2007, a society was founded in Römhild with the purpose of reviving the symposium, and in 2008, a new cycle of Römhild symposia began, this time with five participants, which is to be repeated every three years. Heidi Preus-Grew, an American with German roots, was one of the participants and sends us this report.



I came to the 8th International Ceramics Symposium in Römhild with much anticipation to participate in its rebirth. The Römhild symposium has long had a very good reputation among ceramicists in the United States and, after viewing the strong and surprisingly broad collection from past international symposia participants at the Museum Schloss Glücksburg, one can fully understand why. This collection is of particular note since Römhild is situated in the former GDR and nonetheless became a magnet for so many international artists despite the obstacles to travel in the former Eastern bloc. I was interested in visiting a nearby East-West border educational centre a few kilometres away from Römhild that preserves a watch tower, the three zonal fences, including a section of deactivated landmines, and deep cement trenches intended to prevent high-speed car escapes. Lively conversations with locals throughout the symposium covered many topics and included their experiences prior to reunification and during reunification, which lasted about a year long. Of course, these were often accompanied by tasty regional beer and occasionally the famed local sausage and Klöße (specialty potato dumplings).

Römhild is a wonderful small town located in the Thuringian forest at the base of the adjacent "Gleichberge," two beautifully wooded mountains so named for their similar form and size. On them are incredible early Celtic settlement remains dating from 5000 B.C.E. with prominent bronze, stone, and ceramic archaeological finds housed in the nearby Steinsburg Museum. This museum, and other regional buildings, were funded by a local resident who emigrated to America in the 1800s and made his fortune brewing beer. I soon learned that Römhild's present citizens have a similar generous nature: they are world-oriented people

ILLUSTRATIONS -

top - discussing work during the symposium

left - Danijela Tennert at work and, below, a piece created during the symposium

centre column - Heidi Preus-Grew at work and, below, a piece of her work



who are exceptionally *gastfreundlich* (guest friendly), warm, and welcoming. Indeed, their determination and hard work brought this symposium back and it is through them that I learned much about the region and its history.

The arrangements for the symposium were carefully planned and supported by many local and regional sponsors. We were housed in a cheerfully operated youth centre that was interestingly once a Stasi secret police complex. On warm days we ate our breakfast and dinner outside in the garden surrounded by nature. We either rode bikes, walked, or drove into town to Eliog, a company that designs and manufactures industrial kilns for international export, where an enormous warehouse was cleared for our use. The symposium had formerly been hosted by Gramann Töpferei, a pottery founded in 1720 that employed 450 people in its height during GDR times - today there are only four employees remaining. At Eliog, we had 24-access to our studio and occasionally joined factory workers in the cafeteria for lunch. An ambitious programme accompanied our visit, including lectures by regional scholars, several wood kiln firings, including one modelled in an early Celtic form, concerts and festivals in the Glücksburg castle courtyard, weekly *Künstlergespräche* (artist conversations) open to the public, and outings to cultural sites and cities, such as the renowned theatre city Meiningen. There is much to discover in this area; it is an inspiring place! The main church in Römhild, for example, is a stunning Gothic building that predates the founding of my own country. We also went on a special excursion with Marcus Weingarten, a local potter, to hunt local clay deposits in the forest near our

dormitory. The clay was exceptionally plastic straight from the source and fires a warm reddish colour at 1000 degrees Celsius (1832 degrees Fahrenheit). We took special note of a lush pond, now filled with mountain spring water, which may have possibly been a past Gramann pottery excavation site.

As is often the case when I work abroad, I arrived without a preconceived idea for the theme, "Phoenix from the ashes," but rather planned and expected that this new environment would readily influence my studio output. Indeed, there is much in any given day to provide fertile inspiration, such as elements of a conversation lost in translation or a certain regional hand gesture used by new friends. My observations, particularly

of the thoughtful and tireless efforts of the symposium organizers and engaged locals, were then transformed and re-presented in a new way through figurative ceramic sculptures. I melded animal and human features together to develop specific meaning, symbolism, and psychological impact—it is a combination that allows great freedom in the creative process and results in characters that straddle both real and fictional worlds. This is an intuitive process but nonetheless consciously responsive to available materials, my imaginative intentions, and the real-life situations that inspired the work.

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Photos - Peter Ruszwurm



ILLUSTRATIONS -

above - **Gudrun Petzold** during the symposium;
a group of pieces created there

middle row - **Stephanie Link** at work;
one of her "arrangements"

bottom - **Elsbietta Grosseova** at work;
one of her pieces