

IDEALISATION AS A DESIGN APPROACH IN ENAMELLED CONTEMPORARY JEWELLERY

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Abstract

The Platonic notion of idealism, specifically used in the botanical imagery represented in Renaissance paintings is investigated in this paper and compared to the botanical motifs used in Renaissance enamelled jewellery. The same process of idealisation used in Renaissance painting and enamel jewels is applied to South African botanical motifs, which creates a stylistic departure from the botanical images used during the Renaissance.

It can be postulated that Plato's theory on the thrice removed reality can be applied to the jewellery designer where nature (the form) was imitated as an ideal image by Renaissance painters (first representation). The idealised images from these paintings or drawings were then further interpreted by Renaissance jewellery designers and applied as even more stylised motifs in the jewels (second representation) due to the even further idealisation of the original form. Hence, subjects and objects became 'idealised' through the conversion of a philosophical principle into an artistic style. Thus, in the artistic or design approach of idealism, artworks became representations of the ideal form which were created through the process of perception and recollection.

The approach in this research is threefold. Firstly, a literary review is conducted on the thought and theory of idealism and its link with Renaissance painting and enamelled jewellery. This literature review contextualises the idealisation of botanical motifs, enamelling techniques and colours employed on Renaissance jewellery. Secondly, images and information on selected Renaissance paintings and enamelled jewellery incorporating botanical motifs are compared and analysed in order to investigate the progression of the idealised motif. Such pieces are interpreted, processed and the overall designs in each category stylistically analysed. Through the analysis of the pieces in terms of design format, enamelling techniques, enamelling types and colours used, the basic design model that was employed in the designing of the piece becomes apparent. The enamelling techniques, types, colours and motifs are re-applied using the notion of idealisation, to South African botanical motifs and a design is constructed for contemporary enamel jewellery.

Lastly, although enamel is chosen as the medium in this case study it can be substituted with other mediums employed in contemporary jewellery.

Results from the design framework are practically applied through the designing and manufacturing of contemporary jewellery using enamel as a medium. The botanical motifs used in the contemporary jewellery would thus represent the idealised image of the South African botanical example, which would be based on the idealised botanical images of Renaissance jewellery. Hence, the motifs would be thrice removed from the 'truth', which is aligned with Plato's theory on idealism. This would show the application of an historical design principle to contemporary design.

Historical fine art concepts can thus be applied and used as a design approach in contemporary jewellery design and, as a result, a contemporary enamel range of jewellery is created, translated from the Renaissance idealised botanical motifs into a South African context.

Keywords: *Idealisation, Renaissance, enamelled contemporary jewellery.*

Introduction

This paper is based on current research which proposes to create contemporary enamel jewellery using idealisation as a design approach. The Renaissance, a cultural movement originating in Italy and spreading to other European countries such as France, England, Spain and the Low Countries (a period ranging from 1150 to 1580) forms the historical context of the study because of the inclusion of botanical motifs in both forms of art and the extensive use of enamel in Renaissance jewellery design.

Enamel, the material used to introduce colour to the contemporary pieces, is coloured glass which is fused onto a metal base at a high temperature (Clark, Feher & Feher 1967, p. 8). This coloured glass, or enamel, consists of a clear flux and metal oxides, which not only introduce colour to the flux, but also determine the degree of translucency of the specific enamel once fused. The idealised representation of botanical images in Renaissance jewellery, which relates to the Renaissance paintings, was enhanced through the use of enamel, and thus is chosen to retain the historical context in terms of the colour and techniques used during the Renaissance.

The aim of this paper is achieved through focusing on individuated design, which is facilitated by the development of a design framework and practically applied to create contemporary jewellery pieces. A further objective of this paper would be to investigate how idealised botanical motifs, discernible in Renaissance jewellery, can aid in the design of contemporary enamel jewellery. As a result, this would also address the problem of creating contemporary designs within a South African context and with a unique South African identity.

Definition of 'idealism'

Although the concepts of 'idealism', 'idealise' and 'idealisation' are related, they are by no means the same. Idealism is defined by Blackburn (2008, p. 177) as a philosophical doctrine where reality is fundamentally mental in nature. Although many forms of idealism exist, the most common manifestation of idealism is the creation of a world through the employment of mind-dependant linguistics and social categories. The dichotomy of idealism lies within this definition, as we do not 'create' worlds, but find ourselves in one. Furthermore, Little (2002, p. 1310) defines idealism from a philosophical stance as 'any of various systems of thought in which the object of external perception is held to consist of ideas not resulting from any unperceived material substance'. This definition could relate to the artistic or design approach of idealism where artworks became representations of the ideal form which were created through the process of perception and recollection.

The study mainly refers to Plato's interpretation of idealism, specifically focusing on his dialogues in Book X of *The Republic*. In this, Plato discusses his ideal state and, subject to that, the role that the arts (specifically poetry and painting) should play in these idealised circumstances. Plato (1974, pp. 336-339) describes the work of artists as mere representations of objects (the reality) and explains that a work of art is a copy of a copy of a form (three time removed from reality), thus creating an illusion or an ideal form that does not exist. Plato concludes that the artist knows little or nothing about the subjects that he represents and that the art of representation holds no serious value. However, despite these critiques from Plato, Classic Greek artists used idealism as a guide in the creation of their artworks.

Idealisation as a design approach during the Renaissance

In contrast to the largely theological studies of the mediaeval times, the Renaissance was based on an avid study of the classical works of Greece and Rome. This attempt to re-establish both classical thinking and arts

into a culture in its own right became known as 'humanism'. 'Humanism' is defined by Blackburn (2008, p. 171) as the renewed study of liberal Greek and Roman studies (which included grammar, rhetoric, history, poetry and moral philosophy), a harmonious unity of humans and nature and a renewed celebration of the pleasures of life. Central to humanism was the new concern with man and his world and, unlike mediaeval art, man became worthy of representation and featured in sculptures, paintings and even jewellery alongside religious and mythological motifs and imagery.

Humanism was the catalyst for the pursuit of the ideal form. Artists, adopting the classic works from the Greeks and Romans, ignored the flaws found in nature and sought to replicate nature in its most ideal and perfect form. Alberti (1966, p. 94) explains in his treatise on painting, *Della pittura*, that painters should 'always take from nature that which you wish to paint, and always choose the most beautiful'. Consequently the Renaissance artists, much like the Classic artists, chose to represent art as nature in its most ideal form. This representation of a person or thing in an ideal form and an ideal state of perfection is defined as 'idealisation', which refers to the action of idealising (Little, 2002, p. 1310).

Idealisation resulted in eliminating all extraneous accessories and concentrating only on the essential qualities of the subjects or objects, which were perfected or embellished. This approach is also supported by the Renaissance painter and historian, Giorgio Vasari (1912) who insisted that true Renaissance art consisted of the imitation and improvement of nature according to the Platonic Idea. Consequently subjects and objects became 'idealised' through the conversion of the philosophical principle into an artistic style. Berenson (1968, p. 21) notes that the Renaissance painter strove towards the naturalistic reproduction of objects but, due to humanistic principles, objects were presented in their ideal state. The Renaissance painter thus portrayed images as they ideally should be and tried to transcend the physical limitations of the object by omitting defects and perfecting undesirable features.

Idealisation as a design approach in contemporary jewellery

The notion of using idealisation as a design approach in contemporary jewellery is justified as there are various ways to initiate design in contemporary jewellery. Broadhead (cited in Grant 2005, p. 25) suggests that ideas in contemporary jewellery design have inevitably converged with those originating from other disciplines, notably fine art. Apart from fine art, designs could also be inspired by nature, techniques of the industrial world, personal imagery and symbolic expressions, could comment on aspects of contemporary life or could simply be concerned with composition and form.

Another contemporary design approach is to revert to history as a means of inspiration. The designer is then confronted with applying the historical content within the conformations of a contemporary movement and to challenge the boundaries of traditional jewellery. Conversely, contemporary jewellery designers may choose to emulate historical materials, designs and techniques, but could interpret these aspects within a contemporary context. This paper would clarify this approach by applying both historical materials (enamel) and a design framework (based on idealisation) to contemporary jewellery design.

Methodology

According to Goddard and Mellville (1996, p. 8) this study can be seen as creative research since a new design framework is developed which includes both practical and theoretical research. As the outcomes of the framework are subjective and conceptual, qualitative research methods are applied. In order to develop a design framework that would be inclusive of all the characteristics pertaining to the Renaissance (specifically idealisation), it is important for sufficient research and images to be analysed for valid sampling and to capture the essence of the Renaissance enamelled pieces.

This study also focuses on applied research, where the research was initiated to solve a problem with a practical outcome (the developing of a design framework for contemporary jewellery based on the notion of idealisation). Through the construction of the design framework, it is imperative that a constant comparison between the collected data and the outcome (framework) be maintained for an optimum result.

The following steps are applied in the research methodology:

- A literary review is conducted where idealism and its link with Renaissance painting and enamelled jewellery is investigated.
- Images and information about appropriate Renaissance paintings and enamelled jewellery incorporating botanical motifs are compared and analysed in order to investigate the development of the idealised motif.
- The information gained from the analyses, specifically the enamelling techniques, types, colours and idealisation of motifs, are re-applied to South African botanical motifs and a design is constructed for contemporary enamel jewellery.

Classification of Renaissance painting and enamel jewels

As the enamelled jewels need to be compared with the painted counterpart of the specific period, it is important to note the development of the botanical motifs with the advent and demise of the Renaissance. A chronological classification would demonstrate how Renaissance jewellery was influenced by painting and give a clearer indication of the idealisation process of the botanical motifs in Renaissance jewels from Renaissance paintings. To create coherent and comparative analyses of Renaissance painting and jewellery, the Renaissance is classified into four eras which include the proto-Renaissance (1150 to 1400), Early Renaissance (1400 to 1480), High Renaissance (1480 to 1525) and Late Renaissance, also known as Mannerism (1520 to 1580). Although all four periods are dealt with in the research, only the proto-Renaissance will be covered in this paper due to the length restriction.

Sufficient images and illustrations of paintings and jewellery pieces are essential in this part of the research methodology in order to justify the results. In each of the four chronological eras, a painting (first representation) which includes botanical images that encompass the main characteristics of the specific period, is analysed. The botanical images are further analysed within the context of idealisation and compared to botanical motifs applied in enamelled jewellery. Through these analyses, it would become clear whether the idealised images from these paintings or drawings were then further used by Renaissance jewellery designers and applied as even more stylised motifs in the jewels (second representation) due to the even further idealisation of the original form.

Comparison and analyses of a proto-Renaissance painting and enamel jewel

Although the International Gothic Style lasted until the sixteenth century in certain European countries, a new style started to emerge in Italy in the late thirteenth century. Panofsky (1944, p. 213) classified this period as 'proto-Renaissance' to indicate the departure from the International Gothic Style. This study affiliates with Panofsky's system of chronological classification as it firstly, indicates the re-emergence of a higher culture that was unknown in the preceding period, and, secondly, denotes the rebirth of classical antiquity (Panofsky, 1944, pp. 202-203).

The painting, seen in figure 1, called *The Annunciation*, forms part of the Maestà Predella Panels and was painted by Duccio di Buoninsegna (c. 1255–1318) between 1307/8 and 1311. The panel contains gold and *tempera* on wood, measures 44.5 cm by 45.8 cm and is currently on display at The National Gallery in London

(Duccio n.d.). This painting demonstrates the development of the figural shape, as well as the strong idealisation of botanical images indicative of proto-Renaissance paintings.



Figure 1: *The Annunciation* panel from the *Maestà* altarpieces by Duccio di Buoninsegna, gold and *tempera* on wood, painted between 1307/8 and 1311, 44.5cm by 45.8cm, The National Gallery, London (Duccio n.d.).

Berenson (1967) and Wundram (1988) comment on the religious subject matter, the bright heraldic blue and red colours of the Virgin's clothing and the use of gold leaf in the background of the painting, which is suggestive of the lingering International Gothic Style present in most proto-Renaissance paintings. However, the garments' drapery and folds indicate the abandonment of the International Gothic Style and a movement towards a more realistic representation initiated by the proto-Renaissance artists (Berenson 1967). The darker, more pronounced colours of the Virgin's garments, as well as her placement in the composition, makes her the focal point of the painting. The white architectural frames surrounding the Virgin also allude to her virginity and further enhance the figure as the focal point. Arguably, the small urn, close to the bottom of the painting, can be seen as a second focal point of the painting due to its scale and the emphasis through isolation.

The urn between Gabriel and the Virgin holds white lilies (seen in figure 2), which symbolise the Virgin's purity (Haig 1913, pp. 41-62). Unlike the figures in *The Annunciation*, the lilies are not painted naturalistically and show a strong stylisation of shape, even alluding to the French stylised *fleur-de-lis* motif. Although the botanical features of the lilies remain identifiable (such as the basic shape and colour), various details were omitted. In contrast to the detailed rendition of figures, the lilies, although painted in various stages of flowering, are devoid of leaves or any natural flaws. The lilies are also painted using a single colour and lacks any tonal values which could render a more realistic and three-dimensional shape. It can thus be assumed that Duccio painted the lilies as visualised in his mind, as the images remain highly stylised. This conforms to the Platonic stance on idealism where the work of an artist is a representation of reality (*viz* the lilies), and so an illusion or an ideal form is created that does not exist.



Figure 2: Detail of *The Annunciation* showing the urn with lilies (Duccio n.d.).

From the analysis, the difference in execution between the figures and the botanical content is evident. Although naturalism (through the use of colour and technique) is applied to the figures, the botanical content still remains highly idealised. As painting was considered the height of expression during this period, other applied arts, including jewellery design, followed the approach set by the fine artists.

The following jewellery piece was chosen as it exhibited the most salient features of proto-Renaissance enamelling. The botanical motifs used in the jewellery piece is, firstly, discussed and analysed within the proto-Renaissance features and, secondly, compared to the proto-Renaissance painting equivalent. By comparing the botanical motifs in both the proto-Renaissance painting and enamelled jewel, it can be gauged whether Plato's theory on idealism is adopted and whether a copy (enamelled jewel) of a copy (painting) of the botanical object is produced.

The enamelled jewel, seen in figure 3, is a pendant diptych of St. Catherine and St. Agnes. The pendant, manufactured in c.1370 -1380, contains silver gilt and is French in origin. The *champlevé* enamelling technique, where opaque or transparent enamels are fired into etched or carved surfaces, is employed in this pendant, as well as *basse taille* - a technique where transparent enamels are fused over an engraved, carved or chased metal surface. The pendant has a length of 5.8cm, an open diameter of 7.8cm and is currently housed at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (Lightbrown 1992, p. 503).



Figure 3: The opened view of the devotional pendant diptych of St. Catherine and St. Agnes (manufacturer unknown), silver gilt and enamel incorporating *champlevé* and *basse taille* techniques, Flemish or English origin, c.1380, length of 5.8cm and opened diameter of 7.8cm, Victoria and Albert Museum (Campbell 2009, p. 83).

Elements, reminiscent of the International Gothic Style, are visible when analysing the diptych pendant. This is evident through the diptych format, the religious subject matter, as well as the employment of heraldic colours and gilt on the silver pendant (Evans 1953; Phillips 1996; Campbell 2009). Also characteristic of the International Gothic Style is the inappropriate scale of the figures and lamb, that tower above the trees. Comparable to proto-Renaissance painting, the figures of both saints are the focus of each plaque and, due to the hatched background; perspective and depth are omitted from the design.

Furthermore, when referring to the drapery of the garments, it is clear that similarities exist between the approach of the proto-Renaissance painters and the goldsmiths. The figures of the saints appear static in translation and no attempt is made to render more realistic expressions or features. The detail and effort to realistically depict the folds in the garments are indicative of proto-Renaissance painting and the pursuit to a more realistic representation. However, the influence of the linear Byzantine enamelling style cannot be discarded when analysing proto-Renaissance enamelling. The more linear approach, specifically applied to portray the palm, lamb, crown and trees of the plaques, is indicative of the Byzantine style as most detail is omitted (unlike the drapery of the garments) and only the essential lines are used to identify the specific motif (Lightbrown 1992, p. 503). So, it can thus be argued that both fine art, in terms of painting approaches, as well as the linear Byzantine style are adopted and incorporated by the proto-Renaissance goldsmiths.

When analysing the botanical enamelled motifs of the pendant (seen in figure 4), the linear Byzantine style, adopted by the mediaeval goldsmiths, is evident. The 'trees', as noted by Lightbrown (1992, P. 503), are generic in design and devoid of any identifiable characteristics. Although difficult to distinguish from a picture, the technique of *champlevé* seems to be employed in the creation of the motif, where depressions are gauged from the metal and filled with the enamel. Single colours of transparent enamels are used which are devoid of any tonal values. This use of singular colours further accentuates the two dimensionality of the botanical motif.



Figure 4: Enlarged versions of the three trees depicted in the pendant diptych of St. Catherine and St. Agnes (Campbell 2009, p. 83).

The trees consist of stylised lines whose shapes are all uniform in shape and size, creating a very flat impression of the motif. The leaves of the trees are also uniform in shape and size and a generic marquise shape was used to emulate the leaves. The trunks and leaves are also, similar to the proto-Renaissance painted botanical motifs, devoid of any natural flaws, and unlike the garments of the saints, no effort is made to portray the trees more naturalistically.

The Platonic notion of idealism can be observed in the botanical motifs of the pendant as non-specific shapes and colours are applied to create idealised versions of trees. Through the analysis, it is also evident that the botanical motifs, applied in the enamel jewel, are far more idealised than the painted counterpart and thus shows the progression of idealism, as described by Plato.

Both the proto-Renaissance painted botanical motifs and the enamelled botanical motifs are characterised by highly stylised shapes. Although proto-Renaissance painting started incorporating more identifiable features, the proto-Renaissance goldsmith reverted more to the mediaeval tradition of adopting the Byzantine style as a point of reference and created a more idealised botanical motif when compared to the painted counterpart.

The application of idealisation as a design approach to contemporary enamel jewellery

From the analyses of the proto-Renaissance painting and enamel jewels, the most salient features regarding the idealised botanical motifs become apparent which would facilitate the development of a design framework. The use of a framework in the design process is justified by Chase (1915, p.11) who asserts that it will govern and facilitate the use of motifs through a process of careful consideration. In addition, the framework would also illustrate the progressive steps of idealisation where a copy of a copy of a copy is created.

To summarise, the following steps are used in the framework:

- Firstly, the botanical motifs, observed in the enamel jewels of each chronological category, are, where possible, identified. A list is compiled of the most characteristic design and enamelling features of the botanical motifs, which includes the enamelling technique, enamel type and enamel colours employed.

- Secondly, South African botanical images are selected and the characteristics of the idealised Renaissance motifs are applied. The same stylised features are adopted, as well as the enamel technique, type and colour.

To clarify this process, the proto-Renaissance enamel jewel is used as an example and to showcase the design process based on the framework.

From the analysis of the proto-Renaissance botanical motifs, the following salient characteristics are identified regarding the features of the botanical motifs and the enamel techniques, enamel type and colours employed:

- The botanical shape is generic and highly stylised.
- Only the most prominent features of the botanical motif are relayed.
- The leaves and other botanical contents remain highly idealised as they are uniform in shape and size.
- Mainly *cloisonné*, *basse taille* and *champlevé* techniques are applied in most proto-Renaissance enamelled jewels, creating very flat designs.
- Both opaque and transparent enamels are applied in the same enamel jewel.
- Singular colours are applied with no attempt to create variations of tonal values, rendering the enamelled jewel two-dimensional.
- Only the most salient colours are used to represent the botanical motif.
- The colours employed are very bright, indicative of proto-Renaissance painting's influence.

These characteristics were used as guidance in the design process and incorporated in the *Daisy Pendants Range*, seen in figure 5. As indicated by the title, the pendants are based on the *Asteraceae* (daisy) family and were manufactured from sterling silver and *cloisonné* opaque enamel. The twelve pendants are 40mm long, with widths of 11mm, 20mm and 35mm. The backs of the pendants are set with partridge wood.



Figure 5: *Daisy Pendants Range* by author, hand fabricated from sterling silver and opaque enamels, *cloisonné* technique, length of 40mm and variant widths of 11mm, 20mm and 35mm (Photograph by Valentina Nicol).

As dictated by the design framework, various forms of daisy flowers were idealised and represented in their most basic form. Similar to the proto-Renaissance approach regarding idealism, the flower was highly stylised to the most essential lines. As with the proto-Renaissance example, the high idealisation resulted in a generic botanical motif as all identifiable traits were eliminated from the design.

The shape of the pendants is also suggestive of the proto-Renaissance as a similar diptych shape, as previously seen in figure 3, was applied. The *cloisonné* technique was chosen as it lends itself well to replicate highly stylised motifs. This technique also alludes to the Byzantine influence evident in many proto-Renaissance enamel pieces and also creates the flatness as dictated by the design framework.

Only single, bold colours were employed in each *cloison*. The choice of colours were further dictated by the specific daisy, but still remain very generic in its use. Similar to the proto-Renaissance painting and enamel jewel, no attempt was made to create a graduation of colour or a three-dimensional effect.

Conclusion

This paper shows how idealisation can be used as a design approach in contemporary enamel jewellery. The botanical motifs used in the contemporary jewellery represents the idealised image of a South African botanical example, which is derived from a design framework based on the analyses of Renaissance paintings and enamel jewels.

The idealisation of botanical motifs creates a continuous design link between Renaissance painting, Renaissance enamel jewellery and contemporary enamel jewellery. When the botanical enamel motifs are compared to the painted botanical images, the different approaches to idealism in painting and jewellery design becomes apparent. It can be postulated that the Renaissance jewellery designer designed pieces using the ideal forms of the botanical images, as they were visualised in the mind. It may then be assumed that Plato's theory on the thrice removed reality can be applied to the jewellery designer where nature (the form) was imitated as an ideal image by the Renaissance painters (first representation). The idealised images from these paintings were then further appropriated by the Renaissance jewellery designers and applied as even more stylised motifs in the jewels (second representation) due to the even further idealisation of the original form.

An interesting aspect of this approach is that, although historical and traditional in inspiration, the final pieces are contemporary and arguably original, suggesting that originality can be achieved *via* historical research and through a design process. However, the use of a design framework could be somewhat formulaic or restrictive which could impede a spontaneous creative thought process.

The outcome of the research is thus twofold; firstly this research investigates how historical fine art concepts can be applied and used as a design approach in contemporary jewellery design and, secondly, as a result, a contemporary enamel range of jewellery is created, translated from the Renaissance idealised botanical motifs into a South African context. This suggests that a defined design framework in theory, can lead to a design approach that in practice, can result in unique contemporary designs.

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