Early Renaissance Idealization as a Framework for Contemporary Jewellery Design

Nina Newman & Ingrid Stevens
Tshwane University of Technology

Plato, in considering idealism, refers to the work of artists as merely representations of objects and suggests that a work of art is a copy of a copy of a form, thus creating an illusion or an ideal form that does not exist. This article considers the idealization of botanical motifs and how this can be said to create a design link between Early Renaissance painting, Early Renaissance enamelled jewellery and contemporary enamelled jewellery. It is postulated here that Plato's theory on this thrice-removed reality of an artwork can be applied to the jewellery designer where nature (the form) was imitated as an ideal image by Early Renaissance painters (first representation). The idealized images from paintings or drawings were then further adapted by Early Renaissance jewellery designers and applied as even more stylized motifs in the jewels (second representation), resulting in even further idealization of the original form. The same process of idealization used in Early Renaissance painting and enamel jewels is then applied to designing enamelled South African botanical motifs, which creates a contemporary version of the botanical images used during the Early Renaissance, showing that analytical studies of historical art and design can be used by contemporary artists to achieve original designs.

The premise of this article is that a close study of an historical model, using appropriate analytical tools, can give rise to original, contemporary design, without resorting to the simple appropriation or pastiche that are features of much postmodern design, when it refers to history. The Renaissance was chosen as the historical context of the study because of the botanical content (that is, pertaining to plants or plant life) represented in both painting and jewellery, based technically

on the extensive use of enamel in Renaissance jewellery. Botanical motifs are particularly suited to applied design in many forms: textiles, weaving, ceramics and jewellery, to name a few. According to Barzun,[1] the appeal to nature throughout western history resounds as the Great Absolute, with nature seen as the handiwork of God and thus 'never wrong'. Its most powerful expression, after the Enlightenment, lay in the natural sciences, and the idea of science as the 'best truth' found its counterpart in 'living according to nature'.

The Early Renaissance made use of botanical motifs in both painting and jewellery. In order to commence with an analysis of the work of this period, its most defining characteristic was identified: namely, idealization of the botanical motifs. First, the philosophical principle of idealism is discussed, then its manifestation in painting, because painting was the discipline where philosophical principles were first applied to the visual arts. The jewellers subsequently took motifs and approaches from the paintings, as occurred in other applied arts of this period. The Platonic notion of idealism, specifically applied to the botanical imagery represented in Early Renaissance paintings, is investigated here and compared to the botanical motifs found in Early Renaissance enamelled jewellery. This analysis also considers materials and techniques, as these enable the particular artistic manifestation and visual qualities to be achieved. This same process of idealization, as well as adapted historical materials and techniques, are then applied to enamelled South African botanical motifs, creating a stylistic departure based on an historical model. This approach assumes that a defined design framework in theory, can lead to a design approach that in practice can result in unique contemporary designs.[2]

Idealism and idealization

The concepts "idealism", "idealize" and "idealization" must be clarified in order to substantiate the differences between philosophical and

---

[1] Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence: 1500 to the Present: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life* (London, 2000), pp. 125–26.

[2] The original study on which this article is based covered all Renaissance periods, including the Proto-Renaissance, Early and High Renaissance and Mannerism, because the degree of idealization, as well as the styles and techniques of enamelled jewellery, changed in each sub-period.

design contexts. Subjects and objects became "idealized" through the conversion of the philosophical principle into an artistic style, so "idealism", according to the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*,[3] represents a person or thing in an ideal form and an ideal state of perfection, whereas "idealization" refers to the action of idealising. This study mainly focuses on this action, and the way that idealization was approached in Renaissance painting and jewellery design and how the process of idealization can be used as a design approach in contemporary jewellery.

Idealism is defined by Blackburn as a philosophical doctrine where reality is fundamentally mental in nature.[4] Many approaches to idealism exist, but the most common manifestation of idealism is the creation of a world through the employment of mind-dependent linguistics and social categories. This definition could relate to the artistic or design approach of idealization, where artworks became representations of the ideal form, which are created through the process of perception and recollection. Although the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BCE) discussed the art of imitating objects, the study mainly corresponds with Plato's interpretation of idealism, specifically his dialogues in Book X of *The Republic* (c. 375 BCE). Here, Plato considers the ideal state and, subject to that, the role that the arts (specifically poetry and painting) play in these idealized circumstances. Plato rather dismissively describes the work of artists as mere representations of objects (the reality) and explains the work of art as a copy of a copy of a form (three times removed from reality), thus creating an illusion or an ideal form that does not exist.[5] He uses the analogy of a painted bed as an example where the original subject (the form) is created by God, then copied and manufactured by a carpenter and lastly painted by an artist. The painted image is only a representation and so becomes three times removed from the "truth". Plato concludes that the artist knows little or nothing about the subjects that he represents and that the art of representation holds no

---

[3] *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, 5th edn (New York, 2002), *sub* ideal, B, *sb*. 1; idealism, 2.

[4] Simon Blackburn (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd revised edn (New York, 2008), p. 177.

[5] Plato, *The Republic*, trans. D. Lee, 2nd revised edn (London, 1974), pp. 336–39.

serious value.[6] However, despite these critiques from Plato, classical Greek artists used idealism as a guide in the creation of their artworks.

The conversion of idealism as a philosophical principle to an artistic style created a paradigm shift where an unattainable concept became a tangible artwork (although the "truth" will always remain unattainable, as the ideal does not exist). Renaissance artists adapted classical works from the Greeks and Romans, so they ignored the flaws evident in nature and sought to represent nature in its most ideal and perfect form. This is particularly evident in painter and author Alberti's *Della Pittura* ('On Painting'). The impact of idealism on painting is evident in Book 3 of *Della Pittura* when Alberti instructs the Renaissance artist to 'make all the parts true to his model but also add beauty there … Demetrius, an antique painter, failed to obtain the ultimate praise because he was much more careful to make things similar to the natural than to the lovely'.[7] Although seen as 'lovely' in the eyes of the artists (and of the patrons), these creations, including the images of botanical motifs, were actually imperfect copies of nature (as they were removed from "reality") and an indication of the Renaissance artist adopting the Platonic approach to idealism in a positive interpretation of the original notion.

Renaissance painters and sculptors explored the concept of *natura naturans*, whereby the idea of nature was imitated in a way that classical artists were believed to have done. Alberti, introducing the term, argues that painters should 'always take from nature that which you wish to paint, and always choose the most beautiful'.[8] Classical artists, and consequently Renaissance artists, chose to represent art as nature in its most ideal form. This approach eliminated all extraneous details and variations, concentrating only on the essential qualities of the subject (which was perfected or embellished). The Renaissance painter and historian Giorgio Vasari wrote that true Renaissance art sought, and achieved, the imitation and improvement of nature according to the Platonic Idea.[9]

---

[6] Plato, *The Republic,* 344.

[7] Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. J. R. Spencer, revised edn (New Haven, 1966), p. 92.

[8] Ibid., 94.

[9] Giorgio Vasari, *Artists of the Renaissance,* trans. G. Bull (London, 1965), p. 14.

Idealization is a term that has often been confounded with style or stylization. In an attempt to clarify the term, "idealism", the sculptor and art critic Frederick Ruckstuhl explains that both idealization and stylization are seen as a departure from the commonplace truth of nature. Although both concepts are based on ignoring the "true" and naturalistic aspects of the subject, idealism starts with omitting the truth of nature from a philosophical position (to improve on the subject and the idea), whereas stylization can be seen as merely a design principle (*disegnare*) based on the simplification or representation of form.[10] The Renaissance painter thus portrayed images as they should be and simultaneously tried to transcend the physical limitations of the object.[11]

This is particularly evident in the botanical images seen in Renaissance paintings, where botanical images, used in the background and never as the major subjects of the paintings, were painted naturalistically (although remaining idealized) by the Renaissance painters. The botanical images employed in Renaissance jewellery, conversely, are often more stylized than naturalistic, as they were represented by the most rudimentary shapes and with a very limited colour range.

The idealized botanical motif in Early Renaissance painting

Panofsky summarizes the start of the Renaissance as, firstly, a trend towards individualism, and secondly, as the escalating awareness of nature and the scientific approach to it.[12] In terms of the arts, painting, sculpture and architecture were classified as the fine arts, with other forms of arts, such as jewellery, seen more as crafts. Alberti notes that painting of the Early Renaissance is seen as the superior art and that 'all the smiths, sculptors, shops and guilds are governed by the rules and art of the painter'.[13]

---

[10] Frederick Ruckstuhl, 'Idealism and realism in art', *The Art World* 1 (1917): 252–56 (p. 252).

[11] Bernard Berenson, *Italian Painters of the Renaissance (*London, 1968), p. 21.

[12] Erwin Panofsky, 'Renaissance and Renascences', *The Kenyon Review* 6 (1944): 201–36 (p. 231).

[13] Alberti, *On Painting*, 64.

The style of the Early Renaissance, especially in Italy, was a departure from the International Gothic Style. Artworks depicted more lifelike and realistic representations, and a more decisive step towards naturalism (which was initiated during the Proto-Renaissance), was taken. Berenson refers here to the 'second generation' of painters who pursued this approach of a more naturalistic reproduction of objects.[14]

Artists of the Early Renaissance notably rendered human bodies more realistically, and, as suggested by Alberti, antique styles were adopted and human figures were sculpted and painted according to Classical Greek and Roman forms.[15] Panofsky states that this humanistic approach towards Classical antiquity marks the departure from the Proto-Renaissance and the beginnings of the "true" Italian Renaissance.[16]

An important reason for the reference to Classical forms would be that most artists of the Early Renaissance, for example, Filippo Brunelleschi (*c*.1377–1446), were well read in Classical literature and applied their literary knowledge to their artistic works.[17] This prompted the artists to be more theory-led, with the ideal Renaissance artist becoming multi-disciplined in all forms of art, namely sculpture, architecture, painting and literature. Throughout *Della Pittura*, Alberti continuously urges the artist to draw and paint 'from nature'.[18] Vasari, from 1400 CE onwards, also adopts Alberti's description of 'from nature' in his discussions. However, Alberti, being a Neo-Platonist, does suggest that the artist should correct flaws while keeping a likeness, as in the idealized approach of the ancient painters.[19] Even Vasari describes the painting colour and manner of this period as 'the reduction of everything to perfection and for the exact imitation of the truth of nature', advocating the idealized approach.[20]

---

[14] Berenson, *Italian Painters of the Renaissance,* 21.

[15] Alberti, *On Painting,* 76–77.

[16] Panofsky, 'Renaissance and Renascences', 225.

[17] Berenson, *Italian Painters of the Renaissance*, 4–5; R.M. Letts, *The Renaissance* (Cambridge, 1981), p. 18.

[18] Alberti, *On Painting*, 73.

[19] Ibid., *On Painting*, 77.

[20] Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, trans.

Furthermore, Alberti notes that the artist who refers regularly to nature will 'make his hand so skilled that whatever he does will always appear to be drawn from nature'.[21] We can thus assume that, with familiarity with natural motifs, many artists would render elements from the mind's eye and without any imperfections. The Platonic notion of idealism and argument that a painting is a mere copy from a copy, is supported by Alberti, who states that a painter can copy works from others, but preferably from a mediocre sculpture rather than an excellent painting. The explanation that Alberti gives for this statement is that the painter can enhance the painting (from the sculpture) through added colour and light, whereas nothing more can be obtained from imitating an existing painting.[22]

The development of Early Renaissance painting was strongly influenced by the invention of oil paint. This points to the fact that an artwork or design, while philosophically based and originated, is as much influenced by the techniques and materials available as the idea, once a work becomes manifest. Vasari initially mentions the technique of oil in his second volume of *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, but does not specifically state the origins thereof in Italy. Only in his third volume, does Vasari credit the Flemish painter, Johann of Bruges, known as Jan van Eck, with the development of oil painting and further recognizes Antonello da Messina (*c*. 1430–1479) as the painter who introduced the technique of oil painting to Italy.[23] It was only in the 1480s that Italian artists started to incorporate this medium into their works. The incorporation of oils (usually walnut or linseed oils) resulted in softer colours which blended more easily into each other, rendering the paintings smoother

G. du C. de Verre, 10 vols (London, 1912–1914), II, 84.

[21] Alberti, *On Painting*, 93–94.

[22] Apart from the attempts at realism shown in southwest Germany, painting in Flanders and other painting north of the Alps, especially by painters Jan van Eyck (*c*.1390–1441), Rogier van der Weyden (*c*. 1400–1464) and Robert Campin, known as the Master of Flémalle (*c*.1378–1444), also became more naturalistic, making a clear break from the International Gothic Style. This was mostly due to the spread of Italian painting to France and Flanders through the School of Avignon: Manfred Wundram, *The Renaissance* (London, 1988), p. 135. Countries such as France and northern Germany were influenced by the Flemish painters and incorporated the Flemish technique into the International Gothic Style to produce strongly coloured and ornate pictorial scenes.

[23] Giorgio Vasari, *Lives*, III, 60.

and more realistic. Wundram states that using oil as a binder for the pigments made it possible to superimpose layers of fine glazes to give the surface a 'shimmering glow', similar to that of transparent enamels over metal.[24] The use of such colours played an important role in capturing realistic effects. Artists, especially from Venice, started manipulating colours by adding various tints and graduated colours in order to achieve more realistic and three-dimensional images. The falling of light onto their subjects was also observed and copied, using graduating colours and tones. Alberti further urges painters to observe shadows and reflections within the paintings and to include these in paintings to create a more realistic representation.[25]

Analysis of an Early Renaissance painting

The painting style of the Early Renaissance can be seen in Figure 1 by the goldsmith and painter Sandro Botticelli. The painting, called *Primavera* (The Allegory of Spring), was painted *circa* 1482 and commissioned by the Medici family. We chose this painting because the variety of flowers and trees seen in *Primavera* are specifically identified and discussed by Capretti.[26] We will very briefly discuss selected figurative and mythological aspects, but will focus on the botanical content, which supports the argument regarding the idealization of Early Renaissance botanical motifs.

In *Primavera*, Flora, the goddess of flowers and blossoms (third figure from the right), is dressed in a flowered gown and her former self, Chloris, is placed to the right of Flora. According to mythology, Chloris was attacked and assaulted by the god of wind, Zephyr, who is represented as a blue male figure in the far right. Remorseful, Zephyr atoned for his sins, and married Chloris. Chloris is transformed into Flora, which is indicated by the flowers flowing from her mouth. The transformation is further enhanced by the repetition of the floral motifs on the garment of Flora. Barolsky notes this clever approach by Botticelli to heighten the sense of metamorphosis with the flow of "real" flowers into the "painted" flowers on the garment of Flora.[27] The subjects are captured in movement (as opposed to the static and

[24] Wundram, *The Renaissance*, 159.

[25]   Alberti, *On Painting*, 50–51.

[26] Elena Capretti, *Botticelli,* trans. P. Bevilacqua and L. Longinolti (Florence, 2002).

[27] Paul Barolsky, 'Botticelli's "Primavera" as an Allegory of its own Creation', *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 13.3 (Spring 1994): 14–19 (p. 16).

rigid poses of the Proto-Renaissance subjects), which can also be seen in the flowing folds of the garments and the bending of the branches in the top right corner. The orange grove in the background shows the departure from the *maniera greca* of the Proto-Renaissance and the attempt at creating perspective and depth in paintings by the Early Renaissance painters. Perspective and distance is further enhanced through the use of darker colours in the background, in contrast to the brighter colours used in the subjects in the foreground.

Figure 1: 'Primavera' by Sandro Botticelli, c.1481, tempera on poplar wood panel, 203 cm by 314 cm, Uffizi Gallery, Florence

The richness in colour and chromatic development from Proto-Renaissance painting can be seen in the colours applied by Botticelli. Alberti notes the importance to a painter of dispersing various colours throughout the composition and the affected value of the colours in the work.[28] Darker and lighter shades were used, of blue as well as yellow and brown colours to produce depth and a chromatic richness.

---

[28] Alberti, *On Painting*, 84.

Vasari comments on the goldsmith training of Botticelli and commends the 'good design' of his compositions.[29] In *Primavera*, Botticelli alludes to his goldsmithing skills by adorning Venus and the Graces with jewels. Two of the Graces are adorned with a pendant, a brooch and hair ornaments (Figure 2), whereas Venus has a brooch pinned below her breasts. These jewels contain pearls and red gems and are assumed to represent jewels of the Medici family.

The botanical content of the painting is rich in symbolism. Over five hundred identified plant species are depicted, with over 190 identified different species of flowers. Figure 3 shows the detail of the flowering plants, which are noted by Capretti as the realistic representation of plants flowering during spring in Florence.[30] This is in line with the Early Renaissance approach as it indicates Botticelli's awareness of nature and the realistic depiction thereof. The iris (Figure 4), seen in the bottom right of the painting, shows the more detailed and realistic approach of the Early Renaissance artists to rendering nature. As opposed to the Proto-Renaissance approach, where only the basic shape of a botanical element was suggested, the observation of nature is more evident in the work of Botticelli.

Vasari refers to the imitation of nature by the Early Renaissance painters and notes that these artists 'attempted to give more reality to landscapes, trees, herbs, flowers'.[31] This approach is evident in this painting where the iris, with flowers in different stages of bloom, is unlike the idealized and stylized Proto-Renaissance depictions. The iris is rendered as more organic and true to nature, and movement is indicated through the leaning positions of the flowers and leaves. Apart from the realistic depiction, the iris, as with the other botanical motifs, is painted with more chromatic variants, as opposed to the basic colours employed in the Proto-Renaissance equivalent. With the use of a wider tonal range, a more three-dimensional likeness is achieved.

Although more detail and attention is given to the replication of botanical motifs by the Early Renaissance artist, no documentation exists that the artists (in this example, Botticelli) actually copied the

---

[29] Vasari, *Lives*, III, 249.

[30] Capretti, *Botticelli*, 49.

[31] Vasari, *Lives*, II, 87.

botanical motifs from the natural objects themselves. It can be assumed that Botticelli, gaining knowledge through observation of the world, applied his conceptions to an iris and painted the botanical image with a more naturalistic approach, without necessarily observing a real iris. The iris remains idealized as the petals and leaves are devoid of any flaws with colours applied evenly and without any blemishes.

Figure 2. Detail of 'Primavera', showing the jewels adorning the Three Graces

Figure 3. The variety of flowering plants in 'Primavera'

Figure 4. Realistic depiction of an iris in 'Primavera'

The idealized botanical motif in Early Renaissance jewellery

Owing to the short timeframe and the ambiguous classification of "Renaissance jewellery" by many jewellery historians, information regarding Early Renaissance jewellery is limited. Most of the information on Early Renaissance jewellery is collated through existing jewels such as the Fishpool hoard found in Nottinghamshire, dating from c.1400 to 1460, and the Chalcis treasure found in Greece which dates from c.1350 to 1460. Other references to jewellery come from inventory archives and even portraits, where the jewellery worn by the sitter is documented by the painter.[32] Although Italian goldsmiths manufactured their own designs (which created localized styles that can be distinguished), various patrons attracted goldsmiths from other parts of Italy and Europe, which ultimately created a more generic design style in jewellery, across countries and regions.[33]

According to sources on both painting and jewellery, many sculptors, architects and painters active particularly in the Early Renaissance trained first as goldsmiths. Vasari notes the close connection between painters and goldsmiths and emphasizes the importance of goldsmithing as it trains the artists in both drawing and design skills.[34]

All these artists contributed to bridging the gap between Renaissance fine art (especially painting) and jewellery design. It is apparent that jewellery started to be governed by Renaissance painting principles. This is confirmed by Phillips, who notes, from a jewellery perspective, that the intricacy and minute detail of jewellery design was inspired by the naturalistic style of Early Renaissance painting.[35] For example, works by Finiguerra are described by Vasari as 'coloured

---

[32] References to jewellery in archives are found in Yvonne Hackenbroch, *Renaissance Jewellery* (London, 1979); Joan Evans, *A History of Jewellery 1100–1870* (New York, 1953) and Ronald Lightbown, *Mediaeval European Jewellery* (London, 1992).

[33] Hackenbroch, *Renaissance Jewellery*, 12–13.

[34] Vasari, *Lives*, III, 219. These fine artists include the sculptor Lorenzo Ghiberti (1378–1455), the painter and sculptor Andrea del Verrocchio (c.1435–1488), the sculptor, painter and architect Lorenzo Vecchietta (1410–1480), the architect Filippo Brunelleschi (1377–1446), the painter and engraver Antonio Pollaiuolo (1431–1498), the painter Domenico di Tommaso del Ghirlandajo, known as Tommaso (c. 1449–1496), the painter Masolino da Panicale (c.1383–1447) and the painter Sandro Filipepi, also known as Sandro Botticelli.

[35] Claire Phillips, *Jewelry from Antiquity to the Present* (London, 1996), p. 75.

by the action of fire, which are such that they could be scarcely improved with the brush'.[36] This comment by Vasari emphasizes the link between painting and enamelling and the similarity in outcomes of the two media.

Although various Renaissance painters, such as Sandro Botticelli (1444/45–1512), Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) and Benvenuto Cellini (1500–1571), designed and even manufactured jewellery, there is no indication that any Renaissance jewellery designer referred to nature as the primary source of inspiration. It can, therefore, be postulated that the Renaissance goldsmith designed pieces using the ideal forms of the botanical images, as they appear to the mind's eye, or as they appeared in the paintings. It can then be assumed that Plato's theory on the thrice-removed reality can be applied, where nature (the form) was imitated as an ideal image by the Renaissance painters (first representation). The idealized images from these paintings or drawings were then employed by the Renaissance jewellery designers and applied as even more stylized motifs in the jewels (second representation) due to the even further idealization of the original form.

Enamel, the material used to introduce colour to the botanical images of Renaissance jewellery pieces (apart from stones), is coloured glass which is fused onto a metal base at a high temperature.[37] 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.

Early Renaissance jewellery, similar to the preceding Proto-Renaissance jewellery, followed fashion trends, which became similar in style throughout Europe. The low cut gowns of the early fifteenth century were conducive to the wearing of necklaces, pendants and jewelled collars, and the wide, loose sleeves made the wearing of bangles fashionable.[38] Although rings and brooches remained popular, pendants were worn more frequently on long or short chains in conjunction with belts and chatelaines. By the end of the fifteenth century, earrings (which mainly incorporated pearls) became popular

---

[36] Vasari, *Lives*, III, 239.

[37] Geoffrey Clarke, Francis Feher and Ida Feher, *The Technique of Enamelling* (London, 1967), p. 8.

[38] Marion Campbell, *Medieval Jewellery in Europe 1100–1500* (London, 2009), p. 42; Evans, *A History of Jewellery 1100–1870,* 73.

as medieval head coverings were abandoned.[39]

When analysing images of Early Renaissance jewellery containing enamel, it is evident that trends similar to Proto-Renaissance enamelled jewellery were followed at the beginning of the fifteenth century. The circular brooch remained popular in the first half of the fifteenth century and the adoption of the circular shape of the brooch is evident in most forms of Early Renaissance enamel jewellery. Colour is incorporated into devotional jewellery through the use of enamel, as in the Proto-Renaissance counterpart. The enamel is applied onto the more three-dimensional figures through the use of *émail en ronde bosse* technique (enamel on rounded metal forms), as opposed to the flat *cloisonné* and *champlevé* techniques employed in the Proto-Renaissance jewels.

Many forms of jewellery such as brooches, pendants, *enseignes* and even neckpieces and chains adopted figural and natural motifs which were enhanced with enamel. Most jewellery items were devotional or sentimental in nature (such as the Fishpool hoard) and were given as tokens of love. Evans and Phillips list secular themes and motifs such as stags, eagles, pelicans, huntsmen, ladies in gardens, lilies, swans and unicorns that were encrusted with enamel.[40]

Through the analysis of Early Renaissance jewels and information obtained from scholarly works, the motifs used in Early Renaissance jewellery pieces can be seen as the amalgamation of the naturalistic International Gothic Style and Renaissance painting and sculptural forms. Jewellery motifs were further influenced, to a lesser degree, by humanistic principles. Tait notes that although Early Renaissance jewellery forms were not classical in origin, they were quite distinct from the Gothic Style.[41] The result was the emergence of three dimensional motifs in jewellery which were modelled in a romanticized way using idealized shapes which were often enamelled using the *émail en ronde bosse* technique. Floral designs were popular and were used in Early Renaissance jewels as an added decorative motif or to create accent points on a piece. Lightbown notes that the

---

[39] Phillips, *Jewelry from Antiquity to the Present*, 75.

[40] Evans, *A History of Jewellery 1100–1870*, 63; Phillips, *Jewelry from Antiquity to the Present*, 65.

[41] Hugh Tait, *7000 years of Jewellery* (London, 1986), p. 151.

flower form was used extensively during this time as an enhancer around mounted gems.[42] Hackenbroch speculates that most botanical motifs are based on Roman cameos and intaglios and notes the use of the acanthus leaves in Germany during the mid-fifteenth century.[43] More references are made in the Renaissance inventories (specifically by Evans, Hackenbroch and Lightbown) to the specific flowers used in Early Renaissance jewels, compared to previous references merely to 'flowers'. The identification of the botanical motifs is done through the inventories and not from actual pieces, as it is seldom that the specific jewels still exist. Some of these references, listed by Evans, include sunflowers, forget-me-nots, pansies, hop leaves and roses.[44] Because the motifs have to resemble the botanical counterpart, the basic shape of the flower or plant was manufactured and enamelled with similar colours.

The brooch shown in Figure 5, referred to by Lightbown as a 'camel or dromedary brooch', displays most of the Early Renaissance characteristics of enamel jewellery discussed above.[45] The botanical content of the brooch is analysed so as to gauge whether the motifs are related to Early Renaissance painted botanical motifs. This brooch was manufactured either in France, England or Germany *circa* 1400 to 1420 from gold and enamel, and contains pearls and a sapphire.

The brooch, which Campbell states was given as a New Year's gift, consists of a circular frame containing green translucent *émail en ronde bosse* enamelled leaves with a central pearl interspersed with five sets of pearls.[46] The frame holds a pierced domed plate reminiscent of sun rays. Within the circular frame and pierced plate sits a white enamelled camel, also called a dromedary, with the pierced rays extending from behind the camel. The camel, mainly associated with travel and the Orient, is according to Ferguson also used in Renaissance art as a symbol of royalty and dignity.[47] The camel (the focal point of the brooch) is placed on an enamelled rock-like structure, which grounds

---

[42]   Lightbown, *Mediaeval European Jewellery,* 175.

[43]   Hackenbroch, *Renaissance Jewellery*, 5, 107.

[44]   Evans, *A History of Jewellery 1100–1870,* 65, 66, 67, 71, 72.

[45]   Lightbown, *Mediaeval European Jewellery,* 169.

[46]   Campbell, *Medieval Jewellery in Europe 1100–1500,* 23.

[47]   George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art* (London, 1954), p. 13.

the subject. Six additional pearls and four small flowers, enamelled in white and blue, surround the camel and a blue sapphire, seen on the end of the tail, is set in four prongs.

Figure 5: Brooch c. 1400–1420, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence

This brooch displays various Early Renaissance painting characteristics that were adopted by the goldsmiths. The three-dimensional shape of the camel is certainly an attempt at a realistic and naturalistic representation, compared to the highly stylized and flat approach seen in the Proto-Renaissance enamelled pieces. The enamelling technique *émail en ronde bosse* is employed on various elements of the brooch, such as the camel, to give volume, which also lends a more naturalistic feel. The motifs, specifically the leaves and flowers, are mounted on stalks which further enhance the visual depth and three-dimensionality of the brooch.

Phillips notes the use of the dry branch motif (where the gold is textured to resemble bark) which is characteristic of naturalism.[48] This branch motif is known in France as *bresseronné* or *brossonné* work and forms the circular frame of the brooch. Although the circular

---

[48] Phillips, *Jewelry from Antiquity to the Present*, 66.

frame is a remnant of the Proto-Renaissance, the more naturalistic and romantic translation of it indicates the movement away from the stark geometric framework adopted in the Proto-Renaissance. This is in line with the naturalistic stance adopted by the Early Renaissance painters, which indicates the influence that painting had on jewellery design during this time.

Apart from the more naturalistic disposition, lightness and movement are further characteristics associated with both Early Renaissance paintings and enamelled pieces. Through the analysis of available images, most enamelled pieces from the Early Renaissance contain negative spaces, which have both visual and actual impact on the piece. The lightness of the pieces is also enhanced through movement. Early Renaissance painters captured movement, as suggested by Alberti's treatise, and similarly goldsmiths of the Early Renaissance captured both visual and actual movement in their pieces. In this example, visual movement is captured by the twisting branches and shapes of the leaves. Movement is further enhanced by actual movement because the pearls hanging among the leaves are connected to the piece by o-links, allowing them to move with the wearer. The aspects discussed above show that Early Renaissance jewellers emulated the painters by aiming at naturalism and even realism.

On the other hand, the goldsmiths' adoption of Renaissance principles of idealization is particularly evident when analysing other botanical content of the brooch. Figure 6 shows enlarged versions of the enamelled flowers seen in the camel brooch:
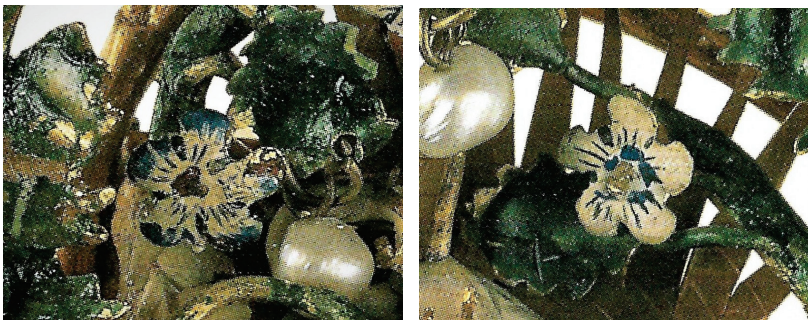
Figure 6: Detail of enamelled flowers in the brooch

The enamel technique employed in the flowers is *émail en ronde bosse,* but the result is a fairly flat, idealized motif where the individual flowers are uniform in size and shape, and details are represented by the most salient colours. No sources indicate the type of flowers, and they are simplified into an idealized form. Although they are more spatial, the general treatment of the leaves is also idealized in the same way. Although speculative, the use of enamel colours could be associated with the true colours of the actual flower represented. This can be assumed as the goldsmith took additional time to add detail to the flower (unlike the leaves or camel), which could indicate that a specific flower was represented. In Proto-Renaissance enamelled botanical motifs, basic colours were employed and no conscious effort was made by the goldsmith to represent the botanical motif as realistically as possible. The use of two colours (the white base and dark blue painted detail) employed in the flowers is a progression from the Proto-Renaissance, but unlike Early Renaissance painting, no tonal value or depth in terms of colour is created by the enamel, rendering the enamelled motifs flatter and less realistic. The change in the approach to enamel jewellery design can be attributed to the goldsmith's adoption of Early Renaissance painting elements. This includes the capturing of movement, a more three-dimensional and naturalistic approach to the forms, and the more realistic employment of colour.

However, because the five-petalled flowers and leaves in the camel brooch are generic in shape, uniform in size and devoid of any natural flaws, they can be described as "idealized". Thus, in accordance with Plato's interpretation of idealism, it can be argued that the botanical motifs of Early Renaissance enamelled jewellery are a copy of a copy of a copy.

Applying idealization to the design of South African contemporary jewellery

In this study, the process of idealization, specifically applied to botanical motifs, is used as a design approach in contemporary jewellery. Although there is not an accepted universal definition of the term "contemporary jewellery", Lignel defines it as a type of practice which is the contemporary offspring of a craft-based design activity.[49]

---

[49] Benjamin Lignel, 'What does Contemporary Jewellery Mean?' (2006), http://www.

This type of jewellery underlines the notions of craftsmanship and its troubled relationship to the production mainstream. Contemporary jewellery thus focuses on the manifestation and affirmation of individuality and shuns pure commercial motivation.[50] Broadhead states that contemporary jewellery investigates material, form, value, colour and movement.[51] A conventional or even historical jewellery material, such as enamel, can be reinterpreted in contemporary jewellery where the validity, meaning and properties of the materials are explored and redefined to suit the needs of the designer. This notion of re-assessing or re-contextualizing materials and their use is confirmed by Derrez, who states that within contemporary jewellery 'priority lies with developing new meaning and a new language of form – a new aesthetic. Any kind of material and technique can be used'.[52] The choice, use and ultimately the meaning of the materials thus lie with the contemporary jewellery designer and are used in order to communicate.

Employing idealization as a design approach for contemporary jewellery can be justified, as there are numerous ways to approach contemporary jewellery design. Broadhead suggests that concepts have inevitably converged with those originating from other disciplines, notably the fine arts.[53] Apart from the fine arts, designs could also be inspired by nature, the industrial world and its technologies, personal imagery and symbolic expressions, could comment on contemporary society, or could simply be concerned with formal elements.

One contemporary design approach is to revert to history as a means of inspiration, as described by Meilach: '[M]ost artists have some art history in their backgrounds. It is natural and beneficial for them to study, and to be inspired by, the work from earlier artists from many countries.'[54] Turner confirms this assessment by stating that, although there are jewellers who look at present situations for inspiration,

klimt02.net/forum/index.php?item_id=7624, accessed 4 March 2010.

50 Ralph Turner, *Contemporary Jewelry* (New York, 1976), p. 11.

51 Jivan Astfalck, Caroline Broadhead and Paul Derrez, *New Directions in Jewellery* (London, 2005), p. 25.

52 Ibid., 13.

53 Ibid., 25.

54 Donna Meilach, *Art Jewelry Today* (Atglen, PA, 2003), p. 16.

many are inspired by a romantic gaze at the past. Contemporary jewellery designers may choose historical materials, designs, symbols or techniques as inspiration, and would interpret these within a contemporary context.[55] The design approach employed in this case applies both historical materials/technologies (enamel) and a design framework (based on idealization) to contemporary jewellery. The botanical motifs used in this contemporary jewellery range thus represent the idealized image of South African botanical examples, founded on the idealized botanical images of Renaissance jewellery. Hence, the motifs are thrice removed from the "truth", which aligns with Plato's theory on idealism.

The following information relating to Early Renaissance enamelled jewellery is collated from the information above and used to form the design framework seen in the organogram in figure 7. A collection of earrings, based on different species of the *Erica* flowers, was created and the design process guided by the design framework. The features of Early Renaissance enamelled jewellery were taken into consideration in the design process of this collection. These features include the more naturalistic, three-dimensional approach to botanical motifs and the incorporation of the *émail en ronde bosse* technique. Earrings were chosen to form this collection as they lend themselves well to being translated according to the properties listed in the framework.
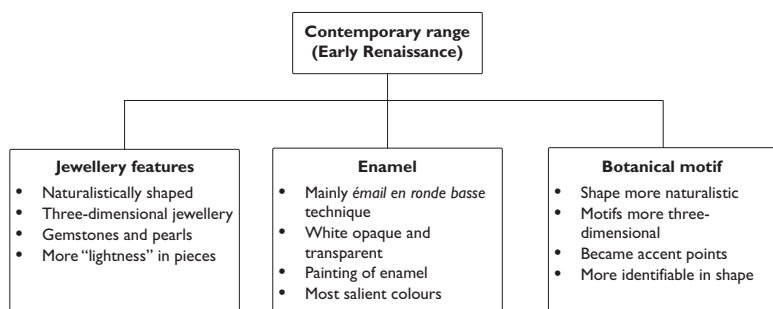

Figure 7: Characteristics of Early Renaissance jewellery, enamel and botanical motifs applied to design framework

---

55 Turner, *Contemporary Jewelry*, 11.

Designs from botanical photographs were developed in sketches (Figure 8), and then manufactured as jewellery pieces. The collection, consisting of four pairs of earrings in 9ct yellow gold, explores the development of the round shape, prevalent in jewellery of the early fifteenth century. Olver explains that the shape of a jewellery item ensures good aesthetic and visual balance. The shape of the earrings in this collection thus conveyed the botanical motifs of the design.[56] The lightness characteristic of Early Renaissance enamelled jewellery pieces was incorporated into the designs through the use of negative spaces and thin wirework. Pearls, a popular means of enhancing Early Renaissance jewellery, were also incorporated into the collection, with pearls of various colours and sizes suspended from the earring.

Figure 8: Development sketches for earrings in the Erica Collection

[56] Elizabeth Olver, *The Jeweller's Directory of Shape & Form* (London, 2007), p. 48.

As guided by the design framework, the technique of *émail en ronde bosse* was applied to the botanical motifs of the *Erica Collection*. The enamel was applied over a three-dimensional shape, which created a more naturalistic approach, seen in the Early Renaissance enamelled examples. Opaque colours were used to represent the specific *Erica* flowers and were combined with white enamel (consistent with Early Renaissance enamelled pieces). The technique of basic enamel painting (as discussed in the analysis of the Early Renaissance enamelled piece) was applied to the enamelled *Erica* motifs (Figure 9).
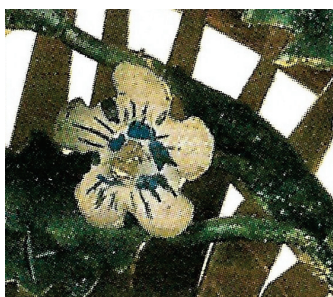

Figure 9: Painting technique in the enamelled flower of the dromedary brooch and in the contemporary enamelled Erica flower (photograph by Valentina Nicol and Nina Newman).

Various species of *Erica* were used as inspiration for this range. The flowers were chosen for their distinct tubular shape that could be naturalistically represented in metal. The idealization of the flower is seen in Figure 9, which indicates that the shape remained three-dimensional and the use of colours similar to the actual flower. Although not realistic (due to a lack of any natural flaws and the generic application of colour), the enamelled *Erica* flower still remains identifiable and follows the design approach of Early Renaissance jewellery.

Two final examples from the *Erica Collection* are seen in Figure 10. The earrings are hand-manufactured from 9ct yellow gold and the *émail en ronde bosse* enamelled flowers, transparent and opaque, from 18ct yellow gold. Blue, black and white pearls of various diameters are incorporated in the designs.

Figure 10: The Erica Collection: (left) diameter of 43 mm and length of 94 mm and (right) diameter of 50 mm and length of 93 mm (photographs by Valentina Nicol).

Conclusion

The objective of this paper was to investigate how a close analysis of historical art, including its philosophical underpinnings, its manifestation in various visual forms and its materials and techniques can be used to design original contemporary art or design. Idealized botanical motifs used in Renaissance jewellery can aid the design of contemporary enamel jewellery. In the *Erica Collection*, for example, South African botanical motifs were idealized and applied following the guidance of design frameworks. As a means to create uniformity and to translate historical information through a series of steps, the framework of each Renaissance period was presented in an organogram which directed the jewellery features, enamel characteristics and idealization of the botanical motifs for the contemporary collections.

Through the application of the design frameworks, the Platonic notion of idealism was embodied in the collection, illustrating the progressive steps of idealization: a copy of a copy of a copy. Through the translation of a translation of a translation, an original object is created.

Works Cited

Primary Sources

Alberti, Leon Battista. *On Painting*. Trans. John R. Spencer. New Haven, 1966.
Plato. *The Republic*. Trans. Desmond Lee. 2nd revised edn. London, 1974.
Vasari, Giorgio. *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects.*
    Trans. G. du C. de Verre. 10 vols. London, 1912–1914.
Vasari, Giorgio. *Artists of the Renaissance*. Trans. G. Bull. London, 1965.

Secondary Sources

Astfalck, Jivan, Caroline Broadhead and Paul Derrez. *New Directions in
    Jewellery.* London, 2005.
Barolsky, Paul. 'Botticelli's "Primavera" as an Allegory of its own Creation'.
    Source: Notes in the History of Art 13 (1994): 14-19.
Barzun, Jacques. *From Dawn to Decadence: 1500 to the Present: 500 Years of
    Western Cultural Life.* London, 2000.
Berenson, Bernard. *Italian Painters of the Renaissance.* London, 1968.
Blackburn, Simon, ed. *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy.* 2nd revised edn.
    New York, 2008.
Campbell, Marion. *Medieval Jewellery in Europe 1100–1500.* London, 2009.
Capretti, Elena. *Botticelli.* Trans. P. Bevilacqua and L. Longinolti. Florence,
    2002.
Clarke, Geoffrey, Francis Feher and Ida Feher. *The Technique of Enamelling.*
    London, 1967.
Evans, Joan. *A History of Jewellery 1100–1870.* New York, 1953.
Ferguson, George. *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art.* London, 1954.
Hackenbroch, Yvonne. *Renaissance Jewellery*. London, 1979.
Letts, Rosa Maria. *The Renaissance.* Cambridge, 1981.
Lightbown, Ronald. *Mediaeval European Jewellery.* London, 1992.
Lignel, Benjamin. 'What does Contemporary Jewellery mean?' (2006). www.
    klimt02.net/forum/index.php?item_id=7624, accessed 4 March 2010.
Meilach, Donna. *Art Jewelry Today.* Atglen, PA, 2003.
Olver, Elizabeth. *The Jeweller's Directory of Shape and Form*. London, 2000.
Panofsky, Erwin. 'Renaissance and Renascences'. *The Kenyon Review* 6 (1944):
    201–36.
Phillips, Claire. *Jewelry from Antiquity to the Present*. London, 1996.
Ruckstuhl, Frederick. 'Idealism and Realism in Art'. *The Art World* 1 (1917):
    252–56.
Tait, Hugh. *7000 Years of Jewellery*. London, 1986.
Turner, Ralph. *Contemporary Jewelry*. New York, 1976.
Wundram, Manfred. *The Renaissance*. London, 1988.