Preamble:

It was lovely to be asked to give a talk on some of the jewels in these wonderful paintings - lovely jewels - we think of sentiment, coquetterie, vanity and always this love of display!

But the exciting thing about jewellery in paintings is that it can show us the social context for the jewel - jewellery is a revealing social artefact and always a mirror of our time.

I have a particular love of jewellery made in the 16th and 17th Century - it was an exciting period across all art forms. A few years ago, with the benefit of an Australia Council Grant, I travelled to the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, the Schmuckmuseum in Germany and then The Museum of London. I met with curators and was able to handle some incredible objects from this era - and of course this has had a significant influence on my own contemporary work.

I'm going to talk about a few of the paintings in particular - they range from the mid 1500's to the end of the 1800's and I'll give you some background to the technical developments as well as the changing fashions - for me its a bit like looking in the rear view mirror to everything that lead up to the radical reinvention of jewellery in the 1900's - and that's where I/we came in - so looking at these works somehow explains where my work fits as a product of this era and its social context.

1. Clara Eugenia

1585 age 22 years

Infanta Clara Eugenia in her stiff bodice dripping with jewels (her mothers and her stepmothers). The Infanta Clara represents the wealth of the Spanish Court which by the mid 16thC and enriched by the New World and its gold and emeralds was leading Europe into its last great epoch of formal ostentatious display in which the art of jewellery played such an important role.

There are three important aspects to the context of this painting;

Firstly the artistic and intellectual revolutions of the Renaissance -

the techniques of rendering a more natural reality applied as much to jewellery as other art forms.

Secondly this was a time of discovery on a global scale - Columbus reached America in 1492 then Vasco de Gama sailed around the Cape of Good Hope to new lands and new riches to plunder.

2. Marharani of Sikkim

In the 1500's the centuries old conduit for precious goods travelling from the east to the west - The Silk Road was overthrown by these new sea routes to the gem rich countries of Ceylon, Burma and India, effectively shifting the centers of trade in luxury goods from Venice to Seville and Lisbon (both cities were part of Spain at this time)

3. Clara Eugenia close-up

Clara Eugenia's pearls would have come from the Persian Gulf, the massive emeralds and gold from South America and diamonds from India.

There was enormous potential for jewellery with the new materials and new styles - but equally significant was the third factor, the recent development of the printing press - this really was an information revolution enabling designs to be distributed throughout the goldsmiths workshops of Europe.

The Infanta Clara uses her jewellery - in no subtle way - to display power and status - the sumptuous necklaces inherited from her mothers family (the Hapsburgs) re-enforce her matrilineal power base, while the hard stone cameo she holds in her right hand is a portrait of her father Felipe 2nd - presents the viewer with a strong sense of dynastic continuity.

4. Renaissance jewel V&A Museum

Despite the obvious trappings of wealth & power the language of forms of the renaissance jeweller show a delicacy and beauty that reflected the renewed fascination for the beauty of nature

In this pendant cupid fires his arrow from a garden of rubies pearls and colourful enamel.

5. Agate Cameo Rings

These hard stone carvings are similar to the portrait cameo in the Clara Eugenia portrait - probably made in Venice where this extraordinary skill peaked in the renaissance period. The gem carvers utilised the contrasting layers of black of dark and light material that form naturally in the agate to define these figures.

6. Medici Goldsmith's Workshop

This oil painting portrays the Medici court craftsmen at work - many aspects of the goldsmiths work are shown - preparatory drawings pinned up for easy reference, charcoal furnaces in the background for annealing and casting metal, two men work at a heavy block hammering out sheets of silver - the blows of the hammer are absorbed by the heavy tree stump on which their hammers are conveniently strapped.

In the foreground the master goldsmith works on a crown, momentarily distracted by the workshop dog.

centre left we can see a workbench with bench pegs extending from the table to enable the goldsmith to manipulate the work for filing and shaping. In the foreground trays of gems and components await finishing, on the shelf to the right finished goods are temporarily displayed out of harms way.

Any jeweller could walk into this workshop today and feel at home - so little has changed

Although notably absent are a focused light source and evidence of magnification.

7. Daphne

The renaissance fascination with the natural world manifested in the idea of the Kunstkammer, or cabinet of curiosities - an encyclopaedic collection of types of objects whose categorial boundaries were yet to be defined.

Rulers and aristocrats, members of the merchant class and early practitioners of [science](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Science) in [Europe](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Europe) also formed collections that were precursors to [museums](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Museum).

This statuette of Daphne - by Wenzel Jamnitzer made around 1580 shows Daphne transformed into a tree, he uses a spectacular piece of red coral from the mediterranean sea to depict this mythic tale. Coral was considered to be the quintessential Kunstkammer material because, according to the understanding of the time, it united the three realms of nature: mineral, animal and vegetable.

8. Death's Head Toothpick

Here’s a Toothpick made in England in 1620 of enamelled gold set with a ruby - a death’s head and father time’s sickle . . .

Memento Mori - literally 'remember you must die' was a common theme at this time and urged the wearer to 'live now'

9. Woodcut of Artist designing jewellery

By the 1500's Jewellery was being designed on an international scale by artists and and men who were not practising goldsmiths and the princes of Europe, wishing to keep abreast of the latest fashions expected their court artists to provide drawings and designs for jewellery in the new styles. This would have been no problem for Henry VIII's court artist William Holbein who had made his way to the English court from Augsberg - Southern Germany - a wealthy city firmly located on the trade route to Italy, that supported up to 700 skilled jewellers and goldsmiths at this time.

But it was the printing press that enabled the reproduction of designs which were soon being distributed through the jewellery workshops of europe. This rapid dissemination of styles brought a new stylistic unity to to european jewellery and it was not uncommon for leading jewellers and goldsmiths to move from one court to another according to the chance of patronage - leading to a constant exchange of ideas, techniques and styles.

10. Gem shapes

Glittering coloured stones were invested by our pre-historic forbears with a sacred aura and this magic significance certainly remained the chief reason for their use on into the 16th C.

Gem faceting techniques up until this time had been limited to rubbing stones into rounded shape - cabochon - or polishing the natural crystals - simple interventions - compared to today's technology. To the observer, light reflected from the crystal structure of the stone seemed to come from within. The magic qualities attributed to gems and this mysterious emanation of light referred to the divine principal. And there were sumptuary laws which forbade any but the ruling classes to wear precious gems.

11. Table Cut Diamond Ring

This ring I'm holding, is from the Cheapside Hoard - a large cache of 16C jewellery and gems found beneath the floorboards of a demolished building - now held in the Museum of London- its table cut diamond gleams with an unfamiliar mystery - we are so used to the restless scintillation of modern brilliant cut diamonds.

It was usual at this time to set the stone into a closed back setting, unlike today where you will see a gem clasped with minimum metal around it - so that as much light can reach it from every angle. In closed setting the gem would be set into the metal with very thin polished foil behind it - often these foils were subtly coloured to enhance the gem - if a diamond was of very good quality they would use a black foil to show it off.

12. Gem cutting woodcut

Gem faceting developed and the more sophisticated it became the more light effects shifted to the surface of the stone, the magical significance of the mineral wandered as it were from the inside to the faceted surface. It seems as if the advancement of gem cutting and polishing technology is directly linked to the diminishing of the magic aura of the gem's own material substance.

13. Gem faceting

This early wooden mechanism allowed for more precise alignment of the gem against the cutting wheel

14.

to produce the rose cut which was the most advanced cut for diamonds during the 1600's

15. Margarita de Austria

1665 age 15years

Here in mourning dress for her father.

she wears jet bracelets and ring and large earrings or hair ornaments of black ribbon - her siblings in similar sober attire in the background.

Margarita effectively became Queen of Germany and she would have had a lavish collection of jewellery as part of her dowry. One enormous diamond of 36cts was auctioned at Christies in 2008 - it was one of the few lasting diamonds from India - the Kohinoor - British Crown Jewels, The Regent - The Louvre, The Orlov - the Kremlin and the Hope - The Smithsonian. The blue diamond sold for 24.3 million the highest price paid for a diamond at auction. Purchased by London jeweller Laurence Graff - who raised eyebrows when he re-cut the gem losing 4.45 cts and indeterminable historical significance - although it resulted in a diamond of technically higher calibre.

16.

An early form of the brilliant cut was developed in 1700 now the number of facets increased and the precision of their alignment gave the diamond far greater fire than the rose cut

17. Widow Gonzaga

1795 age 60 years

Goya's portrait captures a small woman with a strong character - one can imagine her maintaining decisive control of her family's fortunes. Her white shawl, ribbons and rose reveal a new softness and delicacy in vogue as fashions now took their lead from France.

During the 1700's 'the sublime gave way to the delightful, the dignified to the graceful, grandeur of size to the charm of elegance'. Along with an increased regard for women - the expression of tenderness and feelings became more important.

Diamonds were by now mined in Brazil and the quantities imported had increased 10 times the amount as in the last years of Indian production.

18. Earrings

No more heavy gold settings or straight rows of gems - a new lightness permeated. Diamonds were now set in silver to best show off their whiteness - and as the settings became lighter metal was relegated to a supporting. These airy designs expressed the new naturalism - stones could be set at varying angles rather than face on to the viewer - with the result of even more sparkle as the wearer moved.

Improvements in lighting became widespread, you could hardly invite guests to a ball lit by smoking greasy tallow candles, the wealthy could afford cleaner beeswax candles . Now they would have both daytime and evening jewellery - and diamonds became synonymous with glittering ballrooms and sparkling conversation across candelabra laden dinner tables.

19. Portrait ring

Affection, sentiment, keepsakes and mourning all found expression in jewellery - in a time before photography the miniature portrait of a loved one was extremely popular. Here the role of the artist flourished - they painted on vellum or ivory and were set beneath polished quartz.

20. Delicado de Imaz

1833

Vincente Lopez technical skill and precise depictions made him a favourite painter to a society eager to show off their status. His attention to detail knows no bounds - so we can only hope that la señora was not vain. But we can be thankful for the almost photographic depiction of the fabrics and jewellery.

A set of several matching pieces, the parure became popular. A parure consisted of necklace, earrings, a breast ornament, two bracelets and a diadem - this 'over the top' look had returned to vogue in the late 1700's!

But La señora seems to be bridging both older and new trends in her jewellery.

Her bracelet shows a revival of rococo style and seems to be set with shaped and polished crystal - certainly paste or lead crystal was not a new invention - it had reached its peak in 1700's to meet the demands of a new middle class.

21. Stamped Gold Brooch Components

The industrial revolution had brought constant material and technical innovations and by the 1820's jewellery was being made by soldering together several stamped sheet gold components.

22. Maria Dolores de Aldama Marchioness of Montelo

1855

Wealthy, young & beautiful, she drew the rich & powerful to her like moths to a flame.

Maria Dolores has jewelled rings, bracelet, hair pin and a brooch that brings us full circle back to the Renaissance.

23. Alexis Falize renaissance revival jewel

Artistic creativity in the 19th Century was influenced primarily by the imitation of style forms from the past. Often several historic revivals were popular at the same time - to us this doesn't seem to make sense, but for people at this time revival and analysis of works from the past trained both observation and taste.

24. Castellani - Greek revival brooch based

The name Castellani is almost synonymous with classical revival jewellery. Based in Rome, several generations of the family became famous for their Greek, Etruscan, Medieval and Renaissance style jewellery. From commercial to exhibition pieces their jewellery was often masterful copies of originals that had been excavated at various archeological sites around this time.

25. Watercolour bracelet designs Alexis Falize 1833-35

Inevitably there was a backlash to this reverence for past eras . . .

This kind of accurate replication contrasts with the ideals of John Ruskin in 1853 - who believed that the true artist should not slavishly copy something of past times without without incorporating some new inventive aspect.

'No artist has any business to be an antiquarian'.

By the end of the 1800's this idea would underwrite the overthrow of the old artistic paradigms and jewellery in particular, like the society it so faithfully mirrors - was about to re-invent itself in the most radical ways.

26. Dali

In the 20th century, more than ever before artists and sculptors showed an interest in jewellery design, Spanish surrealist painter Salvador Dali explored how complex pictorial concepts might be transferred to jewellery.

While Alexander Calder, Jean Cocteau, Pablo Picasso and others approached jewellery design from a perspective freed from the hierarchies of preciousness and material value - and the post war era saw a new movement of artist jewellers who deeply questioned the concepts and function of jewellery. And thats where I found myself at the start of my career in jewellery.

27. Bernard Munsteiner contemporary gem cutting

The last couple of images just follow recent developments in the field of gem cutting - here and enormous slab of Rutile Quartz is shaped on the saw - as you see the technologies employed have actually changed little in 500 years only that then the blade was turned by the millers wheel driven by the running river.

28.

to create this massive polished gem sculpture

29.

and this carved Green tourmaline and gold ring.

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