



Beyond the market value of gold and gold jewellery, lies the timeless mystery of ancient gold. Mapungubwe re-mined is based on the design of contemporary jewellery objects inspired by early African indigenous gold working. The gold artefacts from Mapungubwe epitomize the history of our gold industry and clearly mark an advanced indigenous progress in mining, smithing and smelting of gold, then fashioning it into precious ornaments and jewellery. Mapungubwe gold inspires the original frame of reference for creating contemporary objects and could serve as a source for developing a South African 'style' of designing and making jewellery.

MAPUNGUBWE RE-MINED

Creations of contemporary
jewellery design

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Introduction

The history of jewellery is permeated universally with the effects of colonization, power, demographic fragmentation and human suffering. The South African participation in this phenomenon is of relevance to my work as a jewellery artist.

As a trainee jeweller and enameller in England and Israel in the late 1980s I was distanced from direct engagement with the social consequences of the South African mining of gold and diamonds. These include the fragmentation of families, the use of cheap mining labour to maximize industrial profits, and the export of precious materials for jewellery production outside South Africa.

Rather than develop an independent jewellery design and manufacturing culture and reputation commensurate with its material resources, South Africa was primarily marketed and exploited as a source for raw materials. The development of South African 'jewellery aesthetic' during apartheid did not occur for two pivotal reasons: the apartheid policies systematized an inferior education system and a lack of skills training for the indigenous black majority of South Africans. The demographic and group-separation laws blocked the potential for an abundant cultural hybridity between the colonial (western) and indigenous (African) adornment forms, ritual practices and goldsmithing techniques.

As a self-serving power, the government acted as a bridge to the loyal foreign markets and kept in place a perceived South African reliance upon the continuing 'western' colonization and 'civilization' of the region. In keeping with its goals, apartheid challenged and deprecated the cultural sovereignty of the indigenous black peoples of South Africa.

A South African jewellery aesthetic

I returned to live in South Africa in 1995 and, having worked with European and British jewellers, found no noticeable differences in the South African and European precious jewellery forms. Also, my transition to living in a democratized South Africa was less simple than I had hoped for after so many years. As a jeweller I found that I just could not work with gold. In retrospect it seems that the redolence of 'apartheid gold' was still too fresh in my mind. My visit to the Mapungubwe Museum at the University of Pretoria was a turning point in my thinking as a jeweller living and working in South Africa. I had first heard about Mapungubwe in 2001 from the curator of the Royal Ontario Museum of Canada, Robert Barnett.

Mapungubwe is renowned for its indigenous community that included goldsmiths, wood carvers and crafters of other materials, including glass. They made distinctive adornment objects and established trade links with people as far away as China.

Of particular interest to me was the fact that their knowledge and skills-base included the making of gold jewellery and larger gold objects by mining, refining and working with gold. In the face of my apartheid education about the colonization of southern Africa since the 17th century, here was evidence that an ancient, pre-colonial southern African community possessed the ingenuity and acumen to work with gold. Mapungubwe and the gold objects held an intrigue and a rationale to work with gold that could symbolically circumvent the suffering that gold mining had precipitated during apartheid.

Contemporary tools and
fine unalloyed gold



The gold objects of Mapungubwe

The gold artefacts, including the gold-foil outer shell of the Mapungubwe rhinoceros, gold bowl (possibly a headdress) and sceptre, the gold beads and wire helices, tacks and off-cuts were discovered in 1933 and researched by the University of Pretoria. Since democracy the Mapungubwe rhinoceros in particular has come a long way as just an ornament and has been brought into the public domain in a number of ways; it is on permanent display in the Mapungubwe Museum of the University of Pretoria, and a national award, the Order of Mapungubwe was created for exceptional achievement. It also appears on billboards advertising tourism in the North West and Limpopo Provinces. The history of Mapungubwe as the iconic evidence of a pre-colonial southern African autonomy is also now taught in schools. One hopes that learning of Mapungubwe's history and importance will have an impact on the personal and national self-esteem of young South Africans.

I believe that the symbolic power of the Mapungubwe artefacts has only been partially exploited. I have been suggesting for some time that adopting the forms of the Mapungubwe objects as hallmarks of gold jewellery made in South Africa would be a fitting way to correct and vindicate the accurate origins of working with gold in South Africa as well as to symbolically redress the demographic and economic imbalances that the mining industry has precipitated for decades.

The importance of Mapungubwe as 'precious-craft'

Mapungubwe, besides altering the gold mining and goldsmithing history of South Africa, offers a value that can impact on the re-evaluation of South African craft as a category of objects. I assume firstly that the people of Mapungubwe used gold as an auspicious material. Unequivocally highly skilled artisans lived at Mapungubwe and made objects including the gold rhino, crown/bowl and sceptre for votive or regal purposes. The artefacts are evidence of an ancient southern African competence for craft that was superbly executed, appreciated and used. With this as a background, South African craft need no longer be subordinated or softly patronized.

Further, the integrity of the artefacts could predicate a discourse that fractures the centuries' domination of foreign colonialist forms, semiotics, measures and standards that seem to derive from the European Arts and Crafts movement.

The marketing of jewellery universally is hermetic and geared towards the perpetuation of maximum material value. The historical exclusion of adornment or craft elements from South African precious jewellery designs is regrettable particularly because there is a current scramble to identify and show South African jewellery design. It is plausible that the inclusion of indigenous references was previously taboo in the jewellery formulae. Jewellery and indigenous craft were diametrically opposed. In contrast to Europe, it follows that the existence of a 'precious craft jewellery' category would have been contradictory for the apartheid jewellery industry.

Indigenous adornment objects

Notwithstanding the importance of Mapungubwe in altering the chronology of the South African gold history, the development of South African precious jewellery forms could indeed be informed by a second group of ancient and venerated craft objects, i.e. the glass-beaded adornment objects of the diverse South African cultural groups. Albeit not empirically connected with Mapungubwe (although imported glass beads were cast into larger 'garden-roller beads' and used for adornment purposes) as a jeweller and artist I mention them here for three reasons:

- 1 Adornment interfaces with the paradigms of jewellery, fine art and craft, as do the Mapungubwe artefacts.
- 2 Since jewellery is a form of adornment, the question arises as to why the aesthetics of the myriad indigenous adornment objects never filtered into the South African jewellery designs, as was the case with the Mapungubwe jewellery.
- 3 Thirdly and personally, in my work I do appropriate and conflate visual elements from large indigenous body-adornments together with my interpretation of the gold objects of Mapungubwe.

Shifting the status of indigenous adornment and craft

During apartheid the indigenous beaded works were never concealed from public view; rather, they were exhibited in ethnographic museums both inside and outside of South Africa as the representative works of the local primitive or tribal peoples and their rituals.

South African craft jewellery is commonly regarded as containing beads in one form or another. Their ubiquitous presence in curio stores and flea markets perhaps detracted from their consistent quality and creative diversity of patterns, colours and forms. If black South Africans were considered racially and culturally inferior, then by association their handwork would have been similarly regarded. In countries where the Arts and Crafts movement occurred from the late 19th century in England, America and Denmark, craft jewellery was established as a valued expression of the indigenous, ancestral and local ingenuity. In apartheid South Africa, on the contrary, indigenous crafts including adornment and jewellery such as beaded *lipthos* (marriage aprons) and necklaces, were neither allocated fitting rank for their beauty and resolution as objects, apparent ease of skill, appropriacy for function, nor for the composition and integrity of constituent materials and designs.

South Africa favoured a western colonial value system; a discourse on prized indigenous craft objects did not arise. Exploitation and vulnerability of the objects' value might be exacerbated by the frequent lack of a maker's identity. The lack of accountability to a maker would predispose the pieces to an opaque appreciation of the object's integrity.



Noam Chomsky (1998), the American sociolinguist, has drawn attention to the American media's use of language to generate consensus or majority opinion. 'The mass media serve as a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populace'. I draw on his ideas about the strategic manipulation of cultural symbolic systems such as language to generate specific meaning for political ends. I apply them to the symbolic system of cultural 'objects', and their use.

'Craft' as objects associated with black South African makers would have come to embody inferior value under white rule. The term 'township art' is an example of an object category that was created and used to discriminate the fine art painting of black artists from the work of white artists.

An example of the impact of socio-cultural status of makers in determining the value of an object category was cited by Brenda Schmahman in her course on 'Feminist Art' at Wits University in 2001. She referred Roszika Parker's account (1984) of how the concept of 'craft' emerged in the first place during the Renaissance as something distinct from 'art', and how this became a gendered division. Women were seen as the producers of *craft*, and men of *art*, with art coming to be considered more worthy than craft from that time on.



The process of 'object status by affiliation' is curiously and ironically illustrated by its converse, this having recently occurred in South Africa. Until the end of the 1980s indigenous cultural objects, including adornment, were kept in the ethnographic collections of the South African Cultural History Museum in Cape Town. Synchronous with the twilight of apartheid, the Wits Art Galleries and South African National Gallery began buying these objects into their fine art collections. The strategy of instilling new value and meaning by selling, re-classifying, transmigrating and affiliating with 'fine art' increased the socio-cultural rank of these indigenous objects.

South African jewellery and cultural hybridity

Considering the requirement to market and sustain the precious material value of jewellery, the South African jewellery industry could find benefit from the reviewed perceptions and values recently given to our indigenous cultural craft and adornment objects.

The credibility of craft to jewellery planners is corroborated by the Mapungubwe craft objects because they are made of 'trusted' gold. Once a contradiction in terms, this juxtaposition can be turned to the good. Internationally not many jewellery industries have the opportunity to re-invent themselves.

An English colleague recently said to me that in South Africa we are close to 'source', not only to our raw materials, but to culturally ancient adornment rituals and objects that abound in groups such as the Ndebele, Xhosa, Zulu and Pedi people. Design features such as the large size of objects, percussive elements and the contribution of the human body and gravity to the final form might enter the western canon. If appropriate jewellery syllabuses are taught, and jewellery is made that represents a cultural hybridity, a South African design eminence could emerge that is commensurate with our material fame.

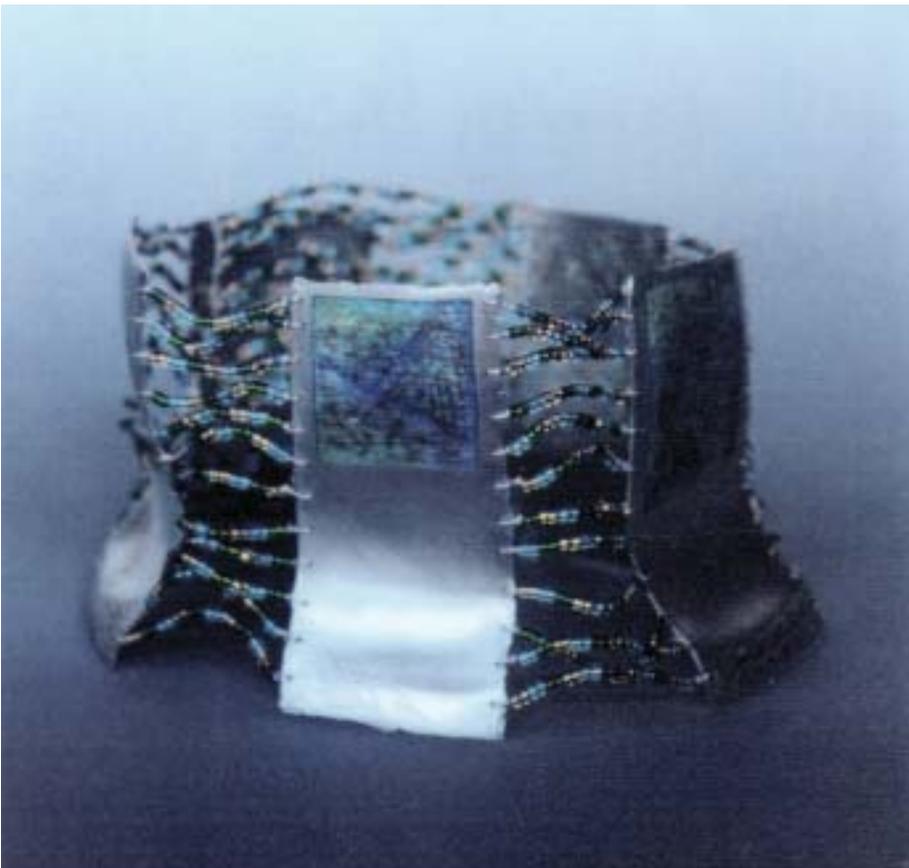
Embossed gold foil made with a pock-textured punch





Whose Gold? (2001). Gold painted wire armature of rhino with articulated foiled images and a fringe of pyrite

Mapungubwe Trans-fused (2001). Gold-plated sliver with vitreous enamel and glass beads



The Mapungubwe creations

Since 2001 I have made three works in a series called Mapungubwe Re-Mined. My interest has been to bring attention to Mapungubwe's relevance for jewellery in South Africa. I have drawn on Duncan Miller's metallurgical investigations (2004) and personal communication with him, as well as with Sian Tiley-Nel and Professor Tom Huffman (pers comm 2001). The first work (2001) was a 40cm sculpture made to a 3.5 scale of the Mapungubwe rhinoceros. It is a gold painted wire armature which is adorned with a harness of joined and articulated foiled images, terminating with a fringe of fool's gold or pyrite. The images are of precious jewellery made inside and outside South Africa. The subtitle of the work is 'Whose Gold?' and draws attention to the indigenous true origins of gold working in South Africa.

At that time I made a gold-plated silver, vitreous enamel and glass bead neck-piece the colours of which referenced the blue-green colours of the 'garden-roller beads', as well as the neck-form of some Mapungubwe clay pots that are in the Mapungubwe Museum. This work is entitled 'Mapungubwe Trans-fused' (2001).

My third work arose when I decided to suggest the idea of a 'rhino hallmark' to the jewellery industry by means of a large (524 grams) gold neckpiece. I used, among others, a punch tool with the stylized form of the Mapungubwe rhinoceros which has a characteristic single horn and has its tail pointing upwards.





Punches in a stylized form of the Mapungubwe gold rhino



Mapungubwe Re-Mined (2005), a beautiful hollow tubular gold neckpiece with 18-carat gold jump. AngloGold Ashanti Collection

From Duncan Miller's findings (2004) I used fine, unalloyed, gold and the technique of hammering rather than alloying the metal in order to work-harden it and to keep its form. The gauge of the gold foil was consistent with the foil on the Mapungubwe rhinoceros, 0,2 - 0,3mm thickness. I had punches made for texturing the metal in order to render the rows of chevrons that are found on some of the original gold relics. I also embossed some of the foil with a pock-texture punch to reference the process of body scarification. This aesthetic connection between the decoration of the skin and the gold material interests me but is not proven to have occurred at Mapungubwe.

The gold was generously supplied to me by AngloGold Ashanti during the time of Kelvin Williams and Alyson Horsley (2005) who showed much interest in the idea and mechanism of the piece. Anglo Gold Ashanti now own the piece.

I worked as authentically as possible, creating volumes of fine gold plate and then cutting platelets and hammering over wooden punches to achieve their final form.

Goldsmithing

Beyond the market value of gold and gold jewellery, lies the timeless mystery and privilege of the goldsmith's intimacy with the metal which universally connects us, whether from Mapungubwe or



Johannesburg. This profound bond with gold is a rite of passage and cannot be known to designers or planners who do not work with the metal; fine gold plate feels like a combination of blotting paper and butter.

My second intention for this work was to create a jewellery work that was redolent of a South African cultural hybridity between western and indigenous origins. For a number of years I have referenced large Ndebele adornment objects such as *liphothos* (marriage aprons) and *Linagas* (marriage capes). I value the large African scale as it offers a greater expressive forum than the frequently discrete sizes of western jewellery. A percussive element is often present, and I make work that moves with the body and can change form according to the way the wearer places it on the body. I use small foiled images that I join together to make jewellery of a varying complexity.

The Mapungubwe neckpiece is a hollow tubular form with protuberances at three points that create a triangular symmetry. It is a bold and heavy piece, but wearable because it is not a solid weight, i.e. the articulated platelets offer less inertia to the wearer's movement. It can be worn entirely to the front of the torso, or to hang half to the back of the body and comprises the small rectangular textured platelets which reference Mapungubwe and which are connected by small 18-carat gold jump rings. I used this alloy for its strength since the rings were not soldered closed, in keeping with the practice used at Mapungubwe (Miller *et al.* 2004). This also provided a contemporary western element.

I hallmarked the work in the colonial way which is with the symbols of the maker, year, metals and the place of manufacture. To represent South Africa I used my Mapungubwe rhinoceros punch. For me the work's form captures boldness and celebration of the human body that I find to be signifiers in African and South African beaded adornment objects. Coupled with the goldsmithing of Mapungubwe, they constitute a personal inspiration to circumvent the jewellery history of apartheid and to create hybrid jewellery forms which are precious and authentically South African.

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Fine gold before hammering and texturing

