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The Concept of Filigree

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Abstract:

There is some form of debate regarding what filigree is and what it is not. Due to this different opinions have been formed regarding the concept of filigree. This includes cast pieces and non-metallic craft also bearing the name filigree. This paper seeks to bring to light the wonder art, filigree in its true definition. It seeks to acknowledge what filigree is, how it is created, the fancy nature of it, its fascination and mind blowing flora. This research was basically contents analyses of filigree information from relevant literation as well as interviews and observation of local artisans in certain parts of Ghana. The data collection process sought after: the knowledge of filigree; how it is done; uses of filigree; filigree works from the doer's perception, and materials employed for filigree. This resulted in a three fundamental areas regarding the filigree paradigm: the required Elementary forms; materials used; and the processes involved. The research also identifies artworks that are called filigree but lack some of the basic elements. In this regard, two main recommendations are made to guide the production and marketing of filigree to preserve the craft and the industry for posterity.

Keywords: *Filigree, integrates, soldering, ajouré, arabesque*

1. Introduction

Filigree is a delicate type of work done by twisting threads popularly of gold, silver or platinum. These twisted threads create an intricate design which in appearance is reminiscent of lace. Gemstones and other integrates may be added as additional design elements. While some authors suggest that filigree can sometimes be used as a term to describe any type of pattern in jewellery that looks intricate and sophisticated, others argue that filigree jewelry should strictly involve metal threads being soldered together to form the design. This paper therefore aimed at bringing to light what filigree really is. The importance of this paper therefore is to look into the concept of filigree to broaden the scope of knowledge in this wonder art. The total appreciation of this brainy work would equip the reader to be a master in differentiating filigree from all other similar works.

Filigree is one of the most delicate types of jewellery metalwork, which generally uses precious metals. It is created with small and detailed beads and twisted threads fused together to stand on their own or fixed onto an object. It is ideal for arabesque designs. The name, "*filigree*", derives from the union of the Latin "*filum*", which means "*thread*", with "*granum*", which means small bead. This places *Filigrana* as the Italian name for the art of filigree. The French connotation is *filigrane*. (COVET Foundation, Design and Craftsmanship, 2019)

According to Steffano (2013), filigree refers to jewellery that incorporates into its design handcrafted twisted threads usually of gold and silver or other metals. The metal is soldered and is arranged in delicate designs of various patterns on the gold or silver jewellery; its appearance is suggestive of lace.

However, Lane (2013) also defines filigree as coming from two Latin words "*filum*" and "*granum*" which, when combined, mean thread grain. In the past, the process was difficult to create and was often painstakingly finished by hand. Words which were formerly used to describe the process are "*filigrana*" and "*filigrane*." The motif often brings to mind lace. Filigree jewelry made today is often mass produced, but the effect is the same, although less intricate. Lane further argues that some people confuse the term filigree with another term "*ajouré*." This is understandable, since the effect is similar. It is very common when browsing online; to see the word filigree attributed to jewelry that is actually *ajouré*. When the pieces are compared, it is easy to see why. While both types have many open areas, and a delicate look to the overall design, filigree jewelry involves threads being soldered together to form the design and *ajouré* means that holes have been punched, cut or drilled into a piece of metal.

Moreover, Mithra(2014) suggests that since the Art Deco era, when the aesthetics of delicate work became widespread in architecture, print, and fashion, filigree has also been used to refer to an openwork motif on objects like

book covers, lawn furniture, or fabric. Filigree designs often have vines, leaves, buds, waving hair, or spider webs incorporated into their textures. Historically inspired reproduction of antique pieces may use the word *filigree* to note the general design, rather than to describe the specific method used to form the jewellery.

Furthermore, Goud (2005) asserts that filigree refers to lacelike decoration using gold or silver wires. It is ideal for arabesque designs. One of the necessary steps in making filigree is the forming of wire. It is made by twisting very tightly two pieces of very small wires then flattening it. Country seeds, feathers, leaves, fruits, animal bones, claws and teeth have been used in early India to fashion ornaments. Even today, such ornaments are popular in tribal societies. In India, filigree work of Karimnagar, Orissa, Scrinagar, etc. are known for their intricate designs and artistic work.

1.1. Concept of Filigree in Various Geographic Origins

The concept of filigree varies in knowledge and outlook depending on their geographic locations. Even though the main concept of wire work and soldering remain, various people have adopted filigree to suit their origin and style. Hence we are presented now with classifying filigree per their origin. Some of the known origins are the Orissa (India), Russia, China, Karimnagar (India), Ireland and Egypt.

In India, people of the Cuttack city of Orissa state are predominantly involved in producing the art of filigree. More than a hundred families in Cuttack city are engaged in producing various patterns of filigree jewelry. The filigree art is popularly known as 'Cuttacki Tarkasi' among the local people of the state. For its intricate designs and brilliant artistic patterns, filigree jewelry of Orissa is famous all over the world. For the people of Orissa, filigree has been a significant export item since ancient times. It also symbolizes the excellence and showcased the talent of Orissa's craftsmen. (Cultural India, 2020)

1.2. Orissa Filigree

It can be noticed that filigree types from Orissa seem to employ a lot of the zigzag wires in its production. This is an ancient art internationally known for its elegant craftsmanship. It is the most exquisite art of Orissa and the artisans who make these items reside mostly in Cuttack and a few villages of the Cuttack district. (Radha Jewellers, 2015). Figure 1 is an example of Orissa filigree showing elements of the zigzag at the base and most parts within the design. The weight is recorded to be 18 grams within the dimensions of 3.4 inches by 4 inches which is approximately 8.6 cm by 10.2 cm. Figure 2 also shows an Orissa brooch. This brooch is material intensive and weighs 70 grams.



Figure 1: Silver Filigree Ganesha

Source: www.craftsvilla.com- Author: Radha Jewellers



Figure 2: Silver Filigree Brooch, Weight: 70 Grams

Source: Bhubaneswar (N.D.)

1.3. Russian Filigree

According to Cyndie's Studio Designs (2009) Filigree articles by Russian goldsmiths are known by the smooth and delicate ornamental lines with mild curves of wire, clearly defined ornaments and numerous designs within an individual object. The five-sided vase in figure 3 is handmade in filigree technique. This is as mentioned earlier, characterised by shapes filled with twists and turns of wires. Vertical edges are framed with flower openwork patterns. This is a filigree piece from Russian folk art. (Tupichkin, 2011)



Figure 3: Filigree Work Vase

Source: www.art-holding.com. Russian Folk Art- Author: Tupichkin, B.I

1.4. Chinese Filigree

Figure 4 shows an example of Chinese filigree. The butterfly measures 3" x 1 3/4" which is approximately 21 cm by 10 cm. This is a brooch dated circa 1930s (Proctor, 2014). The Chinese filigree comes in similar fashion like others. However, samples of these are characterised by zigzag boundaries unlike the straight boundaries from most cultures.



Figure 4: Lacy Silver Filigree Butterfly Brooch. Left: Front of the Brooch; Right: Back of Brooch

Source: [Rb.Montecristosjewelry.Com](http://rb.montecristosjewelry.com) – Author: Proctor, Julie A.

1.5. Karimnagar Filigree

Karimnagar filigree also has a unique feature. In this case the wire ornamentals are bounded by wider borders. Besides, unlike the smaller shapes of areas filled by the ornamentals in most cases, the Karimnagar filigree has wider areas covered with the ornamentals. Figure 5 show examples of Karimnagar filigree showing the broader boundaries and the wider coverage of the wire ornamentals. It is hand-crafted in Sterling Silver, it personifies the classic sophistication and elegant charm of a modern woman. (Jay pore Inc., 2013)



Figure 5: Filigree Work Silver Cuff, End-to-End Length - 7.6in, Width - 1.5in
Source: Www.Jaypore.Com- Author: Jay Pore Inc.

1.6. Irish Filigree

The filigree for Ireland often have solid appearance and more compact in design. Lane (2011) admits that no more varied or thoughtfulness in design can be found than the filigree work from Ireland. Instead of the fine curls normally used in other types of filigree jewelry, Irish filigree varies by the way that one thread can be traced through various knots and complicated designs. Although they flow over large surfaces on the pieces of jewelry, they still tend to balance one another and add special varieties and arrangements which are difficult to follow with the naked eye.



Figure 6: Filigree Work: Leaf Petal Brooch
Source: Www.Rubylane.Com/Blog - Author: Lane, (2011)

Egypt is another origin of filigree. But there are no known filigree registered as Egyptian filigree. Egyptian jewellers also worked with wire; however, they were only interested in precious metal chains. Filigree art was not very popular among them, it was rare. Examples of round plaited gold chains of fine wire, similar to those made today in India, can still be seen around the world and are known as Trichinopoly chains. These chains are often decorated with tiny fishes and other detailed ornaments. Some of these works are also characterised by Egyptian images as seen in figure 7. (COVET Foundation, Design and Craftsmanship, 2019)



Figure 7: Bracelet with Egyptian Panels Made in Silver
(COVET Foundation, Design and Craftsmanship, 2019)

Ghana, a country in West Africa, is also one of the African countries where filigree is produced. But they are also not tagged as Ghanaian filigree. Sample of filigree works from the traders and producers in Ghana suggests that different design that is produced can be related to some the designs from Europe and Asia as well as Africa. The filigree from Ghana is characterised by the use of flat and round wires that are used to form borders with various ornamental fill-ins. Like the Egyptian concept of filigree, they are made for personal adornment purposes. They are also employed in the decoration of corpses laid in state by some communities among the Ghanaian community. Figure 8 is Ghanaian made filigree necklace made from a combination of flat wires: a single flat wire for the borders and other flat wires made from twisting two wires and used for the fill-in designs. Unlike in figure 8 and figure 9 is a combination of round wire. Again the outer borders are single and the inner fill-ins are double twist wires. Figure 10 is another necklace with certain parts of the design devoid of boarder shapes. Figure 11 is a floral design of a pendant with floral shape borders with twisted wire ornamentals. This is furnished with a dome in the center of the design. This dome is also seen in figure 10.



Figure 8: Ghanaian Made Filigree Necklace Known as Agushi 99
Source: Anum (2015)

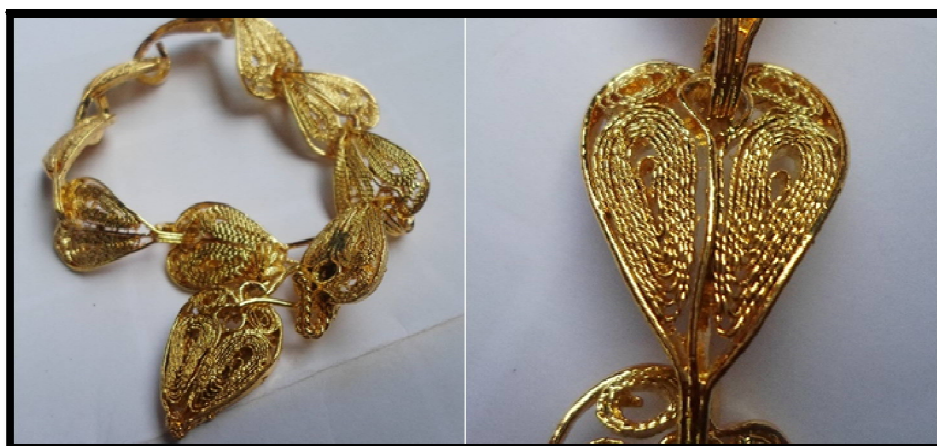


Figure 9: Ghanaian Made Filigree Bracelet. Nungua Gold Bracelet
Source: Accra Mall, Nungua Gold Trader: Naa (2015)



Figure 10: Locally Made Ghanaian Filigree Works Necklace for Adornment of Royals and Corpse
Source: Accra Mall, Nungua Gold Trader. Naa (2015)



Figure 11: Locally Made Ghanaian Filigree Pendant for Adornment
[Source: Accra Mall, Nungua Gold Trader. Naa (2015)]

2. Methods

This research sampled opinions of the concepts of filigree from different authors, practitioners and marketers. Data accrued from review, observation and interviews were subjected to comparative and reduction analyses. This led to some facts underlying the concept of filigree; common opinion that a shared by stakeholders; and disparities. The search design is summarised in figure 12.

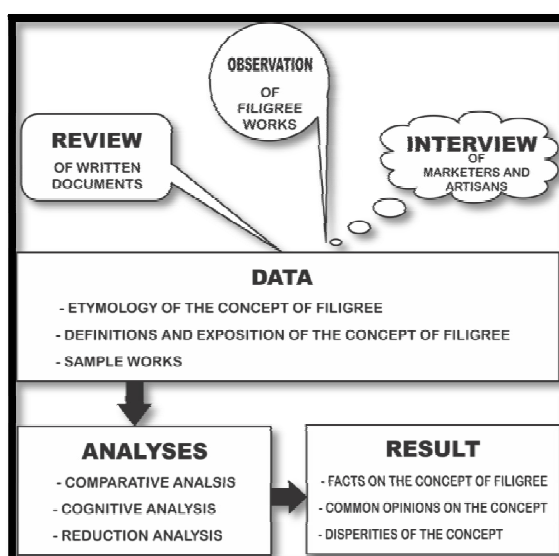


Figure 12: Summery of Research Design

The review focused on the data that try to bring out the root meaning regarding the concepts of filigree. Such data were subjected to comparative and reductions analyses to produce the information into a more concise form. This aimed at defining what filigree is really. Furthermore, observation of some of the artworks produced in the name of filigree also generated pictorial data that were also analysed cognitively based on information on the conclusions earlier conceived

regarding the concept of filigree. The observations of the live works especial from Ghana were validated by the producers and marketers. This was to ensure the accuracy of the analyses and information thereof.

3. Results and Discussion

A wide range of authors worldwide agree that Filigree has no strict rules in its composition; the concept of soldered wires must remain for it to be called a filigree work. However, sources like Lane (2013) that try to explain the meaning of filigree as already spealt out in the introduction of this paper, tackled it from the two Latin words "filum" and "granum" which means thread and grain respectively. Therefore filigree simply means "thread grain". Filigree in English also corresponded with both the French and the Latin connotations: *Filigrana* as the Italian and *filigrane* for French. All carrying the sense of the element that composes filigree: threads and grains. Moreover, it is also seen as a craft that involves working of wires that represents the threads and metals beads and granules that represents the grains, then soldering them together. In this regard, figure 13 is a watch case showingsoldered wires with both thread and grain effects in the design. This can therefore be mentioned as a good example of filigree.



Figure 13: A Watch Case

Source: Covet Foundation, *Design and Craftsmanship*, 2019

However, figures 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11 shows example of filigree characterised by thread effects but devoid of grains. This is an evidence of how attention is not being paid to the original concept of the craft. Besides, the fact regarding the soldering of wires are also beginning to suffer the same fate. In some cases the threads are makes in wax and used to create models that are replicated in metals. As seen in figure 14, they look like filigree though but are devoid of soldering and also supplementary grains.



Figure 14: Brass Filigree Beads

Source: *West African Brass Beads*, 2013

The flexibility of this art work allows for a wide range of form to be derived from it. Due to this people take advantage of the processes to product a lot of forms. In this regard irrespective of the original precious metals that were

used, sometimes they give way for the use of other metals like brass and copper. The other metals may be chosen for functional and economic reasons.

However works gathered from Ghana prove that very little is being done with filigree. Most artworks produced are copy works of other existing personalised art forms from other societies. From research carried out, it was noticed that the smiths in Ghana refer to filigree simply as wire work. The market vendors call them Nungua gold. This was because the smiths in Nungua are those popularly found to be producing them beside the facts that they were always plated in gold. Again, it can be realised that name filigree is gradually being lost among the people of Nungua, let alone the principles that governs their making.

4. Conclusion

It is obvious the factual knowledge of the concept of Filigree has evolved through the years and has been very much personalised by sects of people. For example, the Irish filigree differs from that of Orissa and so on. The concept however still remains, regardless of how much additions one makes. Also the difference is clear between what filigree is and the background it is mounted. Therefore an overall work may not be filigree but only its surface may be decorated with filigree.

The facts regarding the concept of filigree can be categorized by their prescribed Elementary forms; Materials and Processes.

- The Elementary forms of filigree are expected to have threadlike patterns executed with wires and embellished with granules patterns like grains: usually of metal domes and granules.
- With regards to materials, filigree as an art is made of precious metals such as silver and gold. Though the metals considered were precious metals, the malleability of the metal was considered as the key. However, filigree was instituted as a precious metal art.
- The fundamental processes involved in the making of filigree include the twisting, bending and soldering of wires together to form intricate patterns on one end; and the forming and attachment of grains of metals on the other end. These grains at some point were replaced by other materials such as stones and pearls.
- Apart from the original facts of filigree above, there are other ideas that are also referred to as filigree. These can be classified as: partial filigree; imitation filigree and non-precious filigree.
- Partial filigree: these can be seen in some of the examples above like in figure 3, regarding thread oriented works without any elements of grain in its design. In such works, several twists and turns of wires are soldered together to form intricate designs in a precious metal like silver or gold. But judging from the fundamental concepts of filigree, this can only be termed as partial filigree. Because it is devoid of the supplementary element (grains)
- Imitation filigree: in this case some of the works appear like filigree but do not go through the processes like the twisting and soldering of wire. Some of such works are cast, like the brass bead in figure 14. This makes them more of imitations than actual, though the looks may be the same.
- Non-precious filigree: from the literature, it can also be concluded that, the fundamental material for filigree are precious metals. This may be because of their super malleability; non corrosiveness; their ability to hold the beauty and intricacy of the design; and also sell at prices that can commensurate the enormous efforts of the craftsmen who make them. However, for other reasons, other non-precious metals have set in. For this reason, filigree can be dichotomised by classifying them under precious and non-precious in order not to deceive those who collect or patronise them.

5. Recommendation

Regarding the facts surrounding the art of filigree, this paper recommends that filigree works should be judged according to the fundamental principles regard the threadlike twisting and bending of precious metal wires and arranging them into intricate designs and soldering them together. And these intricacies should be integrated with grainy elements. Any other compositions lesser than can be achieved by these fundamental principles should be given one of the classifications above: Partial filigree; Imitation filigree or Non-precious filigree. It is also recommended that these classifications should be used by buyer and marketers to determine authenticity and pricing. This may go a long way to sanitise the market and also preserve the actual filigree craft industry for posterity.

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