



original gangsters

Copying is stealing. There are no two ways about it. As Knoll's Justin Pratt so eloquently expresses it: 'Copies could not exist without the training, graft and inspiration of the original designer, and the investment in good times and bad from the original manufacturer.'

Those people who seek to profit from the manufacturer's investment and the designer's inspiration have no loyalty to the design and no respect for the designer. They simply steal and in most cases bastardise the original design.'

This question of what constitutes the 'original design' is often a subject of some

debate. And more particularly, what are the legal and moral ramifications of reproducing the original design? Rolf Fehlbaum, Chairman of Vitra, discusses the issues. 'Reproduction is an intrinsic aspect of design logic. In the field of design, the most prevalent misunderstanding of the term 'original' is that the only objects which ▶▶▶▶





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▶▶▶▶ deserve this designation are those that were manufactured during the earliest years of a design's production. According to this interpretation, a Corbusier armchair from the year 1928 or an Eames plywood chair produced in 1946 would be originals, while the same models by Le Corbusier or Charles and Ray Eames from current production would be copies, regardless of who the manufacturer is. Copyists adhere to this notion. They admit that they are copying the original design, but claim that the licensed manufacturers of classic designs – ie the companies who own the copyright (Cassina for Le Corbusier and Vitra for Eames) – do the same thing.

'In their view, the 'originals' are the models from the earliest periods of production which are now found in museums and private collections, but not the present products by licensed manufacturers found in the furniture stores. This line of argument is faulty and misleading. Early examples of a design from the initial production phase are vintage objects. Rare and valuable, they are sought

after by collectors because they represent the first expression of a new idea.

'Almost without exception practical usage eventually reveals the need for improvements in specific aspects of the design. For the duration of their career, Charles and Ray Eames continued to develop and perfect their designs. The dimensions and materials of a product were changed, as well as individual parts (like glides, etc), when better solutions were found.

From this perspective, an early production model is worthy of admiration, but outdated and in some cases even obsolete. The term 'original', therefore, has nothing to do with the production date. The status of an original is determined by the relationship between the designer (or rightful heirs) and the manufacturer of the designer's products. There is not only a legal component to this relationship, but also an intangible one based on shared ideals and mutual cooperation. For any product to be designated as an 'original' the originator of the design must have given the

manufacturer the legal authorisation to produce it. Anyone who produces a design without legal permission is appropriating property that belongs to someone else. This applies not only to the manufacturer, but also to the consumer who buys an unlicensed product.'

This last element of the issue that Fehlbaum highlights, that of the consumer's role, is an important one. In recent times consumers have become far more design aware. It is also probably true that the more design aware consumer will increasingly demand originality, because apart from legal and moral concerns, originality will confer added value to their purchase.

ACID (Anti Copying in Design), the vociferous membership trade organisation that combats plagiarism in the design and creative industries, has clearly identified the role of the end user as critical. The very emergence of ACID in 1996 says a lot about the lack of legal protection for designers in this country. That there should have to be a not-for-profit lobby group to raise the profile of the copying issue also ▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶



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►►► says something about how this country values design.

If you read national newspapers you will have noticed the adverts for design classics, selling 'Eames' and 'Mies' chairs at eye



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wateringly low prices. There's even a nice little strap line about how the pieces are 'inspired' by the originals. Presumably legal, these ads prey on consumers who want a modern classic.

The whole thing is bizarre – do you suppose that if an advertiser chose to promote classic Ferrari or Maserati cars at a fraction of the normal price, (with weasel mouthed words about being inspired by the originals) anybody would buy one when they stopped laughing?

Since we've widened the scope of the topic, it's probably worth mentioning other areas of concern. The recorded music sector, for example, has had its business model decimated by illegal Internet downloads, not to mention the burning of CD copies from the original. This is illegal, but commonplace globally. The issue is clearly one of morality and not of education.

Take also the fashion industry: those original designs resulting from the creative inspiration and skill of McQueen, Versace,

Choo and the rest clearly 'inspire' the low cost variants seen in High Street retailers later in the season. You only have to check out the 'get the look' sections in the style magazines to know that the fashion industry as whole apparently accepts this state of affairs and is seemingly complicit in the arrangement. The attitude changes somewhat when tourists cross into Italy with their three quid Dolce e Gabbana handbags, only to find them theatrically scissored by the border patrol.

As we said at the beginning, copying is stealing and there are no two ways about it, but we need to do more than just say it's wrong, we need to do the right thing as the consumer. We need enforceable legislation to combat piracy. We need to value design and creativity and we need the design and creative industries to value intellectual property as much as their tangible assets ●



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credits

1. Panton Chair, Design Verner Panton, 1999
© Vitra

4. Aluminium Chair EA 107 – EA 108, Design Charles & Ray Eames, 1958 © Vitra Collections AG

5. & 6. Ply Wood Group LCM, Design Charles & Ray Eames, 1946 © Vitra Collections AG

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