

Copying and Originality – The Hidden Story

Every so often members of the Standards and Education Committee are called upon to mediate in circumstances where a charge of copying has been levelled by one Guild member against another. The discussion that ensues invariably has two characteristics. First, the discussion is difficult - it is uncomfortable and fraught with anger and feelings of betrayal. Second, it is hushed up, to spare the feelings of those involved. How many Guild members, who have not been involved in these discussions, even know that they take place? While discretion around individual cases is called for, a general discussion of the issues involved would underline the fact that the Guild upholds the value of striving for originality. At the same time, acquainting members with the Guild's expectations regarding originality might result in fewer challenges in the future.

What do we mean by copying? What do we mean when we talk about it as it relates to work produced by members of the Guild? Why does the Guild embrace the idea that it is important to strive for originality in our work? How can we protect ourselves from charges of copying? How do we handle charges of copying? The answers to these questions are not simple, one-size-fits-all solutions, but they are still worth talking about.

What do we mean by copying?

Who hasn't had to copy something at some time? Was your first cooking lesson "copying" someone's process as they threw together a batch of chocolate chip cookies? Now make the leap to art. If you've taken an art class you have probably been asked to attempt to copy another artist's work. Maybe you made a copy of a painting by an Old Master. The copy probably wasn't anywhere near as proficient as the original. (I bet those chocolate chip cookies weren't either, the first time you tried). With practice, copying teaches you valuable lessons about form, composition and working with colour. Are you going to keep copying once you have these lessons under you belt? Yes, likely you will. There are always other lessons to learn.

As a student, copying is an important tool in your toolbox. Since we keep learning all our lives, copying is going to remain useful...but it's worthwhile noting that its usefulness starts out in the learning process. Copying teaches you skills you can use to fuel and drive your personal creativity – your originality.

How does copying relate to the work we create as Guild Members?

Copying is an important tool in learning ceramics. When making functional ware, imitation is a teaching tool used in classes all the way up to expert-level. If you look at a dozen handmade mugs, made by different potters, all with pulled handles, and all glazed blue, there will be differences. They may not be extreme, but there will be differences: the way the handle feels, the size and weight of the piece, the lip-feel. There will be similarities too. But no one is going to level a charge of copying if 12 potters each make a blue mug.

Copying really becomes an issue when you add more to the process. The same issues that apply to other forms of art, to paintings, or drawings or sculpture, also apply to functional ceramics, as work approaches the blurry line that separates craft from art. A mug may be a functional object but it may also be much more.

When a teacher gives us the value of the years they have spent developing a form or a technique for working with clay, they do not do so with the expectation that we will begin making this piece exactly as they do, unless it is solely for personal use. They do not assume that we will immediately begin to sell work made using all of their techniques, as they do, in one place. We are being offered privileged information with the unwritten understanding that we will use this information to develop our own voice, *if we choose to go on to offer our work for sale*. Over the years I have had the distinct advantage of working with teachers who were unfailingly generous in the knowledge they imparted. None of them, (not one!) put limits on how they expected the knowledge to be used. To a student that is an incredible gift, but it comes with a responsibility. The next section outlines the responsibilities that we have to uphold the ethical standards in our field. For the most part, a student attempting to copy their teacher's work will fall short. But the student's work may look enough like the teacher's work to cause some embarrassment when the work is offered for sale in the same market. The Guild can be of service to its members by talking about these issues.

Why is originality important to the Guild?

The first line in the Ottawa Guild of Potters' mandate says that we intend to encourage the growth and development of pottery and maintain a high standard of artistic expression and craftsmanship. In order to meet this standard of artistic expression, ceramic artists must embrace the same standards that other artists do. Ethically this entails producing art *for sale* that is the product of your own creative efforts. If the work is collaborative, this should be noted. If it is wholly the product of someone else's creative genius, maybe you should give it to your sister for her birthday, with the relevant credit to the source of your inspiration!

How do we protect ourselves from charges of copying?

The development of one's creative voice does not take place overnight. It's a process that is a unique blend of your training, the things you have seen and done and the medium you are working with. Over time you will build up a record of your work. You will be asked to write artist statements. You will be asked to talk about your work. You will begin to see what motivates you and what fuels your creative growth. As you articulate these things, for yourself and for others, you will have a record of your creative journey. If it happens that others produce work independently that looks like yours, or vice versa, your ability to document how you arrived at that point in your work is the key to the originality of your work and your voice. It matters that we can arrive at similar points by unique paths.

How do we handle charges of copying?

From the Guild's side, charges of copying should be handled with care and discretion. This is not a position we want to find ourselves in, but it does arise. The first step after receiving a claim that *appears to be* substantiated should always be a respectful discussion with the artist.

From the artist's side, their ability to document how they arrived at a particular place in their work makes this conversation less difficult than it might otherwise be. The better we understand our creative process the easier it is to articulate it.

While I hope not have to deal with another charge relating to originality and copying in my tenure on Standards, the discussion of the Guild's expectations around this issue is a useful one. This is a discussion that rarely takes place. Perhaps because the issue is so devastating that we just want the discussion to be over; or maybe because we assume, without really thinking about it, that we all understand the same thing with regard to these issues. Whatever the case, it's a dialogue worth having within the Guild.

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Standards and Education

April 2021



Some Added Reading on the Subject in no particular order...

Book publishers and the internet are full of resources that expand on the topics of originality and visual plagiarism. Below are a few resources that have been recommended by fellow Guild members that might pique your interest.

Austin Kleon. *Steal like an Artist: Things nobody told you about Being Creative.* Workman, 2012.

Melissa Maya's articulate take on "ripping off other people's work" on Instagram:

<https://www.instagram.com/tv/CLIGXANAbc9/?igshid=egi01717j3hl>

Ginger Davis Allman @The Blue Bottle Tree, *Is this a copy? Or "inspired by"?*

<https://thebluebottletree.com/copy-inspiration/>

For fun...a website that documents jaw-dropping plagiarism in manufacturing:

<https://www.plagiarius.com/index.php?ID=2>

Tara Leaver @ Artwork Archive, *How to Be Inspired by Other Artists Without Copying Them,*

<https://www.artworkarchive.com/blog/a27c4117-0eaa-403c-b745-60863fd26bc6>

University of Manitoba, *Preventing Visual and Spatial Plagiarism*

<https://centre.cc.umanitoba.ca/integrity/preventing-visual-plagiarism/>

This resource offers link to references including one to a *Code of Best Practices for Fair Use in the Visual Arts.*