

Need to Know

What Does It Mean to Plagiarize in the Design World?

Three designers consider where the ethical borders lie for them

By Kyle Hoepner

April 30, 2021

Your clients have fallen in love with a dining room from a Paris apartment and want one “just like it” for their own use. How close a duplicate can you give them without violating your principles—or the law? Where does taking legitimate inspiration from another designer’s work turn into a dishonest appropriation of their ideas?



Klismos chairs by T.H. Robsjohn-Gibbings frequently appear in *AD*, as seen in this [penthouse](#) by Delphine Krakoff and Mark Ferguson. Photo: Eric Piasecki

“No one can say that they designed something totally out of their own imagination.”

asserts [Timothy Corrigan](#), speaking from his office on the West Coast. “Everything comes from an earlier source. So it’s a little tricky how you attribute ownership of design.” Working within any definable style, he points out, necessarily involves a degree of imitation. “If you think about it, how many [klismos chairs](#) have there been? So yes, you could say that T.H. Robsjohn-Gibbings did a beautiful klismos chair. But it came from this person, and from that person...back to ancient Greek times.”

Join AD PRO and save 20% on an annual membership

[Join Now](#)

In the same way, a “[modern farmhouse](#)” interior is only recognizable as such because it shares so many characteristics with similar rooms. The internet today is awash in shiplap-paneled walls, herringbone tile floors, and reclaimed wood either layered onto a ceiling or fashioned into barn-style doors. Are all of those rooms copies? Obviously, yes, to an extent. What keeps designers out of trouble is how inventively they deploy the common ingredients.

“Part of the reason we learn history is so we can draw from it,” New York’s [Barry Goralnick](#) observes. “If you love [Dorothy Draper](#), you love her sense of color, her overscale moldings, her insouciance with antiques—and that’s really inspiring.” For a room scheme of your own, “you might do a valance that she did, or something else that works in your project.” When one of his clients, following a visit to [London’s](#) Eltham Palace, asked him to infuse her Manhattan residence on Central Park West with a matching “echo of Deco,” Goralnick wasn’t at all uncomfortable with the brief. “There are so many elements to play with. You can work in that idiom and still make it your own. We gave her the essence of what she wanted without copying at all.”

Cliff Fong, of [Matt Blacke](#) and [Galerie Half](#) in Los Angeles, also advises hinting at a look rather than directly replicating it. “There’s a zeitgeist around certain kinds of aesthetics,” he believes, and hooking into it can be “a beautiful thing. To me, it’s a natural creative progression, especially if it helps make things more relevant.” Literal borrowings are out, though; producing a new project based too much on preexisting models, he says, “feels like either set dressing or drag.”

Become an AD PRO Member

Buy now for unlimited access and all of the benefits that only members get to experience. →



When design professionals ask clients to collect reference images as a way of clarifying their likes and dislikes, the practice tacitly acknowledges a human tendency to covet items that have already been seen. The same holds true for magazines that include a “shop this look” spread in a home-design feature. Goralnick stresses the importance of treating supplied photos as a starting point for brainstorming rather than as a [shopping](#) list: “You have to home in on what it is they like about an image, what elements they are

attracted to. Then go from there.”

Straying into [plagiarism territory](#) becomes “a bigger problem”—one that could land you in court—“when you’re actually taking money out of someone’s pocket,” Corrigan states emphatically, and Goralnick and Fong are equally firm on the subject. But all three highlight a broader argument against wholesale poaching, as well. Ultimately, relying on what another person has already done simply won’t lead to the best results. As Corrigan puts it, true designers aren’t just talented magpies. “You don’t physically take something from someone else and exactly copy it; you reinterpret it for a new situation,” he explains. Fong likens the role of proper influence in design to “an organic process, bringing things together where they make sense and creating something fresh”—that is, a genuinely custom solution rooted in the unique challenges and opportunities each job presents.

Not everyone agrees on precisely what is or isn’t kosher. Corrigan, for example, will sometimes fabricate a modified version of an existing product if the manufacturer can’t or won’t customize, while Goralnick takes a harder line. However, since designers will always be looking at the work of their peers for ideas that can be fitted to a new purpose, this might serve as a practical rule of thumb: “If you even *think* you may be infringing on someone’s design, you should probably do something else,” says Goralnick. “After all, how would you feel if they did it to you?”

ADPRO

Become an AD PRO member today and save 20%
on your annual membership.

BUY NOW