



Original or Copy?

Over the last few years, occasional incidents have occurred in which artists mistakenly believed that in converting a commercial artwork or published image—be it a magazine photo or copyrighted painting or drawing—into a different color scheme or a new medium (such as converting a photo to a pen and ink drawing), they were creating a new and original piece. It's easy to see how this happens. In many introductory art classes, students are encouraged to find an image they like—often a magazine photo, a postcard, or a page from a seed catalog, calendar, or art publication—and use it as their model or even trace it. Sometimes the instructor provides a photocopied image from a similar source for the class to use. Unfortunately, there is seldom a follow-up discussion pointing out that the student's completed artwork is not truly original in composition and would be a violation of copyright if offered for sale or exhibit. As a result, many new artists—who are delighted with their new-found skill in accurately rendering a published photo or copying a Monet—never really think about or comprehend plagiarism as it applies to art. Though you may love your finished piece from class and hang it on the wall, you should not exhibit it or sell it as an original if it is based on someone else's image. We remind you of this for two reasons. First, artists who copy a commercial or published artwork and submit it to a competition gain an unfair advantage over other exhibitors: the skilled professional photographer or commercial artist whose work they have copied has done a lot of the hard work for them— choosing the topic, designing the composition, and selecting form, color and perspective. Second, The Association of Wisconsin Artists are put in a potentially awkward legal situation and could be sued for plagiarism if in Contour Notes or other publications we inadvertently reprint artwork that is a copy of professional copyrighted work without appropriate permission. This situation has prompted the board to reword the description of "original" in our printed materials and application forms. The new application also will state that work must be original in another sense of that word. That is, that giclee prints or other reproductions of the exhibitor's own work will not be accepted as substitutes for the original in any show. So, no photocopy or giclee print of your watercolor or pastel. We want the real thing. Of course, it gets confusing because we do accept prints that are serigraphs, etchings, lithographs, monotypes and similar works which are the result of a very demanding multi-step printing process carried out by the artists themselves. And we do accept digitally processed photos and digitally manipulated photos (since film has practically vanished and this is the current form that photography takes). In the area of fiber arts, we do not want works that are essentially stitched collages of various manufactured fabrics and accessories. The work must show significant alteration and manipulation of the materials by the artist. Also, we are now asking artists to state from what sources they drew their art. Just as you have always done in the past, you will be asked to sign a statement that your work is original when you submit a program entry form. The revised statement, however, will be more explicit and will read in part as follows: "If your artwork is a copy of a commercial photograph or of a work that is not your own (such as from a magazine photo or illustration, postcard, calendar or seed catalog), you must have permission from the photographer or original artist. Please include a copy of that permission with your artwork." Remember, our concerns are with art copied from commercial, professional, copyrighted photos and artworks - not from snapshots of your brother's trip to Yosemite or your daughter's pencil sketch. It may be a little confusing for a while, but as we pay closer attention to these important distinctions, coordinators and exhibitors alike will develop a better understanding and awareness of what makes a work original. The Association of Wisconsin Artists board are taking this issue very seriously and we trust our members will do the same. And we urge those of you who know art instructors to ask them to gently make their students aware of what is a copy and what is original and the importance of copyright.