

Commentary: Did you plagiarize that quilt?

By Joanne Cleaver

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Did I plagiarize a quilt?

The design was lovely: three patchworked ribbons twisting around each other and blending where they intersected.

The moment I saw it on Pinterest, I knew I had to make it.

I clicked: only more photos. No pattern to buy, no directions to download, no designer to contact or credit.

So I figured it out the old-fashioned way. I unearthed some graph paper and a real pencil with an eraser at one end and graphite at the other. I sketched and outlined and colored. I used a hand-held calculator to figure out the proportions and to scale the design to a cutting and sewing plan. I shopped my fabric stash and auditioned likely combinations on my design board. I cut and I sewed.

It turned out beautifully — a 6-foot flutter of flowers twisting together on a lavender field. So, of course, I shared it. People liked it. Other quilters wanted to know how they could replicate it.

But it wasn't mine to share ... was it?

A concept cannot be copyrighted. However, written directions are automatically the property of the creator, as are images and unique designs.

I stole the idea, but I made it my own. Did I plagiarize my quilt?

It's a cold topic in the cozy world of crafting, and an escalating issue as creatives try to protect their designs from being copied by retailers and other crafters, even as they look to the same for their own inspiration.

"Just like Anthropologie, but for less!" is a common tag for crafters' versions of classic skirts, dresses and aprons.

"From Etsy, but easy to figure out!" people tag photos lifted from the popular handcraft market.

What goes around comes around. Etsy sellers and craft designers shame Anthropologie and its parent company, Urban Outfitters, for blatantly copying their designs. Magazines trumpet on their covers that the projects within are "inspired by Instagram."

These pinpricks are drawing blood. A brawl broke out last winter in an online quilter's group when one crafter shared her just-finished project and called it her "shimmer" quilt.

The problem was, "Shimmer" was the name of a meticulously engineered pattern authored by an Australian designer. The pattern was available at a popular crafts website, but the proud quilter had seen the photo, figured out the design on her own, and then shared the result as a "Shimmer."

"You ripped off the designer!" charged angry quilters.

"Not possible, as 'Shimmer' is merely a contemporary version of the classic block 'Hen and Chicks,' " shot back an

equally incensed bee of buzzing quilters.

The argument escalated. Courtesy was restored only when the designer herself weighed in, asking that her copyrighted name and design be used only for quilts made with her copyrighted pattern. A crush of quilters bought the pattern and two weeks later, a new crop of Shimmer quilts bloomed.

A new group, Real Stitchers Don't Steal, has just formed to fight off design plagiarism by Eastern European hackers who apparently have nothing better to do than take high-resolution photos of completed cross-stitch and needlepoint projects and translate them to grids, which they distribute for little or no cost. That cuts the original designer out of the \$10 to \$15 fee she's entitled to for selling each copy of the design. For the record, materials to complete a cross-stitch or needlepoint project can easily top \$100. Trimming the designer out of the picture doesn't save much.

I just started another quilt. I'm trying to sew down about 2,000 2-inch pieces I stupidly cut 20 years ago. They've been in boot boxes ever since. Yes, I know my time is worth something. But quilters are supposed to be thrifty. I must exorcise this heap of squares from my stash.

I found a design online that will be fun and easy to make. The designer is long gone, so permission is moot. She stitched her quilt in the 1850s, of hundreds of tiny squares. Each block is a letter of the alphabet. I'm pretty sure it's in the public domain. If I'm wrong, I'm sure someone will tell me.

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