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Copyright Protection for Fashion Design: A Legal Analysis of the Design Piracy Prohibition Act, H.R. 2033

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Summary

Fashion design does not currently receive explicit protection under U.S. copyright law. Limited avenues for protection of certain types of apparel designs can be found through trademark and patent law, though proponents of copyright protection for fashion design argue that these limited means are insufficient. H.R. 2033, the "Design Piracy Prohibition Act," would amend Chapter 13 of the U.S. Copyright Act, which currently provides protection for designs of vessel hulls. The bill would grant fashion designs a three-year term of protection, based on registration with the U.S. Copyright Office.

This report analyzes the amendments that H.R. 2033 would make to Chapter 13 of the Copyright Act. It also summarizes arguments both in favor of and against extending copyright protection to fashion designs.[1]

Introduction

H.R. 2033,[2] the Design Piracy Prohibition Act, was introduced by Representative William D. Delahunt, for himself and Representatives Goodlatte, Maloney, and Bono, on April 25, 2007. The bill would amend Chapter 13 of the U.S. Copyright Act (the Act) to provide copyright protection for fashion design. U.S. copyright law does not protect useful articles, and copyright protection has been denied to fashion designs because clothing garments have traditionally been viewed as useful articles — basic items of necessity having utilitarian value — rather than as artistic creations. The Act does specify protection for the designs of one category of useful articles, the designs of vessel hulls. H.R. 2033 would amend the Act to add protection for fashion designs as well, for a term

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[1] This report was prepared under the general supervision of Brian T. Yeh, Legislative Attorney.

[2] H.R. 2033, 110th Cong., 1st Sess. (2007). An identical bill, H.R. 5055, was introduced in the 109th Congress by Rep. Robert W. Goodlatte, for himself and for Rep. Delahunt, Rep. Coble, and Rep. Wexler. The House Subcommittee on Courts, the Internet, and Intellectual Property held hearings on the bill on July 27, 2006.

of three years, provided that registration is filed with the U.S. Copyright Office within three months from the time that the design is first made public.

Background

The Copyright Act defines a "useful article" as "an article having an intrinsic utilitarian function that is not merely to portray the appearance of the article or to convey information."[3] If the function of an article is found to be inherently utilitarian, rather than exclusively aesthetic or informational, then the article cannot be protected under U.S. copyright law. Although useful articles cannot be protected in and of themselves, certain aesthetic or creative aspects of such articles can receive protection. Designs of useful articles can be protected under copyright law "only if, and only to the extent that, such design incorporates pictorial, graphic, or sculptural features that can be identified separately from, and are capable of existing independently of, the utilitarian aspects of the article."[4] Because "pictorial, graphic, and sculptural" works are expressly eligible for copyright protection under § 102 of the Act,[5] copyright protection is permitted for aspects of a utilitarian article that fall into this category and can be physically or conceptually separable from the utilitarian aspects of the article.[6] The U.S. Copyright Office describes this "separability test" as an "extremely limited" means of protection for the designs of useful articles, as courts have excluded most industrial designs from copyright protection.[7]

The avenues for protection of fashion design available through the patent and trademark law regimes are narrow. Under the concept of trade dress, part of trademark law, a fashion design can be protected in cases where the product has gained a reputation among consumers as being identifiable with a particular market source.[8] Under patent

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[3] 17 U.S.C. § 101.

[4] *A Bill to Provide Protection for Fashion Design: Hearings Before the House Subcomm. on Courts, the Internet, and Intellectual Property,* 109th Cong., 2nd sess. (2006) [hereinafter *Hearings*] (statement of the U.S. Copyright Office) (citing 17 U.S.C. § 101).

[5] 17 U.S.C. § 102(a)(5).

[6] *See* Chosun, Int'l, Inc. v. Chrisha Creations, Ltd., 413 F.3d 324 (2d Cir. 2005) (holding that it is at least possible that elements of plush sculpted animal Halloween costumes are separable from the overall design of the costume and therefore eligible for copyright protection).

[7] *Hearings*, *supra* note 4 (statement of the U.S. Copyright Office) (citing Brandir Int'l, Inc. v. Cascade Pacific Lumber Co., 834 F.2d 1142 (2d Cir. 1987) (holding that a bicycle rack derived from wire sculptures was a product of industrial design and therefore not protectable, because its "[f]orm and function are inextricably intertwined"); Norris Indus. v. International Tel. and Tel. Corp., 696 F.2d 918 (11th Cir. 1983) (holding that wire-spoked wheel covers for automobiles were not copyrightable because they are useful articles without separable features)).

[8] *See* Samara Bros. v. Wal-Mart Stores, 529 U.S. 205 (2000) (holding that a product design, specifically that for children's clothing, could be protected under federal trademark law if it were found to have acquired recognition among consumers as being associated with a particular source).

law, design patents could also be a potential means for protection.[9] However, commentators have noted the potential shortcomings of each of these approaches.[10]

The design protection for vessel hulls[11] in the Copyright Act is a unique, specially carved-out area of protection for designs of useful articles. Chapter 13 of the Act provides protection for vessel hull designs for a period of 10 years;[12] such protection is granted if the application for registration of the design is made within two years from the date on which the design is first made public.[13] A design is considered to have been made public "when an existing useful article embodying the design is anywhere publicly exhibited, publicly distributed, or offered for sale or sold to the public by the owner of the design or with the owner's consent."[14]

Section 1308 of the Act describes the exclusive rights of design owners under Chapter 13. The owner of a protected design "has the exclusive right to (1) make, have made, or import, for sale or for use in trade, any useful article embodying that design; and (2) sell or distribute for sale or for use in trade any useful article embodying that design."[15] If the design protection under Chapter 13 were expanded to include fashion designs, fashion design owners would be granted the exclusive right to place their designs on the marketplace, and to thereby prevent others from copying a design and disseminating it without authorization.

Analysis of H.R. 2033

Designs Protected. As discussed above, Chapter 13 of the Copyright Act, entitled "Protection of Original Designs," is currently limited to vessel hull designs.[16] Section 1301 of the Act grants protection to the designer or other owner of an original design of a "useful article" that makes the article's appearance attractive or distinctive to the buying public.[17] The definition subsection of § 1301 first explains what makes a

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[9] *See* 35 U.S.C. § 171.

[10] *Hearings, supra* note 4 (statement of the U.S. Copyright Office) (noting that "design patents are difficult and expensive to obtain, and entail a lengthy examination process," and that trademark law only protects those product configurations that identify the source of the product, while the other aspects are not protected, and any trademark protection is only against uses of the design that create at least a substantial likelihood of customer confusion).

[11] A "vessel" is defined as "a craft that is designed and capable of independently steering a course on or through water through its own means of propulsion; and that is designed and capable of carrying and transporting one or more passengers." A "hull" is "the frame or body of a vessel, including the deck of a vessel, exclusive of masts, sails, yards, and rigging." 17 U.S.C. § 1301.

[12] *Id.* § 1305(a).

[13] *Id.* § 1310(a).

[14] *Id.* § 1310(b).

[15] *Id.*

[16] *Id.* § 1301.

[17] *Id.* § 1301(a)(1).

design original,[18] and then limits the definition of "useful article" to a vessel hull.[19] H.R. 2033 would amend the definition of "useful article" by adding the provision "or an article of apparel," in order to protect clothing under the Act.[20] To the end of the definition section, H.R. 2033 would add the definitions for "fashion design,"[21] "design,"[22] and "apparel." The definition of apparel is broad, encompassing articles of men's, women's, and children's clothing, including undergarments, and outerwear, gloves, footwear, and headgear. Additionally, the term covers handbags, purses, tote bags, belts, and eyeglass frames, rendering these items eligible for protection.

Term of Protection. H.R. 2033 would amend the Copyright Act to prescribe a three-year term of protection for fashion designs.[23] The Act currently specifies a 10-year term of protection for vessel hulls.[24] Proponents of the legislation assert that a three-year term is sufficient because its purpose is to protect high end "haute couture" designs when they are first sold at expensive prices — a time when the designs could be vulnerable to copies sold at substantially lower prices.[25] Because trends arise and fade quickly, the shorter term is considered a sufficient time period for the designer to have exclusive rights.[26] The 10-year protection for vessel hulls would remain unchanged under the bill.

Application for Registration. Section 1310 of the Copyright Act mandates a two-year time period after a design has been made public during which an application for registration of the design must be filed.[27] The section refers only to registration for vessel hull design protection. H.R. 2033 would add to this section a window of three months for registration of a fashion design after it has been made public.[28] The purpose of including a limited registration period "is to require prompt registration of protected designs, which

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[18] *Id.* § 1301(b)(1) ("A design is 'original' if it is the result of the designer's creative endeavor that provides a distinguishable variation over prior work pertaining to similar articles which is more than merely trivial and has not been copied from another source.").

[19] *Id.* § 1301(b)(2).

[20] H.R. 2033, 110th Cong., 1st Sess. § 2(a)(2)(A) (2007).

[21] *Id.* at § 2(a)(2)(B) ("A 'fashion design' is the appearance as a whole of an article of apparel, including its ornamentation.").

[22] *Id.* ("The term 'design' includes fashion design, except to the extent expressly limited to the design of a vessel.").

[23] *Id.* at § 2(c), amending 17 U.S.C. § 1305(a).

[24] 17 U.S.C. § 1305(a) (The term of protection under copyright law generally, other than for vessel hulls, is the life of the author plus seventy years. *Id.* § 302(a)).

[25] *Hearings, supra* note 4 (statement of the U.S. Copyright Office).

[26] *Hearings, supra* note 4 (statement of the U.S. Copyright Office) (applauding the proponents of the legislation for seeking a modest term of protection that is appropriate for the nature of fashion design).

[27] 17 U.S.C. §§ 1310(a-b).

[28] H.R. 2033, at § 2(e)(1).

gives notice to the world that design protection is claimed."[29] Because the entire term of protection for fashion designs is significantly shorter than that for vessel hulls, a shorter window for registration of fashion designs is necessary.[30] The two-year time frame for vessel hull registration would remain unchanged under the bill.

Infringement. Section 1309 of the Copyright Act details what constitutes infringement of the design of a useful article.[31] In addition to a violation of any of the design owner's exclusive rights under § 1308, discussed above, it is also an infringement for a seller or distributor who did not make or import an infringing article, to induce or act in collusion to make or import the article.[32] A seller or distributor can also be liable if a design owner asks where the article came from and the seller/distributor refuses or fails to do disclose its source, and orders or reorders the article with the infringing design after being notified by mail that the design is protected.[33] Section 1309 has a narrow exception to infringement liability for acts without knowledge: it is not an infringement to make, have made, import, sell, or distribute any article embodying a copied design that was created without knowledge that the design was protected.[34]

H.R. 2033 would narrow this exception by amending the language so that it *would* constitute infringement if one did not have actual knowledge but had *reasonable grounds to know* that design protection is claimed.[35] Additionally, the bill would add protection for images of fashion designs as well as for the designs themselves, stipulating that an article is infringing if its design was copied from a protected design "or from an image thereof."[36] The bill would also amend § 1309 to apply the doctrines of secondary liability to actions for infringement of a design of a useful article.[37] Doing so would codify the doctrines of secondary liability, which are not presently found in the Copyright Act, but which exist in case law.[38] Finally, the bill would change recovery for infringement from the current amounts of $50,000 or $1 per copy, to $250,000 or $5 per copy.[39]

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[29] *Hearings, supra* note 4 (statement of the U.S. Copyright Office).

[30] *Hearings, supra* note 4 (statement of the U.S. Copyright Office) (describing that "a 2-year window [as vessel hulls receive] to register a fashion design that is entitled to protection for only 3 years and that likely is already starting to go 'out of fashion' after 2 years would make registration a relatively meaningless formality").

[31] 17 U.S.C. § 1309.

[32] *Id.* § 1309(b)(1) (explaining that purchasing or giving an order to purchase an infringing article in the ordinary course of business does not of itself constitute inducement or collusion).

[33] *Id.* § 1309(b)(2).

[34] *Id.* § 1309(c).

[35] H.R. 2033, 110th Cong., 1st Sess. § 2(d)(1) (2007).

[36] *Id.* at § 2(d)(2).

[37] *Id.* at § 2(d)(3). These doctrines include contributory, vicarious, and induced infringement.

[38] *See, e.g.,* Sony Corp. of America v. Universal City Studios, Inc., 464 U.S. 417 (1984).

[39] 17 U.S.C. § 1323(a); H.R. 2033, at § 2(g). These values are higher than the maximum statutory damages for copyright infringement, which are between $750 and $30,000 per work and up to $150,000 for willful infringement. 17 U.S.C. § 504.

The Protection Debate

Law professors, government officials, and design industry professionals have expressed diverse viewpoints on the need for and desirability of legislation granting copyright protection to fashion design. Those in favor of protection assert that the copyright law mistakenly views clothing as purely utilitarian in nature, and ignores the possibility that fashion design may be a form of creative expression deserving of protection.[40] Proponents also highlight the effects of modern technology on the ease and speed of copying fashion designs, pointing to the ability for copiers to easily access images of runway photos posted on the Internet.[41] Additionally, emphasis is placed on the particular vulnerability of young designers whose names and logos are not yet recognizable in the marketplace, and have difficulty promoting their work when it is quickly copied by established competitors.[42] Supporters of the legislation also point to the protection granted to fashion design in other areas of the world.[43]

Those against offering copyright protection for fashion design generally point to the success of the marketplace as it is and note that copying is an integral and accepted part of the fashion industry.[44] They claim that such interference into the fashion market would be harmful because of increased litigation over the standard for infringement.[45] As a result, creative production of fashion designs would be stifled, ultimately resulting in less choice for consumers.[46] Finally, these critics assert that foreign experience with fashion design protection has not had material effect because copying still occurs in nations that have design protection laws — to the same degree it occurs in the U.S. where there is currently no such protection.[47]

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[40] *Hearings, supra* note 4 (statement of Susan Scafidi, Associate Professor of Law, Southern Methodist University) (arguing that "designers are engaged in the creation of original works").

[41] *Id.* (asserting that "high quality digital photos of a runway look can be uploaded to the Internet and sent to copyists anywhere in the world even before the show is finished").

[42] *Id.* (stating that younger designers "cannot simply rely on reputation or trademark protection to make up for the absence of copyright").

[43] *Id.* (noting that France has strong copyright protection for fashion design).

[44] *See, e.g., Hearings*, *supra* note 4 (statement of David Wolfe, Creative Director, Doneger Creative Services) ("The absence of copyright in fashion frees designers to incorporate popular and reemerging styles into their own lines without restricting themselves for fear of infringement, thus facilitating the growth of new trends.").

[45] *Hearings, supra* note 4 (statement of Christopher Sprigman, Associate Professor, University of Virginia School of Law) (noting that "[d]rawing the line between inspiration and copying in the area of clothing is very, very difficult and likely to consume substantial judicial resources").

[46] *Id.* ("It is hard to imagine an industry [with design protection] producing the same rich variety of new designs that today's healthy, competitive fashion industry yields."). *But see Hearings*, *supra* note 4 (statement of Susan Scafidi) (describing the recent trend of high-end designers designing mass-market clothing lines for stores such as Target and Wal-Mart, reducing the need for consumers to rely on low-priced knock-offs).

[47] *Hearings, supra* note 4 (statement of Christopher Sprigman) (asserting that the European Union still faces substantial design copying despite offering substantial protection for apparel designs).