United States Copyright Office
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September 9, 2013

Schwabe, Williamson & Wyatt
Attn: Matthew R. Wilmot
Pacwest Center, 1211 SW 5th Ave., Suite 1900
Portland, OR 97204

Re: Columbia Design 3
Correspondence ID: 1-ELL198

Dear Mr. Wilmot:

The Review Board of the United States Copyright Office (the "Board") is in receipt of your second request for reconsideration of the Registration Program's refusal to register the work entitled: *Columbia Design 3*. You submitted this request on behalf of your client, Columbia Sportswear, on April 24, 2013.

The Board has examined the application, the deposit copies, and all of the correspondence in this case. After careful consideration of the arguments in your second request for reconsideration, the Board affirms the Registration Program's denial of registration of this copyright claim. The Board's reasoning is set forth below. Pursuant to 37 C.F.R. § 202.5(g), this decision constitutes final agency action on this matter.

I. DESCRIPTION OF THE WORK

Columbia Design 3 (the "Work") consists of eight rectangles with rounded edges. The rectangles are arranged into four parallel pairs. The parallel pairs are arranged to make the shape of a square that is tilted at a ninety degree angle.

The below image is a photographic reproduction of the Work from the deposit materials:



II. ADMINISTRATIVE RECORD

On June 27, 2012, the United States Copyright Office (the "Office") issued a letter notifying Columbia Sportswear (the "Applicant") that it had refused registration of the above mentioned Work. *Letter from Registration Specialist, Lisa Pastuchiv, to Matthew Wilmot* (June 27, 2012). In its letter, the Office stated that it could not register the Work because it lacks the authorship necessary to support a copyright claim. *Id.*

In a letter dated September 26, 2012, you requested that, pursuant to 37 C.F.R. § 202.5(b), the Office reconsider its initial refusal to register the Work. *Letter from Matthew Wilmot to Copyright RAC Division* (September 26, 2012) ("First Request"). Upon reviewing the Work in light of the points raised in your letter, the Office concluded that the Work "does not contain a sufficient amount of original and creative artistic or graphic authorship" and again refused registration. *Letter from Attorney-Advisor, Stephanie Mason, to Matthew Wilmot* (January 25, 2013).

Finally, in a letter dated April 24, 2013, you requested that, pursuant to 37 C.F.R. § 202.5(c), the Office reconsider for a second time its refusal to register the Work. *Letter from Matthew Wilmot to Copyright R&P Division* (April 24, 2013) ("Second Request"). In arguing that the Office improperly refused registration, you claim the Work includes at least the minimum amount of creativity required to support registration under the standard for originality set forth in *Feist Publications v. Rural Telephone Service Co.*, 499 U.S. 340 (1991). *Second Request* at *passim*. In support of this argument, you claim that the Applicant's careful selection and arrangement of the Work's constituent elements possess a sufficient amount of creative authorship to warrant registration under the Copyright Act. *Id.* Specifically, you state " . . . the combination of the following design elements are entitled to copyright protection under *Feist* and its progeny: (1) the location and placement of each shape making up the Work; (2) the size of each shape included in the Work; and (3) the orientation and angle of each shape making up the Work." *Id.* at 5.

In addition to *Feist*, your argument references several cases in support of the general principle that, to be sufficiently creative to warrant copyright protection, a work need only possess a "modicum of creativity." *Id.* at *passim*. You also reference several cases that demonstrate works comprised of otherwise unprotectable elements are acceptable for copyright protection if the selection and arrangement of their elements satisfies the requisite level of creative authorship. *Id.*

III. DECISION

A. *The Legal Framework*

All copyrightable works must qualify as "original works of authorship fixed in any tangible medium of expression." 17 U.S.C. § 102(a). As used with respect to copyright, the term "original" consists of two components: independent creation and sufficient creativity. *See*

Feist, 499 U.S. at 345. First, the work must have been independently created by the author, *i.e.*, not copied from another work. *Id.* Second, the work must possess sufficient creativity. *Id.* While only a modicum of creativity is necessary to establish the requisite level, the Supreme Court has ruled that some works (such as the telephone directory at issue in *Feist*) fail to meet this threshold. *Id.* The Court observed that "[a]s a constitutional matter, copyright protects only those constituent elements of a work that possess more than a *de minimis* quantum of creativity." *Id.* at 363. It further found that there can be no copyright in a work in which "the creative spark is utterly lacking or so trivial as to be nonexistent." *Id.* at 359.

The Office's regulations implement the long-standing requirements of originality and creativity set forth in the law and, subsequently, the *Feist* decision. *See* 37 C.F.R. § 202.1(a) (prohibiting registration of "[w]ords and short phrases such as names, titles, slogans; familiar symbols or designs; [and] mere variations of typographic ornamentation, lettering, or coloring"); *see also* 37 C.F.R. § 202.10(a) (stating "[i]n order to be acceptable as a pictorial, graphic, or sculptural work, the work must embody some creative authorship in its delineation or form").

Of course, some combinations of common or standard design elements may contain sufficient creativity, with respect to how they are juxtaposed or arranged, to support a copyright. Nevertheless, not every combination or arrangement will be sufficient to meet this grade. *See Feist,* 499 U.S. at 358 (finding the Copyright Act "implies that some ways [of selecting, coordinating, or arranging uncopyrightable material] will trigger copyright, but that others will not"). Ultimately, the determination of copyrightability in the combination of standard design elements rests on whether the selection, coordination, or arrangement is done in such a way as to result in copyrightable authorship. *Id.*; *see also Atari Games Corp. v. Oman*, 888 F.2d 878 (D.D.C. 1989).

To be clear, the mere simplistic arrangement of unprotectable elements does not automatically establish the level of creativity necessary to warrant protection. For example, the Eighth Circuit upheld the Copyright Office's refusal to register a simple logo consisting of four angled lines which formed an arrow and the word "Arrows" in a cursive script below the arrow. *See John Muller & Co., Inc. v. NY Arrows Soccer Team, Inc. et. al.*, 802 F.2d 989 (8th Cir. 1986). Likewise, the Ninth Circuit held that a glass sculpture of a jellyfish that consisted of elements including clear glass, an oblong shroud, bright colors, proportion, vertical orientation, and the stereotypical jellyfish form did not merit copyright protection. *See Satava v. Lowry*, 323 F.3d 805, 811 (9th Cir. 2003). The court's language in *Satava* is particularly instructional:

> [i]t is true, of course, that a combination of unprotectable elements may qualify for copyright protection. But it is not true that *any* combination of unprotectable elements automatically qualifies for copyright protection. Our case law suggests, and we hold today, that a combination of unprotectable elements is eligible for copyright protection only if those elements are numerous enough and their selection and arrangement original enough that their combination constitutes an original work of authorship.

Id. (internal citations omitted) (emphasis in original).

Finally, Copyright Office Registration Specialists (and the Board, as well) do not make aesthetic judgments in evaluating the copyrightability of particular works. They are not influenced by the attractiveness of a design, the espoused intentions of the author, the design's uniqueness, its visual effect or appearance, its symbolism, the time and effort it took to create, or its commercial success in the marketplace. *See* 17 U.S.C. § 102(b); *see also Bleistein v. Donaldson*, 188 U.S. 239 (1903). The fact that a work consists of a unique or distinctive shape or style for purposes of aesthetic appeal does not automatically mean that the work, as a whole, constitutes a copyrightable "work of art."

B. *Analysis of the Work*

After carefully examining the Work, and applying the legal standards discussed above, the Board finds that *Columbia Design 3* fails to satisfy the requirement of creative authorship.

First, the Board has determined that the Work's constituent elements, considered individually, are not sufficiently creative to warrant protection. As noted, 37 C.F.R § 202.1(a), identifies certain elements that are not copyrightable. These elements include: "[w]ords and short phrases such as names, titles, slogans; familiar symbols or designs; [and] mere variations of typographic ornamentation, lettering, or coloring." *Id.* Here, the Applicant's Work consists of eight rounded-edged rectangles. A rectangle shape with rounded edges is a familiar symbol or design shape and is undoubtedly in the public domain. Thus, consistent with the above regulations, we conclude that the Work's constituent elements do not qualify for registration under the Copyright Act.

Second, the Board finds that the Work, considered as a whole, fails to meet the creativity threshold set forth in *Feist*. 499 U.S. at 359. As explained, the Board accepts the principle that combinations of unprotectable elements may be eligible for copyright registration. However, in order to be accepted, such combinations must contain some distinguishable variation in the selection, coordination, or arrangement of their elements that is not so obvious or minor that the "creative spark is utterly lacking or so trivial as to be nonexistent." *Id.*; *see also Atari Games,* 888 F.2d at 883 (finding a work should be viewed in its entirety, with individual noncopyrightable elements judged not separately, but in their overall interrelatedness within the work as a whole). Viewed as a whole, the Work consists of eight rounded rectangles configured into a simple square that is tilted ninety degrees to one side. Despite your claims that the size, placement, and orientation of the Works elements make it eligible for registration, the Work remains a basic arrangement of eight unprotectable shapes that are ordered so that they form a larger, unprotectable shape. Such a configuration is, at best, *de minimis*, and fails to meet the threshold for copyrightable authorship. *Feist,* 499 U.S. at 359; *see also Atari Games,* 888 F.2d at 883. Accordingly, we conclude that the Work, as a whole, does not possess the requisite "creative spark" necessary for registration. *Feist,* 499 U.S at 359; *Satava*, 323 F.3d at 811.

Your assertion that the arrangement of the Work's elements creates "the visual effect of the Work being in a perpetual state of motion, with the four separate square shapes circling

around an inner axis" does not add to your claim of sufficient creativity. *Id.* at 5. As discussed above, the Board does not assess the espoused intentions of an author, a design's visual effect or appearance, or a design's symbolism in determining whether a work contains the requisite minimal amount of original authorship necessary for registration. *See* 17 U.S.C. § 102(b); *see also Bleistein*, 188 U.S. 239. Thus, even if accurate, the mere fact that the Applicant's Work causes a viewer to experience a specific visual effect would not qualify the Work, as a whole, as copyrightable.

In sum, the Board finds that both the individual elements that comprise the Work, as well as the Applicant's selection, organization, and arrangement of those elements lack the sufficient level of creativity to make them eligible for registration under the Copyright Act.

IV. CONCLUSION

For the reasons stated herein, the Review Board of the United States Copyright Office affirms the refusal to register the work entitled: *Columbia Design 3*. This decision constitutes final agency action on this matter. 37 C.F.R. § 202.5(g).

Maria A. Pallante
Register of Copyrights

BY: _____
William J. Roberts, Jr.
Copyright Office Review Board