

My chairs are not original

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Mangrovia is the place where [Roberto](#) Casati and [Goffredo](#) Puccetti talk about design. This conversation has started in December 2013. We are interested in the intellectual intricacy of design. We keep our eyes open on good and bad design – equally important for us. Equally important are theory (mostly from cognitive science) and practice (mostly from communication and process design).



Mangrovia è dal dicembre 2013 la bacheca appunti di Roberto Casati e Goffredo Puccetti sul design. Il design ci interessa per la sua complessità intellettuale. Cerchiamo intorno a noi esempi di buono e cattivo design e ne parliamo prendendo spunto dalla teoria (soprattutto dalle scienze cognitive) e dalla pratica (soprattutto dalla comunicazione e dai processi di progettazione).

In the pictures above: my Eames Chair and my two Barcelona chairs. Please hold on a minute before congratulating me, as you might not like what I am about to say. Facts is they are not « the original ones ».

They are replicas, knockoffs, rip-offs, copies, call it as you want, you got the idea. The Eames is made by an English company which outsources in China a great part of the production, I believe.

The Barcelona is made in Italy.

Now, before you start insulting me, I would like to propose some food for thoughts on the theme of what an original is in the first place; on how to properly promote and share the value of design; and lastly we might even debate if we, as designers and consumers, are doing the right thing by granting trademarks rights the way we do today.



Let's start: first of all I have serious doubts about a chair manufactured in the

year two thousand being an 'original' by Van der Rohe or Eames.

Let's get the semantics right: we are talking about replicas, reproductions. Some are 'licensed', they are approved by the designer (or by their relatives or... not at all but someone bought a patent) and they carry some labels of sort, guaranteeing that they are the closest you can get to the originals. Fair enough, I actually think that in many cases, the vast majority of these industries have many good reasons to make those claims. But do you mind terribly if I do check? Do you mind terribly if I do not take all that I read on brochures at face value and simply check and then choose? Do you mind if I, as a designer, just go to the showroom, take measurements, sniff the leather, touch the veneer and the chromed parts and make my own mind about it? And do you mind if I, as a consumer, then decide if a price makes sense to me or not?

I really hope you don't mind, my friend, because that's what I did, and that's what has brought me to the purchase of my furniture.

I don't have an 'original' Barcelona or Eames because I think originals do not exist and among the various replicas available in the market, I chose what I considered the best.

My Barcelona chairs in example are in the exact size Mies Van der Rohe designed them. Not a millimeter more or less. Believe it or not, the size and materials as well, of many *official* furniture changed through the years; In addition my chairs do not carry any visible logo on the leather and the legs. Since it seemed that many people bought them as a fashion statement, at a certain point the 'originals' were gratified with this quite tacky and intrusive feature. Who knows if Mies would have approved that. I know that these little details matter to me. And I bought the Eames because, after comparison, I found it of better quality than the rest. Period.



Now, one can reasonably object that there is a premium to be paid to the designer, a premium that surely belongs to the inventors and to those who marketed the invention, to those who promoted design in the first place. By buying a replica we are denying the designers what's truly theirs and we are mining the foundation of the whole design industry. It must be noted that companies like Knoll do pay royalties on sales to the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

An [interesting article](#) on Dwell.com explains it concisely:

Here's how a designer makes money: One day she dreams up a chair. She spends months developing the concept, selecting materials, devising the exact curve of the arm, the dip of the back. Satisfied with the piece, she works with a manufacturer to produce it. The manufacturer refines the design, invests in tooling to build it, promotes it, and gets it to market. You, the consumer, buy it. This is an original, authentic design.

Usually, a percentage of your purchase goes back to the designer, who reinvests

it into her business, her next idea. In order to take risks and innovate—and, indeed, to make a living—a designer needs to profit from her successes. Same with manufacturers—they need money to contract and promote designers' work and to keep their production quality high. This is the basic premise of how the design industry works, at least when all goes well.

So this is the story, before the advents of rip-offs. Do I agree with this account? Well, I am a designer so I am of course inclined to agree. But then I think I like the free market even more than design. I am just not really comfortable with claims that have to be accepted at face value, with the legacy of artists and designers being owned and dictated by corporations. I just think that art and monopoly do not go together very well. Let's talk about licensing policies for example, let's talk about granting an inventor their profits, for sure! We managed to do that for years for authors in all fields, after all with various success: If your band want to play some Beatles, please go ahead: just make sure you pay your royalties and produce your record, then let the market decide. I personally think that the Adagio of Albinoni is worth listening to in the version of the Berliner Philharmoniker released in May, 1984, and in that version only! But I am glad to live in world where nobody has imposed anything like that or forbid any other orchestra in the world to play it! Just imagine it for a moment: Oh, so you like Mozart? Well, you can listen to his music as performed by this orchestra, which has secured the rights to perform it back in the days... And don't you dare listening to any other performers or I will seriously question your musical tastes...

So I guess my question is: would the world of design be better off if we implement different policies to protect and promote design? I sometimes imagine some authority on design actually pushing people to do replica: do you want to produce a Wassily Chair? Sure: here the specs, here the standards, here the benchmark and these are the royalties to be paid on sales. And may the best win!

See my point? The floor is open to discussion.

PS: In the spirit of full disclosure I must concede that the two Vassily chairs in the background, from the same manufacturer of the Eames-knock off, are horrid and I regret the purchase! I am too ashamed to post a closer photos of those leather strips! :)

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eames-breuer-copy-original-1050x700.jpg

Se continuiamo a tenere vivo questo spazio è grazie a te. Anche un solo euro per noi significa molto. Torna presto a leggerci e [SOSTIENI DOPPIOZERO](#)