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Book Review Steal Like an Artist: 10 Things Nobody Told You About Being Creative

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Abstract

The 2011 publication 'Steal Like an Artist' provoked a lot of interest at that time. This review considers the main arguments contained in the first chapter and the debate over originality, plagiarism and precedent. The reviewer brings other viewpoints and his own experiences to the discussion.

Keywords Debate; Originality; Plagiarism; Precedent

Summary of Book Review

In 2011 Austin Kleon wrote a little book (physically, and 10,000 words by my reckoning).

In the year of publication, it was Amazon.com Top Best-Selling Book of 2012. It has been translated into 44 languages, is available in many formats. As one disgruntled Amazon reviewer put it,

“I liked what this author had to say and enjoyed the material, but this was not a book. When I got to the end, I said "Where's the rest of it? Where's the useful stuff?" I went on a hunt and found the author on YouTube giving a TED Talk called Steal Like an Artist. There it was, the entire book in an eleven-minute speech. Save your money and just listen to the speech.”

A warning to authors not to have too many media formats.

That said the book has gleaned many glowing reviews, one in Forbes magazine neatly encapsulating the contents,

“Equal parts manifesto and how-to, *Steal Like an Artist* aims to introduce readers to the idea that all creative work is iterative, no idea is original and all creators and their output are a sum of inspirations and heroes...”

The sub title, “10 Things Nobody Told You About Being Creative” is a clue both to the origins of the work and its purpose. As Madanmohan Rao writes in YourStory Media (<https://yourstory.com/2013/09/steal-like-an-artist-book-review>),

“When Kleon was asked to address college students in upstate New York, he shaped his creativity speech around the ten things he wished someone had told him when he was starting out. The talk went viral, and the author dug deeper into his own ideas to create this book.”

Kleon states in the book he is addressing his 19-year old self and reading I could not get the refrain,

I wish that I knew then what I know now, from Rod Stewart’s song “Ooh La La” out of my head.

The book is organised into ten chapters:

1. Steal like an artist.
2. Don’t wait until you know who you are to get started.
3. Write the book you want to read.
4. Use your hands.
5. Side projects and hobbies are important.
6. The secret: do good work and share it with people.
7. Geography is no longer our master.
8. Be nice. (The world is a small town.)
9. Be boring. (It’s the only way to get work done.)
10. Creativity is subtraction.

From my experience in teaching design students for 40 years, the burden of the book, chapters 2 to 10 are nine pieces of advice that you were probably told when you were 19, it’s just that you were too busy dreaming of other things to pay attention.

This review only considers the first chapter, not coincidentally the title of the book.

It opens, “Art is theft” Pablo Picasso.

Picasso said many things, frequently in reported conversations though without attribution. Equally disputed is “Good artists copy, great artists steal”, though Kleon does not choose to use this. He does, however on the next page use the T. S. Eliot quote,

“Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different...” — T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood* (1920)

I think this is well stated by the philosopher R G Collingwood,

“If an artist may say nothing except what he has invented by his own sole efforts, it stands to reason he will be poor in ideas. If he could take what he wants wherever he could find it, as Euripides and Dante and Michelangelo and Shakespeare and Bach were free, his larder would always be full, and his cookery might be worth tasting...” *The Principles of Art* (1938)

The American playwright Wilson Mizner put it more cynically,

“If you steal from one author, it’s plagiarism; if you steal from many, it’s research.”

The chapter is a series of seven exhortations, and it is worth reviewing from the standpoint of current forces driving design, the quest for innovation and the concern for intellectual property protection. The first exhortation can be summed up as “You are going to have to steal from others to get ideas, so make sure they are worth stealing”. This begs the question “Are there no such things as new ideas?” Clearly Kleon doesn’t think there are. This leads to the second insistence that “Nothing is Original” or as he conditions it, nothing completely original. Steal is a very emotive word, good for catching the attention in a book title, but to steal rather than adapt, adopt or repurpose, all of which could be regarded as innovative, is dangerous advice. What is at the heart of this chapter are very old ideas, that of precedents and the body of knowledge.

All disciplines have their own body of knowledge, and for design this is precedents, the works of earlier and current designers. Historically this can be seen as an extension of the architectural Grand Tour to absorb the works of antiquity. There are very few schools of architecture which did not have at some time a design studio brief which went “Design a ... in the manner of ...” (you choose the building type and the venerable architect). The assumption was the process would serve two purposes, the student would have to research the works (and frequently the words) of the architect and apply what they gleaned to a building type usually chosen to be

completely alien to the world of that architect. The result was probably superficial, but it encouraged the habit of seeking precedents. This is still required of designers.

This mashup is further emphasized in the third exhortation “The Genealogy of Ideas”, you are the sum of your influences. This leads to a restating of Mizner as “One precedent could be plagiarism; many precedents must be research”.

The fourth simply points to being discriminating in your choices of heroes.

“Climb Your Own Family Tree” the fifth suggests exploring the links between chosen designers and their contemporaries and disciples. Tom Wolfe in *From Bauhaus to Our House*, takes to task the designers in the first part of the 20th Century for the incestuous nature of the “art club” and the exclusion of alternative views. The student exploring design movements and styles should be wary of being wedded to the club and excluding other influences. It is too easy to become a blinkered enthusiast.

The last two pieces of advice “School Yourself” and “Save Your Thefts for Later” can be summed up as read a lot, write a lot, draw a lot, save everything it might be useful in the future.

Is this chapter dressing old ideas in new clothes? Yes, it is, but perhaps there is a need for old knowledge to get a retread.

References

- [1] Kleon, A. (2012). *Steal Like an Artist: 10 Things Nobody Told You About Being Creative*. New York: Workman Publishing Company.