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A Case Update for Chapter 10, Part C – Useful Articles

Recently in *Star Athletica, LLC v. Varsity Brands, Inc.*, the Supreme Court has attempted to clarify the conceptual separability analysis. The Court explained that an aesthetic feature of a useful article is eligible for copyright protection only if the feature:

- (1) can be perceived as a two- or three-dimensional work of art separate from the useful article; and
- (2) would qualify as a protectable pictorial, graphic, or sculptural work—either on its own or fixed in some other tangible medium of expression—if it were imagined separately from the useful article into which it is incorporated.

In setting forth this test for conceptual separability, the Court rejected reasoning that lower courts had employed in the past. Specifically, the Court rejected the argument that a creator’s design methods and purposes could suggest conceptual separability. The Court taught that rather than inquiring into the design process of the article, courts should instead examine how the article and feature are perceived. At the same time, the Court rejected the argument that the market’s reaction to a work may suggest conceptual separability.



Star Athletica, L.L.C. v. Varsity Brands, Inc.

137 S.Ct. 1002 (2017)

THOMAS, J.

Congress has provided copyright protection for original works of art, but not for industrial designs. The line between art and industrial design, however, is often difficult to draw. This is particularly true when an industrial design incorporates artistic elements. Congress has afforded limited protection for these

artistic elements by providing that “pictorial, graphic, or sculptural features” of the “design of a useful article” are eligible for copyright protection as artistic works if those features “can be identified separately from, and are capable of existing independently of, the utilitarian aspects of the article.”¹

We granted certiorari to resolve widespread disagreement over the proper test for implementing § 101’s separate-identification and independent-existence requirements. We hold that a feature incorporated into the design of a useful article is eligible for copyright protection only if the feature (1) can be perceived as a two- or three-dimensional work of art separate from the useful article and (2) would qualify as a protectable pictorial, graphic, or sculptural work—either on its own or fixed in some other tangible medium of expression—if it were imagined separately from the useful article into which it is incorporated. Because that test is satisfied in this case, we affirm.

I

Respondents Varsity Brands, Inc., Varsity Spirit Corporation, and Varsity Spirit Fashions & Supplies, Inc., design, make, and sell cheerleading uniforms. Respondents have obtained or acquired more than 200 U.S. copyright registrations for two-dimensional designs appearing on the surface of their uniforms and other garments. These designs are primarily “combinations, positionings, and arrangements of elements” that include “chevrons ..., lines, curves, stripes, angles, diagonals, inverted [chevrons], coloring, and shapes.”

Petitioner Star Athletica, L.L.C., also markets and sells cheerleading uniforms. Respondents sued petitioner for infringing their copyrights in the five designs. The District Court entered summary judgment for petitioner on respondents’ copyright claims on the ground that the designs did not qualify as protectable pictorial, graphic, or sculptural works. It reasoned that the designs served the useful, or “utilitarian,” function of identifying the garments as “cheerleading uniforms” and therefore could not be “physically or conceptually” separated under § 101 “from the utilitarian function” of the uniform.²

The Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit reversed.³ . . .

II

. . . The Copyright Act also establishes a special rule for copyrighting a pictorial, graphic, or sculptural work incorporated into a “useful article,” which is defined as “an article having an intrinsic utilitarian function that is not merely to portray the appearance of the article or to convey information.” The statute does not protect useful articles as such. Rather, “the design of a useful article” is “considered a pictorial, graphical, or sculptural work 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.”

Courts, the Copyright Office, and commentators have described the analysis undertaken to determine whether a feature can be separately identified from, and exist independently of, a useful article as “separability.” In this case, our task is to determine whether the arrangements of lines, chevrons, and

¹ 17 U.S.C. § 101.

² 2014 WL 819422, *8–*9 (W.D. Tenn., Mar. 1, 2014).

³ 799 F.3d 468, 471 (2015).

colorful shapes appearing on the surface of respondents' cheerleading uniforms are eligible for copyright protection as separable features of the design of those cheerleading uniforms.

A

As an initial matter, we must address whether separability analysis is necessary in this case.

Respondents argue that separability is only implicated when a pictorial, graphic, or sculptural work is the “design of a useful article.” They contend that the surface decorations in this case are two-dimensional graphic designs that appear *on* useful articles, but are not themselves designs of useful articles. Consequently, the surface decorations are protected two-dimensional works of graphic art without regard to any separability analysis under § 101.⁴ Under this theory, two-dimensional artistic features on the surface of useful articles are “inherently separable.”

This argument is inconsistent with the text of § 101. The statute requires separability analysis for any “pictorial, graphic, or sculptural features” incorporated into the “design of a useful article.” “Design” refers here to “the combination” of “details” or “features” that “go to make up” the useful article.⁵ Furthermore, the words “pictorial” and “graphic” include, in this context, two-dimensional features such as pictures, paintings, or drawings.⁶ And the statute expressly defines “[p]ictorial, graphical, and sculptural works” to include “two-dimensional ... works of ... art.”⁷ The statute thus provides that the “design of a useful article” can include two-dimensional “pictorial” and “graphic” features, and separability analysis applies to those features just as it does to three-dimensional “sculptural” features.

...

We must now decide when a feature incorporated into a useful article “can be identified separately from” and is “capable of existing independently of” “the utilitarian aspects” of the article. . . . The statute provides that a “pictorial, graphic, or sculptural featur[e]” incorporated into the “design of a useful article” is eligible for copyright protection if it (1) “can be identified separately from,” and (2) is “capable of existing independently of, the utilitarian aspects of the article.”⁸ The first requirement—separate identification—is not onerous. The decisionmaker need only be able to look at the useful article and spot some two- or three-dimensional element that appears to have pictorial, graphic, or sculptural qualities.

The independent-existence requirement is ordinarily more difficult to satisfy. The decisionmaker must determine that the separately identified feature has the capacity to exist apart from the utilitarian aspects of the article. In other words, the feature must be able to exist as its own pictorial, graphic, or sculptural work as defined in § 101 once it is imagined apart from the useful article. If the feature is not capable of existing as a pictorial, graphic, or sculptural work once separated from the useful article, then

⁴ See 2 W. PATRY, COPYRIGHT § 3:151, p. 3–485 (2016) (Patry) (“Courts looking at two-dimensional design claims should not apply the separability analysis regardless of the three-dimensional form that design is embodied in”).

⁵ 3 OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY 244 (def. 7, first listing) (1933) (OED).

⁶ See 4 *id.*, at 359 (defining “[g]raphic” to mean “[o]f or pertaining to drawing or painting”); 7 *id.*, at 830 (defining “[p]ictorial” to mean “of or pertaining to painting or drawing”).

⁷ § 101.

⁸ *Id.*

it was not a pictorial, graphic, or sculptural feature of that article, but rather one of its utilitarian aspects.

Of course, to qualify as a pictorial, graphic, or sculptural work on its own, the feature cannot itself be a useful article or “[a]n article that is normally a part of a useful article” (which is itself considered a useful article).⁹ Nor could someone claim a copyright in a useful article merely by creating a replica of that article in some other medium—for example, a cardboard model of a car. Although the replica could itself be copyrightable, it would not give rise to any rights in the useful article that inspired it. . . .

C

In sum, a feature of the design of a useful article is eligible for copyright if, when identified and imagined apart from the useful article, it would qualify as a pictorial, graphic, or sculptural work either on its own or when fixed in some other tangible medium.

Applying this test to the surface decorations on the cheerleading uniforms is straightforward. First, one can identify the decorations as features having pictorial, graphic, or sculptural qualities. Second, if the arrangement of colors, shapes, stripes, and chevrons on the surface of the cheerleading uniforms were separated from the uniform and applied in another medium—for example, on a painter's canvas—they would qualify as “two-dimensional ... works of ... art.” And imaginatively removing the surface decorations from the uniforms and applying them in another medium would not replicate the uniform itself. Indeed, respondents have applied the designs in this case to other media of expression—different types of clothing—without replicating the uniform. The decorations are therefore separable from the uniforms and eligible for copyright protection.

The dissent argues that the designs are not separable because imaginatively removing them from the uniforms and placing them in some other medium of expression—a canvas, for example—would create “pictures of cheerleader uniforms.” Petitioner similarly argues that the decorations cannot be copyrighted because, even when extracted from the useful article, they retain the outline of a cheerleading uniform.

This is not a bar to copyright. Just as two-dimensional fine art corresponds to the shape of the canvas on which it is painted, two-dimensional applied art correlates to the contours of the article on which it is applied. A fresco painted on a wall, ceiling panel, or dome would not lose copyright protection, for example, simply because it was designed to track the dimensions of the surface on which it was painted. Or consider, for example, a design etched or painted on the surface of a guitar. If that entire design is imaginatively removed from the guitar's surface and placed on an album cover, it would still resemble the shape of a guitar. But the image on the cover does not “replicate” the guitar as a useful article. Rather, the design is a two-dimensional work of art that corresponds to the shape of the useful article to which it was applied. The statute protects that work of art whether it is first drawn on the album cover and then applied to the guitar's surface, or vice versa. Failing to protect that art would create an anomaly: It would extend protection to two-dimensional designs that cover a part of a useful article but would not protect the same design if it covered the entire article. The statute does not support that distinction, nor can it be reconciled with the dissent's recognition that “artwork printed on a t-shirt” could be protected.

⁹ *Id.*

To be clear, the only feature of the cheerleading uniform eligible for a copyright in this case is the two-dimensional work of art fixed in the tangible medium of the uniform fabric. Even if respondents ultimately succeed in establishing a valid copyright in the surface decorations at issue here, respondents have no right to prohibit any person from manufacturing a cheerleading uniform of identical shape, cut, and dimensions to the ones on which the decorations in this case appear. They may prohibit only the reproduction of the surface designs in any tangible medium of expression—a uniform or otherwise.¹⁰

D

Petitioner and the Government raise several objections to the approach we announce today. None is meritorious.

1

Petitioner first argues that our reading of the statute is missing an important step. It contends that a feature may exist independently only if it can stand alone as a copyrightable work and if the useful article from which it was extracted would remain equally useful. In other words, copyright extends only to “solely artistic” features of useful articles. According to petitioner, if a feature of a useful article advances the utility of the article, then it is categorically beyond the scope of copyright. The designs here are not protected, it argues, because they are necessary to two of the uniforms’ “inherent, essential, or natural functions”—identifying the wearer as a cheerleader and enhancing the wearer’s physical appearance. Because the uniforms would not be equally useful without the designs, petitioner contends that the designs are inseparable from the “utilitarian aspects” of the uniform. . . .

The debate over the relative utility of a plain white cheerleading uniform is unnecessary. The focus of the separability inquiry is on the extracted feature and not on any aspects of the useful article that remain after the imaginary extraction. The statute does not require the decisionmaker to imagine a fully functioning useful article without the artistic feature. Instead, it requires that the separated feature qualify as a nonuseful pictorial, graphic, or sculptural work on its own.

Of course, because the removed feature may not be a useful article—as it would then not qualify as a pictorial, graphic, or sculptural work—there necessarily would be some aspects of the original useful article “left behind” if the feature were conceptually removed. But the statute does not require the imagined remainder to be a fully functioning useful article at all, much less an equally useful one. . . .

Petitioner’s argument follows from its flawed view that the statute protects only “solely artistic” features that have no effect whatsoever on a useful article’s utilitarian function. This view is inconsistent with the statutory text. The statute expressly protects two- and three-dimensional “applied art.” “Applied art” is art “employed in the decoration, design, or execution of useful objects,”¹¹ or “those arts

¹⁰ The dissent suggests that our test would lead to the copyrighting of shovels. But a shovel, like a cheerleading uniform, even if displayed in an art gallery, is “an article having an intrinsic utilitarian function that is not merely to portray the appearance of the article or to convey information.” 17 U.S.C. § 101. It therefore cannot be copyrighted. A drawing of a shovel could, of course, be copyrighted. And, if the shovel included any artistic features that could be perceived as art apart from the shovel, and which would qualify as protectable pictorial, graphic, or sculptural works on their own or in another medium, they too could be copyrighted. But a shovel as a shovel cannot.

¹¹ WEBSTER’S THIRD NEW INTERNATIONAL DICTIONARY 105 (1976).

or crafts that have a *primarily utilitarian function*, or ... the designs and decorations used in these arts.”¹² An artistic feature that would be eligible for copyright protection on its own cannot lose that protection simply because it was first created as a feature of the design of a useful article, even if it makes that article more useful. . . . Were we to accept petitioner's argument that the only protectable features are those that play absolutely no role in an article's function, we would effectively abrogate the rule of *Mazer* and read “applied art” out of the statute.

Because we reject the view that a useful article must remain after the artistic feature has been imaginatively separated from the article, we necessarily abandon the distinction between “physical” and “conceptual” separability, which some courts and commentators have adopted based on the Copyright Act’s legislative history.¹³ According to this view, a feature is *physically* separable from the underlying useful article if it can be physically separated from the article by ordinary means while leaving the utilitarian aspects of the article completely intact. *Conceptual* separability applies if the feature physically could not be removed from the useful article by ordinary means.¹⁴

The statutory text indicates that separability is a conceptual undertaking. Because separability does not require the underlying useful article to remain, the physical-conceptual distinction is unnecessary.

2

Petitioner next argues that we should incorporate two “objective” components into our test to provide guidance to the lower courts: (1) whether the design elements can be identified as reflecting the designer's artistic judgment exercised independently of functional influence, and (2) whether there is a substantial likelihood that the pictorial, graphic, or sculptural feature would still be marketable to some significant segment of the community without its utilitarian function.

We reject this argument because neither consideration is grounded in the text of the statute. The first would require the decisionmaker to consider evidence of the creator's design methods, purposes, and reasons. The statute’s text makes clear, however, that our inquiry is limited to how the article and feature are perceived, not how or why they were designed.

The same is true of marketability. Nothing in the statute suggests that copyrightability depends on market surveys. Moreover, asking whether some segment of the market would be interested in a given work threatens to prize popular art over other forms, or to substitute judicial aesthetic preferences for the policy choices embodied in the Copyright Act.¹⁵ . . .

¹² RANDOM HOUSE DICTIONARY 73 (1966) (emphasis added); see also 1 OED 576 (2d ed. 1989) (defining “applied” as “[p]ut to practical use”).

¹³ See H.R. Rep. No. 94–1476, p. 55 (1976).

¹⁴ See Compendium § 924.2(B); but see 1 P. GOLDSTEIN, COPYRIGHT § 2.5.3, p. 2:77 (3d ed. 2016) (explaining that the lower courts have been unable to agree on a single conceptual separability test); 2 PATRY §§ 3:140–3:144.40 (surveying the various approaches in the lower courts).

¹⁵ See *Bleistein v. Donaldson Lithographing Co.*, 188 U.S. 239, 251 (1903) (“It would be a dangerous undertaking for persons trained only to the law to constitute themselves final judges of the worth of pictorial illustrations, outside of the narrowest and most obvious limits”).

III

We hold that an artistic feature of the design of a useful article is eligible for copyright protection if the feature (1) can be perceived as a two- or three-dimensional work of art separate from the useful article and (2) would qualify as a protectable pictorial, graphic, or sculptural work either on its own or in some other medium if imagined separately from the useful article. Because the designs on the surface of respondents' cheerleading uniforms in this case satisfy these requirements, the judgment of the Court of Appeals is affirmed.

It is so ordered.

BREYER, J., *dissenting*

I agree with much in the Court's opinion. But I do not agree that the designs that Varsity Brands, Inc., submitted to the Copyright Office are eligible for copyright protection. Even applying the majority's test, the designs cannot be perceived as two- or three-dimensional works of art separate from the useful article.

Look at the designs that Varsity submitted to the Copyright Office. You will see only pictures of cheerleader uniforms. And cheerleader uniforms are useful articles. A picture of the relevant design features, whether separately "perceived" on paper or in the imagination, is a picture of, and thereby "replicate[s]," the underlying useful article of which they are a part. Hence the design features that Varsity seeks to protect are not "capable of existing independently o[f] the utilitarian aspects of the article."¹⁶

I

The relevant statutory provision says that the "design of a useful article" is copyrightable "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." But what, we must ask, do the words "identified separately" mean? Just when is a design separate from the "utilitarian aspect of the [useful] article?" . . . Consider, for example, the explanation that the House Report for the Copyright Act of 1976 provides. It says:

Unless the shape of an automobile, airplane, ladies' dress, food processor, television set, or any other industrial product contains some element that, *physically or conceptually*, can be identified as separable from the utilitarian aspects of that article, the design would not be copyrighted....¹⁷

These words suggest two exercises, one physical, one mental. Can the design features (the picture, the graphic, the sculpture) be physically removed from the article (and considered separately), all the while leaving the fully functioning utilitarian object in place? If not, can one nonetheless conceive of the design features separately without replicating a picture of the utilitarian object? If the answer to either

¹⁶ 17 U.S.C. § 101.

¹⁷ H.R. Rep., at 55 (emphasis added).

of these questions is “yes,” then the design is eligible for copyright protection. Otherwise, it is not. The abstract nature of these questions makes them sound difficult to apply. But with the Court's words in mind, the difficulty tends to disappear.



An example will help. Imagine a lamp with a circular marble base, a vertical 10–inch tall brass rod (containing wires) inserted off center on the base, a light bulb fixture emerging from the top of the brass rod, and a lampshade sitting on top. In front of the brass rod a porcelain Siamese cat sits on the base facing outward. Obviously, the Siamese cat is physically separate from the lamp, as it could be easily removed while leaving both cat and lamp intact. And, assuming it otherwise qualifies, the designed cat is eligible for copyright protection.

Now suppose there is no long brass rod; instead the cat sits in the middle of the base and the wires run up through the cat to the bulbs. The cat is not physically separate from the lamp, as the reality of the lamp's construction is such that an effort to physically separate the cat and lamp will destroy both cat and lamp. The two are integrated into a single functional object, like the similar configuration of the ballet dancer statuettes that formed the lamp bases at issue in *Mazer v. Stein*, 347 U.S. 201 (1954). But we can easily imagine the cat on its own, as did Congress when conceptualizing the ballet dancer. In doing so, we do not create a mental picture of a lamp (or, in the Court's words, a “replica” of the lamp), which is a useful article. We simply perceive the cat separately, as a small cat figurine that could be a copyrightable design work standing alone that does not replicate the lamp. Hence the cat is conceptually separate from the utilitarian article that is the lamp. . . .



By way of contrast, Van Gogh's painting of a pair of old shoes, though beautifully executed and copyrightable as a painting, would not qualify for a shoe design copyright. Courts have similarly denied copyright protection to objects that begin as three-dimensional designs, such as measuring spoons shaped like heart-tipped arrows, candleholders shaped like sailboats, and wire spokes on a wheel cover. None of these designs could qualify for copyright protection that would prevent others from selling spoons, candleholders, or wheel covers with the same design. Why not? Because in each case the design is not separable from the utilitarian aspects of the object to which it relates. The

designs cannot be physically separated because they themselves make up the shape of the spoon,

candleholders, or wheel covers of which they are a part. And spoons, candleholders, and wheel covers are useful objects, as are the old shoes depicted in Van Gogh's painting. More importantly, one cannot easily imagine or otherwise conceptualize the design of the spoons or the candleholders or the shoes without that picture, or image, or replica being a picture of spoons, or candleholders, or wheel covers, or shoes. The designs necessarily bring along the underlying utilitarian object. Hence each design is not conceptually separable from the physical useful object.

The upshot is that one could copyright the floral design on a soup spoon but one could not copyright the shape of the spoon itself, no matter how beautiful, artistic, or esthetically pleasing that shape might be: A picture of the shape of the spoon is also a picture of a spoon; the picture of a floral design is not.

To repeat: A separable design feature must be “capable of existing independently” of the useful article as a separate artistic work that is not itself the useful article. If the claimed feature could be extracted without replicating the useful article of which it is a part, and the result would be a copyrightable artistic work standing alone, then there is a separable design. But if extracting the claimed features would necessarily bring along the underlying useful article, the design is not separable from the useful article. In many or most cases, to decide whether a design or artistic feature of a useful article is conceptually separate from the article itself, it is enough to imagine the feature on its own and ask, “Have I created a picture of a (useful part of a) useful article?” If so, the design is not separable from the useful article. If not, it is. . . .

II

To ask this kind of simple question—does the design picture the useful article?—will not provide an answer in every case, for there will be cases where it is difficult to say whether a picture of the design is, or is not, also a picture of the useful article. But the question will avoid courts focusing primarily upon what I believe is an unhelpful feature of the inquiry, namely, whether the design can be imagined as a “two- or three-dimensional work of art.” That is because virtually any industrial design can be thought of separately as a “work of art”: Just imagine a frame surrounding the design, or its being placed in a gallery. Consider Marcel Duchamp's “readymades” series, the functional mass-produced objects he designated as art. What is there in the world that, viewed through an esthetic lens, cannot be seen as a good, bad, or indifferent work of art? What design features could not be imaginatively reproduced on a painter's canvas? Indeed, great industrial design may well include design that is inseparable from the useful article—where, as Frank Lloyd Wright put it, “form and function are one.”¹⁸ Where they are one, the designer may be able to obtain 15 years of protection through a design patent. But, if they are one, Congress did not intend a century or more of copyright protection. . . .

IV

If we ask the “separateness” question correctly, the answer here is not difficult to find. The majority's opinion, in its appendix, depicts



Fig. 4: Marcel Duchamp, “In Advance of the Broken Arm”

¹⁸ F. WRIGHT, AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY 146 (1943) (reprint 2005).

the cheerleader dress designs that Varsity submitted to the Copyright Office. Can the design features in Varsity's pictures exist separately from the utilitarian aspects of a dress? Can we extract those features as copyrightable design works standing alone, without bringing along, via picture or design, the dresses of which they constitute a part? . . . Looking at all five of Varsity's pictures, I do not see how one could conceptualize the design features in a way that does not picture, not just artistic designs, but dresses as well.

Were I to accept the majority's invitation to "imaginatively remov[e]" the chevrons and stripes as they are arranged on the neckline, waistline, sleeves, and skirt of each uniform, and apply them on a "painter's canvas," that painting would be of a cheerleader's dress. The esthetic elements on which Varsity seeks protection exist only as part of the uniform design—there is nothing to separate out but for dress-shaped lines that replicate the cut and style of the uniforms. Hence, each design is not physically separate, nor is it conceptually separate, from the useful article it depicts, namely, a cheerleader's dress. They cannot be copyrighted.

. . . As Varsity would have it, it would prevent its competitors from making useful three-dimensional cheerleader uniforms by submitting plainly unoriginal chevrons and stripes as cut and arranged on a useful article. But with that cut and arrangement, the resulting pictures on which Varsity seeks protection do not simply depict designs. They depict clothing. They depict the useful articles of which the designs are inextricable parts. And Varsity cannot obtain copyright protection that would give them the power to prevent others from making those useful uniforms, any more than Van Gogh can copyright comfortable old shoes by painting their likeness.

I fear that, in looking past the three-dimensional design inherent in Varsity's claim by treating it as if it were no more than a design for a bolt of cloth, the majority has lost sight of its own important limiting principle. One may not "claim a copyright in a useful article merely by creating a replica of that article in some other medium," such as in a picture. That is to say, one cannot obtain a copyright that would give its holder "any rights in the useful article that inspired it."

With respect, I dissent.

CASE COMPREHENSION

1. The majority attempts to clarify the test for conceptual separability by providing a two-pronged test. What is that test? How well does it provide clarity in determining the copyrightability of useful-article designs?
2. What is the distinction between physical and conceptual separability and why does the majority abandon this distinction?
3. Why does the majority find it necessary to employ the separability analysis given that the decorations of the uniforms merely appear *on* useful articles, and therefore do not seem to constitute the designs of the useful articles themselves?
4. Recall that the majority cites the design of an automobile as an example that could not receive copyright protection under the useful article doctrine. Yet consider a lavish-looking sports car.

Couldn't such a car be perceived as a three-dimensional work of art, separate from the functionality of the car? And if we imagined the design of the lavish-looking sports car as a clay sculpture, wouldn't that qualify as a sculptural work? Under the test that the majority has laid out, would the useful article doctrine necessarily preclude copyright protection? Why or why not?

5. Why does the majority reject the argument that a copyrightable feature must be able to stand along as a copyrightable work and that the useful article must remain equally useful after conceptually extracting the aesthetic feature?
6. What problem does the dissent see with the majority's reasoning? What test would the dissent adopt?