July 16, 2015

Greetings! My name is Ikumi Kayama, and I am a professional artist. My special area of expertise is in medical and scientific illustration, where I work closely with scientists and doctors to create pictures that make modern medicine and science accessible to everyone. Works I create can be found in science textbooks, doctors' offices, science museums, and zoos/aquariums. I have my own illustration business, and I love my job.

I've always wanted to be an artist since I was very young. When my family moved from Japan to the US when I was seven years old, the only voice I had was my drawing. One day I realized that I didn't have to speak English, but I could communicate with my classmates through my artwork! Also, I had asthma as a child. Watching my parents struggle to explain my conditions to the doctor was so embarrassing and painful. That's why when I learned about the field of medical illustration, I knew I had to do it. This field would let me help others by creating illustrations to describe medical conditions and options for treatment.

I have been working as a professional artist for eight years, but I've been studying art all my life. Drawings and pictures have a special way of connecting people. Viewers of my artwork do not have to speak the same language or have the same educational level to understand the subject of the drawing. When I create my illustrations, I combine my knowledge in science and art to create illustrations that are not only accurate, but are easy to understand and remember. My artwork is an essential learning tool.

The training I went through to create such accurate and educational illustrations took me many years of study. I majored in scientific illustration for my bachelor's degree at University of Georgia, and received further training in medical illustration at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine where I received my master's degree. I've received many awards for my illustration work and recently given a TEDx talk on importance of medical and scientific illustration. I've worked with world-renowned scientific researchers and experts from all over the world.

I take great pride in every single illustration I create because I know my illustrations are helping others learn and understand. To me that's very important. I've met many doctors and healthcare providers who thanked me for the work I do—they would not have made it through their science courses without looking at the medical illustrations in their textbooks and lab manuals.

In order to create such useful and valuable images, I spend a lot of my time planning and researching for my illustration. I work closely with experts in different fields to develop artwork that will match the viewers' needs. Oftentimes the illustrations will go through rounds of edits and corrections much like writing.

Because of the nature of the drawings, the work I create remains valuable for years. A student or patient can view my work years after the completion of the artwork and still learn something new from them. I constantly see many medical and scientific illustrations from decades ago that are still useful as educational tools today. I strive my artwork to be timeless teaching devices.

In a field as medical and scientific illustration, having copyright protection of my work is essential. Copyright is the basis on which my business rests. In order to work with more experts and to help more students, I have to be able to protect my work and be acknowledged as the specialized artist who has the experience and expertise to create educational illustrations.

As a professional artist, I have a library of copyrighted, original work that I use as my resource of income through licensing. The beauty of copyrighted work is that I don't have to recreate illustrations every single time a new project arises, but I have exclusive rights to create derivative works from my own collection of images for consistent quality of my work. Sometimes, my artwork can be reused by different specialists or organizations. They can license the illustrations through me, the copyright owner/creator, to help their students. This way I can control where, how, and by whom my work is used.

Having copyright infringement is like stealing money and intellectual property. My work takes hours to research, develop, and create. Beneath my finished work are layers of drafts and edits, meetings with scientists, and countless email discussions. I find it unfair that someone can simply take my finished artwork, claim it as theirs, and begin to generate profit without any credit or acknowledgement given just because they couldn't find me as the original artist.

The digital era and the rise of social media have been exciting and I enjoy seeing my artwork reach more people than I could have ever imagined. On the other hand, keeping an inventory of my work and where my work has been shown has been a bigger challenge. I constantly get requests to have my illustrations featured on various websites, blogs, and e-journals, that staying on top of my publication list is another added item on my professional artist to-do list. To the best of my knowledge, most of the people I worked with are honest, understanding, and respectful of my work. Having the layer of copyright protection helps me propel forward to expand my business using the digital tools available today.

Some challenges related to licensing illustrations include comments that I'm asking too much money for licensing fees—art buyers claim that artwork licensing should cost less. On the website, I create web-sized images for quality and speed. The images always include a copyright notice and where to reach me to get permission to reuse. Unfortunately, the notice gets cut off by a third party, low-resolution image is stolen for print, or a scanned file from my printed gets uploaded online without any credit given. As an artist, I always add my signature to my work, but even then, the size and the file quality of the web files, it is sometimes difficult to read the credit line/signature. It is frustrating, but knowing my work is protected under copyright, I can focus on creating new work instead of worrying how my work are being used without permission.

The current copyright law protects me as an artist and gives me a way to make a living creating artwork that will help others understand concepts in medicine and science. I understand that there is value in educational illustration, and they can be prone to theft/copyright infringement. That is why I am very concerned about the current discussion about the new draft of the US Copyright Act.

If I am not able to protect my work and have control of my work, I will no longer be able to support myself as a professional artist. Being a professional artist has not been easy, but it has been my dream since I was very young. My friends and family have been so supportive over the years to help me to reach my goals. It would be a shame to lose it all because of one law.

Thank you for your consideration for keeping the current copyright law to protect hundreds and thousands of artists like me.

Sincerely,

Ikumi Kayama, MA