No Trademark Protection for Artworks in the Public Domain – A Practical Guide to the Application of Public Order and Morality as Grounds for Refusal

Senftleben, M.

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I. Introduction

Article 7(1)(f) of the EU Trade Mark Regulation (EUTMR)\(^2\) and Art. 4(1)(f) of the Trade Mark Directive (TMD)\(^3\) bar from registration trademarks ‘which are contrary to public policy or to accepted principles of morality.’ Experiences with this ground for refusal, however, show that judges and examiners may be hesitant to argue that considerations of public order or morality militate against the grant of trademark rights to signs with cultural significance. In the *Winston Churchill* decision, for example, the Dutch Supreme Court rejected the argument that registration of the name and portrait of Winston Churchill as a trademark for cigars was contrary to morality or public order.\(^4\) The Court found that, even though some may perceive the use of Churchill’s name and portrait for tobacco marketing as vulgar, others may find it acceptable. Moreover, use for this purpose may keep the memory of this popular statesman alive.\(^5\) The German Federal Patent Court also rejected the public order and morality argument in respect of an attempt to register the Mona Lisa as a trademark. Instead, the Court assumed a lack of distinctive character and denied trademark protection for this reason.\(^6\) A similar pattern arose in the more recent *Nachtwacht* (Night Watch) decision of the Court of Appeals of The Hague. The case concerned an application to register the famous painting by Rembrandt van Rijn as a trademark for the marketing of the chemical element strontium. Despite the fact that use of the Night Watch in respect of this chemical product seemed rather exotic, the Court arrived at the conclusion that the painting could not be deemed inherently distinctive. It lent weight to the fact that the Benelux Office for Intellectual Property had demonstrated that the Night Watch had been used frequently as a decorative element on various goods.\(^7\) On this basis, the Court concluded that the average consumer of strontium would immediately recognize a reproduction of the Night Watch on the packaging of strontium as one of the most famous paintings of the world and fail to understand that the sign was intended to indicate the commercial origin of the goods. The consumer would perceive the sign as a mere decoration.\(^8\) Like the German Federal Patent Court in *Mona Lisa*, the Court of Appeals of The Hague saw no need to base its rejection of trademark rights not only on a lack of distinctiveness but also on a conflict with *ordre public*.

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\(^*\) Professor of Intellectual Property Law and Director, Institute for Information Law (IViR), University of Amsterdam.

\(^1\) EFTA Court, 6 April 2017, Case E-3/16 Municipality of Oslo (‘Vigeland’), paras 65-66 and 92-96.


\(^5\) Ibid para 12.


\(^8\) Ibid para 12.
The Benelux Office for Intellectual Property had explicitly invoked this additional ground for refusal. Nonetheless, the Court refrained from a discussion of a conflict with public policy or accepted principles of morality even though it was fully aware that a denial of rights because of a lack of distinctive character would leave open the backdoor of acquiring distinctiveness – and trademark protection – as a consequence of use in the course of trade.

The latter feature of trademark law – the option of acquiring trademark rights to cultural heritage material through continuous use in trade – is worrisome when the registration of cultural heritage material as trademarks is seen as an act of re-monopolizing and misappropriating cultural expressions that should remain free as sources of inspiration and building blocks of new literary and artistic productions. From this perspective, the rejection of public policy and principles of morality as further grounds for refusal in Mona Lisa and Nachtwacht has far-reaching consequences. The exclusion of cultural heritage signs on the ground of a lack of distinctive character following from the painting’s widespread use in advertising is weak because cultural signs can acquire distinctive character as a result of use in trade. The decisions of the German Federal Patent Court and the Court of Appeals of The Hague allow the possibility of overcoming the obstacle to registration through intensive use in product marketing and advertising. Once consumers have been taught to perceive the Mona Lisa and the Night Watch as source identifiers referring to the applicant’s enterprise, a registration of the famous paintings becomes possible. Furthermore, the assessment of distinctive character may differ from trademark examiner to trademark examiner. The verdict of a lack of distinctive character in the Benelux, for instance, did not prevent the EUIPO from assuming inherent distinctive character and granting EU-wide trademark rights to the Night Watch for the sale of strontium. An exclusion based on a conflict with public policy and principles of morality would be more robust. Proof of the acquisition of distinctive character through use is not sufficient to surmount this registration hurdle. In contrast to a refusal based on a lack of distinctiveness, the rejection of trademark rights on the ground that the application is contrary to public policy or accepted principles of morality leads to an outright exclusion – irrespective of whether the painting is distinctive or not. Instead of following this secure route, the German Federal Patent Court and the Court of Appeals of The Hague deemed it sufficient to rely on the basic requirement of distinctive character. Hence, they failed to permanently eliminate the risk of a removal of the Mona Lisa and the Night Watch from the public domain.

II. Roots of the problem

The Mona Lisa and Nachtwacht decisions seem grounded in traditional assumptions about the field of application of public order and morality as grounds for refusal. The guidelines developed by the Grand Board of Appeal of the former Office for Harmonisation in the Internal Market (OHIM), for instance, indicate that the focus has traditionally been on the offensive character of the sign as such, or the offensive character of the use of a particular sign in respect of objectionable goods or services. The test for refusing trademark rights to a cultural sign would thus culminate in the question whether a sufficiently broad part of the relevant public considered the sign in and of itself offensive, or would find the use of the sign in relation to certain goods or services unacceptable. With regard to signs of symbolic value, the decision of the General Court of the European Union (GCEU) in Couture Tech v OHIM (‘Soviet coat of arms’) illustrates this field of application. In this case, trademark protection was sought for a figurative sign showing the coat of arms of the former Soviet Union. The application had been rejected by OHIM on the ground that in Latvia and Hungary, the registration of official symbols of the former USSR would cause a conflict with public policy. Confirming this decision, the GCEU pointed out that in the assessment of a sign’s offensive character, national circumstances had to be factored into the equation that were likely to influence the perception of a mark by the relevant public. As it seemed obvious that a substantial part of the public in Hungary and Latvia would consider the mark offensive, the application for registration had to be refused.

This traditional focus on the offensive nature of the sign for which protection is sought narrows the field of application with regard to cultural signs. Obviously, a sign consisting of the Mona Lisa or the Night Watch is not scandalous in and of itself. Under the traditional approach, cultural signs can thus only be refused in extreme cases where the sign is placed in an objectionable context, for instance, because of the goods or services involved.

9 ibid para 1.4.
10 ibid paras 8-9.
12 Nonetheless, Yann Rasire, ‘Public Domain Versus Trademark Protection: The Vigeland Case’ (2018) 13 Journal of Intellectual Property Law and Practice 434, 435, prefers a solution based on the requirement of distinctiveness and the assumption that consumers will perceive cultural signs as descriptive or decorative product elements. This solution, however, does not address the destabilizing effect of the possibility of acquiring distinctiveness through continuous use in trade.
13 EUTM No 0166613903. As the CJEU, 6 September 2018, Case C-488/16 P Bundesverband Souvenir – Geschenke – Ehrenpreise (‘Nenschwaersten’) ECLI:EU:C:2018:673, para 72, pointed out, the EU trademark system is ‘an autonomous system with its own set of objectives and rules peculiar to it; it applies independently of any national system.’ Hence, the EUIPO was not bound to follow the decision on distinctive ness taken by the Court of Appeals of Brussels on the basis of the harmonized Benelux trademark system.
17 ibid paras 36 and 53.
18 ibid paras 57-62.
An attempt to register a sign derived from Pablo Picasso’s famous painting ‘Guernica’ for the sale of weapons might be such an example where the goods concerned contradict the meaning of the affected cultural sign.\(^{19}\) As long as the traditional focus on the scandalous nature of the sign as such, or an objectionable context arising from the goods or services, is not abandoned in favour of a more flexible approach, public order and morality can hardly play an effective role with regard to cultural signs.

### III. Alternative Vigeland approach

A national precursor of a more elastic application of public order and morality can be found in the area of religious signs. In *Messias*, for example, the German Federal Patent Court denied the registration of the word mark *MESSIAS* for clothing, shoes and hats. Obviously, the sign as such was not offensive. To pave the way for the application of public order and morality as grounds for refusal, the Court focused on the fact that the trademark registration would lead to commercial use of the religious sign in trade.\(^{20}\) In *Budha*, the German Federal Patent Court assumed that significant parts of the German public would perceive the word *BUDHA* (which the trademark applicant sought to register for perfumery, cosmetics, jewellery, watches, clothing, shoes and hats) as a reference to the Budha as the founder of Buddhism. As the grant of trademark rights would lead to the commercial exploitation of the word ‘Budha,’ the Court held that the trademark application was contrary to the religious or ethical values of significant parts of the German public. The relevant public would perceive the registration as offensive.\(^{22}\) The focus, therefore, switched from the offensive nature of the sign to the offensive nature of the registration as a trademark and the subsequent commercialization of the religious sign.

Similar impulses for a broader application of public order and morality as grounds for refusal in cases involving cultural heritage material can follow from the milestone ruling of the EFTA Court in *Vigeland*. In this case, the EFTA Court was called upon to assess an attempt to register several artworks made by Gustav Vigeland – one of the most eminent Norwegian sculptors – as trademarks. The reason for the initiative to acquire trademark rights was the expiry of the term of copyright protection.\(^{23}\) The questions referred to the Court came from the Norwegian Board of Appeal for Industrial Property Rights. The Board of Appeal was wondering about the application of several grounds for refusal, including public order and morality.\(^{22}\) Among other works, the underlying trademark application concerned Vigeland’s ‘Monolith’ (*Monolitten*) and ‘Angry Boy’ (*Sinnataggen*) – popular works which feature prominently in the Vigeland Installation in the centre of Oslo’s Frogner Park. Interestingly, the registration initiative had not been taken by a trademark ‘troll’ seeking to obtain rights to popular artistic works for the sole purpose of threatening users with infringement claims and pressing for excessive licence fees without any intention to make genuine use of the works itself.\(^{24}\) On the contrary, the trademark application had been filed by the Municipality of Oslo. In respect of this remarkable step, Oslo submitted arguments to the EFTA Court which were derived from a distinction between Vigeland’s artistic work on the one hand, and the city’s commercial marketing efforts on the other. In particular, Oslo argued that ‘[a]ll of the shapes have been exclusively connected to, and used by or through, the Municipality since the death of Gustav Vigeland in 1943. Many of these shapes are well known and valuable, in particular, due to the efforts and investments made by the Municipality.’\(^{25}\)

Hence it seems that from the perspective of the Municipality of Oslo the city ought to be entitled to the rights to Vigeland’s works – even after the expiry of the copyright – because of the efforts made to ensure that the works became well known. Oslo stated that against this background no other entity could have justifiable interests in the commercial exploitation of Vigeland’s works.\(^{26}\) The Municipality also pointed out that it had specifically been chosen by Gustav Vigeland to administer and safeguard his artistic reputation and memory.\(^{27}\) Nonetheless, considerations of art custodianship, such as the need to preserve the cultural dimension of Vigeland’s works by preventing third parties from attaching undesirable commercial connotations, did not play a central role in the submission to the EFTA Court.\(^{28}\) Instead, Oslo insisted that ‘it should be assessed whether the value and fame of the work are related to characteristics and qualities of the artwork alone, or if the value and renown may be attributed to investments and efforts made by the Municipality.’\(^{29}\)

With this strategy, the city of Oslo had little success in its own country. The Norwegian Industrial Property Office remained unimpressed and refused the trademark application on the grounds that Vigeland’s works were non-distinctive, descriptive and functional. The shape of the works added substantial value to at least some of the goods, in respect of which registration was sought.\(^{30}\) Instead of dispelling these concerns, the Board of Appeal decided to supplement the list of grounds for refusal with a further argument. It expressed the view that a trademark registration of works belonging to the cultural heritage may be contrary to public policy or accepted principles of morality, and wondered which factors should inform the decision on these grounds for refusal.\(^{31}\)

\(^{19}\) See the discussion of this example by European Copyright Society (n 14) 459-460.


\(^{21}\) German Federal Patent Court, 17 January 2007, Case 28 W (pat) 66/ 06, 5 – *Budha*.

\(^{22}\) *Vigeland* (n 1) para 20; Gustav Vigeland died on 12 March 1943.

\(^{23}\) ibid paras 28-30.

\(^{24}\) For a case that has arisen from this practice, see Higher Court of Appeals of Dresden, 4 April 2000, Case 14 U 3611/99, [2001] NJW 615 – *Johann sebastian Bach*. The case concerned the registration of the name and portrait of Johann Sebastian Bach as a trade mark for various goods and services, including glassware, porcelain and crockery. While the trade mark proprietor had not commenced using the sign himself, he systematically asserted his trade mark rights against users referring to Johann Sebastian Bach; cf the background information given by Horst-Peter Götting, ‘Persönlichkeitsmerkmale von verstorbenen Personen der Zeitsgeschichte als Mark*’ (2001) GRUR 615.


\(^{26}\) ibid para 36.

\(^{27}\) ibid para 36.

\(^{28}\) ibid paras 31-42.

\(^{29}\) ibid para 37.

\(^{30}\) *Vigeland* (n 1) para 27.

\(^{31}\) ibid paras 28-30.
Answering this question submitted, the EFTA Court took several important steps towards a more flexible application of public order and morality as grounds for denying trademark rights to cultural signs. First, the EFTA Court stated that for a cultural creation to be part of the public domain, it had to be unencumbered by intellectual property rights. According to the EFTA Court, the legal status of ‘absence of individual protection for, or exclusive rights to, a work’ is the normal status of literary and artistic works and the period of copyright protection is an anomaly during which the work is withheld from a free and entirely open communication process. Precursors of this approach can be found in the domestic law of EU Member States. The German Federal Constitutional Court, for instance, also held that a work, once published, becomes an independent factor influencing the cultural and intellectual perception of its age, which increasingly evaporates in the process of its communication until the time of protection finally expires.

Second, the EFTA Court clarified the policy objectives which formed the basis of its approach. In the Court’s view, the determination of a fixed time frame of copyright protection after which anyone can draw from ideas and creative content of others without limitation served the principles of legal certainty and protection of legitimate expectations. It also served the general interest in ‘protecting creations of the mind from commercial greed’ and ‘ensuring the freedom of the arts’.

Third, the EFTA Court recalled the remarkable development of EU trademark protection in recent years: from a protection system that focused on the protection of consumers against confusion as to origin, to a protection regime that recognized investment in brand development as an independent objective of protection. While explicitly referring to remaining differences in the configuration of copyright and trademark protection, this modern understanding of the trademark system led to a clear articulation of the risk of wrong incentives for investment in cultural heritage grabbing:

‘The possibility of acquiring distinctiveness through use provided for in Art. 3(3) of the Trade Mark Directive may lead undertakings, which seek to transfer the appeal of formerly copyright protected works to their goods or services, to try to appropriate the work through targeted marketing campaigns.’

Therefore, the understanding of trademark law as an incentive and investment scheme – and trademark rights as brand exploitation instruments – yielded the insight that the mere possibility of acquiring distinctiveness through use in trade could lead to rights acquisition strategies aimed at the exploitation of positive cultural connotations attached to cultural signs such as the Mona Lisa and the Night Watch. In line with its earlier reference to the need to protect cultural creations from ‘commercial greed’, the Court thus warned against ‘targeted marketing campaigns’ seeking to derive profit from valuable cultural meanings.

On the basis of these considerations, the EFTA Court finally embarked on a closer inspection of public order and morality as grounds for refusing trademark rights to Vigeland’s artworks. In this context, the Court made a first contribution to the further development of public order and morality as grounds for refusal by clearly distinguishing two aspects: a refusal based on grounds of public policy requires an assessment of objective criteria, whereas a refusal based on accepted principles of morality implies the examination of subjective values.

As to the subjective criterion of a conflict with accepted principles of morality, the Court underlined the necessity to examine on a case-by-case basis how the relevant public would perceive the sign at issue. In line with the traditional approach outlined above, the Court posed the question whether Vigeland’s works – in and of themselves – would be considered offensive by reasonable people.

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32 ibid para 66.
33 ibid para 66.
34 ibid para 66.
36 Vigeland (n 1) para 65.
37 ibid para 65.
38 ibid para 72; cf Kur and Sentfleben (n 14) paras 1.29-1.39.
39 Vigeland (n 1) para 62.
40 ibid para 75. As to the risk of dysfunctional cumulation, see also European Copyright Society (n 14) 458.
42 Vigeland (n 1) para 65 and 75.
43 ibid paras 84-86. As to the innovative character of the decision, see Geiger and Machado Pontes (n 14) 11-12, who place the judgment in the context of previous EU office practice.
44 For an overview, see Geiger and Machado Pontes (n 14) 8-11; Kur and Sentfleben (n 14) paras 4.205-4.218; European Copyright Society (n 14) 459-460.
consumers with average sensitivity and tolerance thresholds. Quite clearly, this question could be answered in the negative. The EFTA Court, however, went beyond this standard analysis and added an important nuance by holding that ‘certain pieces of art may enjoy a particular status as prominent parts of a nation’s cultural heritage, an emblem of sovereignty or of the nation’s foundations and values. A trade mark registration may even be considered a misappropriation or a desecration of the artist’s work, in particular if it is granted for goods or services that contradict the values of the artist or the message communicated through the artwork in question. Therefore, the possibility cannot be ruled out that trade mark registration of an artwork may be perceived by the average consumer in the EEA State in question as offensive and therefore as contrary to accepted principles of morality.’

This addition is remarkable. With this statement, the EFTA Court departed from the traditional focus on the scandalous nature of the sign itself. A refusal based on accepted principles of morality may also follow from a finding that the relevant public perceives the trademark registration of a work of art as offensive. In this way, the EFTA Court substantially broadened the field of application of the ground for refusal. It extended the above-described broader perspective – including the possibility of the public perceiving the registration for use in commerce as offensive – from religious signs to signs with cultural significance. While in the past the offensive nature of the cultural sign or its attachment to scandalous goods or services was decisive, the offensive nature of the attempt to register a cultural sign as a trademark offers an alternative avenue for a refusal based on a conflict with morality in line with the approach taken by the EFTA Court.

As to the second aspect – the objective criterion of a conflict with public policy – the EFTA Court noted that ‘public policy’ referred to principles and standards regarded to be of a fundamental concern to the state and the whole of society. Therefore, a refusal based on public policy required exceptional circumstances, namely ‘a genuine and sufficiently serious threat to a fundamental interest of society.’ Nonetheless, the Court saw room for applying this ground for refusal in the context of artwork registrations:

‘An artwork may be refused registration, for example, under the circumstances that its registration is regarded as a genuine and serious threat to certain fundamental values or where the need to safeguard the public domain, itself, is considered a fundamental interest of society.’

As in the context of accepted principles of morality, the EFTA Court stated that a genuine and serious threat to public policy could follow from the trademark registration of an artwork. The Court thus confirmed the substantial broadening of the scope of the ground for refusal: not only the nature of the sign at issue but also the registration attempt as such can be sufficient to justify a refusal based on public order.

However, the EFTA Court could hardly carry out a more concrete assessment of the situation surrounding the application filed by the Municipality of Oslo. Given the discretion enjoyed by the national authorities in this respect, it was for the Norwegian office and courts to determine whether these requirements were met in the Vigeland case. In fact, the Norwegian Board of Appeal for Industrial Property Rights finally rejected the trademark registration of Vigeland’s artworks on the basis of public order considerations. The Board of Appeal saw a conflict with public order arising from the registration of Vigeland’s works as trademarks ‘due to the signs depicting works of art which hold considerable cultural value to Norwegian society, and partly because the temporal limitation of the copyright protection period pursuant to the Copyrights Act is meant to safeguard fundamental societal considerations.’

The Board of Appeal thus combined two lines of reasoning which the EFTA Court had declared valid in the context of the public order assessment. First, the Board of Appeal held that, because of their significant cultural value, the registration of Vigeland’s artworks threatened fundamental values of Norwegian society. Second, the Board stated that the temporal limitation of copyright constituted a fundamental interest of Norwegian society. Offering further support for its refusal of trademark protection, the Board also pointed to unfair competitive advantages that could follow from free riding on the positive reputation which the artworks had already acquired during the term of copyright protection:

‘[n]ot only are there no costs in connection with development of a trademark, but the sign is in itself already known as a work of art and connected to something positive. As a result, there is no need to build consumer recognition of the mark or to generate the positive associations required for recurring purchases.’

Finally, the Board made it clear that the intention of art investment and art custodianship did not constitute a legitimate interest in trademark law that could supersede the considerations and fundamental societal interests underlying the limitation of the term of copyright protection.

This final outcome shows that the EFTA Court has provided important exemplary lines of argument in Vigeland for a more systematic exclusion of cultural

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45 Vigeland (n 1) paras 89-90 and 93.
46 ibid para 91.
47 ibid para 92.
49 Budtz (n 21) 5.
50 Jeharaj Kenneth trading as Screw You v OHIM (n 15) para 30; Dick Lexic Ltd v OHIM (n 15).
51 Vigeland (n 1) para 93; cf Basire (n 12) 435.
52 Vigeland (n 1) paras 94-96.
53 ibid para 96.
54 ibid para 96.
55 Norwegian Board of Appeal for Industrial Property Rights, 13 November 2017, Cases 16/00148, 16/00149, 16/00150, 16/00151, 16/00153 and 16/00154 – Vigeland, para 14.
56 Vigeland (n 1) para 96.
57 Vigeland (n 55) para 23.
58 ibid para 24; cf Basire (n 12) 435.
59 The Municipality of Oslo did not appeal the decision of the Norwegian Board of Appeal for Industrial Property Rights. The decision of the Board thus remained the final word in the matter.
heritage material from trademark protection on the basis of public policy or morality. As already pointed out, this solution is more robust and complete than a refusal based on a lack of distinctiveness. The acquisition of distinctive character through use in trade does not affect a refusal based on public order or morality. As the Norwegian Board of Appeal finally qualified the registration of Vigeland’s artworks – not the artworks themselves and not the context arising from use in respect of specific goods or services – as contrary to public order, the refusal of trademark rights also applies across the whole spectrum of goods and services. As the focus is on the mere fact of registration for use in commerce, any trademark registration is impermissible regardless of the goods or services involved.

Before embarking on a closer inspection of the refusal arguments which the Vigeland decision offers, it is important to note that the EFTA Court’s approach has also drawn criticism. While recognizing the risk of an increasing commercialization of artworks and the potential deterrant effect of allegations of trademark infringement after the grant of protection, Annette Kur considers a denial of trademark rights based on public order or morality unnecessary. In her opinion, the registration as such does not endanger public policies, but the way in which the trademark proprietor exercises his rights. Against this background, she recommends a targeted approach relying on bad faith in cases where the trademark applicant seeks to artificially prolong protection after the expiry of copyright. As to the infringement analysis, she relies on the unwritten requirement of ‘use as a mark’ to prevent excessive claims.

Both elements of Kur’s alternative solution, however, seem inefficient. The bad faith analysis, as conducted by the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU), focuses on the trademark owner’s intention of making genuine use of an affected artwork in the sense of trademark law: use ‘falling within the functions of a trade mark, in particular the essential function of indicating origin’... 64 At the registration stage, however, the trademark applicant is not obliged to give evidence of use. Instead, he can acquire trademark rights in the EU by simply registering an artwork as a trademark – with the requirement of genuine use becoming an issue only five years after completion of the registration procedure. In Sky, the CJEU confirmed that trademark applicants were not required ‘to indicate or even to know precisely’ which use they would make of the mark in the five-year period following registration. 65 Given this configuration of the test, bad faith has proven incapable of preventing trademark registrations even if the trademark applicant could easily be identified as a ‘cultural heritage grabber.’ In Johann Sebastian Bach, for instance, the Higher Court of Appeals of Dresden found no starting point for a refusal based on bad faith even though it saw clear indications that signs concerning Johann Sebastian Bach (and various other cultural signs) had been registered for the sole purpose of preventing others from using them and forcing them to enter into licensing agreements – without any true intention of using the signs in trade. 66 As the registration had occurred in 1999 and the case was decided in 2000, an obligation to put the trademarks to genuine use had not arisen yet.

Hence, an approach based on bad faith does not offer a convincing solution. Instead, it gives trademark trolls seeking to exploit cultural heritage material ample room to threaten users with infringement claims. Kur’s second argument – a strict gatekeeper requirement of ‘use as a mark’ – could reduce the trademark proprietor’s chances of success in infringement proceedings. The strict gatekeeper criterion which she has in mind against the background of German jurisprudence, however, has not been adopted by the CJEU. Instead of developing a robust requirement of use as a mark, the CJEU follows a flexible approach that opens wide the doors to trademark protection in order to maximize the harmonizing effect of EU trademark law. 67 Considering this development, the proposal to abandon an ex ante approach based on public order and morality in favour of ex post corrections of the infringement analysis is not convincing. It is unclear whether the ‘use as a mark’ doctrine which Kur recommends will ever evolve in CJEU jurisprudence.

The invocation of public order and morality in Vigeland has also been criticized by Rochelle Dreyfuss. Drawing an analogy between public order/morality exclusions of trademark rights and the outright exclusion of patent protection in cases involving genes and metabolic pathways, diagnostics and fundamental business practices, she arrives at the conclusion that the categorial exclusion of trademark protection for artworks is problematic. More specifically, she fears that the denial of trademark protection based on public order and morality may – depending on the cultural and societal background – differ from country to country, deprive competitors of the legal certainty following from a registration decision in favour of one trader, decrease incentives to develop new language and rhetorical devices, limit branding opportunities that may cross-subsidize literary and artistic productions, and deflect attention away from the need to strengthen defences to infringement in trademark law.

These concerns, however, are unfounded. In the case of universal cultural heritage, such as the Mona Lisa and the Night Watch, trademark offices will have little difficulty in arriving at more or less uniform, corresponding decisions across countries. If the risk of artificially extending

61 ibid 1086.
62 ibid.
63 ibid.
64 CJEU, 29 January 2020, Case C-371/18 Sky and Others ECLI:EU:C:2020:45, para 75; CJEU, 11 June 2009, Case C-529/07, Lindt v Hauswirth ECLI:EU:C:2009:361, para 44.
65 art 18(1) EUTMR and art 16(1) TMD.
66 Sky and Others (n 64) para 76.
67 Johann Sebastian Bach (n 24) 615, 617.
68 Sentefleben (n 11) 407-411.
69 Kur (n 60) 1086.
70 Sentefleben (n 11) 146-152 and 426-427.
71 See Kur (n 60) 1086, footnote 46, pointing out that EU-wide agreement on a strict gatekeeper requirement of use as a mark is missing. For a detailed proposal to develop such a robust doctrine, see Sentefleben (n 11) 426-477.
73 Dreyfuss (n 72) 328-329.
protection after copyright expiry and removing artworks from the public domain is recognized as a basis for invoking public order or morality, the application of these grounds for refusal can moreover be grounded in objective facts – the public domain status/expiry of copyright – that do not depend on a specific cultural or societal background. The legal certainty and incentive arguments which Dreyfuss advances overlook negative effects of the grant of trademark rights. Dreyfuss’ analysis conceals the fact that legal certainty and the encouragement of investment following from the grant of trademark rights are highly problematic. By awarding one trader an exclusive trademark right in an artwork, the trademark office encourages this trader to impugn the artwork with commercial connotations. In the light of sociological insights into literary and artistic creation processes, these commercial connotations are likely to devalue the sign as a basis for cultural follow-on innovation. By awarding an exclusive right, the trademark office, furthermore, gives the trader a stronger position in the communication process surrounding the affected artwork. It offers a control instrument that allows the trader to suppress use by others, in particular use by artists who are risk-averse and likely to refrain from use once they are confronted with a cease-and-desist letter. Therefore, legal certainty for cultural heritage branding is not desirable. Instead of contributing to new language and rhetorical devices, as Dreyfuss expects, it seriously impedes the remix and reuse of affected artworks in the literary and artistic discourse. Potential opportunities for subsidizing literary and artistic productions can hardly outweigh the broader and more fundamental risk of losing artworks as meaningful reference points for new literary and artistic productions. It also remains unclear why reliance on public order and morality would reduce the need for more robust defences in trademark law. This need arises in particular from the increasing cultural significance of genuine trademarks, such as ‘Coca Cola’. It does not depend on the acceptance of artworks as trademarks.

Finally, it is noteworthy that Dreyfuss chooses a doubtful reference point for her entire critique. If trademark law had all the positive effects Dreyfuss describes, it would be high time to offer trademark protection for the genes and metabolic pathways, diagnostics and fundamental business practices that remain underprotected according to her analysis. Interestingly, however, her analysis does not raise the question whether the trademark law doctrine of utilitarian functionality (categorically excluding technical subject matter from trademark protection) should be abandoned to pave the way for the extension of trademark protection to technical knowledge in the public domain, or the perpetuation of protection after the expiry of patent rights.

In sum, the critique of the Vigeland decision only confirms that public order and morality are indispensable tools in the regulation of cultural heritage branding. If public order and morality are not properly developed and cultivated as grounds for refusal, alternative instruments – ranging from distinctiveness and bad faith to ‘use as a mark’ – are unlikely to yield satisfactory results. Purported advantages of artwork branding, such as clarity about use entitlements and opportunities to invest in the development of commercial connotations, can be unmasked as heavy burdens on artistic creativity that are likely to devalue affected artworks and thwart new literary and artistic creations. Against this background, it is important to explore the full potential of the arguments which the EFTA Court developed to enable a broader application of public order and morality as grounds for refusing trademark rights in cultural heritage material.

IV. Morality as a ground for refusal after Vigeland

With regard to morality as a ground for refusal, the EFTA Court provided two core arguments for an outright exclusion:

• the relevant public may perceive the registration as a trademark as offensive because certain pieces of art enjoy a ‘particular status as prominent parts of a nation’s cultural heritage, an emblem of sovereignty or of the nation’s foundations and values’ (morality ground 1);

• the relevant public may perceive the registration as a trademark as offensive because it would lead to a ‘misappropriation or a desecration of the artist’s work, in particular if it is granted for goods or services that contradict values of the artist or the message communicated through the artwork in question’ (morality ground 2).

1. Misappropriation and desecration arguments

At first sight, the latter argument focusing on misappropriation or desecration (morality ground 2) may appear narrow. Quite clearly, the scenario mentioned above – an attempt to register a distinctive element of Pablo Picasso’s Guernica for the marketing of weapons – would fall within this category. However, this example also illustrates potential limits of the approach. While consumers may regard the registration in respect of weapons as a desecration of the artwork in the light of the painting’s message, the outcome may be different when the trademark application concerns goods and services that do not contradict the values conveyed by the painting. If interpreted strictly, the desecration argument will thus fail in many cases.

However, the EFTA Court used the words ‘in particular’ to introduce the scenario in which goods or services contradict values communicated through the artwork. This specific example does not prevent the invocation of

74 Senftleben (n 11) 293-299.
75 ibid 200-203 and 291-293.
76 ibd 63-67.
77 ibid 456-459; Dreyfuss (n 41) 397-398, 413 and 418.
79 Vigeland (n 1) para 92.
80 ibid para 92.
81 ibid para 92.
the desecration argument in other cases. It does not pre-
vent the use of morality as a ground for refusal when the
registration of a cultural sign as a trademark is likely to
trigger a redefinition process in the commercial domain
that is undesirable. Arguably, the attachment of market-
ing messages blurs a sign’s cultural meaning and reduces its
potential to serve as a reference point for the discourse
in the artistic domain. The original message of the art-
work may even be suppressed and lost in the end.
In other words, it may be argued, regardless of the
goods and services involved, the grant of trademark rights
to cultural heritage material always leads to a desecra-
tion of the artist’s work, namely the desecration following
from the attachment of commercial marketing messages
that interfere with the sign’s cultural meaning. A trade-
mark registration entails the obligation to make genuine
use of the registered sign as a trademark. This, in turn,
requires the attachment of commercial marketing mes-
sages to the affected sign. The desecration of an artwork
is thus inherent in the grant of trademark protection.
Viewed from this perspective, the argument applies across
all goods and services and has the potential to categori-
cally exclude cultural heritage signs from trademark pro-
tection. Consumers may perceive the attachment of
marketing messages to cultural heritage material as offens-
ive because it suppresses the sign’s cultural meaning and
desecrates the artwork in this way.

The second aspect of morality ground 2 – the EFTA
Court referred not only to ‘desecration’ but also to ‘mis-
appropriation’ of the artist’s work can have a broad
exclusionary effect as well. In the CJEU case that concerned an attempt to register, among
other signs, the first nine notes of Ludwig van
Beethoven’s piano piece ‘Für Elise’ as a trademark –
Advocate General Dámaso Ruiz-Jarabo Colomer
addressed the misappropriation risk. He expressed the
view that it was difficult to accept ‘that a creation of the
mind, which forms part of the universal cultural heritage,
should be appropriated indefinitely by a person to be
used on the market in order to distinguish the goods he
produces or the services he provides with an exclusivity
which not even its author’s estate enjoys.

In the light of this statement, it is conceivable that con-
sumers with a similar feeling of unease regard the registra-
tion of a cultural sign as an offensive misappropriation
of the artist’s work by third parties who – unlike the
author’s heirs – do not have a family connection. In
this line of reasoning, the ground for refusal, again, applies
across the whole spectrum of goods and services and
leads to an outright exclusion of trademark protection.
At the same time, Colomer’s statement may set limits to
the misappropriation approach. What if an author’s es-
tate itself files the trademark application? Would the close
connection with the author legitimize the registration at-
tempt in the eyes of the relevant public? If so, the misap-
propriation argument would be rendered inapplicable.
This, however, need not lead to a trademark registration.
The desecration argument offers an alternative basis for
an outright exclusion. As other trademark proprietors,
the author’s estate is bound to make genuine use of the
cultural sign once it is registered as a trademark. The reg-
istration exposes the affected sign to the risk of desecra-
tion as a result of use for commercial marketing purposes.
The refusal of trademark rights thus follows from the
need to avoid the desecration of the artist’s work. The
fact that, in this case, the author’s estate registers the sign
and controls the use in commerce does not eliminate the
desecration risk.

On balance, the amalgam of desecration and misap-
propriation considerations which the EFTA Court applied to
establish morality ground 2 can thus have a far-reaching
exclusionary effect. It can be a powerful legal instrument
to keep cultural signs outside the trademark system. The
exclusionary effect will be particularly strong when the
commercial redefinition of the sign’s meaning in the con-
text of use in trade is qualified as a desecration of the
artist’s work.

2. Particular national status arguments

Morality ground 1 refers to a scenario where the relevant
public finds the trademark registration offensive because
the affected sign constitutes a prominent part of a nation’s
cultural heritage, an emblem of sovereignty or an emblem
of a nation’s foundations and values. From the outset,
this ground for refusal is confined to signs with a particu-
lar status. It is incapable of covering all kinds of signs
with cultural significance. Nonetheless, practical experi-
cences with cases involving signs that are important na-
tional cultural heritage, emblems of sovereignty or
emblems of a nation’s foundations and values show that
there is room for a broader application of this line of ar-
gument. In the above-described Nachtwacht case, for in-
stance, the Court of Appeals of The Hague explicitly
pointed out that the Night Watch was ‘carved in the col-
lective memory of the inhabitants of the Benelux.’
Nonetheless, the Court refrained from a refusal based on
a conflict with morality and relied on a lack of distinctiv-
eness instead. In fact, this is a missed opportunity. As the
painting plays such a prominent role in the collective
memory of the Benelux population, it would only have
been a small step to assume that Benelux consumers
would perceive the registration of the Night Watch – one
of the most prominent parts of their cultural heritage – as
offensive.

Hence it becomes apparent that trademark judges and
examiners are not exhausting the full potential of moral-
ity considerations relating to a sign’s particular status in
the pantheon of a nation’s cultural heritage, emblems of
sovereignty or symbols of state foundations and societal
values. This reluctance is problematic. While the

82 cf Sentfleben (n 11) 293-299.
83 Katya Assaf, ‘Der Markenschutz und seine kulturelle Bedeutung: Ein
GRUR Int 1, 2-3; Martin RF Senftleben, ‘Der kulturelle Imperativ des
Urheberrechts’ in Matthias Weller, Nicolai B Kemle and Thomas Dreier
(eds), Kunst im Markt – Kunst im Recht (Nomos 2010) 75; Artur
Wandtke and Winfried Bullinger, ‘Die Marke als urheberrechtlich schutz-
84 cf Franken (n 48) 88 and 94, who describes the formal recognition of
cultural offensiveness – in the sense of the use of cultural symbols in inap-
propriate commercial contexts – with regard to symbols of Māori culture
in the trademark legislation of New Zealand.
85 Vigeland (n 1) para 92.
86 Case C-283/01 Shield Mark v Kist ECLI:EU:C:2003:197, Opinion of AG Colomer, para 52.
87 Vigeland (n 1) para 92.
88 Chiever v Benelux-Organisatie voor de Intellektuele Eigendom (n 7)
para 12.
89 ibid paras 8-9.
aforementioned misappropriation and desecration arguments focus on a sign’s meaning in the cultural domain (morality ground 2), the consideration of a sign’s status as national cultural heritage, an emblem of sovereignty or a symbol of state foundations and values (morality ground 1) allows the social and political dimension of cultural signs to enter the picture. Taken together, the two categories of morality considerations identified by the EFTA Court offer a broad spectrum of reference points for the inquiry into a conflict with morality.

3. Impact of consumer perception

As the EFTA Court pointed out, however, a conflict with morality is a subjective criterion – subjective in the sense that the perception of reasonable consumers with average sensitivity and tolerance thresholds is decisive. Accordingly, an examiner or judge following in the footsteps of the EFTA Court cannot posit readily that the registration of a given work of art would lead to the misappropriation or desecration of the artist’s work. The central question is whether the relevant public would find the registration attempt unacceptable for this reason. In the case of artworks, the necessity to assess the situation through the lens of consumer perception raises further questions about the level of knowledge and sensitivity of the relevant public. Can consumers be expected to recognize the risk of a redefinition and devaluation of cultural signs as a result of use as trademarks? Do consumers have sufficient knowledge of the values and messages underlying affected artworks? Even if these works are not widely known?

In other words, it is important to clarify the reference point for the assessment. Quite clearly, an assessment based on the perception of consumers with sufficient awareness of matters of art and culture may enhance the potential of morality considerations to achieve a categorical exclusion of cultural signs from trademark protection, whereas an assessment based on the perception of consumers who do not care too much about matters of art may reduce this potential and limit the exclusionary effect of the ground for refusal. In practice, the consumer standard that is currently applied in the EU to assess conflicts with accepted principles of morality is the ‘reasonable person with average thresholds of sensitivity and tolerance.’ According to the CJEU, the assessment from the perspective of this consumer must shed light on the ‘fundamental moral values and standards’ to which society adheres at the time of assessment: the prevailing ‘social consensus.’ In Constantin Film, the CJEU emphasized that this determination should not be confined to an abstract assessment of the allegedly scandalous sign. The case concerned an attempt to register the title of the German film ‘Fack Ju Göhte’ (a phonetic transcription of ‘Fuck you, Goethe’ in German). Considering the enormous success of the comedy among the German-speaking public and its worldwide educational use by the Goethe Institute, the Court insisted on an assessment that included the ‘concrete and current social context’ to ascertain whether the relevant public found the sign acceptable despite its vulgar nature. As there were no indications that the film title had caused a controversy in Germany or Austria, the CJEU saw no reason to assume a conflict with morality.

Quite clearly, the consideration of the ‘concrete and current social context’ surrounding a sign allows empirical findings to enter the picture, such as the popularity of a film with a vulgar title and its use by a renowned cultural institution. The consumer standard on which the assessment is to be based, however, is far from empirical reality. The qualification of relevant consumers as ‘reasonable’ with ‘average thresholds of sensitivity and tolerance’ indicates that this consumer is a normative fiction. As Graeme Dinwoodie and Dev Gangjee rightly observed with regard to normative connotations of the average consumer in the infringement analysis, ‘[t]he more that the reasonably well-informed and reasonably observant and circumspect consumer is a normative fiction, the greater the scope for the CJEU to create legal rules that establish EU-wide standards. The more empirical that question becomes, then the greater the role of national courts and the more likely that divergent market realities in Europe will result in different outcomes with adverse effects on the creation of an integrated market.’

Applying this insight to the prototype of a reasonable consumer with average sensitivity and tolerance thresholds in morality cases, it can thus be said that the assessment of consumer perception need not depend exclusively on empirical findings. Normative assumptions, such as the undesirability of trademark rights that may hamper the use of cultural heritage material as a basis for new literary and artistic creations, can influence the determination of the degree of sensitivity and tolerance that is ascribed to the relevant consumer. The inclusion of normative considerations in the assessment is not unusual. In La Mafia Franchises, the GCEU had to decide on the offensive nature of a figurative trademark showing a red rose and the slogan ‘La Mafia se sienta a la mesa’ for restaurant services offered in themed restaurants, clothing and footwear, and business management and organization consultancy services. As the words ‘La Mafia’ constituted the dominant element of the mark, the analysis focused on the question how the relevant public – reasonable consumers with average sensitivity and tolerance thresholds – would perceive that sign. The GCEU emphasized that the word element ‘La Mafta’ was understood worldwide as a reference to a criminal organization.
involved in illegal activities, such as drug and arms trafficking, money laundering and corruption, and not shying away from intimidation, physical violence and murder.\textsuperscript{103} The Court went on to explain that such criminal activities breached the very values on which the EU was founded, in particular the values of respect for human dignity and freedom (Art. 2 of the Treaty on European Union) and the right to life, integrity of the person, liberty and security (Arts. 2, 3 and 6 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights). Those values were indivisible and made up the spiritual and moral heritage of the EU.\textsuperscript{104} In sharp contrast to the illicit practices of the criminal organization, the connection with the sentence ‘se sienta a la mesa’ (‘takes a seat at the table’ in Spanish), trivialized the violence of Mafia activities by referring to the idea of sharing a meal and thus conviviality and relaxation.\textsuperscript{105} Based on these findings and normative considerations, the Court arrived at the conclusion that the contested mark, considered as a whole, refers to a criminal organisation, conveys a globally positive image of that organisation and, therefore, trivialises the serious harm done by that organisation to the fundamental values of the European Union [...]. The contested mark is therefore likely to shock or offend not only the victims of that criminal organisation and their families, but also any person who, on EU territory, encounters that mark and has average sensitivity and tolerance thresholds.\textsuperscript{106}

On its merits, the Court thus inferred from normative values reflected in primary EU legislation that the relevant public could not help but find the mark scandalous. In the light of the values at stake, it was inconceivable for the Court that any EU citizen could accept the trademark registration. The way in which the Court dealt with counterarguments pointing to acceptance of references to the Mafia in the creative sector, confirms this impression. The GCEU remained unimpressed by the defence argument that the Mafia was often the subject of fictional accounts in literature and in cinema, and that the registration was not intended to shock or offend, but to allude to the ‘Godfather’ film series on which the concept of the themed restaurants using the figurative mark was based.\textsuperscript{107} The Court dismissed these arguments by stating that the existence of Mafia books and films in no way altered the perception of the harm done by that organization.\textsuperscript{108} It thus disregarded starting points for an inquiry requiring an assessment through the prism of consumer perception. Instead, the normative construct of a reasonable consumer with average sensitivity and tolerance thresholds allows judges and examiners to make assumptions about the perception of a contested sign in the light of societal values. Hence, the analysis need not remain limited to the question how flesh and blood consumers actually perceive the sign. Instead, what is decisive is the perception to be expected from the prototype of a reasonable consumer with average sensitivity and tolerance thresholds who knows and cares about overarching societal values. This normative colouring paves the way for a value-based evaluation of cultural signs with the status of important cultural heritage, an emblem of state sovereignty or a symbol of societal foundations and values (morality ground 1). It also offers the opportunity of a value-based assessment when the risk of artwork misappropriation or desecration (morality ground 2) is central to the analysis and the inquiry into consumer perception must address concerns about an undesirable redefinition and devaluation of cultural signs in the commercial domain of trade. The focus on the ‘concrete and current social context’ in Constantin Film\textsuperscript{109} does not preclude the inclusion of normative considerations. As the CJEU also pointed out in Constantin Film, the yardstick for assessing the concrete and current social context remains the ‘reasonable person with average thresholds of sensitivity and tolerance.’\textsuperscript{110} This reasonable person, however, is the ‘normative fiction’\textsuperscript{111} that offers room for the inclusion of normative considerations, such as sufficient sensitivity regarding the risk of blurring and suppressing the cultural meaning of affected signs through use in product marketing and devaluing them for the discourse in the artistic domain.\textsuperscript{112}

\textbf{V. Public order as a ground for refusal after Vigeland}

In Vigeland, the EFTA Court characterized public order considerations as objective criteria in the sense of not requiring an assessment through the prism of consumer perception.\textsuperscript{113} The assessment can thus focus directly on the objective to safeguard the public domain – regardless of whether consumers would find the registration of a cultural sign objectionable. As to relevant public order criteria, the Court provided the following central arguments for an outright exclusion of cultural signs from trademark protection:

- the registration as a trademark would pose a genuine and sufficiently serious threat to ‘certain fundamental values,’\textsuperscript{114} ‘a fundamental interest of society,’\textsuperscript{115} or ‘a

\begin{thebibliography}{111}
\bibitem{103} ibid para 35.
\bibitem{104} ibid para 36.
\bibitem{105} ibid para 45.
\bibitem{106} ibid para 47.
\bibitem{107} ibid paras 39-42.
\bibitem{108} ibid para 43.
\bibitem{109} Constantin Film v EUIPO (n 90) para 43.
\bibitem{110} ibid para 42.
\bibitem{111} Dinwoodie and Gangjee (n 98) 367.
\bibitem{112} cf Sentfleben (n 11) 293-299.
\bibitem{113} Vigeland (n 1) paras 84-86.
\bibitem{114} ibid para 96.
\bibitem{115} ibid para 95.
\end{thebibliography}
fundamental concern to the State and the whole of society (public order ground 1);

• the registration as a trademark would run counter to the need to safeguard the public domain which amounts to a genuine and serious threat if this need ‘itself, is considered a fundamental interest of society (public order ground 2).

As with the morality argument, these lines of reasoning have the potential to effectively achieve a categorical exclusion of cultural signs from trademark protection across the whole spectrum of goods and services.

1. Need to safeguard the public domain

Public order ground 2 – referring to the preservation of the public domain as a fundamental interest of society – directly addresses the cultural concerns at stake. It can be seen as a special case of the broader reference to fundamental interests, values and concerns of society in public order ground 1. On its merits, public order ground 2 deals with a specific scenario where a legal system recognizes the preservation and cultivation of the public domain as a fundamental societal interest in its own right – with the consequence that attempts to reappropriate cultural public domain material on the basis of trademark law, and attempts to prevent literary and artistic works from entering the public domain at the end of copyright protection, automatically give rise to a conflict with this element of ordre public.

As to theoretical groundwork capable of elevating the preservation and cultivation of the public domain to an independent element of public order, Séverine Dusollier explicitly recognized that, in order to immunize the public domain of cultural expressions from renewed commodification on the basis of trademark rights, ‘the registration of a trademark should be denied when it would lead to the reconstitution of a monopoly akin to that provided formerly by copyright and preventing use of the work in creative expression. The public interest or general interest could be taken into account as a ground for such a refusal.

To strengthen the arsenal of legal tools contributing to the preservation of the public domain, Dusollier proposes the qualification of the public domain as a res communis: a legal status that implies the prohibition of ‘a recapture of the work as a whole’ and guarantees ‘collective use of the work’ in the sense of an entitlement of each member of the public to use, modify, exploit, reproduce and create new works from public domain material. In the light of the Vigeland decision, a refusal of trademark protection because of a conflict with ordre public appears as a first step in the right direction from this perspective. Commenting on the above-described Mona Lisa decision of the German Federal Patent Court, Wilhelm Nordemann argued for a broad concept of public order, including the entirety of all legally binding laws that are currently in force. As copyright legislation belongs to this circle of binding laws, Nordemann argued that a trademark proprietor’s exclusive right to a work in the public domain had to end where the assertion of the trademark right would run counter to the free use of the public domain material concerned – irrespective of whether the use took place in the private sphere or in commerce. Based on this recognition of copyright’s public domain principle as an element of ordre public, Nordemann saw room for limiting the exclusive right of trademark owners in cases where the exercise of this right would impede use in the cultural domain.

Nordemann’s broad concept of public order is in line with the concept of ‘constitutional order’ in the German Constitution (Grundgesetz). Article 2(1) of the German Constitution guarantees a person’s general freedom of action. With regard to this fundamental freedom, the German Federal Constitutional Court held that the concept of ‘constitutional order’ was not confined to the norms of the Grundgesetz or fundamental constitutional principles. It encompassed every legal norm which formally and substantially complied with the Grundgesetz. A person’s freedom to act, in other words, falls within the constitutional guarantee of freedom as long as it keeps within the legal framework set by the entirety of legal norms satisfying the requirements of the Constitution. Applying this line of reasoning to the problem of copyright/trademark overlaps, it may be said that the registration of public domain material as a trademark, and the invocation of trademark rights to a cultural sign after the expiry of copyright protection, are illegitimate actions and in conflict with public order because they thwart the public domain principle (limited term of protection) in copyright law – a copyright rule that is formally and substantially in conformity with constitutional norms. This line of argument goes beyond Nordemann’s proposal of a mere limitation of trademark rights. It employs public order – understood broadly as a reference to all legally binding laws that comply with a country’s constitution – to arrive at an outright exclusion of cultural signs from trademark protection.

With regard to the evident counterargument that not only copyright but also trademark law has the status of legally binding and constitutional legislation, Friedrich Klinkert and Florian Schwab argued convincingly in the German debate about the Mona Lisa decision that, as an

116 ibid para 94.
117 ibid para 96.
119 ibid 167.
120 Mona Lisa (n 6) 1021-1023.
122 According to Nordemann (n 121) 391, this limitation would only have effect when the trademark owner seeks to prohibit use in relation to cultural productions, such as use on a book cover. For an approach seeking to establish the public domain principle in international intellectual property law, see Kaya Köklü and Sylvie Nerisson, ‘How Public Is the Public Domain? The Perpetual Protection of Inventions, Designs and Works by Trademarks’ in Hannes Ulbrich and others (eds), TRIPS plus 20 – From Trade Rules to Market Principles (Springer 2016) 361, 573-577.
123 art 2(1) Grundgesetz, available in English at <https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch_gg/> accessed 19 July 2021, reads as follows: ‘Every person shall have the right to free development of his personality under as he does not violate the rights of others or offend against the constitutional order or the moral law.’
absolute ground for refusal in trademark law, a conflict with public order provided room within the trademark system to take account of the public domain principle stemming from copyright law. Given this openness of the trademark system, the recognition of copyright’s public domain principle did not presuppose a higher rank of copyright legislation. Reference to copyright’s public domain principle in trademark law simply ensured the most harmonious interplay of two sets of laws with the same rank in the norm hierarchy. As use of a broad concept of public order leads to the most consistent calibration of the relationship between copyright and trademark legislation, this solution is better than an interpretation that would neglect the public domain principle when taking registration decisions in trademark law.

Hence, it may be posited that, as a legally binding and constitutional rule, copyright’s public domain principle—understood as the obligation to leave the public domain of cultural expressions intact as a basis for artistic discourse, and the obligation to release a literary and artistic work into the public domain in exchange for the enjoyment of exclusive rights during the term of copyright protection—falls within the scope of the concept of public order.

To this day, this argument remains underdeveloped in case law. In Medusa—a decision of the German Federal Supreme Court where the defendant referred to the ancient ‘Medusa Rondanini’ exhibited in the Glyptothek in Munich to demonstrate that he had not copied Versace’s Medusa logo—the Court tersely concluded that the public domain status of a sign did not prevent its use as a trademark. In infringement proceedings, the judge was bound by the office decision to grant trademark rights and could not rely on a sign’s public domain status to deny actionable trademark use. In the aforementioned Winston Churchill decision—concerning the registration of Churchill’s name and portrait as trademarks for cigars—the Dutch Supreme Court held that, in principle, the unauthorized communication of a portrait to the public may amount to an offence under Art. 35 of the Dutch Copyright Act (Anteurswet, as in force at the time of the decision) and conflict with public order for this reason.

Hence, the Court acknowledged that the infringement of a norm of copyright law (Arts. 19 to 21 of the Dutch Copyright Act set forth provisions regulating the protection of portraits) can give rise to a conflict with public order. In the concrete case, however, the requirements for the assumption of an offence were not fulfilled. Moreover, the facts of the case did not offer starting points for the Court to discuss whether an encroachment upon copyright’s public domain principle could come into conflict with public order even though the Dutch Copyright Act did not (and still does not) contain criminal provisions seeking to safeguard the quid pro quo underlying the grant of protection.

In U.S. case law, copyright’s quid pro quo—copyright protection is granted with the ultimate goal in mind that the protected work will finally enter the public domain and enrich the reservoir of cultural expressions that can serve as the basis of new productions—features more prominently. The U.S. Supreme Court emphasized in Dastar v Twentieth Century Fox that it was necessary to shield the quid pro quo underlying copyright law from the corrosive effect of protection regimes with potentially indefinite rights. In this context, the Court explicitly referred to the ‘carefully crafted bargain’ that regulated the interplay between the grant of copyright and freedom of use after copyright expiry. In its earlier decision in Graham v John Deere, the U.S. Supreme Court had already recognized the need to preserve the public domain of technical know-how in the context of patent law. According to the Court, Congress may not authorize the issuance of patents whose effects were to remove existing knowledge from the public domain, or restrict free access to materials already available. However, the Court clarified in Eldred v Ashcroft and Golan v Holder that this passage of its earlier decision was not intended to put a categorical ban on legislation that, as a result of an extension of the term of copyright protection, delayed the entry of existing works into the public domain, or restored copyright to works that had already entered the public domain for the purpose of achieving compliance with international minimum standards of copyright protection. The statement made in Graham v John Deere only addressed ‘an invention’s very eligibility for patent protection. In Golan v Holder, the U.S. Supreme Court finally concluded that, for the purpose of allowing the U.S. to adhere to the Berne Convention, expand markets for U.S. authors and invigorate protection against copyright piracy abroad, it was legitimate to remove foreign literary and artistic works from the U.S. public domain by reviving copyright protection.

With regard to the question of whether use of trademark law to re-appropriate public domain material may be qualified as incompatible with public order, this U.S. judicial practice yields mixed results. On the one hand, Eldred v Ashcroft and Golan v Holder seem to indicate that the Supreme Court may accept a delay in public domain enrichment and the removal of cultural signs from the public domain. On the other hand, it must not be overlooked that these decisions concerned the grant of an extended or revived term of copyright protection. Hence, the basic principle of a limited term of protection was not

125 Klinkert and Schwab (n 121) 1070-1071.
127 German Federal Supreme Court, 24 November 2011, Case 1 ZR 175/09, paras 19-20 – Medusa.
128 Winston Churchill (n 4) 24.
129 ibid 24-25.
130 For a rejection of the public order argument in the Benelux context, see Vinciane Vanovermeire, ‘Inschrijving als merk van een in het publiek domein gevalle werk’ in Alexandre Cruquenaure and Séverine Dusollier (eds), Le Cumul des droits intellectuels (Larcier 2009) 177, 180-183.
131 U.S. Supreme Court, 2 June 2003, Dastar v Twentieth Century Fox 539 U.S. 23 (2003), 33-34.
135 ibid 321.
136 ibid 324.
137 ibid 315-321 and 328-329.
138 cf Dusollier (n 118) 154-157.
at issue. Neither Eldred nor Golan addressed potential threats to public order that may arise from the grant of indefinitely renewable trademark rights. In respect of a trademark scenario with potentially perpetual protection, the concerns about an erosion of copyright’s ‘carefully crafted bargain’ which the Court expressed in Dastar v Twentieth Century Fox may finally prevail. Moreover, it is noteworthy that the inquiry into a conflict with public order is one of the questions that informs the decision on a sign’s eligibility for trademark protection. Even if the passage taken from Graham v John Deere was only meant to address ‘an invention’s very eligibility for patent protection’, this specific focus does not render it inapplicable in a trademark scenario. By contrast, it is the very purpose of the public order inquiry to clarify whether cultural signs can be deemed eligible for trademark protection. In combination with Dastar, the decision in Graham v John Deere may thus serve as a basis for holding that the grant of trademark rights whose effects are to remove cultural signs from the public domain conflicts with public order because they undermine copyright’s carefully crafted bargain. Therefore, U.S. case law offers starting points for the recognition of the preservation and cultivation of the public domain as elements of ordre public.

In the EU, similar reference points can be found in CJEU judicial practice. To preserve the public domain of technical knowledge, the Court held in Philips v Remington that it was a legitimate aim to prevent individuals from using the ‘registration of a mark in order to acquire or perpetuate exclusive rights relating to technical solutions’. In Hauck v Stokke, the Court recognized the more general objective to prevent the exclusive and permanent right which a trademark confers ‘from serving to extend indefinitely the life of other rights which the EU legislature has sought to make subject to limited periods.’ As copyright constitutes such a right with a limited term of protection, Hauck v Stokke can be seen as groundwork for a CJEU decision in which the Court invokes public order considerations to exclude cultural signs from trademark protection.

Admittedly, the CJEU explicitly recognized in Butterfly Music and Flos that the introduction of a harmonized 70-year term of copyright protection in the EU may have the effect of ‘protecting afresh works or subject matter which had entered the public domain.’ Like the U.S. Supreme Court in Eldred v Ashcroft and Golan v Holder, the CJEU thus accepted inroads into the public domain to achieve overarching policy goals, in particular EU harmonization and internal market objectives. This judicial practice, however, need not prevent the Court from generalizing the public domain rationale known from Philips v Remington and Hauck v Stokke. Like the U.S. decisions, Butterfly Music and Flos only concerned the extension and restoration of a limited term of copyright protection – without questioning the basic principle of a limited term as such. Trademark law, however, offers potentially perpetual protection. The grant of trademark rights would undermine copyright’s public domain principle altogether. With regard to this further fundamental assault on the public domain, the CJEU remains free to take measures on the basis of the concerns expressed in Philips v Remington and Hauck v Stokke, and qualify the acquisition of indefinitely renewable trademark rights as incompatible with public order.

Like U.S. case law, the judicial practice of the CJEU thus offers starting points for the inclusion of the preservation and cultivation of the public domain in the circle of public order considerations that can lead to a categorical exclusion of cultural signs from trademark protection. Against this background, the Vigeland decision of the EFTA Court can pave the way for a new approach. Highlighting the possibility of recognizing the need to safeguard the public domain as a fundamental interest of society, it may inspire decisions that invoke public order as a ground for refusing trademark rights to cultural signs. As explained, the Norwegian Board of Appeal for Industrial Property Rights has already given an example of this new approach. The Board qualified the attempt to register Vigeland’s sculptures as being contrary to public order because of the considerable cultural value of the artworks and the fundamental societal considerations underlying the temporal limitation of copyright protection. This final word in the Vigeland case demonstrates the effectiveness of public order ground 2 as a means to keep cultural signs outside the trademark system: the scenario where a legal system recognizes the preservation and cultivation of the public domain, in and of itself, as a fundamental interest of society.

139 U.S. Supreme Court, 2 June 2003, Dastar v Twentieth Century Fox 539 U.S. 21 (2003), 33-34.
142 cf the corresponding lines of reasoning in U.S. Supreme Court, 21 February 1966, Graham v John Deere Co. 338 U.S. 1, 5-6 (1966), and U.S. Supreme Court, 2 December 2003, Dastar v Twentieth Century Fox 539 U.S. 23 (2003), 33-34.
143 Philips v Remington (n 78) para 82.
145 cf Antoon A. Quaedvlieg, ‘Overlap/Relationships Between Copyright and Other Intellectual Property Rights’ in Estelle Derclaye (ed), Research Handbook on the Future of EU Copyright (Edward Elgar 2006) 479, 511-512, discussing the ‘public interest in ending protection’ (emphasis in the original text) and whether the CJEU could recognize ‘a reflex on trademark law.’
146 art 1(1) TD.
149 Butterfly Music (n 147) paras 9-10 and 24; Flos (n 147) para 42.
150 Butterfly Music (n 147) paras 18-20; Flos (n 147) paras 43 and 46.
151 Vigeland (n 1) para 96.
153 Vigeland (n 55) para 14.
2. Threat to fundamental values, interests or concerns

As explained above, however, public order ground 2 is a special case of the broader, more general public order ground 1: the scenario where a trademark registration poses a genuine and sufficiently serious threat to ‘certain fundamental values,’

154 Vigeland (n 1) para. 96.

155 ibid para. 95.

156 44 IIC 299.

157 For a more detailed discussion of this argument, see Senftleben (n 11), 290-291.


domain by acquiring trademark rights. Once trademark protection is granted, use of affected cultural expressions is no longer as free as it was before. The risk of potential trademark infringement is hanging above use made of affected cultural creations like the sword of Damocles. From the perspective of freedom of expression, the scenario in which an artwork belongs to the public domain and is entirely free, is clearly preferable over a situation where trademark rights are granted and artists are exposed to the risk of an infringement claim.

160 Given the human rights dimension and the fundamental importance of freedom of expression to society, it seems justified to apply public order as a ground for refusal to eliminate the risk of inroads into freedom of expression.

VI. Conclusion

On balance, the public order and morality arguments following from the Vigeland decision of the EFTA Court have a remarkable potential to support an outright exclusion of cultural heritage material, such as the Mona Lisa, the Night Watch, the Angry Boy and the Monolith, from trademark protection. Based on a normative understanding of the consumer type prototype used for the assessment of conflicts with morality, applicable sensitivity and tolerance thresholds can be aligned with cultural concerns to a large extent. As the GCEU decision in La Mafia Franchises indicates, morality arguments are particularly strong when fundamental values are associated with the cultural heritage sign at issue. Morality considerations

160 For a discussion of this chilling effect of trademark protection, see Senftleben (n 11) 200-205.

can certainly acquire particular importance in the case of cultural heritage signs that play a central role in a country’s cultural landscape and the discourse in the artistic domain. The concept of public order following from Vigeland has a remarkable potential to achieve a categorical exclusion of cultural heritage signs from trademark protection as well. Unlike a scrutiny in the light of morality standards, public order criteria are not inherently limited by the need to conduct the analysis through the prism of consumer perception. By contrast, trademark tribunals can directly invoke fundamental values, interests and concerns that militate against the grant of trademark protection. The described lines of argument – based on copyright’s public domain principle, the need to ensure undistorted competition and the constitutional guarantee of freedom of expression – broaden the ambit of operation of public order as a ground for refusal. The EFTA Court expressed the view that ‘registration of a sign as a trade mark may only be refused as contrary to public policy in accordance with [EU trademark legislation] in exceptional circumstances.’

Considering the societal values, interests and concerns discussed above, however, the threshold of exceptionality need not be high. Arguably, an exceptional situation that calls for caution arises whenever trademark protection is requested in respect of cultural heritage material in the public domain.

162 Vigeland (n 1) para 96.