

Apple's Liquid Glass Changed Everything

What it means for Flat UI

2026 Design Guide | By Shreyas K

The death of flat design, what Liquid Glass is really doing, and how to design for depth in 2026.

Apple's design language has undergone several significant evolutions. Understanding these shifts is crucial for navigating the current landscape.

The History of Apple Design

Apple's design philosophy can be broadly categorized into three distinct eras:

Era 1: Skeuomorphism (2007–2013)

This era was characterized by the *physical mimicry* of real-world objects in digital interfaces. Leather textures, wooden shelves, and other realistic elements were prevalent. This approach was heavily influenced by Steve Jobs' vision. Jony Ive, however, viewed it as somewhat *dishonest*.

Era 2: Flat Design (2013–2025)

iOS 7 marked a radical departure with its minimalist, flat design. The industry rapidly followed suit, leading to the rise of *Material Design* and *Fluent Design*. However, flat design introduced its own set of problems, including *reduced affordances* and a *loss of spatial vocabulary*.

Era 3: Liquid Glass (2025–present)

Announced at WWDC 2025 and first shipping with iOS 26, Liquid Glass features a *translucent material* that *reflects and refracts* its surroundings dynamically. This is not a simple return to skeuomorphism; it's a more nuanced approach.

"A delightful and elegant new software design language...The translucent material reflects and refracts its surroundings, while dynamically transforming to help bring greater focus to content." - Apple's official description

What Liquid Glass Is and Is Not

Liquid Glass IS:

- A material system (not just a style)
- Physically simulated
- Dynamic (changes with background)
- Cross-platform (iOS 26, iPadOS, macOS, watchOS, tvOS)

Liquid Glass IS NOT:

- A return to skeuomorphism
- Purely decorative
- Universally praised
- Free from critiques

NNGroup critique: legibility problems, ambiguity, implementation burden

5 Key Implications for Flat UI

Liquid Glass has profound implications for designers accustomed to flat UI principles.

1. **Depth Is Back** - Shadows and layering are legitimate again. Subtle, purposeful depth creates hierarchy.
2. **Background Matters More** - UI must be designed across all user wallpapers, not just brand colours.
3. **Legibility Under Glass Is a New Discipline** - Vibrancy layers, text shadow systems, dynamic contrast become critical.
4. **The Skeuomorphism Question Is Back** - Apply the meaning test: does this visual property communicate something functional?
5. **Accessibility Is More Complex** - Designers must account for dynamic contrast, motion sensitivity, and layering legibility for screen readers.

How to Adapt (Practical Guide)

Here's how designers can adapt to the Liquid Glass paradigm:

For iOS Designers:

- Audit typography on glass.
- Test with system wallpapers.
- Implement Reduce Motion fully.
- Use SwiftUI native glass APIs.
- Revisit icon design.

For Web/Non-Apple Designers:

- Depth is no longer anti-modern.
- Material thinking is valid.
- Flat ≠ accessible.
- Watch the adoption curve.

5 Questions Every Designer Should Ask

Consider these questions when implementing Liquid Glass:

- Does this depth cue carry meaning (functional or decorative)?
- Is this legible on every background?
- Does this work without motion?
- Is this hierarchy immediately legible?
- Does this add to or subtract from content?

The Bigger Shift: From Rules to Principles

Flat design gave us clear, rigid rules. Liquid Glass signals the return of principled judgment. This is ultimately good news, as skill, judgment, and design thinking become more valuable. Designers who understand *why* Apple made these choices will be better equipped for the next decade.

Designers who understand Liquid Glass, not just how to imitate its aesthetic, but *why* Apple made these choices and what design problems they are trying to solve, will be significantly better equipped for the next decade of UI design.

Summary

This document explored the evolution of Apple's design language from Skeuomorphism to Flat Design and finally to Liquid Glass. It highlighted the key aspects of Liquid Glass, contrasting what it is and what it isn't. The implications of this new design language for Flat UI were examined, along with a practical guide on how to adapt. The document concluded by emphasizing the shift from rigid rules to principled judgment in design.