

Fake status watches: a genuine bargain?

WATCHES / From IBL

search of vendors, he said.

Another federal court suit, filed April 1, charged that 43 retail firms in the Miami and Fort Lauderdale area were selling imitation Cartier goods.

Miami is a haven for the practice, industry officials said, because of its heavy tourist trade and proximity to South America.

"Hundreds of thousands of them are going out of the country," Umans said. "That is why South Florida is such a hot spot."

The increase in sales for the merchandise began in the 1970s, when consumer interest in name brands and their labels or symbols began to rise, said Neal Gordon, a Cartier staff attorney.

"We've had problems with just about every major country in the world," he said.

Companies that make status items like Cartier watches say replica makers threaten the existence of status products everywhere.

"It is a status item — the scarcity causes people to pay the price," Umans said. "If it's common, people might not be so inclined to buy the real thing."

Merchandise being copied include designer items by makers such as Calvin Klein, Bill Blass, Yves St. Laurent, Jordache, Valentino, Pierre Cardin and Izod.

And the trend now also includes drugs, automobile parts and chemicals — even Mickey Mouse memorabilia.

Several years ago, 70 companies plagued by imitators formed The International Anti-Counterfeiting Coalition. The group, which includes Cartier, Ralph Lauren, Calvin Klein and General Motors, has urged legislation that would make counterfeiting a criminal offense, carrying fines of up to \$250,000 and five years in prison. The practice is a misdemeanor in most states and violators often wind up in civil court.

Yet while court suits mount, one potential party is conspicuously absent — the consumer. Most of the buyers, consumer and industry officials agreed, know they are buying an imitation.

"A large number of people are happy with their purchases," said Michael Fischler, a prosecutor for the economic crimes unit of the

masses if they didn't get what they paid for."

Moreover, they know the sale of the merchandise is illegal.

"Most buyers don't want to admit they bought a counterfeit," said Arthur Hershbein, director of the Dade County Consumer Protection Agency.

But there are some consumers who are fooled. They usually find out they have bought an imitation when it breaks and Cartier refuses to repair the watch.

Recently, for example, a tourist brought her broken imitation into Cartier's Bal Harbour store to be repaired.

"She was furious when we told her it was a counterfeit," store manager Charles Pelegrin said. "She said she had bought it in good faith for \$350." When Pelegrin asked her where she bought the watch, she replied: "From a gypsy at a hotel pool in San Juan, Puerto Rico."

"I told her we never have wandering gypsies selling our merchandise," Pelegrin said.

There are a few tell-tale signs to distinguish the imitation from the authentic to avoid such a dilemma. Foremost is packaging.

"A real Cartier is packaged in a plush, fancy velvet box with a card giving it the lifetime guarantee," said Harley Tropin, Cartier's Florida attorney. The replicas often come in plastic or leatherette pouches decorated with Cartier's "crossed C's" logo.

There are other, more discreet markings on the watch itself, but Cartier officials are unwilling to describe them for fear of encouraging even better forgeries.

Ironically, the fakes now carry a certain chic of their own.

"There is a certain status to wearing a counterfeit now," said James L. Bikoff, president of the anti-counterfeiters coalition. "It is something to talk about. People wear them proudly at parties."