



Luxury or Lie? A Guide to Identifying Replica Watches

If you speak to any one of the valuers at Doerr Dallas, you will know that one of our biggest fears is having to confront a client when we believe that an item 'is not right' whether that be a diamond, a Picasso, a Birkin, or in some circumstances – a watch.

Without any doubt it has always been a case of addressing the issue of whether or not they know its fake, or if in the worst circumstances, they have purchased it thinking it was genuine.

The market for fake watches, or as some kind people refer to them, 'replica' watches is booming, the desire to own a luxury timepiece as a status symbol is possibly the highest it's ever been and with technology advancing at such a high rate, the availability of these items is incredible.



So, where do these items come from? 30 years ago, when I first became interested in watches, fakes were something you saw on a towel in Puerto Banus, terrible quality and instantly recognisable from the real thing from about 200 metres, and generally TAG Heuer watches – possibly because they generally all had quartz movements and lots of plastic in the 90s, so a lot easier then dealing with an automatic movement.

Today, the Chinese replica industry is huge, probably dealing with 90% of all the replicas that you see available – they have the technology, the skill set, and the lapse enforcement on prosecuting the factories that make the watches – despite what many people may think about the law in China, they are still illegal, they just don't enforce the law.

Other places such as Turkey seem to be taking a lot of heat recently as well, possibly because of the tourist industry and many well-made replicas are seen from this area.

Vietnam, is the last place that you would expect

to see such a commercial symbol come from, but in the last 5 years there has been a huge influx of exceptionally good replica dials, cases, and hands for vintage watches with even some of the best experts in the world being fooled.

Who buys fake watches?

This is a question that I get asked quite a lot, and it couldn't be more of a polarising answer.

Of course, there are people that aspire to own a Rolex for example and will never be able to justify the thousands of pounds that it costs to own one so this might be as close as it gets, if they want the style or the kudos then perhaps this is the only option?

There are also the collectors....People are fascinated by horology and the believe it or not some people purposely collect replica watches in order to see just how close they are to the real thing – they modify and tinker and enjoy the hobby.

Finally, there are the people that purchase a replica after buying the real thing, they wear the fake in the knowledge that they own the real thing, so perhaps it gives them some authority to wear a dodgy copy in public, I won't pass comment on that however!



So it's a fake, if you know that – what's the problem?

Well, the problem first of all is that replica and counterfeit goods are illegal, by purchasing them you are breaking the law, and whilst you may not think that it harms anyone – there are many

problems associated with counterfeit items and organised crime, sweatshops, and other nasty things that owning watches shouldn't be related to – but it doesn't stop people from buying them.

So what are the tell tale signs?

In the last 20 years, the market for replicas has increased so much that the pieces that you see now are nothing like the terrible forgeries of old, in some circumstances you cannot tell without disassembling the watches, and looking at all the component parts, but as a rough guide, here are a few things that the forgers still get wrong on a regular basis, and for this example we will use probably the most counterfeited watch in the world – the Rolex Submariner.

Boxes and paperwork

It seems a strange one to start on, but this is still where a lot of replicas fall down within the first 30 seconds, the forgers still struggle to get this right – often the boxes are either the wrong colour or the wrong proportions, or there may be a certain smell to the glue that's used and often its done badly – something that would never leave a Swiss factory. The paperwork is often not stamped or dated by a retailer, of it is, it's usually by a Chinese chain of jewellers or similar – if these things don't add up just walk away. Another thing in recent times, especially with Rolex cards is the colour and the font of the logo, it can be very close, but just not the right texture – admittedly, it's difficult to tell if you haven't got a genuine article to compare it to but it should be quite obvious.

The Crystal

For those of you that don't know, the crystal is the piece of glass that covers the dial, protecting it, this can be made of plastic, glass, sapphire, with or without coatings – make sure you know what type the specific watch should have and if it's different, start asking questions.



The Cyclops lens is a magnifier that you will see on many Rolex watches, and this is regularly incorrect in terms of

magnification and alignment, it should always be 2.5x magnified, and whilst we are talking about the date wheel – be sure to check that every number is the correct font as well!

In recent years Rolex have started etching a coronet to the six o'clock position to their watches as an anti-counterfeit measure – but of course, this has now been copied. Firstly, if you can see it without a loupe of magnifying glass, its fake. Now, when looking under magnification it should almost appear to be floating, this is creating by Rolex engraving it at different heights throughout the cipher, and whilst the forgers are almost there, it's still not quite perfect and is a give-away.

The Bevel

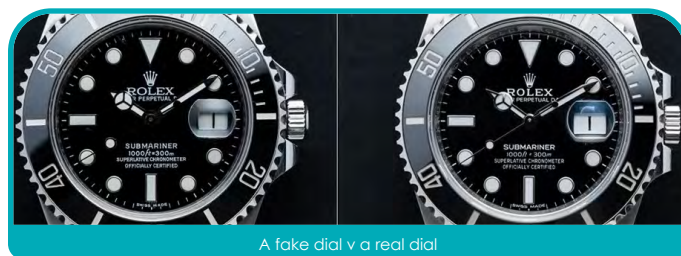
No, not the bezel, the bevel.

The inner ring surrounding the dial has always been a difficult thing for the forgers to get right, either the depth or the angle – it has never quite worked, but in recent years Rolex having introduced an engraving to the interior of the bevel and unless the font and spacing is totally 100% spot on, then – you guessed it, its fake.



The Dial

Possibly the biggest give away on the Rolex Submariner is the dial, so many things can be ascertained by this and with so many aftermarket dials it's an absolute minefield, so obvious things



A fake dial v a real dial

include the setting of the markers – are they straight? Is there any lume on the surrounds? Are they the right shape? All of these things will be obvious from looking under a loupe, but one of the most bizarre ones is actually the presence of dust or dirt. Remember these items are made in sweatshops, where a lab coat and gloves may not have even been heard of.



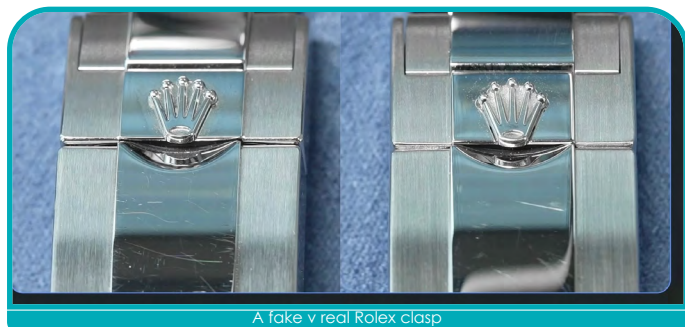
A fake dial v a real dial

The Case

The key to fishing out a dodgy case is to look at the proportions first, does it look too thick? This is usually a situation with Rolex where the forgers will use the same case for a GMT, Submariner, Explorer, Yachtmaster and others and merely change their markings and bezel. The other major giveaway is material markings – The forgers don't have the funds to change all the cases for each model of watch so there are specific fakes for the yellow gold, rose gold, white gold and stainless steel, so they will use the same case for each...now just in the past few weeks I have seen a very good fake, but with 750 markings (meaning 18ct Gold) on a stainless steel watch – this again means 100% that you are dealing with a replica.

The Bracelet

One of my favourite go to things before looking at anything else in a suspected watch is the bracelet – if this is wrong it is usually a very good indicator, not always but 90% of the time. Look at the screws that hold it together, do they have a chamfered edge? Do they turn easily, are they all the same? Look at the end links where they meet the case, do they slot in perfectly?



A fake v real Rolex clasp

The Movement

This used to be the point where all arguments were settled, as soon as you took the case back off (which also contains serial numbers btw) you could see whether the movement was right or not,



A genuine Rolex movement

usually because it was marked, but in 2024 and the advent of 3D printing, scanning and manufacture, we now see what are known as clone movements in the back of these watches and basically they are exactly the same but for a few details, and the details are what makes it genuine – look at the brushing, what's the quality like? Look at the wording, does it look off or not clear? Look at the jewels and the retainers, do they look right? And finally, look at the screws – again a brilliant giveaway.



A fake Rolex movement

And finally....

Always buy the seller, not the watch. If you really are in doubt about a watch, walk away – a good seller will understand your questions and know that he can sell it another day, some passing off a fake will not.

Whilst a person working in a jewellery chain or a large watch retailer may have a lot of knowledge about certain things and usually a lot of bravado, they will not and should not tell you a watch is fake or genuine upon merely a first glance - When in doubt always have a watch appraised by a professional valuer/authenticator.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Alastair Meiklejon is a highly experienced auctioneer and valuer, specialising in rare watches and luxury collectibles. A Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, he has worked with some of the world's finest collections.

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