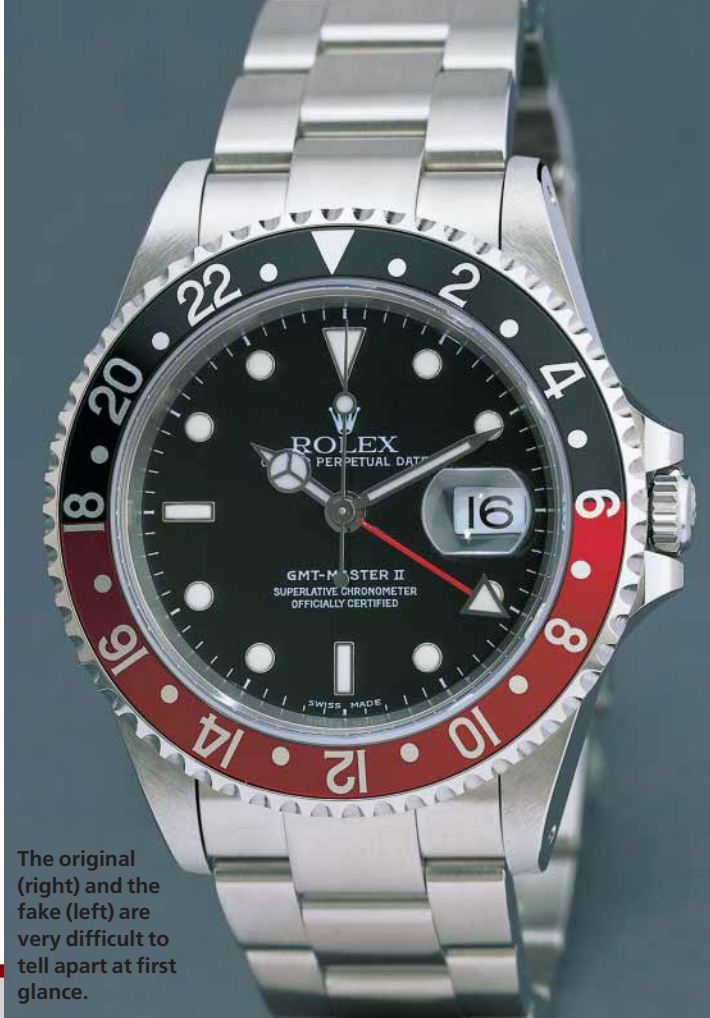
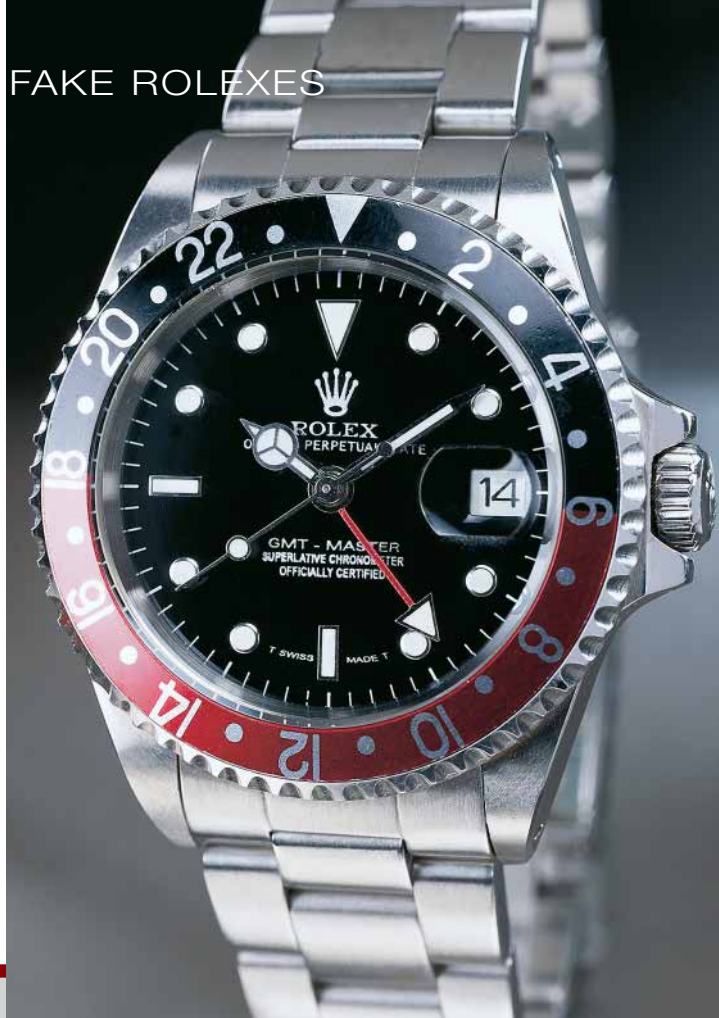


FAKE ROLEXES



The original (right) and the fake (left) are very difficult to tell apart at first glance.

# The Counterfeit Trail

Counterfeit wristwatches are a growth market that has exploded during the past few years, partly because of the Internet. Counterfeiters are continually improving their techniques, making the fakes progressively more difficult to distinguish from the authentic ones. *WatchTime* scrutinized three counterfeit Rolexes to show our readers how to detect imitations.

BY RÜDIGER BÜCHER

**N**ews item number one: in March 2003, inspectors at Tegel Airport in Berlin, Germany confiscated an air-freight load containing a total of 8,128 counterfeit wristwatches and 1,500 other counterfeit items. Of the more than 8,000 fake watches, 1,083 were imitation Rolexes.

News item number two: in October 2002 alone customs officials in Vienna, Austria confiscated more than 11,000 counterfeit sport and luxury watches.

News item number three: A customs official at Zurich Airport, announced on Swiss television in October 2003 that approximately 15,000

counterfeit watches were seized at Zurich Airport in the year 2002. A total of 30,000 counterfeits are stockpiled at the airport.

These three examples show that the counterfeiting of luxury wristwatches has become a gigantic and rapidly growing business. The days are over when you could go on a holiday trip to Bangkok, Thailand or elsewhere, buy a cheap Rolex knock-off with a Chinese quartz movement and a glued-on seconds-hand, return home, show it around to your friends, gradually lose interest in the fake, and finally leave it to gather dust in a drawer.

However, the quality of counterfeit watches is becoming progressive-



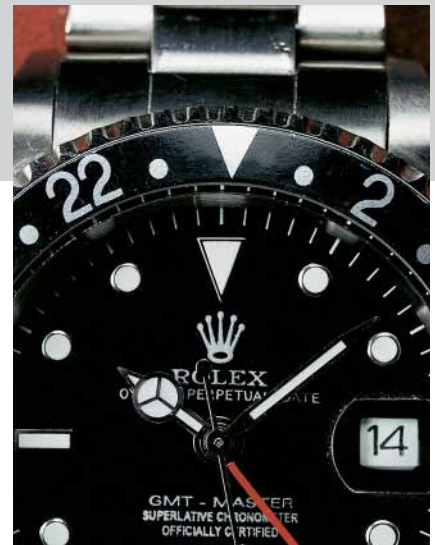
Gotcha! The word “superlative” is poorly printed on the dial of the fake (left).



Typically fake: the hole (left) for the crosspiece hasn't been drilled cleanly.



Real and fake are clearly distinguishable here: the green disks on the back are clearly different.



Fake! The triangle on the bezel that indicates the 24th hour doesn't point exactly to the corresponding “12” stroke on the dial.



Miyota movement, plastic movement-holder ring, rust around the rim: this \$50 fake is not a pretty sight.

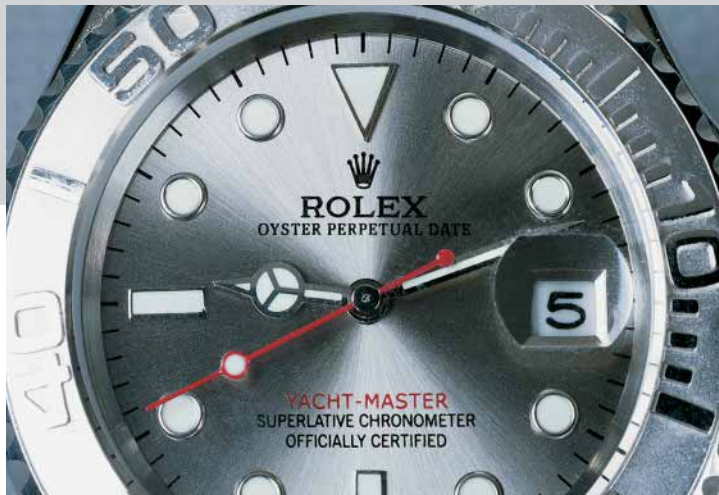
ly better – so good, in fact, that some of the fakes now pose a serious threat to gullible consumers who pay full retail price for junk items. Rolex lovers are especially at risk, as the brand continues to attract the most attention from counterfeiters, and even specialists may need to take a second or third look at the watch before ruling it a fraud.

Not so very long ago, a reliable “tell” was that if the seconds-hand on the alleged Rolex jumped along its orbit in full-second increments (a dead giveaway of a quartz movement), then the timepiece was a fake. Nowadays, however, counterfeits are available in every conceivable degree of verisimilitude. There are Internet pages where you can order your

“Rolex” with a Chinese, Japanese, or Swiss movement and where you can specify whether you want your fake powered by a quartz or mechanical movement!

Some fakes are so good that only a side-by-side comparison with the real McCoy will bring the forgery to light. We visited master watchmaker and Rolex concessionaire Peter Hoffmann at his atelier in Ulm, Germany, where we participated in a comparative test to explore the differences between genuine and imitation Rolex wristwatches.

Exhibit A: a counterfeit Yachtmaster, purchased by a collector for \$50 at a flea market a few years ago. This timepiece was obviously in-



Yachtmaster: the fake's dial (left) is obviously darker.



Clearly different: you can search the fake's crown for the wide-diameter tube and insulating ring, but you won't find them.



tended to imitate an actual Rolex model. The fake's bezel has a series of alto-relievo numerals and strokes, just like the real deal. The counterfeit's crystal has a built-in magnifying lens above the date display. The dial's design and the brand's logo all look quite genuine at first glance. Even the seconds-hand progresses along its orbit in small increments, which suggests that the watch's case encloses a mechanical movement. The only clue to the actual identity of the counterfeit lay in the shade of gray metal used for the dial. It was obviously darker than the gray hue on a genuine Yachtmaster dial. Some musicians have perfect pitch, but very few of us, even counterfeiters, have a "perfect eye" when it comes to subtle differences in color – unless the fake is scrutinized right alongside a genuine Yachtmaster. One detail, however, instantly made us suspicious: the triangular arrowhead on the rickety, much too easily rotating bezel couldn't be positioned perfectly opposite the index that marks

## THE GROWTH MARKET FOR COUNTERFEIT PRODUCTS

According to the OECD, counterfeit goods comprised 3% of total world trade at the beginning of the 1990s. By the end of the decade, fakes accounted for 9% of the total global figure. The World Economic Forum estimates that the total value of counterfeit merchandise traded in the year 2000 amounted to more than \$450 billion.

European Union customs officials seized approximately 100 million counterfeit products, most of them manufactured in the Far East and Eastern Europe. This figure compares with ten million counterfeits confiscated in 1998. Thailand leads all other nations as the most frequent source of fakes. Not only wristwatches are subject to forgeries. Brand-name textiles from Prada and Gucci to Boss and Adidas, as well as brand-name cigarettes, are frequently counterfeited items. Most recently, phony automobile parts and medications have appeared as well.

In Europe alone, the consequences of product piracy lead to the annual loss of roughly 200,000 jobs.



The clasp: the embossing on the fake's clasp (left) is in lower relief than the high-relief emblem on the real Yachtmaster's clasp.



Side view: laymen would find it difficult to recognize the differences between the real McCoy (right) and the imposter (left).



Inside the counterfeit: a Japanese Miyota self-winding movement.

Orthographic incompetence: the spelling of the words stamped into the back is atrocious.



the "12 o'clock" position on the dial. This is such an obvious flaw that even a layman ought to be able to recognize that this watch is an imposter. The next test is a tactile one. Hoffmann says, "One can often recognize a fake Rolex with one's eyes closed. A fake's case and bracelet often have sharper edges than a genuine Rolex." This also held true for the forgery that we examined. After we unscrewed its crown, the fakery was impossible to overlook. It was a sad sight indeed: an anemically slim and wobbly tube without an insulating ring came to light, thus betraying the shameful identity imposter. There were several other differences between the real and the fake: the hands on the fake are slimmer; the zigzag marks on its screw-in back are rounder; the crosspieces between its bracelet and lugs are puny; and the typeface used to spell out the word "Rolex" on its dial is different than the one used on genuine Rolexes.

When we opened the case and took a look inside, we felt sad at first, but had to chuckle when, rather than finding the familiar Rolex Caliber 3135, there was a cheap Japanese Miyota movement, entirely unembellished and wholly without engravings, held in place by a cheap plastic movement-holder ring. Our chuckles became genuine laughter when we read the engraving on the inner surface of the case's back. Spelled out in capital letters across the shiny steel disk was a peculiar combination of words and nonsense letters: "MONARCH POLFY SA GELENA SHITINERAND." Even before we read the first syllable of the last word, it was already obvious to us that what we were holding in our hands was best handled with forceps. But which regent did the counterfeiters have in mind when they inscribed the word "monarch"? And what in the world is a "POLFY"? After considering these five capital letters for a rather long time, we realized that adding a little straight line to the right



**Daytona:** Quite a deceptive imitation at first glance, but...

spot on each letter would transform "POLFY" into "ROLEX." The counterfeiters, who most likely hail from East Asia, seem to have encountered some problems with the Latin alphabet. In fact, the entire engraving was intended to imitate the one inscribed on the inside back cover of a genuine Rolex: "MONTRES ROLEX SA GENEVA SWITZERLAND."

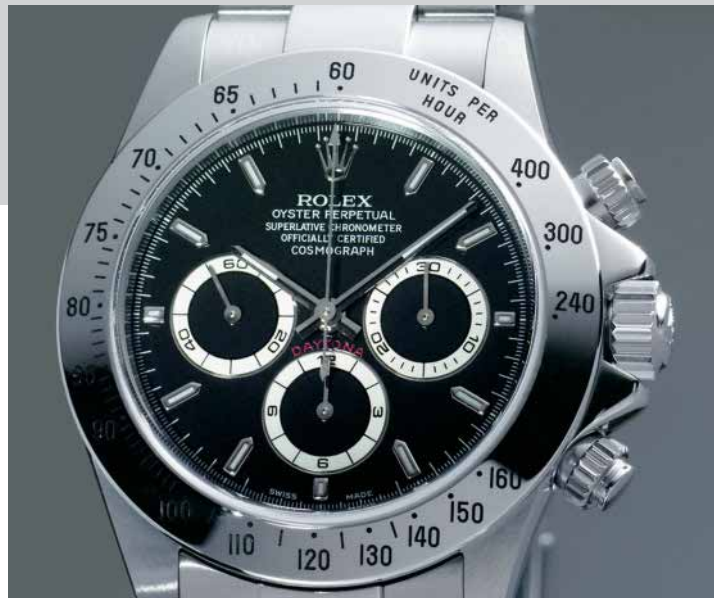
The next example, a counterfeit GMT Master purchased during a vacation in Spain for the equivalent of about \$40, likewise encased a Miyota movement. The quality of this counterfeit revealed similar strong and weak points. Anyone who has even a vague idea of what a genuine Rolex ought to look like should be able to recognize the poor quality of the lettering printed on the dial and the incorrect position of the red hand that's supposed to indicate the hour in a second time zone. The fake's bezel rotates in only one direction, a feature that would have been more suitable on a counterfeit Submariner. Clumsily drilled holes to accommodate the bracelet's crosspieces and a ridiculously primitive green sticker pasted onto the back of the case likewise betray this fake's ignoble origins.

A more interesting forgery, a counterfeit Daytona, was bought in San Marino by a collector who forked over nearly \$500 for the fake. Why was the watch so expensive? Because rather than encasing a cheap Japanese movement, its interior contained an unembellished Valjoux 7750 rebuilt to support the classic tri-compax display (three symmetrically arranged subdials) of the Daytona. The rebuilding was probably

## LITERATURE:

**John E. Brozek**, *The Rolex Report*, Revised & Expanded 4th Edition. An Unauthorized Reference Book for the Rolex Enthusiast. With a foreword by Jeffrey P. Hess. InfoQuest Publishing, Saint Petersburg, Florida, U.S.A., 1999-2002 (ISBN 0-9723133-0-3).

**Michele Birmelen**: *Gefälschte Armbanduhren – schnell erkannt* [Counterfeit Wristwatches, Quickly Recognized], Lavori publishers, D-79110 Freiburg i. Br., 2003, (ISBN 3-935737-45-9).



done at Jaquet SA in La Chaux-de-Fonds, a firm which has specialized for a number of years in the task of altering movements in this manner, then selling the tweaked calibers to various Swiss and German watch manufacturers. How did one of these modified calibers find its way into a deliberate counterfeit? That's a good question, and one that is currently occupying the minds of many specialists and a number of Swiss criminal investigators.

Whatever else it may be, this tested timekeeper exemplifies a new generation of counterfeits, some of which are equipped with high-quality components and sold at high enough prices that it's not immediately obvious that the proffered merchandise is counterfeit. This wristwatch was built to deceive its purchaser, so the intention was obviously fraudulent. Says Hoffman, "I've seen tears form in people's eyes when I tell them the bad news that their 'Rolex' is a fake. They bought it in good faith." But they surely didn't buy it from a reputable watch retailer. Purchasers who want to protect themselves against the possibility of fraud would be wise to think carefully about where they buy their watches. Anyone who knowingly buys a counterfeit "just for the fun of it" should be aware of the deed that he or she is actually committing.



...the counterfeiters left a hair on the dial!



Inside the imitation Daytona: a Valjoux 7750, rebuilt to support a tri-compax display.