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Faking It: A Legacy of Knock-Off Fashion

March 1, 2010 11:00 AM by Joanne Chen

Is nothing sacred? We all know about knockoff designer purses, but you'd think that faking famous brands of candy, cough syrup, and pantyliners would be taking it too far. Yet that's just the beginning, judging from the dizzying 3,500-plus examples of phony merchandise on display at the Museum of Counterfeit Goods in Bangkok.

The recently expanded museum, which opened in 1989, is a testament to modern times. Thanks to a steep rise in bargain-hunting amid the global recession, the international trade in counterfeit goods is now worth an estimated \$1 trillion—more than twice the value of the drug trade. "People are more willing to buy cut-price fakes now, and companies have fewer funds with which to fight the counterfeiters," says French-born Clemence Gautier, 29, an intellectual-property specialist at Thai law firm Tilleke & Gibbins, which runs the museum and stocks it mostly with spoils seized during police raids.

Today's designer fakes are so good, says Gautier, that brand-obsessed Japanese women—who'd usually rather leap from a speeding bullet train than buy knockoffs—are snapping up bogus designer handbags to use on rainy days "so they can keep the genuine articles safe and dry at home."

Part of the museum's raison d'être is to highlight the broader dangers of the counterfeit industry: "People who buy fake goods don't realize that they're helping to perpetuate evils like child labor," says Gautier. "Plus, the trade is run by criminal gangs who use the profits to fund sex trafficking, drugs, and even terrorism." The message is clear: Bargain-hunter, beware.

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