



U.S. Customs official dumps counterfeit Cartier watches on pavement for steamrolling

The Big Crunch

It looked like a send-up of a Timex-watch commercial. In the parking lot of the U.S. federal building in West Los Angeles, an eight-ton steamroller moved back and forth over a pavement strewn with more than 4,000 wristwatches. Yet, when the torture stopped, not a watch was ticking.

Thus went Operation Big Crunch, endorsed by none other than the august French jewelry firm of Cartier. The stunt was aimed at discouraging the lucrative rip-off of luxury goods through counterfeiting. The crushed timepieces, which will go on display in Cartier stores around the world, were phony renditions of the company's famous \$650 Tank watch. They were nabbed en route from Zurich to Tijuana by alert U.S. Customs inspectors. Once in Mexico, the fakes could have been sold for \$300 to \$400 each.

In the past, counterfeit goods were returned by the Customs Service to the exporter. But after appeals from Cartier and some 50 other manufacturers that have banded together in the International Anti-Counterfeiting Coalition, the Los Angeles officials became the first in the U.S. to take advantage of a 1978 law enabling the Customs Service to confiscate counterfeit property and destroy it.

The squashed shipment of watches represents no more than a fraction of the counterfeit goods that move in international trade every day. Counterfeits are a problem for such other well-known brand-name products as Levi Strauss blue jeans, Puma running shoes, and Johnnie Walker Scotch whisky. Cartier's hope is that the steamroller tactics will help encourage governments around the world to take whatever steps are necessary to crush the counterfeiters.