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Eric Ong is an independent watch restorer, appraiser and founder of Bonfield Pte Ltd. We had a chat with him during A Journey Through Time VIII held at Starhill Gallery

Tell me exactly what it is you do?

“People call me out to get their timepieces authenticated because it is so easy to get replicas today. So they need someone like me to check whether it is a replica or a mix-match. Also as enthusiast’s collections grow, they will call me to value the pieces and get a replacement value for insurance purposes. I look at every detail of the watch. Even right down to the jewels and diamonds. I check whether every element and stone of the watch is originally from the manufacturer.”

Is there a difference between a replica and “mix-and-match”?

“Yes. What I mean when I say “mix-and-match” is that not all the parts of the watch is from the same era or manufacturer, for example perhaps a Rolex from the 70’s needed a new strap and so the original was replaced. When I authenticate the watch I will see that something is different and certain parts don’t come from the same era, which affects the value of the watch quite considerably.”

Does it take you a while to spot a replica?

“Nowadays it is quite tough to see whether a watch is authentic. You won’t see any imperfections at first glance, only after further scrutinising.”

Any tips for careful watch buyers?

“It is really not an easy task, and you need to know what to look out for, so I would definitely advise buyers to seek professional help before making any big commitments. One of the biggest ways buyers are caught is in the gold karat, where they get a lower karat or plated in the karat claimed by the seller.”

Do you think the counterfeit market has affected the watch industry?

“In my opinion, not really. In fact, I think sometimes it helps them. Many of these brands have been around for a very long time and are so well-known. If they weren’t such a popular brand and didn’t do so well then the counterfeiters wouldn’t want to copy them, and counterfeiters are market driven. So in a way it is a compliment to the watch brands.”