

Are You Getting Tiffany's or Tinsel on eBay?

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Experts Say Think Before You Click When Buying Jewelry Online

Sue Paul has simple tastes, but she does like to shop. And like 80 million other Americans, she just loves eBay.

Paul said she generally makes low-cost purchases. "I stick with the small stuff, with a dish here or a cup there," she said.

Then Paul decided to try something different. Her daughter loved a [Tiffany bracelet](#) she had bought her over the summer, and Paul began looking for a [sterling silver necklace](#) to match it. Sure enough, eBay had one — at least that's what the ad said.

EBay is the nation's biggest online auction site. Like regular auctions, whoever is willing to pay the highest price online when the auction closes, gets to buy the item.

Poised to get her daughter a [Tiffany necklace](#), the low price made Paul even more excited to make the purchase. "It was like a third of what it was going for at the time, and I could knock her socks off," she said.

When the necklace came in the mail, her daughter's socks may have come off, but they would soon be back on. Paul said the necklace was slightly off-color, and she said the clasps were not as solid as you'd expect from the renowned high-end jeweler. Even the famous blue Tiffany pouch had a cheap feeling to it, she said.

We then brought her necklace to Tiffany's expert, who confirmed it was a fake. And it's not the only one. In fact, so many eBay sellers are pushing counterfeit [Tiffany jewelry](#), that Tiffany is now suing eBay. The lawsuit came after the retailer's researchers found that almost three-fourths of all [Tiffany jewelry](#) sold on the eBay are knockoffs

"20/20" bought 16 new pieces from five different sellers (including the one who sold Paul her necklace) who advertised the items as Tiffany jewelry on eBay.

When we brought our purchases to Tiffany's experts, they told us only one of the items was authentic.

Of course you can legitimately sell used Tiffany on eBay, but jewelry expert Antoinette Matlins says that's it. You're not going to find new Tiffany items on the site, because there's no Tiffany discount retailer out there.

"The only people who can sell Tiffany jewelry is Tiffany," Matlins said.

Since Tiffany says Paul's bracelet was fake, we went to Indiana to try to track down Kevin Morris, the man who sold it to her under the Southbeachbodyjewelry name. Morris had a For Sale sign up on his house, and did not answer his door. He also wouldn't respond to our calls and letters, requesting an interview.

Educate Yourself Before Buying Online

Master Gemologist Appraiser Neil Cohen said he is wary of buying pricey jewelry online. "You can't tell the workmanship or anything when you're looking at a photograph," he said.

But we did just that for our "20/20" investigation, and Cohen helped us look at 24 other pieces of jewelry we bought on eBay. These pieces weren't advertised as Tiffany products, but all of them, according to Cohen, had greatly exaggerated descriptions and phony "appraised" or "retail" values.

One seller advertised a pearl necklace as being worth more than \$13,000, describing it as having excellent luster, and a thick pearl coating. Cohen said the necklace should sell for no more than \$425, and is low- to medium-luster, with only the thinnest coating.

A 4-carat sapphire ring valued on eBay for \$1,400 was actually just over 2.5 carats and worth only \$275, according to Cohen.

And a half carat diamond ring an eBay seller valued at \$990 was actually a quarter carat with a value of \$200, Cohen said.

"Everything was poor. As a matter of fact, we sometimes in slang refer to them as frozen spit," Cohen said of the eBay jewelry.

Jewelry expert Antoinette Matlins, author of "Jewelry and Gems at Auction," agreed.

Matlins said the clarity of the gems was "really below the lowest grade." She said, "They should have been ground up for sandpaper."

eBay told us that it is just the marketplace, and with 60 million items being sold at any given time, it cannot police everything. Still, the company's fraud team regularly busts bad users and suspends sellers, although it won't say how many.

Of course there are plenty of good eBay jewelry sellers. If you do shop on eBay for jewelry, learn about the kind of jewelry you're buying — so you'll know what it's really worth.

Here are some tips:

- Ignore "retail" or "appraised" values, especially if they're high.
- Check the seller's refund policy, and make sure it allows you to return the piece if you're unhappy

- Don't assume a positive rating means the seller is honest — the ones who ripped us off all had approval ratings of at least 97 percent.
- Our experts say if you must buy jewelry online, get an independent appraisal.
- If it's not what you ordered, you can get your money back more easily if you paid with a credit card or Paypal, eBay's own credit card payment program. (That's how Sue Paul got her refund, after the seller turned her down.)
- EBay also offers an escrow program, which holds your payment until you've checked the jewelry out.

Source:eBay