

Police raid store suspected of selling counterfeit items

Merchandise seized, but no arrests made at accessories shop inside Eastland Mall

By **Ted Hart**
WBNS-10TV

Columbus police raided a store at Eastland Mall yesterday and seized 18 boxes of merchandise.

Investigators said Mufasa's, a mall tenant for about a year, has been selling purses, belts and other accessories bearing counterfeit labels from designers such as Gucci, Prada and Louis Vuitton.

Armed with a search warrant, detectives arrived at the store at 11 a.m., cordoned off the entrance and then moved from rack to rack, filling boxes with merchandise.

No one was arrested yesterday. Sgt. Brent Mull, spokesman for the Columbus Police Division, said the investigation is continuing.

Mull said authorities hoped the raid would serve as a warning to landlords who might be leasing space to unscrupulous retailers.

"They need to be on guard,"



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he said.

Eastland's manager, Richard Hunt, declined to discuss the matter.

"It's a police investigation," he said. "We have nothing more to say about it."

A woman who answered the phone at Mufasa's last night identified the store's owner as Malick Dialo, of Columbus. He could not be reached for comment.

The woman, who described herself as a clerk, said the store would be closed at least temporarily. The raid, she said, left the store with little to sell.

When a crew from WBNS-TV (Channel 10) visited Mufasa's several weeks ago, a producer bought a purse bearing a Coach tag and a label indicating it was made in the United States. Inside, however, another label said the handbag was manufactured in China.

At the time, a clerk said the store was able to offer a deeply discounted price — \$45.99 instead of \$400 or more — because the manufacturer had dis-

continued the line.

"This is aftermarket," the clerk said. "After they cannot sell it anymore, they just sell it cheaper, and we get it from them."

Mull said undercover officers subsequently bought four supposed designer purses from the store, then took them to an independent expert to determine their authenticity. All of the handbags, he said, turned out to be counterfeit.

Buying knockoff handbags isn't a crime, but selling them is. Under Ohio law, trademark counterfeiting is a fourth-degree felony punishable by up to 18 months in prison and a \$5,000 fine.

Joseph Dreitler, a Columbus lawyer who specializes in trademark law, does occasional work for designer labels. He said selling counterfeit items is nothing short of "thievery."

Dreitler said consumers sometimes don't see any harm in buying counterfeit merchandise. But they should, he said.

"It's taking away money from the U.S. economy — money that U.S. workers and the people who are shareholders should be getting — and giving it to crooks."

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