The Museum at FIT presents *Faking It: Originals, Copies, and Counterfeits*, an exhibition that explores various levels of authenticity in fashion, ranging from original designer garments and accessories to licensed copies and diffusion lines to counterfeits. *Faking It* features approximately 100 objects, spanning more than 150 years, from the museum’s permanent collection, many of which have never been on display.

What is considered “authentic” in fashion is a much-debated topic. Throughout history, couture copies, diffusion lines, and licensing agreements have blurred the line between genuine and imitation. Moreover, the exponential growth and sophistication of the counterfeit industry has made it increasingly difficult to identify an inauthentic item. *Faking It* sheds light on the complexities surrounding these issues.

The exhibition opens with two identical suits from 1966—an original by Gabrielle “Coco” Chanel and a licensed copy—alongside a video featuring side-by-side comparisons of the suits, revealing that while their fabrics are the same, some construction elements differ. *Faking It* then continues chronologically, beginning with a 1903 purple velvet evening dress by Charles Frederick Worth, accompanied by a detail photo of his signed label, which authenticated his creations. Worth’s was essentially the first “designer label” in history, and it became an appealing target for forgers.

By 1914, over 2 million counterfeit couture labels had been sewn into garments, and couturiers implemented various initiatives to stop knockoffs. Madeleine Vionnet, for example, marked her label with her thumbprint in order to authenticate each creation. Unfortunately, this did not prevent copyists, as can be seen in an unauthorized copy of her “Little Horses” dress from 1924 that is featured in the exhibition. In the ongoing effort to battle unauthorized copying during the 1930s, the Fashion Originators’ Guild of America registered fashion designers’ work. An example of a black fringe evening dress with the registered label and sketch is on display.
From its inception in 1868, the Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture struggled with maintaining the exclusivity of haute couture, while simultaneously promoting it through press coverage and licensed copies. During World War II, the haute couture industry dwindled as resources were dedicated to the war effort. When the industry began to restabilize after the war, the struggle against illegitimate copying intensified. For example, the high demand for Christian Dior’s famed “New Look” collection of 1947 inspired much unauthorized copying of his silhouette, such as a Nettie Rosenstein dress from that same year that is on display.

During the 1950s, couturiers relied heavily on department stores that would purchase couture garments in order to produce licensed copies. *Faking It* features more than ten examples of authorized couture copies from department stores around the world. Couturiers such as Dior and Jacques Fath further expanded their markets by designing secondary collections to be sold in the United States. A luxurious red silk satin dress from Jacques Fath for Joseph Halpert is on view alongside a gray tulle evening dress by Christian Dior New York.
A landmark lawsuit in 1959 resulted in the first copyrighting of patterns. Emilio Pucci then went a step further by incorporating the signature of his first name into his patterns. A kaleidoscope print dress, circa 1960, features Pucci’s signature.

Chanel’s tweed suits were so recognizable that she viewed copies of her designs as a form of publicity. She once said, “Fashion should slip out of your hands. The very idea of protecting the seasonal arts is childish. One should not bother to protect that which dies the minute it is born.” A selection of six Chanel originals and copies from the 1960s to the 1980s is featured.

In 1965, Yves Saint Laurent “borrowed” from the world of fine art to design the Mondrian dress. Moschino and Versace similarly used images from Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol in their collections. Perhaps surprisingly, there have been no copyright disputes over the use of art works in fashion design. Legal experts explain that artists typically do not pursue legal action because they perceive such sampling as a form of flattery, as well as promotion of their work.

The 1990s ushered in the era of logomania, along with the mass production of counterfeit goods. A special display case features authentic designer bags next to their corresponding counterfeits, including bags from Louis Vuitton, Gucci, Chanel, and the CFDA x eBay anti-counterfeit campaign, “You Can’t Fake Fashion.” A pair of shoes by Christian Louboutin is also shown alongside a counterfeit version. A video includes detailed photos illustrating how to spot a counterfeit, along with exclusive interviews with Susan Scafidi, founder of the Fashion Law Institute at Fordham University, and Valerie Salembier, CEO of the Authentics Foundation. They discuss their experiences educating the public on the counterfeit industry, as well as current initiatives that are being implemented to curtail illegal copying.

The emergence during the late 1980s of designer diffusion brands, such as Moschino Cheap and Chic, DKNY, and, recently, Missoni for Target, has altered the standard for what is considered an authentic designer garment. By creating less expensive versions of their higher-end collections, these designers are, in a sense, knocking off themselves. Thus, deciphering a fake can no longer be determined by simply looking at a garment’s quality, material, label, or price tag. Featured in the exhibition are pairings of original designer garments with similar items from their diffusion lines.

At his fall 2007 runway show, Yohji Yamamoto debuted a newly created “YY” logo that was featured prominently on a number of garments and pieces of luggage. The logo was remarkably similar to the well-known Louis Vuitton monogram, and some audience members thought Yamamoto was referencing Vuitton’s origins as a designer of luxury luggage. Was Yamamoto mocking the French brand? Was he making a comment about consumerism? Or was he applauding the power of a venerable luxury brand? No lawsuits resulted from Yamamoto’s new logo, but it did flirt with crossing the line of trademark infringement. More recently, Los Angeles designer Brian Lichtenberg created a witty interpretation of the Hermès logo with his Homiéïs collection. Fashion lawyers are still debating whether this is a case of trademark infringement or protected speech as legitimate parody. A complete Homiéïs ensemble is featured in Faking It.
While there are strict rules against copying a unique fashion design in France, Italy, and the United Kingdom, there are no laws against copying in the United States. This lack of protection has allowed fast fashion knockoffs to flourish. The Innovative Design Protection Act of 2012 (IDPA), a bill that aims to protect designers’ intellectual property, has been proposed in Congress. However, the industry is still debating whether the bill benefits or stifles creativity. Such ambivalence is one factor preventing the bill from moving forward.

Faking It concludes with a video featuring exclusive interviews with select fashion insiders who provide their views on the current state of protection for designers against copyists and fast fashion knockoffs.

Faking It: Originals, Copies, and Counterfeits is organized by Ariele Elia, assistant curator of costume and textiles, The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology.

The Museum at FIT
The Museum at FIT, which is accredited by the American Alliance of Museums, is the only museum in New York City dedicated solely to the art of fashion. Best known for its innovative and award-winning exhibitions, the museum has a collection of more than 50,000 garments and accessories dating from the 18th century to the present. Like other fashion museums, such as the Musée de la Mode, the Mode Museum, and the Museo de la Moda, The Museum at FIT collects, conserves, documents, exhibits, and interprets fashion. The museum’s mission is to advance knowledge of fashion through exhibitions, publications, and public programs. Visit fitnyc.edu/museum.

The museum is part of the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT), a State University of New York (SUNY) college of art, design, business, and technology that has been at the crossroads of commerce and creativity for 70 years. With programs that blend hands-on practice, a strong grounding in theory, and a broad-based liberal arts foundation, FIT offers career education in nearly 50 areas, and grants associate, bachelor’s, and master’s degrees. FIT provides students with a complete college experience at an affordable cost, a vibrant campus life in New York City, and industry-relevant preparation for rewarding careers. Visit fitnyc.edu.
The Couture Council is a philanthropic membership group that helps support the exhibitions and programs of The Museum at FIT. The Couture Council Award for Artistry of Fashion is given to a selected designer at a benefit luncheon held every September. For information on the Couture Council, call 212 217.4532 or email couturecouncil@fitnyc.edu.

Museum hours: Tuesday–Friday, noon–8 pm; Saturday, 10 am–5 pm. Closed Sunday, Monday, and legal holidays.

Admission is free.