

Consumer Reports WebWatch's 'Look Before You Click' Campaign Online Auction Lessons Learned the Hard Way by New Yorkers

Though many people have mostly positive experiences with online auctions, they top the list of Internet complaints in New York and other states. Across the state, New Yorkers have encountered duplicity, deceit, and disappointment when bidding and selling via online auctions. These are personal stories:

Even Experts Get Taken

The Item: Original Artwork

The Buyer: Peter, Brooklyn, N.Y.

The Story: Purchasing artwork sight unseen can be a risky proposition even without the online factor. In this case, the buyer, Peter, is a well-known artist whose work has graced dozens of magazine covers. He's also a life-long fan of the legendary graphic science fiction and fantasy artist Frank Frazetta, and has collected prints of Frazetta's work for years. Since he is a diligent student of artwork, he says, "I would never have imagined that I could be fooled."

He was browsing eBay and found what was advertised as an original Frazetta pen-and-ink drawing of a frontispiece the artist had created for an Edgar Rice Burroughs paperback. Peter paid \$800—which he considered "a really good price" for such a drawing—and took delivery. What impressed him was that the work was printed on a small piece of porous, yellowed paper, which even was marred by a coffee stain. Convinced it was genuine, Peter framed the work and hung it on the wall of his home, where it remained nearly five years.



A "Very Competent Copy"

Then, while en route to an artists' convention, a friend showed Peter a catalogue from Heritage Auction Galleries, a respected institution that bills itself as "The World's Largest Collectibles Auctioneer." Peter was shocked to be confronted by the very drawing that was hanging on his wall at home: "There was my piece, on more yellowed patina."



A Genuine Frazetta

He soon contacted a noted authority on Frazetta and submitted his drawing for examination. The conclusion: Peter's \$800 purchase was "a very competent copy" with "line work that was that good." But it was a copy nonetheless.

Because too much time had passed, contacting the seller was no longer an option.

The Lesson: "If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is," goes the old saying, and it applies to many would-be treasures found in online auctions. Before bidding, contact the seller with detailed questions and ask for further information and additional photographs and documentation. If geography permits, ask about viewing the item in advance, or having a local expert view it; it could be worth it to pay for an appraiser. (Though this approach can have risks in itself – it's usually expensive, and charlatans are everywhere). If it's a big-ticket item, inquire if a refund policy is in effect once the goods are delivered. If the seller responds reluctantly to any of these requests, think hard before committing.

Avoiding a Bugaboo

The Item: Bugaboo Stroller

The Buyer: Donna, New York City, N.Y.

The Story: This mother of a two-year-old encountered an inordinate amount of fraud while using online auctions. Earlier this year, while shopping for a Bugaboo stroller, she found one on eBay at an attractive price and placed a bid. A short time later the seller sent a message: "I am not selling a Bugaboo—someone must be using my name and password fraudulently." Shortly after that, eBay cancelled the auction and no bids were accepted.

"When we bid, it was an issue of it being offered at a very attractive price, given what they normally cost," explains Donna. "There's a big market for these Bugaboos but they are so expensive that people will bite when it's lower. Someone had somehow hijacked their account to 'sell' it under their name. The thing with eBay is that you have to pay these people in advance so if somehow this had worked, and I'm sure it does sometimes, I guess I would have paid for it and never gotten the product."

Lesson Learned: Always contact the seller before forwarding a payment. If you're using PayPal or an online financial system, verify the seller and the PayPal account are linked to the same account. If you have any doubts, notify the auction site *before* you forward a payment.

007 Memorabilia: License To Swindle?

The Item: James Bond Branded Rubber Bands

The Buyer: John, Yonkers, N.Y.

The Story: John Is A Self-Described "James Bond Nerd" so it was natural he bid online to scoop up a box of "original" 1965 rubber bands imprinted with the British secret agent's logo. Unfortunately, after he took delivery of the colorful cardboard box and the rubber bands inside, he realized they were brand new. In fact, they were never made in the 1960s.

The Lesson: Pop-culture memorabilia is among the riskiest categories of products to buy. If you're not certain about a specific item, contact the seller and ask detailed questions. It also helps to conduct a little online research of your own. There's a fan site for just about every cultural phenomenon.

On The Wrong Track

The Item: Audio Eight-Track Tape

The Seller: Joseph, Franklin Square, N.Y.

The Story: Buyers are not the only victims of online auction fraud. This seller and his wife are experienced eBay merchants, and he estimates they've initiated more than 7,000 auctions since 2001. Together this couple visits flea markets and swap meets all over Long Island, buy items in bulk, and resell them online. At their peak, they were netting \$2,000 a month from online sales. But when one devious buyer attempted a scam, they were reminded they needed to keep close track of every auction.

Two years ago, Joseph auctioned off a rarity from the 1970s: A quadraphonic eight-track tape of the musical group Blood, Sweat & Tears. It sold for \$60. He packed it off to the winning bidder, but shortly after received an email from the buyer telling him the tape malfunctioned and could not be played. Joseph paid to have the merchandise returned to him and promptly refunded the \$60. When Joseph played the returned tape he assumed the bidder was correct, since the eight-track was blank.

About a month later, he auctioned off another eight-track tape, and the same customer placed the winning bid again. This time, Joseph opened the case, and discreetly carved his initials into the interior of the eight-track case before sealing it again and shipping it off. Sure enough, the same bidder once again sent him an email claiming the tape had malfunctioned and could not be played.

Once more, Joseph asked for the merchandise to be returned—at his own expense—prior to issuing a refund. When the second tape arrived back, he opened the case and found no initials—it had been replaced with a blank tape, just as the first tape undoubtedly had been. This time, Joseph notified the seller of the missing initials. Despite several attempts, the buyer never responded. Joseph left negative feedback.

The Lesson: It's clear sellers can be ripped off as well—even the most experienced. Maintaining accurate records and retaining receipts and emails is important but it's also a good idea to photograph items before you ship them. Also, remember online reviews work both ways. Joseph says he now refuses to sell to bidders without a history or with less than 95% positive feedback. "I follow the guidelines," he says. "But not everyone does."

Close-But-No-Cigar Collectibles

The Items: Automobile Dealership Brochures

The Buyer: Bill, Formerly Middle Village, N.Y.

The Stories: This buyer has a unique hobby: He collects antique brochures and catalogues originally distributed by automobile dealerships. He specializes in collecting classic American station wagon brochures, in preparation for a book he is writing on station wagon memorabilia. Within a span of several months a few years ago, he encountered three separate problems:

1.) The buyer spotted an eBay offering touting a rare item, described in the auction as: "Rambler Ambassador 1958 Station Wagon Brochure." The listing included a photograph of two of these models, under the heading: "Introducing the Distinguished Ambassador Station Wagon Family." The buyer successfully bid for \$9.99, then forwarded a payment of \$12.99 to cover shipping.



Not What it Appears to Be

Excitement turned to immediate disappointment, however, when the brochure arrived. The "cover" was exactly as depicted in the auction; however, the brochure had been turned to an inside page and the photograph actually reflected Page 9 of what was not a station wagon brochure, but a generic 1958 Rambler brochure.



Not What the Bidder Expected

The buyer sent the following email: "I'm writing to express my extreme displeasure with this transaction, since I believe the item was misrepresented, causing me to purchase it under false pretenses. The descriptive title 'Rambler Ambassador 1958 Station Wagon Brochure' is incorrect and misleading, since what was presented as the cover page of a brochure on station wagons is in fact Page 9 of a 'Presenting Rambler for 1958' brochure turned inside-out. Since I collect station wagon brochures only, I have no interest in this item and would never have spent \$12.99 for it."

The next day the seller responded with this message: "I did not purposely mislead you with this item. I guess I just wasn't very thorough when describing it. Return the item and I will refund your purchase price."

At this point, the buyer was faced with spending another \$3 in shipping fees to return an unwanted brochure, for a transaction total of \$7.92 in shipping, postage, and money order fees.

The Lesson: When it comes to rare items, the rarer it looks, the more you should inquire about it. Don't hesitate to contact the seller and ask specific questions.

2.) A few months earlier, this buyer bid for a 1956 Chevrolet station wagons brochure that was described as "CHEVROLET 1956 Station Wagon Sales Brochure 55-56-57" in the header. Unfortunately, after forwarding the payment, he received a 1955 Chevrolet station wagons brochure, a duplicate of one he had already bought in another auction. He sent a detailed message to the seller and was pleased to receive a prompt and apologetic reply. The vaguely worded description was meant to imply the winning bidder would receive a brochure from any one of three years (1955-1956-1957). However, the seller immediately sent a 1956 brochure at no additional cost, and told the buyer to keep the 1955 brochure as well.

The Lesson: Prompt and polite communication may save a transaction from disaster. If you think you've been misled in an online auction, immediately send a detailed and civil e-mail to the

seller. In many cases, the implied threat of negative feedback will nudge the seller into keeping you satisfied.

3.) Finally, even the best-looking memorabilia is not always genuine. For example, the same seller referenced above recently posted an auction for an item described as "CHEVROLET 1957 Station Wagon Sales Brochure 57" in the header. However, buried in the fine print were these words: "With [General Motors'] permission, this reprint brochure was printed on an offset press and not a copy machine, so you can be confident it is a mint condition reproduction of the original that came with your car when it was new. It looks identical in every respect to the original and if laid side by side even an expert would be hard pressed to tell the difference." For some collectors, this would not make a difference; for others, it would rule the purchase out.

The Lesson: In fairness, the notice was clearly written. No buyer could claim such a purchase was made under false pretenses. Read the *entire* posting for every auction.

Sidebar: No One Is Immune (Including Webwatch)

Beau Brendler, the Director of Consumer Reports WebWatch, encountered a host of problems when he bid for a copy of the Klaus Kinski film *Paganini*. His experiences are recounted in detail on the [WebWatch blog](#) and reprinted here:

Use eBay long enough, you're probably going to get ripped off somehow, whether you know it or not. I should probably know better, but I got burned three ways by a seller; you might find the story amusing. Those who know me know I'm a huge fan of Klaus Kinski. I wanted to track down what is something of a holy grail among Kinski collectors, a copy of his self-penned, self-directed, self-worshipping biopic, *Paganini* (also called *Kinski Paganini*). Sounds like an ideal mission for eBay, right? Well, I won the auction, but what followed was one of the worst eBay experiences I think it's possible to have.



Nicht Sehr Gut

First, I overpaid (more than \$30—*Paganini* frequently goes at auctions for around \$12). Then I sent a note to the seller, Yesmovies, asking whether she accepted PayPal, which provides extra fraud protection. She wrote back to say she didn't, and in the note asked me to e-mail her my

credit card number in an open e-mail—then initiated a payment dispute after I didn't ante up within seven days.

It gets worse. I made the payment, telling her in seven years of shopping on eBay with a 100 percent positive feedback record, no one had ever started a dispute with me, let alone that fast. I asked her to remove it, and warned her to expect negative feedback from me. Sure enough, I left it, and she reciprocated by ruining my perfect 100 percent rating by leaving a nastygram for me. And, of course, the final insult was that Yesmovies sent me a bootleg, yep, that's right, a dub off TV or some other source. So not only did I overpay, I got ripped off, my reputation took an unfair hit and technically, I participated in a crime.

So how could I have avoided this, and how can you learn from my mistakes?

First, I should have read Yesmovies' feedback more closely and thoroughly. Though Yesmovies has thousands of positive ratings and a high percentage overall, reading through all that feedback looking for the negatives would have been instructional in this case. Let me emphasize that: A long list of positive feedbacks for a seller is great, but read the negative feedbacks if the site makes them available. At least one ex-customer wrote in to complain Yesmovies sent a bootleg, too. She responded to another similar complaint by saying that bootlegs are all that's available among certain rare movies. So there's yet another shade of caveat emptor! Yes, it's true, eBay doesn't make searching negative feedback easy, for obvious reasons (they should make the negative feedbacks searchable, for one thing, by clicking on the little red number in the chart). But do it anyway.

Second, if you look on the auction page, the words "this video comes in a plastic snapcase, with color cover art insert," is basically code among people who swap bootlegs. If you want to lessen the risk, look for the words "factory sealed" (though anybody can buy a cling-wrap machine), "never used," or "new." The "color cover art" insert I got was clearly output from a copier, and was all in German, though the tape was subtitled in English (an English-subtitled videotape is intended for an English-speaking market, and so, would have a cover printed in English).

Third, PayPal has its problems, but the best sellers accept multiple payment methods. Those that don't, probably don't for a reason.

Fourth, eBay is a notorious venue for illegal bootleg sales. There are better places to satisfy a jones for a rare or out of print movie: MoviesUnlimited or Critics' Choice. If that doesn't work, go to the IMDB chat boards at the bottom of the page listing the movie you're looking for.

By the way: *Kinski Paganini*, the movie, sucks. Especially a second or third-generation copy. Even if you loved the master's dubbed performance in Star Knight.