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Stolen products: America's "most wanted" gifts

Nothing says happy holidays like getting a hot gift from someone special. No, I'm not referring to a pair of Ugg boots or the latest incarnation of the [Apple iPhone](#). We're talking "hot" as in stolen, swiped, fell off the back of a truck. But before you sic the authorities on us, rest assured it's legal. Honest. We may be tightwads, but we're not crooks.

Curiosity got the better of me recently when I received an e-mail from Cher Murphy, a publicist for [PropertyRoom.com](#), an eBay-like Web site, founded by a former Long Island, N.Y., police detective, that auctions off goods seized by law-enforcement. More than more than 1,500 of the nation's police departments use the site to dispose of pirates' booty clogging up their storage facilities, including the LAPD and NYPD. You'll find bargains on everything and anything for sale from coins, artwork, and signed sports memorabilia, to cars, electronics, and jewelry. Looking for a diamond-studded gold Rolex watch? They've got it. How about a Nikon camera, Ford Crown Victoria, or Sony Vaio computer? They're for sale, too, as are coffins, boomerangs, prosthetic limbs, even "jaws of life" devices to free accident victims of from car wrecks.



When I first heard about PropertyRoom, the concept left me a bit uneasy, and the jury's still out in my mind. Most of the merchandise up for auction was confiscated as a result of criminal activity — burglaries, auto theft, drugs, shoplifting, and credit-card fraud. I wondered how much effort the police put into trying to find the rightful owners. I know how I'd feel if my expensive camera equipment was stolen and it auctioned off without law enforcement trying to track me down first.

Murphy assured me that both law enforcement and PropertyRoom try mightily to reunite people with their stolen property if there's an identifying mark or serial number. Over the years, PropertyRoom has returned things like a tombstone, college ring, custom racing bicycle, and Fender Stratocaster guitar to their rightful owners.

Though the rules vary by state, police agencies will generally retain seized or forfeited property for 90 to 120 days before selling it off. The old-fashioned way was to auction the goods off in a parking lot, an exercise that tended to draw the same buyers over and over, Murphy says. PropertyRoom opens the process to a much broader audience, obviously, and generates more revenue for local governments. PropertyRoom gets a cut of the proceeds, too, though, Murphy wouldn't reveal how much.

The site's operators pledge that PropertyRoom is a "fraud-free" marketplace, something eBay cannot guarantee. Winner bidders can have their merchandise shipped to them, though some items, like vehicles, must be picked up at designated processing centers. That could be inconvenient to some bidders. Also, not all items are returnable, and some may be subject to a 15 percent restocking fee.

Would you have any qualms about buy holiday gifts from PropertyRoom? Let us know. Write to tightwad at cro dot consumer dot org.

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