

The man who fooled the Art-Business – Wolfgang Beltracchi

He pulled the wool over the eyes of the art world and, in doing so, exposed a system in which millions are paid for paintings whose authenticity is very difficult to determine -- a system that makes erratic decisions about which art is worth a lot and which is worth nothing at all, and that doesn't even seem to know exactly what art is.

In the end, the court case involved 14 paintings, which allegedly brought Beltracchi a total of about €16 million (\$21 million) in earnings. The total loss, calculated on the basis of all subsequent sales of the works, amounts to €34 million

The Beltracchi case is the biggest art forgery scandal of the postwar era, in terms of both the scope and perfection of the works, as well as how the paintings were marketed. The forgeries were sold as works by Max Ernst, Fernand Léger, Heinrich Campendonk, André Derain, Max Pechstein, classic modernist paintings, most of them by French and German Expressionists.

Beltracchi's principle was not to copy the paintings of the Expressionists, but, as he says, to fill the gaps in their bodies of work. Either he invented new paintings and motifs, tying in to specific creative phases in the artists' lives, or he created paintings whose titles appear in lists of the respective painters' works but which were believed to have been lost -- and of which no images existed.

Beltracchi has all of the things that a master forger requires: knowledge of art history and science, the command of painting techniques and, most of all, considerable artistic talent. But he also acted with the callousness of a gambler, taking advantage of the greed of an overheated art market.

Some excerpts of an interview:

“...the most important requirement for forging art is to capture the essence of a piece of art. You look at it, essentially absorb it, and you have to be able to understand it visually without having to think about how it was done.”

“The trick is to paint a picture that doesn't exist, and yet that fits perfectly into an artist's body of work. (...) I wanted to find the painter's creative center and become familiar with it, so that I could see through his eyes how his paintings came about and, of course, see the new picture I was painting through his eyes -- before I even painted it.”

“The forgeries were all good, really. The big forest painting by Max Ernst, I thought that was really beautiful. And there was also a Campendonk, the one dedicated to (German writer) Else Lasker-Schüler, a painting that really existed but was lost. I found one of her prose pieces in her collected works published by Suhrkamp, volume 3.1, page 104, just two or three pages long. It's called "Künstler" ("Artist"), and I used it to obtain elements for the painting. I'd be interested to see what the real painting looked like.”

question: Would you say that the art market is corrupt?

Beltracchi: No more corrupt than I am. That was clear to me early on.

question: Would you still forge paintings today?

Beltracchi: I might have a few painters in reserve. But it was bothering me more and more to sign my paintings with someone else's signature. Besides, I somehow lost interest. I didn't feel good about it anymore.

question: Were there enough gaps in art history?

Helene Beltracchi: The Internet makes it much more difficult to find these gaps. Everything is documented. And it's practically impossible for art after World War II. That American case that was reported at the end of last year, the one with the forged Pollocks, de Koonings, Rothkos, it just can't work.

Beltracchi: I could have painted that too. Nothing is easier than a Pollock.

question: You certainly don't suffer from a lack of self-confidence.

Beltracchi: No. I can paint anything. Leonardo? Of course. But why? You couldn't sell it.

question: There are art critics who declare your forgeries to be concept art, because you address the absurdities of the art market with them.

Helene Beltracchi: Damien Hirst says that the art market itself is art. He puts his serial images or his diamond skulls on the table, and he says: Folks, I'm going to play you for suckers now. And people play along.

question: The art market decides what is art and what isn't. Could there be a different way?

Beltracchi: No idea. You're always talking about morality.

question: So?

Beltracchi: Then shouldn't you ask yourself how it is that Gerhard Richter publicly mocks the fact that a painting goes for €12 million? The market is willing to pay these prices. Only the person at the end of the chain foots the entire bill.

question: You made plenty of money in the process.

Beltracchi: Yes, and I can only say that I wouldn't be ashamed to sell my own art for a lot of money.

question: And would you pay a lot of money for a painting by an artist?

Beltracchi: The first question would be: Couldn't I paint it myself? Then I'd ask myself: Is there even a painting that I want? Every person has images in his head that are important to him. The birth of my daughter, for example, is one of those images for me, or the first time I saw my wife. You can't paint pictures of love. You can only imagine them. So I suppose I don't need a painting by another artist. I have enough of my own.

Question: Are you painting now?

Beltracchi: Yes. And I'm signing my real name to the paintings.

question: What are you painting?

Beltracchi: Still classic modernism, but combined with my own portrait photos. I'm also in the process of completing two large works of my own, which I had started before the arrest, as well as a triptych sculpture. Most of all, I'm painting really big now. The pictures used to be on the small side, no more than 80 by 100 (centimeters), and I was always a little on the meticulous side. Painting a big picture is just more fun.

question: And are there people who want to buy it?

Beltracchi: Yes. They're the same people who normally buy expensive art. But I'm not all that crazy about painting just to pay off my debts. It's like contract work. And yet I have to do it.

question: Do you love art?

Beltracchi: I love my wife. I think art is beautiful.

question: Are you an artist?

Beltracchi: Of course.

question: What is an artist?

Beltracchi: Someone who makes art.

question: And when is something art?

Beltracchi: For the cynic, art is defined through money. That, of course, is a very sad statement. But an artist is someone who does creative things. Just read a book by Beuys. Then you'll have no idea what art is anymore.

(taken from <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/0,1518,819934,00.html>)