



BELTRACCHI

The Art of Forgery

A FILM BY ARNE BIRKENSTOCK



US distribution

KimStim
417 13th Street #2
Brooklyn, NY 11215
www.kimstim.com
info@kimstim.com

Press Contact

For NYC screening
Adam Waker
adam@filmforum.org
Tel: 212.627.2035 x306



A mesmerizing, thought-provoking yet surprisingly amusing documentary on the life and times of Wolfgang Beltracchi, who tricked the international art world for nearly 40 years by forging and selling paintings of early 20th-century masters. A larger-than-life personality who was responsible for the biggest art forgery scandal of the postwar era.

Synopsis:

For nearly 40 years, Wolfgang Beltracchi fooled the international art world and was responsible for the biggest art forgery scandal of the postwar era. An expert in art history, theory and painting techniques, he tracked down the gaps in the oeuvres of great artists – Max Ernst, Fernand Léger, Heinrich Campendonk, André Derain and Max Pechstein, above all – and filled them with his own works. He and his wife Helene would then introduce them to the art world as originals.

What makes these forgeries truly one-of-a-kind is that they are never mere copies of once-existing paintings, but products of Beltracchi's imagination, works "in the style of" famous early 20th-century artists. With his forgeries, he fooled renowned experts, curators and art dealers. The auctioneers Sotheby's and Christie's were hoodwinked, just like Hollywood star Steve Martin and other collectors throughout the world.

It was ultimately Beltracchi's own success that brought him down. Passed off as an original Heinrich Campendonk and regarded by specialists as a "key work of modernism," Beltracchi's "Red Painting with Horses, 1914" was sold at auction for a record 2.8 million Euros. But it was here that the master forger made the mistake that was to expose him...

In “Beltracchi – The Art of Forgery”, Wolfgang and his wife Helene Beltracchi chat openly – and with great wit and charm – about their quixotic adventures in an overheated art world ruled by blind greed, and in which apparently no one has an answer to the question as to what is an original, and what is a forgery...

The story of Wolfgang Beltracchi is that of an engaging rogue, a warm-hearted husband and father, and an impossibly self-confident artist who tells a journalist: “I can paint anything. Leonardo? Of course. But why? You couldn’t sell it.” As the son of the Beltracchis’ attorney, director Arne Birkenstock enjoyed the exceptional trust and openness of his documentary subjects. The mood is light and relaxed, the Beltracchis good-natured and cooperative.

This documentary reveals the inner workings of today’s art world, the greed, the pretentiousness of a business segment whose profit margins are surpassed only by those of the arms trade and prostitution. “He exposed a system in which millions are paid for paintings whose authenticity is difficult to determine – a system that makes erratic judgments about which art is worth a great deal of money and which is worth nothing at all, and that often doesn’t seem to know what exactly art is.” (SPIEGEL Online)
“Wolfgang Beltracchi...is rather vain, a scintillating personality and bon-vivant with a penchant for hedonism, charming and witty.... Up to now, he led a fast, colorful, adventurous life, and the revelation of his deeds is perhaps the best thing that could have happened to him: nothing would have pained him more than to die rich but undiscovered.” (director/ producer Arne Birkenstock).



Film Details

Country of production: Germany

Year of production: 2014

Genre: Documentary

Running time: 93 mins

Color: Color

Original language: German with English subtitles

Cast:

Wolfgang & Helene Beltracchi

Henrik Hanstein, James Roundell, Monsieur Ommeslaghe, Madame Ommeslaghe

Sofia Komarova, Niklas Maak, René Allonge, Henry Keazor

Director / Screenwriter

Arne Birkenstock

Producers

Arne Birkenstock,

HelmutG. Weber,

Thomas Springer

Edward MacLiam

Director of photography

Marcus Winterbauer

Editing

Katja Dringenberg

Music

Dürbeck & Dohmen

Sound mixer

Ludwig Bestehorn

Sound

Patrick Veigel

Sound editor

Klaus Waßen-Floren

ARNE BIRKENSTOCK

Born 1967. Writer and filmmaker. Based in Cologne, Germany. Studied Economics, Spanish and Portuguese language and literature, History and Political Science in Germany and Argentina. Master's Degree in Latin American Studies from Cologne University. Birkenstock directed and produced numerous successful feature length documentaries for cinema, such as "12 Tangos – Adios Buenos Aires", "Chandani -the daughter of the elephant whisperer" (German Academy Award 'Lola' for best children's feature 2011), "Sound of Heimat", "Beltracchi - The Art of Forgery" German Academy Award 'Lola' for best Documentary 2014) and "The Moscow Trials". Birkenstock works as an instructor and consultant for several Film- and Media-Schools in Germany and served as a juror for several festivals and film funding commissions. He also wrote several non-fiction books and scientific studies for "Deutscher Taschenbuchverlag", Adolf Grimme Institute, the state government of North Rhine Westphalia and the German Federal Family Ministry. Arne Birkenstock is a board member of the German Film Academy and a member of the German Documentary Association AG DOK and a member of the European Documentary Network EDN and the European Film Academy.

Weblinks:

- Homepage in English: <http://www.arnebirkenstock.de/home-2/>
- English Wikipedia on Arne Birkenstock: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arne_Birkenstock

BELTRACCHI –THE ART OF FORGERY FESTIVALS AND AWARDS

AWARDS

2014:

- German Film Academy Award "Lola" for "Best Documentary", 2014
- Nomination as „Best Documentary“ for the Award of the German Association of Film Critics 2014

FESTIVALS

2014

- Berlinale
- Montreal World Film Festival
- Festival of German Film Paris
- German Currents Film Festival Los Angeles
- Warsaw International Film Festival
- Sao Paulo International Film Festival
- Stockholm International Film Festival
- Scanorama European Forum Vilnius
- Denver International Film Festival
- BlickDOC14 Filmfestival Moscow
- Camerimage International Film Festival of the Art of Photography
- DocPoint Helsinki
- Berlin & Beyond Festival San Francisco
- Reel Artists Filmfestival TorontoArticles ArArt

SPIEGEL Interview with Wolfgang Beltracchi

Confessions of a Genius Art Forger

In one of Germany's greatest art scandals, former hippie and talented artist Wolfgang Beltracchi forged dozens of paintings over a period of 35 years, earning millions and fooling top collectors and museums. Now he's about to go to jail. In a SPIEGEL interview, he reveals how he did it and why he eventually got caught.

At some point during the two-day interview, Wolfgang Beltracchi talked about a friend in Freiburg, a pathology professor. The two men know each other well. Beltracchi, sounding almost proud of himself, said: "He would like to examine my brain. He believes that he would find something completely different there." There are many people who would like to take a look inside Beltracchi's head. First there are the collectors, the gallery owners, appraisers and museum officials who fell for his forgeries. Then there are the investigators with the Berlin State Office of Criminal Investigation, who hunted him down but with whom Beltracchi refused to speak. Finally, there are the enlightened art lovers who admired this hippie-like desperado, because 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.

The meeting with Beltracchi and his wife Helene took place in a suburb in the south of Cologne, in the house of attorney Reinhard Birkenstock, which looks out over the meadows along the Rhine River. In late October, a Cologne court sentenced the couple to prison terms of six and four years. The investigators, specialists in art forgeries, had zeroed in on 55 dubious paintings that had appeared in the art market since the early 1990s.

In the end, the court case involved 14 paintings, which allegedly brought the couple 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. If the judge had not agreed to a deal with the attorneys, the court would have had to determine whether Beltracchi painted each individual work, a difficult task given the lack of direct evidence. The agreement also required the Beltracchis to make a detailed confession before the court.

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. During the two days of interviews, Beltracchi said several times that he had forged paintings by more than 50 artists, although he was unwilling to cite the exact number. Under German criminal law, serious cases of fraud fall under the statute of limitations after 10 years, but injured parties can file civil suits relating to cases much further in the past.

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. He has the selfconfidence and hubris of a man who believes he is a genius -- and he could be one. He believes that he has a better understanding of the works of the artists he forged than most experts.

In the 1980s Beltracchi and his friend Otto S.-K. from Krefeld, north of Cologne, who was sentenced to five years in prison in the same trial, devised a perfect back story to explain where the paintings came from. The

tale went like this: Otto had a grandfather named Knops, a master tailor from Krefeld, who had left his grandson a large art collection when he died. Knops had bought the works in the 1920s from art dealers like Alfred Flechtheim in Düsseldorf, and then hid the paintings during the Nazi era.

Beltracchi invented the Jägers collection in the 1990s. Werner Jägers was a real person, a businessman in Cologne. More importantly, Jägers was also the grandfather of Beltracchi's wife Helene, who Beltracchi married in 1993 and whose name he took (he was born Wolfgang Fischer). Jägers, according to Beltracchi's story, had also bought the paintings of well-known Expressionists from Flechtheim and other galleries in the 1920s. The two allegedly knew each other well.

The Beltracchis have never spoken publicly about their actions, neither before the beginning of the trial nor after making their confessions. Beltracchi is currently writing a book about his life and is also working on a documentary film. The couple will begin their sentences this month, Helene Beltracchi in the Ossendorf district of Cologne and her husband in the town of Euskirchen, west of Cologne. They will be incarcerated in open prisons.

SPIEGEL: Mr. Beltracchi, just how large are your debts today?

Beltracchi: They are €6.5 million, I think. Or maybe even 8 million? But we don't know who else is going to sue for damages.

SPIEGEL: Do you have a plan for how you intend to satisfy the claims?

Beltracchi: We own properties in France and in Freiburg (in southwestern Germany). They are up for sale. And then there is also the money in the bank.

Helene Beltracchi: We also work every day.

Beltracchi: We have to, in order to have a place in an open prison. We work in a friend's photo studio. My wife worked there in the 1980s, and she now deals with customer acquisition, while I handle the artistic aspects.

SPIEGEL: Is it fair to say that at the age of 61, this is the first time in your life that you have had a regular job?

Beltracchi: Yes, the first time.

SPIEGEL: You've managed to do it just before reaching retirement age.

Beltracchi: But that wasn't my intention.

SPIEGEL: Did you imagine everything would turn out differently?

Beltracchi: No one imagines ending up like this.

SPIEGEL: But you did have an inkling that it wouldn't end well, didn't you?

Beltracchi: For some time, yes.

SPIEGEL: Mr. Beltracchi, you are celebrated as an exceptional talent who has exposed the absurdity of the art market. But there are also those who say that you got off far too easily with your prison sentence. For them, you're a criminal.

Beltracchi: One is a criminal to some people and an artist to others. I can understand that. In a legal sense, I am a convicted criminal.

SPIEGEL: Have you thought about whether what you did is right?

Beltracchi: Of course. But I never decided to become an art forger. I was aware of my talent at an early age, and I used it foolishly. This developed over the years. In my heart, I don't see myself as a criminal.

SPIEGEL: You are one, though, from a legal point of view as well as morally. You deceived people and made millions through fraud.

Beltracchi: In my 14 months of pretrial detention, I met real criminals: murderers, child molesters, people convicted of manslaughter. I didn't injure anyone, nor did I steal from or rob anyone.

SPIEGEL: So the penalty you received is too high?

Beltracchi: Well, it's tough but justified, because I did forge paintings, after all, and have done so for a long time. In a certain sense, it's also a relief. Now I can do all the things openly that I've always liked doing: writing, making films, sculpting, painting my own subjects.

SPIEGEL: In the past, you had a lot of money but no fame. Now you're famous, but you have no money.

Beltracchi: Fame never interested me. I could have exhibited more of my own works in the 1970s, but I

didn't want to. It's sort of like being a child. When you're finished with school, you have only one thing on your mind: to get out and experience life. Did I want to spend all my time working on a painting? No, I wanted to have fun, travel, meet women and live life.

SPIEGEL: Were you never tempted to tell the world: Listen, people, it was me?

Beltracchi: No.

Helene Beltracchi: If that were the case, he could have marked the paintings. There are forgers who have done that.

Beltracchi: With one Max Ernst, it did briefly cross my mind to incorporate a Mickey Mouse into the painting. But the people who did that sort of thing usually didn't remain in the business for long. I did enjoy painting my own subjects, and they sold well, but it was much more fascinating to paint the unpainted pictures of other artists.

'I Worked as a Waiter in a Strip Bar'

One of the most famous art forgers of the 20th century is Han van Meegeren of the Netherlands. He had tried his hand as a neoclassical artist, but he hated the art critics and began painting pictures in the style of the famous Jan Vermeer, who, to the astonishment of the art world, had left behind almost no Christian motifs. Van Meegeren closed the gap. He invented the motifs, even if the hairstyles of his figures were sometimes more suited to the 1930s than the 17th century. In his villa on the Côte d'Azur, he perfected the artificial aging of canvases with the help of a drying furnace he had developed. He sold a Vermeer ("Christ and the Adulteress") to leading Nazi Hermann Göring in 1942. He was arrested for collaboration after the end of the war. He made a confession and, before the investigators' eyes, painted a Vermeer in his prison cell.

As the art market became more and more commercialized after World War II, forgers increasingly sought to profit from it. They included Lothar Malskat from Königsberg in East Prussia (now Kaliningrad), who forged the works of Max Beckmann, Marc Chagall and Edvard Munch and was sentenced to 18 months in prison in 1955, and the Hungarian Elmyr de Hory, who forged works by Derain, Matisse and Picasso, and who committed suicide before he could be turned over to the French authorities in 1976. British art forger Tom Keating claims to have produced more than 2,000 paintings in the style of the Old Masters throughout his career. In a fake Rembrandt, he painted a drinker holding a glass of Guinness. After he was exposed, he became a folk hero of sorts, and he went on to host a TV show.

"If the counterfeit were a good one," Picasso reportedly once said, "I should be delighted. I'd sit down straight away and sign it."

SPIEGEL: Why exactly are you so good at forging art?

Beltracchi: I think that the most important requirement 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. I was already able to do that as a child.

SPIEGEL: There is a man in England who, after flying over London in a helicopter, can draw a panorama of the city from a bird's eye perspective, down to the last detail. It's astonishing.

Beltracchi: He has some sort of autism. I don't have that.

SPIEGEL: When did you start painting and drawing?

Beltracchi: At the age of 10 or 12. My father was a church painter and conservator. We lived in Geilenkirchen, near Aachen. I helped him often. When he painted copies of old masters, the hands weren't very good sometimes, and I would ask him: Dad, what happened there? My sister claimed that, when I was a young child, I acted as if I was disabled. That Wolfgang, she said, he would just sit there and stare. The interesting thing is that in everyday life, I fail to see the most ordinary things. I often stumble and sometimes I even fall over. But when I draw or look at a painting, I go into a sort of overdrive and just see things differently than other people.

SPIEGEL: In court, you said that you once copied an early Picasso for your father.

Beltracchi: I was 14, and my father had given me a postcard. I was allowed to use my father's oil paints for the first time. I didn't like the original. I thought it was too sad. So I changed it, omitting a piece of material and making the picture less monochromatic. The painting took an afternoon. My father didn't touch a brush again for the next two years.

SPIEGEL: Because it was painted so well and so quickly?

Beltracchi: The time it takes to create a painting like that, as well as the movements, that's what constitutes the style. If it took the original painter two or three hours to do a small canvas, you can't finish it in only an hour or, conversely, in four hours. Then something about the style won't be quite right.

SPIEGEL: You were expelled from school at 17.

Beltracchi: I worked as a waiter in a strip bar in Aachen at the time, a place called the Cortis. I supplied the other boys in school with certain publications.

SPIEGEL: Publications that weren't necessarily available at the newsstand in those days?

Beltracchi: You could put it that way. My math teacher caught me in a private room in the bar. He said to me: Fischer, what are you doing here? You're much too young. And I replied: I'm making money, but what are you doing here? My mother made sure that I got my high-school diploma. Then I passed an examination for the highly gifted at the school of applied arts in Aachen, and that was when the problems began. One of the instructors claimed that the work I was turning in wasn't my own -- it was much too good. My former high-school art teacher had to confirm the authenticity of the work. That was in 1969, but I wasn't overly interested in going to university. I spent most of my time in a café on Südstrasse. I liked sitting in that coffeehouse.

SPIEGEL: How did you support yourself?

Beltracchi: By painting.

SPIEGEL: Were you already doing forgeries at the time?

Beltracchi: A little.

SPIEGEL: What, for example?

Beltracchi: The unpainted works of Old Masters at first, and later Art Nouveau and the Expressionists. It was for flea markets. I think the buyers were aware that the paintings weren't originals. Otherwise, I spent a lot of time on the road -- going to music festivals, traveling. I went on my first trip at 15.

SPIEGEL: Where did you go?

Beltracchi: Europe. I painted on sidewalks in downtown areas, which was still very unusual at the time. My first trip took me all the way to Barcelona. Sometimes you could make 100 deutsche marks (around €50) a day there. It was a huge amount of money. My father was making 800 marks a month at the time.

SPIEGEL: Let's go back in time for a second. You painted the old masters when you were that young?

Beltracchi: Yes, but it was too much work.

SPIEGEL: Why?

Beltracchi: Too time-consuming. They used to paint on wood, but that doesn't work with forgeries. How can you ever get the paint to dry without the wood warping? And then there's the glazing technique of the old masters. You would spend weeks working on a painting, and in the end you might make 5,000 marks on it.

SPIEGEL: Were you politically active?

Beltracchi: I once went to a demonstration in Aachen against fare increases on public transport. A police officer pulled out a bunch of my hair, and there were a lot of violent beatings. That's when I thought to myself: You'd better leave it alone.

SPIEGEL: Did you take drugs at the time?

Beltracchi: Mostly hashish, starting in about 1968. Sometimes I smoked opium. And I also took LSD -- for a while, quite a lot of LSD, in fact. But I never had any bad experiences. I stopped in 1985. I'd had enough, and I don't miss it, either.

SPIEGEL: You weren't interested in a middle-class life and a career?

Beltracchi: No. I just painted and lived my life. The period from 1970 to the early 1980s was like one big film. I lived on a houseboat in Amsterdam for a year. It was intense, and it's possible that I even had a few blackouts.

SPIEGEL: Did you paint in Amsterdam?

Beltracchi: Not a stroke. I went to the flea market in the morning and charged tourists money to take pictures of me. I looked pretty wild, with hair down to my waist, Indian robes, a floor-length fur coat. There must be lots of photos of me out there.

SPIEGEL: Sounds fantastic. But was it really? Drugs can do terrible things.

Beltracchi: The really hard drugs weren't that common back then, in the early 1970s. It was easy living. You could get a job anywhere, there was no pressure and money wasn't a problem. Nothing was a problem.

SPIEGEL: One could say that you kept up that approach to life for a very long time, perhaps even to this day?

Beltracchi: I stretched it out as long as I could.

SPIEGEL: Since when has it been over?

Beltracchi: Since prison, I would say. But I'm working on getting it back. When I was in pretrial detention, they used to say to me: Man, you're in such a good mood! I happen to be a happy person, and I thought to myself: Now you're here, and there are reasons for that. That was clear to me. Of course, living in an open prison won't be child's play, either. The houses are gone, and the money's gone. For any normal person, that would be a big deal.

SPIEGEL: And for you, as well, surely.

Beltracchi: Not really.

Helene Beltracchi: Something new is about to begin, and it doesn't necessarily have to have a monetary value. We're at an age at which most people say: OK, now I'm not going to do anything anymore. But we're starting all over again.

SPIEGEL: One doesn't have the impression that you are completely indifferent to material things, though. You invested almost €1 million in your 28-hectare (69-acre) vineyard in France, and your villa in Freiburg cost €5 million. The swimming pool alone cost €1 million.

Beltracchi: That's not true. The pool cost €700,000. The money wasn't important. It was all about how much fun it was. I considered it to be art.

SPIEGEL: And what about when the money was gone, back in the 1970s?

Beltracchi: Then I went back to painting. I also did my own paintings at the time: acrylic on canvas, extremely detailed, almost photo-realistic, and very time-consuming.

SPIEGEL: Your paintings were even exhibited at the Haus der Kunst art museum in Munich in the 1970s.

Beltracchi: Yes. Suddenly, doors had opened up. I was approached by collectors and gallery owners. One of my paintings went for 11,000 marks, and two others sold for 5,000 apiece. It was a lot of money.

SPIEGEL: Is it true that you even bought back your paintings at some point?

Beltracchi: There's a story by E.T.A. Hoffmann that takes place in 17th-century Paris, about a jeweler who makes wonderful jewelry. Each time he sells a piece of jewelry, the ladies are murdered and the jewelry disappears. I didn't murder the owners of the paintings, of course, but I can understand that. I wanted my paintings back, and I never really wanted to sell them.

SPIEGEL: Do you still have the paintings today?

Beltracchi: Not all of them. One is in Freiburg, and another one is in France.

SPIEGEL: How many of your own paintings did you paint in the 1970s?

Beltracchi: Maybe 10.

SPIEGEL: So few?

Beltracchi: Yes, what of it? Vermeer only did 40 paintings in his entire life.

SPIEGEL: And how many forgeries did you paint at the time?

Beltracchi: I can't tell you that, or else my attorney will have a fit.

SPIEGEL: That would certainly be interesting.

Beltracchi: Well, it's pretty easy to figure out. Just take...

Helene Beltracchi: Stop!

Beltracchi: I only painted when I felt like it and needed money. But it never really became a professional thing, even though the dealers would have liked that. The art market was going crazy here. You could have easily sold 1,000 or 2,000 paintings.

SPIEGEL: You also had an art gallery in the early 1980s, together with a real estate broker from Düsseldorf.

Beltracchi: Not for long. I had to sit in the office, which wasn't for me. Suddenly I had a guy breathing down my neck who was mainly interested in making a lot of money fast. He gave me a quarter of a million marks to spend on paintings. I went to London, to Christie's and Sotheby's, and I went shopping: a (David) Teniers, a (Lucas) Cranach, a beautiful Joachim Beuckelaer from the 16th century. He never understood how it works. He thought that you buy a painting and sell it for a profit two or three weeks later. In fact, you have to give it a few years to make it work.

SPIEGEL: The real estate broker later claimed that you had burglarized him and stolen paintings that later turned up at an auction.

Beltracchi: A break-in? Ridiculous. That's what you reported in SPIEGEL, too. The article even said that paintings had been cut from their frames. What nonsense! I would have forged a painting like that, but I would never have stolen it.

'I Painted Because I Wanted To'

Beltracchi's career as an art forger almost came to an end in the 1990s. The Berlin police had investigated two art dealers from Aachen and a technical draftsman who was addicted to heroin. They had been dealing in forged paintings since the late 1980s, preferably works by the relatively unknown Expressionist Johannes Molzahn, but the fakes also included a Heinrich Campendonk. The paintings had been sold for relatively small sums, several tens of thousands of marks in each case, and the sentences were mild. The police discovered that most of the fakes, 21 in total, were the work of a certain Wolfgang Fischer from Krefeld. But the investigators couldn't find him.

Beltracchi looks at the images. "That one's great," he says. "That one's garbage." He flips through the police list with the 21 forged paintings. "And that's supposed to be a Campendonk? That junkie must have painted it. I stand behind my paintings, but some of those aren't mine. I was always afraid that these people would be caught one day."

SPIEGEL: In addition to the Molzahns, did people order other paintings from you? Campendonks, for example?

Beltracchi: Gentlemen, I can only say one thing in reply to that: No one ever ordered anything from me. I painted because I wanted to. It's really unbelievable that you're trying to insinuate something like that.

SPIEGEL: There is a 1986 exhibition catalog from the Claus Runkel Gallery in London.

Beltracchi: Do you have the catalog? I've never seen it.

SPIEGEL: There are paintings in there that could also be Beltracchis: two Campendonks, "Yellow Nude with Deer in a Mountain Landscape" and "Red Cow and Houses", and one by the Russian painter Vladimir Bechtheyev that's called "Landscape near Murnau." Are you familiar with the paintings?

Beltracchi: They're beautiful, aren't they?

SPIEGEL: You should explain the way you work once again. So you would study an artist and then paint a small series?

Beltracchi: I didn't paint any series, but you have to study the artists very intensively. That's why there were times when, years later, I painted individual paintings by a given artist again. That way it wasn't as much work anymore. Besides, the painting part was never the problem. What was really complicated was finding old canvases and frames. Sometimes they could be had for €30 and sometimes for €5,000. Some of them were really beautiful paintings, and I still have them in my head today. If I couldn't get the old paint off, I incorporated details of the old image into the new one.

SPIEGEL: In your confession before the court, you described how you approached an artist's work.

Beltracchi: Yes, based on the example of André Derain, who, next to Matisse, was one of the main representatives of Fauvism. One also has to know that only Derains from the Fauvist phase, that is, from the years 1905 to 1909, fetch high prices. At first I got the literature on the artist, and then I went to exhibitions and museums. It was important to see the paintings in the original, because the colors in printed images are often wrong. I also went to Collioure, where Derain spent a summer with Matisse in 1905. I took a look at the village, the beach and the light, and I got a feeling for the atmosphere and the mood of that summer.

SPIEGEL: How does that work?

Beltracchi: I became one with Derain and his time. (Alfred) Dreyfus was about to be acquitted, (Georges) Clemenceau was about to become prime minister, and World War I was still nine years away. Derain painted fantastic pictures that summer. I recognized what was special about a particular artist, in order to do it just a little better than he had managed himself. Which is certainly possible: After all, we know today how art history has developed since then.

SPIEGEL: That all sounds very strange.

Beltracchi: But this is the key point. Every philharmonic orchestra merely interprets the composer. My goal was to create new music by that composer. In doing so, 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.

SPIEGEL: Your Campendonk forgeries, for example, led to an explosion in prices for his paintings on the art market.

Beltracchi: Prices tripled. The same thing happened with (Max) Pechstein and Max Ernst. His widow Dorothea Tanning, an artist in her own right, said that one of my forgeries was the most beautiful Max Ernst painting she had ever seen. The trick is to paint a picture that doesn't exist, and yet that fits perfectly into

an artist's body of work. Even though experts claimed otherwise during the trial, I didn't use any additional technical help on a single painting. No projectors, no grids. It's ridiculous. Why should I take the trouble to project a sketch if I can draw it by hand?

SPIEGEL: Why does this infuriate you?

Beltracchi: It annoys me. These are just after-the-fact, shabby attempts by experts to explain away the fact that they had praised the same paintings for years.

SPIEGEL: Would you have recognized your own paintings as fakes?

Beltracchi: Of course. It was always a little strange to see one of those paintings in a museum. Whenever that happened, I would try to steer clear of the painting in question. I didn't want to get too close, because I was afraid that the painting would talk to me.

SPIEGEL: You met Otto S.-K., who has also been sentenced, in Krefeld in the mid-1980s. You painted and he was in charge of sales. That was the beginning of the period when stories had to be invented about the provenance of the paintings.

Beltracchi: I didn't want to get involved with art dealers and experts. Previously, it had just involved flea markets. Otto had come up with the story about the Knops collection. He turned master tailor Knops from Krefeld, his grandfather, into an art collector. But we didn't take the issue of provenance overly seriously at the time.

'No One Wants a Painting to Be a Forgery'

The Beltracchis can rant at length about the art market. They're a little like bicycle thieves who accuse the victims of not having locked up their bicycles effectively enough. There are certain things they would prefer not to see described in print, such as how rich they became as a result of their fraud, how much commercial talent was involved on top of artistic talent, and how well they understood the mechanisms of the market. Nevertheless, the Beltracchi case does paint a fairly accurate picture of the global art market and its players. It involves reputable galleries in Paris, Zurich, London and New York, as well as prestigious dealers like Kunsthaus Lempertz in Cologne. There are dubious companies in the Virgin Islands or Hong Kong that provide cash-strapped gallery owners with bridge loans. There are museums that exhibit the fakes, like the MoMA in New York, the Sprengel Museum in Hanover and the Fondation de l'Hermitage in Lausanne. Finally, there are the international auction houses like Christie's, which ultimately auction off the paintings at record prices to collectors who can afford to pay them. Beltracchi's fakes ended up in various places, including a discreet company in Malta believed to be backed by Eastern European investors, the collections of German entrepreneur Reinhold Würth and Hollywood actor Steve Martin, the art foundation funded by drill manufacturer Hilti, the Surrealism collection of former Paris Match publisher Daniel Filipacchi, and the collections of the families of other industrialists in Paris and investment firms in Switzerland.

None of the people who were involved, those through whom the paintings reached the art market, seems to have had any real doubts about their authenticity. They include Henrik Hanstein, head of Kunsthaus Lempertz and a buyer of some Beltracchi paintings, as well as Werner Spies, the former museum director at Centre Pompidou in Paris and an expert on Max Ernst, who declared seven Beltracchi fakes to be genuine. Doubts are bad for business.

A dealer who buys a painting for €100,000, but knows that he can sell it for €200,000 or €300,000, possibly doesn't want to ask too many questions about its origin. In most cases, a conservator also examined the paintings, but Beltracchi's forgeries were so good that no one noticed anything. And once a painting has been shown in a museum and bought by an important collector, this chain becomes a perfect provenance -- especially when the chain begins in major galleries from the beginning of the 20th century, with Flechtheim and the Der Sturm Gallery.

There were doubts along the way, but they had nothing to do with the authenticity of the paintings. The Jewish art dealer Alfred Flechtheim had to leave Germany in the 1930s. A restitution fight has been raging for years over what happened to the works in his collection. Paintings that had been owned by Jews and were seized by the Nazis would have posed a problem.

SPIEGEL: Does everyone want a painting to be real?

Beltracchi: It also helps if it looks great and there is nothing unusual about it. No one wants a painting to be a forgery. They all think very positively.

SPIEGEL: You and Otto S.-K. parted ways for a short time in 1989. Why?

Beltracchi: Well, we had differences over business matters. I wrote a screenplay for a road movie with a lot of music, which takes place mostly in Morocco, where I lived for a year in the early 1980s. We even received official funding for the screenplay. But in the end the film wasn't made because of a lack of financing.

SPIEGEL: You didn't paint anymore?

Beltracchi: There were still enough paintings in storage. Besides, the art market collapsed in 1990. I painted almost nothing for one or two years. Then I met Helene, in February 1992.

SPIEGEL: When did you tell her how you made your money?

Beltracchi: After a week. Normally you have to be careful. Most forgers are caught because they tell the wrong person about what they do.

SPIEGEL: How did you react, Mrs. Beltracchi?

Helene Beltracchi: Oh, I thought, I've never heard of anything like this. It sounded cool. And, of course, I was impressed, and I still am, that he can paint a better Max Ernst than Max Ernst himself. Nevertheless, you do ask yourself: What sort of a person is this? But when you're really in love and know that he's the one, you just have to accept it. If he had said he was a dentist ... now that would have been bad.

SPIEGEL: You took over responsibility for sales.

Beltracchi: Sales sounds a lot more businesslike than the way we lived at the time. The problem was that I didn't want to involve my wife. One could see where that would lead. I started working with Otto again in 1997.

SPIEGEL: And then you produced a steady flow of paintings?

Beltracchi: Not at all. We lived in a motor home for years. We spent months in Asia and Guadeloupe. It was never our idea to continuously increase output.

SPIEGEL: Was there a point at which you thought it would be better to stop?

Beltracchi: Not until the very end. I painted a Derain and a Léger, but I already sensed that they might be the last two.

'The Whole Thing Was Discovered Because of an Incorrectly Labeled Tube'

In 2006, the Beltracchis delivered a Heinrich Campendonk titled "Red Picture with Horses" to Kunsthaus Lempertz in Cologne. Beltracchi had affixed stickers to the back that read "Flechtheim Collection," "Der Sturm Gallery" and "Emil Richter Art Salon."

The painter Heinrich Campendonk, who was born in Krefeld in 1889 and died in Amsterdam in 1957, was a member of a group of artists called "The Blue Rider" in the early 20th century. His friends included August Macke, Franz Marc, Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky. He emigrated to Belgium in 1934. A painting called "Red Picture with Horses" does exist in the list of Campendonk's works, but without an image or any information about its dimensions and whereabouts.

It was said that an appraisal was to be prepared, although that claim has been disputed by Hanstein. In November 2006, Trasteco, a Maltese company, bought the painting at auction for €2.88 million. It was the highest price paid for a picture at auction in Germany that year. But because the appraisal was missing, the new owners commissioned a scientific analysis. They received the results in 2008: There were traces of titanium white on the canvas, a pigment that Campendonk couldn't have used because it didn't exist at the time. The buyer's attorney filed a complaint with the district court in Cologne, demanding reimbursement of the purchase price. Various appraisals with differing results followed. Finally, in 2010, the attorney filed a criminal complaint. On Aug. 27, Wolfgang and Helene Beltracchi were arrested in Freiburg and held in custody ahead of their trial in October 2011.

During those 14 months, Beltracchi drew portraits of his fellow inmates, and he and his wife wrote each other letters -- "7,000 or 8,000 pages in total," he says. They are currently spending a last 10 days on their vineyard estate in France, together with their attorney, who was ordered by the judge to accompany them, because there is still a small risk of flight. Then their time in prison will begin.

SPIEGEL: Was "Red Picture with Horses" your biggest mistake?

Beltracchi: Why do you say mistake? Scientific analyses were still relatively new at the time. I am only going to say two things. First, the results of these tests are still subject to interpretation. Second, it's easy to paint pictures in such a way that these analyses wouldn't turn up anything. They wouldn't be able to discover anything for years. I didn't pay such close attention to that at the time.

SPIEGEL: But how did the titanium white get on the canvas?

Beltracchi: I had always used a zinc white, which was completely normal in Campendonk's day. Usually I mixed the paints myself, but I was missing some pigments. So I took a zinc white from a tube, a Dutch product, but unfortunately it didn't say that it contained a small amount of titanium white. In other words, the whole thing was discovered because of an incorrectly labeled tube.

SPIEGEL: Then one expert also found out that those gallery stickers never existed.

Beltracchi: Those creations of mine were, of course, idiotic.

SPIEGEL: Why didn't you use authentic ones?

Beltracchi: I didn't want to. It was a joke. I also thought that it would only work one or two times.

SPIEGEL: Starting around 2003, you received more and more requests for documentation to support your invented Jägers collection. In retrospect, one might say that the noose was tightening. At some point, you were no longer just forging paintings, but also photos to support the authenticity of your fakes.

Beltracchi: Yes. We were asked if perhaps there were some family photos in which the paintings could be seen. Well, of course there were. I got myself an old camera, one of those big cardboard things from the 1920s, as well as old film rolls, enlargers, trays, whatever I could find in the flea market. The paper was the hardest part.

Helene Beltracchi: And I put on the kind of blouse that grandmothers used to wear.

Beltracchi: There were photocopies of the fakes hanging on the walls. We no longer had the paintings because, of course, they were already sold.

SPIEGEL: You also made a photo that supposedly depicts a show at the Flechtheim Gallery in 1928.

Beltracchi: I even reconstructed the skirting board in the gallery, even though it didn't even end up being visible in the photo. I printed the paintings from the still life exhibition in black-and-white, in their original size, pasted them into old frames and simply included the copy of my Léger.

SPIEGEL: How exactly did you find out about the titanium white discovery?

Beltracchi: Through (Henrik) Hanstein, the head of Kunsthaus Lempertz.

Helene Beltracchi: We had assumed that Hanstein had ordered an appraisal before auctioning the painting. But he hadn't done that.

Beltracchi: He messed up.

SPIEGEL: The appraisal was prepared in March 2008. Did you know things were going south at that point?

Beltracchi: Yes.

SPIEGEL: And what was your plan?

Beltracchi: There was no plan. Other people advised us to sell the houses and take off. But it was out of the question for us, just as it is today.

SPIEGEL: You say this so matter-of-factly, but you must have been very nervous.

Beltracchi: We were.

Helene Beltracchi: It could have something to do with the cancer I was diagnosed with a few years earlier. I had already cheated death. And, of course, there was some hope for a while. We would probably have won the civil case. But then the buyers' attorneys filed a criminal complaint.

SPIEGEL: Did you really pay the art historian Werner Spies a total of €400,000 for his appraisal of seven Max Ernst forgeries?

Beltracchi: It's quite possible.

SPIEGEL: And he thought it was completely normal to be paid 8 to 9 percent of the selling price for an appraisal?

Beltracchi: Yes, he did. I feel bad about some people, but for some people my sympathy maybe isn't as great as their greed.

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

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

SPIEGEL: In the end, you still tried to place that Léger and that Derain. Wasn't it risky?

Beltracchi: We were a little uncertain, because we knew that things weren't quite right. But we wanted to use the money to buy back the Campendonk from the Maltese company, and the rest of the money to buy a palazzo in Venice. A nice dream, isn't it?

Helene Beltracchi: We were offered €5 million for each of the paintings at a relatively late date. Of course, the potential buyers pulled out when things became critical. Our civil attorney even spoke with the people from the criminal investigation department and told them that we were available. But I think they wanted to make a really big splash.

SPIEGEL: Was it clear to you that all of this would end up with you in prison?

Beltracchi: Oh come on, that's logical. After we realized that they didn't want to talk to us, we straightened up our house in France and drove to Germany, to Freiburg. Our son's house had already been searched. My wife had spoken on the phone to the officer in charge of the search and told him: Put a seal on it, and we'll be there on Friday. When we arrived in Freiburg, the investigators even let us into the house, and when we drove to a restaurant for dinner later on, they followed us, blocked off streets with dogs and police cars and drew their weapons. They even made the children stand up against the car. It was as if we were terrorists.

Helene Beltracchi: Then the police asked us if we had weapons. Are brushes weapons?

SPIEGEL: And the children?

Helene Beltracchi: They had no idea. They were standing there in the rain and were completely horrified. Wolfgang had only painted when the children were in school.

SPIEGEL: You don't wish to and cannot reveal the number of paintings you forged. But how many artists were there?

Beltracchi: About 50 throughout my entire life.

SPIEGEL: Do you actually know where all your paintings are today?

Beltracchi: No.

'Nothing Is Easier Than a Pollock'

SPIEGEL: Perhaps they'll fall off the wall soon in one museum or another?

Beltracchi: Let's just let them hang. Wouldn't it be the height of vanity if I were to tell you now where which paintings could still be hanging?

SPIEGEL: This isn't exactly what one imagines as a full confession.

Beltracchi: Wait a minute. I made a confession about the paintings that were the subject of the trial. Aside from that, if the police had asked me at the time, I would have told them where the paintings were, at least as far as I knew.

Helene Beltracchi: If anyone thinks he has a Beltracchi hanging in his house, he should contact us.

Beltracchi: And he'll get an honest answer.

SPIEGEL: Do you have an image in your head of every painting you've forged?

Beltracchi: Every one of them. There also about 300,000 to 400,000 paintings in there that I've seen in my life. One has quite a lot of room up there.

SPIEGEL: 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.

SPIEGEL: 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.

SPIEGEL: 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.

SPIEGEL: What's your best work?

Beltracchi: They 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.

SPIEGEL: 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.

SPIEGEL: 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.

SPIEGEL: 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.

SPIEGEL: 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.

SPIEGEL: 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.

SPIEGEL: Are you painting now?

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

SPIEGEL: 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.

SPIEGEL: 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.

SPIEGEL: Do you love art?

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

SPIEGEL: Are you an artist?

Beltracchi: Of course.

SPIEGEL: What is an artist?

Beltracchi: Someone who makes art.

SPIEGEL: 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.

SPIEGEL: Mr. and Mrs. Beltracchi, thank you for this interview.

Interview conducted by Lothar Gorris and Sven Röbel. Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan.

URL:

<http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/spiegel-interview-with-wolfgang-beltracchi-confessions-of-agenius-art-forgers-a-819934.html>

Related SPIEGEL ONLINE links:

Photo Gallery: Interview with Forger Wolfgang Beltracchi

<http://www.spiegel.de/fotostrecke/photo-gallery-interview-with-forger-wolfgang-beltracchi-fotostrecke-79583.html>

Art Forgery Scandal: Ringleader Reveals He Faked Many More Works (03/05/2012)

<http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/art-forgery-scandal-ringleader-reveals-he-faked-many-moreworks-a-819409.html>

A Cheerful Prisoner: Art Forger All Smiles After Guilty Plea Seals Deal (10/27/2011)

<http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/a-cheerful-prisoner-art-forgers-all-smiles-after-guilty-pleaseals-deal-a-794454.html>

The \$7 Million Fake: Forgery Scandal Embarrasses International Art World (06/13/2011)

<http://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/the-7-million-fake-forgery-scandal-embarrasses-internationalart-world-a-768195.html>

Steve Martin Swindled: German Art Forgery Scandal Reaches Hollywood (05/30/2011)

<http://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/steve-martin-swindled-german-art-forgery-scandal-reacheshollywood-a-765658.html>

Copying the Expressionists: Germany's Mega-Forgery Scandal Gets Even Bigger (12/16/2010)

<http://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/copying-the-expressionists-germany-s-mega-forgery-scandalgets-even-bigger-a-734798.html>

The Hippy and the Expressionists: Investigators Zero in on Massive Art Forgery Scandal (11/05/2010)

<http://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/the-hippy-and-the-expressionists-investigators-zero-in-onmassive->

October 10, 2012

VANITY FAIR

The Greatest Fake-Art Scam in History?

By Joshua Hammer

One of his forgeries hung in a show at the Met. Steve Martin bought another of his fake paintings. Still others have sold at auction for multi-million-dollar prices. So how did a self-described German hippie pull off one of the biggest, most lucrative cons in art-world history? And how did he get nailed?

Nobody in Freiburg could remember a party quite like it. The date was September 22, 2007, and Wolfgang and Helene Beltracchi, affluent newcomers to this lively university town near Germany's Black Forest, had invited friends and neighbors to celebrate a milestone. Workers had just put the finishing touches on their \$7 million villa, after 19 months of extensive renovations. Lanterns lit up the cobblestone walkway to the hillside house, a five-level minimalist structure with a glass and Siberian-larch-wood façade, steel beams, pastel-colored tile floors, and contemporary paintings and sculptures filling every room. The staff of Freiburg's luxurious Colombi Hotel—where the Beltracchis had lodged in a \$700-a-night penthouse suite when they were in town during the remodeling—had prepared the ample food and drink, including magnums of fine champagne. The Beltracchis had even flown in a celebrated four-member flamenco band from Granada to dance and sing for their 100 guests.

Spanish ballads floated across gardens and courtyards to the glass pool house. Inside it, the party-goers ogled a large painting by the French Cubist Fernand Léger. Others admired art installations throughout the villa, including Baghdad Table, an intricate stylized aluminum model of the Iraqi capital by the Israeli industrial designer Ezri Tarazi. From the terraces, they took in the lights of the medieval city far below. Wolfgang, a longart haired, 56-year-old Albrecht Dürer look-alike, and Helene, an ingénue-like woman of 49 with waist-length brown hair cut into girlish bangs, had spared no expense to announce their arrival on Freiburg's scene. "Everybody was blown away," remembers Michel Torres, who had hired the flamenco dancers on the Beltracchis' behalf and who had befriended the couple during the years that they lived in southern France. "It was unforgettable."

Yet mingling with admiration for the Beltracchis' style and taste was a feeling of unease. None of the architects, lawyers, university professors, and other Freiburg residents knew the first thing about where their hosts had come from, nor how they had amassed their wealth. "One [German] woman asked me, 'Who is this guy? Is he a rock star?'" recalls Magali Richard-Malbos, another of the Beltracchis' French friends. "And I said, 'No, no. He's an artist, a collector.'"

Strictly speaking, that was true. It would be another three years before the truth about what kind of artist Beltracchi is came out

"The big question every reader will want to know is, how and why does a person become an art forger?" Wolfgang Beltracchi tells me. His question is just a tad modest: Beltracchi, in fact, masterminded one of the most audacious and lucrative art frauds in postwar European history. For decades,

this self-taught painter, who had once scratched out a living in Amsterdam, Morocco, and other spots along the hippie trail, had passed off his own paintings as newly discovered masterpieces by Max Ernst, André Derain, Max Pechstein, Georges Braque, and other Expressionists and Surrealists from the early 20th century. Helene Beltracchi, along with two accomplices—including her sister—had sold the paintings for six and seven figures through auction houses in Germany and France, including Sotheby's and Christie's. One phony Max Ernst had hung for months in a retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Steve Martin purchased a fake Heinrich Campendonk through the Paris gallery Cazeau-Béraudière for \$860,000 in 2004; the French magazine-publishing mogul Daniel Filipacchi paid \$7 million for a phony Max Ernst, titled *The Forest (2)*, in 2006. For the 14 fakes that the Beltracchis were eventually charged with selling, their estimated take was around €16 million, or \$22 million. Their total haul over the years must have been far more.

I was meeting with the couple last winter in the dining room of their lawyer's house in Sürth, an affluent suburb of Cologne. Large windows looked over a snowdappled garden and, just beyond, the Rhine River, clogged on this bright and frigid February morning with chunks of ice. After complicated negotiations, they had agreed to tell me their story.

Beltracchi, who was wearing jeans and a pale-blue fleece, still appeared every bit the hippie rogue. His shoulder-length blond hair, thinning on top, along with his blond mustache and graying goatee, made him look something like a swashbuckler out of *The Three Musketeers*, with a touch of Mephistopheles. For 61, he seemed surprisingly youthful, an appearance enhanced by the upper- and lower-eyelid lifts he had received in a clinic in southern France six years ago. Helene, clad in a blue knit turtleneck sweater, her thick tresses cascading to her waist, had clearly done her best to retain her girlish appeal. She looked at her husband adoringly, as he began to explain what drew him into a life of crime.

"Obviously one has to invest a lot of time to achieve success by painting one's own works," he told me, displaying a healthy amount of what the Germans call *Selbstgefälligkeit*, or self-satisfaction. "I was always a guy who wanted to be out and about . . . For me, life is on the outside, not the inside."

Beltracchi, whose original name was Wolfgang Fischer, was born in 1951 in Höxter, a village in Westphalia, in west-central Germany. His father was a house painter and a restorer of churches who supplemented his income by producing cheap copies of Rembrandts, Picassos, and Cézannes. Beltracchi inherited his dad's skill with a brush, and took it to a new level: at 14 he astonished his father, he says, by painting a passable Picasso in a single day—"a mother and child from the Blue Period"—and adding original flourishes. Three years later, he enrolled in an art academy in Aachen, but ended up skipping most of his classes. It was the late 1960s, "the hippie time," Beltracchi says. He grew his hair long, purchased a Harley-Davidson, and smoked hashish and dropped L.S.D. with U.S. soldiers stationed at a nearby NATO base on their way home from Vietnam. "Many of them had gone a little bit crazy from the war," Beltracchi recalls. "Some of them became my friends."

During the 1970s and early 80s, young Wolfgang Fischer led a nomadic life—like Peter Fonda in *Easy Rider*, Helene says. He spent a year and a half on a beach in Morocco, and lived in a commune in Spain. He drifted around Barcelona, London, and Paris, buying and selling paintings at antique markets. He lived on a houseboat in Amsterdam, where he put on psychedelic light shows at the Paradiso nightclub. He enjoyed some early success as a

painter in his own right, contributing three works to a prestigious art exhibition in Munich in 1978. But, by his own admission, he was more drawn to the outlaw life. One day during his wanderings, he bought a pair of winter landscapes by an unknown 18th-century Dutch painter for \$250 apiece. Fischer had noticed that tableaus from the period which depicted ice skaters sold for five times the price of those without ice skaters. In his atelier, he carefully painted a pair of skaters into the scenes and resold the canvases for a considerable profit. Thirty years ago, fakes were even harder to detect than they are now, he tells me. "They weren't the first ones I made, but they were an important step." Soon he was purchasing old wooden frames and painting ice-skating scenes from scratch, passing them off as the works of old masters.

In 1981, Fischer made a stab at holding a conventional job. With a Düsseldorf real-estate salesman, he formed an art-dealing firm, Kürten & Fischer Fine Arts GmbH. "I had to sit around in an office, and I realized very quickly that I hated it," Beltracchi says. He was soon squeezed out of the business on the grounds of negligence by his partner and, faced with money problems, he ratcheted up the pace of his forgeries.

He had moved from old masters to early-20th-century French and German artists, partly because it was easier to find pigments and frames from that period. The forgeries came in "waves," he says, depending on his need for cash. "Sometimes I'd paint 10 works in a month, and then go for six months without doing any." Among his specialties were paintings by the German Expressionist Johannes Molzahn, who had fled the Nazis and taken refuge in the U.S. in 1938; Fischer sold as many as a dozen purported Molzahns, which fetched up to \$45,000. (One was even bought by the artist's widow.) He says he insinuated three fake paintings, by three different artists, into a single auction held by art dealer Jean-Louis Picard in Paris in 1991.