



Gallery owner who sold phony artwork sentenced to year in prison

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A Florida art gallery owner was sentenced to a year in prison Monday for participating in an international scheme that reaped millions by passing off phony prints as originals signed by masters from Pablo Picasso to Marc Chagall.

As a judge in Chicago's federal court handed down the sentence, Jerome Bengis, 67, kept his hands clasped on the defense table and glanced at his wife seated in the front row of the courtroom.

In addition to the prison time, U.S. District Judge Robert Dow Jr. ordered Bengis, who pleaded guilty to wire fraud, to serve 18 months of home confinement after his release from prison and pay more than \$300,000 in fines and forfeiture.

Bengis, of Coral Springs, Fla., was charged as part of a sweeping case unsealed in Chicago five years ago that eventually snared a dozen defendants, including two Northbrook art dealers accused of selling the fake art to unsuspecting customers around the world.

Many of the fraudulent pieces involved "limited-edition" prints supposedly signed by the artist. Prosecutors alleged that for years, Bengis and his co-conspirators forged the artists' signatures, created bogus appraisals for the works and in some cases put the pieces up for online auction at vastly inflated prices.

One of the Northbrook dealers, Michael Zabrin, was convicted of a nearly identical scheme involving a Magnificent Mile gallery in 1992. Zabrin cooperated with federal agents in the current investigation and recorded phone calls with Bengis, co-defendant James Kennedy and others, court records show.

In one conversation from March 2007, Bengis was recorded talking about counterfeit Chagall prints he had sold to Zabrin, telling him to make sure they were framed when he resold them to make the forgeries more difficult to detect.

"I've sold probably 10 of them to people and they love them," court records quoted Bengis as saying in one recording.

Zabrin pleaded guilty and was sentenced to nine years in prison in 2011. Kennedy pleaded guilty and received an eight-year term. Several other overseas defendants remain fugitives, records show.

Dow noted Monday that Bengis was a longtime dealer who had an otherwise good reputation in the business. Although he profited from the sales, Bengis was probably motivated more by the thrill of the shadowy side of art dealing than by greed, according to the judge.

"He enjoyed the game," Dow said.