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# The Other Side of an \$80 Million Art Fraud: A Master Forger Speaks

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In the 1980s, Pei-Shen Qian, the painter at the center of an \$80 million art forgery case, used to set up his easel near Manhattan's West Fourth Street and hustle.

Qian, a Chinese national living in the U.S. on a student visa, competed with other artists to convince people walking by that they needed their portraits painted. His rate started at \$15 and on a good day he'd go home with \$200, though he might have to work past midnight to get it. One day, a man offered him \$200 to do an imitation of a modern art masterpiece—he can't recall which master. It was impossible to say no.



Pei-Shen Qian

The artist and his patron—a man Qian said he knows only as Carlos—are now at the center of a scandal that has upended New York's art scene. When dealer Glafira Rosales pleaded guilty in September to selling more than 60 fake paintings—most of them through the prestigious Knoedler & Co. gallery—she revealed that every single one of them was the creation of one man, a painter virtually unknown in Manhattan's salons, working from his modest home in Queens. It was Qian, who says no one was more surprised than he was.

"The FBI said they were done by the hands of a genius," he said on a recent morning in Shanghai. "Well, that's me. How strange it feels!"

In his first interview for the Western media, Qian, 73, insisted on his innocence, outlining in his soft Shanghai accent a classic immigrant's tale that took an odd twist. He made artworks that resembled those of Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and others, yes, but he never intended to pass them off as those artists' work for profit. Sitting in a gallery of his own works, Qian said: "I made a knife to cut fruit. But if others use it to kill, blaming me is unfair."

John Howard says he knows precisely whom to blame. Howard runs Irving Place Capital, a \$2.7 billion private equity firm. He's also the not-terribly proud owner of one of Qian's imitations, a painting sold to him for \$4 million as the work of Willem de Kooning. Howard bought the fake from the Knoedler gallery, a tony Upper East Side institution that had been in business since before the Civil War. The gallery, which closed in November 2011, was owned by Michael Hammer, the wealthy grandson of industrialist Armand Hammer, former chairman of Occidental Petroleum.

Now, Howard is suing Knoedler, its former president Ann Freedman, and various others for fraud, and trying to get his money back. "It's like a joke on the world of art," Howard said. "Here I am dealing with the Knoedler gallery, one of the most prestigious galleries in the U.S., founded before the Metropolitan Museum of Art. If this person was selling these things on the street, we wouldn't buy it. But this is the Knoedler gallery."

Lawyers for Freedman and Knoedler say the gallery committed no fraud, sought expert opinions to authenticate the works, and was transparent about its efforts with buyers.



At least seven civil lawsuits have been filed against the gallery and its former president over Qian's paintings. Plaintiffs include Domenico De Sole, chairman of Tom Ford International; Nicholas Taubman, the former chief executive officer of Advance Auto Parts; and a trust for the Hilti family, of the Liechtenstein-based machinery and toolmaker Hilti.

Howard focuses his anger on Knoedler, which netted \$43 million selling Qian's fakes, according to the federal indictment, and on Freedman, who he said convinced him to buy the work. He accepts that the painter's role—what he knew or didn't know—will never be clear. "Clearly this is a very talented person that he was able to do so many things so well," Howard said, "and so that Knoedler and Freedman could fool so many people."

Qian showed an early aptitude for imitation. As a primary school student, his drawings of door gods—the traditional images of knights or gods said to protect Chinese homes from evil—were so good that his teacher insisted they were tracings from originals, he recalled. As Communists took control of mainland China, his parents, who owned a printing plant, escaped to Taiwan in 1950 with the three youngest of their seven children. Qian, barely 12, stayed with the remaining siblings and later moved in with relatives in Shanghai.