



The Con Artist: A multimillion dollar art scam

For decades, art forger Wolfgang Beltracchi made millions in a scam that eventually led him to a six-year prison sentence and lawsuits totalling \$27 million

Bob Simon
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Wolfgang Beltracchi is a name you may never have heard before. Very few people have. But his paintings have brought him millions and millions of dollars in a career that spanned nearly 40 years. They have made their way into museums, galleries, and private collections all over the world. What makes him a story for us is that all his paintings are fakes. And what makes him an unusual forger is that he didn't copy the paintings of great artists, but created new works which he imagined the artist might have painted or which might have gotten lost.



\$7M Max Ernst forgery

Connoisseurs and dealers acknowledge that Beltracchi is the most successful art forger of our time -- perhaps of all time. Brilliant not only as a painter, but as a conman of epic proportions.

Bob Simon: Are you the best forger in the world?
Wolfgang Beltracchi: Maybe, yeah. In the moment.

He agreed to meet with us in Cologne recently and took us to a small wooden bridge outside his home. He volunteered to show us how he works. He was forging a Max Ernst, the German surrealist of the early 20th century. Beltracchi was painting on this wooden bridge because Ernst had done much of his work on a wooden floor.

Bob Simon: What do you think this Max Ernst would be worth?
Wolfgang Beltracchi: This one?

Bob Simon: Yeah.

Wolfgang Beltracchi: \$5 million, I think.

Bob Simon: \$5 million. And you can do it in three days?

Wolfgang Beltracchi: Yeah, oh yes, yes, sure, or quicker.

Beltracchi estimates he has done 25 Max Ernsts. He is not copying an existing work. He's painting something he thinks Ernst might have done if he'd had the time or felt like it.

Bob Simon: So you would be doing a Cezanne that Cezanne never painted but that you thought he might have wanted to paint?



Wolfgang Beltracchi: Yes, exactly.

So, in a sense, every Beltracchi painting is an original. He just lied about who painted it. He says forged a hundred artists and can do just about anyone.

Bob Simon: Could you do a Rembrandt?

Wolfgang Beltracchi: Yeah, sure.

Bob Simon: Could you do a Leonardo?

Wolfgang Beltracchi: Yeah, yeah, sure.

Bob Simon: Who couldn't you do?

Wolfgang Beltracchi: Maybe Bellini. Bellini's really difficult.

He has sold his forgeries. Of course, but says he can still see some of them because they're on public display.

Bob Simon: Have you seen your paintings, your forgeries hanging in museums?

Wolfgang Beltracchi: Yeah. Yeah, all the museums, you know. I think I am one of the most exhibited painters in museums of the world.

Bob Simon: You are one of the most exhibited painters in the world?

Wolfgang Beltracchi: Yeah, yeah.

Bob Simon: That's quite an accomplishment

Wolfgang Beltracchi: Yeah.

You might have seen his stuff in New York's Metropolitan Museum or in the Hermitage in Lausanne...to name just a couple. You can also see them in the homes of the one percent. Actor Steve Martin bought this one. Beltracchi's forgeries have also made it into art books listing the best paintings of the 20th century and have been sold in many of the world's top auction houses.

Bob Simon: I have seen Beltracchi forgeries on the cover of Christie's catalogues.

Jeff Taylor: Yes, yes.

Bob Simon: That's pretty good isn't it?

Jeff Taylor: It is really good, it is really good

Jeff Taylor teaches arts management at Purchase College. He says though there is no shortage of gifted forgers, Beltracchi holds the title. He has made more money than any other art forger ever.

Jeff Taylor: He combined all the nefarious techniques of everybody who came before him and made very important innovations in exactly what is essential.

Bob Simon: You have called him an evil genius?

Jeff Taylor: Yes.



Bob Simon: So aside from being a very talented painter, he was also a very accomplished conman?

Jeff Taylor: Absolutely one of the best.

He started making a few bucks in the game when he was quite young, but his career really took off when he married Helene, a perfect co-conspirator, in 1993.

Bob Simon: You were really the Bonnie and Clyde of the art world, weren't you?

Wolfgang Beltracchi: Yes, Bonnie and Clyde, yeah. Without weapons. Only with pencils.

Bob Simon: But you were a pair, you did everything together.

Helene Beltracchi: Yeah.

Wolfgang Beltracchi: Everything together, yes, yes.

They invented a story that fooled them all. Helene said her grandfather hid his art collection at his country estate in Germany before the war to protect it from the Nazis. When he died, she said, she inherited it. But there was nothing to inherit, because there had never been a collection. Every one of the works had been painted by Wolfgang Beltracchi.

Helene Beltracchi: When I said it's a collection of my grandfather it was OK.

Bob Simon: It was OK, but it wasn't true

Helene Beltracchi: No, it wasn't true. But the others – never asked me more.

Bob Simon: 'Cause it was a good story?

Helene Beltracchi: Yeah.

Bob Simon: And you were a good actress in telling the story?

Helene Beltracchi: Maybe.

She and Wolfgang even created fake labels from a real German dealer which they put on the backs of paintings, staining them with coffee and tea to make them look old.

They toured flea markets like this one to find canvases from the right periods.

Bob Simon: Tell me what we're doing here. Tell me what we're looking for.

Wolfgang Beltracchi: We're looking for a painting like that because we need something that is 1919, 1910, see that's a French one.

Bob Simon: You can get that completely clean?

Wolfgang Beltracchi: Yeah, yeah, completely clean, yeah.

They sent paint pigments to labs to make sure they had been available at the time the artist had painted.

Bob Simon: You were really perfectionists weren't you?

Wolfgang Beltracchi: Yeah, yeah sure.



Bob Simon: And hearing you talk, you were really good criminals.

Wolfgang Beltracchi: Yeah, yeah.

Helene Beltracchi: Yeah.

Wolfgang Beltracchi: Yeah, it's true.

To back up their story, they found an old box camera like this one, dressed Helene up to look like her grandmother, hung up some forgeries behind her and took some bogus photos on pre-war paper.

Jeff Taylor: To make it look like an old photograph which is, in the art world, in the documentation aspect, is golden. Archival photographs are sort of the El Dorado.

Bob Simon: Now when you see something like that, do you say, "You gotta hand it to him"?

Jeff Taylor: Yes, yes you do.

Bob Simon: He was off and running.

Jeff Taylor: He was off and running.

Running to luxurious estates they bought in Germany and in France, vineyard included. They gave parties Gatsby would have loved and they traveled the world in style, by land or by sea. Bonnie and Clyde had taste.

Wolfgang Beltracchi: This is - was - my boat, yah.

Bob Simon: I don't think you're translating correctly. This isn't a boat, it's a yacht.

Beltracchi was riding high and thought he would stay up there forever. He was turning out forgeries – like this Max Ernst which went for \$7 million. But then in 2010, he got busted by this tube of white paint.

The Dutch manufacturer didn't include on the tube that it contained traces of a pigment called titanium white. That form of titanium white wasn't available when Ernst would have painted these works and Beltracchi's high ride was over.

Jamie Martin, one of the world's top forensic art analysts, uses science to help determine whether or not a painting is genuine. We asked him to examine this Beltracchi forgery for us.

Jamie Martin: His fakes are among the best fakes I've seen in my career. Very convincing. Very well done.

Bob Simon: And what you're saying is that basically he got away with it for 40 years because nobody was examining them properly?

Jamie Martin: Nobody was examining them closely enough.

He showed what he does, how he uses a stereomicroscope to study every millimeter of a painting's surface, and to select and remove samples.

Bob Simon: You actually take little pieces off of the painting?



Jamie Martin: We take very little pieces. We take only the minimum amount that's required. Smaller than the width of a human hair.

He uses what is called Raman spectroscopy, which can help detect historically inaccurate pigments. That's what cut Beltracchi's career short. He was sentenced to six years in a German prison. His wife, Helene, to four. But the chaos they wrought has not been undone. Now, galleries and auction houses who vouched for his forgeries have been sued by the collectors who bought them.

Bob Simon: You have, in fact, you've really upset the art world, haven't you?

Wolfgang Beltracchi: Yeah sure, they all hate me, these experts now--

Bob Simon: Do you think the experts are just incompetent or that they are also frauds, that they pretend to know more than they know?

Wolfgang Beltracchi: No, no nearly all the experts we have met, we met, they were serious, really serious. Their only problem was that I was too good for them. Yes, that was their problem, that's all.

And with all the legal problems they now have, many experts are very hesitant to use their expertise.

Jeff Taylor: I think they're terrified. I think that Beltracchi particularly put them in a very nervous position.

Bob Simon: So being an art expert today is a risky business?

Jeff Taylor: It's so risky that a lot of authentication boards have shut down. There's just simply too much legal peril out there. It's one of the reasons why a lot of experts will not give their opinions.

Many foundations representing major artists like Andy Warhol, Keith Haring and Willem de Kooning are refusing to authenticate works brought to them at all. Francis O'Connor is the world's top Jackson Pollock expert. He says he can spot a fake Pollock in a second, but these days is keeping his opinions to himself.

Bob Simon: What if I were to come to you and say "this has been presented to me as a Pollock"

Francis O'Connor: Someone comes to me about once a week. I just let it go by

Bob Simon: Let it go by?

Francis O'Connor: In other words, ignore it.

Bob Simon: I'm not quite sure I understand. If I come to you and I say, "Hey, this has been presented to me as a Pollock" and you can see right away that it isn't, you're not going to tell me "this is not a Pollock"?

Francis O'Connor: I would be very hesitant to give any opinion at that point, because of the legal situation.

Bob Simon: Where do I go to see whether my painting is a real Pollock or not?

Francis O'Connor: There is nowhere to go.

When collectors do have suspicions about their paintings, one of the few places they can go is Jamie Martin's lab.

Bob Simon: Ballpark figure, if you've examined say a hundred paintings, how many of them are fakes?



Jamie Martin: I would say probably 98 percent are fake.

Bob Simon: No kidding.

Jamie Martin: That's just the numbers.

At his trial in 2011, prosecutors said Beltracchi had created 36 fakes which were sold for \$46 million. But art historians believe, and Beltracchi told us, that there may be more than 300 of his fakes all over the world. German police have uncovered 60 so far and the numbers keep climbing.

Bob Simon: Do you think we'll be uncovering fake Beltracchis for years to come?

Jeff Taylor: Absolutely. There's gonna be many more out there. But one thing we know about fake art works is short of having them burned or destroyed, they have a strange way of finding their way back onto the market, generation after generation.

And no one disputes that they are awfully good. Beautiful. This \$7 million dollar fake Max Ernst is being shipped back to New York. Its owner decided to keep it even after it had been exposed as a fake. He said it's one of the best Max Ernsts he's ever seen.

Beltracchi spent a year and a half in this grim penitentiary, but is now allowed to spend many days at home, where he is launching a new career. Beltracchi is painting again and is signing his works Beltracchi. He needs to get his name out there, which is probably why he agreed to talk to us. He's lost everything is now facing multiple lawsuits totaling \$27 million.

Bob Simon: Did you ever think you would wind up in prison?

Wolfgang Beltracchi: No.

Bob Simon: At what point did you realize, uh-oh, I'm in trouble, this is over?

Wolfgang Beltracchi: When I was in prison.

Bob Simon: Not before then.

Wolfgang Beltracchi: Not really, no.

Bob Simon: Do you think you did anything wrong?

Wolfgang Beltracchi: Yes, I use the wrong titanium white, yeah.