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A Not-Quite-Great Documentary About the Greatest Art Forger of Our Time

by Benjamin Sutton on August 21, 2015



Wolfgang Beltracchi in Arne Birkenstock's documentary 'Beltracchi: The Art of the Forgery' (all photos © Fruitmarket / Wolfgang Ennenbach, courtesy of KimStim)

“I think I can paint anything,” says [Wolfgang Beltracchi](#), the infamous German art forger, in Arne Birkenstock’s 2014 documentary [Beltracchi: The Art of Forgery](#), which opened Wednesday at [Film Forum](#) in New York. And he did, at least by his own account, which is the one that gets the most traction here. In addition to the 14 fakes he admitted to painting during his trial in 2011 — attributed to André Derain, Kees van Dongen, Max Ernst, Fernand Léger, Heinrich Campendonk, and Max Pechstein — he claims that nearly 300 more he made remain in circulation as authentic works by modern masters. Beltracchi and his wife, Helene, became the subjects of a [media frenzy](#) in 2010, as their scheme to sell the paintings — strategically created to fill gaps in desirable artists’ catalogues or resemble works they might have painted — unravelled. If you followed the story then, you won’t learn much from this very engrossing but disorganized documentary by the son of the Beltracchis’ legal counsel; if you didn’t, you will emerge with many questions. But what it lacks in clarity and chronological cohesion, *The Art of Forgery* makes up for in access.

Interviews with the Beltracchis and footage of Wolfgang working in his studio make up the bulk of the film. Birkenstock evidently spent years visiting the couple, first at their estates in Mèze in the south of France and Freiburg in Germany (both since seized and sold off to repay the people they deceived) and later at the art studio in Cologne where they met during the day while serving out their respective sentences (six years for him, four for her) at night in open prisons. We witness Wolfgang making a new fake, a lost landscape painting by [Marie Vassilieff](#), from start to finish: buying an old canvas at a flea market; scraping off the existing painting; creating a new work that combines elements of Vassilieff’s best-known, quasi-Cubist landscapes; artificially aging it in a makeshift oven; even sprinkling dust behind the stretcher bars to make the illusion of oldness complete. He brags to a visiting curator about his facility with faking Old Masters — “Vermeer?” “Him, too.” “Rembrandt?” “Any of his.” “Leonardo?” “Of course, he’s not difficult.” — and waxes philosophical about the smell of paintings. Birkenstock’s attention to the vivid textures and materials of the art-making process, like the opening footage of Wolfgang grinding pigment and making his own paints, is *The Art of Forgery*’s greatest unexpected pleasure.



Wolfgang Beltracchi in Arne Birkenstock's documentary 'Beltracchi: The Art of the Forgery' Helene's interviews are a little more grounded. She remembers when Wolfgang told her, just three days after they met, that he made fake paintings for a living, and recalls the difficulty she had at first in carrying out her part of the operation: duping dealers and gallerists into taking their fakes to auction. The Beltracchis' ruminations and remembrances are juxtaposed with commentary from the gallerists, auction experts, and collectors they deceived; the Geneva dealer who helped identify the fake Campendonk that set the whole house of cards crashing; and Niklas Maak, a journalist who covered the whole saga. "It was like a bad cowboy film," he says. "The cowboy mows down one sheriff after the next."

However, like in the best cowboy films, *The Art of the Forgery's* bad guys are far more compelling than the good. It's hard to resist the Beltracchis' charm, their bohemian lifestyle — even their chic hippie wardrobes are endearing. As a character portrait, Birkenstock's film is fascinating, but by more straightforward documentary standards it frustrates. The chronology is a jumble, opening with interviews at the villa in France, followed by later scenes of the couple serving time in Cologne, and finally the film's earliest footage, of the entire Beltracchi brood packing up their Freiberg mansion. Interspersed throughout are high-speed slideshows of family

photos intended to show the extravagant lifestyle they led during the years when Wolfgang's fakes flew off the auction block; these are most successful at causing migraines. Far more interesting would have been to hear the recollections of their teenage kids, who appear only briefly, enumerating the adventures of their childhoods.



Wolfgang Beltracchi in Arne Birkenstock's documentary 'Beltracchi: The Art of the Forgery'
That Birkenstock is partial to the Beltracchis is hardly surprising, given the role his father played in the story, but that doesn't excuse the more fundamental organizational issues hampering his film. What he does capture, possibly by accident, is how thoroughly insulated from risk and real world problems the rarified upper echelons of the art market are. Both the Beltracchis and their victims, as they serve out prison sentences and repair tarnished reputations, laugh about the forger's audacity and concur that all parties involved would rather go on believing that the paintings were the real deal.