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The Art of Forgery: How Beltracchi fooled the art world for decades

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‘The director of this film knows nothing about art. It’s a pity.’

So says Wolfgang Beltracchi, the style-swiping painter and convicted fraudster who is the curious subject of *Beltracchi: The Art of Forgery*, a documentary by Arne Birkenstock. Beltracchi, 64, was the mastermind behind perhaps the biggest art scandal of last century, fooling the art world for decades and earning himself millions of euros with the scam.

The duping involved passing off his own work as recently surfaced paintings done by masters such as Picasso and Matisse, or someone such as the Dada movement pioneer Max Ernst. Beltracchi did not copy their paintings – he extraordinarily appropriated their styles to produce new work. There is no crime in that, but there is in forging a signature to the paintings and concocting fake provenance.

In 2011, Beltracchi was found guilty of forging more than a dozen paintings. Co-conspirators included his long-time wife, Helene, who, like her husband, served a jail sentence that involved them being imprisoned nightly, but free to work – in order to pay restitution to those they conned – during the day.

They are both free now.

“It’s a funny film,” Beltracchi says of the documentary that is the opening-night feature in this year’s Reel Artists Film Festival, which runs March 26 to 28 at TIFF Bell Lightbox. “It’s not so bad,” Beltracchi continues, speaking earlier this week in passable English from Germany. “But the film is not really serious.”

What he means is that the film is not an in-depth probe into the international scandal he triggered. It’s more a meditation on authenticity and originality when it comes to art. It’s also a study of Beltracchi, a former hippie and undeniably a real piece of work.

“He’s very, very charming, and he has a wittiness one can admire,” says director Birkenstock, also reached in Germany this week. “He is also quite a showoff, and he can be quite rude when talking about others’ art or the market for artists.”

In short, Birkenstock sees his documentary subject as someone with an "ambivalent personality."

If there are two sides to Beltracchi, opinions on him are divided as well. Some see him as a genius, while others view as something close to the devil himself. "I was damn angry at Mr. Beltracchi," says a German auctioneer in the film. Adds James Roundell, of the Society of London Art Dealers, "He hasn't really brought in anything new."

Most all of the collectors and art experts duped by Beltracchi declined to appear in the film. Understandably so. Birkenstock was unable to speak with Steve Martin, for example. According to a report in the German newsmagazine *Der Spiegel*, in 2004 the actor and avid art collector had purchased for €700,000 (\$950,000) the painting *Landscape With Horses*, said to be the work of the modernist artist Heinrich Campendonk (and mistakenly authenticated by an expert as such). It was another false Campendonk that brought down Beltracchi. *Red Picture With Horses*, supposedly from 1914, was determined to be a fake when, in 2008, scientific analysis showed the painting contained titanium white, a pigment not yet available in 1914. Birkenstock, whose lawyer father represented Beltracchi in the criminal case, uses his documentary to question what constitutes artistry. Certainly Beltracchi's pieces are "original," but is he a true artist, or is he a master craftsman?

"It's not so easy for me to judge," Birkenstock says. In considering the question, he looked at the process of making a documentary, which involved editing miles of film to pare the final result down to 90 or so minutes. *Beltracchi: The Art of Forgery* incorporates archival footage of Ernst, who speaks of invention. "The moment," Birkenstock says, "where he does not know what to do next." Beltracchi and others see all art as products of what came before, but Birkenstock doesn't agree. Where an Ernst could never be sure whether his next piece would be accepted by critics or the market, Beltracchi doesn't have that same apprehension. "He's never in the situation of not knowing what to do or being fearful in front of the white canvas," the director says. "That's the difference. He always knew what to do next."