'The Art World Is Rotten': Giacometti Forger Tells All

Robert Driessen is one of the most successful art forgers in the world. Over his 30 years of work, he came to specialize in creating forgeries of Swiss artist Alberto Giacometti. Now living in Thailand, out of the reach of European authorities, Driessen wants his story told.

By Michael Sontheimer – April 10, 2013

Roman Abramovich's luxury yacht is anchored out in the bay. We are sitting under coconut palms on a white beach, Bob Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone" is playing on the stereo and ice cubes clink in our glasses of white wine. Robert Driessen lights a cigarette. "I am trapped in paradise," he says. Driessen has lived in Thailand for the last eight years. He owns a café that is close to the water but far away from Europe. They are after him in his native Europe -- especially Ernst Schöller, a detective from Stuttgart who specializes in art crimes. Driessen forged sculptures by the Swiss sculptor Alberto Giacometti (1901-1966). Two of his accomplices are in prison in Germany, after the gang raked in more than €8 million ($10.4 million) with its scrap metal. The only member of the gang still at large is Driessen. The police believe he forged at least 1,000 sculptures. Driessen, holding a wine glass in his hand, says that it was probably more like 1,300. "But I never kept records."

Horst Haug of the Baden-Württemberg State Office of Criminal Investigation (LKA) shows off a fake sculpture sold as an original by Alberto Giacometti. Driessen's partners sold their forgeries to wealthy individuals with little knowledge about art. A billionaire in Wiesbaden, near Frankfurt, bought 49 fake Giacomettis for €3.5 million. Stuttgart investment manager Peter Hans Schuck paid at least €3.7 million for 18 forgeries.

Driessen, 54, spent more than 30 years forging art, including paintings and sculptures, and has lived well on the proceeds. He has probably made at least €3 million with his forgeries. Being a prisoner in the South China Sea isn't the worst thing in the world, and he has no regrets, says Driessen. But he thinks it's time for the world to know about him and his works.

Wolfgang Beltracchi, a painter from Germany's Rhineland region, forged at least 100 Expressionist paintings over a similar period of time, earning an estimated €30 million. He is something of a king of the art forgers, a hippie and a risk-taker who fooled the art world, and he has been a media star since he was caught three years ago.

Driessen could justifiably claim that after Beltracchi, he is Europe's second-most important art forger. The only problem is that no one knows who he is. Beltracchi sits in prison while Driessen is in Thailand. He pours himself a second glass of white wine.

The Most Expensive Sculptor

Alberto Giacometti was one of the great artists of the 20th century, and today, 47 years after his death, he is the world's most expensive sculptor. Three years ago, the widow of a Lebanese banker bought
his sculpture "L'Homme qui marche" at a Sotheby's auction for the equivalent of €74 million. Exhibitions of Giacometti sculptures, like the one currently underway in Hamburg, are always a guaranteed popular success.

Giacometti went from his native Bergell, Switzerland to Paris when he was 20. He was a friend of Max Ernst, Joan Miró and Pablo Picasso, of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, of André Breton and Man Ray, and of Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet and Igor Stravinsky. A portrait of Giacometti, with large eyes, a wild shock of dark hair and a face furrowed with wrinkles, graces Switzerland's 100-franc note today. He was a member of the Paris avant-garde, a man obsessed with his art, a Bohemian whose breakfast, at noon, consisted of hard-boiled eggs and copious amounts of black coffee, along with several unfiltered cigarettes. He created an oeuvre of strange figures, delicate, elongated, emaciated, desperate-looking creatures, as recognizable as a Coca-Cola bottle.

The artist is believed to have produced no more than 500 unique pieces, although no one knows exactly how many there were. Even the Fondation Alberto et Annette Giacometti in Paris, established by his widow, struggles with the task of bringing order into the chaos of Giacometti's life of an artist. He often had different foundries produce bronzes from the same design, after apparently losing track of which of his plaster models he had cast and which ones he had destroyed because he didn't like them. There is no catalogue of his oeuvre, only an incomplete database with images of his works on the Internet. He was a great artist who created a great body of work, leaving behind even greater disorder. In this sense, Giacometti made things very easy for Robert Driessen.

It was also relatively easy from a technical perspective. "Long, thin figures, and an amorphous, crumbly surface," says Driessen. "It isn't difficult to make Giacomettis." After a while, he says, he "literally had Giacometti in my fingers." According to Driessen, it took him 30 to 40 minutes for the small figures. But they weren't simply recast versions of the originals. Instead, Driessen just added to Giacometti's body of work. He made his own models, had them cast and stamped them with the stamps of the foundries Giacometti had used.

Driessen is a Dutch citizen from Arnhem in the eastern Netherlands, but he speaks fluent German. At 16, he left home and dropped out of school, and began painting for a living: windmills, canals, anglers, boats and the sea. He churned out typical Dutch scenes, 30 by 40 centimeters (about 12 by 16 inches), which were especially popular in Germany. The dealer who sold his paintings eventually asked him if he could copy the works of the Dutch Romantic painters: Paul Gabriel, Johan Hendrik Weissenbruch, Hendrick Willem Mesdag. Driessen bought old paintings at flea markets, removed the paint from the canvas and got started.

No one was interested in his own paintings. After two or three years, Driessen began painting variations on the works of Expressionists like Emil Nolde, August Macke, Wassily Kandinsky and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff. Sometimes he simply painted mirrored versions of originals, and sometimes he created a new painting from several others -- an old forgers' technique.

Business Booms

Soon a number of dealers were buying his paintings. One of them was Michel van Rijn, who would eventually acquire the reputation of being the most successful art smuggler in the world. He lived in a villa in the Spanish resort town of Marbella, was shot at by competitors and eventually cooperated with Scotland Yard. For a fake Schmitt-Rottluff painting, for example, Driessen was paid €500 to €700. The dealers also ordered motifs from him. He remembers that he once painted 15 Nolde watercolors in a single day.

Driessen estimates that he must have done more than 1,000 paintings in total. He has no interest in knowing what happened to them. "One or two of them are probably hanging in a German or a Dutch museum," he says. He remembers that a dealer had paintings he had made sold at auction at

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Sotheby's and Christie's. "I knew that I was forging art. The dealers knew that they were buying forgeries. But we didn't talk about it. I assume that they sold the forgeries as authentic paintings."

It was the 1980s, and business was going well. Driessen rented a villa with 11 bedrooms, six bathrooms and three studios on the top floor in Arnhem, only 10 kilometers (six miles) from the German border. His BMW 7 Series was parked outside.

He lives in a more modest house today, which is made of wood and stands on stilts, two kilometers up into the green mountains. It has only two rooms, and in the living room is a stack of pages with Chinese characters that he recently painted for a friend. He has written down his story as an art forger in a large sketchbook.

Moving on to Sculpture

In 1987 he began casting sculptures, a craft he had learned from Roel Maaskant, a caster in Brummen, near Arnhem. Bronze sculptures are expensive and complex, and the path from a wax or plaster figure through a latex mold to the finished sculpture is a long one. "You never know if it's going to work," says Driessen. "It's exciting."

The market for sculpture is even shadier than the market for paintings, because recasting is easier than painting. Cases have repeatedly come to light in which heirs have had castings made after the sculptor's death. For instance, there are 80 castings of a famous sculpture by Berlin artist Georg Kolbe. It is difficult to verify how many castings of a sculpture exist, partly because foundries often make copies or cast more sculptures than the artist commissioned. As a result, there are real and fake originals that are indistinguishable from one another.

Dirk Grosman is considered the best bronze caster in Arnhem. Driessen bought a number of latex molds from Grosman, which he had used to produce bronzes by artists like Degas, Rodin, Matisse, Lehbruck, Barlach and Kollwitz -- in fact, by almost every well-known, modern sculptor. For instance, the purchase included a mold for the Ernst Barlach sculpture "Kussgruppe" (Kissing Group) and Käthe Kollwitz's relief "The Complaint." Driessen recast the bronzes and took them to Berlin, to the deeply traditional Hermann Noack foundry, which had worked for Barlach and Kollwitz in the 1920s and 30s, and where he was told that the recast bronzes were authentic. Driessen sold the pieces for a total of 17,000 Dutch guilders (about €7,700) to an art dealer in The Hague. It was much more difficult to forge bronzes when no mold or casting was available. Driessen went to Duisburg more than 10 times to take more than 200 photos of Wilhelm Lehbruck's famous "Kneeling Woman" in front of the Lehbruck Museum there. To sell the finished bronze, which weighed 150 kilos (330 lbs.), he bought an ad in the art journal Weltkunst. The first prospective buyer arrived in Arnhem by helicopter.

The second was Cologne art dealer Michael Werner, one of Germany's great gallery owners, who represents artists like A.R. Penck, Markus Lüpertz and Jörg Immendorff. Werner drove up in a Jaguar and paid €42,500 for the Lehbruck copy. Today it stands in the garden of the Werner Gallery in Trebbin, south of Berlin. Werner was very enthusiastic about the piece at the time, says Driessen, but today Werner calls it an "atrocious forgery."

Driessen made his first Giacometti sculpture in 1998. After studying Giacometti's style, the signatures and the foundry stamp, he made a thin, plaster figure 2.7 meters (8'10") tall, named it "Annette," after Giacometti's wife, and put it in storage in his attic. Only after one of his dealers had found a potential buyer did he have the bronze cast.

Soon afterwards, several men paid Driessen a visit: a Dutch art dealer he had known for a long time, Guido S., an antique dealer from the southwestern German city of Mainz, and a Greek living in the southern German region of Swabia. The Greek pulled out a brown envelope and counted out 250,000
deutsche marks, all newly printed 1,000-mark bills, which he gave to the art dealer, who in turn handed the money to Driessen.

As they were leaving, Guido S. asked Driessen: "Do you have any more Giacomettis?" "Yes, I might be able to get another dozen," Driessen replied, "including some from England."

So began the great Giacometti swindle. Guido S. went to see Driessen again three weeks later, this time leaving with 12 Giacometti bronzes, all small figures less than 40 centimeters tall. Driessen was paid 6,000 deutsche marks. Neither Guido S. nor the forger was troubled by the fact that, a few months later, the police found Driessen's 13 Giacomettis at the house of the Greek art lover, who was involved in various shady deals. Instead, they began a thriving business.

Guido S. was an insatiable buyer, and Driessen provided the antique dealer with as many forgeries as he wanted. Guido S. always came in person to pick up the bronzes, and he told Driessen that he planned to open a gallery near Lagos in Portugal's Algarve region, stocked with 1,500 Giacometti sculptures. The two men would meet on Sundays at a rest area on the A3 autobahn, which passes from the Netherlands to the Rhine-Main region in Germany. Driessen moved the fake Giacomettis from his BMW to Guido S.'s Daimler station wagon. He received an envelope filled with cash, or the purchase price was simpler transferred to his bank account. The Giacometti business went on for 10 years.

The Forgery Network Grows

During one of his visits to the antique dealer in Mainz, Driessen met his partner Lothar S., who appended the title "Count von Waldstein" to his name. Lothar had been a train conductor in East Germany before he was sent to prison for challenging the political system and was later deported to West Germany. While the count handled sales, Guido S. acted as the gang's strategist.

Guido S. even wrote a book, which he called "Diego's Revenge," and of which he had 300 copies printed. It tells the story, part truth and part fiction, of Diego Giacometti, a brother and assistant of the artist, who had established a secret cache of sculptures. According to the book, the brother had even removed "the results of Giacometti's work, and of long nights of struggle" from the studio and made castings of them, "which he took to the foundry, either on his own or after checking with Alberto."

In the book, Diego initially hid the castings, but after Alberto's death in 1966, sold them to collectors in Greece, France and England. Count Waldstein, as Guido S. wrote in his tall tale, had bought the bronzes back from the collectors. Even the ISBN number printed in the book was a forgery. Every forgery needs its legend, and every forged work of art needs a plausible provenance.

Driessen's partners searched for wealthy individuals with little knowledge about art. And they were successful. A billionaire in Wiesbaden, near Frankfurt, bought 49 fake Giacomettis for €3.5 million. Stuttgart investment manager Peter Hans Schuck paid at least €3.7 million for 18 forgeries. But the attempt to sell about 300 sculptures to two New York gallery owners for €50 million failed after the Americans became suspicious.

Driessen even had to hire two assistants to keep up with the casting. The majority of the pieces were produced in Roel Maaskant's foundry in Brummen. Driessen later found out that on average he had been paid less than a fifth of the purchase price. "It was really unfair," he says, "since I was the artist, after all."

Refuge in Southeast Asia

In 2005, Driessen, his wife and their son emigrated to Thailand to escape the gray winters at home. Before they left, Driessen burned all his photos of forged works of art.

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He rented a large villa on the Gulf of Thailand, while Guido S. continued sending money to his bank account from Germany. At first, Driessen still made regular trips to the Netherlands, where he continued to produce Giacomettis. But in February 2009 the police, who were already on to Guido S. and the fake count, detained him for two hours at the Frankfurt airport. When Driessen drove to the Netherlands from there, plainclothes policemen kept him under close surveillance for the next 10 days. To be on the safe side, Driessen decided not to visit his two foundries and soon flew back to Thailand.

In early March 2009, Driessen received the following text message from Guido S.: "I'm transferring the money to your account, but make sure you don't come to Germany." Five months later, Guido S., Lothar S. and two assistants were arrested at the Frankfurt airport by a mobile police unit while in the process of selling five Giacometti forgeries for €338,000 in cash. Lothar S., the fake count, had crossed paths with real, undercover investigators with the state police in the southwestern German state of Baden-Württemberg.

The police officers also searched the gang's warehouse on Kaiser-Karl-Ring in Mainz. In several rooms in the basement, there were 831 bronzes and 171 plaster figures in the style of Alberto Giacometti, as well as 20 pieces of metal furniture, copies of originals by Giacometti's brother Diego.

The regional court in Stuttgart imposed stiff penalties. Lothar S., who insisted until recently that the sculptures are real and that he had known Diego Giacometti personally, was sentenced to nine years in prison, while Guido S. was given seven years and four months. The case against Driessen is still open, but because he is not a German citizen, the investigators cannot have him extradited from Thailand.

In June of last year, Inspector Ernst Schöller and his coworkers transported Driessen's more than 1,000 creations to a foundry in the Swabian town of Süssen. A backhoe was used to smash the plaster figures, while the metal sculptures were melted into bars at temperatures of more than 1,000 degrees Celsius (1,832 degrees Fahrenheit). The casters later used the resulting five tons of bronze to make doors for a customer in Abu Dhabi.

Driessen watched a television report on the destruction of his works on YouTube, but he wasn't overly moved by it. He doesn't feel guilty, and there are limits to his pity for the victims. "Anyone who believes he can buy a real Giacometti for €20,000 deserves to be duped. The art world is rotten."

He says that he doesn't know if he would do it all again. His wife and son moved back to Europe some time ago. Driessen pours himself another glass of wine -- with lots of ice, as usual.