

Los Angeles Times Magazine

December 16, 2001

Los Tigres'
Enduring Music

**The
Repentant
Hit Man**

A Face-Lift for
the Clift Hotel

The Immortal Golden Lady

Scandal. Intrigue. Nazi Atrocities.

**100 Years After He Started His Work, Gustav Klimt's Portrait of
Adele Bloch-Bauer Is More Incendiary Than Ever.**

By Anne-Marie O'Connor





12

features

Whose Art Is It Anyway?

12

Austrian artist Gustav Klimt's portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer is the subject of one of the most scandalous art stories of the 20th century. The work captivated and offended Vienna society when unveiled in 1907. Nazi Germany seized it during World War II. Now a Los Angeles heir to the Bloch-Bauer estate, aided by the grandson of composer Arnold Schoenberg, is trying to wrest it away from the Austrian government. **BY ANNE-MARIE O'CONNOR**

The Tigers' Tale

18

Los Tigres del Norte straddles two countries by speaking for one class—hard-driving Mexicans. For three decades the band has sung about Mexicans in their homeland and those who come north to work the fields in the United States. **BY SAM QUINONES**

A Hit Man's Guilt

22

John Sheridan got away with it. He murdered a man 12 years ago in exchange for cash and a job at a strip club. Then he began having second thoughts. **BY FRED DICKEY**

style

Design > The Suites of San Francisco

26

Ian Schrager and Philippe Starck have reinvented the Clift Hotel, but not so you wouldn't recognize the venerable San Francisco institution.

Fashion > Heeling Power

34

A Hollywood bar stocks up on the shoes of Joseph La Rose just in time for this winter's new stocking designs.

Next Week in the Los Angeles Times Magazine
The magazine will not be published for the next two weeks because of the Christmas and New Year's holidays. The magazine returns Jan. 6.



26

departments

4 Letters

5 Metropolis > JAMES RICCI

A cynic learns something positive about humanity, surprisingly while on jury duty.

CHAT ROOM > Bringing back the mullet hairdo.

PASSING THROUGH > The Southwest Museum's 11th Annual Invertrubal Marketplace.

SO SOCAL > Martini mania-cures. Home design's newest dragon lady.

FIXATIONS > Hooked on mechanical puzzles.

38 Entertaining

Winter lettuces.

39 Restaurants

Mélisse in Santa Monica.

46 Puzzle

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Whose Art Anyway?

Gustav Klimt's Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer Hangs in Austria's National Gallery.
Now Her Family Wants It Back.
 By Anne-Marie O'Connor

A painting, reduced to canvas and cadmium, gesso and wood, is not worth much. It is the genius behind the image that imbues it with value. Its meaning cannot be divorced from history.

You have seen this painting somewhere: The portrait of the sultry woman surrounded by gold is one of the most famous in the world. You may not remember the name of the artist. Perhaps you never knew it. But you remember the woman's face, pale as a diva of the silent screen.

The face keeps resurfacing, on key chains, paperweights, even dogs. People who know nothing about this anonymous woman, or the outrage the artist aroused, are still seduced by her enigmatic smile, by the painter's shimmering language and by the sheer sensuality of art.

A few observers might recognize her as an icon of turn-of-the-century Vienna. A woman who rushed to embrace new ways of experiencing art, music and the human psyche while the rest of the world was still adjusting its eyes and ears.

They recognize Adele Bloch-Bauer, one of the patronesses of the arts, most of them Jewish, whose husbands commissioned portraits by the brilliant artistic heretic Gustav Klimt. Perhaps they recall some of her story.

Didn't people once whisper that Adele and Klimt were lovers? Didn't she die young, before Adolf Hitler ravaged her world? Isn't this painting caught up in the international imbroglio over art looted by the Nazis?

This is the story behind the paint on the canvas. It begins in the tumultuous world of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna and leads to turn-of-the-century Los Angeles, where the value and meaning of this work of art is being debated as fiercely today as the moment it was unveiled.

IT IS A WEEKNIGHT IN WESTWOOD, AND A CORUS OF COMMITTED ART lovers is crowded into a Klimt lecture at the UCLA Hammer Museum. A slide of the "Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer" looms above them like a ghost. Yes, she is beautiful, an Austrian art expert tells the audience, but her face betrays her longings and desires far more than was acceptable for a woman of her time.

Her willowy form is trapped behind the gold armor covering the surface of the painting, just as Vienna's hidebound society contained the forces of modernism straining against it a century ago. Adele, the lecturer says, was a princess of the Vienna avant-garde, one of Klimt's most illustrious co-conspirators.

Just a few miles away, in Cheviot Hills, Maria Bloch-Bauer Almann, Adele's niece, carefully hands me a Viennese coffee brimming with whipped cream. Once a belle of Vienna, Maria is 85 now, and a widow. She is gracious and warm, the kind of woman referred to in another era as a *grande dame*. And she is suing the Austrian government, and its national art museum, to recover the portrait of her aunt and five other Klimt paintings.

Maria pauses a moment, trying to decide where to start.

"It is a very complicated story," she begins in an elegant Old World accent, sitting down in her sun-dappled living room. "People always asked me, did your aunt have a mad affair with Klimt? My sister thought so. My mother—she was very Victorian—said, 'How dare you say that? It was an intellectual friendship.'"

Maria looks up at a reproduction of Adele's portrait on the wall, regarding her face thoughtfully.

"My darling," she says finally, "Adele was a modern woman living in the world of yesterday." She was one of those people who are put on earth to ask uncomfortable questions, to imagine the unimaginable, to push history forward.

She was born Adele Bauer in August 1881. Her father was Jewish financier Moritz Bauer, general director of the seventh-largest bank in the Austro-Hungarian empire. Restrictions on Jewish settlement in Vienna, a metropolis of nearly 2 million when Adele came of age, had relaxed. A community of a few thousand Jews had swelled to nearly 1 in 10 Viennese. Wealthy Jews were among the city's most prominent citizens and generous philanthropists. A few, like the Rothschilds, were even given titles by the Hapsburg monarchy. They were, in the words of Czech novelist Milan Kundera, the "intellectual cement" of Middle Europe.

Adele grew up in luxury; she was poised and arrogant and seemed perfectly cast in the role she was born to play: privileged society woman. But she was also intellectually precocious. What she really wanted was to study.

It was an unlikely aspiration. There was no high school for girls in Vienna. Respectable women didn't frequent cafes—Vienna's most populist cultural hubs—where the men table-hopped, smoked and argued in German, Czech, Hungarian, Italian, Polish and Russian.

"[Adele] wanted to go to the university. She wanted to work in an

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL KELLEY



intellectual job," Maria says. "But that wasn't done at the time by women of her-so-called social position. So she married, at 17, just to get out of the house. They had great respect for each other, but I don't think there was any love, definitely not on her side."

Adele wed a Czech sugar magnate, Ferdinand Bloch, a man twice her age. It was a good match, if not a particularly romantic one. Ferdinand was a cultured man; one of his best friends was a revered Czech intellectual, Jan Masaryk, who was on his way to becoming his country's first president. Ferdinand was also a wealthy man of a nouveau riche class unburdened by aristocratic convention, though he had acquired some aristocratic trappings—a summer castle near Prague—and, perhaps, some pretensions. A sepia photograph shows Ferdinand in a fashionable Hapsburg pose, in a hunting costume with a rifle and a downed stag.

Adele's betrothal was viewed as a joining of dynastic families, an impression strengthened by the fact that Adele's sister, Therese, had married Ferdinand's brother Gustav. Adele and Therese's four brothers had died—of tuberculosis, cancer, even a duel—so the Bloch brothers agreed to a joint surname.

Adele and Therese, Maria explains, "were as different as night and day." Therese was charming and flirtatious, thrilled to lead the waltz at the annual ball of the concert hall. But "the balls bored Adele to death!" Maria recalls. "She was only interested in intellectual gatherings."

The Bloch-Bauer brothers, too, were opposites. Gustav, a lawyer, was the bon vivant who spent his nights at the opera and his days in cafes. Ferdinand was a workaholic with a passion for hunting, art and politics—and for his beautiful teenage bride.

Ferdinand delighted Adele, shortly after their marriage, by commissioning a portrait of her by Gustav Klimt. It was no small gift. A Klimt commission, at the time, cost a quarter of the price of a well-appointed, furnished country villa. Klimt was the painter of the moment, the bete noire of the Austrian cultural establishment. He bit the hand that fed him by answering a prestigious state art commission with imagery so erotic and deviant that it is startling even today. Yet such high jinks endeared him to Vienna's emerging intellectual class; his paintings of prominent women conferred a mutual cachet akin to a Warhol pop portrait.

The artist's libidinous charms were almost as famous as his irreverence. Vienna femme fatale Alma Mahler credited Klimt with her sensual awakening. His mistresses were legend, and people said he wore nothing at all under his painter's smock. Klimt made several studies of Adele—starting as early as 1900—then more, until there were hundreds of sketches. Adele and Ferdinand became habitués in Klimt's circle, a coalescing new world peopled by Gustav and Alma Mahler and their friend Arnold Schoenberg, who was conceiving the atonal symphonies that would startle the world in just a few years.

People couldn't help noticing that Adele and Klimt shared a special rapport. Perhaps it was this friendship that allowed Klimt to capture Adele's restless spirit with his shimmering 1907 portrait. When it was unveiled in Vienna, it was an immediate sensation. A newspaper said the painting elevated Adele to "an idol in a golden shrine." Critics compared its gold leaf surface to Greek Orthodox icons. To others, the metallic crust suggested the hard, glittering surfaces of upper-class society and the fragile humanity underneath. At 26, Adele was an instant celebrity.

The portrait put her in the company of some of the most remarkable women of her time: art patronesses, orchestrators of salons where famous composers mingled with such remarkable women as pioneer female journalist Berta Zuckerkandl, who embraced Klimt as the creator of a modern image of women. Klimt may have been shunned by arts bureaucrats, but this son of a failed gold engraver was now ensconced in an admiring and generous circle of patrons. Klimt assured his reputation in 1908 with another sensual gold painting, "The Kiss," an image of a man embracing a woman who bore a strong likeness to Adele. People saw a likeness too in Klimt's gold portrait of Judith, the biblical femme fatale, whom he cast as a bare-breasted sexual provocateur. This Judith wore the same gold collar Adele wore in her portrait.

Some see these as clues. But others believe Klimt and Adele enjoyed nothing more than a deep friendship misunderstood by a society unaccustomed to intellectual bonds between men and women.

Art historians were not the only ones left to sort out the waltz of intimacies. The indiscretions of the Vienna intelligentsia were open secrets. If Schoenberg's atonal compositions provoked scuffles at 1908 premieres, his marriage raised no less a ruckus. His wife Mathilde was involved with the young painter Richard Gerstl, who took his life when she went back to her husband.

Publicly, though, decorum was as rigid as the gold mosaic on Adele's portrait. Viennese playwright Arthur Schnitzler mapped out the tensions of this social schizophrenia in a story, made into the Stanley Kubrick film "Eyes Wide Shut," of

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how one man's fears of his wife's infidelities become inseparable from reality.

In this confusing milieu, Sigmund Freud became the confidant for the sexual anxieties of a generation of Vienna women. And Klimt's studio became a refuge for Adele and her friends, who hung around to talk and drink coffee. In a puritanical society hostile to the body, Klimt's world was a haven of sensuality.

MARIA, THE YOUNGEST CHILD OF THERESE AND GUSTAV BLOCH-BAUER, REMEMBERS her aunt in a long black dress, a gold cigarette holder dangling defiantly from her hand in the Vienna drawing room where Adele staged her famous salons. Adele would hold forth from one of her gilt Empire chairs, framed by glass cabinets filled with porcelain gilded with the mythical heroines and beasts of ancient Greece and Rome. She told people she was an atheist. To Maria, she was glamorous, aloof—and more than a little intimidating. Less evident to a child like Maria were Adele's disappointments: Her attempts to have children ended with two stillborn babies and a son, Fritz, who lived only three days.

"She blossomed when she was with people who were learned," Maria says. But "she was not what you would call a happy woman."

Yet Adele had succeeded in becoming an anchor of Vienna's artistic life. Klimt had died by then, after a stroke in 1918, and there were new faces in her salon, such as Richard Strauss and Chancellor Karl Renner, a Social Democrat who became president of Austria after World War II.

If other, unseen impulses still laid claim to Adele's heart, they never strayed far from her ideals. Adele was now a socialist. Maria still remembers how Adele's maid warned a relative to remove a stack of letters from her mistress's bedside. The letters were from a progressive champion of Vienna's poor, one of the people—dismissed as "few lackeys"—who helped earn the city the nickname "Red Vienna." Adele was reading the letters while ill on a winter day in 1925. She put them down and drifted off into a feverish coma. She died a few days later, at 43, of meningitis.

Her cerebral brand of existentialism left a lasting impression on Maria, who still has a letter Adele wrote to Maria's brother Robert: "If fate has given me friends who may be counted intellectually and ethically as extraordinary, then I owe these friendships to one of my main qualities: the strongest self-criticism.

"You have to learn to see. If you can appreciate what has quality and what is worthless in art, you will appreciate it in people," Adele wrote, signing her letter: "Hugs from your Buddha."

After Adele's death, Ferdinand complied with her wishes, detailed in writing in 1923, that he donate money in her name to workers' movements and orphanages. Adele had also asked her husband to donate the Klimts to the Austrian Gallery upon Ferdinand's death—a request that would have lasting repercussions.

Ferdinand never really stopped grieving. He turned Adele's bedroom into a shrine. He instructed his servants to keep fresh-cut flowers in vases by Adele's bed. He hung the gold portrait in the room along with a less idealized 1912 Klimt painting of an older Adele, her teeth stained by smoking, that some would call evidence of the end of the affair. They were flanked by other Klimts, one a landscape of the gardens of Ferdinand's Czech castle. On Adele's bedside table, Ferdinand left a photograph of the artist, smiling, a kitten in his arms.

For years, Ferdinand would visit the room and gaze at the portrait of the bride he had outlived, and of the golden moment when Vienna rivaled Paris, and Austria boasted the glittering prophets of intellectual and artistic modernism.

RANDOL SCHÖENBERG, A LOS ANGELES LAWYER, PACES AROUND HIS WILSHIRE Boulevard law office. Kinetic and intense, he yanks art tomes and history books from his shelves to illustrate his points. Framed by a view of the Santa Monica Mountains, Schoenberg spreads a century of photographs on his desk as though he is introducing the cast of a Russian novel.

As if on cue, a Fedex man shows up with Austria's appeal of a federal judge's decision to allow the case to go forward in U.S. District Court in Los Angeles. Lawyers for the defendants, the Austrian Gallery and the government of Austria, are appealing that decision to the U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals. Maria is demanding the return of six Bloch-Bauer Klimts owned by the Austrian Gallery— which she values them at \$150 million—or just compensation. Both sides are scheduled to return to the appeals court in February. The Austrian appeal is as thick as a phone book. Schoenberg flips through it and scoffs.

"It's all about jurisdiction," he says. "How sad."

If cases like this actually can be won or lost on petty-sounding technicalities,



Gustav Klimt, circa 1904, above: The painter's patroness, Adele Bloch-Bauer, in 1910, right.

Klimt's Studio Became a Refuge for Adele and Her Friends.

In a Puritanical Society Hostile to the Body,

Klimt's World Was a Haven of Sensuality.



Maria wanted to file a case on the paintings in Austrian court, but the law required a deposit of \$1.8 million based on the value of the Klimts. Schoenberg got it reduced to the equally unaffordable \$500,000. Last year, Schoenberg filed the case in U.S. District Court.

Maria sold 11 of the recovered porcelain pieces for \$100,000 to pay Schoenberg's former law firm—a lot of money for a retired dress shop owner who still works part time from her home selling clothes to older women.

Today, Maria is wearing pink, a silk scarf over her rose sweater, her warm sensuality a contrast to the glittering but cool characterizations of her aunt. She appears from the kitchen with a plate of tiny sausages, a lovely gesture, but so Old World. No one serves sausage in Los Angeles. She's describing her August trip to Vienna. There a guard at the Austrian Gallery tried to stop her from being photographed with the portrait of Adele. "I told him, 'that painting belongs to me,'" Maria says, with a feisty smile. "They delay, delay, delay, hoping I will die. But I will do them the pleasure of staying alive."

Maria may have inherited something from her aunt after all.

IF KLIMT AND SCHOENBERG WERE AUSTRIAN PROPHETS OF THE 20TH CENTURY, so was Adolf Hitler.

Like Trotsky, Hitler came to Vienna in 1907. Born in a small Austrian town near the Bavarian border, Hitler had been studying in Linz, where schoolchildren shouted out "Heil," a signature salutation adopted by anti-Semitic Austrian politicians.

Hitler was dismissed from high school for bad grades. He headed to Vienna and its famous Ringstrasse, where he gazed at the lights and the well-dressed people and vowed to become a member of this charmed circle of high culture parading into the opera.

But when he applied to the Vienna art academy, he failed the drawing exam. He moved into a homeless shelter and immersed himself in Austria's rising anti-Semitic politics, which embraced the swastika symbol, advocated tattooing gypsies and called for segregating the "master race" from Austrian Jews. Such anti-Semitism prompted Gustav Mahler to leave Vienna for a post at the New York Metropolitan Opera in 1907.

Despite such fertile soil, Hitler's destiny failed to take root there. Rejected by the Austrian army for his weak physique, he enlisted in Germany and applied for citizenship. He would return in 1938.

Maria Altmann can't remember hearing an anti-Semitic slur during her sheltered childhood in the 1920s and '30s. Her family lived in a fashionable district of the city. Her sister and three brothers were waited on by a cook, kitchen maid, chambermaid, and butler. Maria was looked after by a beloved governess, Emma, a young Lutheran woman from Poland.

She shows me fragile pages of an old leather book filled with black-and-white photographs. Here is one of Maria Bloch-Bauer, a girl becoming a woman, at the opera, smiling behind the long red velvet curtains of a private balcony. In another, the year of her debutante ball, she is draped in an off-the-shoulder silk organza gown, with the provocative stare of a starlet. Like her mother, Maria was a bit of a flirt.

"I was so spoiled," Maria sighs.

Now her eyes linger on another photograph, of herself in an ivory wedding gown, kneeling before a white marble fireplace with gilded Corinthian detailing. She is surrounded by roses.

In December 1937, Maria married Fritz Altmann, a friend of her brother Leopold. Maria's uncle Ferdinand presented Adele's diamond necklace and earrings as a wedding gift. The couple honeymooned for a month in Paris and St. Moritz, returning to a new apartment in Vienna, where they lived as newlyweds for 10 days.

MANY PEOPLE KNOW ABOUT HITLER'S INVASION OF AUSTRIA FROM "THE SOUND of Music," a Disneyesque fable where evil Nazi storm troopers strong arm a noble and unwilling nation. The reality was far less flattering.

When Hitler marched into Austria on March 12, 1938, many Austrians embraced the Nazis, a welcome that encouraged Hitler's decision to declare the Anschluss, or union of Germany and Austria, a day later. The news was shouted up from

Schoenberg, 33, doesn't want to hear it. His grandfather, the composer, fled rising Nazi hostility in Berlin in 1933.

While the Austrians have concentrated on trying to get the lawsuit dismissed, saying U.S. courts lack jurisdiction, Schoenberg is focusing on whether the Bloch-Bauers actually willed away the Klimts.

The Austrians say Adele bequeathed the paintings to the national gallery for delivery after Ferdinand's death. Schoenberg says her request had no legal authority, and that the art was seized by the Nazis seven years before Ferdinand's death, violating the terms. The only valid document, Schoenberg argues, is Ferdinand's will written in exile in Switzerland in 1945—and he named Maria and two siblings as his heirs.

At lunch in Los Angeles, the Austrian ambassador to Washington, a portly, amiable diplomat named Peter Moser, says he can see why the Bloch-Bauers are still upset. "You remember the atrocity, the brutality and the humiliation, and it's hard to see it in a strictly legal way," Moser says.

He had no precise details on how the paintings, "by coincidence, ended up in the gallery, where the will said they should."

"It's a legal dispute. It's not a Holocaust-related claim," Moser says. "It should be tried in Austria."

Maria did try to settle the case in Austria. In 1999, an Austrian minister granted the family 16 Klimt drawings of Adele and 19 pieces of Ferdinand's porcelain, but denied the Klimt paintings, saying Adele willed them to the museum.

"They Say Now Austria Was a Victim of the Nazis," Maria Says. "Believe Me, There Were **No Victims**."

The women were throwing flowers, the church bells were ringing. They were jubilant."



on the "philosemitic Klimt," but the more sophisticated recognized his significance. The Austrian Gallery snapped up the gold portrait of Adele. A Nazi lawyer, Erich Führer, sent it over with a cover letter signed: "Heil Hitler."

"And then," Maria says, "they took away my husband."

MARIA ALTMANN'S EYES DARKEN AND HER FEATURES TAKE ON THE WATCHfulness of a soldier who hears the sound of approaching artillery.

The Nazis, she says, had already confiscated her brother-in-law's cashmere factory, but they wanted the business's bank accounts, too, so they hustled her husband Fritz off to Dachau as a hostage.

Maria's father was heartbroken. He tried to stop the Nazis from taking his Stradivarius cello, a lifetime loan from the Rothschilds. His elderly Jewish friends began to commit suicide. The family pediatrician took morphine. A well-known writer jumped from a window. Even a Catholic colleague shot himself.

"Young people could get out," Maria says. "For old people, it was catastrophic. They didn't speak languages, they didn't know where to go. They couldn't go on." Maria's father died in July. "It was as if the thread of his life had been cut," she says.

Her uncle Ferdinand fled his summer castle near Prague as the Nazis advanced. It became the new home of Reinhardt Heydrich, the architect of the Final Solution. Ferdinand's Vienna *palais* became a German railway headquarters. The Gestapo moved Maria to an apartment under guard. The Nazis began to humiliate Jews in the streets, ordering them to clean the shoes of Nazis soldiers or scrub the sidewalks.

Maria's brother-in-law managed to get Fritz released from Dachau, and he and Maria were reunited, though they lived under house arrest. One day Maria told their guards that her husband had to go to the dentist, and he and Maria boarded a plane to Cologne. They made their way to a peasant's house on the Dutch border, and on a moonless night, the peasant led them across a brook and under the barbed wire to Holland.

The rest of the Bloch-Bauers scattered like rain. Maria's brother Leopold was arrested and brought before a Gestapo officer. The Nazi eyed Leopold for a long moment, then asked how he had spent New Year's Eve a few years earlier. Leopold said he had been on a skiing holiday in the Alps when

a call went out for help finding a lost skier. Leopold hiked up the mountain and found the man, injured and suffering from exposure, and carried him to safety.

"You are correct," the Gestapo officer said. "That was me."

The officer told Leopold he was Hitler's nephew. You have three days, the officer told Leopold, to leave Austria. After that, "I can't protect you."

Leopold fled.

There were darker fates. They emerge from the shadows of Maria's memory reluctantly, as if the events can be revoked by silence.

Her sister Luise, like Maria a great beauty, had married a Jewish baron and settled near Zagreb. There they lined up with their two children to board the train to the death camps, but at the last minute, a friend alerted a Gestapo officer who had long lusted after Luise.

"I will save your friend," the Gestapo officer said, "but will she be nice to me afterward?"

Luise's family lived under "protective custody." After the war ended in 1945, the next self-appointed heirs to history, Communist partisans, marched into town. The Communists called a tribunal and declared Luise's husband an enemy of the people. They walked him out to the woods on a chilly winter dawn and shot him in the back. Luise tried to escape Yugoslavia with her children, but she was caught and jailed.

Maria pauses, picking up a glass paperweight of her aunt's portrait and rubbing it like a talisman.

"So you see," Maria says, "I haven't lived through *anything*."

Continued on Page 45

the streets as Maria watched her father play cello in his string quartet.

"They say now Austria was a victim of the Nazis," Maria says, shaking her head scornfully. "Believe me, there were no victims. The women were throwing flowers, the church bells were ringing. They welcomed them with open arms. They were jubilant."

Maria was in her apartment when she noticed some Nazis outside, pushing her new car from the garage. Next a Gestapo officer rang the bell and demanded her jewelry. He took her engagement ring from her finger. Adele's diamond necklace was handed over to Hitler's right-hand man, Hermann Göring, as a gift for his wife. Maria's Uncle Ferdinand was in Czechoslovakia, so no one but the concierge witnessed the Nazis sacking his Vienna *palais*—just across the square from the art academy that rejected Hitler.

Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer's art collection was so enormous and important that Nazi officials, including representatives of what is now called the Austrian Gallery, convened a meeting to divide it up. Hitler himself got a Waldmüller painting of an Austrian prince. Hitler's leading art agent, Hans Posse, "bought" a Rodin owned by Bloch-Bauer at a discount for the Führer Museum Hitler wanted to build in Linz. A Munich bank owner, August Von Fink, acquired other Bloch-Bauer paintings for the Linz museum. Others, by Dutch Master Meindert Hobbema and Hans Holbein the Younger, were passed around. In the end, according to Nazi art theft expert Jonathan Repopoulos, "Hitler acquired more art in the limited amount of time than any other collector in history."

Like most Austrians, Hitler had no eye for avant-garde Austrian artists and was most interested in Ferdinand's Austrian Masters collection. Some Nazis frowned

Luise did get out of Yugoslavia, with a new husband. Her daughter married an Austrian prince.

Let it never be said that the Bloch-Bauers were conquered.

IN WARTIME VIENNA, ARTISTIC AND intellectual circles were plundered, and some of the remarkable patronesses who would be known as "Klimt's Women" found themselves fighting for their lives. Amalie Zuckerkandl converted to Judaism to marry a distinguished surgeon who was a close friend of Klimt. Klimt had painted Amalie with upswept hair and bare shoulders. She was deported in 1942 with her daughter Nora to die in the Belzec death camp.

Elisabeth Lederer, the daughter of another Klimt subject, Susana Lederer, was a sculptor who had joined a Protestant church and married a Gentile baron. Klimt had also painted Elisabeth, with Chinese dragons swirling in her wake.

A Nazi court divorced Elisabeth, and it became clear that her life was in jeopardy. That's when Klimt's roguish reputation came in handy. Elisabeth somehow obtained a certificate stating that Klimt—and not her Jewish father—was her true biological parent. Her mother and other "witnesses" supported this. Investigators studied family photos and handwriting. An art historian said Elisabeth's sculptures betrayed no "Jewish characteristics" and "in her artistic works, there is no expression of a purely Jewish nature." The conclusion? "Descent from Klimt is not improbable." Elisabeth was saved, although she would die at age 30, in 1944.

As such hells played out in private, the Nazis organized a Klimt exhibit in 1943 in Vienna that is still the largest ever staged. They hid the Jewish identities of the Klimt women, deriding Adele with a placard reading simply: "Lady in Gold."

Maria's uncle Ferdinand escaped Czechoslovakia for Switzerland, where he moved into a small Zurich hotel. His art collection, which would fetch hundreds of millions of dollars today, was scattered among many greedy hands.

He struggled in vain to recover a few possessions at the end of World War II. He rewrote his will, naming his niece, Maria, her sister and a brother as his heirs. He died nearly penniless a few months after the war ended, in 1945. His ashes were sent to rest beside Adele's.

"He died alone and lonely, a broken man," Maria erupts, her eyes snap-

ping with outrage. "Adele's wishes were a request, not an obligation, to share her love of the Klimts with her beloved Viennese. What love could my uncle have for Austria after they robbed him of everything? He had no intention of giving the Klimts to those people."

"This art was dragged out of the house by people who murdered their friends. Would Adele want the things she treasured left [in Austria] after that?"

Austrian arts officials realized that the Bloch-Bauer "acquisitions" left them in a sensitive position. The postwar director of the Austrian Gallery, Dr. Karl Garzaroli, revealed his concerns in a March 1948 letter reproaching his Nazi-era predecessor, Bruno Grimschitz: "Neither a court-authorized nor a notarized or other personal declaration of Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer exists, which in my opinion you certainly should have obtained. I find myself in an extremely difficult situation. I cannot understand why even during the Nazi era an incontestable declaration of gift in favor of the state was never obtained from Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer."

"In any case, the situation is growing into a sea snake."

Government officials revealed none of Garzaroli's concerns when Maria's brothers tried to get some of the art back just after the war. The letter might never have come to light had it had not been for an Austrian investigative journalist, Hubertus Czernin. After Austria passed a restitution law in 1998 for victims of Nazi art thefts, Czernin began to dig into old records at the Austrian Gallery. The records became a book, "The Forgery: the Bloch-Bauer Case and the Work of Gustav Klimt," that traced how paperwork on the paintings had been falsified to hide the thefts.

AT THE UCLA HAMMER MUSEUM, THE Austrian art expert has clicked through slides of most of Klimt's portraits and reached Adele's. He gives little hint of the controversy.

"The portrait suggests Adele Bloch-Bauer's restlessness, and also her denial of society's expectations," the lecturer, Tobias Natter, is saying.

Natter is the director of the Austrian Gallery's modern art collection, but he is as formally attired as a time-traveler from Victorian Vienna. He looks away as I press forward with my notebook to ask him about Adele, and his handlers hustle him off.

Natter has faced this before. He himself resurrected the stories behind the paintings, as the chief curator of the remarkable exhibition "Klimt's Women." It opened in Vienna in September 2000 with a beautiful poster of Klimt's "Lady with Hat and Feather Boa"—a work that heists immediately

came forward to reclaim. "The figure's bedroom eyes no longer seemed to signify an erotic gaze," quipped Leo Lensing in the Times Literary Supplement, "but rather to convey something more akin to anxious anticipation, as if she were waiting to be picked up by her rightful owners."

Adele's gold portrait was at center stage of the exhibit, and in a book that accompanied the show, Natter acknowledged its confiscation by the Nazis and Maria's lawsuit.

Its inclusion drew more barbs. Vienna culture reporter Joachim Riedl compared Austria to a "gangster's moll, parading around after a bloody robbery with jewelry that she insists the victims actually gave her as a present."

When the exhibition moved to Canada, Adele's gold portrait stayed in Vienna. Authorities said it was too fragile to move. But international art experts said Austria was reluctant to risk letting the paintings out of the country in an era when stolen art is being seized from museum walls by courts that are increasingly sympathetic to victims of Nazi theft.

A few months after his Los Angeles lecture, Natter takes a leave from the Austrian Gallery. He's not sure he's going back. When I finally track him down, waiting for a plane in the Vienna airport, he admits he is haunted by the mysteries behind the Klimts. But he does not want to discuss the lawsuit.

The public wrangle seems a strange fate for a work of art so intimate. The portrait of Adele is not a field of lilies or a stary night. Here, in her naked eyes, lies a story that is more day than novel. A painting comes from a time and place. Those who have heard the lovely, tragic story of the portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer can never again see her as simply a "Lady in Gold."

Ultimately, old age and death may be the final arbitrator of this legal battle. But Adele will live on. Her portrait is, perhaps, more incendiary and meaningful today than when it was painted. Frozen in Vienna's golden moment, she has achieved her dream of immortality, more than she ever imagined.

And that is the power of art. ■

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