



GOLDEN GIRL

A Portrait of Injustice

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The smell of chicken dumpling soup wafts through Maria Altmann's home. A collection of antique timepieces is illuminated behind a glass case in the living room. Old photos of friends and family seem to chronicle a great life. Wisdom exudes off the walls. Outside her redwood bungalow, blooming flowers stretch for attention surrounded by a swimming pool and the ambiance of her Cheviot Hills neighborhood. At the center of this charmed life: a 90-year-old great-grandmother full of elegance, who always carries herself like a lady

Wearing a neatly tied scarf, French toilet water and a graceful smile, Altmann says, with a thick, prewar Viennese-German accent, "I used to be a very beautiful girl." Seven decades ago, people would have lined up to take her picture. Seven decades – that's also nearly the same amount of time it took her to right the awful wrong that was done to her family. It's the \$300 million dollar story of the gold portrait and its masterpiece companions. It's about injustice, anger and now, finally, revenge – the reason why this proud, witty woman is along for the ride at a media circus parading through her home.



Gustav Klimt, *Adele Bloch-Bauer I*.
1907, Oil, silvering and gilding on canvas
140 x 140 cm.



Vienna, Austria - March 1938



Maria Altmann was a beautiful bride of only four months when the Gestapo came knocking. She felt the chill of that blustery, winter day as she opened her apartment door. The man standing there was short and neatly dressed in a business suit. He said his name was Landau and he was sent to collect taxes for the German government. The Nazis had just annexed Austria and started a campaign to loot wealthy Jewish families. When Landau asked to see Altmann's jewelry, she could see ruthlessness in his eyes.

The notorious Nazi ransacked Altmann's place, taking the earrings and necklace she wore at her wedding. He even took the engagement ring off her finger. "I was terrified they'd take my husband," Altmann recounts. "So I said, 'There's more jewelry in the safe.' I gave them everything hoping they would leave Fritz with me." But by the end of that day in 1938, Altmann's diamonds and dignity were gone, and so was her husband. Landau took Fritz Altmann "hostage" and threw him in a concentration camp. The couple, who'd just finished an extended honeymoon, was now in hell.

Fritz spent several months in the dank Dachau prison. The only condition of his release was an awful example of extortion; the Nazis demanded that Fritz's brother, Bernard, sign over his successful cashmere sweater business to them. Bernard, who'd escaped to France, didn't hesitate. Family had always come first.

Fritz was free, but not really. The Germans moved he and Maria to a small apartment in Berlin, placing them under house arrest. Then, one night, under the cover of darkness and a fake doctor's appointment, the Altmanns made their escape. The risk could have been fatal. Even so, they saw no alternative.

With Bernard's help, they trekked the dangerous route into Holland, and eventually, England. The British welcomed them with

open arms, helping Bernard build a new sweater factory in Liverpool. Fritz, meantime, was intent on building his marriage back up. "I'll never forget the day he came home and said he'd gotten my engagement ring back from the Nazis," Maria says. "He put it on my finger and I believed it. Of course, he had the ring copied. But I so wanted to believe it."

In reality, the Altmanns never got any of their jewelry back. Landau gave Maria's wedding necklace to Hitler's right-hand man, Hermann Göring. And, like the brutal bastard he was, Göring gave it to his wife as a present. No one knows where it is now.

The immaculate necklace was originally a gift from Maria's uncle, Ferdinand. It had belonged to his wife, Adele, who died in 1925 from meningitis. Maria was nine when her aunt died. "She was very cool, fabulously elegant and an interesting woman," Altmann remembers. Adele Bloch-Bauer was thin, beautiful and no ordinary turn-of-the-century woman. She was the hostess of a famed Viennese salon and surrounded herself with interesting people, partying with intellectuals, artists and musicians. "She should have lived in the world today," Altmann says. "She would have gone to a university and been a politician."

One of Adele's party pals was artist and decorator Gustav Klimt. Klimt started the Austrian Secession Movement, the Viennese version of Art Nouveau, and is best known for his ornate painting, *The Kiss*. He was a master at capturing the intelligence, cultural energy and sexuality of Vienna at that time. Tension oozes out of Klimt's paintings as they try to tempt fate. His art seems to make eternity a reality and death inevitable at the same time. But it was his quest for ecstasy and embrace of glamour that Adele so admired. It's what made them good friends and possibly lovers – it was rumored, but never proven, that they had a long affair.



IMAGES CLOCKWISE: PALAIS, VIENNA, AUSTRIA, OWNED BY FERDINAND BLOCH-BAUER, DINNING ROOM AT PALAIS, FERDINAND AND ADELE, MARIA ON HER WEDDING DAY, MARIA AND SON, MARIA & FRITZ IN CALIFORNIA, COPY OF FERDINAND'S WILL, A YOUNG MARIA, ESCAPE ROUTE FROM AUSTRIA, FRITZ SINGING OPERA, MARIA & FRITZ IN AUSTRIA. CENTER IMAGE: MARIA & FRITZ ALTMANN

GOLDEN GIRL

continued

Ferdinand was head of the Austrian sugar industry. He had tons of money and loved spending it on art. In the early-1900's, he commissioned Klimt to do two portraits of his wife. Klimt, in the best period of his artistic career at the time, was methodical in his approach to this work. Adele posed for him countless times as he sketched feverishly. He did more than 100 preparatory drawings and, in the end, it would take three years to bring his vision of her to life on canvas. By all accounts, Klimt felt this portrait would be a universal celebration of beautiful women.

The elegant and erotic *Adele Bloch-Bauer I*, or "Golden Adele," has been called the Austrian *Mona Lisa*. Like da Vinci's masterpiece, this oil and gold-encrusted painting is romantic in its mystery. It's contemporary and medieval at the same time. Her hair, jewelry and dress paint her as an empress, her serpentlike hands exaggerate her sensuality. The ancient Egyptian eyes of Horus give her body stability, yet she appears to be floating in an abstract sea of gold. Klimt manipulated the surface of the canvas by applying gold-laced paint, creating true three-dimensional relief and a reflective surface. There are all kinds of secrets hidden in the Byzantine mosaic background, including her initials "AB" everywhere. It's clear Klimt not only painted a person here, but attempted to capture her aura. What's not clear is its message. Was Klimt portraying Adele's life of wealth and prestige as liberating or suffocating?

Her carefully constructed, neutral facial expression doesn't give much away. Is she reserved or resigned? Quietly content or ashamedly sad? Adele had lots of layers, and perhaps that's the point. She had the means to do what she wanted but never seemed happy at home. Although she got pregnant three times, it always led to a miscarriage or stillborn. It got more devastating each time. Socially, she was also torn between her role as housewife and her excitement about Europe's social revolution.

Klimt, on the other hand, knew exactly where he fit in. He was a bohemian who pushed the boundaries of Viennese taste. He was captivated by sexuality. He often drew naked women masturbating, sometimes while wearing a hooded cloak with nothing on underneath. In 1918, he died at the age of 55 from a stroke; afterward, several mistresses came forward claiming Klimt had fathered 14 children.

In 1912, five years after he finished "Golden Adele," Klimt painted a life-sized version of Mrs. Bloch-Bauer. The colorful mix of green and lavender demonstrates the shift in Klimt's style. In *Adele Bloch-Bauer II*, Klimt again blends various artistic influences with a similar ambiguity of space as in the original painting. This time, decorative Chinese motifs fill the background. Adele is the only patroness he painted twice and the best example of Klimt's artistic evolution.

Affair or not, Adele always had her husband's heart. She did her best to do the family thing, too. "Because she couldn't have her own kids, it seemed like she didn't have a lot of time for us," Maria says. "But I always looked up to her." The Bloch-Bauers were a very close bunch by action and by blood. You see, the two Bloch boys married the two Bauer girls. So, Maria's mother was Adele's sister and Maria's father was Ferdinand's brother. Sounds complicated but their love was not. Each Sunday, Ferdinand and Adele invited Maria, her parents and her four older siblings over to their





palais for brunch. It was a huge building on the finest street in Vienna, near the Opera House. Maria still remembers how gorgeous it was. Fine art, tapestries, porcelain and furniture filled the place.

When Adele died, Ferdinand and the family were crushed. He built a memorial room to her at the palais where he kept fresh flowers at all times. Six Klimt paintings hung in the room. The two portraits of his wife were front and center. Four exceptional Klimt landscapes of Austrian towns, a forest and an apple tree completed the shrine. The landscapes are perfectly proportioned and masterly brush-stroked. In Adele's will, she asked her husband to donate the Klimt pieces they had collected to Austria's Gallery Belvedere when he died. Ferdinand, who paid for the paintings, had always been a charitable man and said he intended to honor his wife's request. But that was before the Nazis changed everything.

Maria's wedding was likely the last great memory of Ferdinand's life. By the time the Gestapo showed up at Maria and Fritz's apartment, Ferdinand had fled to his sum-

mer home, a large castle and estate near Prague, Czechoslovakia. The Nazis, meantime, levied a bogus tax bill on him confiscating his sugar company and his Vienna palais. In early-1939, Eric Führer, a Nazi liquidation lawyer, put Ferdinand's estate up for sale. His famous 400-piece porcelain collection went to the highest bidder. Some 19th century Austrian art went to Hitler while some of the Klimt pieces went to the Austrian Gallery. Führer kept *Adele Bloch-Bauer I* for his own personal collection.

Four months later, Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer wrote in his second-to-last will: "In an illegal manner, a tax penalty of one million Reichsmarks was imposed and my entire estate in Vienna was confiscated and sold off." When the war ended in 1945, Ferdinand was almost penniless. He died in November of that year having never recovered any of his property. Bloch-Bauer's last will revoked all others and left his entire estate to his brother's kids: Maria, Robert and Luise. His intention was to keep the Klimt pieces in the family.

Just before Ferdinand died, he sent a letter to Maria and Fritz telling them to make a good life for themselves in America. And that's exactly what the Altmanns were doing. They arrived in Fall River, Massachusetts, in 1940. Their first son was born a short time later on U.S. soil. "All four of our children were born American," a fact Maria states with pride. "America has been so good to us." In 1942, they made their way to Los Angeles and became U.S. citizens by 1945. The moves came at a time when her extended family was in shambles. Some died in concentration camps, others lost everything.

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As the Nazis divided up Ferdinand's art collection, it also continued its annexation of Europe. When Sudentland became part of Greater Germany, Ferdinand was forced to move again. Friends helped him get to Zurich, Switzerland. At the same time, Nazi Commander Reinhard Heydrich moved into Bloch-Bauer's Prague castle where he planned to finish mapping out his "Final Solution." The plan was to exterminate the entire Jewish population of Europe and the Soviet Union - an estimated 11,000,000 people.

But one day in 1942, after leaving Ferdinand's castle, Heydrich was ambushed and assassinated. Hitler demanded revenge. He ordered the execution of the Czech agents who took down Heydrich and called for the destruction of the small mining town of Lidice on false charges that it had helped the assassins. On June 10, all 172 men and boys in the village were executed, the women and children were sent to concentration camps and each building housing them was burned to the ground.

The Bloch-Bauers were spread out across the globe. Although Ferdinand left all his fortunes to Maria and her siblings, he had control of none of it when he died. So, the kids had nothing to show for it. Anti-Semitism and hostility still existed in parts of Europe and it made recovering the stolen property nearly impossible. The post-war Austrian government put up all kinds of legal hurdles to keep Jews from recovering their looted artwork.

By now, the Bloch-Bauer Klimts, including "Golden Adele," were hanging in Austria's Galerie Belvedere. Records were changed to show the art was donated. The government and museum cited Adele's will as the legal tender to ownership. The facts were twisted and now the heirs' hands were tied. All they could do was watch as pieces from his extensive porcelain collection went up for auction on the open market. Owners and buyers couldn't be sued under "bona fide" purchaser rules.

Maria and Fritz moved on. They were getting well-acquainted with American life. The eldest Altmann son played with Lena Horn's son, ironically, on Horn Street in Los Angeles. "Humphrey Bogart lived across the street," Maria says. "We could hear him and his wife yelling all the way to our house. They were always drunk." Fritz took a job with Lockheed Martin designing aerospace technology. Maria ran a women's clothing boutique. They had three sons and a daughter and were a close-knit bunch. Mom and Dad talked openly to the kids about how the war

changed their family – telling stories about people the youngsters only knew by name.

The children went to school in Los Angeles, enjoyed the sun and the beach and grew into fine people. Maria and Fritz were never bitter; they chose to enjoy life instead. Fritz was a nice-looking gentleman, a hard worker and great father. He loved opera and was a fine singer in his own right. He lived a full life before passing away in 1994. Maria became the lone Bloch-Bauer heir left after her sister, Luise, died a few years later.

For half a century, *Adele Bloch-Bauer I* hung in Vienna. It was on the cover of the museum's guide book and had become part of the country's cultural identity. But in the mid-1980's questions began to surface about the origin of much of Austria's art. The tightlipped government and tightly-sealed records began to crack under enormous pressure. In 1998, Austria passed new laws opening up its archives to the public and a feisty Viennese reporter was about to blow the lid off the looted art controversy.

Hubertus Czernin, a respected writer, started digging. He found that victims of the Holocaust were still being victimized by Austria's greedy government. He also uncovered a letter written by Eric Führer, that same Nazi liquidation lawyer, dated 1941. In it, Führer officially transferred *Adele Bloch-Bauer I* to the Austrian Museum. It was signed "Heil Hitler."

The records showed Ferdinand did donate one Klimt landscape to the museum, but Czernin believed the others belonged to the Bloch-Bauer heirs. Thousands of additional pieces in Austria's art collection also came into question. A separate panel investigating the claims confirmed Czernin's research and the government backpedaled fast. Just a few months after the facts were revealed, Austria's president signed a new restitution bill into law.

Czernin sent a copy of his findings to Maria Altmann's attorney, E. Randol Schoenberg. It was the first time Altmann learned that the Austrian Museum had lied to her brother's attorney about Adele's will and that she had been swindled out of her inheritance. Maria was angry – and so too would the Austrian public be when newspapers reported the Klimt paintings would have to be returned. Feeling political heat, the government reneged. While hundreds of artworks were

returned to their rightful pre-war owners, the Klimt paintings stayed put. Altmann wouldn't stand for it.

At the time, Schoenberg was mainly doing mundane contract cases in Los Angeles. But this injustice really chafed him. It became his passion to get these paintings back. "I remember going to



In August 2000, he sued the Austrian government in the United States under a little-used clause in the Foreign Sovereign Immunities Act. Austria tried to block the suit at every level of the judicial system. But in 2004, this very important case made it all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court.

the Austrian museum as a kid," Schoenberg says. "I remember my mom saying Adele Bloch-Bauer, that painting up there, she's a relative of my friend, Maria Altmann." Other pieces that hung in the museum had Schoenberg family connections. Similar to the Altmanns, all four of Schoenberg's grandparents, including famed composer Arnold Schoenberg, escaped Nazi Germany and moved to California.

In June 1999, an Austrian government committee agreed to return a smattering of the Bloch-Bauer collection – some Klimt drawings and porcelain

settings – to its heirs. But the committee formally blocked the transfer of the five Klimt paintings Altmann felt entitled to. Schoenberg suggested an independent arbitrator sort it all out, but Austria refused. So at the age of 84, Maria Altmann filed suit. Filing a lawsuit in Austria, however, is an expensive proposition. Schoenberg unsuccessfully tried to get the court fees waived. If Altmann was going to make her case in an Austrian court of law, it would cost her as much as a million dollars, a figure she simply could not afford. Austria had won round one, but Schoenberg wasn't done fighting.

In August 2000, he sued the Austrian government in the United States under a little-used clause in the Foreign Sovereign Immunities Act. Austria tried to block the suit at every level of the judicial system. But in 2004, this very important case made it all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. The justices would not rule on who should get the paintings, only if Altmann's claims could be heard in an American courtroom. It was a long shot but the chance of a lifetime for this L.A. lawyer.

Schoenberg is a slender guy who doesn't look like he could hurt anyone. But he's got the mental toughness of ten men.

"Randy has fabulous endurance and knowledge," Altmann says of her attorney. It's any litigator's dream to argue in front of the nation's highest court, and Schoenberg was in for the ultimate David vs. Goliath legal battle. Not only was the entire country of Austria against him, other countries wrote briefs asking the justices to rule against Maria Altmann. Many nations felt a decision in her favor could put scrutiny on their own museums in the future.

Schoenberg went for the gold in that courtroom and most observers thought he did a good job.

A local Washington reporter wasn't so sure. The journalist told Schoenberg he'd been watching the justices' reactions for decades and was certain he'd lose. Schoenberg was back at his L.A. office when that same reporter called one June day. "I guess I was wrong," he said. "You won." The Supreme Court ruled in favor of Maria Altmann. Her case would finally be heard in an open courtroom.

But rather than trodding through an expensive and lengthy trial and appeals process, Schoenberg decided to gamble. He convinced Altmann and the Austrian government to argue the case in front of an arbitration panel in Europe, winner take all. Schoenberg was up against Austria's best attorneys and even presented his case in German. This past January, the arbitration panel made up of two Austrian professors and one Austrian lawyer, unanimously sided with Maria Altmann. After 68 years, the five Klimt paintings, now worth an estimated \$300 million, were finally coming home. "Professionally, it's been the greatest case of my career and a tremendous honor to represent Maria," Schoenberg says. "It's incredibly fulfilling to see the paintings come to the United States, taking the same path its owners took."

On March 20, a separate arbitration panel awarded Altmann a stake in her uncle's \$6 million palais – the same place that once housed the Klimt paintings and the center of Maria's family memories. Despite the long ordeal, Altmann says she has no bad feelings towards Austria and its people. "I want to thank (the panel) for their courage and honesty," Altmann says. "I was very angry with what happened. But now that we have resolved it, I try to see the good side of it."

It was tough for the more than 8,000 visitors that crowded Austria's Gallery Belvedere to find any good in the resolution that final weekend. Many had sad faces as they waited in the freezing cold to get a final glimpse of the beloved Klimt pieces. Many in the art community called on the Austrian government to buy the paintings from Maria Altmann. But the government turned down the plea and the pieces were shipped to Los Angeles. Dr. Verena Traeger, art historian, museum curator and a lecturer at the University of Vienna, says, "The loss of these paintings to an art-appreciating public in Austria is nothing short of a tragedy. Their undisputed art historical value and their obvious material value should not be confused."

Traeger feels that the eighth wealthiest country in the world could have afforded the paintings. She feels the government, whose recent investments include millions to raise the speed limit on a few kilometres of roadway and out-dated anti-aircraft defense, let its people down. "That the government failed to respect the importance of our Jewish cultural 'inheritance' by not purchasing these paintings, is somewhat disquieting. The whole topic has become somewhat polemic. In short – utter confusion and cultural shock." Traeger and her colleagues established an independent interdisciplinary platform of

IMAGES: Maria Altmann's attorney, E Randol Schoenberg in his Los Angeles office. Painting at top: *Houses In Unterach Am Attersee*, at right: *Apple-Tree I*.



Austrian art historians, conservators and representatives of culture. They want the Austrian people to be fully aware of the historical importance of these paintings and put pressure on the government to preserve the country's artistic identity.

Altmann and the four heirs of her deceased siblings will ultimately decide the fate of the Klimt paintings. Maria wants them to remain in the public eye and, at least for now, wants Americans to get acquainted with the much-revered but seldom seen Austrian artist. She loaned the five paintings to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. They will be on display there through the end of June. "This is a tremendous, historic moment for us to premiere the Klimt paintings in the U.S. We are deeply grateful to the Altmann family," says LACMA Senior Curator Stephanie Barron. "Adele Bloch-Bauer I is an icon of 20th century art. To me, it represents the magic and splendor of turn-of-the-century Vienna – the nexus of art and culture, theatre, literature. It all comes together for me in this painting."

For Altmann, the painting simply represents family. She's happy to have it and the others home. "To see them here is a dream come true," Altmann said during their unveiling at the museum on April 4. "Los Angeles has been my hometown for so long, so to have them here is beyond words. I'm going to come here very often and bring friends to see them."

On the downside, the paintings also brought with them "the curse of the cane," as Maria calls it. "My uncle Ferdinand always needed a cane to get around back then. I've never had any problem until now." Maria has recently developed a mild case of arthritis that has hobbled her a bit. Couple that with all the museum and media attention, and Altmann is flat-out tired. But she's the only one in her bloodline to take this journey full circle. While reliving some of these experiences has been painful, it truly has helped her put her life in perspective.

Maria has six grandkids now and just nine months ago she became a great-grandmother. "He's the cutest little thing. He just laughs and laughs. I've never seen anything like it. He's so happy. He doesn't know about any of the wrongs that go on in life. He has no clue about the Nazis or Iraq. He just laughs all day." It's an image Altmann will always treasure, knowing the preservation of what's sacred to a family is what matters most in this world.



Earlier this year, an Austrian advisory panel handling claims for art looted by the Nazis recommended that 6,292 works of art be returned to their original owners. Maria Altmann and the Bloch-Bauer heirs still have a case pending involving a pair of figurines by Belgian symbolist sculptor George Minne.

In response to ARTWORKS Magazine's article on the return of the Klimt paintings to Maria Altmann, Dr. Verena Traeger, art historian & museum curator, working with the independent Proklimtbuilder Platform, wrote the following:



Austrian Gallery Belvedere

To begin with, I can only let a simple fact speak for itself. Once the arbitrator's decision had been made public and the Austrian government had also publicly declined an interest in purchasing the paintings for the people of Austria, things moved very quickly – a decision was made immediately to take the paintings down and put them into museum storage ready for collection by the owners.

The government's decision not to buy the paintings was represented solely on a financial basis (not uncontroversial considering that Austria is the eighth wealthiest country in the world!). The purported lack of funds becomes ridiculous when one considers that our finance minister announced a record high in tax revenue.

That these paintings belonged to and, in part, were commissioned by the famous Viennese Jewish art patrons, Ferdinand and Adele Bloch-Bauer, is not only relevant for their past and present fate, but of pressing significance for Austrian cultural identity. The paintings, especially the two portraits of Adele Bloch-Bauer, were a constant visible reminder in Vienna that Jewish art patronage was not only important but essential to Austrian cultural development before its abrupt end due to the Nazi regime. It also served to remind us of what we had lost.

That perhaps some are only too happy to lose that reminder is a matter no truly decent citizen in this country would like to meditate upon, but that the government failed to respect the importance of our Jewish cultural 'inheritance' by not purchasing these paintings, is somewhat disquieting.

This is why a number of colleagues and I decided to establish an independent interdisciplinary platform of Austrian art historians, conservators and representatives of culture. We felt it our duty to emphasize that other issues were more important than the already exaggerated financial aspect. We also felt it was time that the government realized that these paintings and the controversy around them were not just going to vanish.

For more information: www.proklimtbilder.at