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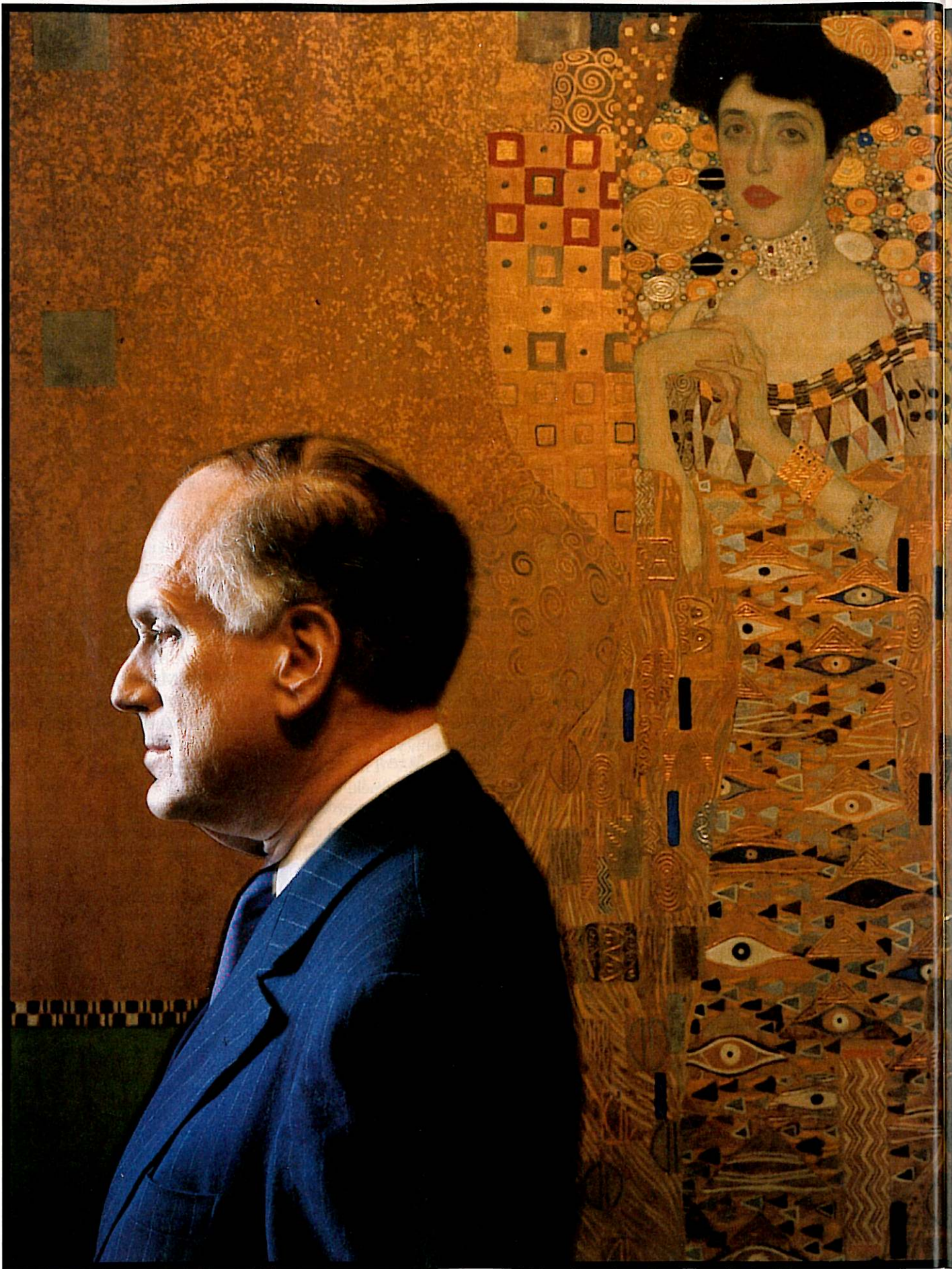
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ARROW



AN ACQUIRING EYE

Ronald Lauder's career in collecting art.

BY REBECCA MEAD

The Neue Galerie, a museum at Fifth Avenue and Eighty-sixth Street that is dedicated to Austrian and German art, occupies the former home of Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt III, and is the kind of place that is usually described as a jewel box: compact, exquisite, and filled with things that conspicuously display the wealth and taste of its owner. That owner is Ronald S. Lauder—the cosmetics heir, businessman, philanthropist, former ambassador, and sometime mayoral candidate—and one recent afternoon he made his way through the museum, checking on the jewels.

It was an hour before the doors were to open for a cocktail party celebrating the latest exhibition—a show of domestic interiors designed by Josef Hoffmann, the Viennese architect, in the early part of the twentieth century—and last-minute preparations were being made. In an upstairs gallery, someone vacuumed specks of dust from the inside of a case that contained examples of Hoffmann's sleek tableware designs; downstairs, waiters were arranging champagne flutes on silver trays. Lauder, who opened the Neue Galerie five years ago and drops by several days a week when he is in New York City, surveyed an austere master-bedroom suite that, in an impressive feat of curatorial persuasion, had been borrowed from a Viennese family, the Salzners, in whose home it remains in daily use. "These people are sleeping on cots," Lauder said, with a note of satisfaction; later that evening, he was to host a dinner for the Salzer matriarch and her son by way of recompense. In another gallery, Lauder stepped into a reconstructed *Mädchenzimmer*—a girl's room, from 1904, with a twin bed, a dresser, and a vanity—and adjusted a curtain hanging from a closet rail, to the mock dismay of the museum's director, Renée Price, who

was accompanying him on his tour. "Sir, sir, we take our shoes off when we walk on the felt—it will get marked!" Price cried. Lauder stepped off the carpeting, which appeared unsullied by his trespass. "Well, maybe not by limousine riders," Price conceded.

Lauder, who is the younger son of the late Estée Lauder and is estimated to be worth \$2.7 billion, is sixty-two years old. He was dressed formally, as he invariably is, in a monogrammed white shirt and a blue pin-striped suit that was made by hand for him in Milan. He has graying hair, which he wears brushed back from his temples. His eyes are heavy-lidded and lugubrious, his voice low and unmodulated, his smile cautious. He is just under six feet four inches tall, and moves with the self-consciousness of one who, having inadvertently claimed more than his fair share of vertical space, is careful not to dominate the horizontal. When he gesticulates, as he does to express the enthusiasm that his subdued demeanor might otherwise fail to convey, the movement is all below the elbow, like that of a reluctant swimmer splashing waist deep in cold water.

The current object of Lauder's greatest enthusiasm, and the most glittering jewel in his museum, is on the second floor: "Adele Bloch-Bauer I," by Gustav Klimt. The painting was commissioned in 1903 by Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer, a wealthy Jewish Viennese industrialist and the husband of its twenty-five-year-old subject, the flush-faced, sensuous-lipped, richly bejewelled Adele Bloch-Bauer. She was a well-known hostess whom Klimt depicted in a sinuous golden gown and robe, against an abstracted golden background, looking like a Byzantine socialite who has just set down her cigarette holder and is about to discuss the latest symphony by that

Ronald Lauder with Gustav Klimt's "Adele Bloch-Bauer I" (1903), which he bought for a hundred and thirty-five million dollars. Photograph by Steve Pyke.



terribly interesting composer Gustav Mahler.

For sixty-five years, the portrait hung in the Belvedere Palace, in Vienna, which houses the Austrian state's incomparable collection of Klimts, including the artist's most famous work, "The Kiss." Eight years ago, however, Adele Bloch-Bauer's heirs began efforts to reclaim the painting, which Austria had appropriated from Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer during the Nazi era. A year ago, a government panel declared that the painting, along with four other Klimts formerly owned by Bloch-Bauer that had been hanging in the Belvedere, was the property of his heirs, among them Maria Altmann—the ninety-year-old niece of Adele Bloch-Bauer, who lives in Los Angeles. Several months later, while the painting was on display at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the news broke that Lauder had bought it, on behalf of the Neue Galerie, for a hundred and thirty-five

million dollars—at the time the highest price ever paid for a work of art, surpassing by thirty-one million dollars the previous record, for Picasso's "Boy with a Pipe," in 2004.

Lauder has been a serious collector for decades—he owns about four thousand works—and his discernment is widely admired in the art world. Glenn Lowry, the director of the Museum of Modern Art, says of him, "There are lots of people who can tell the difference between something great and something very good. He can tell the difference between great and exceptional." He calls Lauder's private holdings "the finest collection of modern art assembled by an individual in the world today." (For many years, Lauder was the chairman of MOMA, and Lowry's museum stands to profit considerably from the fruits of Lauder's connoisseurship when the time comes.) The Klimt purchase has placed Lauder in the select group of individuals whose desire

to acquire superlative works of art has been matched by a willingness to pay any sum to acquire them, a pantheon that includes H. E. Huntington, who bought Gainsborough's "Blue Boy" for seven hundred and twenty-nine thousand dollars in 1921, and Andrew Mellon, who paid eight hundred and thirty-six thousand dollars for Raphael's "Niccolini-Cowper Madonna" in 1928.

The legacies of these men have become beloved public institutions: the "Blue Boy" is the cornerstone of the Huntington Library's art collection, in San Marino, California, and Mellon's collection is the foundation of the National Gallery, in Washington. The Neue Galerie, too, was created not just for the private pleasure of its owner but also for the edification of the public, and not since Henry Clay Frick bestowed his home and art works upon the city has New York been the beneficiary of so impassioned, meticulous, and prodigal a collector. Lauder has strong pedagogical inclinations—one gets the impression that he would happily stand in his museum all day long, explaining Egon Schiele's use of graphic distortion to bemused Dutch tourists—and for him the portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer is both a gorgeous object and a historical document of critical importance to the museum's mission. "Klimt's greatest painting is 'The Kiss,' which I also love," Lauder told me one day. "But Ferdinand and Adele personified Vienna at that time. The Viennese Jews were a very special world unto themselves—they had Sigmund Freud, they had great writers, they had great musicians. And here was Adele Bloch-Bauer, painted by Gustav Klimt, the greatest artist of that time in Austria. This was the personification of what was happening. She had a salon, she had a personality, and you can feel that personality. Unlike 'The Kiss,' this is a painting that is alive."

The portrait hangs high on a wall, in a white frame behind glass, in the museum's main gallery—Mrs. Vanderbilt's music room. Lauder has been spending a lot of time with the painting since July, when it arrived, contemplating it alone for an hour at a time after the museum has closed; once, while speaking to me, he referred to the portrait with proprietary familiarity as "my woman." He has also



"We're going to have to start drafting people."

shown it off to visiting dignitaries: one day, the prime minister of Croatia; another, Prince Albert of Monaco, whom he first met when the Prince was ten years old, because their mothers knew each other. A week or so before the Hoffmann opening, the news had emerged that Steve Wynn, the casino mogul and art collector, had punctured a Picasso with his elbow, thus upending what Wynn said was its planned sale to the hedge-fund manager Steven Cohen, for a hundred and thirty-nine million dollars. Lauder could barely conceal his satisfaction at having his record for immoderation unbroken. "How do you even put your elbow through a painting, unless you have steel elbows?" he asked. (The next day, though, the newspapers reported that Lauder's record had been trumped: David Geffen, the Los Angeles mogul, had sold a Jackson Pollock to David Martinez, a Mexican collector, for a hundred and forty million dollars.)

At openings, Lauder typically stands at the door for the duration, greeting guests like a father of the bride in a receiving line. But this opening fell on the same day as a birthday party for his six-year-old grandson, and so at five-thirty he went to the limousine that was waiting for him outside. (It returned him to the museum an hour later.) Before getting in, Lauder opened the trunk: inside were an enormous toy lion, a giant Teddy bear, and a velvety puppy the size of a small cow, all still in F.A.O. Schwarz shopping bags, squeezed up against each other like victims of a plush-toy Mafia hit. In the realm of stuffed animals, Lauder's vaunted eye had failed him. "Which one do you think a boy would like best?" he said.

I have three levels of collecting: 'Oh,' 'Oh My,' and 'Oh My God,'" Lauder told me one day, repeating a favorite formula. We were in his main office, a corner suite on the forty-second floor of the General Motors Building, on Fifth Avenue between Fifty-eighth and Fifty-ninth Streets; above a desk hung an Oh My God by the Austrian Expressionist Oskar Kokoschka, which Lauder had recently pried away from a private collection. "I have been after this painting for forty years, and finally I got it," he said. "I take my time." To Lauder's nostrum about the three categories of collecting, a

modification has been made in recent years: "There is a fourth category, rarely used—'Oh My God, I Thought It Was in a Public Collection.'"

Lauder prides himself on buying only the best, and on doing so at any price, which are excellent principles to be in a position to observe. In 1997, he paid nearly fifty million dollars at a private sale for Cézanne's "Still Life, Flowered Curtain and Fruit," which was almost twenty million dollars more than the artist had previously commanded at auction. He owns the only Kandinsky "Composition" in private hands, the fifth in a series of ten monumental paintings, the first three of which were destroyed during the Second World War. Buying it reportedly set Lauder back about forty million dollars eight years ago.

Lauder says that he has his eye on between ten and twenty Oh My Gods in other collections. He pages through auction-house catalogues at bedtime, and gathers intelligence from dealers and art-world cognoscenti. When he suspects that the owners of paintings he covets are ready to surrender them, he courts them with phone calls and visits. Some years ago, he decided that it was time to go after Matisse's "The Yellow Curtain." "I knew this painting my whole life," Lauder told me. "It was owned by a man called Marcel Mabilie, who was living in Brussels. I heard one time that he was interested in selling, so I went to Brussels and we spoke about this picture. He said, 'It is not for sale. It will be buried with me.' I said, 'How do you feel, and when will that be?'"

Mabilie did not appreciate Lauder's negotiating strategy, and held on to the painting; but a little later he sold it to a dealer, who then sold it to Lauder. It now hangs in MOMA, courtesy of Jo Carole and Ronald S. Lauder. (The Lauders, who married in 1967 and have two daughters, separated a little more than a year ago, though they remain united in perpetuity courtesy of the Ronald S. and Jo Carole Lauder Building, part of the museum's recent renovation.) Lauder not only lends MOMA works from his collection but has often acquired works for the museum, and its galleries are dotted with Oh My Gods. "I helped the

museum get this," he said on a recent visit as we looked at a Klimt painting, "Hope II"; "I have a similar one to this," he said of Brancusi's "Blond Negress II"; "This is mine," he said, pointing to a Giacometti sculpture of a large, gnarled phallus, called "Disagreeable Object."

The catalogue of his possessions, which fills several shelves' worth of black ring binders, is overseen by Elizabeth Szancer Kujawski, his full-time curator of the past twenty-four years. (Kujawski used to do the same thing for Nelson Rockefeller. Explaining the difference between her two bosses, she said, "Nelson Rockefeller bought more in bulk; Mr. Lauder targets certain things.") Lauder's

office is inside the Estée Lauder Companies headquarters—his suite is on one of six floors that the cosmetics company occupies in the General Motors Building—but not of it. Unlike the rest of Estée Lauder's corporate space, which is light and bright, with reproduction Louis Seize chairs and pale carpeting in the reception area, Lauder's suite, which was designed for him by the architect Charles Gwathmey, is sober and masculine, with dark-wood panelling and Art Deco furnishings, like a Mitteleuropean bank from the early twentieth century.

Actually, many of the objects in Lauder's office—cabinets, tables, lights, chairs, clock—do come from a Mitteleuropean bank dating from the early twentieth century: the Austrian Postal Savings Bank in Vienna, a landmark of early-modern architecture that was designed by Otto Wagner in 1906, and whose contents Lauder acquired from a dealer some years ago. The lights that Wagner designed—in aluminum, a significant innovation at the time—to illuminate Viennese banking tables now gleam above Lauder's desk. There are several Bauhaus telephones on the desk, all of which work, although in a concession to the requirements of his international business interests Lauder has a conventional phone as well. The carpet, gray with geometric patterns, is a reproduction of a design by Josef Hoffmann—"I have the original, but it would be ruined," he said—and the couch and two armchairs in which he has coffee





"Michael takes after me, while Nicole takes after her dad."

with guests, or sits and goes through papers, were also designed by Hoffmann. (Occasionally, Lauder has the chairs switched, so that the one in the position he favors, with his back to the floor-to-ceiling windows, is not subjected to more wear than its twin, which looks out onto the Plaza Hotel.) Practicality is not Lauder's guiding decorative principle. In a lobby down the hall, his receptionist is obliged to sit at a Hoffmann desk with her knees swivelled to one side; her Aeron chair does not fit under it. The clock in the lobby, an Adolf Loos, runs slow, and a specialist comes once a week to wind it and all the other timepieces, among which a similar tendency to tardiness is common. When Lauder decided to display a huge Anselm Kiefer canvas in the lobby, he had to break through the ceiling in order to install it.

Ronald Lauder, too, is part of the Estée Lauder company but not of it. He is the chairman of Clinique Laboratories, one of the company brands, which he helped launch, in 1968, but he has no day-to-day responsibilities in that position. (He claims to use Clinique on his own skin to this day—"Look, no wrinkles," he says, pointing to the corrugations around his eyes.) Leonard Lauder,

who is Ronald's older brother by eleven years, and is chairman of the board of the Estée Lauder Companies, explained to me that Ronald "works with the younger people in Clinique and helps teach them what they should know." One day, Lauder took me to a conference room in the Clinique department to meet some of these young people, among them his daughter Jane, who is the senior vice-president of marketing. (His other daughter, Aerin, is the senior vice-president of marketing and global creative directions at the Estée Lauder brand, upstairs.) The young people were screening a television commercial that was to air at breakfast time; it showed quick shots of various Clinique products, accompanied by Simon and Garfunkel singing "Feelin' groovy." Lauder watched it a couple of times, pronounced it "fabulous," and left the conference room singing a few bars of the tune.

It is hard to imagine Lauder feeling terribly groovy, given the formality of his mien, but his character is not without sybaritic inclinations. "I'm very much a hedonist," he told a reporter for the *Times* in 1973, at the age of twenty-nine, when he was the executive vice-president for

Clinique. "I'm not for sitting here until 3 A.M., going over my figures." He recalled that, as marketing manager of the French launch of Estée Lauder, he had lived in Paris for six months: "I adored it. I looked on myself as a young playboy, I had a fantastic apartment on the Left Bank in the Seventh Arrondissement, and lived the life of Aly Khan." Richard Parsons, the C.E.O. of Time Warner, was Lauder's personal lawyer in the seventies and is now a close friend; he says that Lauder remains untortured by his considerable advantages. "He doesn't have any inhibitions about being wealthy and spending money," Parsons says. "Ronald is the exemplar of 'I am not going to die with all this cash if I can help it.'"

Lauder attended the Wharton School, in Philadelphia, where he met Jo Carole Knopf, who was studying art at Temple University. Jo Carole was, Lauder says, a promising artist, though she chose not to pursue that vocation; she now heads a foundation that commissions art works for American embassies. Lauder himself is a decent draftsman, and one day he showed me his party piece: he asked me to write my signature, then copied it so accurately that he could forge my checks, in the unlikely event he should need to. His daughter Aerin told me that his artistic powers are now used largely to entertain his two grandchildren: "You say to him, 'Draw Bugs Bunny,' and he can do it perfectly."

He was heavily involved in the family company for about a decade, but his hopes for professional fulfillment lay elsewhere. "Idolized" is too strong a word for it, but he had great respect for the Nelson Rockefeller model of a private citizen who has given of himself to public service," Parsons, who had been Rockefeller's lawyer before he became Lauder's, says. In the early eighties, Lauder went into government, joining the Reagan Administration; his mother's friendship with Nancy Reagan was assumed by many to have been one of his main qualifications for his first post, as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for European and NATO Affairs. "I'll never forget coming in and meeting my staff," he once told an interviewer about his first day at the Pentagon. "Instead of having fifty or sixty women, I had fifty or sixty men, most of them in uniform."

At the Pentagon, he became friends

with Colin Powell, who at the time was a deputy to Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, and he and Powell travelled frequently in Europe. "He was very urbane and sophisticated with regard to restaurants and the like," Powell says. "We would always take Ron's lead in matters cultural and epicurean." Once, when Powell and Lauder were on assignment in Turkey, accompanied by their wives, the couples decided to go on a boat trip and Lauder was delegated to hire a suitable vessel. "We didn't know how many people would be able to fit on the boat," Powell recalls, explaining that various staffers were also interested in coming along. "We waited to see what would show up. It turned out that he had hired a car ferry."

In 1986, Lauder became the Ambassador to Austria, a job he had desired. (It had been suggested a couple of years earlier that Lauder might be nominated as the Ambassador to Jamaica, but Estée Lauder objected. "Who in Washington wants my Ronald dead?" she asked Roy Cohn at the time. "My friend Sarah Spencer-Churchill was raped in Jamaica! My Ronald is not going to a crazy country like Jamaica.") Lauder resigned eighteen months after assuming the Vienna post, following a difficult tenure during which Kurt Waldheim, the former Secretary-General of the United Nations, was elected Austria's President, despite having been exposed as a Nazi officer. Lauder, who is Jewish, did not attend Waldheim's inauguration, and diplomatic relations worsened from there. (He did, however, get to take one memorable trip with Powell, who by this time was a corps commander stationed in Frankfurt, Germany. "I had access to a train belonging to the United States Army that if you were senior enough you could use to go to Berlin," Powell recalls. "It had a couple of upscale cars left over from the days of the Nazis. I invited Ron and Jo Carole and their daughters and we had a wonderful trip to Berlin.")

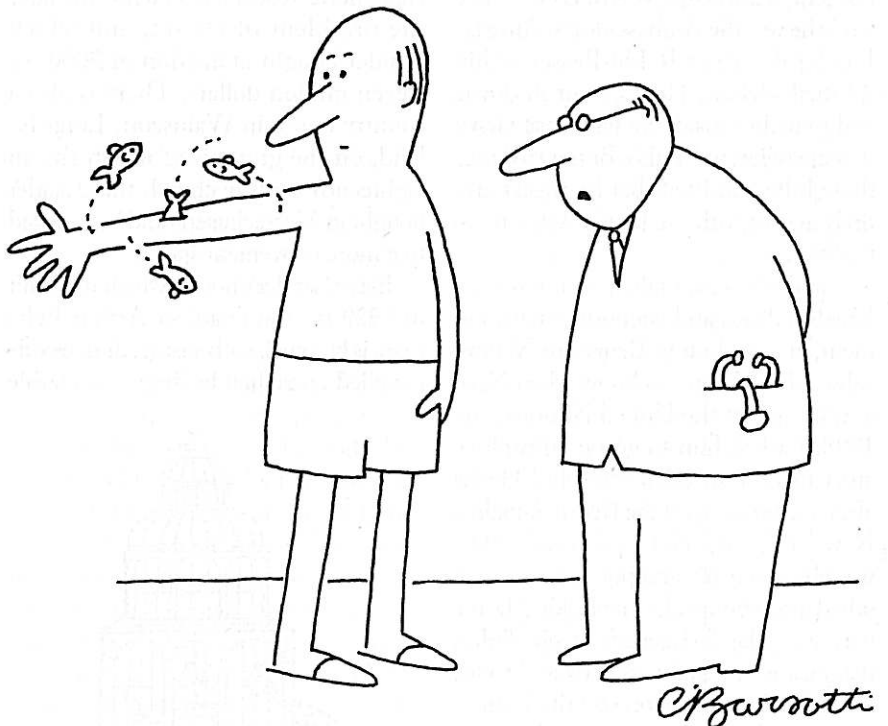
Lauder became prominent in the world of Viennese art and antiques: as a private individual he donated fifty thousand dollars for the re-gilding of the dome of the Secession Building, which had been neglected by the city for decades. Although his advocacy on behalf of Austrian art was appreciated, collectors of lesser means were alarmed by his

resources and his resourcefulness. Ernst Ploil, an Austrian lawyer and collector who is now a friend of Lauder's, recalls encountering him in the city's galleries and antique shops, and told me that his first impressions of the Ambassador were less than ingratiating: "Beside him, there were always his bodyguards, who had quite an impressive largeness, and his arrival at an antique shop always meant that the other customers had to leave." After Lauder resigned, the Austrian government launched an investigation into his purchase of art works while in office; members of the right-wing Freedom Party alleged that he had circumvented strict regulations on the export of Austrian art. The inquiry, which appeared to be politically motivated, found nothing untoward. Renée Price, a friend for twenty-five years, as well as the Neue Galerie's director, said of Lauder's time in Vienna, "He went there with twelve Schiele watercolors, and he left with twelve Schiele watercolors."

After returning to New York, Lauder decided to run for mayor. He spent more than fourteen million dollars in the effort, but lost the Republican nomination to Rudolph Giuliani. He stayed in the race as the Conservative candidate, polling about nine thousand votes, at an approximate cost of fifteen hundred dollars per

ballot. Aerin Lauder says that her father is still approached on the street by former supporters. "People come up and say, 'Oh, I wish that you had won,'" she told me, though it is hard to imagine when they would have the opportunity for sidewalk encounters: one day when Lauder and I were heading from his office to MOMA, six blocks away, he apologized for the absence of his limousine and suggested that we take a cab.

Lauder's political aspirations appear to have lapsed. "I think it is great for younger people to come in and take positions," he says. (Indeed, Kevin Warsh, Jane Lauder's husband, was recently appointed a governor of the Federal Reserve Board, the youngest ever.) His work life is now divided between business and philanthropy. He was among the first American businessmen to seek opportunities in the former Communist states after the fall of the Berlin Wall; one of his investments was Checkpoint Charlie. (He bought a total of four square blocks from forty owners, packaged them, and sold them to a developer.) In 1990, he travelled to the newly independent state of Estonia and bought a cement plant, which went on to provide most of the cement for new development in the region; he sold it after two profitable years. "It was a spectacular



"Arm fish—insurance won't cover that."

plant, except the cement business is not for me," he says. His most high-profile investment has been in a chain of television stations in Eastern Europe, which broadcast American programming as well as local news and entertainment. Lauder's holding was valued, last summer, at three hundred and eighty million dollars. (He just won his first International Emmy for his efforts.)

Eastern Europe is also the focus of his philanthropic endeavors: the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation has established schools for Jewish students in sixteen countries, with the long-term goal of reestablishing a stable, prosperous European Jewry. He is educating ten thousand Jewish students throughout Germany, and also has schools in Warsaw, Berlin, Vienna, Minsk, Kiev, and beyond. Although Lauder had a bar mitzvah (he spent his money on art), he is the kind of Jew who has celebrated Christmas throughout his life, even once impersonating Santa when his children were small. Jewish issues, though, have become increasingly important to him in recent years. One day when Lauder was showing me around his offices, he opened the door to a small room, where a diminutive, elderly Hasidic rabbi was sitting, surrounded by books of Judaica. This was Chaskel Besser, a close friend of the late Lubavitcher Rebbe Menachem Schneerson, whom Lauder met while he was the Ambassador to Austria. Lauder describes Rabbi Besser as his spiritual adviser. "He does not sit down and pray, but inside he has these views that are religious," Rabbi Besser told me, though he admitted that he wasn't entirely at ease with the Lauder Christmas traditions.

Lauder has also taken an interest in Israeli politics and economic development, and is close to Benjamin Netanyahu, whom he got to know when Netanyahu was at the United Nations. "In 1998, I asked him to go on an exploratory mission to Damascus, and Hafez al-Assad broke up in the face of Ronald's New York wit," Netanyahu says. "He was able to create a rapport with a lot of self-deprecation and some Jackie Mason wise-guy jokes." (Lauder's comic diplomacy came to naught, as Syria and Israel were unable to agree on security terms.)

In Lauder's office is a framed photograph from a recent visit to Israel. The

picture shows Lauder in the Negev Desert, surrounded by a crowd of young people; he is supporting a major irrigation project intended to supply water for new residential developments. "There were about five hundred kids moving to Israel from the United States and Canada, and all of a sudden they hand me a microphone and say, 'Let's sing some Hebrew songs, and Mr. Lauder will join us,'" Lauder told me. "The only Hebrew songs I really know are 'Happy Birthday' and 'Oseh Shalom.'" The youngsters around Lauder in the photo are wearing jeans and T-shirts; he is wearing a suit and tie. "When I'm in Israel, I always wear the same thing, a tie and jacket, because it sets me apart," he explained. "People want that."

One afternoon, Lauder took me to a town house, on Seventieth Street between Park and Madison Avenues, that his mother bought in the sixties, and in which she lived until her death, in 2004, at ninety-seven. Estée Lauder left an empire worth ten billion dollars, and part of Ronald's inheritance was this house, which he has added to a collection that includes residences in Florida, Paris, and London; an apartment at 740 Park Avenue; and a town house on East Fifty-second Street that was designed by Philip Johnson in 1950 as a guesthouse for Blanche Rockefeller, who was later the president of MOMA, and which Lauder bought at auction in 2000 for eleven million dollars. There is also a country house in Wainscott, Long Island, on the grounds of which sits an eighteenth-century church that Lauder bought in Massachusetts and had moved to a more convenient spot.

Estée Lauder's house, which was built in 1929 for the financier Arthur Lehman, is baronial, with a large, dim, wood-paneled entry hall leading to a marble

staircase. The place remains much as it was when she lived in it, with a Schiele painting hanging on a wall of the dining room and pictures of her with friends such as Betty Ford and Raisa Gorbachev arrayed in silver frames in a sitting room. One difference this morning, however, was the presence, in a ground-floor reception room, of two life-sized model horses—one in full armor and bearing an armored knight, the other with just half of its armor in place.

Lauder plans to use the house as a private museum, for dinners and functions, and as a place to display his collection of medieval arms and armor. (It is the largest such collection in private hands, and part of it is on loan to the Metropolitan Museum.) "I am bringing back some of my stuff from the Cloisters," he told me. "I have two great knights from an abbey in England—fourteenth or thirteenth century. It's fun. And I have two tombs of knights lying, from Germany. I don't know what I'm going to do with them. I could hang them on the wall, or put them outside in the garden."

Tom Zoufaly, Lauder's personal art installer, had been setting up the armored horses. "You don't think it cuts the room in half to do it like this?" Lauder asked, standing by one horse's metallic muzzle, as he cast an eye around the space. On the wall hung a painting of the Fountain of Youth by Albrecht Altdorfer, a German contemporary of Hieronymus Bosch; a tranquil wooden Madonna stood on a pedestal. Five chairs were lined up against the wall, as if awaiting a papal delegation. "What you need to do is take one of the chairs and put it on a platform," Lauder joked.

Zoufaly explained that a mirror on one wall would be coming down and a tapestry going up. "You have to decide what you want to do with the mirror," he told Lauder.

"Salvation Army," Lauder replied.

They walked over to an imposing fireplace. "Does it work?" Lauder asked a caretaker who was standing by. "Your mother had it capped off," the caretaker said. "She said it was drafty."

Estée Lauder was born in Corona, Queens, to a Czech shopkeeper and his Hungarian wife. In 1930, she married Joseph Lauder, a not particularly successful entrepreneur. (They changed the name to Lauder some years later.) She divorced



TRAIN

You there, in the middle of your mind,
curled up into a ball but wide awake—
I am awake like you, in the same bed

hearing the train that when it passes
means it's almost morning, though the sky
is dark, though the highway is quiet.

You can follow the train in your mind,
but your mind cannot follow the train
from little town to little town to Boston,

where in the dark the transactions happen—
something poured, something filled,
something dropped off, something taken—

happen among the loud men at the wharf
before their very first sign of dawn,
and the train in Boston turns around.

I wish our minds were like the train,
passing once a night through the woods,
fading out among the lights and termini,

its load of oil or metal going some place
they want it, returning in the morning,
its mile-long belly not empty, not hungry;

not the wharf, accepting train after train
of junk from the provinces all night,
a throat that tries and tries to swallow dirt.

—Dan Chiasson

him after nine years of marriage. "I did not know how to be Mrs. Joseph Lauder and Estée Lauder at the same time," she wrote in her autobiography. The couple reconciled three years after the divorce; Ronald was born fifteen months after his parents' second wedding. "We compromise," Joseph Lauder told friends, explaining the dynamic of their relationship. "I go where she goes. We always compromise like that."

While Estée Lauder liked to suggest, for marketing purposes, that she came from a cultured Viennese background, she was, like many first-generation immigrants, eager to assimilate. She was thus taken aback when her younger son, at about the age of twelve, began assuming the trappings and pretensions of a dandy of the Vienna of the twenties and

thirties. "I was very much turned on by all the romantic ideas of what people looked like, how they dressed, and so on," he told me. He started wearing bespoke blue suits, and asked for a private tutor to give him lessons in French and German on alternating weeknights. (Lauder speaks those languages fluently, as well as a smattering of several others, including Swedish, which he studied as an undergraduate, and Dutch, which he acquired during his years as an Estée Lauder executive. "He probably speaks more languages with an American accent than anyone I know," an uncharitable colleague is quoted as saying in an unauthorized biography of his mother.) He studied the art of the period and read the literature. "I read Robert Musil's 'The Man Without Qualities,'" he told me.

"No one else read it. The friends I had who were interested in literature were reading Marcel Proust."

Lauder went to Bronx High School of Science; he asked his parents if he could transfer there from the Barnard School for Boys, in Riverdale, which he found insufficiently rigorous. ("I am the only person I know of who took himself out of private school and went to public school," he says.) While he was enrolled at Bronx Science, he spent a semester at the Lycée Carnot, in Cannes—"I was also the only Bronx Science student ever to take part of my junior year abroad"—where he became friends with Peter Kurtz, the son of an Austrian restaurateur. Kurtz was three years Lauder's senior, and during subsequent summers they made several road trips through Eastern Europe. Kurtz, who later became the head of Estée Lauder's operations in Central Europe, recalled, "We went to Prague and to Budapest and to Zagreb and to Belgrade in my convertible Volkswagen, with two flags mounted on it: one the American flag and one the Austrian." They travelled according to Kurtz's limited budget, and conditions were more primitive than Lauder was accustomed to. "We were boarding in private homes," Kurtz said. "Often, we shared a double bed, because it was much cheaper than two single beds. The bathroom was a fountain in the yard, and we had to wash ourselves in the fresh air with cold water. For me this was natural, but for Ronald this was not so easy." Estée Lauder was very nervous about Ronald's adventures behind the Iron Curtain, according to Kurtz: "Ronald had to call her daily in order to prove that he was still alive, and sometimes we had to wait hours in the Eastern European post offices to get a telephone line to New York." But Lauder was eager for new experiences. "We ate the food that I found in supermarkets, and while I was driving Ronald had to peel the oranges," Kurtz recalled. "He had never peeled oranges before, so I had to teach him how to peel."

Lauder made his first trip to Vienna as a teen-ager. "I stayed in the Bristol Hotel, quite near the Opera, on the Ringstrasse," he told me. "I arrived one evening, and I remember walking the next morning to the Belvedere. I felt like a twenty-five-year-old instead of a four-

teen- or fifteen-year-old. I got there incredibly early, before it opened, and I sat there and waited, and when they opened there was no one in the building other than me and the guards. I saw the Klimts and the Schieles, and I spent hours." (The Neue Galerie, as it happens, does not admit unaccompanied children under the age of sixteen; no one under the age of twelve is allowed in at all, with the occasional exception of the Lauder grandchildren outside of regular hours. This, Lauder explains, is owing to the erotic nature of some of the art—of his own adolescent epiphany at the Belvedere, he noted, "At that time, there were no Klimt and Schiele watercolors of people masturbating on display"—and because he wants to be able to show off his Hoffmann recliners and cabinets without fear of them being touched by small, grubby hands.)

On that trip, Lauder bought his first Austrian Expressionist works, a drawing by Schiele and one by Klimt. "I just loved the idea of being an art collector," he says. Lauder's friend Lally Weymouth, the daughter of the publisher Katharine Graham, recalls that when he took her through the Neue Galerie shortly after it opened many of the paintings he showed her were ones he had owned since his youth: "He would say, 'I bought this when I was fifteen; I bought this when I was sixteen.' It was really fun." As a teenager, Lauder would badger his brother, Leonard, who also became a serious col-

lector of art, to get involved. "He and I went to an auction at the old Parke-Bernet Galleries on Madison Avenue, before they were Sotheby's, and they were auctioning Lautrec posters," Leonard told me. "I would only go to a certain limit, and he kept on giving me the elbow, which meant, 'Go higher, you fool, don't you know these are bargains?'" When Ronald was sixteen, a dealer offered him the opportunity to buy a drawing by van Gogh and one by Lyonel Feininger for a hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Lauder put on his suit and tie, went to the family's bank, and borrowed the money against Estée Lauder stock. "It was very easy—they gave me the money, and I took it and bought the two pieces of art," he told me. "The banker called two weeks later and said, 'Mr. Lauder, we just had to go through your notes and we saw that you put down as your date of birth 1944. You mean 1934, don't you?' I said, 'No, I mean 1944.' He said, 'We can't lend money to a sixteen-year-old.' I said, 'I can't give it back to you. I can give you a van Gogh.' Then I had to have my father come down and sign for me." Today, the drawing, of the postman of Moulin, is worth about six or eight million dollars. Not long after he acquired it, Lauder began buying art for his parents as well as for himself. (The Schiele on the dining-room wall of his mother's house was bought at his urging.)

"I would buy all these big catalogues

raisonnés," he says. "People weren't really collecting German art. This was right after World War Two, and the big prices were for Monet and Manet. Most of the German art was brought here by people fleeing Nazi Europe, coming here with whatever they could bring with them." Some of his best purchases were bought off the walls of apartments on the Upper West Side. "I would go through every book, page by page, and my favorite two words in the book were 'private collection,'" he says.

A crucial figure in Lauder's art education was Serge Sabarsky, a dealer and collector who became, by Leonard Lauder's account, "a father figure to Ronald." Sabarsky was a refugee from Austria—he had been a member of a circus troupe—who, by the late nineteen-sixties, had established a gallery of Austrian and German art on Madison Avenue, catering to a small but devoted clientele. When Lauder went to his first exhibition there, he asked Sabarsky if he knew any American collectors of Klimt or Schiele.

"I know of two," Sabarsky said.

"There's also me and my brother," Lauder said.

"I already counted both of you," Sabarsky said.

Lauder and Sabarsky struck up a close friendship, with daily phone calls and weekly meetings. Aerin Lauder told me, "When I was about six or seven years old, he used to take me to Serge Sabarsky's on the weekend to look at the Schieles. I am sure he told my mother he was taking me to the park."

For years, the men talked about establishing a museum dedicated to their shared interest, and in the early nineties Lauder bought the mansion at Fifth Avenue and Eighty-sixth Street, from the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, for nine million dollars. Sabarsky died in 1996, but Lauder continued with the project, and by the time the museum opened, in 2001, he had spent eleven million dollars more on its renovation. This included turning Mrs. Vanderbilt's wood-paneled library into a specialty bookshop and installing a Josef Hoffmann chandelier in the museum's Café Sabarsky—a replica of a Viennese coffee-house, with Sacher Torte and spaetzle on the menu, its authenticity compromised only by fierce air-conditioning and a ban on smoking.



"Everybody's a critic."

Kirk Varnedoe, in an introduction to the catalogue of MOMA's "Vienna 1900" exhibit, which took place in 1986 and was largely underwritten by Lauder, remarked upon the romantic light in which Vienna is often retrospectively cast. "Klimt and Wagner and Loos thus become tablemates of Freud and Mahler and Wittgenstein at an imaginary coffeehouse for a shining moment in the city that was 'the cradle of modernity,'" Varnedoe wrote. "The deeper collaboration here thus may be between our unfulfilled longings and those of the Viennese artists we study." Café Sabarsky could be the stage set for that imaginary kaffeeklatsch. With his museum, and with his purchases of art, Lauder has managed to insert himself into that fleeting, dangerous period in history, transposing it to the more congenial surroundings of the Upper East Side; he has given himself the grand, cultured Viennese heritage to which Estée Lauder pretended. He has even managed to make the enactment of his fantasy tax deductible, an accomplishment that might have impressed Dr. Freud himself.

Lauder likes to compare contemporary New York City with fin-de-siècle Vienna. "It had the same kind of energy, passion, life," he says. "I always say that, had Adele Bloch-Bauer been alive today, she would be living in New York. One of the great things about New York and about Vienna at that time was that people mixed: it wasn't 'This person was Jewish, and this person wasn't.' And New York is a meritocracy, although some people have money and some do not." Lauder's view of New York City is a rarefied one—if Egon Schiele were living in New York today, he'd be looking at his studio rent and considering a move to Philadelphia—and his view of Vienna before the Second World War is similarly rosy. "It was a place filled with culture, filled with things happening," Lauder told me. "It was not really until '36 or '37, and with the Anschluss, that you really started to have problems. Now, granted, you had the Depression, but, from what I understand, Vienna from the turn of the century right until 1938 was a fabulous place."

Had he lived there at that time, Lauder says, he might have enjoyed a life even more rewarding than the one permitted him as a Lauder in New York. "I

picture myself a little bit like Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer," he told me. "I would have been very involved in the arts, and been very interested in making changes. I think I would probably have been more politically active." He imagines that he might even have had a role in averting the devastating course that history took after Vienna's Academy of Fine Arts declined to accept one aspiring student who was moved to join the city's artistic ferment: Adolf Hitler. "I wish the academy had taken him," Lauder said. "I would have paid for his tuition."

After Lauder bought the portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer, the four other Klimts that had been returned to Maria Altmann and her family were consigned to Christie's for auction. On a rainy evening in early November, they were sold—in what turned out to be the house's biggest night ever—for a combined total of a hundred and ninety-three million dollars, fifty million dollars more than had been estimated. There had been speculation that Lauder might purchase another one of the pictures for the Neue Galerie, perhaps "Adele Bloch-Bauer II," which was painted five years after the golden portrait and shows a haughtier, wearier-looking Adele against a vividly colored background. Instead, Lauder acquired, for thirty-eight million dollars—in collaboration with an unnamed private collector—a Berlin street scene by Ernst Kirchner, which, only months earlier, had been taken off a wall of the Brücke Museum, in Berlin; a German court had determined that its previous owners, Alfred and Thelma Hess, had sold it under duress during the Nazi occupation, and had ordered it returned to their descendants.

Most of the auction's attendees left for dinner as soon as the gavel went down on the last of the Klimts, like sports fans leaving a game where the winner is clear long before the final whistle blows. Lauder, though, was on the premises well after the sale was over, lingering in the almost deserted lobby in his pin-striped suit, while representatives of the world's press were packed into a nearby gallery, being addressed by Christie's elated staff.

Lauder said that he wasn't disap-

pointed to see the Klimts go elsewhere. "I still have eight Klimts, and I feel very happy," he told me. "The reason I didn't buy any of these is I would have had to take one of the other Klimts off the wall to put it up." The purchase of the Kirchner was a coup, he added. "It fills a major hole at the Neue Galerie. It is the most important Kirchner in private hands. It was one of my Oh My Gods—it was an Oh My God, I Thought It Was in a Museum."

Two men crossed the lobby to greet Lauder: Steven Thomas, an attorney, who negotiated the sale of the Klimts, and Randol Schoenberg, an attorney who had represented Maria Altmann and her family. Thomas, who is tall and tan, was composed and satisfied-looking. Schoenberg, who is a generation younger than Lauder and several inches shorter, appeared dazed. (It has been reported that he was due to split forty per cent of the proceeds from the paintings with a Viennese lawyer; Schoenberg will not comment on the arrangement.)

"It was a tremendous validation of everything," Schoenberg, who seemed barely able to contain his exhilaration, said. "It felt like the audience really felt the story behind the paintings, that people weren't just bidding on the art. It felt like a tremendous validation of what we had done. And it's great for Klimt, which is good for all of us."

Lauder nodded paternalistically.

"Did you see the *Financial Times* this weekend, where you are credited with changing the whole paradigm of art history?" Schoenberg asked. Lauder gave an inquiring look, and said that he had not. Schoenberg went on, "It said that people who used to think that art went from Impressionism to Abstract Expressionism are discovering, thanks to Ronald Lauder's purchase of 'Adele,' that there's art in Austria." Lauder rocked back on his heels very slightly and raised his arms at the elbow, in a mild gesture of delight.

Steven Thomas grinned. "I told you about that when I talked with you yesterday," he said. Lauder gave a hesitant smile in return, looking about as pleased with himself as a man who prefers not to show how pleased he is with himself can look. ♦

