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# In Search of the Stolen, Unwanted and Bamboozled: Varieties of Scholarly Inquiry in Honors History

Ariel Furman

Jana Vaughan

Zachery Treft

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## Saving Adele: A History of the *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I*

“The truth is rarely pure and never simple.” ~ Oscar Wilde

### **Introduction**

There are heirlooms, and then there are heirlooms. This particular one had the entire world watching it. The *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I* was stolen by the Nazis, and it was only half a century later that her relatives would be reunited with it, after a long and fierce struggle. This is the story of a painting that people fought over and lied about, but perhaps most of all, it is the story of a changing world.

### **Adele Bloch-Bauer**

Adele Bloch-Bauer was born in Vienna in 1881 as Adele Bauer, the youngest daughter of Bavarian immigrants Moritz Bauer, the general director of the Vienna Bank Association and the president of Oriental Railroad, and Jeanette Bauer, nee Honig. Adele was described later in life as inquisitive, difficult, opinionated, and a patron of the arts, literature, and social causes or, as her niece Maria Altmann would say of her, “a modern woman living in the world of yesterday” (O’Connor xviii). As such, she longed for a formal higher education, but because this was not done at the time, she married instead at the age of 18. After her marriage, she created a strict curriculum for herself, including subjects such as medicine, science, art, politics, and literature. She met her future husband, Ferdinand Bloch, at her sister’s 1898 wedding, where he was the groom’s brother. Seventeen years her senior, he fell in love with the young Adele immediately. Ferdinand was a sugar baron, inheriting the business from his father and building it into a solid and stable monopoly. His passion, however, was for neoclassical porcelain. The Bloch and Bauer

families were some of the most cultured and influential members of their society, and as non-observant Jews, considered themselves Austrian before anything else.

Adele would be immortalized in a painting known as *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I* by the painter of the hour, Gustav Klimt. There is much speculation as to whether they had an affair, and while there is no evidence either way, she was his only model to be painted twice, and Klimt was a known seducer, reportedly fathering fourteen illegitimate children (Hughes, Par 14). While she did not marry her husband, Ferdinand, out of love, they maintained a deep and mutual respect for each other throughout their lives and had much in common as patrons of the arts. Finding Vienna society gossip uninteresting and superficial, Adele began to host weekly intellectual salons for the creme de la creme of Viennese intelligentsia, inviting prominent composers, writers, politicians, and philosophers into her home (Muller 158-159; Kirsta, Par 15).

### **Family**

Adele was the youngest of seven children. After the death of her fourth and last brother, Eugene, in 1915, she and her sister Marie-Therese (Thedy) asked their husbands to amalgamate their names. Beginning in 1917, they appeared as the Bloch-Bauers. Adele was very close to Thedy and her five children: Luise Gutmann, Robert Bentley, Leopold Bentley, Karl David Bloch-Bauer, and Maria Altmann. It would be Maria, the youngest, who would fight for the Klimt portrait of Adele. Unlike Thedy, however, Adele had no living children. Two were stillborn and a little boy died several days after birth (Muller 158).

### **Gustav Klimt**

Gustav Klimt is known today as one of the finest of Austrian artists, but when he was born in 1862 to a desperately poor family, it seemed he was destined to a life of few

opportunities. His Czech father, Ernst, was an uneducated gold engraver who struggled to make ends meet, and his Viennese mother, Anna, had once hoped to be an opera singer, but her dreams did not come true. Klimt's home life was depressing and hungry. School was a terrible ordeal for him - he skipped one year solely because his pants were too ragged to attend. However, he loved to draw, sketching everything he could, from his tired mother to the neighbor's cat. In order to feed their large family, Klimt and his brother would help their father in his workshop, where he worked long, hard, hours.

At the age of 14, Klimt enrolled in the new School of Applied Arts in Vienna, where he immediately distinguished himself. His brother soon enrolled in the school as well. By the time he was 18, Klimt had already been painting imperial commissions - well-paid government projects that gave him important publicity and name recognition - and his family desperately relied on his prospects. Klimt was simply soaring as he, his brother, and another artist formed a successful company and were eagerly sought after. Then, in 1892, tragedy struck when his father died, begging Klimt on his deathbed to care for his mother and siblings. That same year, his brother and partner, Ernst, also died, leaving behind his young widow and small daughter. In a world where only the strong survived, Klimt had to provide for them all.

Klimt began painting differently, experimenting with Symbolism and Japanese influences, and became known for his elegant, erotic art, as well as for leading the Secessionist and Art Nouveau movements, groups that pulled away from traditional artwork and chose instead to paint as their inspiration struck them. As his style changed, he began looking for patrons with modern tastes, many of whom were self-made Jewish businessmen, rather than government commissioners, who regarded his art as obscene. Klimt is best known for his

portraits of wealthy Jewish women of Viennese society, women who were fighting narrow mindsets in society and were thinking about new and often controversial ideas instead (O'Connor 10, 23-25).

One such woman was Adele. When Ferdinand commissioned a portrait of his wife in 1903, Klimt was more popular than ever, although some patrons may have wondered about the wisdom of leaving their daughters and wives alone with the known seducer nicknamed “the King.” The painting cost an incredible sum of money: 4,000 crowns, “a quarter of the price of a well-appointed villa” (O'Connor 42). That December, not long after Klimt began working on Adele's portrait, he visited the Church of San Vitale in Ravenna, Italy, where he saw the golden Byzantine mosaics of Justinian and Theodora, works dating back to the sixth century. Indeed, Klimt was at the height of his “golden phase” during the making of the portrait. He finished Adele's painting in 1907, with experts saying that his preparations were more intricate and precise than for any other work, although all of his paintings were extremely meticulous and detailed. It was lauded to a great degree, though there were, of course, those who critiqued it as “brass” and gaudy (O'Connor 42, 45-46, 58; Muller 159).

During WWII, approximately 14 stolen Klimt paintings were held at Schloss Immendorf castle in Austria. As the allies approached in 1945, 27 years after Klimt's death, the castle was intentionally set on fire by SS officials. The Klimts and many other priceless paintings were destroyed forever.

### **Adele Bloch-Bauer's Death and Will**

In 1925, Adele died unexpectedly of meningitis after going into a coma. She was only 43 years old. Ferdinand was devastated and turned her bedroom and salon into a shrine for her,

filled with the Klimt paintings and freshly-cut flowers. After Adele's death, Ferdinand continued collecting art, but he also donated several works, some per her last wishes. However, he kept most of the Klimt pieces. Adele had stipulated that after her death, her books be left to the Vienna People's and Worker's Library. She bequeathed 50,000 Czech korunas each to the Vienna Kinderfreunde (Friends of the Children), a workers association, and to another association called Die Bereitschaft (Readiness), which was committed to social work and awareness. In her will, she wrote, "I ask my husband to leave my two portraits and the four landscapes by Gustav Klimt to the Osterreichische Galerie [in the Belvedere Museum] in Vienna after his death" (Muller 162). This one seemingly-simple sentence would be the spark to an international debate about one of the most famous works of Nazi-stolen art (Muller 161-162; O'Connor 71).

### **The Times**

March 12, 1938, was the Anschluss, in which Germany annexed a willing Austria, a day Maria Altmann recalled had people throwing flowers on the street in anticipation of the Nazis. As a leading industrialist and firm supporter of the current government, Ferdinand's was a name already known to the Nazis and as a result, he was the first of the Bloch-Bauers to flee Vienna, estimated to be March 15 of the same year. His nephew, Leopold, had already been arrested as a hostage in order to forcefully take shares of Ferdinand's sugar factory. Then in his 70's, Ferdinand first escaped to Czechoslovakia, then to Paris, and finally to Switzerland. He stayed at the Hotel Bellerive au Lac on Lake Zurich; these luxurious and expensive accommodations were likely chosen for him, in order to make up the revenue lost by the fall in tourism. After all,

Switzerland did not consider him a political refugee and barred him from working (Muller 163-164).

The Nazis confiscated Ferdinand's personal belongings and "Aryanized" his corporate equity and he was helpless to respond in any way. One property was taken over by the German Railroad and the other was "gifted" to the governor of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, Konstantin von Neurath. In April, he was charged by several districts of the Financial Office of Vienna for evading taxes. The expected cost was 700,000 reichsmarks and was later increased to 1.4 million RM. In May, there came an immediately executable appropriation permit of his property. This allowed the Nazis to proceed with confiscating Ferdinand's artworks and porcelain collection (Muller 164).

When Ferdinand died just a few months after World War II ended in 1945, alone and heartsick, he left half of his estate to one niece, Luise, who, along with her two children and her husband, Viktor, would survive in occupied Yugoslavia in terrible conditions, only to have Viktor shot by the new Communist government for "collaborating with the Nazis." At this time, Viktor had been jailed with his family alongside political prisoners. The other half of Ferdinand's estate was split between nephew Robert (who would later change his last name to Bentley) and niece Maria. In this last will, he voided all earlier wills, and it was only discovered after the war that he had nothing left: it had all been appropriated.

### **Theft of Painting: From Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer to Woman in Gold**

After the Anschluss, Nazi lawyer Erich Fuhrer took control of the Bloch-Bauer estate. Starting in early 1939, he began to convert Ferdinand's holdings into cash, finishing in 1943. Supposedly representing Ferdinand, he invited prominent museum curators and guests to an "art

inspection” in Ferdinand’s old home in Vienna, and several of the works were claimed by Hitler for the planned Fuhrer Museum in Linz, which was never built. Erich Fuhrer notified Ferdinand of the bargain transactions that were taking place, pretending to act as a responsible advisor. Ferdinand still had a trusting belief in justice and wanted the paintings to end up on public display in an Austrian museum. However, in the summer of 1940, Ferdinand wrote to Fuhrer, opposing the way his art was sold, protesting at the pathetically low bargain prices, and arguing that Fuhrer had no rights to sell the works:

I fail to understand and can hardly believe the way things are proceeding. I divested you of any power to represent me or act on my behalf on February 8 of this year. What, then, gives you the right to sell my pictures? The estimated value of the pictures was more than 40,000 [RM], although their true value is much higher. You have acted on your own authority, doing me an extraordinary amount of harm, and I must now reserve the right to hold you responsible for all damages incurred. You have furthermore failed to inform me of the above-described transaction - something I cannot understand in the least. That you have moreover kept the so-called sales price for yourself, without telling me about it - words fail me (Muller 164-166).

After the Anschluss, and Ferdinand’s subsequent exile, Hitler wanted to purchase Ferdinand’s exquisite antique porcelain collection. However, he eventually decided not to, at which point it was auctioned off for truly pathetic prices. In 1941, Fuhrer settled a deal with Ferdinand’s former art advisor, now the director of the Osterreichische Galerie, Bruno Grimshitz. In exchange for Klimt’s *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I* (then Aryanized into *Portrait of a Woman Against a Gold Background*) and another Klimt, Grimschitz gave Fuhrer



Klimt's *Schloss Kammer am Attersee III*, which had been donated by Ferdinand in 1936. An illegitimate son of Klimt (and a staunch supporter of the SS), Gustav Ucicky, bought the painting. Fuhrer then sold several other Klimts to various galleries. Secretly, he kept 11 paintings from the Bloch-Bauer set for himself, along with the entire library, which he later claimed Ferdinand had gifted to him (Muller 167).

In April of 1942, Ferdinand wrote a letter to an artist he had mentored, Oskar Kokoschka (whose art was considered degenerate by the Nazis) saying, "They took everything from me in Vienna... Maybe I will get back two portraits of my poor wife (Klimt) and my portrait" (Muller 167). When Ferdinand passed away in 1945, he already knew that his late wife's portrait was hanging in the Belvedere. The museum justified this by pointing to Adele's will, written in 1923. However, in 1926, Ferdinand had already clarified matters when he explained that although he was the legal owner of the Klimt paintings, not Adele, he still planned on following her wishes. Yet, as he watched the chaos and horror of WWII unfold around himself and his family, it is understandable that he chose not to follow through with the sentiment.

### **Maria Altmann in America**

In December of 1937, Adele's youngest niece, Maria, married Fritz Altmann, an aspiring opera singer. Less than two weeks after their Paris honeymoon, they were evicted from their luxurious new apartment and placed under house arrest for no apparent reason. A mere five months after their wedding, Fritz was arrested and eventually sent to Dachau as a hostage in order to force his protective brother, Bernhard, who had turned their mother's home knitting business into an international company, to sign over all of his assets. He signed. Fritz was little more than an emaciated skeleton when he returned home to his wife (O'Connor 114-131).

Immediately after Fritz's release, Bernhard contacted him and Maria, telling them he had organized a way out and to be ready to run. Taking with her Adele's diamond earrings, the only piece that remained of Ferdinand's wedding gift (the Gestapo confiscated her valuables, giving Adele's famous diamond necklace to Hermann Goering's wife for her birthday), Maria and Fritz fled with the pretext of going to the dentist. They were supposed to be home by 5:00 pm. To get out, they needed to take a flight to Cologne, in Germany. Since Austria and Germany were now united, they would be able to do so without paperwork, which was of paramount significance because Fritz had no documents. The couple had a terrifying moment when, after the plane's propellor had already been started, it was shut down, and officials boarded the plane to speak with the flight crew - due to weather delays.

Once there, they walked to the house of a Dutch man named Jan Honnef, whose farm ran along the German border. He and his son, Josef, guided refugees to the border, where they were met by other guides and led to safety. At the border, Maria, mishearing Jan's whispered instructions, tripped headlong over the barbed wire, certain that she had given them away. Fritz calmly stepped over the fence and helped his wife up. They were led to a small hotel, where Bernhard had already made arrangements for them, then took the train to Amsterdam, where they boarded a plane to Liverpool.

It was a miracle that they had escaped and survived, and they could hardly believe it themselves. The Nazis were furious when they discovered their escape. Bernhard had managed to move his family, friends, and many factory workers out of Austria, and as a result, the Nazis lost their most valuable hostages. Maria and Fritz were among the last to flee with the aid of the Honnefs. Not long after the Altmanns' escape, the Honnef operation was discovered and Jan was

sent to a Polish concentration camp. He survived, although Josef, who was later sent to Auschwitz, did not (O'Connor 134).

In 1942, Maria and Fritz moved to California, becoming citizens three years later. Maria opened a small clothing boutique and Fritz became Bernhard's West Coast distributor, singing at social events. They had four children.

### ***Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I's Rediscovery***

Postwar Vienna was struggling to invent an excuse for its part in the Holocaust. People were reinventing their pasts, and the stench of secrets blanketed the once-exquisite city. In 1948, the new director of the Belvedere, Karl Garzarolli, had contacted and chastised his predecessor, Bruno Grimschitz, regarding the mess of the Bloch-Bauer Klimts, although the rebuke was for the lack of legal documentation, not for the way the paintings had been obtained. Neither Adele's nor Ferdinand's will allowed for the paintings to be sold and no one had consulted Ferdinand on the matter. It was glaringly obvious to Garzarolli that Adele's last wishes had been disregarded.

On behalf of Maria's brother Robert, an attorney and old friend of the Bloch-Bauers named Gustav Rinesch began to investigate a way to reclaim the Klimts. Garzarolli ordered officials to delay Rinesch's requests. The Belvedere told Rinesch that Adele's will gave the paintings to them. They, however, refused to actually show him the will, purportedly because it was misplaced. Instead, they offered a deal in which the Bloch-Bauers would officially "donate" the Klimts to the museum in return for lesser artworks and a quarter of family antique pieces that had been blackmailed off the family during the war. Rinesch thought it was a fantastic deal and he finalized it without the consent of the family, mentioning in a letter to Robert that museum officials became far friendlier after the deal was agreed upon (O'Connor 216-217).

The Bloch-Bauers were not the only family to be treated unjustly in their claims. Austrian officials dismissed property claims of many exiles, demanding proof of ownership - proof that had been destroyed, stolen, or lost long before. While in Europe, many art owners could claim that they had purchased works “in good faith,” this became increasingly more complicated in the US, where buyers were expected to prove that they had responsibly researched a piece’s history (O’Connor 220, 224).

After an art scandal regarding the painting *Portrait of Wally*, which had been stolen during WWII, made world news, Viennese aristocrat and muckraking journalist Hubertus Czernin decided to take a closer look into origins of the artworks hanging in Austrian museums. He diligently combed through archives that could only be copied by hand before finally striking gold. In February of 1998, Czernin published his first article and it was precisely what officials had so desperately tried to avoid. The Nazis had carefully categorized and documented their appropriated possessions, and it was coming back to haunt them. Hidden away was information about pillaged art. Buried in secret files was evidence that Austria had knowingly and willingly stolen art, through whatever means necessary. These documents, among others, showed that *The Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I* had never been donated at all. Instead, it had been officially, even legally, looted. In addition, museum authorities knew where more stolen art and proof of its macabre past was. The information was out, and there was an uproar (O’Connor 224-225).

### **Trial for Painting**

In October 1998, Austria joined other countries in Washington in an international conference known as the Washington Principles regarding Nazi-stolen property and agreed to investigate the origins of its museum selections. In December of the same year, Austria passed

an Art Restitution Act, which specified that uninvestigated property losses, as well as unjust reparations, should now be corrected. As soon as Maria learned about this, she hired Randol Schoenberg, the grandson of famous composer Arnold Schoenberg, as her lawyer to represent her in getting five Klimt paintings (including Adele's portrait) back. They began to work with Czernin (Muller 169; Kirsta, Par 22).

Then, in 1999, they found Adele's will. Even more incriminatingly, the letter from Erich Fuhrer "donating" Adele's portrait to the museum was signed "Heil Hitler." Despite the evidence, the Beirat, the Vienna Advisory Council on art restitution, was against returning the Klimts, advising the restitution of a mere 16 drawings of Adele and 20 pieces of Ferdinand's porcelain. Maria sent a letter to the the Beirat, writing that we "are keenly aware of the Gold Portrait's importance as a national treasure. Once the Beirat decides to recognize our legal right to the paintings, we would then be in a position to work out a way with you that leaves the portrait in Vienna" (O'Connor 233). Maria was asking for acknowledgement of the theft. She received no response.

Austria rejected Maria's claims to the painting, justifying itself with Adele's will. Until that moment, Maria had been interested in an out-of-court settlement with the Belvedere. Yet, being ignored pushed her to file suit in 2000 in Austria for the return of the paintings. However, Austrian courts demanded an extraordinary \$1.8 million deposit fee, which Schoenberg was able to negotiate down to \$500,000. Nonetheless, Maria could not afford such exorbitant sums. They dropped the case in Austria. Instead, they filed suit in Los Angeles.

In May 2001, Los Angeles federal judge Florence-Marie Cooper ruled that Maria's case could move forward. It would take four years of litigation before the U.S. Supreme Court ruled

in June of 2004 that an American claim could be made against a sovereign nation such as Austria, counteracting the FSIA (Foreign Sovereign Immunities Act). Maria was 88 yrs old at the time. On behalf of her siblings' descendants (the heirs of Ferdinand), in order to speed up the the court proceedings, Maria decided to participate in a risky out-of-court arbitration with a panel of Austrian legal experts. The decision of the panel would be final.

In September of 2005, arbitration began. Schoenberg chose one of the panel members, Andreas Noedl; Austria chose the second, Walter Rechberger, dean of the University of Vienna Law School; and the two of them chose the third, Peter Rummel, a distinguished law professor and one-time dean of the faculty of law in Linz. On January 15, 2006, they came to a decision. It had been eight years since Schoenberg had taken up the case. And they had won: the panel unanimously concluded that the paintings should be returned to the Bloch-Bauer heirs and that Austria had no legal claims on the works based on Adele Bloch-Bauer's will.

Maria explained to the *Los Angeles Times* that she wanted the paintings on public display, "I would not want any private person to buy these paintings. It's very meaningful to me that they are seen by anybody who wants to see them, because that would have been the wish of my aunt" (O'Connor 253). *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I* was sold to Ronald S. Lauder, president of the World Jewish Congress and owner of the Neue Galerie, in June of 2006 for the (unconfirmed) staggering price of \$135 million or roughly €163.4 million, making it the most expensive painting in the world at the time. It hangs in the Neue Galerie New York where the public may view it. The other paintings restituted, *Adele II*, *Hauser in Unterach am Attersee*, *Apfelbaum I*, and *Birkenwald/Buchenwald* were sold to private collectors for a total of \$192.7 million (O'Connor 253; Muller 171).

## **Antagonistic Feeling in Vienna**

In Austria, there was a nationwide integrity crisis, with various plans to “save” the paintings. As the paintings’ departure loomed, the Osterreichische Galerie was filled with people wanting to see the Klimt portraits. One man even threatened to deface the paintings rather than let them leave the country, expressing the anger and disappointment many people felt when the government did not try to buy back the paintings. Elisabeth Gehrler, the culture minister at the time, explained why Austria had no hope of purchasing back the paintings, “Seventy million euros [roughly half the price paid for just *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I* ] amounts to the whole budget for all museums in Austria. This means that we are not financially able to make purchases here.” (Kirsta, Par 6)

## **Conclusion**

*The Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I* is unusual for Nazi-looted works in that it was returned to its lawful heirs. When Randol Schoenberg and Maria Altmann won the lawsuit for restitution of the paintings, the world was shocked. It was rare that an art case, especially one regarding the artworks of Vienna’s painting master “King” Klimt, would be able to succeed. Adele’s portrait is a delicate painting, created by a legend, and has earned its place in art history for its enigmatic past. It represents so much: a woman, a family, a war, and the Holocaust. Maybe, just maybe, it represents some form of justice, too.

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