Journey of the golden lady

Treachery. Lies. Government chicanery. How, at age 83, a dressmaker from Los Angeles began a seven-year fight to overcome them all and reclaim Gustav Klimt paintings stolen from her family by the Nazis.

by Stacey Wilson
It’s a bitter-cold February afternoon in New York City, and art aficionados are filling the tiny lobby of the Neue Galerie on Manhattan’s Upper East Side. The crowd, mostly European, heartily hands over $20 a person to explore the rare collection of Austrian and German art housed in this charming mini-museum, founded in 2001 by cosmetics magnate Ronald Lauder.

On the second floor, in one of the museum’s largest rooms, six people bundled in hats and scarves are chatting quietly as they browse works by Egon Schiele and Gustav Klimt, including the museum’s recently acquired portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer. Klimt’s painting of the Viennese aristocrat draped in gold is familiar to the even amateur art lovers—although not as recognizable as, say, his later masterpiece “The Kiss”—and is quite stunning to see up close. The mysterious gold-encrusted, hieroglyphic detailing of Adele’s gown swirls into a hypnotic mosaic; her large, almond eyes bend mysteriously into sadness.

To the right of the painting, almost hidden around the corner, is its brass identification tag: “Adele Bloch-Bauer 1, 1907. Oil, silver, and gold on canvas. This acquisition made available in part through the generosity of the heirs of the estates of Ferdinand and Adele Bloch-Bauer.”

To most of the tourists taking in the sumptuous work of Klimt and his contemporaries today, the statement is unremarkable. To Puget Sound alumnus Peter Altmann and his mother, Maria, it is the understatement of the century.
The story of the Adele Bloch-Bauer portrait is so dramatic, so full of twists, turns, and intrigue, it could (and probably will) be coming to a theater near you. Its journey from the wall of Adele’s luxurious Austrian home 100 years ago, to the greedy clutches of the Nazis, to its decades spent on display at Austria’s national museum, to the care of Adele’s 91-year-old niece, Maria Altmann ’69, and now to a Manhattan museum, is nothing short of made-for-hollywood. And the saga’s finale—Lauder’s purchase of the painting in January 2006 for a reported $135 million—is truly history-making. “This is our Mona Lisa,” Lauder told The New York Times of the sale. “It’s a once-in-a-lifetime acquisition.”

Peter Altmann says money was never the motivation behind his mother’s tireless, nearly eight-year fight to win back their family’s artwork, which also included four other Klimt paintings. These were sold at Christie’s in November 2006 for a combined total of $170 million.

“This was about justice, never financial gain,” says Peter. “In this case, money just followed.”

It’s the Friday of New Year’s weekend 2006 and Peter, 61, is sitting in the mostly empty living room of an apartment he’s refurbishing on 6th and Alder, near the Puget Sound campus. He graduated from UPS in 1969 with a business degree and a minor in art history (although he admits he doesn’t remember learning too much about Gustav Klimt in school). A retired bus driver and Pierce County Transit union president, Peter, when wearing his glasses, bears a striking resemblance to NBA coach Phil Jackson.

He is lively and animated when he speaks of his mother’s epic battle to win back her family’s artwork. “My mother just knew it was wrong that her family had been lied to and cheated out of this amazing remnant of their past,” he says. “That’s what motivated her. I’m so proud of her and still can’t believe how it all turned out. The whole thing has been surreal.”

Czech novelist Milan Kundera once called the Jewish aristocrats of turn-of-the-century Vienna “the cement of Middle Europe.” Adele Bloch-Bauer lived this life of enviable luxury with natural aplomb and the spunk of a woman very much ahead of her time.

Born to a Jewish financier named Mortiz
Bauer in 1881, she was notably poised, arrogant, and precocious. At age 17, she married Ferdinand Bloch, an Austrian sugar baron twice her age. It was an act that Maria Altmann says completely contradicted her aunt’s true spirit, yet satisfied her need for freedom.

“Adele didn’t love him and mostly got married to get out of her parents’ house,” Maria says, her old-world accent still intact. “She was a very modern woman living in a world of yesterday.”

In the early 1900s, Ferdinand commissioned prolific Viennese artist Gustav Klimt to paint a portrait of Adele, as wealthy men often did for their wives back then. A notorious ladies man who was rumored to paint wearing nothing under his smock, Klimt started sketching Adele, and the two became fast friends. (Many say much more than friends.) Three years and hundreds of sketches later, Adele’s portrait was completed in 1907.

By then, the Bloch-Bauers were officially entrenched in Klimt’s inner circle, which also included Sigmund Freud and composer Arnold Schoenberg. Adele and Ferdinand would never know what their friendship with Schoenberg would mean to their niece Maria nearly one century later.

Born in 1916, Maria was the youngest child of Therese and Gustav Bloch-Bauer. Therese was Adele’s sister and Gustav, a noted cellist, was Ferdinand’s brother. Like their older siblings, Maria’s parents combined their last names upon marrying to preserve the Bauer lineage, since Adele and Therese’s four brothers had died.

Maria says that even as a young child she recalls her aunt’s undeniable glamour: the long white dresses, the dramatic gold cigarette holders, her drawing-room salon gatherings, and unabashed dismissal of religion.

Klimt died in 1918 at age 56, following a stroke, and Adele’s vibrant life was cut short seven years later when she died suddenly from meningitis at age 43. Maria was only 9 years old, but has clear memories of her uncle’s grief. “He turned her bedroom into a memorial,” she says. “He kept everything as it was. The bed, the Klimt portrait and others he painted, fresh flowers every day. He never got over losing her.”

Before her death, Adele had requested that the Klimt paintings be donated to Austrian museums. Peter Altmann says this simple act, had it been fulfilled, would have changed everything. “There is no doubt Ferdinand would have done it, had the world not gone totally upside down,” he says. “But the fact was he never officially donated them, which meant they were still legally his.”

When Austria was annexed by the Nazis, Jews of all social and financial statuses ran for their lives, leaving their possessions behind. The Nazis seized and confiscated as much art and jewelry as they could, thus making the goods the property of the Third Reich. The Klimt art owned by Ferdinand, who fled Austria in 1938, was in Austrian museums by the early 1940s. In 1943 the Nazis held a Klimt exhibition in Vienna where Adele’s portrait was presented—her Jewish surname removed from the title—as “The Lady In Gold.” The painting was ultimately snapped up by the Austrian Gallery, although still technically the property of the Bloch-Bauers.

Ferdinand died while living penniless and in exile in Switzerland. He never recovered any of his property, and his last known will, written in October of 1945, made no provision for donations to museums, although in it he named Maria and her two siblings as his heirs.

Maria says it would be years before anyone, including she, seriously questioned or wondered about the lost Bloch-Bauer paintings. “My husband and I barely escaped after Hitler invaded in March of 1938, and the last things on our minds were those paintings. We never even knew we had rights to them,” says Maria, who at age 22 reached safety with her husband Fritz in Liverpool, England, via the border of Holland and Germany. “All we knew was we had to leave, and fast. I never gave the art a second thought.”

BY 1942, MARIA AND FRITZ ALTMANN were settled in Los Angeles and would ultimately raise four children. Growing up in California, where he was born in 1945, Peter Altmann says stories about Adele, Ferdinand, and the Klimt art were frequent, but casual. He says he knew the paintings had been in the family and had viewed them in person on a family trip to Vienna as a young man, but their greater significance and value was lost on everyone. “My mother had always assumed the paintings were officially donated. That’s what she’d been told,” says Peter.

Then, the bombshell. An Austrian author and journalist named Hubertus Czernin published a series of articles exposing how the government had profited from looted art owned by exiled Jewish families.

Elisabeth Gehrer, the Austrian federal minister for education and culture, ordered an investigation into all art archives. It was reported that many art “donations” during the war had been coerced and falsified by government officials. The only document specifically addressing the donation of the Adele portrait was dated 1941 and written by a Nazi attorney who signed it, “Heil Hitler.” In response to these revelations, Gehrer proposed a new restitution law that would return stolen goods to their prewar owners. It was approved in December 1998.

In February 1999, Maria, then already widowed, and her youngest son, Jim, visited Vienna and met with the director of the Austrian Gallery. She says she was struck by the museum’s laissez faire attitude and quick dismissal of their inquiries into Adele’s will. “They didn’t want to talk about it!” she says, still taken aback all these years later. “They were nice but avoided the subject. We were willing to negotiate some arrangement to keep the paintings in Austria, but their attitude made me angry. It just made me want to fight more.”

The restitution law would have seemed a quick answer to the Klimt quandary. But the Austrian government had other plans. In June 1999, after months of confusing and decidedly tricky legal maneuvering, a special committee voted against returning the Klimt paintings, offering the Bloch-Bauer heirs, instead, 16 Klimt drawings and 19 porcelain settings that had been donated by the family in 1948. The vote was, in the words of Maria’s attorney, Randol Schoenberg, “a sham.”

FOR SCHOENBERG, THE ENSUING seven-year legal battle was as gratifying personally as it was professionally. The grandson of composer Arnold Schoenberg, who fled Berlin in 1933, Schoenberg knew Maria and
Fritz Altmann growing up in California. In fact, there is still some debate today as to which Altmann sibling—was it Peter or his brother Chuck—who ultimately convinced Randol Schoenberg’s parents, Barbara and Ronald, to get married.

While the Austrians claimed Adele’s instructions were to deliver the paintings to the national gallery after Ferdinand’s death, Schoenberg says her request was not legally binding. The art was seized by the Nazis seven years before his death, which violated her terms. The only valid document that existed was Ferdinand’s will, which named Maria and her siblings, Robert and Louisa, as heirs. Maria knew she was in the right to file a claim in Austrian court, but the law required a deposit of $1.8 million, based on the value of the Klimts. Schoenberg got the fee reduced to $500,000—still too much money for the then-84-year-old working boutique owner—and in 2000 filed suit in U.S. District Court alleging that the Austrian government had violated international law.

“I knew it was going to be a long road,” says Schoenberg, 40, who left the firm of Fried, Frank, Harris, Shriver, and Jacobson in Los Angeles in 2000 to pursue the case on his own, risking his new career and financial security. “I also knew it was going to be the case of a lifetime. Working with Maria was like working with family. She is the last remnant of a great generation and to have access to that world was wonderful. It was absolutely worth the risk.” (For Maria’s part, Schoenberg was “fabulous, and speaks German very well.”)

Peter says he is indebted to Schoenberg for his commitment to Maria. “Here’s a guy who’s married, leaves his firm with nothing in hand, and gets a hole-in-the-wall office for himself in Santa Monica,” he says. “But it was his passion. That’s really what drove the case.”

When the saga of Maria and the Klimt paintings is finally packaged for mass consumption beyond the journalistic coverage it’s enjoyed over the years (Peter says a book and a number of films are in the works), the legal events that took place between 2000 and 2006 will likely be condensed or heightened for dramatic effect. In fact the legal work was long and often tedious. The drudgery of the case was at its height during these years, with Schoenberg still working mostly for free.

By January 2006, the decision Maria had hoped for since 1998 was passed down from the Supreme Court. The court decided in a 6–3 vote that Maria could indeed sue the Republic
of Austria in a California court for recovery of the stolen Klimts. Wanting to avoid a prolonged legal battle, a three-member panel in Austria ruled in favor of the claim brought by Maria and the other Bloch-Bauer heirs.

Peter Altmann says as much as he believed in his mother’s cause, even he was shocked at the outcome. He likens the whole thing to a mosquito trying to kill an elephant. “There is a moral story here about the small person standing up to the big person,” he says. “In this case, an elderly woman standing up to an entire government! She was righteous, and that ultimately won out.”

Neither Peter nor his mother is revealing yet just how much of the $135 million sale of the Adele portrait the family will receive after they pay legal fees and split earnings with other heirs. Though Peter is willing to admit, with a sly smile, that he’s very lucky his mother loves her children. “The wealth really hasn’t hit me yet,” he says, still dazed. “I like to say I hit the genetic lottery. I had a ticket entered at birth, and it just happened to be a winner.”

Maria says pride is generally not one of her qualities, so instead she feels an immense sense of gratitude to Schoenberg and her family for supporting her through the Klimt ordeal. “I am grateful,” she says. “Just very grateful.”

And those lucky art lovers at the Neue Galerie would be grateful, too, if they knew Maria and understood how hard she fought for Adele’s portrait to find a suitable and fair resting place.

But then maybe it’s OK if they never know. On this cold, cold day they came to see glimmering relics from a bygone world, and that in itself may be cause enough for gratitude.

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