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The Portrait and the Nazis

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By [Ben W. Heineman Jr.](#)

On a quiet Friday morning, my wife and I came face to face with history.

The face was a portrait, painted by Gustav Klimt in 1907, of Adele Bloch-Bauer, the spouse of a wealthy Austrian businessman. It is one of the iconic paintings of the 20th century.

A heavy-lidded, red-lipped, enigmatic 26-year-old woman is sheathed in a body-hugging gown of gold leaf punctuated by blue triangles and emblazoned with obscure Byzantine, Greek, Egyptian, and modernist symbols. She merges into darker gold leaf with swirling designs, and her long fingers are delicately intertwined below a shimmering necklace.



Klimt was a leader of Vienna's *art nouveau* movement (or *jugendstil*, "youth art," in German). His unique decorative style and his erotic sensibility made him a controversial painter of the time and a widely popular artist as sexual mores changed. Although he painted portraits of wealthy women to earn a living, even those works had strong hints of sensuality. And, although he touched on a variety of subjects, many of his best known works were quite explicitly sexual. Reproductions of "The Kiss" decorate dorm rooms of college students everywhere.

The portrait hung originally in the palatial summer home of Adele and Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer. And our viewing a century later was in another mansion, a beautiful home built in 1914 in *beaux-arts* style by the architects of the New York Public Library (Carrere & Hastings) for an American industrialist—and occupied later by Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt. Located on 86th and Fifth Avenue in New York City, the home is now the [Neue Galerie](#), a small museum of early 20th century German and Austrian art and design, founded by art dealer Serge Sabarsky and businessman, Ronald S. Lauder.

Even on the weekend, the Neue Galerie was not crowded. We could view the remarkable portrait in the mansion-gallery as if we were would-be residents, slowly observing the decorative detail, trying to understand what the expressive hands were telling us, looking at the young face and imagining her feelings and her character, speculating about her relationship with the artist. Unhurried. Alone with our thoughts in a light filled family room overlooking the street.

But the history of the painting is not so serene, and our thoughts could not just be of the portrait. In 1938, it was confiscated by the Nazis when they occupied Austria, as Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer fled to Switzerland (Adele had died in 1925 at age 44).

Members of the family perished in the concentration camps. After the war, the Austrian government claimed that Adele had left the portrait to the state. It hung for years in the Belvedere, an Austrian government museum in Vienna, surrounded by many other Klimts, who had now evolved from artistic rebel to national tourist attraction. The Austrian possession was symbolic of its improper retention of property confiscated from Jews by the Nazis.

But Ferdinand, not Adele, owned the paintings. When he died in 1946, he bequeathed them, not to Austria, but to his nephews and nieces, including Maria Altmann. She had escaped to England and the America before the war and ultimately settled in Los Angeles.

In the late 1990s, Ms. Altmann began a determined and tortuous legal battle to regain five Klimt paintings: the world famous 1907 portrait of her aunt, another 1912 portrait of Adele and three landscapes. Her effort became a symbol of the attempt of families, long after the fact, to regain property confiscated by the Nazis during the terror of World War II. After proceedings bounced from Austria to the United States and back to Austria, an arbitration panel awarded her the paintings in January, 2006. The story of Maria Altmann's perseverance has been told well both in print and in film. (See, for example, [this article here](#).)

In a June 2006 auction, Ronald Lauder bought the 1907 portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer for the Neue Galerie at the then record price of \$135 million. (The 1912 portrait of Adele was sold to a private buyer for a reported \$88 million.) We had long-planned to see the portrait in its quiet home in New York because on a trip to Vienna five years ago we had been stunned by its singular beauty among the other Klimts in the Belvedere but had also been disconcerted by the jostling crowds.

So it happened that we became reacquainted with Klimt's enigmatic Adele Bloch-Bauer

last Friday in New York. And so it happened that the day before, at the age of 94, Adele's niece, Maria Altmann, died in Los Angeles, but not before rescuing Adele from her European captors.

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