

## The Bloch-Bauer Klimts

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An Austrian arbitration court ruled on January 17, 2006 that the Gustav Klimt paintings *Birkenwald/Buchenwald* (1903), *Adele Bloch-Bauer I* (1907), *Adele Bloch-Bauer II* (1912), *Apfelbaum* (ca. 1912) and *Häuser in Unterach am Attersee* (ca. 1916) had been wrongfully appropriated from the Viennese merchant Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer during the National Socialist ("Nazi") era. The court found that all five should be restored without charge to the Bloch-Bauer heirs.

The central personality in this International case is Maria Altmann, an elderly U.S. citizen. She was born Maria Viktoria Bloch in Vienna in 1916, daughter of Dr. Gustav Bloch, a lawyer, and his wife Theresa ("Teddi") Bauer. Mrs. Altmann's father and Ferdinand were brothers who'd married the sisters Theresa and Adele Bauer - thus making Ferdinand and Adele what we sometimes call a "double" uncle and aunt. Both couples legally changed their family name to "Bloch-Bauer" when Maria was around two years old.

The two families were extremely close. Ferdinand and Adele had no children of their own, but spent nearly every Sunday and parts of each summer entertaining Maria and her four elder siblings.

Though both families were prosperous, Ferdinand, a sugar merchant, was clearly more so. He had a mansion in Vienna and a castle in Czechoslovakia, and collected paintings by Austrian artists, porcelains, tapestries and furniture. After the turn of the 20th-century, he began commissioning and purchasing the work of Gustav Klimt. Of seven total Klimts purchased by Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer, two were portraits of his wife, Adele - most importantly, the 1907 piece *Adele Bloch-Bauer I* popularly known as the "Gold Adele," after Klimt's use of that precious metal in its execution.

Prior to her early death from tuberculosis in 1925, Adele Bloch-Bauer requested that her husband donate the two portraits and one Klimt landscape to the (National) Austrian Gallery upon *his* death. Though this request was not enforceable by law (Ferdinand, not Adele, owned the paintings), Herr Bloch-Bauer agreed to follow his wife's wishes.

However, all five paintings were confiscated when the Jewish Bloch-Bauers' real estate holdings and personal property were put under "Protective Custody" by the National Socialist party in 1938. After his entire estate had been either sold or appropriated by others, Ferdinand died, nearly penniless, in Zürich, Switzerland in November 1945. The final version of his will, written in October 1945, made no mention of donating any of his property to a museum - indeed, as far as he could tell at that time, he had no property left to dispense.

Still, with the promise that State repatriations were supposed to be made, Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer stipulated that his nephew, Robert, and nieces Luise and Maria would split his estate at 25%, 50% and 25% respectively.

Meanwhile, Maria, a newlywed, had escaped Austria in 1938 with her husband, Fritz (this occurred quickly after he was released from a concentration camp after "deeding" all of his personal holdings to the Nazis), the coats on their backs and one passport between them. Most of the Bloch-Bauers eventually made their ways to North America, though Gustav died in Austria in 1938.

After Ferdinand's death and the end of WWII, the three Bloch-Bauer siblings - now with their own children, and then grandchildren - spent decades attempting to re-secure bits and pieces of their uncle's estate (mostly through the efforts of a lawyer friend-of-the-family who'd remained in Austria) with very little good outcome. Then, in September of 1998, the Austrian government announced that it would return to their rightful owners works of art that had been illegally seized by the Nazis.

As anyone who's ever hired a lawyer will testify, Maria Altmann took an enormous risk in pursuing the Klimt paintings. She had to liquefy meager assets to proceed with the (several) trials, and there was no guarantee her side would "win." Furthermore, court costs were based on the estimated total value of the works at stake, roughly \$150 million (US).

The five paintings considered under the January 17th ruling were transported to Los Angeles, California. Per Maria Altmann's wishes to put them on public display, they were seen at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art from April 4-June 30, 2006.

*Adele Bloch-Bauer I* (1907) was purchased in June, 2006 by billionaire Ronald Lauder for a reported \$135 million (US). It hangs in the [Neue Galerie](#) in New York City, a museum Lauder co-conceived with his late friend, museum administrator and art dealer Serge Sabarsky.

All five paintings were again on display together at the Neue Galerie from July 13-October 9, 2006. At the end of this viewing, four of the five paintings were consigned to Christie's by Maria Altmann. They went up at auction in the Impressionist and Modern Art sales on November 8, 2006, at Christie's Rockefeller Plaza, New York branch. Their gavel prices were as follows in USD:

- *Birkenwald/Buchenwald* (1903) - \$40,336,000
- *Adele Bloch-Bauer II* (1912) - \$87,900,000
- *Apfelbaum* (ca. 1912) - \$33,056,000
- *Häuser in Unterach am Attersee* (ca. 1916) - \$31,376,000

A sixth painting, *Portrait of Amalie Zuckerkandl* (unfinished, 1917-18), is the subject of a separate lawsuit also seeking its repatriation to the Bloch-Bauer heirs. The Austrian Supreme Court has thus far rejected the heirs' claims, but the case remains on appeal.

The seventh Klimt once part of the Adele and Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer collection, *Schloss Kammer am Attersee III* (1910), was purchased by the Austrian Gallery in 1961. It will remain there.

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