

# Exhibiting determination

How a Jewish Viennese former debutante won a protracted legal battle to reclaim a famous painting of her aunt that was stolen by the Nazis



ANNE-MARIE O'Connor lectures in the Viennese Neue Gallery next to 'Lady in Gold.' (Courtesy)

• ABIGAIL KLEIN LEICHMAN

Adele Bloch-Bauer is considered Austrian painter Gustav Klimt's Mona Lisa. She was the model in Klimt's 1907 masterpiece, *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer*. But there the similarity with Leonardo da Vinci's mysterious lady ends.

This is because Bloch-Bauer – and many of Klimt's other models – were Jewish, the painting was among privately owned artworks confiscated by Austrian Nazis. They renamed the painting “Dame [Lady] in Gold,” so as to erase its subject's Jewish identity when they displayed it in the Belvedere Palace and Museum.

The painting was reclaimed by heirs 61 years after the war ended, through a protracted legal battle described in Anne-Marie O'Connor's *The Lady in Gold: The Extraordinary Tale of Gustav Klimt's Masterpiece, Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer*. It now hangs in a gallery owned by philanthropist Ronald S. Lauder, who bought the portrait for \$135 million.

Recently arrived in Israel with husband William Booth, *The Washington Post's* new Jerusalem bureau chief, veteran journalist O'Connor talked about her award-winning book, now available in Hebrew.

She became interested in the story in 2001, from reading a short article in *The Los Angeles Times* about the quest of local resident Maria Altmann, Bloch-Bauer's niece, to retrieve a family painting from Austria's national gallery.

“It was assumed you'd never get a painting back that was stolen by the Nazis and was hanging in Europe,” O'Connor says. “Then I saw the image of the painting and it was so famous, I said, ‘My God, that painting?’”

O'Connor knew a good story when she smelled one. She tracked down Altmann, a Viennese former debutante then in her mid-80s. Over a cup of Viennese coffee piled high with whipped cream, Altmann told her guest the history of her aunt Adele, who inhabited a world of Sigmund Freud,

Mark Twain, Hedy Lamarr and Billy Wilder.

“It was a very ornate, beautiful story,” she says. “What blew me away as a former art student was that Maria said Klimt didn't paint society women, but rather intellectuals like her aunt, who may have had a thing with Klimt. According to Maria, these women were Jewish and that's why the portraits were stolen.”

O'Connor wrote about Altmann's quest for *The Los Angeles Times Magazine* and continued covering the progression of the case, which eventually reached the Supreme Court and was also documented in several films. When the family finally emerged victorious in 2006, O'Connor was in the best position to write a book about the painting and the legal battle, and spent the better part of six years on the task.

“For me, this saga wasn't just a restitution of a painting,” O'Connor has said. “It was a restitution of history. The restitution resurrected her, and the other Klimt women, as handmaidens of Vienna modernism. Each had a story, and each story raised moral questions.”

Bloch-Bauer was the daughter of a successful banker and railroad baron. At 17, she married the much older Ferdinand Bloch, who'd made his fortune in processing sugar beets for Vienna's insatiable pastry industry. Bloch commissioned the Judeophile artist Gustav Klimt to paint his wife. The handsome painter would make more than 100 sketches of her, in addition to his masterpiece, in a style inspired by Byzantine mosaics.

Ironically, before her death from meningitis in 1925, Bloch-Bauer requested that Klimt's portraits of her be donated to the Austrian Gallery in the Belvedere Palace – which is exactly where they ended up, only through the malevolent agency of the Nazis. This twist complicated Altmann's efforts, which began in 1998.

A September 2000 Austrian Gallery show, “Klimt's Women,” prompted an heir of one of the other Jewish models to demand the return of the painting *Lady with Hat and Feather Boa*. These women greatly intrigued O'Connor, who was frustrated that so little trace of them existed.

One All Saints Day, she went to Vienna's Central Cemetery to find Bloch-Bauer's grave. Cemetery administrators denied that a Jewish woman could be buried there.

“Finally, someone guided me through and I found her grave, with just a rusty votive tin on it and no commemoration whatsoever. I put some African violets there and then went to Klimt's grave on the other side of town,” she recalls.

There she saw a man trimming a small hedge, and a laminated image of Bloch-Bauer from the portrait was lying between two votive candles burning on the grave. “I asked the man who put them there, and he

scowled and said, ‘It wasn't me.’ I asked if he was a relative of Klimt, and he said, ‘I'm his grandson,’ so we started talking.

The two struck up an acquaintance, and he gave O'Connor letters Klimt had written to his grandmother, “including a long, emotional letter art historians have been trying to get for years. There is still information about Klimt that has not been discovered and exploited,” says the author. “There are lots of secrets in Viennese society, a lot of private sorrows among the older generation, Nazi pedigrees among them.”

IF SHE could sit in a Vienna café with Klimt today, O'Connor would want to explore his attitudes toward love and women. She suspects his feelings were colored by the fact that his mother was chronically depressed and most of his sisters mentally ill.

“You can't really say he didn't respect women, because he was very good friends with many leading female intellectuals of turn-of-the-century Vienna who were not well-known – like Berta Zuckerkandl, who had one of biggest literary salons at the time – but didn't write much about the women,” she says.

“Klimt painted some of these women into history and had many lovers among them, but their backgrounds were poorly understood even years later, because of the effort to ignore the theft of portraits collected by these Jewish avant-garde families,” says O'Connor.

It surprised her to discover that the art thieves, like so many other Nazi sympathizers, were entrenched in polite Austrian society.

“Klimt's mosaic of Jewish patrons and friends would be pried apart, piece by piece, by men incapable of creating beauty but determined to steal it,” she writes. “The plunder of the families who gave Vienna its luster would not be engineered by mobs. It would be carried out by well-dressed gentlemen with pretensions to genteel respectability.”

*The Lady in Gold* is popular among book clubs in North America and elsewhere. O'Connor enjoys participating in their discussions whenever possible, whether in person or via Skype. Recently, she attended a book club meeting about *The Lady in Gold* in Jerusalem, the city she is getting to know.

“When we talked to people in LA – including Israelis – before coming here, many of them told us to live in Tel Aviv and not Jerusalem,” she says. “We've been to Tel Aviv once or twice and I see that it has the tropical urbanism of LA, so I understand what they meant. But I'm glad we chose Jerusalem, because everything that is going on regionally and in Israel is so available here. Jerusalem is part of the conversation.”

## THE LADY IN GOLD

By Anne-Marie O'Connor Knopf  
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