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### LATEST ARTICLE



#### Gold Standard

*The journey of a masterpiece through the twentieth century.*

APR 23, 2012, VOL. 17, NO. 30 • BY AMY HENDERSON

"Our Mona Lisa," is how Ronald S. Lauder described the portrait he had just paid a record \$135 million for in 2006. The shimmering Gustav Klimt painting, destined to become the centerpiece of Lauder's Neue Galerie in New York, depicts Adele Bloch-Bauer, the wife of a wealthy Viennese sugar industrialist and a prize social peacock in years when that city was the cultural capital of Central Europe. Klimt's work shows Adele's head floating in a luxurious sea of gold and silver leaf, surrounded by cascading mosaics of Egyptian and Mycenaean symbols. It is a glittering statement of Vienna's opulent *belle époque*.

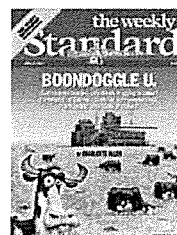
Turn-of-the-century Vienna was energized by the new: an arena for modernism in music (Gustav Mahler, Richard Strauss, Arnold Schönberg), science (Sigmund Freud), letters (Arthur Schnitzler), and art (Klimt, Oskar Kokoschka, Egon Schiele). Gustav Klimt (1862-1918) was part of Vienna's Secessionist Movement that embraced the notion "To every age its art." Beginning in the late 1890s, his portraits of well-heeled women earned him enormous popularity, fueled both by his sensuous depictions and also by his deserved reputation as a rake. His portrait of Adele, with whom he pursued at least a platonic affair, presented her as the quintessential *femme fatale*. The painting was completed in 1907, shortly after the scandalous premiere of Strauss's opera about another seductress, *Salome*.

At first, the idea of *The Lady in Gold* resembles that of Deborah Davis's *Strapless*, the 2003 chronicle of John Singer Sargent's remarkable oops-my-strap-slipped painting of Madame X that shocked the 1884 Paris Salon. But instead, *The Lady in Gold* gets dragged into a decades-long battle over ownership: After Adele died of meningitis at the age of 43 in 1925, the portrait fell under the stewardship of her husband; in 1938, when Germany annexed Austria, he fled to Switzerland and left the portrait behind.

The Bloch-Bauers were Jewish, but when Klimt's portrait of Adele was confiscated by the Nazis it underwent an interesting metamorphosis that erased her Jewish identity. The painting was reinvented as the *Lady in Gold* and put on display at the Belvedere Palace—a highly unusual move in years when Jewish art collections were uniformly confiscated and either passed around to various museums or burned as degenerate. But *Lady in Gold* lived on, and was even the centerpiece of a Klimt exhibition organized by the Vienna Reichsgau in 1943. The painting survived bombs and devastation; after the war, the Austrian government's claim of ownership set off a long and fierce restitution battle by the family.

Anne-Marie O'Connor, who is a journalist, has clearly been swept up in the story of this painting's century-long journey from Klimt's Viennese studio to the Neue Galerie. Her research is dogged, and the early sections of the story are lively and intriguing. But there is little sense of balance as the journey continues and the author becomes entwined first in the horrors of the Holocaust and then in the family's postwar battle for restitution. The second half is burdened by extraneous side stories that clutter the search for provenance. O'Connor increasingly inserts her own feelings into her description of the family's crusade, and uses a distracting heavy hand to relate their arguments for righteous restitution.

The fight climaxed in 2004 when no less than the United States Supreme Court ruled that the surviving descendant, a Los Angeles resident, could sue Austria in the United States. An arbitration tribunal in Austria then decided in favor of the heirs, who put the portrait up for auction. Enter Ronald Lauder, onetime U.S. ambassador to Austria, heir to the Lauder cosmetics fortune, and founder of an art museum devoted to Austrian and German fine and decorative art. One hundred-and-thirty-five-million dollars later, the portrait was enshrined at the Neue Galerie on 86th Street and Fifth Avenue. *The Lady in Gold* appears in conjunction with the



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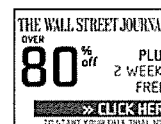


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celebration of Klimt's 150th birthday. Vienna has declared 2012 Klimt Year, and the city's major museums will be staging exhibitions to honor him as a pioneer of modernism.

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A close look at the *Lady in Gold* portrait may reveal the wisp of a smile; Adele would grin.

*Amy Henderson is a cultural historian and curator in Washington.*

BY AMY HENDERSON



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