

DRINKS WITH DEAD PEOPLE

QUARANTINE EDITION

MARCH 31, 2020:
[MARIA ALTMANN](#)

If you want to learn about history, law, art and Nazi-era looting, look no further than the saga of Gustav Klimt's famous "Woman in Gold," painting, which inspired a years-long legal battle (and a [movie with Helen Mirren](#)).

THE STORY

The socialite Adele Bloch-Bauer ran a well-known artistic "salon" in early 20th century Vienna. She was the only subject ever painted twice by the artist Gustav Klimt, and appears in his famous "Woman in Gold" painting.

"Woman in Gold" was the subject of a lengthy legal battle when a journalist discovered in the late 1990s that though it was in the collection of the Austrian national gallery, it may not have arrived there on the up-and-up.

[Maria Altmann](#), the niece of Adele Bloch-Bauer, filed suit to recover possession of "Woman in Gold" and other paintings owned by her family after learning that some of the Austrian national gallery's artwork – including the gold portrait of Adele – had not been donated from their family's estate as the Altmanns thought, but had been seized during WWII and funneled to the museum.

Years of litigation went forward on a point of sovereign immunity: Austria argued that U.S. law didn't permit Altmann to sue for something that happened sixty years earlier, particularly since under 1940's law the U.S. wouldn't have allowed the lawsuit, and after going as far as the U.S. Supreme Court, the meat of the case was decided by arbitrators in January of 2006.

Austria was legally required to return the artwork, which was later consigned to Christie's for a record-breaking sale. The gold portrait of Adele was purchased by Ron Lauder for his [Neue Galerie](#) for an unheard-of \$135 million. Four other Klimt paintings owned by the Bloch-Bauers sold for around \$190 million.

Read on [at the blog](#) for more detail and resources.

DISCUSS:

How should courts and lawmakers approach looted art, especially when heirs may not know what happened to family works?

Should museums be obligated to return looted art?

Do you agree with this case's outcome?

What was the scope of Nazi art looting during the war?

Hi, I'm Betsy. Stuck at home? Let's learn history together, because the past helps us to understand that we are not alone. Weekday updates during #COVID19.

Questions? Comments? Say hello.

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READ MORE:

[Republic of Austria v. Altmann](#), 541 U.S. 677 (2004)

"[World War II Looted Art: Turning History into Justice](#)," U.S. National Archives @ Google Arts & Culture

[Adele's Wish](#) (Film)

"[Gustav Klimt: The Magic of Line](#)," The J. Paul Getty Museum