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Leonard Lauder's Klimt landscape belongs to me, says heir of Nazi victim

Georges Jorisch is represented by Randol Schoenberg, the lawyer who last year won his eight-year case against Austria for the return of five Klimts to California resident Maria Altman

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A Gustav Klimt painting that hangs in the New York apartment of billionaire philanthropist and collector Leonard Lauder is being claimed by a descendant of the Viennese family from whom it was looted during World War II.

The signed oil-on-canvas *Blooming Meadow* (1904/05) was purchased by Mr Lauder in 1983 from Serge Sabarsky, the late Austrian-born Manhattan-based dealer and collector. But the newly published Klimt catalogue raisonné by Alfred Weidinger (Prestel) confirms that the painting belonged to Amalie Redlich, a Viennese Jew whose property was looted after she was deported to the Lodz ghetto in Poland by the Nazis in 1941, where she is believed to have later died.

Her sole surviving grandson, Georges Jorisch of Montreal, is represented by Randol Schoenberg, the Los Angeles-based attorney who last year won restitution from Austria of five Klimt paintings originally belonging to the Viennese Bloch-Bauer family on behalf of California resident Maria Altmann following an eight-year legal battle.

These included the “golden” portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer which was then acquired by Leonard Lauder’s brother, Ronald Lauder, reportedly for \$135m (although this price can not be independently confirmed). It now hangs in Ronald Lauder’s Neue Galerie in New York.

Mr Jorisch, 79, says that Blooming Meadow was acquired by his grandmother’s brother Viktor Zuckerkandl, a Viennese steel magnate, collector and a friend of Klimt. After he died in 1928 the painting passed to Viktor’s sister Amalie and hung in her villa at the sanatorium in Purkersdorf outside Vienna of which she was part owner.

Mr Jorisch says that now that his grandmother’s ownership is confirmed, he will proceed with a claim on the Klimt and that he is leaving the negotiation for its return to Mr Schoenberg. “I suppose he will leave them with a choice: either give back the painting or buy it at a reasonable price, probably fixed by a third party,” says Mr Jorisch, who adds that he has had the painting appraised at \$4m to \$8m, as though it could achieve more at auction. “If we don’t reach a satisfactory arrangement we might have to go court,” he says.

Leonard Lauder’s lawyer Andrew Frackman, of the New York firm O’Melveny & Myers LLP, says that “there isn’t any evidence to support the claim that this painting was owned by Amalie Redlich”. He says he provided Mr Schoenberg with the results of archival research that suggest that the painting which belonged to Redlich is in fact *Roses Under Trees* now in the Musée d’Orsay. (The Weidinger catalogue does not list Redlich as a previous owner of that painting.) “If there were any evidence to support his claim he would have filed a lawsuit,” says Mr Frackman.

But Mr Schoenberg maintains that “there is little doubt that the Lauder painting was the Redlich one”, noting that documents probably would exist had Redlich not died under the Nazis. He and Mr Jorisch have not made an official demand for the painting because the statute of limitations under New York State law, which is three years, commences when a demand is made and refused. “We are trying to exhaust our research before making a demand,” he says, adding that he hopes to resolve the issue amicably.

The painting’s provenance has been confused before in the Klimt literature.

An early monograph listed it as “Estate of Amalie Redlich” but the Redlich provenance was dropped from a later catalogue by Johannes Dobai. According to Mr Schoenberg, this is because Mr Dobai mistakenly consulted a member of the wrong Redlich family who denied having owned the work. The Weidinger catalogue restores Amalie Redlich as a former owner, tracing the painting’s provenance directly from her brother Viktor Zuckerkandl to the estate of Viktor and his wife Paula and then to Amalie Redlich. It is not known what new evidence enabled Mr Weidinger to complete this provenance.

According to Mr Schoenberg, Redlich placed her paintings in storage in 1939, two years before she was deported to Lodz. Her son sought to recover her property in 1947 but discovered it had been looted. The Weidinger catalogue reports that after the war the painting was sold by Galerie Schebesta in Vienna to Rudolf Leopold who in turn sold it to Sabarsky in New York, from whom it was purchased in 1983 by Leonard Lauder. Mr Schoenberg says that Sabarsky appears to have smuggled the painting from Austria without an export permit. “Ultimately the painting is going to have to come back to Jorisch,” says Mr Schoenberg.

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