

# *From Vienna to New York: On the migration of dealers, collectors, and artworks*

At the end of the 19th century, Vienna and New York were characterized by a diversity of languages and nationalities. In 1890, the populations of both cities were around 1.5 million. Twenty years later, in 1910, New York had 4.7 million inhabitants, well over double Vienna's 2.1 million. Both cities were important places for the international art trade. As a Habsburg royal seat, Vienna was home to large aristocratic and upper class art collections – and this in turn linked Vienna with New York, where industrial and financial magnates built up important art collections. In addition, large museums had opened in both cities since the middle of the 19th century. But of course, New York was the star among world cities, the destination of many dreams. Thus, when the Viennese Asian art dealer Anton Exner was surprised by the start of the First World War on one of his trips to the Far East in 1914, he decided to go to New York, where he ran his East Asian art trading business on 56th Street during the years between 1916 and 1919.<sup>1</sup>

With the end of the First World War in 1918, the Habsburg monarchy disintegrated and Vienna, with only 1.9 million inhabitants, was now the capital of the small Republic of Austria. New York, on the other hand, had continued to grow – to over 5.6 million – and by 1940 would have almost 7.5 million inhabitants. In Austria, and particularly in Vienna, during the crises of the interwar period col-

lectors and institutions that had come under economic pressure and needed to raise funds sold works of art – and solvent customers were often found on the other side of the Atlantic. Although the Austrian state tried to minimize the export of works of art by means of restrictive legislation, trade networks between Vienna and New York, probably the most important art market in the US, developed noticeably. For example, the brothers Elkan and Abraham Silberman, who had established a branch in Vienna in 1920 as a subsidiary of their art dealership in Budapest, established business relationships with New York in the 1930s and opened the E. & A. Silberman Galleries at 32 East 57th Street near Madison Avenue by 1937 at the latest.<sup>2</sup> The Viennese art dealership J. Glückselig & Sohn had been commissioned by Duke Ernst August von Braunschweig-Lüneburg to sell the »Welfenschatz« (»Guelph Treasure«). Max Glückselig, who ran the art business and an auction house with his brother Samuel, therefore visited New York three times in 1927 and 1928. Although the sale of the »Guelph Treasure« to the US did not materialize in the end, Max Glückselig was able to establish contacts in New York that were to serve him well in the future.<sup>3</sup>

The »Anschluss« (annexation) of Austria to the National Socialist German Reich in March 1938, which was celebrated by many

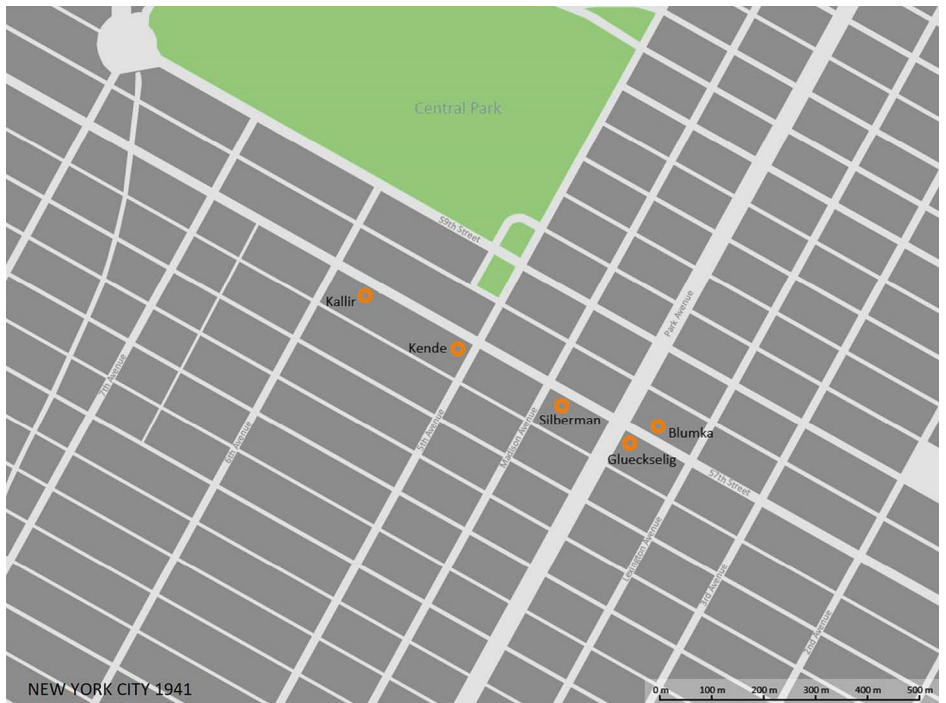


Fig. 1 Maps of the center of Vienna in 1937 and of Midtown New York City in 1941 showing the positions of five art dealers before and after their emigration (Illustration: Leonhard Weidinger)

in Vienna, meant persecution for more than ten percent of the Viennese population who were of Jewish origin. Numerous Viennese collectors and art dealers tried to keep themselves and their property safe from the Nazi regime. New York became a desirable destination for emigrants. Those who had already made ties to the United States before 1938 now had an advantage. The Silbermann brothers managed to flee to New York.<sup>4</sup> Max Glückselig, whose brother Samuel was deported from Vienna to Izbica in 1942 and was subsequently murdered, also made it to New York in 1938 and, together with his son Fritz, who then began to call himself Frederick, opened M. Glueckselig & Son Works of Art at 108 East 57th Street near Park Avenue.<sup>5</sup>

Melanie Kende and her son Herbert had run the S. Kende auction house in Vienna until 1938, when it was »Aryanized« by the Munich art dealer Adolf Weinmüller. They founded Kende Galleries located at 730 Fifth Avenue in New York. Between 1940 and 1953, some 400 auctions were held at these premises and later at the Gimbel Brothers department stores on Broadway, 33rd Street and finally at 119–121 West 57th Street.<sup>6</sup> One of the first auctions was of the collection of Anton Redlich, who also came from Vienna. Born in 1890, Anton Redlich took over not only the Austria Brewery in Vienna, Mödling and Atzgersdorf from his mother Bertha Redlich-Floderer, but also an important porcelain collection. He himself also collected early Islamic ceramics as well as Islamic glasswork and textiles. In 1938, he fled from Vienna to Switzerland and on to the US.<sup>7</sup> He managed to take a large part of his collection with him.<sup>8</sup> On 5 and 6 April 1940, Anton Redlich had a large portion of his art objects auctioned at Kende Galleries in New York.<sup>9</sup>

The largest and most prominent private art collections in Vienna before 1938 were those of the brothers Alphonse and Louis Rothschild. While Louis Rothschild was ar-

rested immediately after the »Anschluss« and had to spend a year in Gestapo custody until he agreed to transfer the family assets to the Nazi state, Alphonse Rothschild and his family were able to flee in March 1938. From 1940, Alphonse, his wife Clarice and his daughters Bettina and Gwendoline lived in New York City and Bar Harbor, where Alphonse Rothschild died in 1942. Louis Rothschild arrived in New York in 1941 but did not stay there long. He eventually moved to Vermont.<sup>10</sup>

In Vienna, the Gestapo confiscated the Rothschild collections in 1938 and had them transported to the so-called Central Depot in the Neue Hofburg. Using the painting *Game-piece with a Dead Heron* by Jan Weenix as an example, the path of the confiscated works of art can be traced as follows: In the Central Depot, the painting was cataloged as AR 887 by the experts at the Kunsthistorisches Museum.<sup>11</sup> After World War II began, it was taken to the »Jagd« salvage depot in Steinbach bei Göstling, from where it was transported to the »Reichskunstdepot« in Kremsmünster on 25 September 1942 and registered under the number K 988.<sup>12</sup> It was to be shown in the planned »Führermuseum« in Linz after the war. On 4 April 1944, it was relocated to the Altaussee salt mine.<sup>13</sup> In May 1945 the US army reached Altaussee and began transporting the stored works of art to the Central Collecting Point (CCP) in Munich. On 10 July 1945, the Weenix painting arrived at the CCP Munich and was inventoried there as Mü 3639, Aussee 2377.<sup>14</sup> The work was identified as part of Alphonse Rothschild's collection, sent to Austria on 15 March 1948,<sup>15</sup> where it was restituted to Clarice Rothschild. In 1950, through the art trade, the Weenix painting came to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York where it is still located today.<sup>16</sup>

Currently, the most famous Viennese woman in New York City is probably Adele Bloch-Bauer – thanks to the painting by Gustav Klimt, which shows her as the *Woman in Gold*.





Fig. 2 Jan Weenix, *Gamepiece with a Dead Heron*, 1695, oil on canvas, 52 3/4 × 43 3/4 in. (134 × 111 cm), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Accession Number: 50.55



Fig. 3 Bodhisattva Mahasthamaprapta (Dashizhi), Jin dynasty (1115–1234), 13th century, China, Wood (willow) with traces of pigment and gilding, single-woodblock construction, H. 39 3/8 in. (100 cm); W. 11 9/16 in. (29.4 cm); D. 10 1/16 in. (25.6 cm), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Accession Number: 1978.543

After its lengthy restitution to Maria Altmann and other heirs of Adele and Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer, the painting was acquired by Ronald Lauder in 2006 and has since been on display at the Neue Galerie on 5th Avenue, with many other pieces originating from Vienna around 1900.<sup>17</sup> Even the name of this museum comes from Vienna. The Neue Galerie was primarily inspired by the art dealership that Otto Nirenstein founded in Vienna in 1923. Otto Nirenstein, who called himself Otto Kallir (his family's original Hebrew name) starting from 1933, fled Vienna in 1939 and came to New York after a brief stay in Paris.<sup>18</sup> In that same year, he also founded the Galerie St. Etienne in 46 West 57th Street, which displayed works by Austrian and German Expressionists as well as American and European self-taught artists.<sup>19</sup>

Until the end of the Second World War, it was mainly collectors and art dealers from Vienna who had come to New York from Vienna – and only a few works of art. This changed with the beginning of the restitutions, especially starting from 1947. Although the art collections that had been confiscated under the Nazi regime were returned to their rightful owners only reluctantly and far from completely, there was still a large number of works of art that those who had fled from Vienna were now bringing back to their new homes. In many cases, the collectors decided to sell the pieces – sometimes because they wanted to make a conscious break with their past, but in some cases also because their financial situation forced them to do so.

To sell their objects, the former Viennese collectors often turned to the former Viennese art dealers: In 1949, for example, Kende Galleries auctioned the paintings from the restituted Viennese collection of Oscar Bondy. Decorative art pieces from the Bondy Collection as well as from the Albert Pollak Collection were brought to the New York market by Leopold Blumka, another art dealer who had emigrated from Vienna. In 1947, part

of his porcelain collection – until 1938, one of the most important in Vienna – was restituted to Heinrich Rothberger, the co-owner of a department store who had fled from the Austrian capital. He gave these objects to Max and Frederick Glückselig, whom he knew from Vienna. When Heinrich Rothberger died in Montreal on 20 January 1953, many of the pieces at Glueckselig & Son had still not been sold. The offer in New York was too substantial. In December 1953, Frederick Glückselig informed Heinrich's widow, Ella Rothberger, that a customer had »unfortunately – or should I say fortunately?« broken a porcelain statue from the Rothberger Collection while inspecting it during a visit. Thus, at least the insurance value could be paid out.<sup>20</sup>

In the post-war period, the opportunities to acquire European art on the New York market under relatively favorable conditions were very good, and many American collectors took advantage of them. Numerous objects from former Viennese collections ended up in New York museums as dedications or bequests in later years – however, in many cases the fact that they had reached New York only because of Nazi persecution has not (yet) been documented.

In some cases, the known information also obscures the actual provenance. In 1978, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York received a Bodhisattva statue as the »Gift of Clara Mertens, in memory of her husband, André Mertens«.<sup>21</sup> Clara Mertens had already dedicated a number of musical instruments to the museum in memory of her husband, who had been a music impresario and died in 1963. However, she had owned the Bodhisattva statue long before her marriage to André Mertens. Clara Mertens was born Klara Steiner in Vienna on 4 June 1901. She was the daughter of the textile industrialists Wilhelm Steiner and Jenny Steiner, née Pulitzer. When Dr. A. Breuer's collection of East Asian art came up for auction at Paul Cassirer's

Kunstsalon in Berlin on 14 and 15 May 1929, the Viennese art historian Ernst Buschbeck purchased lot 245, a Bodhisattva statue,<sup>22</sup> and apparently sold it directly to Klara Steiner. Already in the following year, Klara Steiner made her new acquisition available as a loan for the exhibition of works of Asian art from private collections in Vienna.<sup>23</sup> This show took place in June and July 1930 in the Austrian Museum of Art and Industry, today's Museum für angewandte Kunst (MAK), and had been organized by the Association of Friends of Asian Culture in Vienna, of which Klara Steiner was a member – as was the dealer of Asian art Anton Exner. Klara Steiner lived with her mother until 1938. After the »Anschluss« of Austria, both were persecuted as Jews and their assets were confiscated. However, they were able to flee to New York.<sup>24</sup> On 4 March 1940, the statue was offered as lot 98 at the 458th art auction at the Dorotheum in Vienna.<sup>25</sup> There Anton Exner, by then a committed National Socialist, acquired it and donated it in 1944 to the State Arts and Crafts Museum in Vienna, now the MAK, where it was rediscovered after the end of World War II by Klara Steiner, by then married to André Mertens. In 1947, the museum restituted the Bodhisattva statue to Klara Mertens<sup>26</sup>, who then took it to her new home in New York and eventually dedicated it to the Metropolitan Museum in 1978.

In the first half of the 20th century, and especially after the »Anschluss« of Austria to the National Socialist German Reich in 1938,

the routes of dealers, collectors, and works of art ran almost exclusively from Vienna to New York. The emigrants brought their existing connections with them to their new homeland and integrated them into the networks which they were then establishing – some more, others less successfully – in New York. Almost all of them remained in New York or at least in the US; in only very few cases did collectors and dealers return to Vienna after 1945. This is hardly surprising in the immediate post-war period, as many buildings in Vienna had been badly damaged and the supply situation was improving only slowly. But even later, neither politics nor Vienna's society signaled that the return of emigrants was desired. Austria saw itself as a victim; nearly no one wanted to see the actual victims of National Socialism.

Most of the Viennese firms which had belonged to the emigrated art dealers were liquidated by the Nazi regime. Only the Viennese auction house S. Kende was returned to Herbert and Melanie Kende. They chose to keep Kende Galleries as well and ran both auction houses from New York until the 1950s. In addition, many of Vienna's major art collections were destroyed under National Socialism. Vienna lost an essential part of its culture – but through the emigration of dealers, collectors and works of art, a small part of this culture was preserved in New York and is still traceable there more or less clearly.

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# *Abstract*

## *Von Wien nach New York. Zur Migration von Händler\*innen, Sammler\*innen und Kunstwerken*

Die Krisen der Zwischenkriegszeit führten in Wien dazu, dass Sammler\*innen und Institutionen, die wirtschaftlich unter Druck geraten waren, Kunstwerke verkauften – und zahlungskräftige Kunden fanden sich oft jenseits des Atlantiks. Daher bauten einige Wiener Kunsthändler\*innen Geschäftsverbindungen nach New York auf, dem wohl wichtigsten Kunstmarkt in den USA. Nach dem »Anschluss« Österreichs an das nationalsozialistische Deutsche Reich im März 1938 versuchten zahlreiche Wiener Sammler\*innen und Kunsthändler\*innen, die vom nationalsozialistischen Regime verfolgt wurden, sich und ihr Eigentum in Sicherheit zu bringen. New York wurde zu einem angestrebten Ziel der Emigrant\*innen. Einige Kunsthändler\*innen konnten sich rasch am New Yorker Markt etablieren, wie die Brüder Elkan und Abraham Silbermann sowie Max Glückselig und sein Sohn Frederick. Melanie Kende und ihr Sohn Herbert Kende, deren Wiener Auktionshaus von Adolf Weinmüller arisiert worden war, gründeten in New York die Kende Galleries, die u. a. 1940 die Sammlung des Wieners Anton Redlich und 1949 die Gemälde aus der restituierten Wiener Sammlung Oscar Bondy zur Versteigerung brachten. Kunsthandwerk aus der Sammlung Bondy verkaufte der ebenfalls aus Wien nach New York geflohene Kunsthändler Leopold Blumka. Auch die wohl bekanntesten Kunstsammler aus Wien, die Brüder Alphonse und Louis Rothschild, wählten New York als Ziel und lebten hier kurze Zeit. Nach 1945 wurden die unter dem NS-Regime entzogenen Sammlungen zum Teil restituiert, viele dieser Stücke gelangten nun nach New York. Die Chance, europäische Kunst zu relativ günstigen Konditionen zu erwerben, ließen sich New Yorker Sammler\*innen nicht entgehen. Zahlreiche Objekte aus ehemaligen Wiener Sammlungen kamen in der Folge als Widmungen oder Nachlässe in New Yorker Museen – dass sie aber nur aufgrund der NS-Verfolgung nach New York gelangt waren, ist vielen Fällen (noch) nicht dokumentiert.

- 1 Cf. Anderl 2014, p. 351–352.
- 2 Cf. Anderl 2006, p. 48–49; cf. Lillie 2003, p. 1203; see also [www.digital.wienbibliothek.at/wbrobv/periodical/pageview/269751](http://www.digital.wienbibliothek.at/wbrobv/periodical/pageview/269751) (13. 2. 2023).
- 3 Cf. Bock 2015, p. 12–13.
- 4 Cf. Lillie 2003, p. 1203.
- 5 Cf. Bock 2015, p. 50.
- 6 Cf. Hopp 2021, p. 238–239.
- 7 Cf. Lillie 2003, p. 927–928.
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- 10 Cf. Sandgruber 2018, p. 457–481.
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- 23 Ausst.-Kat. Österreichisches Museum für Kunst und Industrie 1930, p. 9, IV.
- 24 Cf. Lillie 2003, p. 1253.
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