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# Edgar Degas (1834-1917)

## The Bellelli Family, 1859-1867

**I**N 1856, THE ASPIRING YOUNG FRENCH ARTIST Edgar Degas traveled to Italy to study the work of the Renaissance masters and to visit members of his extended family. After stops in Naples and Rome, he stayed for several months in Florence with his aunt Laura; her husband, Baron Gennaro Bellelli; and their daughters, Giovanna and Giulia. Following his return to Paris in 1859, he spent much of the next year turning his many drawings of his cousins and their parents into what is now regarded as one of the most penetrating family portraits ever made. *The Bellelli Family* reveals the young Degas's talents not only as a painter but also as an astute observer of interpersonal relationships.

Despite comfortable surroundings, the Bellelli household was not a very happy one. The 2 parents appear both physically and psychologically far apart. In her youth, Degas's intelligent and beautiful aunt Laura had been deeply in love with another man. But her strong-willed father, whose portrait appears in a drawing on the wall, dismissed that suitor as unworthy. Laura's eventual marriage to Baron Bellelli was an arranged one, and she came to despise what she regarded as her husband's idle and irritable nature. In the painting, she and the girls are shown wearing black, in mourning after the recent death of Laura's overbearing father.

The baron had his own frustrations. The family had been expelled from Naples after he supported a failed revolution there, and they were living in exile in Florence. In the painting, he sits apart, disengaged from the rest of the family and preoccupied with his own affairs. With his back turned to us, he barely deigns to take part in the family portrait at all.

The 2 young girls are a source of warmth in this chilly scene. Degas was fond of his 2 cousins, writing in a letter: "The older one [Giovanna, age 10 years] is really a little beauty; the younger one [Giulia, age 7 years] has

the wit of a devil and the goodness of a little angel. . . ."<sup>1(p71)</sup> Giovanna was the obedient one, a mama's girl. In the picture, she stands primly in front of her mother, with Laura's protective right arm on her shoulder. Giulia was the restless one, tied to her mother but also seeking the attention of her distracted father. She sits perched on a chair in the middle of the picture, one leg curled up under her. On one side, she is at Laura's fingertips; on the other, she looks toward her father across the gap between them, forming a child-bridge between her 2 estranged parents.

Tension in the Bellelli household was relieved permanently when the baron died 5 years later. The next time Degas visited Florence, Giovanna and Giulia were teenagers. He made few drawings of them. Perhaps they had become less interesting to him as adolescents, and perhaps he to them. Laura Bellelli kept the love letters from her youthful paramour until she died at age 83 years. Degas, who later became a founding member of the Impressionists, never married. At his death, also at age 83 years, *The Bellelli Family* was found neglected and dusty among his possessions. It now hangs in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, showing in ways that no photograph could ever reveal what it was like to be part of the troubled Bellelli family.

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### REFERENCES

1. McMullen R. *Degas: His Life, Times, and Work*. Boston, Mass: Houghton Mifflin; 1984.