

Edgar Degas,
The Bellelli Family,
aka *Family Portrait*,
1858-67, oil on canvas,
200 x 253 cm (79 x
100")

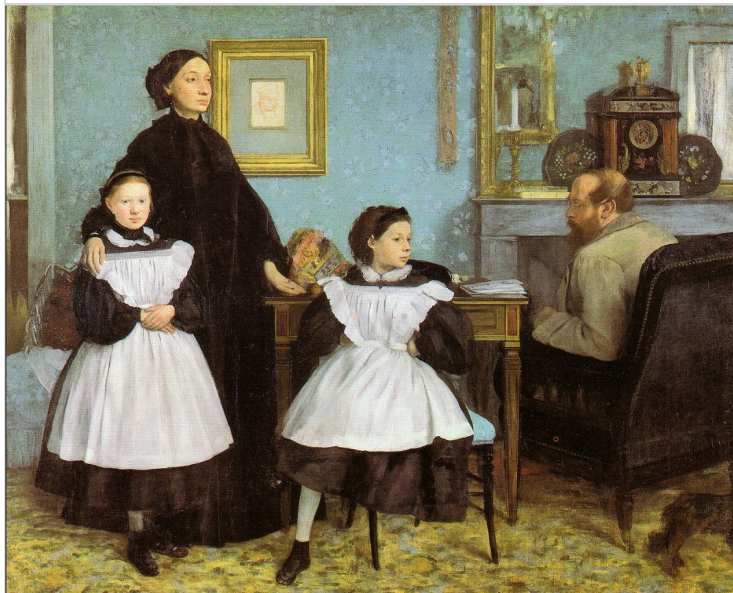
On the left, portrait of Degas' aunt Laura (Degas' father's sister). She is in mourning costume, grieving following the recent death of her father. She is also pregnant and steadies herself with her left hand on a side table and her right around the shoulder of Giulia. The posture of her left hand can be seen in some of the drawings Degas made from the work of Lorenzo da Viterbo in Mazzatosta Chapel of the Virgin Mary and in Anthony van Dyke's portrait of Paolina Adorna in Genoa. (Note 1)

To the left a soft chair upholstered like the chair Giovanna sits on, in a blue pattern, similar to the wallpaper, against the wall overlapping the jamb of a door frame and the edge of a sideboard with a crystal decanter in the adjacent room.

(Note 1. Degas wrote to Gustave Moreau trying to persuade Moreau to join him in Italy to see these paintings. There is a study of these hands dated 1860 in the d'Orsay.)

Background: In 1856 Degas left his home in Paris to study art and visit family relations in Italy, arriving in Naples on 17 July. In 1857 he traveled between Naples, where he stayed with his grandfather, Hilaire Degas, and Rome. At the end of July 1858 Laura Bellelli wrote to Degas from Naples, inviting him to stay with her in Florence; it was there that Gennaro Bellelli, who had been a political journalist supporting the fight for Italy's independence, took refuge from Austrian persecution after defeat of the Revolution of 1848. Degas arrived in Florence by 4 August, living with his uncle Gennaro and making studies in the Uffizi. By September he had become restless, did not get along well with Gennaro, and remained only to see Laura, Giovanna and Giulia, who had prolonged their stay in Naples, following the death of Degas' grandfather Hilaire on 31st August.

The main wall has a flower-patterned blue wallpaper. On the wall a gold-framed portrait of Laura Bellelli's recently deceased father and Degas' grand-father, Hilaire Degas. The frame is purposefully overlapped by Laura Bellelli's face and left shoulder.



Portraits of Degas' nieces, the Bellelli children, Giulia and Giovanna, demonstrating contrasting stances and emphasising a tension in the household. Giovanna is restless and playful, her left leg tucked under herself on the chair. Both girls wear black dresses with white aprons and black velvet hair bands, white stockings and black shoes.

On a side table behind then, on the right some papers, a small green ball and a small white ball-shape, on the left a highly decorated textile, in a shape similar to a cosy to keep a pot warm.

The floor is richly carpeted in a yellow, gold and blue pattern.

There is a set of visual connections which articulate a curve in the front of the picture, from the base of the back legs of the arm chair on the right, the front legs of Giovanna's chair, Giovanna's shoe, then Giulia's right shoe, to the base of Laura Bellelli's gown and the base of Giulia's dress..

The top part of the composition involves a series of ten or more vertical forms.

On the right a portrait of Degas' uncle, the baron Gennaro Bellelli, an Italian patriot in exile from Naples, in Florence. He sits with half of his body away from the viewer, in an upholstered arm chair. Above him a gold-framed mirror, a 'framed' clock-like decorative object on a mantel-shelf, two painted plates as ornaments and a candle-stick holder and candle. Reflections in the mirror provide two further fragments of frames, one showing part of a gold-framed painting and the other another mirror which reflects a curtain and window. To the left of the main mirror a pull-cord, presumably for calling a servant. There are two books on the mantel-shelf in front of the candle-stick holder, partly overlapped by Gennaro's forehead.

On the lower right a dog is seen escaping from the scene, as if cropped by the artifice of a contemporary photograph.

The painting was exhibited at the Salon in 1867, it remained unsold with Degas until his last move in 1913, at which time he left it with his dealer, Paul Durand-Ruel. The painting is now in Musée d'Orsay, Paris