



Art of Family Medicine

The Bellelli Family

Degas and family medicine

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Every image [should have] a claim on the attention and [be] a source of possible meanings.

Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*

As family physicians, we rarely see families together. We see them individually or sometimes in groupings—for example, an elderly patient with a daughter or son, or a parent with his or her children.

What is in a painting?

In *The Bellelli Family* by Edgar Degas we have a whole family in front of us and no medical chart. What can

you observe and deduce? All you have is the painting, your ability to observe, and your knowledge as a physician. Like a radiologist you have to develop a systematic way of viewing the painting, glean information, and drawing conclusions. Now without reading further, what do you see in the painting?

Background

Edgar Degas was born into a well-to-do Parisian banking family in 1837. An important event in his early life was the death of his mother when he was 13. Another noteworthy development was that at an



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Degas, Edgar (1834-1917). *The Bellelli Family*. Oil on canvas, 200 x 250 cm. Inv. RF2210. Photo: Hervé Lewandowski. Musée d'Orsay, Paris, Fr. Used with permission.

early age he showed an active interest in drawing and painting, which was nurtured during his formative years. By the age of 18 he had obtained a degree in literature, and to further his interest in historical painting he registered as a copyist at the Louvre Museum. His father, not seeing any pecuniary advantage to this career path, encouraged Degas to study law. Dutifully he enrolled in the Faculty of Law at the University of Paris, but his passion for art prevailed and in 1855 he transferred to the École des Beaux-Arts. The following year Degas traveled to Italy to study the Italian Masters in Rome and also to visit his paternal grandfather in Naples. His paternal aunt, Laura Bellelli, and her family had lived in Naples, but her husband, Baron Gennaro Bellelli, had been involved in an unsuccessful revolt for Italian Independence, and to escape Austrian persecution, the baron and his family had moved to Florence. In August 1858 the Bellelli family invited Degas to stay with them in Florence. Once there, Degas busied himself sketching studies at the Uffizi Gallery. At the end of the month the family, with the exception of Gennaro, made a hasty trip to Naples. Degas soon returned to Florence, but his aunt and cousins did not return until November. At this time Degas began doing studies and sketches of the family, which he later used in the painting considered to be the masterpiece of his youth.¹

Degas returned to Paris in March of 1859 after spending 8 months with the Bellellis in Florence.

The painting

There are many ways to look at a work of art. Here is one approach.²

- Consider your initial subjective response to the painting.
- Describe all observed visible forms.
- Analyze what is being observed.
- Interpret the work with subjective and objective data collected, and consider biographical information, past influences, and contemporary events.
- Decide if the art is worthy of serious attention and why.

Subjective response to the painting. We are used to seeing photographs of families where everyone is saying “cheese” and they are usually smiling at the photographer. In this painting no one is smiling and only one person, Giovanna, appears to be looking directly at the artist. Laura Bellelli is looking into an unknown middle distance; she looks constrained. Giulia is also looking at something we cannot see, but her youthful distraction is not unhappy. Perhaps she is impatiently posing and would like to be off enjoying her own pursuits. Gennaro Bellelli is hunched over with his back to the artist, ignoring everything except Giulia and perhaps some paperwork on the table.

The painting got my attention. This is not a still life. Degas is telling a story and something is amiss.

Description of observed visible forms. Laura and her daughters are dressed in black. Laura’s dress appears voluminous. The daughters have crisp white pinafores over their black clothing. Gennaro is not dressed in black. His clothing appears casual. He is seated in a leather chair behind which there is a small dog. In front of Gennaro is a mantelpiece on which there is a candlestick, a lacquered box flanked by 2 decorated plates, and a large golden-framed mirror, which reflects a window, a painting, and what appears to be the lower part of a crystal chandelier. Between Gennaro and the rest of the family is the leg and edge of the table, the edge of the fireplace, and the edge of the mirror. Next to the mirror is a hanging golden object, perhaps a device to call a servant.

There are some papers and a multicoloured object on the table. Behind the table there is blue wallpaper with a white floral design, and a vertical frame indicating a door. There is a small portrait on the wall with blue matting and a large frame.

Behind Laura and Giovanna there is a piece of furniture draped with a white fabric. The floor is covered with a multicoloured rug.

Laura’s left hand is abducted, and her right hand is draped over Giovanna’s shoulder. Giovanna’s hands are clasped in front of her at her waist. Giulia is sitting on her left leg and in a defiant position. We can see only Gennaro’s left hand, which is clenched in a fist.

Analysis of what is being observed. When using the clinical method in medicine, some of the information gathered is “noise” of no importance in drawing conclusions. It is important to discern what information is important for your purpose.

The room has the trappings of wealth. Three members of the family are dressed in black. The family members do not appear to be interacting except for Laura and her daughter Giovanna. Laura Bellelli is wearing a loose black garment; could she be pregnant? She does not look happy and she has a protective stance toward her daughter. Her left hand might be steadying her or she might want to use it to push off the table and get out of the situation. Giulia appears to be independent of her mother and sister, and although sitting closer to her father, she does not have eye contact with him. There are artistic physical barriers between Gennaro and the rest of the family. His apparel is not in keeping with the rest of the family. He has turned his chair away from the small dog* and his profile faces the fireplace. He has turned his back on the artist who is immortalizing his family and his left hand is in a clenched fist.

*An art critic suggested that the Bellelli’s dog wanted to get out of the room before “all hell breaks loose.”¹

There is a portrait on the wall just below the gaze of Laura. There might be a significance to its content and placement.

Biographical information and past influences. We know that Degas was aware of a technique used by the Dutch Masters in their artwork to represent the cycle of birth, life, and death.³ Shortly after Degas arrived in Florence his grandfather had died in Naples. After a prolonged stay in Naples, Laura and her daughters returned to Florence. Gennaro did not join them in an outward show of mourning. Laura was pregnant when she left for Naples and when she returned in November the pregnancy was apparent and was an added stress for her. The portrait on the wall just below Laura's gaze was Rene-Hilaire, her recently deceased father. Degas had done the drawing of his grandfather when he was in Naples in 1857.

Degas was very much aware of the tensions in the Bellelli family. Marital problems were also noted by Degas' uncle Achille: "The domestic life of the family in Florence is a source of unhappiness for us. As I predicted, one of them is very much at fault and our sister a little, too."³

Degas' aunt confided in him. Living in exile, she missed her Neapolitan family. Also, her husband was "immensely disagreeable Living with Gennaro, whose detestable nature you know and who has no serious occupation, shall soon lead me to the grave."³

Is The Bellelli Family worthy of attention? Degas left the painting with his dealer in 1913. It had been kept rolled up in his successive studios and was in poor condition. Degas died in 1917 and the painting was sold as part of his estate to the Musée du Luxembourg in Paris for 400 000 French francs. It is currently in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris. Degas personally experienced the Bellelli's marital discord and painted it. He was perhaps the first artist to depict the unease of a dysfunctional family. 

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Competing interests

None declared

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