

"MAKING A DISPLAY"
Adelicia Acklen's Tennessee
Family Portraits

BY RACHEL STEPHENS

Certain expectations were placed upon antebellum women in the American South, namely modesty, and quiet strength even in the face of unspeakable loss. Adelicia Hayes Franklin Acklen Cheatham (1817–1887), known as Adelicia Acklen today, owned nineteenth-century Nashville's most impressive art collection, and she used it to communicate these characteristics. The collection included an interesting mix of white idealized marble sculptures, European masterpieces—both originals and copies, and dozens of family portraits by Tennessee artists. It was eclectic to say the least, and there was nothing else comparable in the region. In her time, family portraits were common in the homes of wealthy Tennesseans, but her residence had excessive numbers of these. In sheer volume, even with the large assemblage of European art aside, Acklen's collection

was unparalleled in antebellum Tennessee, except perhaps by Andrew Jackson who had a personal artist. The presence of so many family members' portraits in her home offers a tangible example of Acklen's devotion to her family. The conservative form and style of the work also falls right in line with dominant artistic trends in nineteenth-century Tennessee. Despite the fact that Acklen collected art from around the world, her family portraits, which helped many of her children's legacies live on past their premature deaths, were perhaps the pride of her collection.

The opulence of Belmont during Acklen's years there between its construction in 1853 and the 1884 sale at the end of her life not only reveals the expansive nature of Acklen's tastes but her acute cultural awareness as well. Much meaning can also be drawn from the Tennessee family portraits in particular. While her

Adelicia Hayes Franklin Acklen Cheatham owned nineteenth-century Nashville's most impressive art collection, including a large number of family portraits. (C.C. Giers, photographer, ca. 1870, Belmont Mansion Association)

