



Belmont's mansion and its grounds became "the show-place of Nashville... the beau ideal of splendor." (Detail from "City of Nashville... 1860," Tennessee State Library and Archives)

some rare painting or piece of statuary. I ceased to remember that I was in a private residence, but thought myself to some grand art gallery."¹⁸ Indeed it seems that people did not quite know what to make of Acklen and her collection.

Acklen's commissioning of dozens of family portraits by Tennessee artists was one of the ways she attempted to align herself with the Nashville elite and join the good graces of society. One's choice of portraitist in nineteenth-century Tennessee was certainly significant, and Nashville was proud and supportive of its growing art scene. Although hiring Tennessee painters was also time and cost efficient, these things did not generally concern Acklen.

Rather, supporting local artists and displaying their works in her home would have helped bolster her local reputation much more than commissioning outside professionals. Having herself and her family depicted in the same styles as other Tennessee elites would have had a similar effect. She could have easily commissioned an artist from elsewhere, and she did do this on occasion; however, she chose to primarily stick to the known and trusted local artists for the majority of her commissioned portraits.¹⁹

Although some itinerant artists passed through Nashville in the 1810s and 20s, the market at that time was dominated by the city's sole resident artist, Ralph E.

W. Earl. By the 1830s, however, Earl had removed to Washington to live at Andrew Jackson's White House, and the art market opened up a bit. Native Tennessean Washington Bogart Cooper was poised to fill Earl's shoes. Cooper quickly gained the lion's share of middle Tennessee's portraiture clientele. Art historian Budd Bishop describes Cooper's "influential patrons, isolated stylistic development, and a provincial flavor" as "a perfect barometer of a developing state beautifully suited to the temper of the times."²⁰ Cooper became Nashville's most prolific nineteenth-century artist, and his modest style perfectly suited local tastes. According to his account book, he averaged thirty-five portraits a year between 1837–1848, making his moniker of the "man of a thousand portraits" seem quite fitting. He became the most popular artist in nineteenth-century Tennessee history, and he produced many portraits for the Acklens.

As a child of distinguished Nashville parents, Adelia had the best upbringing Nashville could offer. She attended the prestigious Nashville Female Academy with the other most prominent of the city's daughters, and she was a young student during the Marquis de Lafayette's visit on May 5, 1825.²¹ Acklen was intelligent and well educated, fluent in French, and she graduated at age sixteen "with highest honors."²² She was also familiar with the Nashville art scene from a young age. Her mother Sarah C. Hightower had sat for Nashville's first resident artist Earl and

according to him, "I never had a lovelier model."²³ Acklen's parents, who were first generation Tennesseans, her father having moved there as a young man from Massachusetts to initiate a legal career, actually had a long tradition of association with local artists. Oliver Bliss Hayes became very well acquainted with Earl after his arrival into Nashville in 1817.²⁴ The two men became founding members of the Tennessee Antiquarian Society in 1820, the precursor to the Tennessee Historical Society. Although it is likely that Hayes also sat for Earl, this is undocumented. Later the Hayeses would sit for Cooper and others. This artistic lineage was carried on and expanded upon by Acklen in the family portraits she displayed in her home.

The family portraits were a prominent feature of Belmont and were created by a virtual who's who of nineteenth-century Tennessee painters, including Cooper and others. Guests to the home regularly commented on the portraits in particular. A newspaper account of the 1867 wedding of Adelia Acklen to Dr. Cheatham noted that "the portrait faces that looked from the walls seemed to have been suddenly instilled with life, and looked smiling upon the happy gathering."²⁵

Acklen carefully cultivated her public image and portraiture was one important way she accomplished this. Like her art collection, Adelia was multifaceted and this view continues when analyzing the ways in which she portrayed herself in her portraits. The surviving portraits of