



The earliest known photographic image of Belmont captured a view of the villa and its garden, shot from the top of the water tower—the highest possible vantage point—by a Union soldier during the Civil War. (Belmont Mansion Association)

attribution of Adolphus Heiman as the designer of Belmont. The earliest known photographic image of Belmont captured a view of the villa shot from the top of the water tower—the highest possible vantage point—by a Union soldier during the Civil War, which enables us to see details including a horse and carriage, a child sitting on a white horse, and several people posed in the landscape. The painting from the Cheekwood collection, however, is the only known oil-on-canvas representation of Belmont. It prompts us to ask, what can an image with a partial provenance, by an (as yet) unknown artist, depicting a subject that typically resides in the margins of scholarly study, disclose to a discerning eye? Arguably, quite an abundance when it is viewed as the visual embodiment of ideals that defined the social elite of planter culture on the eve of the Civil War.

Villa and plantation portraits are related forms of “estate” portraiture. They share certain modes of representation, specifically in regards to conventions used to depict the viewer’s position and direct their gaze—as characterized by John Michael Vlach in *Planter’s Prospects*. The anonymous painter of Belmont used the standard portrait format identified by Vlach, which is to paint the planter’s mansion from the front but slightly to one side demonstrating a familiarity with the conventions of estate

portraiture. The scene is depicted from a low vantage point looking up toward the planter’s home; a reversal of the magisterial gaze found in Hudson River School landscape paintings.

This shift in position directs the viewer’s gaze upward, a pictorial strategy that acknowledges the deference and respect the planter class assumed as its due.<sup>36</sup> The foreground becomes a stage for an unanticipated encounter between two men on horseback and a figure who emerges from the grape arbor holding a cluster of fruit. The rather dramatically oversized “cat-bird” grapes (*Vitis palmata*) he extends to the horsemen as well as the nearby pumpkins and blueberries denote the lushness of the vegetation and the bounty of nature, functioning as outward signs of productivity and prosperity. This portion of the image coincides with the known location of a hothouse for forcing grapes which produced a bountiful supply of the fruit for the family table. But what can be inferred about the figure? The 1860 census lists the Acklens as living in the country with thirty-two enslaved individuals, (eleven females, thirteen males, and eight children), so the black man is likely an enslaved laborer and the horsemen overseers. Historian John Michael Vlach notes that enslaved individuals were rarely represented in plantation paintings made before the Civil War,