

ELLEN GRAHAM ANDERSON

REDISCOVERY OF A LEXINGTON PAINTER

By Kathryn Gephart Benedict

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VIRGINIA ARTIST Ellen Graham Anderson (1885–1970) was born on April 9, 1885, in the family home at 308 Letcher Avenue, now the site of Virginia Military Institute’s Alumni Hall. The day marked the twentieth anniversary of the surrender of General Robert E. Lee, and Anderson frequently marked it not as her birthday, but as “Lee’s Surrender Day.”¹ Her parents, Mary Louisa “Maza” Blair (1849–1933) and William Alexander Anderson (1842–1930), already had four children, and most of the extended family lived in the area. Her cousin Ellen Glasgow, later a Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist, lived in Richmond. William Anderson had been attorney general of Virginia from 1902 to 1910 and was a trustee of Washington and Lee University from 1884 until his death and rector of the board from 1913 to 1924.

1 Frances McNulty Lewis, “Turn-Of-The-Century Echoes,” *The News Gazette*, October 26, 1988, p. A-6.

In terms of education, the Andersons were forward-thinking, incorporating studies of literature, science, art and history into family life. The children were raised with an appreciation both for their Southern heritage and for “the beautiful life of a mountain community.”²

Records indicate that, along with many other Lexington children at this time, Ellen Anderson attended the Misses Pendletons’ Pines School for primary education, and later went to Richmond for instruction at Miss Jennie Ellett’s School, now the reputable St. Catherine’s.

2 Ellen Anderson, “The Four Anderson Brothers,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, April 1954, p. 22.

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Ellen Anderson, undated. Courtesy of the Museum of Western Virginia.

Founded in 1890, this institution aimed to prove that women could handle the rigors of higher education, and it was the first school in the area to send women on to study at the university level. The school's curriculum was described by its founder as "at once classical and revolutionary,"³ reminiscent of the liberal arts approach to education championed by Lexington's own Washington and Lee University.

Anderson later pursued instruction at the Art Students League in New York City. In addition, she studied in 1906 and 1907 under Anne C. Fletcher, an "instructor of Art and the Crafts" at the Richmond Art Club.

Cultural conceptions had inhibited the success of women artists, but this began to change after the Civil War. In 1865, the art historian and critic John Ruskin

published *Sesame and Lilies*, in which he championed women as exercisers of morality, and through expressions of their creativity such as painting, they would purify society.⁴ Women's creative endeavors began to be encouraged, or at least supported. Art magazines and "ladies' publications" encouraged the professional aspirations of women in the arts, and by 1883, women constituted fifty percent of the enrollment of the Art Students' League [on West 57th Street, just west of Carnegie hall].⁵

By 1910, Anderson herself had enrolled there, and had relocated to the art students' housing at the Three Arts Club [on West 86th Street]. The Southern girl found herself at odds with the harsh, urban climate of New York, but Anderson accepted this new situation as "good opportunity" and adapted to and thrived in her new setting.⁶

PARIS

ACCOMPANIED BY her father and sister Judith, she embarked on her own "Grand Tour" in the summer of 1913, a trip that led to her prolonged stay and study of art in Paris, as well as a life devoted to travel as a source of artistic inspiration.

In Paris she became one of many American expatriates, in search of training and experiences different from anything the United States had to offer. She was exposed to Art Nouveau, Post-Impressionism, Cubism and various secessionist movements of Expressionism.

Paris offered a great range of possibilities to American art students. During the day, at *academies* or in *ateliers*, they cultivated skills in draftsmanship and an understanding of anatomy and perspective. When each day's formal lessons were over, however, learning did not end. Ellen Anderson's apartment, along Rue Notre Dame

des Champs in the 6th *arrondissement*, was located in the center of the Montparnasse *quartier*, a neighborhood burgeoning with the innovative ideas of renowned painters and sculptors. (John Singer Sargent lived down the road at number 73.) In a letter to her mother, Anderson described her neighborhood and the personages it attracted: "... [I] find that boulevard Montparnasse is really the center of it. The proverbial longhaired and slouch-hatted species of Artist frequents all the boulevards and street cafés in the quarter—I suppose last summer this species was out of town, for we saw none... nevertheless, I feel really at home now."⁷

She made the most of her studies, and began to tap the artistic influences that surrounded her. A show from the Munich Secessionists inspired Anderson and compelled her to prolong her stay in Europe in order to pursue her art education. She took classes in French and Italian grammar, as well as an afternoon drawing class, in which she first encountered woodblock prints that would have an undeniable influence on her later illustrative work in pen and ink. She made frequent trips to Florence and Rome.

Yet throughout her stay in Europe, Anderson's connections to her home and family remained central, and even as she described the exciting sites or people, her letters always ask after the well-being and activities of her family members and Lexington neighbors. When she returned home after her stint in Paris, it was the local that became her primary subject matter—filtered, however, through the artistic techniques she learned in Europe.

Upon her return to Lexington, she continued to paint, and her subsequent canvases and pen-and-ink drawings demonstrate the command of artistic trends she brought with her from Europe. While abroad, she had been exposed to the work of many prominent French artists, and her still-life scenes, landscapes and portraits show a strong understanding of the aesthetic principles of the French avant-garde. She adapted these themes to the imagery she found in Lexington.

VIRGINIA

ELLEN ANDERSON had missed Lexington and the people she knew, and when she returned from Paris, on the outbreak of war, she resumed a more American subject matter. Her choice of subject matter at this point in her life reflected her relief.

House Mountain

Domestic subject matter and foreign aesthetic merged together in Anderson's *In the Virginia Mountain* (Figure 1) to yield a style unique to her hand. She finished this painting of House Mountain at some point before 1925. The expressive brushwork is immediately apparent in this image; it references the German Expressionist paintings that Anderson saw first in Munich. She synthesized this style with what she saw in France and drew especially from the work of Cézanne. *In the Virginia Mountain* shows a strong Cézanne influence, especially that of his series of Mont Sainte-Victoire from 1902-04 (Figure 2). Anderson's forms are created through her faceted brushwork: The geometries of applied color blend together to create a landscape. In contrast to the clearly divided ground and deep space of other American landscape painters, Anderson's rendering of House Mountain lacks any illusionistic depth. Over all, there is a sense of flat depth, and the scene is presented in an up-close perspective. She used color to suggest volume. Her painterly brushwork typified the Parisian avant garde.

Art history professor Susanna Leval's description of Cézanne's Mont Sainte-Victoire series applies also to *In the Virginia Mountain*: "As our eye delights in the color harmonies, our mind provides the missing forms. We perceive the truth of the image rather than its representational accuracy."⁸ Anderson could not divorce herself completely from line; it delineates the mountains, hills and shrubbery, but they seem to push forward and are pressed more immediately into the viewer's space.

3 "St. Catherine's School: History and Traditions," website accessed June 14, 2010 (web page no longer available).

4 John Ruskin in Kirsten Swinth, *Painting Professionals: Women Artists and the Development of Modern Art 1870-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), p. vii.

5 Swinth, p. 39.

6 "Papers of the Anderson Family," Mss. Box 001, Washington and Lee University Library, Lexington.

7 "Papers of the Anderson Family," Mss. Box 001, October 9, 1913.

8 Susana Leval, "Cézanne's *Mont Sainte-Victoire*," *MoMA*, no. 2, (Winter 1974-75): 2.



FIGURE 1: *In the Virginia Mountain*. Ellen Graham Anderson, before 1925. Treasurer's Office, Washington and Lee University.

The subject matter of *In the Virginia Mountain* diverges drastically from the cosmopolitan dynamism of Paris. But Anderson sought out an iconography more familiar to her and chose to depict what she missed most about her home. Cézanne's renderings of Mont Sainte-Victoire do in fact parallel his similar nostalgia: The scenes come from his home in Aix-en-Provence and serve as a "parenthetical memory" of where he started and ultimately ended his life.⁹ Nature was important to Cézanne, and he emphasized contact with it to his students: "The Louvre is a good book to consult but it must

only be an intermediary. The real and immense study that must be taken up is the manifold picture of nature."¹⁰ Anderson had consulted the Louvre, but then returned, as Cézanne suggested, to nature as a source of inspiration.

A label attached to the back of *In the Virginia Mountain* indicates that it was entered in New York City's "Great Southern Exposition" at the Grand Central Palace in May 1925. (This painting is owned by Washington and Lee University Collections and now hangs in the treasurer's office.) The university library has original entry forms suggesting that Anderson displayed other landscapes in

9 Robert Morris, "Cézanne's Mountains," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 24, no. 3 (Spring 1998): 817.

10 Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art, a Source Book by Artists and Critics*, 356.



FIGURE 2: *Mont Sainte-Victoire, seen from Les Lauves*. Paul Cézanne, 1902–06. Private collection.

art exhibitions: there are labels from the 121st Annual Exhibition of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and the Rockbridge County Art Festival for *In the Valley of Virginia* (1926) and *Liberty Hall Ruins* (date unknown). Anderson's great-niece Aylett Suhr has two landscape paintings, previously unlocated, that seem to match these titles (Figures 3 and 4). Anderson's participation in these exhibitions demonstrated that her painting was a serious, professional endeavor rather than a passing hobby.

Ellen Anderson's young friend Louise Blair (1905–72), later Daura, studied at St. Catherine's in Richmond (Anderson studied here while it was still called Miss Jennie Ellet's) and then at Bryn Mawr College. Upon her graduation in 1927, she traveled to London, Brussels and finally Paris, where she met Pierre Daura (1896–1972), a Spanish painter. Blair and Daura wed and were at the forefront of the modern art world in Paris: Blair exhibited her paintings at the Salon d'Automne, while Daura was active in the Constructivist group *Cercle et Carré*. When political strife overtook Europe in 1939, the Dauras and their daughter, Martha, relocated to Rockbridge Baths, Virginia, ten miles west of Lexington. [Louise's mother had owned land there, which she gave to her daughter.] William Rasmussen, in an appreciation, wrote that Daura "sought the friendship of his neighbors in the

country," and this included Anderson.¹¹ Martha Daura recalls: "She was always referred to as 'Cousin Ellen.'"¹²

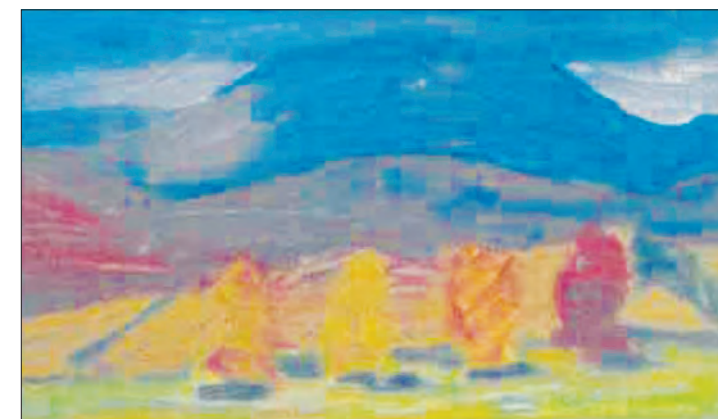
The landscape of Rockbridge County brought Daura a great deal of joy, and though he was not native to the region as was Anderson, their shared love of the Southern land is evident in their landscape paintings. Like Anderson, Daura arrived at this new, vibrant painting style because of his time spent in Paris. Both employed modernism to express their feelings for Rockbridge County.

Portrait of the Artist's Father

Anderson's cousin Ellen Glasgow noted that "the aspect we call regional is only the universal surveyed from a

11 William M. S. Rasmussen, "The Life of Pierre Daura," *Pierre Daura's Vision of Virginia*, exhibition catalogue, (Virginia Historical Society, January 2007), pp. 8, 5.

12 Martha Daura, letter to the author, March 3, 2011.



FIGURES 3 and 4: *In the Valley of Virginia* (top), 1926, *Liberty Hall Ruins*. n.d., Ellen Graham Anderson, courtesy of Aylett Suhr.

shifted angle of vision.”¹³ in Anderson’s case, her experiences in Paris gave her the ability to shift her angle of vision. This portrait of Anderson’s father, entitled *Man in Grey* (Figure 5), was painted around 1926, after her initial trip to Paris. Though this portrait still bears the frontal presentation and dark background of her earlier portraiture — reflecting conventions of American portraiture that Anderson learned from her studies of art in the United States—it is evident that Anderson internalized the aesthetic ideas of the French avant-garde and adapted them for use in her own portraiture.



FIGURE 5: *Man in Grey*. Ellen Graham Anderson, c. 1926. Collection of Washington and Lee University.

Once again, the art of Cézanne was an important precedent. His *Portrait of Victor Chocquet* (Figure 6), 1877, demonstrates the principles Anderson most prioritized in modern portraiture. Cézanne worked to develop a new way of painting, one that embraced the flatness of the canvas. He used dark outlining and directional brushwork to render a three-dimensional subject in two dimensions. Anderson’s own sketchy brushwork is reminiscent of *passage*, a brushwork technique that merges different forms and shapes together, and she used a similar outline to flatten her subject’s form. This outlining technique also meshed with her exposure to Japanese woodblock prints during her study in France, and the cropped composition of her painting also echoes this aesthetic preference.

13 Ellen Glasgow, *A Certain Measure: An Interpretation of Prose Fiction* (New York: 1943), 190.

Her relationship with him and the rest of her family was very close. William Anderson was strong in his support for his daughter and interested in her studies. In 1913, when Anderson described her motivations for staying in Europe to study, she wrote about her father’s financial contribution: “Father of course has insisted on leaving too much, but as it seems the opportunity of a lifetime I decided to . . . do the much needed

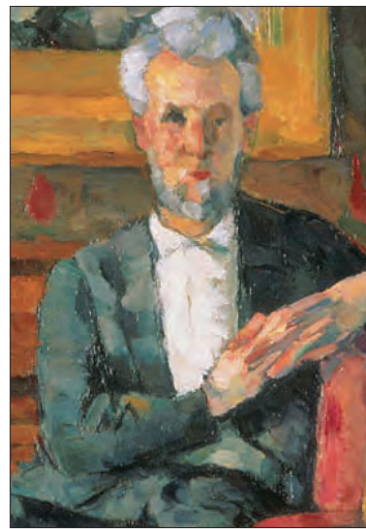


FIGURE 6: *Victor Chocquet Seated* (detail). Paul Cézanne, 1877. Collection of the Columbus (Ohio) Museum of Art.

Her subject matter, however, was far more personal than that often chosen by French painters of the early twentieth century. The usual iconography was either an anonymous figure at an outdoor café or a prominent person. Anderson, in contrast, imbued her images with a starkness of personal feeling that permeates the canvas to confront the viewer with nostalgia: Though the landscape or subject of the portrait may be unknown, it feels familiar. In the case of *Man in Grey*, Anderson’s rendering is not of the august Civil War hero or the attorney general of Virginia, but rather an intimate portrait of a father.

FIGURE 7: *Still Life with Tulips*. Ellen Graham Anderson, 1926. Collection of Carilion Rockbridge Community Hospital.



studying.”¹⁴ Once Anderson was established in Paris, her father corresponded not only with her but also with the girls with whom she studied: in a letter from 1914, Anderson wrote, “I have delivered your messages to Katherine McIntire [a traveling companion], and she says thank you very much for them.”¹⁵

Still life

Stonewall Jackson Hospital [now Carilion Rockbridge Community Hospital] has a still life that Anderson painted for her mother (Figure 7). Bruce and Sunny Macdonald, residents of Rockbridge County, donated the painting to the hospital in 2003. The Macdonalds had decided to take on the responsibility of finding artwork for the new hospital and hosted a fundraiser in order to buy paintings. A partner in their efforts suggested they look at the “old paintings in the ‘mud room,’ a storage area [at the hospital] full of old furniture, junk. . . . One was the Ellen Anderson painting.” Bruce Macdonald recalled that the painting was “very dark” and covered with “the dirt of the decades,” so he cleaned and restored it, and “the lovely, glowing colors from the original painting began to emerge.”¹⁶ Anderson’s use of color, as well as simplification of form and *passage*, once again reflect the understanding of modern approaches to painting that she had studied in Paris.

14 “Papers of the Anderson Family,” Mss. Box 001, October 13, 1913.

15 Ibid. McIntire (1880–?) was a painter and etcher from Richmond. She studied at the Art Students’ League in New York (presumably where she met Anderson) and in Paris at the Academie Julian.

16 Bruce Macdonald, letter to the author, March 7, 2011.

The lower left corner of the painting reads “Paris, 1926.” After World War I, Anderson continued to travel throughout Europe: Brochures and other preserved travel documents from 1925 to 1937 place her in Naples, Genoa, Rome, Florence, Switzerland, Monte Carlo, the

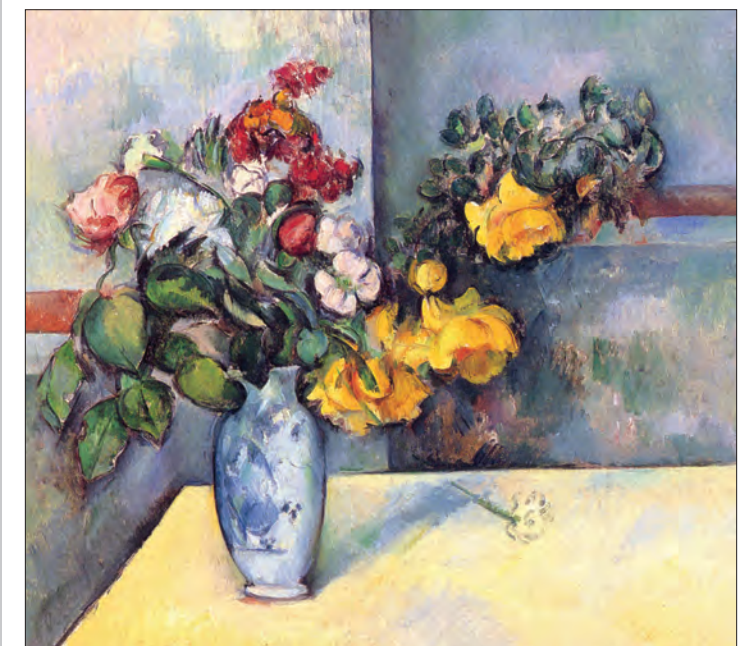


FIGURE 8: *Still Life: Flowers in a Vase*. Paul Cézanne, 1888. Private collection.

Riviera and — repeatedly — in Paris.¹⁷ A collection of cards written in Anderson's hand was originally attached to the back of the canvas. On them, she dedicated the painting to her mother, Mary Louisa, to brighten her declining years. Anderson's mother did not accompany her to Europe as her father had, so perhaps this painting is Anderson's attempt to share a little of Parisian excitement and vitality with her mother.

Anderson's treatment of her subject reflects the art she saw in Paris, particularly that of Cézanne. His *Still Life: Flowers in a Vase* (Figure 8) from 1900 demonstrates the same distorted perspective and faceted handling of color. In both images, space is suggested by planes of color, but the overall effect is flattened, which reminds the viewer of the two-dimensionality of the canvas. Anderson painted her tulips in such a way that the viewer can simultaneously look down into as well as directly at blooms. She used color to create depth and volume, and each tulip consists of sketchy daubs of color (including a yellow similar to that used by Cézanne) set off by areas of pure white highlight and black lowlight. Anderson's handling of the vase is especially skillful. She broke the vase up into facets of light and captured the interplay between reflection and shadow from the flowers above. The bottom of the vase picks up the reflection of the lowest bloom, and this repetition of red draws the eye from the flowers first to the vase and then to the patterned table runner. Anderson used this runner in the same way Cézanne used the counter top as a spatial complication. Both extend off the picture plane — once again referencing the cropped composition of Japanese woodblock prints. The runner also allowed Anderson to explore further geometric patterning. This patterning adds a new, more decorative element to Anderson's still life, and in the pen-and-ink drawings she explored later in her career, this same decorative quality came through more strongly.

ILLUSTRATION

ANDERSON'S INTEREST in illustration was apparent from her travels through Europe. In the early twentieth century, illustration blossomed in publications and for the arts, such as theatre posters, and Anderson would have been familiar with this form of artwork even from the local newspapers of Lexington.

Her own pen-and-ink drawings appeared in a wide range of newspapers and magazines both in Virginia and New York. (See Figure 9.) In 1963, Anderson donated a collection of her private papers to the University of Virginia Library. These three hundred items consist primarily of drawings for newspapers and date from 1912 to 1959. Additionally, there are several sketches of actors, dancers, circus performers, and other entertainers that were never published. Anderson kept careful records of all her drawings and often penciled her name and address on the backs of them. Subjects from this time period include modern dancer Isadora Duncan, actors Margaret Hamilton and O. P. Heggie, acrobats Ira and Edward Millette, musical comedienne Ethel Merman, and *bonne vivante* Tallulah Bankhead.

The liveliest of these drawings are undoubtedly those in which the subjects move. Through her careful modulation of line and dramatic posturing of her figures, Anderson adeptly captures a sense of arrested motion in these drawings. The handling of line is vital to the success of these pieces, and once again, we see the influences of modern art that Anderson acquired in



FIGURE 9: Irene Bordoni in "Hitchy Koo," 1917. Ellen Graham Anderson. *New York Herald*.

Paris. Decoration and line were both highly prized in illustrative work in early twentieth-century French drawing — and, as we have seen, art of this nature was highly visible and publicized. Anderson was well aware of the stylistic trends associated with illustration, and the skill she demonstrates in these drawings reflects a true mastery of the medium. Her ability to bring the dynamism of three dimensions to the flat picture plane derives from her manipulation of the plastic elements, and this jars the viewer's conceptions of space and movement.

Anderson captured twentieth-century film and stage star Lillian Gish in her role in *Within the Gates* (1934) (Figure 10). Its author Sean O'Casey, an Irish Expressionist, called his play "geometrical and emotional, the emotions of the living characters to be shown against their own patterns and the patterns" of Hyde Park.¹⁸ Anderson's mastery of the fine arts enabled her to match O'Casey's. Her linear handling of Gish's form yields a geometric interplay of positive and negative space. The bends and angles of her posturing give the figure an undulating outline. This feature, combined with the juxtaposed diagonals of her hat, arms, and left hand versus her outstretched leg, creates a strong sensation of arrested motion, as though the viewer were a member of the audience and saw Gish saunter across the stage in person.

Most of Anderson's drawings appeared in periodicals including *The New York Times Book Review* and the *Times Magazine*, and many were done from life — suggesting that even though she was no longer in Paris at the heart of the avant-garde, Anderson established connections with prominent figures in both the fine and performing arts after her return to the United States.

Another implication is that Anderson was a seasoned domestic traveler. She seems to have drawn whenever she traveled, and her papers contain sketches from Winston-Salem, North Carolina; Charleston, South Carolina; St. Augustine, Florida; New Orleans, Louisiana; San Antonio, Texas; and Bermuda. Her keen eye was always at



FIGURES 10 and 11: Lillian Gish in "Within the Gates"; Ethel Merman in "Anything Goes." Ellen Graham Anderson, both 1934.

work, and she even noted on a drawing of awnings in New Orleans: "See Charleston. Different."¹⁹ Many of these images from her domestic travels show architectural subjects.

When she drew people, however, they were predominantly performers or those who ran in the more cultured social circles. Many she could have seen only in New York City, and she must have continued to travel between New York and Lexington fairly regularly. The addresses on later drawings bolster this assertion. Two addresses in New York recur in the records: one at "39 Charles Street — Chelsea" and the other the Windsor Hotel, on 58th Street.

Records indicate that Anderson continued to draw until at least 1934, as indicated by the drawing of Lillian Gish, as well as one of Ethel Merman (Figure 11) in the musical *Anything Goes*. But by the mid-1920s, Anderson had returned to Lexington full time. (The addresses that she noted on the back of her works make this clear.) Frances McNulty Lewis, in her 1988 *News-Gazette* article, explained: "Then a knee injury and operation, keeping her for weeks in nearby St. Vincent's Hospital [in

17 "Papers of the Anderson Family," Mss. Box 001.

18 Sean O'Casey in Eileen O'Casey, *Sean* (London: Macmillan, 1971), 67.

19 Papers of Ellen Graham Anderson, Accession #38-96-f.

New York City] and for months on crutch and cane, put an end to climbing editors' stairs in order to deliver her work."²⁰

RETROSPECTIVE OF DRAWINGS

THE LEXINGTON REGIONAL LIBRARY exhibited a collection of Anderson's pen-and-ink drawings, watercolor paintings, and scrapbook pages in 1988. Paintings and original drawings were lent by Anderson's nieces and nephews, and many newspaper illustrations were reproduced for display as well. Forty pen-and-ink sketches for newspapers and magazines appeared, three of which were in color. Two of these drawings, "Types at the Metropolitan Stations" are from 1913, when Anderson was in Paris. Other images include actresses, musicians, opera singers, authors, and even President Calvin Coolidge. Frances McNulty Lewis called this show a "crossroads" in the local art world because of the wide range of styles it encompassed: Each drawing or painting reflected a different stage in Anderson's artistic career. The earliest pieces began with her time at the Art Students' League in New York. Drawings from her trip to London, Scotland, and Paris were paired with scenes from later travels to Mexico and Bermuda. The drawings of entertainers from her career in illustration were juxtaposed with portraits of family members and residents of Lexington.

Anderson's diverse oeuvre encompassed many influences, media and subjects, but her underlying motivations for creation, her love of art and her interest in the world around her, remained constant.

ECCENTRIC NEIGHBOR

ANY REMEMBER Anderson more for her later-in-life sharp tongue and peculiar mannerisms more than for her art. Martha Daura, originally of Rockbridge Baths, describes a wedding to which Anderson was invited: "There was ice cream in the shape of various pastel colored flowers. Cousin Ellen's eyesight

²⁰ Lewis, page 6, section A.

was by then poor, and of course she wore gloves . . . so she took several flowers [and put them in her purse] and did not realize they were ice cream instead of cakes. The next day, she telephoned the hostess and angrily demanded that she replace the handbag which had been ruined by the melting ice cream."²¹ Katie Letcher Lyle, a resident of Lexington, remembered: "She hit me with an umbrella once, when I didn't get out of her way soon enough."²²

Andy Stone never refers to his great-aunt as mean, but he does attest to her sense of entitlement. He shared this "typical family story" (also recounted by David Coffey and James A. Hight, both natives of Lexington).²³ At the dedication of the George C. Marshall Museum at the Virginia Military Institute in 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson, Lady Bird Johnson and an entourage were in attendance. Anderson, however, was not supposed to be. But because she grew up on the campus of the Virginia Military Institute and she was "always invited to everything in Lexington, she decided her invitation must have been lost in the mail." Hight remembers it was a hot day in May, and Anderson wore a bright blue dress with a matching parasol. A neighbor, Dorothy Osburg, commented on "how beautiful Miss Ellen looked . . . like a Renoir painting, and the blue she was wearing was exactly the bright blue of a woman's dress in Renoir's *Boating Party*." Perhaps if Anderson had heard this compliment (and comparison between her and an esteemed French painting), the day might have concluded differently. After the ceremony, Anderson announced that she was going to the VMI Superintendent's House to speak to President Johnson. Coffey suggests that her late father's role in state politics may have given her this "presumed entrée into 'state occasions.'" Naturally, Anderson was stopped by a Secret Service official before she could enter the house. She apparently waved her cane and threatened the officer, but was denied entrance. Not to be squelched, Anderson

²¹ Daura, letter to the author.

²² Katie Letcher Lyle, letter to the author, 22 October, 2010.

²³ Letters to the author from F. Anderson Stone, March 11, 2011; James A. Hight, November 24, 2010; David Coffey, November 24, 2010.

stood outside on the steps and thanked passersby for attending, even the president as he walked out. Hight concludes: "That would have been just like her."

The stories about Anderson extend to rumors about her personal life. Some family members have speculated that it was because of a love affair, not a knee injury, that Anderson returned home in the 1920s. Great-nephew Joe Logan explained that she may have been involved with a man in New York while her father was in poor health, and Logan proposes that William Anderson feared his daughter would stay in New York with her beau. He wanted her closer to home and asked her to return to care for him. Great-niece Aylett Suhr also suggests a possible love affair, this time with a man from Europe. In her collection of Anderson's paintings, Suhr owns "a large oil of a very handsome man known by the title on the back of the painting as 'Sculptor from Scotland'" (Figure 12).²⁴ She explains that her mother and aunts always thought that Anderson had "fallen in love during her Paris time and later he was killed in World War I. Many of her poems read as if she had loved and lost."

Several of her poems include ideas about love, death, and her own conceptions of heaven, including this one:²⁵

Dear Lord, I do not think that those
Who died these later years
Could stand a heaven of quietness
And watch our futile tears.
They want the sort of Paradise
Where they can run downtown
To look for silver sandals
Or try a gauzy gown.
And, coming back, to meet their friends
Along Celestial Lanes,
Where all the bright throng congregates
As earthly sunset wanes.

Great-nephew Jim Hoge also recalls a rumor of involvement with a married man in New York City. Her father "ordered" her to return home in the early 1920s

²⁴ Aylett Suhr, letter to the author, March 4, 2011.

²⁵ Ellen Graham Anderson, poem, c. 1925, in Aylett Suhr, letter to the author, April 8, 2011.

FIGURE 12:
Sculptor from Scotland.
Ellen Graham Anderson,
date unknown.
Collection of
Aylett Suhr.



to care for him, and then in 1927, upon the death of her sister Anna, Anderson's father made her come back to help care for the entire family.²⁶

None of these supposed romances explains the end of her artistic career, however. Hoge and great-niece, Betty Kuyk, have both related accounts that suggest a different reason Anderson abandoned her artistic career. Three years after the death of William Alexander Anderson in 1930, Anderson's nephew, William Anderson McNulty (namesake of her father) married. Anderson disapproved of his bride. (In fact, Kuyk writes: "She hated his wife. And since she was from Georgia, that backed up her belief that my mother was not good enough for William Anderson McN[ulty]."²⁷) Ellen Anderson even threatened to revoke a niece's financial support for college when the girl was asked to be a bridesmaid in the wedding. And then in 1934, her brother William died — and all the men of significance in her life were now gone.²⁸

Yet Aylett Suhr recalls a different side of Anderson:

I loved Aunt Ellen for her eccentricities and her devoted love of all of us. There is not a room in my house where there isn't something Aunt Ellen wanted me to have, to love and to use. I could go

²⁶ Jim Hoge, letter to the author, March 28, 2011.

²⁷ Betty Kuyk, letter to the author, March 28, 2011.

²⁸ Hoge, letter.

on and on. She was the grandmother figure for us. We would have tea on her side porch while she taught us how ladies act and all about our ‘illustrious forbears.’ We walked to the Robert E. Lee Church and the Stonewall Jackson Cemetery [now Grace Episcopal Church and Oak Grove Cemetery] and did rubbings of the gravestones and talked about the history of our family, Lexington, and Virginia.²⁹

Despite a brusque exterior, Anderson was devoted to helping her family and improving the Lexington community. Dedicated to preserving the history of the community, she was active in Lexington’s Mary Custis Lee chapter of the Colonial Dames, a national society devoted to historic preservation, patriotic service and education. She served as president during the 1950s, and even modeled an elaborate lace dress for a charitable living tableaux exhibition at the local high school. She was also a board member for the Stonewall Jackson Hospital and was involved in the R. E. Lee [now Grace] Episcopal Church in town. A subscriber to *The News Gazette*, Anderson saved many articles in her scrapbook, and even wrote a number of articles for the paper. Hight recalls one “indignant” letter pertaining to the “proposed use of fluoride in the town water. What, she wanted to know, would happen to her fine linens? She was not interested in children’s teeth.”³⁰

CONCLUSION

THE THREE PAINTINGS I looked at initially—the landscape with House Mountain, the portrait of Anderson’s father and the still life of tulips—helped me develop this thesis. These were the only extant paintings by Anderson that I knew of, but even with such a small body of work, the importance of her hometown and family came through.

Anderson was clearly a skilled painter, adept at expressing her feelings for her subjects on the canvas. I found records of the show at the Lexington Regional

29 Suhr, letter.

30 Hight, letter.

Library in the Washington and Lee Leyburn Library’s Special Collections, and I submitted a letter to the local newspaper requesting information about Anderson. The feedback was incredible and led to the rediscovery of twenty more paintings scattered from Georgia to New Jersey.

As more of her paintings, drawings and letters describing her studies and love of art have come to light, it is clear that Anderson was also a noteworthy artist.

It is important to remember that Ellen Anderson was not the only one. For every Mary Cassatt, there are myriad Ellen Andersons who studied and loved to paint, but for whatever reasons, or none, have been lost to history. There are still many unanswered questions about Anderson’s life and work, but one thing is clear: Though nearly lost up to now, her work deserves rediscovery.

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SOURCE NOTE

Most of the primary source information about Ellen Anderson and her family comes from *The Anderson Family Papers*, a collection of documents dating from 1755 to 1958 and consisting of around 700 Anderson family items. They include some 300 letters, various receipts, brochures, and tables of genealogy. The collection came into the possession of Washington and Lee University in 1977.

ELLEN GRAHAM ANDERSON: A 21ST-CENTURY ARTIST’S OBSERVATIONS

Mysterious, puzzling, inexplicable — Ellen Graham Anderson captured the essence of these attributes. A well-educated painter, traveler, illustrator and expatriate, she studied and worked and lived a life of sophistication in a Paris neighborhood of artists and teachers. She was strongly influenced by Cezanne, and the dark outline producing a flat canvas is prominent in most of her work — though it could not contain the brilliance of color in her *Still Life With Tulips*.

Some of her more inviting works are illustrations: for example, one of Lillian Gish, drawn cleverly to provide the viewer with the sense of motion. This Lillian Gish makes us want to understand the bends and angles of her undulating posture.

Ellen Anderson’s return to Lexington brought forth her love of home and the mountains.

Her later years were spent in private, and her shortcomings in manners, insight and compassion left many uninformed of her earlier, sophisticated experiences. The issue may have been poor eyesight, or perhaps an expression of her feelings of entitlement. Or her assumed disappointments in love may have been at the bottom of her discontent.

The only matter of which we can be sure is that Miss Ellen Anderson was an enigma — mysterious, puzzling and inexplicable.

BEVERLY TUCKER

prolific portrait and landscape artist