



Douglas Ellington

Asheville's Art Deco Master

By Rob Neufeld

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“Dear Douglas,” Kenneth Ellington wrote his brother, the 38-year old Pittsburgh architect, on May 6, 1925, “I know things are going to “break” beautifully for you within a fairly short period. Just hold a high head, and all will be well.”

Just two weeks before, Douglas Ellington had spent a few days in Asheville, staying at the George Vanderbilt Hotel on Haywood Street, to present himself to the building committee of the city's First Baptist Church. Supplied with a portfolio that Kenneth had prepared for him, he made his case.

At one point, he flipped over a photo of his completed Maute Theater in Irwin, Pennsylvania, to sketch a church design. The sketch is part of an Ellington archive at the Asheville Art Museum, the gift of artist Sallie Middleton, Kenneth Ellington's daughter.

Frank Thompson, museum curator, explains his interest in Ellington. “We get a lot of visitors who drive down Patton Avenue and see the S&W Cafeteria. ‘Wow! That's a wonderful building,” they say.





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'Who did that?' 'Douglas Ellington,' I say. Then they see the City Hall. 'Who did that?' they ask. 'Douglas Ellington.' Later on, they catch sight of the First Baptist Church. 'That's incredible. Who designed that?' It's like the punchline of some Zen koan: Douglas Ellington."

Kenneth's faith in his older brother's genius has been vindicated. In the architect's forty-year career, he produced distinctive works in Pittsburgh, Asheville, Greenbelt (Maryland), and Charleston. A national reputation grows from the unmatched and now revered body of work he created in Asheville, 1925– 1929, including the first Art Deco city



The S&W Cafeteria





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hall in the world (a Mayan-style, organic edifice as opposed to the machine-like, black-and-chrome, skyscraping Buffalo City Hall, 1931).

In 1925, however, the Ellington brothers had to hustle to get Douglas good commissions. In January of that year, Douglas was pursuing a theater-builder about having changed architects without having paid him for his set of preliminary drawings; and Kenneth was peppering the east coast with proposals.

On January 13, 1925, Kenneth wrote a Virginia Beach hotel developer asking that "my good friend and brother" be given a show of his work. He then summarized Douglas' greatness in a paragraph that bears being quoted in full:



Asheville's City Hall





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“Ellington is one of the finest designing architects in America, having won the Paris Prize from [the Society of Beaux Arts Architects in] America, which gave him free study in the Beaux Arts school in Paris and travel throughout Europe for a period of three years. While in this Paris school he won the highest prize for designing given by the School, and is the only American that has ever won this prize.”

Douglas and Kenneth grew up on a farm in Clayton, North Carolina, a town that Sallie Middleton compares to Mayberry. When Douglas was eleven, they lost their mother, a victim of consumption, contracted, it is believed, from a beggar woman whom she had chosen to rescue. From his mother, Douglas inherited both his looks and artistic personality.

“He was like an innocent child,” Middleton says; his playfulness along with his acute sense of color and his love of found materials became his hallmarks.





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Kenneth shared his brother's traits to the extent that he could provide inspiration and support. Middleton recalls how she had once asked her father to help her decide why her painting of an old apple orchard did not seem quite right. He looked at the painting, "rays of pride" emanating from him, and then *"he walked out of the room. Sometime later, he came back with a curled, yellow, worm-eaten apple tree leaf and laid it on a spot— and that was the answer."*

For Douglas Ellington, artistic sensitivity could be painful. "His eyes," Middleton reflects, were *"dark and brooding, but when lit up with joy, there was a red light in the middle."* He carried colors and lines around in his head, she says, as did her sister, who drove house painters crazy trying to eliminate ghosts of wrong hues from her house walls.

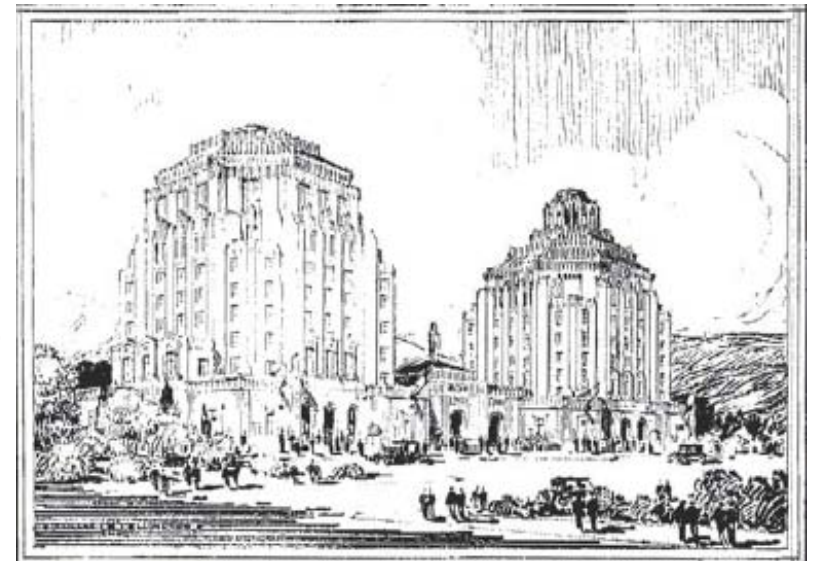
When Ellington had a surface painted according to a client's jarring concept, he'd put a "soupcon of purple in the yellow," for instance, to please himself without alerting others.





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Many of Ellington's great buildings feature strikingly original color schemes. Famous also for his use of natural materials (see the stonework in his residences), organic masses (see the Asheville High School and the Merriam Avenue Fire Station), and for Art Deco motifs (see the S&W Cafeteria), it is fair to say that Ellington, who was a painter, painted with architecture.



1926 Rendering of Asheville City-County Building Group

The fire-flash purple, brown, red, ochre, and verdigris-green clay tiles on the roof of the First Baptist Church simulate, in an impres-





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sionistic way, aging effects on a Florence cathedral. The bottom-to-top progression of pinks and rose reds in Asheville's City Hall represents the gradation of color in the region's soil.

When Rose Brown threw Ellington the challenge that he couldn't build her a nice-looking house out of cinder blocks at 24 Kimberly Avenue, he incorporated bands of red brick in the walls to produce a vernacular Moorish pattern.

Ellington built his own home at the end of Chunn's Cove Road out of materials salvaged from other projects, including bricks from buildings that still showed traces of painted advertisements. He built it without a set of plans. Architectural Digest celebrated it as the most significant residence in the country in 1932.

Even before the Depression set in, Ellington was beginning to have trouble exercising his creativity fully. Certain local architects opposed his plans for the County Courthouse, intended to complement





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the City Hall. A Washington D.C. firm, Milburn and Heister, rushed in to take the contract, eventually employing a classical design featuring a museum of column types. Mayor John Cathey, a major Ellington booster, was devastated by the loss of the unified plaza.

Douglas Ellington died in 1960 of cancer, working on a concept for a mural that, Middleton says, he knew he'd never start. Middleton, reviewing her uncle's painting career, illustrates his life. "When he was very young, his paintings were dark and brooding," she recalls—"Pittsburgh at night...."

He had fits of painting, and with each fit, his paintings went lighter and brighter. Toward the end, his paintings were mostly mists and skies with accents of a twining tree. His very last painting was not well controlled—a blasting forest fire."

Rob Neufeld is a historic researcher and writer who contributes a biweekly history column, "Visiting Our Past," to the Asheville Citizen-Times.





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visit us at 13 Biltmore Ave., Asheville, NC 8801
write us at presociety@bellsouth.net
or P. O. Box 2806, Asheville, NC 28802,
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