
Milton Avery on Paper



Whitney Museum of American Art, Fairfield County
September 10–November 3, 1982

Works in the Exhibition

Dimensions are in inches, height preceding width, and refer to paper size. *Gouache* is a technique of mixing watercolor with a white powdered metal, such as zinc, which makes the color opaque rather than transparent. *Monotype* refers to a unique print created by inking or painting a flat surface, usually metal or glass, and then pressing paper directly on it.

Boatyard, 1932

Gouache on colored construction paper
12 x 18
Estate of the artist, courtesy Grace Borgenicht Gallery, New York

After the Rain, 1935

Watercolor on paper
22 x 30
Collection of March Avery Cavanaugh

Gaspé Village, 1938

Watercolor on paper
22 x 30
Collection of Sally M. Avery

Pensive Woman, c. 1938

Gouache on colored paper
17½ x 11½
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Edward F. Kook

Country Road, 1939

Watercolor on paper
22 x 30
Milton Avery Trust

Spring Day, 1940

Watercolor on paper
22 x 30
Sid Deutsch Gallery, New York

Nude on Drape, 1941

Gouache on paper
18 x 24
Collection of Sally M. Avery

Early Spring, 1943

Watercolor on paper
22 x 30
Collection of Morley Greenberg

Rock Sitters, 1943

Watercolor on paper
22 x 30
Private collection

Bathers and Watchers, 1944

Watercolor on paper
22 x 30
Sid Deutsch Gallery, New York

Dark Sail, 1944

Gouache on paper
22 x 30
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. M. Anthony Fisher

General MacArthur on the Rocks, 1944

Gouache on paper
22 x 30
Private collection

Gloucester Cove, 1944

Watercolor on paper
22 x 30
Collection of Mrs. Charles Ballou

Lighthouse, 1944

Gouache on paper
22 x 30
Collection of Barry Stern

March in Yellow, 1944

Gouache on paper
22 x 30
Private collection

Master and Pupil, 1944

Gouache on paper
30 x 22
Private collection, courtesy Andrew Crispo Gallery, New York

Rocky Coast, 1944

Watercolor on paper
22 x 30
Private collection

Sitter by the Beach, 1944

Gouache on paper
22¼¹/₁₆ x 31¼¹/₁₆ (irregular)
The Santa Barbara Museum of Art; Acquisitions Fund

Two Women Playing Checkers, 1944

Gouache on paper
22 x 30
Private collection

Umbrellas and Bathers, 1944

Watercolor on paper
22 x 30
Andrew Crispo Gallery, New York

Haircut, 1945

Watercolor on paper
30 x 22
Collection of I. and P. Bogen

Lone Rock and Surf, 1945

Watercolor on paper
22 x 30
Milton and Sally Avery Arts Foundation

Cactus and Ploughed Land, 1946

Gouache on paper
22 x 30
Collection of Art Berliner

Desert Landscape, 1946

Gouache on paper
22 x 30
Estate of the artist, courtesy Grace Borgenicht Gallery, New York

Mexican Landscape, 1946

Watercolor on paper
22 x 30
Collection of Sally M. Avery

Prayer, 1946

Watercolor on paper
30 x 22
Estate of the artist, courtesy Grace Borgenicht Gallery, New York

Water Carrier, 1946

Watercolor on paper
22 x 30
Private collection

March with Flowers, 1947

Gouache and watercolor on paper
22 x 30
Sid Deutsch Gallery, New York

Lobster Pots and Green Sea, 1948
Gouache on paper
22 x 30
Estate of the artist, courtesy
Grace Borgenicht Gallery,
New York

Three Figures on the Rocks, 1948
Watercolor on paper
22 x 30
Vanderwoude Tananbaum
Gallery, New York

King Palm, 1949
Gouache on paper
22½ x 15
Private collection

**Bather with Blue
Towel,** 1950
Monotype on paper
22 x 17
Private collection

Birds by Blue Sea, 1950
Monotype and pencil
on paper
17 x 22
Associated American Art-
ists, New York

Blue Vase, 1950
Monotype on paper
22 x 17
Associated American Art-
ists, New York

Reclining Nude, 1950
Monotype on paper
17 x 23
Collection of Sean A.
Cavanaugh

Soaring Gull, 1950
Monotype, watercolor, and
stencil on paper
18 x 24
The Alpha Gallery, Boston

Southern Sea, 1950
Watercolor on paper
22 x 30
Private collection

Myself in Blue Beret, 1951
Monotype on paper
21 x 15
Milton Avery Trust

Rosy Moon, 1951
Monotype on paper
18 x 24
Associated American Art-
ists, New York

Pale Sentinel, 1953
Gouache on paper
30 x 22
Collection of Sally M. Avery

Pink Tree, 1953
Watercolor on paper
30 x 11
Collection of H.S. Bloch

Studio, 1953
Watercolor on paper
30 x 22
Private collection

Tall Trees, 1953
Watercolor on paper
30 x 22
Collection of Ann and Burt
Chernow

Spring in Vermont, 1954
Monotype on paper
18 x 24
Private collection

Trees in Landscape, 1954
Oil on paper
18 x 24
Sid Deutsch Gallery,
New York

Dark Mountain II, 1956
Monotype on paper
20 x 24
Estate of the artist, courtesy
Grace Borgenicht Gallery,
New York

Two Birches, 1956
Monotype on paper
24 x 18
Private collection

Gulls on Sandspit, 1958
Oil on paper
35 x 23
Private collection

Dunes and Sea, 1960
Gouache on paper
23 x 35
Collection of Gabor Peterdi

Night Harbor, 1960
Oil on paper
23 x 35
Milton and Sally Avery
Arts Foundation

Racing Sails, 1960
Watercolor on paper
22¾ x 34¾
Whitney Museum of Amer-
ican Art, New York; Law-
rence H. Bloedel Bequest
77.1.2

Speedboat in Choppy Sea, 1960
Watercolor on paper
23 x 35
Gimpel & Weitzenhoffer
Ltd., New York

**Dark Forest, Pale
Mountain,** 1962
Oil on paper
23 x 35
Collection of Bernard Sivak

Nude Reclining, 1962
Oil on paper
17½ x 22½
Private collection

Self Portrait by Sea, 1962
Oil on paper
18 x 23
Collection of Mr. and
Mrs. Morris W. Stein

Road through Mountains, 1963
Oil on paper
23 x 35
Private collection

Trees and Lavender Hill, 1963
Oil on paper
23 x 35
Estate of the artist, courtesy
Grace Borgenicht Gallery,
New York

Milton Avery on Paper

Milton Avery (1885–1965) created works on paper throughout his career. An inveterate sketcher, he also made numerous watercolors of the landscapes and seascapes he saw during his summer travels around the country with his wife, Sally. During the winter, when they returned to their home in New York City, he would turn some of the watercolor compositions into oil paintings. Avery also produced monotypes and oils on paper toward the end of his career.

It is worth noting the relationship between Avery's works on paper and his oil paintings. Although some watercolors later became studies for paintings, they were created as complete, independent works of art. Working on paper was particularly important for Avery: it allowed him the flexibility and spontaneity that he so enjoyed. By devoting his summers to watercolors, he was able to experiment with techniques and approaches that in turn affected his oils: "The method of his oils is itself adapted from his water-color practice. The luminosities and thin washes of close-valued areas of color are clearly the result of applying to this more intractable medium the swift and irrevocable technique that is normally consigned to water color alone."¹ Although Avery's watercolors influenced his choice of subject matter and the application of paint in his oils, they retain a different look: with the exception of his later works, the watercolors tend to be significantly more detailed and linear, more like his drawings.

Milton Avery was born in 1885 in Sand Bank (now Altmar), New York, near Oswego. His family moved to a town near East Hartford, Connecticut, in 1898. Some time after 1905, Avery enrolled in a lettering class at the Connecticut League of Art Students with the hope of

earning a living as a graphic artist. The class was discontinued after one month and, at the suggestion of the school's director, he switched into a life-drawing class taught by Charles Noel Flagg. Although this class represented Avery's only formal art training, he emerged convinced that he wanted to be an artist. Soon thereafter, he began to paint outdoors, directly from nature, a tradition which he carried on with his watercolors and sketches throughout his life.

While summering in Gloucester, Massachusetts, in 1924, Avery met Sally Michel, who had also gone there to paint. He followed her to New York City, and in the spring of 1926, they were married. For Avery, it was an ideal marriage: Sally supported them by working as an illustrator, which left him free to paint for the remainder of his life. He began by sketching and then doing watercolors and oils of everything that surrounded him. Through the years Avery's repertoire of images remained remarkably consistent: landscapes, seascapes, still lifes, and figures (particularly of his wife and their daughter, March). What is so striking is that in spite of his traditional subject matter, Avery was able to achieve an original and lasting vision of the world.

The usually reticent Avery once described his approach to art:

I like to seize the one sharp instant in Nature, to imprison it by means of ordered shapes and space relationships. To this end I eliminate and simplify, leaving apparently nothing but color and pattern. I am not seeking pure abstraction; rather, the purity and essence of the idea—expressed in its simplest form.

*I work on two levels. I try to construct a picture in which shapes, spaces, colors, form a set of unique relationships, independent of any subject matter. At the same time I try to capture and translate the excitement and emotion aroused in me by the impact with the original idea.*²

Avery's ties to the real world were unequivocal: "No matter how much he simplifies or eliminates, he almost always preserves the local, nameable identity of his subject; it never becomes merely a pretext."³ Sally Avery remarked that he was not interested in abstract art because it was too boring and too easy; for him the challenge was to abstract the essence of the forms he had actually experienced.⁴ Surfaces, rather than volumes, commanded Avery's attention. Moreover, he paid particular attention to edges—how the color of one form meets that of the next.

So much emphasis has been placed on Avery's extraordinary color sense that other important elements—line, form, and composition—have been underrated. His works on paper in particular reveal his skill as a draftsman. In *Gaspé Village*, done during the summer of 1938 on the Gaspé Peninsula in Quebec, the entire composition is united and balanced through a linear system in which different sets of lines describe the dunes, the sea, and the sky. The deployment of lines anticipates Avery's mature compositions, where the canvas is divided into three sections (land, sea, and sky), tightly controlled and balanced through the inseparable elements of color and form. The overall effect of *Gaspé Village* is one of flatness, of a normally three-dimensional vista rendered in two

dimensions—an effect noticeably different from that in his earlier works, which all evoke the feeling of spatial recession.

Avery's use of line varies from composition to composition. In some, entire forms are described by single lines, while in others, several lines are used to describe one form. Also, in some works, line functions in the traditional manner—as contour—while in others it is used to create a more modern, decorative look.

In addition to color and line, form is an important element in Avery's compositions. In both *Gloucester Cove* and *Rocky Coast* of 1944, the composition consists of a tightly organized network of interlocking shapes, contrasting in color and hue. In *Gloucester Cove*, rocks, sea, surf, and sky are united in one continuous plane. The two-dimensionality of the image is reinforced by the high horizon line—a device used in many of Avery's seascapes—which has the effect of canceling spatial recession by tilting the whole scene toward the viewer.

Avery further simplifies his forms in *Dunes and Sea* of 1960. The composition is divided into beach, dune, sea, and sky, each a different area of color. A wavy blue line running through the center of the composition separates the land from the sea and sky, and at the same time locks the elements together. The juxtaposition of spare, color-contrasting shapes is what gives Avery's compositions their power.

Avery's treatment of the figure parallels that of the landscapes and seascapes—the same progression from particularized, detailed forms to generalized, simplified ones. In *Pensive Woman* of about 1938, the face and the clothing of the figure are rendered in

detail. Avery's figures of the forties, however—*Bathers and Watchers*, *Two Women Playing Checkers*, and *Umbrellas and Bathers*, all of 1944—are reduced to blocks of color integrated into the environment. Their situation in the composition is all-important. Avery paid little attention to the individual: the figures often have their backs to the viewer; those facing forward usually lack facial features.

After he suffered a severe heart attack in 1949, Avery began to produce monotypes, an endeavor which was physically less strenuous than painting on canvas. Although Avery's experience as a printmaker was limited, he mastered the monotype with ease. Moreover, his approach to the medium was highly individualistic: "He applied oil washes to glass plates with brushes, rags, crumpled bits of paper, or his fingers, and printed them, not with a press, but usually with the back of a spoon. A base of turpentine on the glass kept his pigments from drying too rapidly and puddled them like paints in the hands of children."⁵ Avery was obviously drawn to the spontaneity of the medium. The need to work rapidly also suited him. As in his watercolors, he chose to depict images around him: sea, land, birds, fish, human figures, etc. Although monotypes by definition are printed in editions of one, Avery would often use the residue of one image—the outline of a tree or animal—as the starting point for another print. Sometimes, he would add other media—pencil, watercolor, gouache, crayon—as in *Soaring Gull* of 1950.

Between 1950 and 1956, Avery created nearly 250 monotypes, the majority of which were executed during 1950 and 1951. One of the most outstanding is

Two Birches of 1956. The simplicity and subtlety of the image are astounding: two white tree trunks, with a few black lines for branches, emerge from a soft gray background.

During the early 1950s, Avery started to create oils on paper as another substitute for painting on canvas. As his health continued to decline, he increased his production of oils on paper, while also continuing to paint on canvas when he could. The oils on paper bear a close resemblance to the paintings in their extreme reduction of forms. Avery also limited the palette in some of the oils on paper to shades of black, gray, purple, and blue. It is interesting to note that the brushwork in the oils on paper is similar to that of the watercolors: the strokes tend to be looser, brushier, and more spontaneous than those of the oils on canvas.

Critics have always had difficulty placing Milton Avery within the history of American art, precisely because his work eludes categorization—it is neither abstract nor realist, yet it is definitely modern. And even though there were other artists who influenced him, he developed his own style, one which he continued to refine throughout his life, regardless of current fashions.

When Avery came to New York City in 1925, he saw for the first time the French modern painters who were being exhibited there. He was drawn to the work of Matisse, but the sensibilities of the two artists were quite different. Both shared an extraordinary color sense, but Avery's colors were more muted. Also, Matisse's compositions tended to be more deco-

relative than Avery's. In addition to European modern painters, Avery was also aware of the early modern experiments of the Americans Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, John Marin, and Georgia O'Keeffe.

Milton Avery's effect on other artists is easier to define. Adolph Gottlieb, Barnett Newman, and Mark Rothko were three of the artists who most frequently visited the Averys. Avery's influence on Rothko (and subsequent Color Field painters) is undeniable: Avery's depiction of the land and sea in large, flattened areas of color led to Rothko's canvases composed of several bands of color. The spareness, two-dimensionality, and concern for surfaces that determine Avery's style were the foundations upon which Rothko built.

At the memorial service for Avery in 1965, Rothko spoke about Avery's art and his influence on others:

This conviction of greatness, the feeling that one was in the presence of great events, was immediate on encountering his work. It was true for many of us who were younger, questioning, and looking for an anchor. This conviction has never faltered. It has persisted, and has been reinforced through the passing decades and the passing fashions. . . .

Avery is first a great poet. His is the poetry of sheer loveliness, of sheer beauty. Thanks to him this kind of poetry has been able to survive in our time.

This—alone—took great courage in a generation which felt that it could be heard only through clamor, force and a show of power. But Avery had that inner power in which gentleness and silence proved more audible and poignant.

From the beginning there was nothing tentative about Avery. He always had that naturalness, that exactness and that inevitable completeness which can be achieved only by those gifted with magical means, by those born to sing.⁶

What gives Milton Avery's work its staying power is the originality and single-mindedness with which he approached his art. His own credo was: "Keep painting—day in—day out. Be absorbed by it. Hold on to the dream—try to make the great dream a reality."⁷ For Avery, the dream was deeply rooted in the real world: over and over again he was able to transform the everyday scenes before him into memorable images.

—Pamela Gruninger

Notes

1. Hilton Kramer, *Milton Avery: Paintings, 1930-1960* (New York: A.S. Barnes & Company, Inc., 1962), pp. 20-21.
2. Milton Avery, statement in *Contemporary American Painting*, exhibition catalogue (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois, 1951), pp. 158-59.
3. Clement Greenberg, "Milton Avery" (1958), in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), p. 198.
4. Sally M. Avery, interview with the author, New York, June 30, 1982.
5. Colta Ives, *The Painterly Print: Monotypes from the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Century*, exhibition catalogue (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1980), p. 220.
6. Mark Rothko, memorial address (1965), printed in Barbara Haskell, *Milton Avery*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art in association with Harper & Row, Publishers, 1982), p. 181.
7. Milton Avery, statement in *Contemporary American Painting and Sculpture*, exhibition catalogue (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois, 1959), p. 192.

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