



Avery, Milton

American, 1885 - 1965

Katherine Young, *Milton Avery*,
1946, gelatin silver print, Library of
Congress, Prints and Photographs
Division, Washington, DC

BIOGRAPHY

Milton Avery was born in Sand Bank (now known as Altmar) in upstate New York on March 7, 1885, and moved with his family to Hartford, Connecticut, in 1898. From about the age of 20, he studied part-time at local art schools, including the Connecticut League of Art Students and the School of the Art Society of Hartford. To support himself and his large family—his father died in an accident in 1905—Avery worked a series of jobs in factories and construction and as a file clerk.

On a summer visit to the Gloucester, Massachusetts, artists' colony in 1925, Avery met artist Sally Michel (American, 1902 - 2003), who was visiting from Brooklyn. He joined her in New York, and they married the following year. Both frequented evening sketch classes at the Art Students League, and Michel's steady work as an illustrator provided the financial support necessary for Avery to fully pursue painting as a career. For the next 40 years, the couple worked side by side, often sharing a studio. In 1932 the Averys had a daughter, March, who appeared frequently in her father's work. The family often spent summers in Gloucester or Vermont, where Avery was inspired by the landscape. He was represented by the Valentine Gallery, which held his first solo exhibition in 1935, and then by the Paul Rosenberg and Durand-Ruel galleries, which supported the artist until 1950.

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Avery maintained a delicate balance between representation and abstraction. He painted figural, genre, and landscape subjects whose simplified forms and flat expanses of color indicate the influence of Pablo Picasso (Spanish, 1881 - 1973) and especially Henri Matisse (French, 1869 - 1954), with whom he is most often compared. He was a gifted colorist who inspired a younger generation of abstract painters, most notably William Baziotis (American, 1912 - 1963), Adolph Gottlieb (American, 1903 - 1974), and his close friend Mark Rothko (American, born Russia (now Latvia), 1903 - 1970). In 1951 Avery said: "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."^[1]

Avery suffered a severe heart attack in 1949 and did not fully recover. Over the next two years, he produced more than 200 monotype prints, a medium he found less physically taxing while recuperating. In 1957 Avery enlarged the scale of his canvases, a decision in line with his contemporaries working in abstract expressionism that was rewarded with increased critical attention. Avery was honored with a retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1960. The artist's deteriorating health prevented him from attending the opening, and he suffered a second heart attack later that year. Avery died on January 3, 1965, in New York.

[1] *Contemporary American Painters* (Urbana, IL, 1951), 159, quoted in Barbara Haskell, *Milton Avery* (New York, 1982), 78.

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July 24, 2024

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