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ART HISTORY PAPER
MILTON AVERY

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Within the parameters of what has been called art, there have been countless acts taken in order to actualize one's potential to learn whatever it is to be "human." It is never easy to strive for the answers to what one ought to be, or do, instead of merely how to succeed in society. To reach for the completeness where thought and action are one and to attempt unity among all possibilities is a difficult choice, being aware of one's own incompleteness and the overpowering relativism of modern western culture.

Aesthetic styles have reflected the changes created within cultural thinking. Generally speaking, within western culture the Nietzschean philosophic popularity initiated through Nietzsche's "Birth of Tragedy" overwhelmed the basically idealist position, rendering those of, say, Collingwood or Tolstoy as being less important or, more precisely, less popular. The fact is that both the existential and the idyllic positions are partly correct, partly incorrect. But as long as more focus is given to the idea that metaphysical systems actually do break down instead of there being a simple popular shift from one to another, a false sense of what is right or wrong is implied. This has often led to the definitions of grand and powerful as being the tragic and sublime.

The expressive qualities that art has encompassed have been tremendously affected by the popular concept of the struggle of man. As it is no longer popular to look at a future utopia or consider a life hereafter, the expressive qualities of art have more often been seen to record "the terror and horror of existence" whereby "man is alone in a hostile environment."¹ Since 1900, the strongest expressive qualities have been considered to be within the more strife-riddled artistic compositions. Along the way, however, there have been a few artists who have maintained the kind of individual strength and self-belief necessary to avoid conforming to this popular mode.

In particular, I believe the paintings by Milton Avery stand strong as they not only embrace existential thinking but also express the ideals of man in, quite simply, a very "human" way. Avery was able to create dramatically typical works from apparently unprepossessing subject matter and often render the paintings "not only poetic, but timeless."² He could grasp the significance of a moment and while adhering to the integrity of his expression, develop an interesting composition. These fresh, accurate compositions became inspirations for younger artists such as Rothko, Gottlieb, and Newman. However, these artists in time became attached to a more abstract way of painting leaving Avery as unique for the time.

Avery's career began from 1912-1920 with training from both the Connecticut League of Art Students and the School

of the Art Society of Hartford. This eight years of formal instruction must be taken into consideration when viewing Avery's work from this period, for they reflect a conservative academic atmosphere.

Considering the developments in abstraction that had occurred in the earlier part of the century and the revolution in subject matter brought about by artists such as the Eight, Avery's work from the twenties is traditional. Yet, clearly they foreshadow his mature style. It is easy to recognize the layered color, muted palette, and simplified shapes--all of which became enhanced in his later work. Paintings such as "Moon Over Marsh" from 1919 and "White Moon" from 1957 show relationship not only in subject matter and palette but also in conception and sensibility. Both works concentrate on the visual aspects of painting, specifically color, with less emphasis on any kind of drama or narrative content. Size notwithstanding, the major difference between this early and late work lies in the thick impasto of one and the thin washes of the latter.

It was by the mid-twenties that Avery began using less of the impasto technique and thereby changed a major interest from surface quality to a greater concern for color. As consistent as his progression away from texture toward color was, Avery's technical and compositional evolution was never consistent. Often he would have several directions working at once, and it was not until the early 1940s that he settled into a more concise way of painting.

In 1924 Avery met his future wife Sally Michel. Sally was his greatest inspiration, and often it would be her belief in him and his work that would help carry him through rough times. It was somewhere during the first part of their relationship that he adjusted his age to seem closer to Sally's. This fact was not discovered until very late in Milton's life.

Apparent by the early thirties was Avery's approach to compositions based on large, closely modulated color areas. By treating each shape as a single color area and minimizing the number of shapes in a painting, he flattened and abstracted the images. This metamorphosis of representational elements into flat, interlocking shapes of homogeneous color formed the basis of his mature work. The interplay between recognizable forms and abstract shapes always characterize Avery's best paintings. Although still a bit tentative in the abstraction, paintings such as "Sitters By The Sea" share much of the same characteristics we came to expect in later works.

The mid-thirties paintings Avery made exhibit a thin application of matte pigments, generally scumbled onto the canvas using a stiff brush. In effect, this blurred the edges between shapes and allowed for bits of unpainted canvas to show through. The edges began to be quite significant for Avery and often heightened the painting's aesthetic.

It was during the thirties when Avery's paintings seemed most different from the rest of the American styles.

This was also when the majority of American paintings sought to define the American experience as something distinct from the European one. Avery did not pursue narrative content as strongly as did other American painters during this period. To him, content was secondary to form and color. The way in which his paintings were executed was of utmost importance to him. Frequent visitors of the Avery's during this period from 1930-1940 were artists such as Rothko, Gottlieb, and Barnett Newman. Avery, being almost 20 years older than these artists, offered inspiration to them, and they, in turn, would break many barriers in the advancement of American painting.

One of the abilities Avery successfully enhanced during this period was his extraordinary use of color. As was written by Henry McBride about Avery at a 1935 exhibition at the Valentine Gallery in New York:

He (Avery) really is an exceptional colorist. When an artist gives you a landscape with a moving and dramatic, but wine-colored sky, and then makes you believe literally in the wine-colored sky, it simply means that the artist can do things with color that not every artist can do."³

On the whole, Avery's paintings from his first ten years in New York (1925-1935) reflected not only the subject matter of the American academics but also the techniques of the Europeans. By 1930 Avery had been incorporating aspects of the work of Picasso and Matisse into his paintings. In "Woman with Mandolin" of 1930, for example, layers of allied hues create the suggestion of brushy, homogeneous color areas reminiscent of early Picasso. Later, as Avery's work

developed through the thirties, he focused not on Matisse's compositional modes but on his exploitation of arbitrary color--a characteristic which would become the mainstay of Avery's own art.

In October 1932 Sally Avery gave birth to a daughter, March. The family became even more central to Milton. March became a regular portrait subject for Avery throughout her childhood; depictions of her were included in the Durand-Ruel Galleries in a 1947 exhibition entitled "My Daughter March."

By 1940 a shift had taken place in Avery's attitude toward color. The dark palette of previous work had brightened and was more saturated. Also, he was introducing more colors which, although related to reality, were not necessarily naturalistic. The red sky and blue and red fields of "Gaspé-Pink Sky" (1940) reflect a mood more than a naturalistic representation of color. By 1944 he would combine nonassociative color with his earlier technique of flattening compositional elements into abstract tonal planes.

The year 1944 marked a new prestige for Avery as he had his first one-man exhibition at the Phillips Memorial Gallery in Washington DC. In 1945 two concurrent exhibitions were held at the Paul Rosenberg and Durand-Ruel galleries. As Maude Riley summed up Avery's reputation:

After remaining unnoticed for a good many years, Milton Avery has of late become a sort of institution. No one remains ignorant of his past; and while enthusiasm varies, a general cordiality

prevails in regard to this innocently sophisticated form of picture making.⁴

Despite the critical recognition, Avery's sales were slow and infrequent. At one point in the forties, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., director of the Museum of Modern Art, asked Mark Rothko, "which American artists he considered the greatest." When Rothko named Avery, Barr laughed.⁵

The Whitney Museum of American Art was no more receptive; it was not until 1944 that Avery was included in a Whitney painting biennial and then only because Rosenberg otherwise had threatened to withdraw his other gallery artists from the competition.

As Avery sharply reduced the numbers of elements in his compositions, shape came to play a role equal in importance to color. Given the nature of his subjects and the simplicity of his formal means, his work might easily have become boring, were it not for his highly developed pictorial logic. In addition to maintaining pictorial tension, shape came to define pictorial space as Avery's introduction of closely valued color harmonies eliminated the spatial illusionism traditionally created by light/dark contrasts. To suggest space, Avery relied on depth cues such as diagonally thrusting lines and overlapping planes in which he created a typically shallow space of steep perspective and tilted planes. Throughout, Avery's landscapes proved to be more abstract than did his figurative paintings.

In January 1949 Avery suffered a major heart attack, and for most friends who thought he was 55, this seemed

premature. Since his actual age was 63, the coronary and his subsequent fragile health are somewhat more comprehensible. Although his health was poor and the doctors told Sally he might live only three years, Milton lived for 16 years, though he never fully recovered.

His paintings began to take on a deeper, more somber and reflective mood as one could expect from his confrontation with death. Often depressed over his physical weakness and pain, Avery nonetheless continued to paint idyllic landscapes and peaceful figure compositions, but his more muted color tonalities revealed a deepening of perception and feeling.

Later in 1949 the Avery's moved to Florida. Milton turned to making monotypes as it was easier with less physical exertion. Over the next two years he produced a body of nearly 200 works. Because of the rapid execution and relative simplicity of this form of printmaking, Avery's paintings took on a similar look when he resumed painting during the summer of 1950. He began to generalize contours broadly and minimize shapes and graphic details. He sought to transcend the particular factual incidents of his subjects and to capture their universality--whether of individual form or of essential relationships between objects. As an example, a comparison of his 1930 and 1950 interpretations of the maternity theme reveals that Avery's treatment became more generalized. The descriptive detail of the earlier picture suggests a particular characterization,

whereas the 1950 version is quite distilled, almost iconic, evoking an archetypal mother and child relationship.

Avery's palette also changed becoming richer and more refined as he replaced the vibrant hues of earlier work with quieter, more muted color harmonies. Thin washes of paint dealt with transparent, slightly mottled fields of color. There was greater enhancement of the boundaries between shapes with intricate color transitions at the edges.

Ironically, as the aesthetic of Avery's art came to full maturity, his critical favor fell to almost nothing. Much acclaim was accorded to the Abstract Expressionists and this acclaim overshadowed work like Avery's which were said to be too realistic. Several considerations enter in here, but regardless of the lack of fame or fortune, Avery's own dedication to his goals as a painter never faltered. His refusal to compromise his vision attested to this belief in his own aesthetic and in himself as an artist.

Undoubtedly, however, Avery was influenced by the Abstract Expressionists to a certain degree. His paintings were made larger and his already simple shapes took on an even greater degree of abstraction. By the late fifties his technique had matured to accommodate the larger scale. Examples are "Boathouse by the Sea" (1959) or "Sand, Sea, and Sky" (1960), which are represented only in title as the paintings are simply abstract shapes. This also exhibits Avery's dry sense of humor. The humor in his earlier work was more narrative and anecdotal. By the end of the

fifties, it was more concerned with form such as odd qualities of shape and quirkiness of outline. In doing so, Avery ultimately played with shape and color as a punster would play with words. In the process, part of which are the flat areas of color and enhanced contours, he made a statement about the nature of painting, i.e., the ability of two-dimensional surface to yield an illusion of three dimensions. The effect was a spatial reading, simultaneously flat and infinite.

Avery's paintings did not reveal emotional nuances of his life as much as they revealed an underlying mood. There is a sense of contentment within the solitude, a harmony of balance between extremes. Mechanically, this was painted by building chromatic harmonies around closely allied hues, equalizing values so even complementaries had similar intensity (e.g., "Beach Blankets," 1960). He would often use very little oil pigment, thinned with turpentine to keep a dry, flat-surface look. The effect is a luminous treatment of the underpainted hues.

As Avery's mastery of coloristic and formal nuance fully matured, so did his development of a generalized imagery. By this, I mean he treated specific images as visual expressions of generalized experiences. The experience had been simplified to the significant "felt" idea (e.g., "Madonna of the Rocks," 1957).

William Carlos Williams wrote, "There is no whiteness so white as the memory of white."⁷ Death and thoughts

associated with it come into play late in human life. By the late fifties, Avery's work became a great deal more nostalgic, and the generalization of his imagery speaks to the "looking back." In doing so, Avery captures a feeling of celebrating life and reflecting upon it (e.g., "Mountain and Meadow," "Self-Portrait--Feeling Old," 1961).

Avery's health deteriorated badly, and from 1962-63 he only managed to paint a few canvases. Finally, in February 1964 he had to be admitted to Montefiore Hospital, where he remained virtually unconscious in intensive care. On January 3, 1965, he died in his sleep.

In summary, I feel there has been a significant contribution made to art by the work of Milton Avery. Prolific and honest, his paintings can never be solely understood in its color, forms, or other design elements "for it never became entirely abstract."⁸ It is not possible to separate the formal, compositional elements totally from the imagery subject matter. Sincerity to his personal, intended expression and an obscurity of certain ideas have allowed Avery's paintings to assume a position by a mystery achieved through the use of ordinary pictorial representations. This becomes clearer when understanding that common to all of the different varieties and meanings of expressions is the fact as Stephan Morawski has stated:

Although the sets of qualities, as manifest traits, occur in art objects, their effect is virtually psychic and as such they find their referents in the human subject. The sincerity which lies in the expressive nature is not that which pertains to a man making confessions but to⁹ an artist who determines what and how to confess.

The expressive relationship between a work of art and the artist is intransitive and asymmetrical. When considering an intended expression, the choices fall under whether the expression conveys a sincerity in the form of intimacy; or in the sincerity in the artistic sense of congruity between idea and execution; or intentional fallacy, which may also have a bearing.¹⁰

Milton Avery refused to abandon his subjects, thus signifying the importance of not only the "unheroic cast"¹¹ but also his personal expression, for there is certainly a feeling aroused by these works which complements the successful formal arrangements. Through Avery's characterization of art, there is virtually an absence of threat to an idyllic world, and it has indefinite continuation. His images of technology or machines occur not as conflicts to the serene but instead enhance the activity of a romantic nature and beneficent progress. There is a distance exemplified between the existing world and the idyllic one. However, they don't become boring or trite, which attests to Avery's sense of awareness and humor. He understood the possibilities and limitations of a two-dimensional surface.

I believe Avery's "Speedboat Wake" of 1959 is a strong example of his mature work. The painting lies in a balance of his capabilities and clear, perceptive response to the experience. The noisy speedboat seems to be in harmony with man and environment. The composition speaks to man's isolation and his desire to integrate himself with the environment. Avery's keen poetry renders this and many of his mature works timeless. Landscapes such as "Sand, Sea, and Sky" or "Black Sea" speak to the humble existence of man in his environment.

In that Avery's work obviously exhibits a world seen specifically through his own eyes, we can assume there were no superficial attempts to fool. Avery was able to compose uniquely successful compositions. To realize mankind's existence for what it is, yet hope for something better, is simply a basis for an accurate perception.

I truly appreciate many of the formal qualities of Avery's paintings, i.e., the interlocking shapes, spatial puns, intricate edge color, etc. I also appreciate his humor and peaceful compositional subject matter. I feel Milton Avery has given much to painting and that his position in the history of art is significant.

ENDNOTES

¹Richard Schacht, Aesthetics--A Critical Anthology (New York: St. Martens Press, 1977), p. 274.

²Bonnie Lee Grad, Milton Avery (Strathcona Pub. Co., 1981), p. 2.

³Barbara Haskell, "Milton Avery," Whitney Museum of American Art, (New York: Harper & Row Pub., 1982), p. 69.

⁴Ibid., p. 77.

⁵Ibid., p. 80.

⁶Ibid., p. 169.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Grad, Milton Avery, pp. 2-3.

⁹Stephan Morawski, Inquiries into the Fundamentals of Aesthetics (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1974), pp. 184-86.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 186.

¹¹Haskell, "Milton Avery," p. 181.

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