



Milton Avery. New York: Hudson Hills Press, Inc., 1990; pp. 29-31+225.

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MILTON AVERY

Milton Avery is a consummate sophisticate who maintains a witty dialogue with European modernists, with his American peers, and with fine and folk-art traditions. Although he was generally quiet in his daily life, preferring to leave the art of conversation to others, in his painting he was loquacious: he maintained as many as two and sometimes three simultaneous conversations with other artists in a single work. Avery's art is collaborative in the true sense of working with culture, for it responds to various aspects of his world, making delightful, incisive ripostes and becoming by turns modern, naïve, realistic, and abstract, depending on the art to which he was responding. One can enjoy Avery's painting without recognizing his artistic dialogues, but an understanding of his responses adds immeasurably to one's appreciation of the quality and charm of his art and the subtle, dry wit that he only occasionally revealed in his everyday conversations with family and friends.

Avery created a charming and delightful body of work featuring family and friends, intimate settings, and landscapes encountered on summer holidays. In his work he embraced many of the attitudes of modern French art that the Fauves Raoul Dufy and Henri Matisse espoused, particularly their concern with saturated color in distinctly new combinations coupled with an interest in retaining the two-dimensional character of the canvas or paper on which they worked. Modern critics have considered Avery's work to be such an extension of Fauvism that he has frequently been referred to as the "American Matisse."¹ While he held Matisse's art in high regard along with Dufy's, and respected a number of other School of Paris painters, including Pablo Picasso, he also brought to his art an understanding of American Impressionism and an appreciation of American folk art that allowed him to create a distinctly native brand of modernism. His art responded to the needs of a country that suffered the Great Depression, became embroiled in World War II, and endured the aftermath of the Cold War while enjoying at the same time a postwar prosperity that continued well into the 1960s. In the more than three decades that extended from the 1930s until the early 1960s, Avery's art served the very real need in the United States for positive and believable images of itself, images that would assure people that life could be pleasurable, that family ties and intimate, enduring relationships continued to have meaning, and that an understanding of America's then little-known cultural past might help them deal with the unsettling changes that an economic depression, war, and postwar prosperity necessitated.

Similar to the responses of all truly genuine creative artists, Avery's reaction to the political and social changes of his day developed out of his own experiences. He did not first mentally formulate and solve problems and then try to translate them into art, as did his contemporaries Philip Evergood and Ben Shahn, who, in spite of their enormous talent, frequently illustrated rather than manifested their ideas as distinctly felt content. Avery's method was the indirect process of thinking through the

artistic codes for modernism, folk art, and American Impressionism and welding them into a new style that conveyed his reactions to the world. His process of thinking in terms of artistic conventions and media was thus indirect and nonverbal. After completing a work he rarely troubled himself to reflect on its meaning, preferring to allow later paintings to represent elaborations or critiques of earlier ideas. Although art historians might think him unconcerned with the major political, economic, and philosophic trends of his day because his art is so intimate and charming, he actually did respond to the political temper of his times; only his responses were given in an artistic language reflecting deeply held values and convictions. Unlike Evergood and Shahn, Avery was not polemical or partisan. Indeed, he was so little concerned with elections and current issues that he never voted.² His concerns were broadly based; they focused on America's cultural traditions as they were being reformulated in the twenties and thirties through contacts with European modernism and a new understanding and appreciation of America's folk-art traditions. Only in the broadest terms can Avery's art be considered political when it personalized and qualitatively enriched ideas about the modern world and America's special cultural traditions.

1. Frank Getlein writes:

You used to hear it said that Avery was a kind of American Matisse. Nowadays he is more often compared to Rothko and there are observers unlearned enough to suggest that the last phase of Avery, the large-scale canvases of sea, beach, and sky, were derived from Rothko's horizontal rectangles of color. . . . The Matisse comparison is more interesting. There are similarities, certainly, though Avery never set foot in France until he was long established. The differences are more rewarding than the similarities. . . . The French Master wished to make an art as comfortable as a good armchair, and he succeeded. The American's art is more nearly described as a swim in the ocean off Maine. Frank Getlein, "On the Beach in Nebraska," *New Republic*, April 16, 1966, 34.

In Avery's obituary in the *New York Herald Tribune*, he is referred to as "the American Fauve" ("Milton Avery: His Art Accepted after 40 Years," *New York Herald Tribune*, January 4, 1965, 14). References to Matisse and the Fauves go back to the 1930s. A notable reference to "the American Fauve" is in the

catalogue essay for Avery's 1943 retrospective at the Phillips Memorial Gallery:

New York critics have attempted to pigeon-hole Milton Avery as "the American Fauve." . . . We ourselves see no cause to classify Avery as an American Fauve; his metamorphosis of experience into broad clear shapes of color appears to have a quite different starting-point and to arrive at a far different result. The original experience in his case seems to have been both optical and emotional—even lyrically sentimental. The color relations and contrasts are not smashing in their intensity; they are more often sensitive and subtle. Gentleness and quiet humor give grace to the boldness of the simplification and the reformation of the objects.

C.L.W., "Milton Avery," in *Six Loan Exhibitions* (Washington, D.C.: Phillips Memorial Gallery, January 17–February 15, 1943), n.p.

2. "The Reminiscences of Sally Michel Avery: Interviews with Louis Shaeffer," Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, 1980, 115.

3. Wolf Kahn, manuscript for "Milton Avery's Good Example," Spring 1983, Milton Avery Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C., 1.

4. "Reminiscences," 10.

5. *Ibid.*, 12.

6. Quoted in Carter Ratcliffe, *The Gloucester Years* (New York: Grace Borgenicht Gallery, February 6–March 4, 1982), 3. Much of the information about Gloucester comes from this source.

7. Barbara Haskell has carefully unraveled the history of Avery's changing birth date, citing a census report of 1892, the Avery's marriage license, and critical literature on Avery, which generally gives his birth date as 1893. Haskell concludes from the various sources that Avery was born in 1885. See Barbara Haskell, *Milton Avery* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, September 16–December 5, 1982), 182.

8. "Reminiscences," 124.