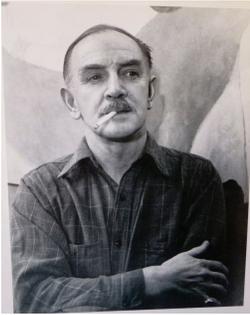


Milton Avery - Why Talk When You Can Paint?



Fancy Hat - 1950 KIA Collection

Milton Avery (1885-1965) has been called the American Matisse. His work centers around the everyday aspects of life sensitively employing color and composition. Mark Rothko said of him, "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. . . . There have been several others in our

generation who have celebrated the world around them, but none with that inevitability where the poetry penetrated every pore of the canvas to the very last touch of the brush."

Hans Hofmann observed, "Avery was one of the first to understand color as a creative means. He was one of the first to relate colors in a plastic way." In the era of abstract expressionism, the depression, war and big egos, Avery went his own way. Although he barely eked out a living, his life was rich in family and abundant in his work. There is a serenity and calm in his work that is not typical of the period.

Milton Avery was born in upstate New York in 1885 into a working class family dedicated more to survival than creative expression. He grew up in a large extended family that had moved to a small town just outside of Hartford, Connecticut in 1889. His mother, sister Minnie, her husband and two daughters, brother Fabian, his wife and children all lived in one house sharing expenses and chores. His father died in 1905 in a tragic wood chopping accident. By 1915, all the other males in the family were deceased. Avery at 30 years of age lived with nine women and children.

In 1905 Milton Avery began studying art in night classes at the Connecticut League of Art Students while he worked as a mechanic and lathe operator at Underwood Manufacturing. In 1917 he became a day student at the School of the Art Society of Hartford, contributing to the communal support of the family by working as a night filing clerk at Travelers Insurance. He worked and studied summers in art colonies where in 1924 he met his future wife Sally Michel an artist from Brooklyn, NY.

After Milton and Sally married in 1926 they moved to New York City creating an artist's studio at Broadway and 65th. They established a warm inclusive home that hosted regular evenings of food, drink and talk. Although all their friends were impoverished artists, the gatherings provided important opportunities for discussion, debate and moral support. The Averys were loved and respected in the art community. Sally was an illustrator providing the primary support of the family. She and Milton worked from home making a professional and personal collaboration that lasted all their lives. Their daughter March was born in 1932. She is also an artist - March Avery Cavanaugh.

Avery was a disciplined artist. He kept extensive sketchbooks that he worked up into finished studio paintings. He had little patience for painters immobilized as they waited for the muse to inspire them. He worked all day during the week. On weekends he and Sally explored the exhibits in museums and galleries around the city.

The Averys traveled between 1941-1949 to Mexico, California, the Canadian northwest and Maine. Every summer found the family in an art colony or seaside in one place or another. A severe heart attack in 1949 left the 64 year old artist in a fragile state. His work at this time showed a focus on interconnections and universalities utilizing a soft edge on his forms.

Avery had a major exhibit in 1944 at the Phillips and his work was promoted through the Paul Rosenberg Gallery in NYC. When the Gallery passed on to the son, Avery lost an important advocate in Paul Rosenberg who had been regularly buying his art and essentially supporting him. He moved to the Grace Borgenicht Gallery in 1951. But his quiet lovely paintings were lost in the energy and noise of the exuberant styles and verbiage of the time.

In 1952 the family toured London, Paris and the Riviera for three weeks. Avery spent most of his time sketching as he found the museums too exhausting. The summer of 1957 found him in Provincetown, Massachusetts with Mark Rothko and Adolf Gottlieb. His paintings became larger and his style more abstract although he always gave them representational names. His continuing health problems restricted his work, but he kept creating. He died in 1965. He was a working class man not given to intellectual musings about the creative process or his work. He characteristically said, "Why talk when you can paint?"



Pamela Boudreau