



Milton Avery
American, 1885 - 1965

Artist and Nude

1940

oil on canvas

overall: 94 x 73 cm (37 x 28 3/4 in.)

framed: 93.7 x 73 x 4.1 cm (36 7/8 x 28 3/4 x 1 5/8 in.)

Inscription: lower left: Milton Avery; center reverse: "Artist & Nude" / by / Milton Avery / 36 x 25 / 1940

Gift of Yves-André and Christine Istel 1991.192.1

ENTRY

Artist and Nude combines Milton Avery's interest in the human figure and his use of flat expanses of color. In this painting, he represented himself at work. Avery, his back to the viewer, sketches a nude model who stands on a bed, her figure framed by an open window. She holds at her side an indistinct object that could be a robe or blanket, its rose color matching that of the windowsill. In keeping with his reductive aesthetic, Avery refined the composition into areas of two-dimensional form and bold color. Within these sections, the painter added subtle details. Red swirling brushstrokes decorate the back wall, the playful lines only slightly darker in color than the wall itself. For the wood grain of the floorboards, the artist's hair, and the window shutters, Avery incised lines with the wooden end of his brush, a technique called sgraffito. The painting's bright palette, seen in details such as the vivid pink of the artist's face, fulfills an expressive rather than solely naturalistic function. Avery would continue in this direction as the decade progressed. Curator Barbara Haskell, who organized a 1982 retrospective of Avery's work at the Whitney Museum of American Art, observed that around 1940 Avery's colors "became much bolder as he created the mood of a situation by discarding the constraints of naturalistic hues and favoring a saturated, non-naturalistic palette." [1]

The painting's subject, colors, decorative patterning, and prominently placed open window are all reminiscent of Henri Matisse (French, 1869 - 1954). The visual links between Matisse and Avery were most apparent during the late 1930s and early 1940s, the years when Avery exhibited at the Valentine Gallery, owned by Matisse's American dealer, Valentine Dudensing. Early in 1940, Henry McBride

became the first major critic to notice the similarity between the artists' works. Avery, however, denied that Matisse had influenced him. [2] Sally Michel (American, 1902 - 2003), the artist's wife and an accomplished artist in her own right, found dissonance between the two artists' treatments of the nude figure: "Matisse was a hedonist and Milton was an ascetic. . . . That is the opposite of French sensibility. . . . Milton's nudes are the purest nudes you ever came across, where, you know, Matisse's have an erotic quality. Milton never gets anything erotic in his work." [3]

While the woman in *Artist and Nude* assumes a less openly available posture than that of Matisse's odalisques (see *Odalisque Seated with Arms Raised, Green Striped Chair* or *Odalisque, Half-Length--The Tattoo* [both 1923]), the painting is not stripped of all sexual connotation. The power dynamic inherent in an artist-model relationship is made physically evident in this work. The artist's hulking form, fully clothed in a suit, appears capable of overpowering the model, whose garment or blanket seems too small to fully cover her body and who is already situated on a bed. Nonetheless, the model's position—standing centered against the flat, bright blue of the view through the window—and her elongated proportions lend her solidity and make her the focal point of this work.

Robert Torchia

July 24, 2024

NOTES

- [1] Barbara Haskell, *Milton Avery* (New York, 1982), 72.
- [2] Henry McBride, "Hartley and Avery: Two American Artists Who Paint for Painters," *New York Sun*, Feb. 24, 1940. For a discussion on the somewhat contentious issue of Matisse's influence on Avery, see Karl Emil Willers, *Milton Avery & the End of Modernism* (New Paltz, NY, 2011), <http://www.tfaoi.com/aa/9aa/9aa483.htm>.
- [3] "The Reminiscences of Sally Avery: Interviews with Louis Schaeffer" (unpublished manuscript, Oral Research Office, Columbia University, 1980), 23, partially quoted in Robert Carleton Hobbs, *Milton Avery: The Late Paintings* (New York, 2001), 54.
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TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The plain-weave fabric support remains attached to its original, commercially manufactured (Anco) stretcher. The artist applied a thin white paint over the canvas surface to serve as a preparatory layer; there is no ground. Avery first sketched the outlines of the figures with black, red, and brown paint. Color was initially applied very thinly. Subsequently, thicker paint was applied in select areas, such as in the figure and hair of the model, and in the blue window behind her. The artist's paper is unpainted, utilizing the preparation as its color. The tone of the preparation also plays a role in many other areas, particularly at the edges of forms. Avery manipulated the paint after application by scraping the surface, which produced a rough, crumbled paint texture, and by scratching with a tool, which left white lines. Neither x-radiography nor infrared examination revealed changes in composition or contour. The infrared reflectogram of the model's face shows her features much more clearly than what is visible on the picture surface, where a scumble of paint is drawn over them. The support was exposed to moisture that resulted in the water stain in the lower left corner. The surface is unvarnished.

Michael Swicklik

July 24, 2024

PROVENANCE

The artist's wife, Sally Michel Avery [1902-2003], New York; (William Zierler Gallery, New York); Mr. and Mrs. Yves-André and Christine Istel, New York; gift 1991 to NGA.

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