

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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MILTON AVERY'S JOYOUS SPIRIT SHINES IN PRINT SURVEY
AT NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, SEPTEMBER 18, 1994 - JANUARY 22, 1995

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- American artist Milton Avery's favorite subjects--his family and friends, the landscapes he studied during his many summer work sessions, relaxed nudes, and delightful animals--will fill the exhibition galleries of Milton Avery: Works on Paper, in the National Gallery, East Building, September 18, 1994, through January 22, 1995. This survey celebrates the foundation in 1991 of the Milton Avery Print Archive, donated by the Avery family in honor of the Gallery's 50th anniversary. The exhibition of 67 works includes important drypoints, lithographs, woodcuts, sketchbooks, watercolors, and a monotype in addition to original drypoint plates and carved woodblocks used for some of the prints.

"The extraordinary gift from Milton Avery's widow, Sally Michel Avery, and his daughter, March Avery Cavanaugh, and her family, has established the National Gallery as an important center for the study of the artist's graphic work," said

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Earl A. Powell III, director of the National Gallery of Art.

"This enticing exhibition will reveal a little-known aspect of Avery's oeuvre as well as the creative role that printmaking played in the development of his aesthetic vision."

Avery prints have also been acquired by the Gallery with funds donated by Ailsa Mellon Bruce, and through gifts of works of art from Dr. Ruth B. Benedict, Mrs. Robert A. Hauslohner, and Harvey S. Shipley Miller, a close friend of the Avery family. The Gallery's unique monotype--part painting, part print--was donated by the Prospero Foundation, courtesy of Jane and Raphael Bernstein. Sketchbooks and watercolors that enhance the exhibition are loaned by Sally Michel Avery; Ruth and Jacob Kainen; and an anonymous lender.

Avery was born in Sand Bank (later Altmar), New York, in 1885. At the age of 13, his family moved to East Hartford, Connecticut, where he spent most of his childhood and young adult years. A life-drawing class at the Connecticut League of Art Students was the beginning of Avery's formal art education and lifelong commitment to art.

As the sole male provider in a household of nine women relatives, Avery worked evenings in order to attend art classes during the day. The artist spent several summers painting the landscape in Gloucester, Massachusetts, where in 1924 he met a young New York painter named Sally Michel. The following spring he moved to New York to be closer to her. They married in 1926, and she worked as an illustrator to support them, allowing Avery to work on his art virtually uninterrupted during several of the

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most turbulent decades in the history of twentieth-century American art. March, the Avery's only child, would also become an artist. Over the years the family's artist friends would include Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb, and Barnett Newman.

While Avery's images of home, family, friends, and summer vacation sites fit within the realm of American art of the 1930s, he evolved an independent style that conflated representation and abstraction, never abandoning nature.

Avery worked in printmaking sporadically throughout his career, producing a total of sixty different images. His drypoints date from 1933 to 1950 and reveal, as do his drawings, the artist's concern with organized patterns in space. The surfaces of his drypoints juxtapose lyrical outlines of form with diverse strokes that create textures and tonalities, adding a sense of depth to the compositions. The drypoints highlight Avery's inventiveness and demonstrate that in his art, compositions in black & white could be as powerful as those in color.

The twenty-eight drypoints in the exhibition include quiet and intimate portraits such as Mother and Child (1933), a study of Sally Avery nursing March; Rothko with Pipe (1936), a rendition of the artist Mark Rothko; and Self Portrait (1937). Drypoints that confirm Avery's interest in the American genre scene include Riders in the Park (1934) and Bathers (1941); and his calligraphic landscapes are represented in drypoints such as Japanese Landscape (1939). Three very different drypoints from 1948--By the Sea, March at a Table, and Reclining Nude--

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demonstrate his strong reductive stance, wherein planes are flat and shapes are simplified and generic.

In 1939, Avery made Tirca, his first lithograph, and his only one drawn on stone. Most of his other lithographs, drawn on zinc plates, date from the early 1950s. Gray Sea (1963), a transfer lithograph, was his last lithograph and last print. Avery's spontaneous artistic temperament was not suited to the technical complexities of lithography, which played a modest role in his printmaking career.

Avery was attracted to monotype techniques during the winter of 1949 while recovering from a heart attack in Florida. The process of monotype requires only the most basic tools and no printing press. Between 1950 and 1951 Avery made more than 200 monotypes, among the most beautiful of which is Birds by Blue Sea (1950).

Coinciding with a revival of interest in the woodcut in the 1950s, Avery produced a rich and diverse group of twenty-one woodcuts between 1952 and 1955, often printing variant editions of his woodcut images in different color schemes. In the three different impressions of Three Birds (1952), Avery demonstrates his sensitivity to the expressive inking of his woodblocks. Night Nude (1953) and Beach Birds (1954) show that in the woodcuts, as in the drypoints, Avery simplified and clarified his subjects. Animals, absent from his drypoints, are an important theme in the woodcuts. Prints such as Fantail Pigeon (1953) and Hen (1954) reveal the artist's joyous spirit, keen sense of observation, and sophistication in composition. Ultimately, poor

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health curtailed Avery's ability to meet the demanding physical rigors of the woodcut. In 1960 Avery suffered a second heart attack, which left him weak for the remainder of his life. He died on January 3, 1965, in New York at the age of seventy-nine.

Carlotta J. Owens, assistant curator of modern prints and drawings, National Gallery of Art, organized the exhibition and wrote the accompanying catalogue. She wrote of Avery's prints: "They are wonderful individual achievements that further clarify the singularity of Avery's expressive language and the constants of his art that have held our attention for so long."

The 96-page soft cover catalogue includes 14 color and 72 black and white reproductions as well as an essay on Avery's printmaking career by Owens. Published by the National Gallery of Art, it will be available \$19.95 in the Gallery bookstore. It may also be ordered by calling (301) 322-5900.

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