

CHAPTER I

FORMATIVE YEARS

Milton Avery, the son of Russell Eugene and Esther March Avery, was born in Altmar, New York, a small town near Oswego, on March 7, 1885. When Avery was eight years old, his family moved to Hartford, Connecticut, his home for the next twenty-four years. Upon graduating from high school he took a low-paying job at a local typewriter factory, but in hopes of finding more lucrative employment as a commercial artist he applied for a course in lettering at the Connecticut League of Art Students in Hartford. Unable to gain admittance to the over-crowded lettering class, he opted for a drawing course at the League taught by Charles Noel Flagg and Albertus Jones. This single semester of drawing in charcoal was Avery's only formal art training in a painting career that would span more than fifty years.

Avery began painting directly from nature in the rural area around Hartford known as the East Meadows, and also began his lifelong practice of sketching the human figure. He began working a night shift at the United States Tire and Rubber Company in order to free his daylight hours for painting. Avery spent the next twelve years of his life working and painting in almost complete obscurity. He would always modestly refer to the activity of painting as a "favorite pastime."¹

In the summer of 1925, Avery, now 40, traveled to the artists' colony in Gloucester, Massachusetts, where he met Sally Michel, a young artist and illustrator from Brooklyn. That fall he moved to New York to be with Sally, and in the spring of 1926 they were married. Sally financially supported the family for the next 25 years by illustrating the children's page of the Sunday New York Times Magazine, allowing Avery to devote his days to art. Sally "used to tease him and say that his greatest patron was the Times."² Sally's economic support also relieved Avery from having to compete within the New York art market, and this freedom from cutthroat financial competition contributed to Avery's ability to remain largely detached from the stylistic trends and artistic movements in American art during the first half of the twentieth century.

During Sally and Milton's early years together, they often spent Saturdays visiting the New York galleries. Through this and his discussions with other artists Avery became well-acquainted with the various modernist movements and avant-garde concepts being imported from Europe that were taking root in America. However, it is difficult to speak of other artists as directly influencing Avery and his work: Avery was quick to internalize the knowledge of modernist concerns, and this knowledge then re-emerged within his own art as a unique statement of style and temperament.

In 1928, Avery entered a competitive exhibition at the Opportunity Gallery in New York City, a small space established to provide young New York artists an initial opportunity to exhibit their work. Avery won and, as a result, was selected by Max

Weber to receive his first solo show at the gallery. Here Avery met many other aspiring young painters, including Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb. These three attended an artists' group that met weekly in each others' homes and studios to sketch and discuss art. During the 1930s, Avery also knew and associated with the artists Louis Eilshemius and Marsden Hartley, two artists whose stark compositions and intense color influenced Avery's art. Years later, at the end of Avery's life, the critic Ben Wolf aptly expressed the unique quality of Avery's camaraderie with other artists throughout his long career:

*It has been stated that Milton Avery was "self-taught." This would be misleading were it to conjure up the image of an insular man...a self talking to itself. He looked, listened, and learned from...his peers. He had the rare gift, especially in an artist, of patiently listening to others. He never ceased believing that it was necessary to look at things in order to see them.*³

EARLY WORKS

Before considering the stylistic characteristics of Avery's oeuvre, it should be noted that Avery's art reveals few if any dramatic thematic changes or inconsistent stylistic developments. Avery seems never to have participated in what Barbara Rose refers to as "the breakthrough mentality characteristic of American artists."⁴ Rose elaborates and clarifies this concept of a "breakthrough" mentality by describing American artists as seeming "to share the same driving force, the same competitive instinct, and the same desire for constant innovation that leave their mark on every phase of this country's social and economic life."⁵ In the words of Avery's wife, he was never one to "seize the fad of the instant and work like mad to make the most of it."⁶ Avery may best be characterized as an experimental artist—he once revealingly commented that, "In order to paint one has to go by the way one does not know. Art is like turning corners: one never knows what is around the corner until one has made the turn."⁷ Hilton Kramer commented on the consistency of Avery's artistic vision when he said,

There are no dramatic changes in his work, no sudden shifts or abrupt revelations. Avery's career...was imbued with a classic calm and detachment—a detachment above all, from ideological struggle and critical self-consciousness....

*Yet Avery was a painter deeply attached to things of this world, conscious of where his art stood in relation to the art of others, and possessed of a proud, affectionate regard for his own experience.*⁸

Avery's career shows a process of consistent development and refinement, intimately connected to his creative method and reflective of his personal life. However, Avery's earliest works of the 1920s and early 1930s possess few similarities to his mature work of the 1940s and 1950s. In *Sunday Riders* of 1929 (see fig. 1), the predominantly dark tones create an overall somberness and severity of mood. This early painting also reveals a concern with the details of facial features and garments that is foreign to Avery's later, more mature style. In a review of an exhibition at the Morton Gallery in 1930, Carlyle Burroughs, critic for the *New York Tribune*, describes Avery's color as "generally very drab" and refers to Avery himself as "rather depressing in his outlook upon life."⁹

Malcolm Vaughn of the New York American affirms Burroughs's critical judgments, saying that the paintings' "dark forbidding color indicates that the artist is passing through a melancholy experience from which his art now suffers."¹⁰ However, such early works as *Country Brook* of 1938 (see fig. 3) reveal a freedom of paint application and a jagged, violent brushstroke that will later re-emerge in Avery's paintings of the 1950s. There exists in these early works a simplification of form that separates Avery from nineteenth-century academic concerns with precise illusionism—the elimination of detail that points toward a painting style embracing the modernist credo "less is more." As early as 1928, a reviewer from a local Hartford newspaper, referring to paintings created during two summers on the Cape Anne shore, commented that, "An artist but recently returned from Paris remarked that there, of all places, these pictures would be classed as modern."¹¹

Although Avery was always to maintain a representational element within his work, he increasingly developed a concern for the formal aspects of his compositions. Ashley St. James commented in 1971 that in his later work,

*Avery was not only concerned with references to nature; pictorial interests played an equal or even dominant role in his work. Color, contour edge, and mass establish interlocking planar shapes...and his flat, carefully ordered color patterns are as much the subject as are the representational objects.*¹²

By the fall of 1931, Avery had developed a painting style of simplified flat areas of more brilliant, but more closely valued color. Malcolm Vaughn refers to this change in style as a "transition of spirit—from melancholy to vivacity."¹³ Vaughn further elaborates upon Avery's stylistic developments with the comment that, "Youth is so variable—one moment sad and gloomy, a moment later bright and frolicsome...Who would have dreamed, a year ago, that Milton Avery was to abandon his melancholy landscapes and become today, a painter of subject pieces of sparkling wit."¹⁴ In 1936, Emily Genauer also recognized transformations in Avery's work, saying he,

*...has mellowed since his last exhibition. The truculent, grotesque, violent side of his painting has given way to a rather poetic quality—to a gentle romantic outlook on landscape, expressed in a loose, light technique which is amazingly effective. Color has become less monotonous and infinitely more subtle.*¹⁵

During the late twenties and early thirties, many of Avery's paintings depict scenes of circus performers or vaudeville actors. The use of such patently humorous subjects is largely uncharacteristic of Avery's art after 1940. An overall brightening of Avery's painting—in color, atmosphere, and mood—is evident during this period. More than one critic has claimed that an exposure to the bold and abstract use of color by the French Fauves—whose works could be viewed in several galleries and exhibitions in New York throughout the 1930s—greatly influenced Avery's development. However, the slow, progressive transformation into Avery's mature style was more likely the result of a gradual absorption of modernist aesthetics, the development of a consistent method of artistic production, and an overall coordination of formal expression with personal experience.

A MATURE STYLE

As early as 1933, Avery produced the painting *Sitters by the Sea* (Private Collection), a work that clearly embodies all the elements of a style that he would further refine and experiment with, but never really depart from, for the remainder of his career. The painting depicts people sitting, and one child standing, upon a beach contemplatively surveying the broad expanse of sea and sky which extends before them. Illusionistic detail has been removed from the scene. The landscape setting is reduced to three simple horizontal bands representing sand, sea and sky; while the figures are rendered by a few large color shapes. The deep contrast of light and dark, characteristic of Avery's early work, has been replaced by more closely-valued hues. The palette is considerably lighter and covers a wider range of the spectrum, giving the space represented the sense of being filled with light. There emerges a direct, almost naïve presentation of the commonplace—and a contemplative stillness-of-moment characteristic of Avery's late works. Avery himself expressed the concerns and goals of his mature style:

*I always take something out of my pictures, strip the design to essentials; the facts do not interest me so much as the essence of nature. I never have any rules to follow. I follow myself. I began painting by myself in the Connecticut countryside, always directly from nature...I have long been interested in trying to express on canvas a painting with a few, large, simplified spaces.*¹⁶

The large, flat color areas that Avery renders reveal a modernist concern for asserting the flatness of the painting's canvas support. The reduction of all areas of the canvas to simple color shapes—regardless of whether they refer to figures, objects, or settings—results in the assignment of equal aesthetic value, and similar visual weight to all areas of the painting surface. Throughout his life, Avery was a painter concerned with meticulously refining his palette and carefully balancing his compositions. Sally Michel said that he “was not interested in the superficial aspect of appearance or in literary content. His preoccupation was with the relationship of form and color...”¹⁷ Harvey Shipley Miller discusses this aspect of Avery's art when he writes,

*Cézanne...recast the impressionist world of light and color into a new world of lines, planes and solids locked together, usually in a tight composition that included the sides of the picture's rectangle and the spaces between the figures as active, important parts of the whole. This expressive use of the whole surface area of the painting was certainly employed by Avery.*¹⁸

In *Sitters by the Sea* there are no hard edges or sharp lines dividing one color area from another. There is instead a scumbling of the borders dividing color shapes, causing them to merge and bleed into one another. These muted edges, combined with the studied use of closely valued hues, result in a mingling of objects with the space surrounding them. Thus, Avery's painting comes to express the continuity between material objects and the light and space in which they exist.

Aesthetic concerns for the self-referential quality of a work of art—the flatness of the picture plane, the importance of the entire painted surface, and the relation of objects to the space they inhabit—were apparent in the art of Cézanne, and further developed in Cubist theory and ideology (and later codified in the 1940s by Clement Greenberg in

his seminal articles on modernism). However, it would be difficult to assert that Avery was directly influenced by Cubism. Unlike many American artists active during the 1920s, Avery never adopted the acute angles and fractured planes characteristic of the Cubist style. Writing on Avery's landscapes, Stephanie Terenzio noted,

*The process which Cubism imposed upon subject matter must have been alien to Avery's temperament; it fractured and transformed according to intellectual methods...In his rejection of Cubist solutions (or his lack of interest in them) is affirmation of Avery's particular concern for subject. The physical world could not be manipulated in the manner Cubism demanded.*¹⁹

Avery's emphasis upon flatness, the integrity of the picture plane, and a severe reduction of illusionistic detail has prompted several critics to look to Eastern sources for his work—the spare flatness of Japanese prints, for example, might be seen as a source for many aspects of Avery's painting. However, Avery never studied Asian art and attempts to establish these direct links with his work are difficult to substantiate. "I've never been particularly interested in Oriental art," Avery once observed, "even though some people say I'm the original Zen without knowing it."²⁰ Another time, asked if there was any reason for an apparent Eastern aesthetic in his work, Avery replied with his usual brevity and wit saying, "Yes... I used to paint in East Hartford."²¹ Oriental and Eastern art undoubtedly had a great influence upon many Western artists during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—the flat color of Japanese prints was particularly influential in creating a modern interest in expressing the planarity of the picture surface. In his own work, Avery adopts and addresses many of the modernist concerns originally derived from East Asian aesthetics, but to assert more concrete or direct influence upon Avery's work is unwarranted.

Considering the flatness and elimination of detail characteristic of Avery's style after the early 1930s, his ability to give figures and objects a sense of mass and volume is quite remarkable. By simplifying his figures into flat color shapes in such works as *Sitters by the Sea*, Avery has abandoned the traditional western chiaroscuro technique of modeling volumes and three-dimensional forms in light and shade. When shadow is depicted in Avery's paintings it is never rendered in subtle gradations, but in clearly differentiated areas of a slightly darker color (as in, for example, *March With Green Hat* of 1948, see fig. 25). Despite Avery's rejection of conventional modeling in chiaroscuro, his figures retain an unmistakable sculptural quality—they possess a definite weight, mass, volume, monumentality, and ability to occupy the space in which they are placed. In his book *Art and Culture*, Clement Greenberg recognizes the three-dimensional quality of Avery's figures, yet remarks:

*I quarrel with Avery's figure pieces...for all the inspired distortion and simplification of contour, factual accidents of the silhouette will intrude in a way that disrupts the flat patterning which is all important to this kind of painting.*²²

However, it is Avery's precision of outline and silhouette that defines the volume, proportions, and poses of his figures. Thus, those "factual accidents of the silhouette" are obviously not accidents at all. On the contrary they are precisely what is "all important to this kind of painting."

Avery also frequently gives his figures an exaggerated, almost awkward perspective as is clearly evident in *Three Friends* of 1944 (see fig. 17). This exaggerated perspective—produced through a proficiency in drawing, never through mathematical or theoretical calculations—endows his figures with a sense of solidly occupying a pictorial space that often recedes dramatically into depth. Paintings like *Sitters by the Sea* and *Three Friends* have led many critics to remark on Avery's juxtaposition of volumetric figures and objects against backgrounds of extreme flatness. In 1961, for example, George Morris pointed out that,

*One aspect of Avery's concept of space calls for mention. This is the visual pull-and-tug engendered by his habit of coordinating a form of exaggerated perspective in his figures (a device which creates a feeling of great dignity in his case, rather than the opposite) within enclosing areas of extreme flatness.*²³

Almost a decade later, Charlotte Lichtblau would make a similar observation,

*One of Avery's most impressive accomplishments is his very personal solution to volume in relation to the flat picture-plane. For despite the fact that he simplified nearly all object forms into near silhouettes, they retain their volume and intrinsically individualized characteristics...In relation to these volume-objects which have figurative meaning in every one of his canvases, the ground—be it defined as sand, sea, sky, field, wall and floor spaces (depending on the locale of the painting)—is always subtly related to the flatness of the canvas itself.*²⁴

Although such generalizations about the relationships between figures and settings in Avery's work may be applicable to specific paintings, it would be difficult to decide whether the figures or background are more suggestive of the picture plane in paintings such as *Card Players* of 1945 (Collection of the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art, State University of New York at New Paltz).

Avery's ability to represent depth is never dependent upon his ability to suggest figurative volume. This is evident in such non-figural landscape and seascape paintings as *Gaspé—Pink Sky* of 1940 (Collection of Mr. & Mrs. Samuel H. Lindenbaum, New York) and *White Sea* of 1947 (Collection of Benta Borgenech Kerr). In these paintings, a few color shapes—defined by a minimal use of diagonal, undulating, and zigzagging lines—create an impressive sense of spatial recession. Avery is also able to suggest great depth through a rapid reduction of the size of figures and objects as they recede further into the distance—an effect clearly evident in the treatment of figures in *Clover Leaf Park* of 1942 (see fig. 8). The critic Thomas Albright commented in 1968 that,

*...no one has managed to suggest more sense of depth...with a few limpid, thin color shapes which seem both to hover as flat, weightless screens and to flow languidly into a panoramic space.*²⁵

With the elimination of unnecessary illusionistic detail and simplification of forms into a few flat shapes, color naturally became a dominant element with Avery's art. Avery has always been recognized as a colorist of the highest quality and most inventive means. It has already been mentioned that during the thirties Avery's color gradually began to

lighten in tone and range over the entire spectrum. Significantly, his use of more close-valued hues served to further emphasize the painting's canvas support. All of these characteristics are almost poetically described by Edwin Mullins in what is undoubtedly among the most frequently quoted commentary on Avery's art:

*[with] Avery...the gift of being a great colorist is not a matter of selecting beautiful colours...but rather of selecting a range of colours which cohere and complement each other like notes in a chosen key...if it were possible to weigh against each other the different areas of color with which Avery builds up a single painting, they would be found to be more or less equal... Their uniform lightness of tone...emphasizes the flatness of the paint surface, and emphasizes too that the artist's concern is with the purely surface qualities of a subject, not with its densities and volumes.*²⁶

These are very flattering words and, with the exception of Mullin's final assertion, largely correct. Avery, as previously stated, clearly expresses and is greatly concerned with the density and volume of objects. Furthermore, he is able to utilize color itself as a means of suggesting and emphasizing mass, weight, and three-dimensional form in his paintings. Likely it was this aspect of Avery's art that Hans Hoffman was referring to when he said that Avery, "was one of the first to understand color as a creative means. He knew how to relate color in a plastic way."²⁷ The light, close-valued quality of Avery's color emphasizes the interrelationships between the physical objects represented in the paintings and the light or space which surrounds them. Carter Ratcliff attempts to elaborate upon this elusive quality with the words:

Avery's color...is not intended to be anything like a pure manifestation... no matter how luscious its suggestions of light, Avery's color always makes references to objects—to their volume as well as their surfaces, to the way they affect the space surrounding them.

*His colors are thoroughly materialized...Throughout his career, Avery induces air and light, light and object, object and space to mingle.*²⁸

Avery's color is original, expressive and largely intuitively rendered, that is to say that it was never based on mechanical color theories or dogmatic aesthetic prescriptions. As Stephanie Terenzio suggests, his "color could not be controlled by logic. It was neither an arbitrary nor a compartmentalized device. As a plastic element, integral to the structuring of form, color was evoked from sensations produced by specific properties of the subject."²⁹

A final aspect of Avery's formal style that must not be overlooked is the artist's textural application of paint. Throughout his life, Avery thinned his paints with turpentine and applied them with a fairly dry brush. Such practices guaranteed that Avery's brushwork would be clearly evident in the paintings. The brush strokes forming Avery's flat color shapes are more obvious and exaggerated at different moments throughout his career, but in almost every painting the means of paint application is clearly discernible. In his usual humorous mode, Avery once joked, "I paint so thinly, that a tube of paint lasts a long time. A paint salesman used to come around to me every month, and I was embarrassed because I never needed any paint."³⁰ Frank Getlein has commented extensively and sensitively upon the importance of this textural element saying,

*...one of the great personal virtues of Avery is to be able to use oil paint with much of the economy of watercolor...Avery's strokes may be discerned as those of watercolor are: thin, precise, strictly limited, yet adding up to a mosaic of rhythmic movement. His pictures are often divided into four or five bold simple areas of contrasting colors...But none of these simplicities are ever simply painted...each is composed an endless rhythm of strokes and colors.*³¹

And again, a year later,

*The areas are always thoroughly 'activated'...although the paint is thin and often very dry, the individual brush strokes exist for the eye as individual strokes and in their multiplicity they set up what may be thought of as a field of energy. A serene but pulsing life is felt in every area of the work and it is the strokes themselves that account for it.*³²

The painting *Vermont Hills* of 1936 (Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts), as compared to *Sitters by the Sea* painted only three years earlier (Private Collection), provides some idea of the range of both the freedom and control with which Avery wielded his brush during the 1930s.

A VISUAL HUMOR

Avery's jovial wit and sense of humor, mentioned in almost every description of his personality and apparent in many of his recorded statements, is also clearly evident within his art. Edward Mullins has commented that, "Laughter is as fundamental in an Avery, as angst is in a Kirchner, fear in a Munch, pomposity in a Reynolds, and sex in a Modigliani."³³ Avery's humor is never cynical—it is never used as a means of social criticism or psychological analysis as was common during the 1930s with the rise of American social realism. Avery's humor is the opposite of that developed by an artist such as Reginald Marsh whose prints are a biting parody of degenerating social conditions and reprobate urban behavior. In contrast to Avery, Marsh evolved an analytic humor that emerges from mocking caricatures and a burlesque narrative. But Avery, by the early 1940s, had largely eliminated the situationally comic subjects derived from the vaudeville theater and circus performance found in his early painting.

Throughout the remainder of his career, Avery's art exhibits a whimsical, witty quality, one achieved almost entirely through form rather than content. Avery possessed a wide vocabulary of squiggly lines, calligraphic brush strokes, and scratched or scraped designs evident in such works as *Little Fox River* of 1942-43 (see fig. 12). The rapid staccato brush strokes found in a work on paper such as *Hills and Mountains* of 1944 (see fig. 21) seem to play and frolic across the surface. Canvases like *Rooster's Domain* of 1948 (see fig. 26) inspire a robust sense of rambunctious amusement with eccentric outlines and interlocking forms. James R. Mellow perceptively observed:

Avery's humor was never of the anecdotal kind that once delighted 19th-century audiences—pictures of tipsy monks oversampling their wines, for example. He scarcely used situational comedy at all. The humor...is strictly visual, often structural; it derives from an amazing repertory of formal

devices—semaphores dots and dashes, squiggles, scrawls—that tell the viewer a good deal about both the subjects under consideration and the artist's attitudes toward them. ³⁴

In *Oyster Catcher* of 1944 (see fig. 18), the gawkily portrayed sea bird whimsically racing along the shore masterfully exhibits Avery's ability to create an extremely witty dialogue through minimal design. James Mellow, who often commented upon the humor in Avery's art, remarked,

Humor is an essential element of Avery's painting. It is, in fact, of critical importance to the work. For Avery's humor is almost always a visual humor, hardly anecdotal at all. It concentrates upon the odd quality of a shape, the quiriness and the delightfully awkward surprises of an outline. It deals with the visual material at hand rather than its literary possibilities. ³⁵

Avery's skill in conveying the comic through formal elements is rare in twentieth-century art, and can possibly only be compared to the genius of Paul Klee, whose work Avery greatly admired.

Avery's simplification of composition into a few basic color shapes and his repertory of humorous formal devices often led critics to comment on the innocent childlike nature of his work. As a particularly insightful commentator on Avery's art, James Mellow once wrote that,

In...Avery's drawings...there are several brilliant examples of the artist's use of the shorthand techniques by which children set down their visions of the world: fir trees sketched in with nothing more than continuous, zigzagging lines, hens wobbling on their stick legs, hills that look like rows of turtles rather than elements of topography. ³⁶

Avery himself apparently had a strong admiration for the directness of expression and elimination of detail characteristic of children's art, however, there is no evidence that he ever seriously studied works of art produced by children. Upon seeing an exhibition at The New School of Art done by children of the Greenwich House art class, Avery remarked, "We would all go more often to the galleries if such work was to be seen. These children express a spontaneity and joyousness in their painting, which all works of art should have for us. These paintings are an explosion of color arrangement. It is this color which particularly appeals to me rather than any literary content, which is, and should be, secondary." ³⁷

However, if such works as the sumptuous *Blue Trees* of 1945 (see fig. 22) can be praised as childlike, they could never be derided as childish: Avery's simplification of form, his use of color, his cohesive composition, and his pictorial wit and humor are the result of a concentrated process of creation. This fact was partly recognized by Adelyn D. Breeskin in the catalogue accompanying the 1969 exhibition of Avery's art at the Smithsonian Institution: "He preserved a certain innocence, which was maintained in spite of experience which brought with it a rare kind of sophistication...His understanding of method, of techniques, of color was thoroughly pervasive." ³⁸ However, it must be acknowledged that what Breeskin refers to as Avery's "certain innocence" was developed and maintained as a result of—rather than in spite of—his many years of experience.