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Milton Avery 1893 - 1965

Norman A. Geske

Director at Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska- Lincoln

Frank Getlein

Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery

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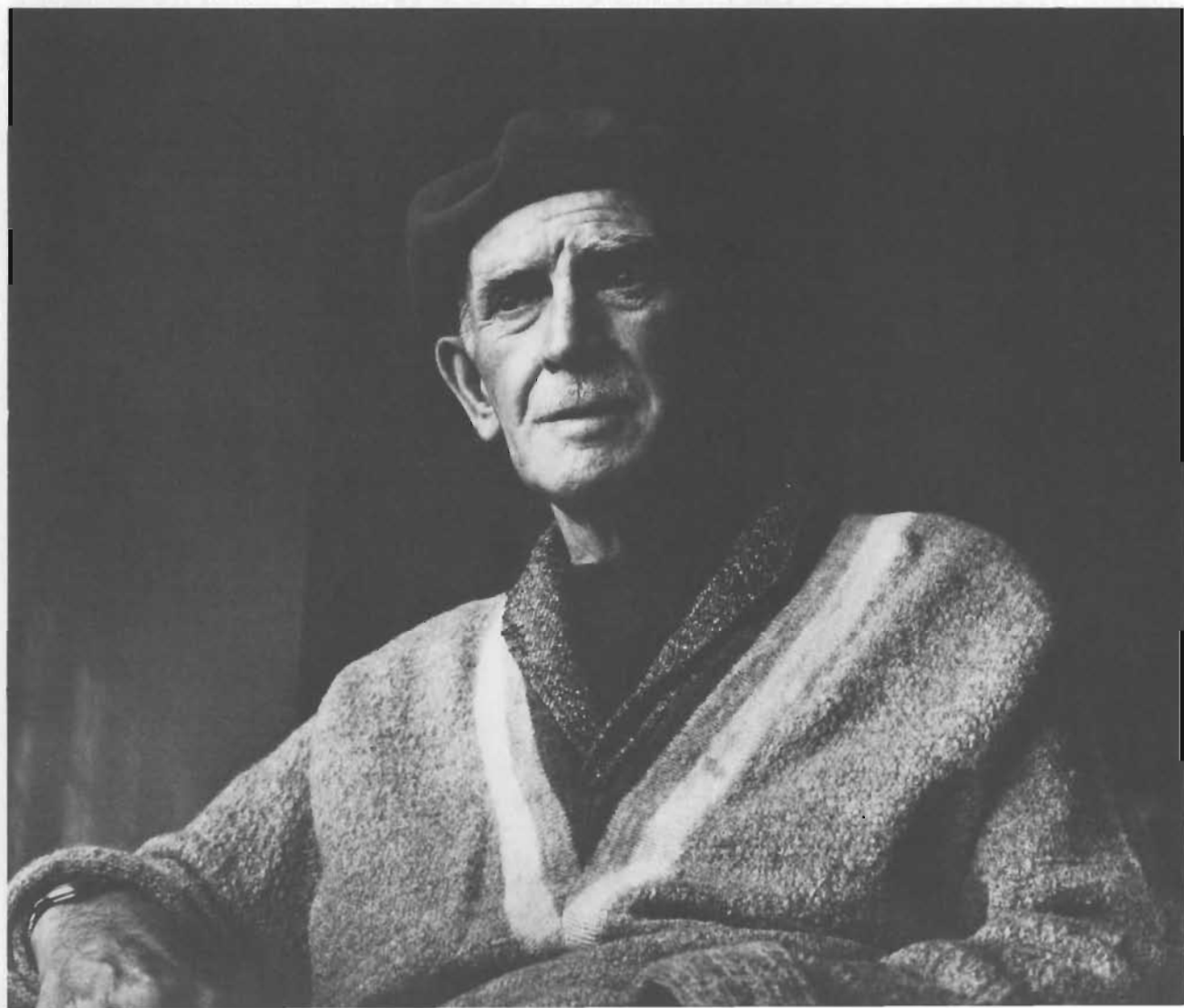
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Milton Avery

Photograph by Dena



Milton Avery

1893 - 1965

The Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery
University of Nebraska, Lincoln
April 3 through May 1, 1966

The Arkansas Arts Center
MacArthur Park, Little Rock
May 6 through June 26, 1966

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There are few painters quite like Milton Avery in the whole history of 20th century American painting. To find his precedent in independence of spirit, purity of vision or completeness of realization one must at least look back to the "loners" of the past century, to Homer, Ryder and Eakins. Of his own generation one can cite Stuart Davis, Edwin Dickinson, Charles Burchfield, or, Arthur Dove, Edward Hopper or Charles Sheeler, and yet, like all these in quality, how different he is at the same time. He does not react in the same way to the influences, foreign and domestic, which have affected so many. From the beginning to the end he is singularly himself and the style which he achieved is intrinsic to the man. It is a temperament, a point of view, a way of life.

In these words the present tense is necessary, for, not only is our separation from the man still a matter of a few months, but more importantly, it is only now that Avery's achievement has suddenly come into focus for a present generation of young Americans.

To bring together the present exhibition has been a pleasure, enhanced by the fact that it was developed as a collaborative project with our friends in Little Rock, also admirers of Avery's art. Nor would it have been possible for us to undertake the project without the help of Sally Avery, whose presence is a part of so many of the pictures. To these circumstances we owe thanks and to the helpful assistance of Grace Brandt and the generosity of the various lenders, public and private. A special gratification lies in the contribution of Frank Getlein which will make this catalogue a significant record of the event. If this exhibition departs from the tradition of The Nebraska Art Association's annual exhibition in presenting the work of a single artist, it does so knowingly and confident that the departure is no real break with tradition but represents instead its maturity.

To an astonishing extent, the art of Milton Avery prophesies, guides and yet transcends several of the major art movements in the American art of his lifetime and beyond. Such prophetic correspondences may be seen to begin even in the American Scene manner so completely dominant in the 1930's. Avery had begun to paint the American scene, without the second capital, in the previous decade. He did so, however, as he did everything throughout his life, with no bombast, no aesthetic jingoism, no presumption of superiority, only the firm conviction that what he did was right for him.

It was well he had that conviction, for Avery's evolving ways with paint received no echo and no support in the American art community of his early years as a painter. Neither the triumph of the American Scene nor the counterpoise of American abstraction seemed to offer him a home. He had neither the sometimes raucous vulgarity of the one nor the austere theories of the other, although there were certain points in common with both. Perhaps more relevant to the liveness of Avery's path is the fact that he was a Connecticut man by adoption and education, long before parts of that state became adjuncts of New York. He grew up, inevitably, within the Connecticut Yankee tradition of quiet self-confidence in the steady pursuit of aims established very early.

The name of Matisse used to be mentioned as the model of Avery's art, but in truth there

are profound differences between the two. The similarities were apparent only in a period when both stood completely apart from the dominant manners of their countries. In fact, Avery never got to France at all until 1952, long after his own distinctive, mature style was fully formed and in the process, which went on until his death, of deepening. The similarities between the two men in their art are easy to see but they are deceptive. Artistic affinities are not, finally, a matter of means and devices. They come from the spirit. Matisse and Avery both simplified enormously the shapes they found in nature. Both were often impelled to reduce the scene before them to just a few colors in just a few large, simple areas. But there is such a thing as mood, as point of view. There is even such a thing as subject, although it is not highly regarded as an artistic consideration. Highly regarded or not, such artists as Matisse and Avery do choose or are attracted to certain classes of subject. We ignore those choices or attractions only at our peril if our aim is to find in an artist everything he has to give us. With few exceptions, an artist practices with a wide range of subjects, yet, usually, it is a range, not the universe. The French member of this often-compared pair painted nudes, still lifes, studio interiors. He was, in fact, a studio painter. We are rarely not conscious of the studio, of the deliberately chosen and constantly celebrated profession

of painter. A corner of a palette is seen; or the odalisque is placed naturally in the position of the undraped, reclining model; or nature, the sunburst of the south of France, the richness of sunlight, sea and foliage bursting like rockets, these are seen through the frame of the studio window.

How different Avery. It is not only that the vast majority of the subjects are out of doors, for many of the most moving are interior moments, quiet communion between the painter's wife and his daughter, for example. But there is never any suggestion of the studio. The profession of painting is taken for granted and unobtrusive. It exists in the paintings only because the paintings themselves exist.

This, indeed, was Milton Avery's style as an artist in the world. In New York he was never loath to stop work and give the time of day to anyone who came to ask it. On Cape Cod he struck many as merely another beach-bound basker in the sun, for he seemed, often, to spend entire days lazing about upon the strand. The fact was that he rose early, worked steadily for four or five hours of the morning and could be on the beach at eleven for the rest of the day. Nor was that rest of the day idle. He sketched, he planned the next day's work. Perhaps more important, he kept in touch with what seemed increasingly through the years his deepest source of inspiration, the sea and its beach, the sky and its lights.

There lies the deepest distinction from Matisse. The light for Matisse was bright, even glaring. In Avery light and color often become rich and glowing, but they never dazzle. Like that austere New England coast that seems so intimately Milton Avery's, his lights compel in their subtlety and complexity, but they do so very quietly. They are willing for you to turn away. But if you give your attention it will be richly rewarded.

The other painter with whom Avery has been stylistically likened in recent years is Mark Rothko and the comparison here is more relevant. Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb both were painting companions of Avery's for years. It is quite easy to see Rothko's mature style as a total abstraction based upon Avery's vision of sea, sand and sky, those great horizontals of color adrift upon other shades of the same color. The connection links Avery to another dominant American painting manner, the abstract expressionism of the 1950's. In his simplification of form and space, in his vibrant use of color as form, Avery contributed much to abstract expressionism without ever associating himself with it as a movement. But Avery's gifts to American painting continue well beyond abstract expressionism's dominance. Just this side of Op art, contemporary "color painters" explore and examine ground Avery made his own decades ago, the juxtaposition of large areas of color. Yet all of these affinities or relationships between Milton Avery and American

developments fail, finally, to get close to the heart of what he saw and created during four decades of achievement. They do serve to place him in the art history of his time and after. They testify that, early appearances to the contrary, he was working very intensely with visual materials and with approaches to those materials that were to be at the center of his country's art in the second half of the twentieth century. But Milton Avery defies classification as a member of any of the movements in art in which his influence or his example may be seen. "There are no movements in art," said Corot, "only personalities." This, to our loss, has not always been true of American art during Avery's lifetime, but it was never truer of any artist than it was of him.

The spare, austere, going-his-own-way quality of the artist in his works is perfectly matched to the subject. The New England coast is different from that of southern France. There is no swelling up of nature or of nature's sun. Half the time the weather is palpable in the form of fog, yet fog is translucent, sometimes transparent. Bird shapes, boat shapes appear through it. The differences of density, mysterious and not very sharply defined, give shapes that are not quite shapes to fog on the New England coast. This gets into Milton Avery's paintings.

Take clouds and wind. Take sea full of tidal motion and stirred by wind. Take beach

as a base. All of these environments have in common the quality of shifting subtly from inch to inch. Any surface of wind-stirred water is in constant motion, constant change. We do not see a broad expanse of blue. We see rather a blue with endless variations, a blue field upon which different blues, or purples, or greens, or even reds, browns, beiges and yellows, extend themselves in smaller, choppy areas created by the heave of the water, the passing of the sun behind a cloud, the turning of the earth toward and away from the great light in the sky.

All of these variations within what seems perfectly simplicity, all these are captured in Milton Avery's paintings of the sea, captured and transmuted into something rare and fine,—“those are pearls that were his eyes,”—transmuted into art, with all its power to enhance our lives by the sudden vision of the everyday, familiar place seen under the aspect of eternity.

The aspect of eternity most readily grasped in the paintings of Milton Avery is the simplicity of the vision. Details, the fussiness of life, are sheered away. Things are reduced to their bone essentials and we contemplate the bones which miraculously yet pulse with life as much as any flesh and blood.

It is the pulse of life that is the heart and the skin of Avery's paintings of the sea and

its shore. It is very simple to describe the process in paint that achieves this effect, yet that process eludes imitation and finally eludes comprehension. The process is to paint very thinly, very dryly in muted tones, then, over that thin skin of paint again swatches and patches of the same color a bit heavier, darker, more substantial. The result is a vision of the field of the life-force vibrant with particles of energy. The contrast between the dim ground and the vivid swatches sets up a pulse in the eye, thence in the mind, thence in the heart, eventually in the bloodstream. Or it corresponds to such a pulse, already present. It is circulatory, it is electrical. It is the rhythm of the universe, the music of the spheres. Avery is capable of enlarging and diminishing the scale of this dynamic pulse without ever losing it, without ever miniaturizing it or overswelling it. There are paintings in which three or four of the paint swatches in darker tones would take up half the total space of earlier paintings. Yet the effect does not disappear in bombast or lose itself in tininess. Science reveals astonishing correspondence between the patterns of the atom and the patterns of the galaxies, both swirling in infinite space, both beating with comparable rhythms, both constructed along similar general lines of centers and satellites. Avery's paintings of large scale and small scale reveal the same kind of correspondence between works on opposite ends of a size range.

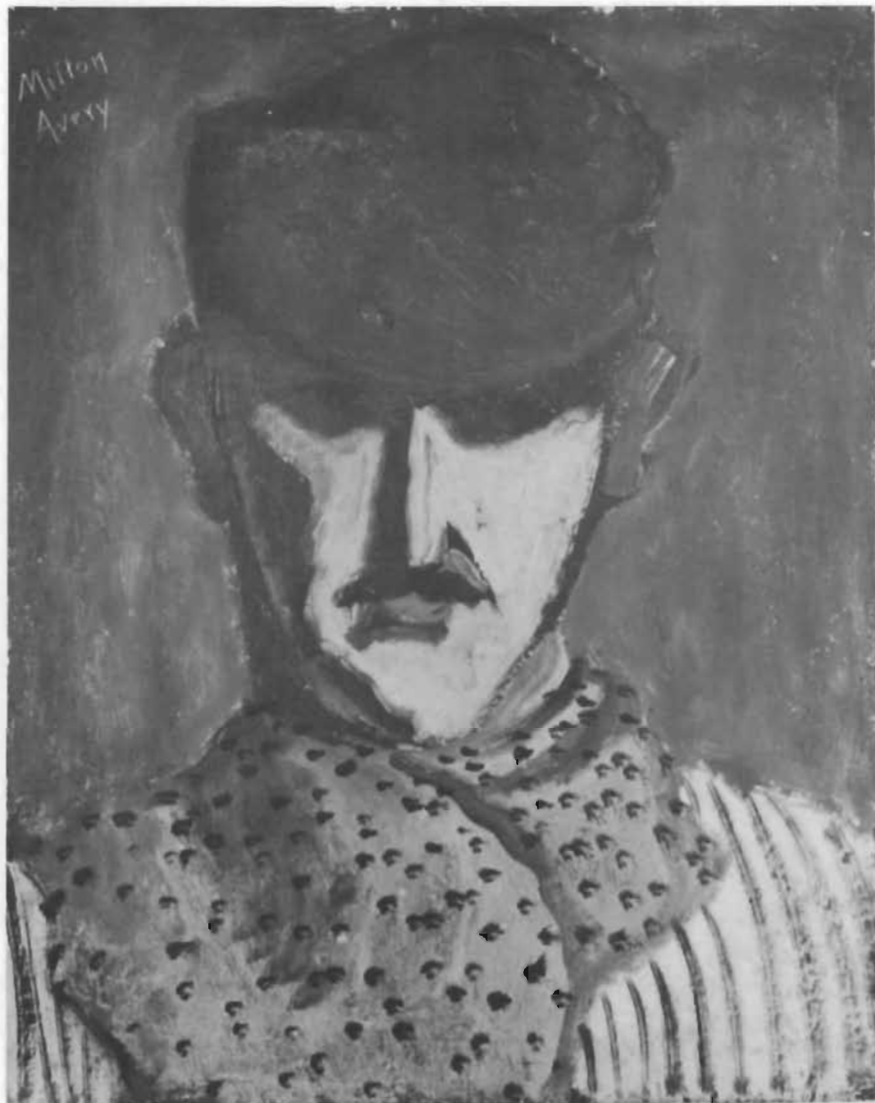
Through Avery's preoccupation with his special locales, we are led back to the very beginnings of the human race, that meeting of water and land where man's ancestors first emerged from the sea, beneath the sun that was to energize and fecundate a new race on earth. Through the manner of his painting, this vision of our beginning's place is also a vision of that primal, solar energy that lifted us from the sea and that sustains us still. The beat we sense in Avery's paintings, the beat it is so easy to see in terms of pure paint, is also the beat of life, of the rays of the sun going forth to give light and power to all.

This cosmic vision of Avery is accompanied at every step of his career by a countertheme; or at least it seems a countertheme. It is that of domesticity, of the quiet conversations and communions of the women in his life: Sally Michel, his wife and a distinguished illustrator who supported his efforts for years by her own professional labors; and his daughter, March.

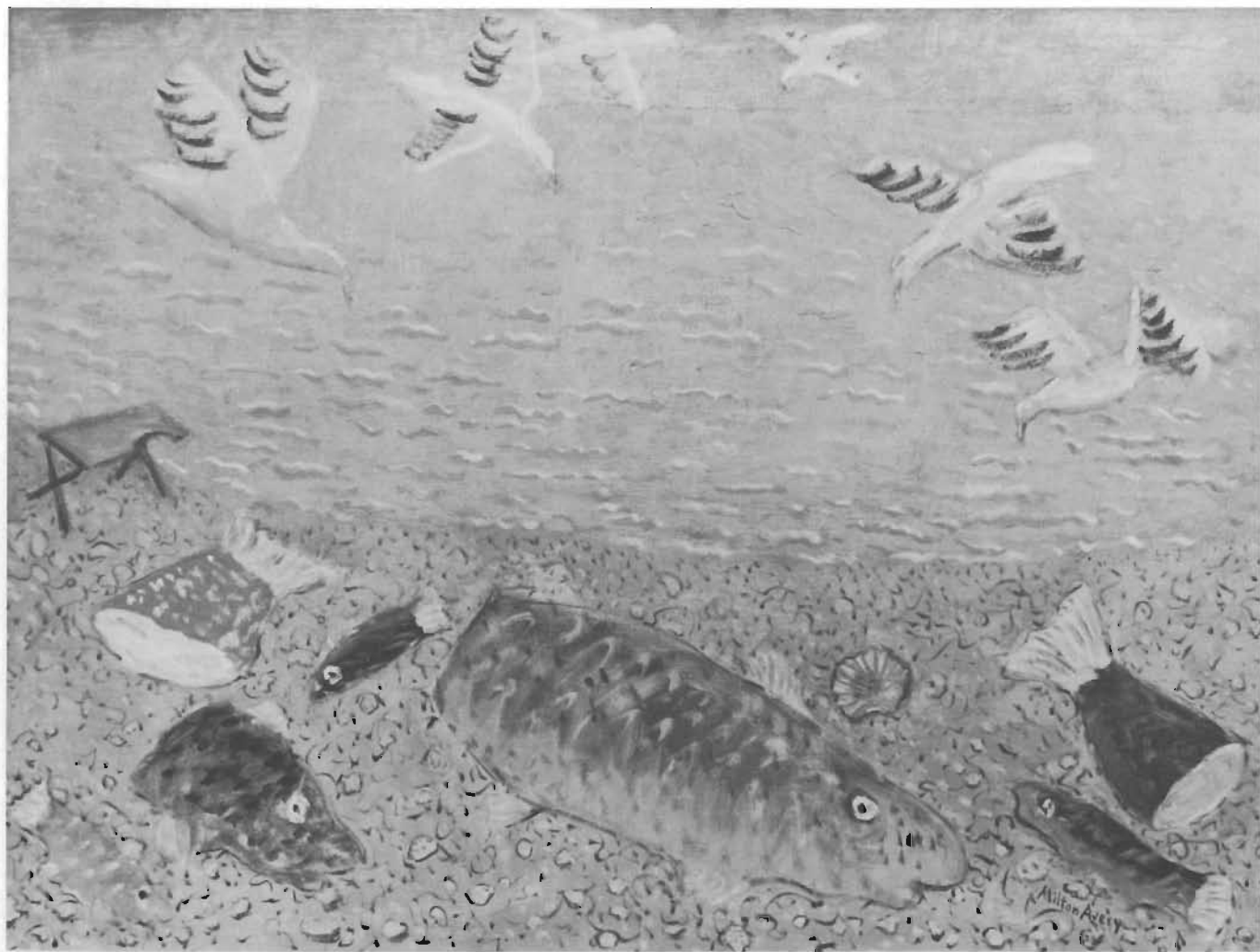
There are other figures, including his own, in Avery's work, but these two women predominate, accurately reflecting the artist's own concern. Again, the energizing beat of the paint strokes activates and enlivens the great simple, pallid surfaces. But there is no contradiction between the cosmos and the fireside, between the eternal spaces of

sea and sky, and the intimate sitting together in a living room, or leaning together over a pier built upon mud flats, of mother and daughter. Here, on human scale, is the point of the cosmic beat. Here, in the persons of a woman and child, is the point of the force of the universe. An artist's vision cuts through the universal field to grasp its nature; anyman's heart-vision cuts through all the world's bombast to the simplicity of love, of the family. In Avery's vision, the two are united.

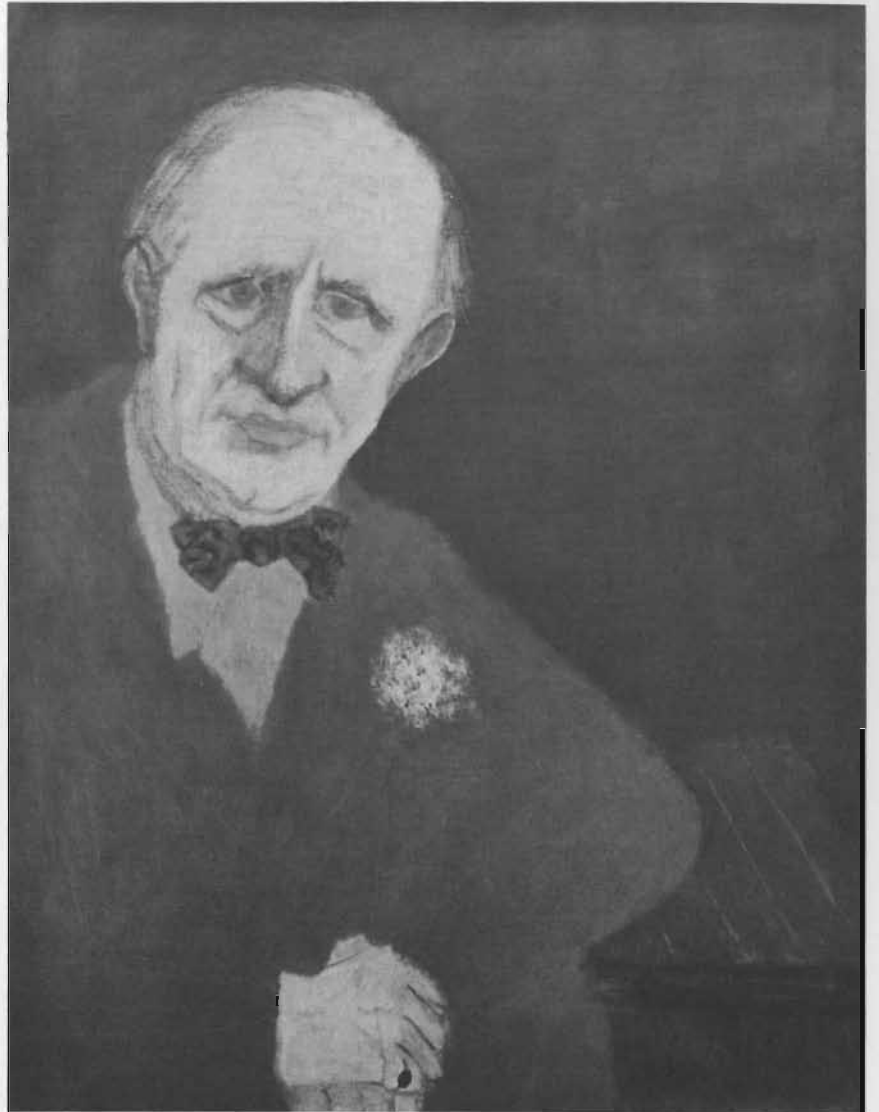
2. Self Portrait, 1930







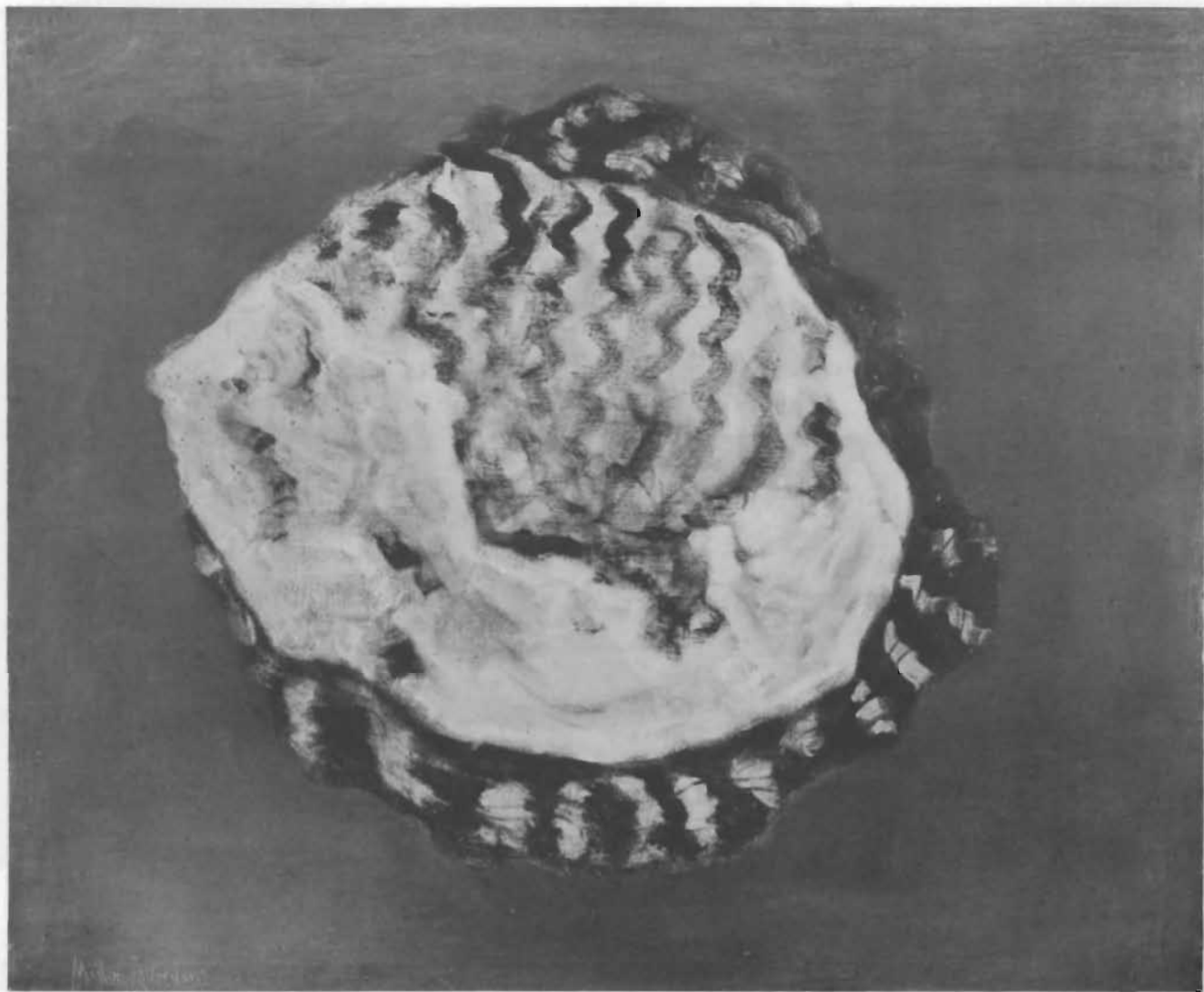
10. Portrait Of Marsden Hartley, 1943



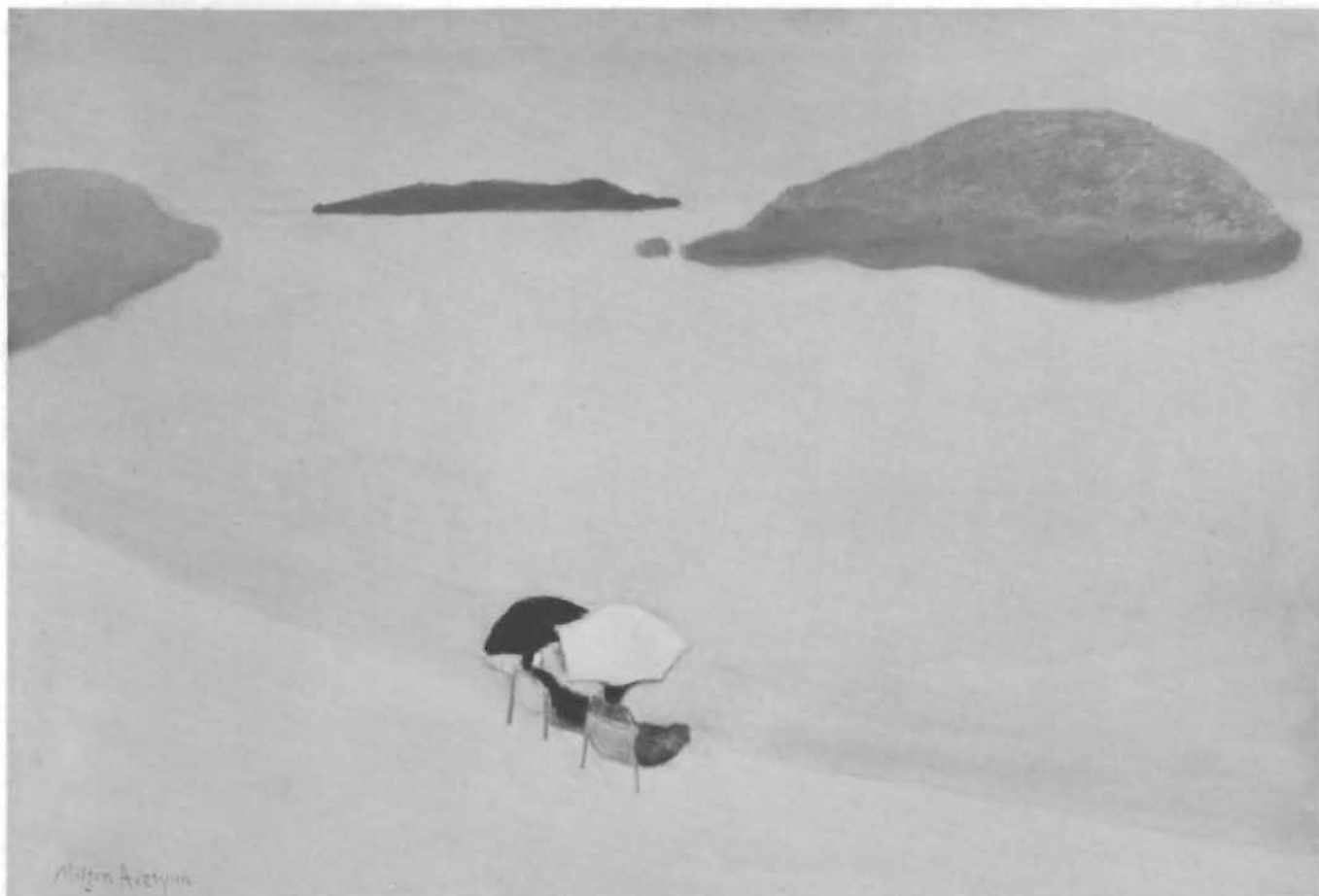


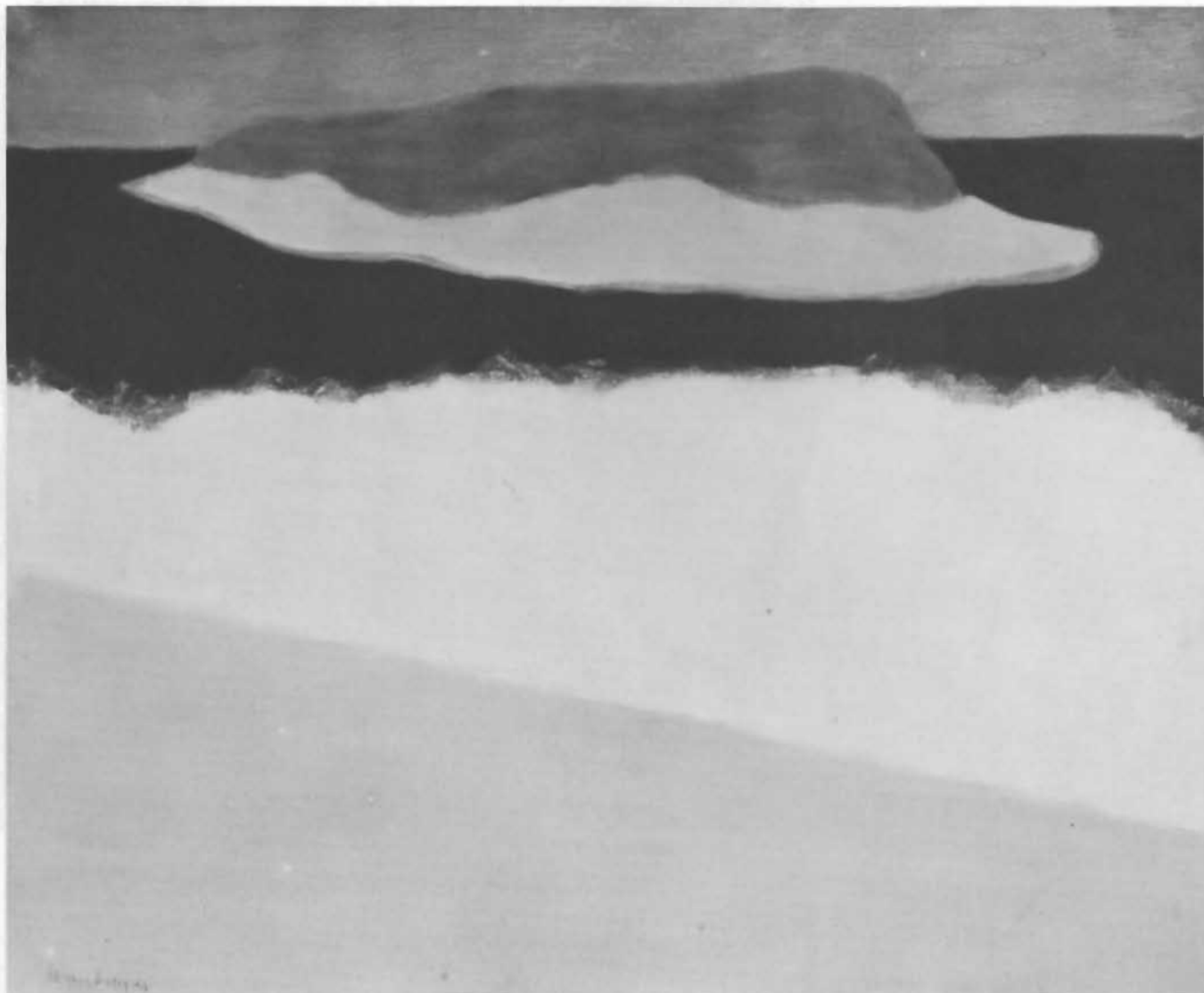


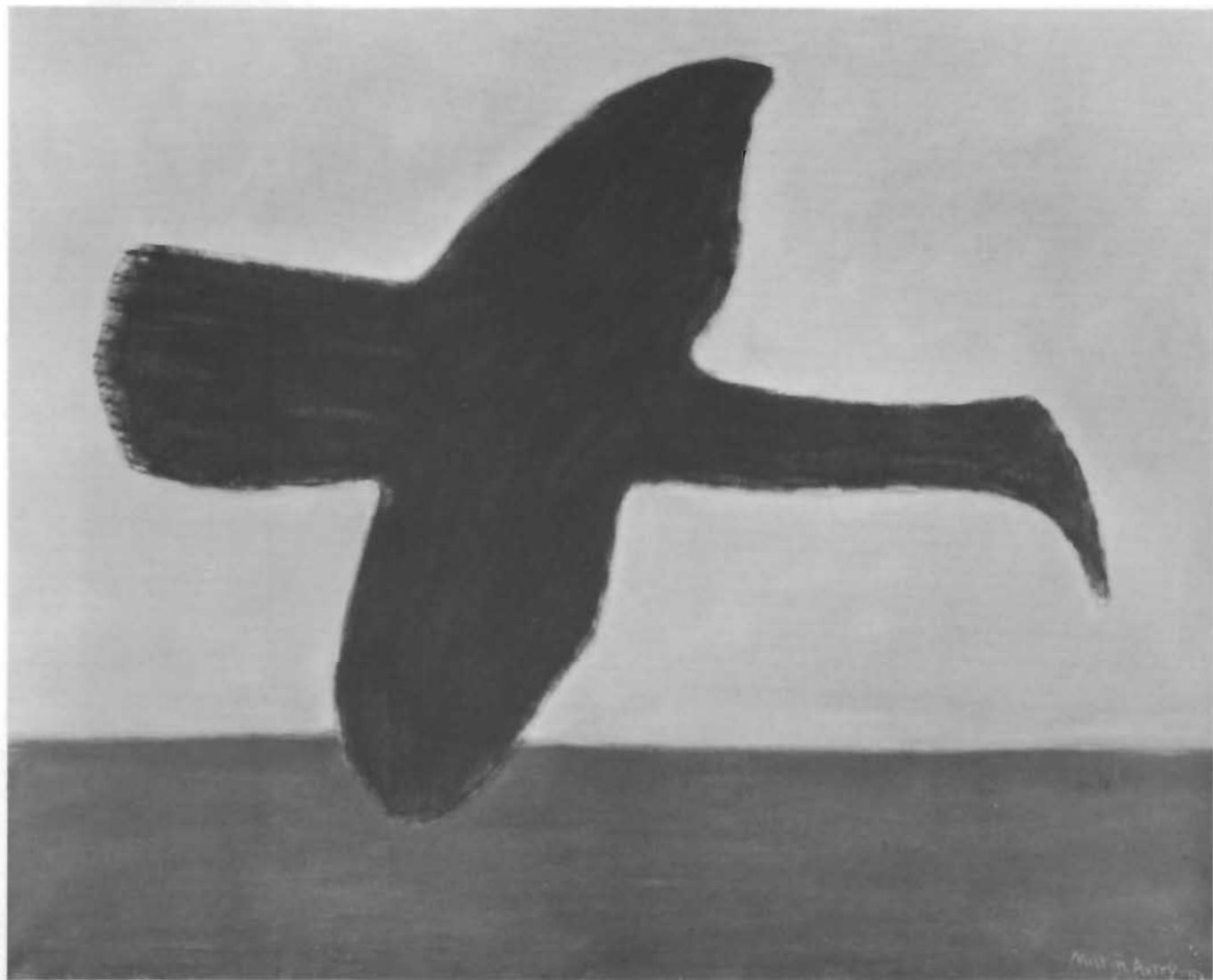






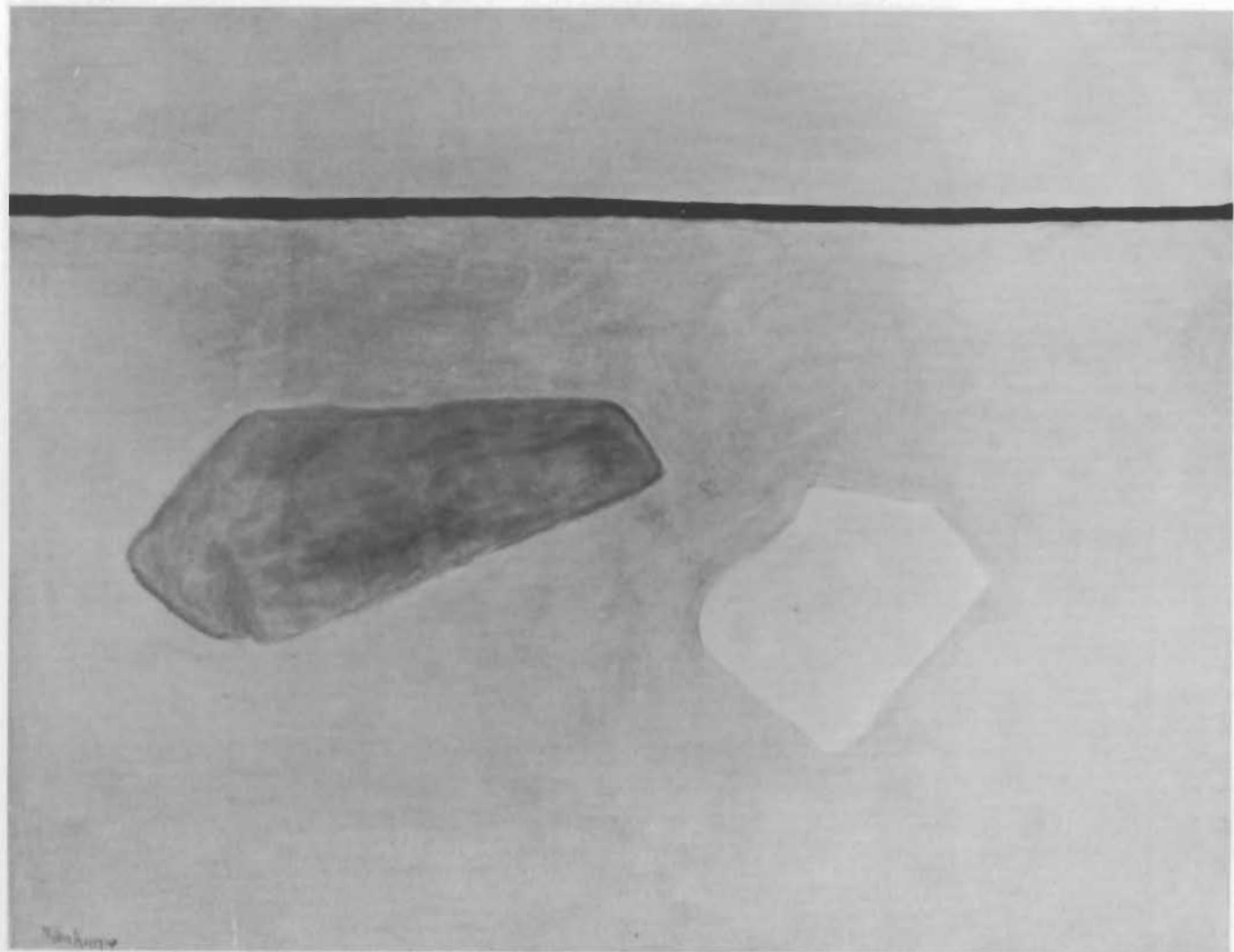






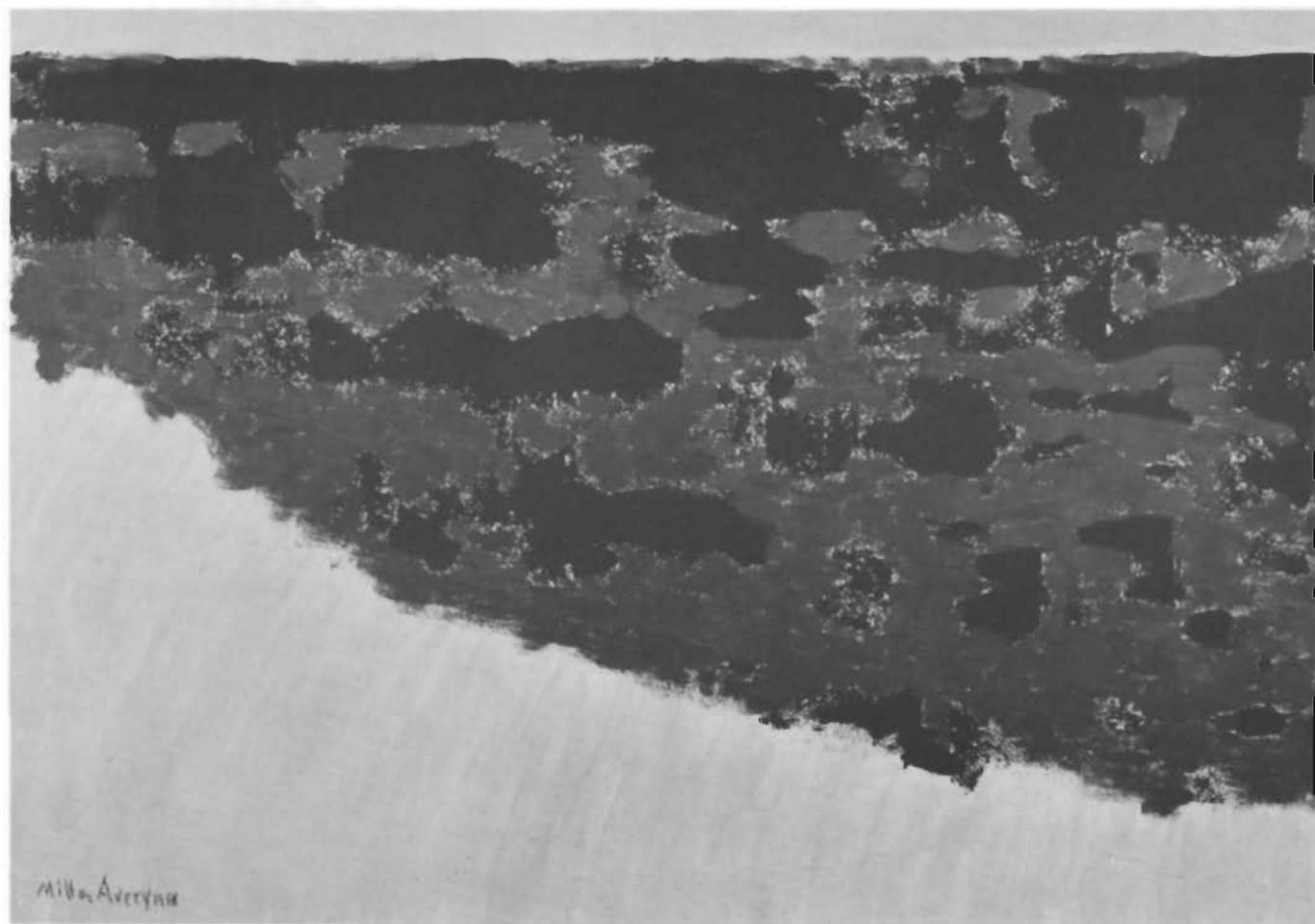














Note: All works listed below are lent by Mrs. Milton Avery, unless otherwise indicated. All woodcuts and etchings are lent by Associated American Artists, New York City.

Paintings, Oil On Canvas

1. **Woman In Wicker Chair, 1929**
40" x 32", signed lower right
2. **Self Portrait, 1930**
19½" x 15", signed upper left
University of Nebraska Collection
3. **Breakfast, 1930**
36" x 36", signed lower left
4. **Sitters By The Sea, 1933**
28" x 36", signed lower left
5. **Children At Sea Side, 1935**
30" x 40", signed lower right
6. **Little Girl, 1936**
36" x 24", signed lower left
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Philip Cavanaugh
7. **Gulls - Gaspé, 1938**
30" x 40", signed lower right
Lent by The Addison Gallery of American Art

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30" x 40", signed lower right
Lent by The Addison Gallery of American Art

18. **The Seine, 1953**
41" x 50", signed lower left
Lent by The Whitney Museum of American Art
19. **Landscape With Trees, 1953**
28" x 36", signed and dated lower right
20. **Abalone Shell, 1953**
34" x 39", signed and dated lower left
21. **French Landscape, 1953**
36" x 46", signed lower right
Lent by the Grace Borgenicht Gallery
22. **Mountain And Trees, 1955**
40" x 50", signed and dated lower left
23. **Yellow Nude, 1955**
54" x 42", signed and dated lower right
24. **Yellow Meadow, 1955**
42" x 60", signed and dated lower left
Lent by the Grace Borgenicht Gallery
25. **Sea Gazers, 1956**
30" x 44", signed and dated lower left
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence Bloedel
26. **Dune Bushes, 1958**
54" x 72", signed and dated lower left
27. **The Letter, 1958**
50" x 40", signed and dated lower right

28. **Offshore Island, 1958**
46" x 56", signed and dated lower left
Lent by The Nebraska Art Association
29. **Yacht Race In Fog, 1959**
50" x 72", signed and dated lower left
30. **Flight, 1959**
40" x 50", signed and dated lower right
31. **Two Women, 1959**
50" x 66", signed and dated lower left
Lent by the Grace Borgenicht Gallery
32. **Stars And Sea, 1960**
50" x 60", signed and dated lower left
33. **Autumn, 1960**
52" x 68", signed and dated lower left
34. **Lone Bather, 1960**
50" x 72", signed and dated lower right
35. **Two Figures I, 1960**
72" x 52", signed and dated lower right
Lent by the Grace Borgenicht Gallery
36. **Dancing Trees, 1960**
52" x 66", signed and dated lower left
Lent by the Grace Borgenicht Gallery
37. **Mountain Lake, 1960**
60" x 68", signed and dated lower left
Lent by the Grace Borgenicht Gallery

38. **Beach Blankets, 1960**
54" x 72", signed and dated lower left
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. S. O. Beren
39. **Self Portrait, 1961**
42" x 30", signed and dated lower left
40. **Cows On Hillside, 1962**
24" x 30", signed and dated lower left
41. **Morning Talk, 1963**
50" x 60", signed and dated bottom center
42. **Reclining Female, 1963**
30" x 50", signed and dated lower right
43. **Two Figures, No. 2, 1963**
42" x 50", signed and dated lower left
Lent by the Grace Borgenicht Gallery
44. **White Nude, No. 2, 1963**
50" x 40", signed and dated lower left
Lent by the Grace Borgenicht Gallery

Paintings, Oil On Paper

45. **Sea Grasses And Blue Sea, 1958**
22" x 30", signed and dated lower left
Lent by the Grace Borgenicht Gallery
46. **Dark Mountain, Light Mountain, 1962**
23" x 35", signed and dated left center

47. **Lakeside Firs, 1962**
23" x 35", signed and dated lower left
48. **Pasture And Mountain, 1962**
23" x 35", signed and dated lower left

Paintings: Water Color

49. **Trees And Rocks, 1943**
22 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 31", signed and dated lower left
The F. M. Hall Collection, University of Nebraska
50. **Bubbly Sea, 1945**
22" x 30"
Lent by the Grace Borgenicht Gallery
51. **Calm Bay, 1945**
22" x 30"
Lent by the Grace Borgenicht Gallery
52. **Women On Rocks, 1945**
22" x 35", signed and dated lower right
53. **Stella In Red, 1945**
22" x 35", signed and dated lower right
54. **Lone Rock And Surf, 1945**
22" x 30", signed and dated lower right
55. **Bursting Wave, 1948**
22" x 30", signed and dated lower right

- 56. **Sea And Rocky Shore, 1948**
22" x 30", signed and dated lower right
- 57. **Nude Sunbather, 1948**
22" x 35", signed and dated lower right
- 58. **Pool in The Rocks, 1948**
22" x 30"
Lent by the Grace Borgenicht Gallery
- 59. **Towering Tree, 1953**
22" x 30", signed and dated lower right
- 60. **Waning Moon, 1959**
22" x 30", signed and dated lower left
- 61. **Sandspit And Jetty, 1960**
23" x 35", signed and dated lower left
- 62. **Speedboat In Choppy Sea, 1960**
23" x 35", signed and dated lower left

Drawings

- 63. **Sleeping Girl, 1930**
11" x 14", ink, signed lower right
- 64. **Pool In Rocks, 1945**
14" x 17", ink, signed lower right
- 65. **Rocky Mountain Landscape, 1947**
17" x 14", ink (two drawings), signed and dated lower left

66. **Seated Nude, 1947**
17" x 14", ink, signed and dated lower right
67. **Surf And Rocks, 1948**
14" x 17", ink, signed lower left
68. **Pale Rocks, 1949**
17" x 14", ink (two drawings), signed and dated lower right
69. **March Seated, 1949**
11" x 8½", ink, signed and dated lower right
70. **Self Portrait, 1950**
11" x 8½", ink, signed and dated lower right
71. **Two Nudes, 1953**
14" x 17", ink, signed and dated lower right
72. **Tree, 1954**
11" x 8½", ink, signed and dated lower left
73. **Trees And Stream, 1955**
8½" x 11", ink, signed and dated lower right
74. **Nude With Drape, 1955**
17" x 14", ink, signed lower left
75. **Walking Girl, 1956**
17" x 14", oil crayon and pencil, signed lower right
76. **Bucolic Notes, 1956**
11" x 8½", ink, signed and dated lower left

77. **White Goats, 1957**
5" x 7", ink
78. **Fantail Pigeon, 1957**
11" x 8½", ink and crayon, signed and dated lower left
79. **Birds And Birds, 1957**
11" x 8½", ink, signed lower right
80. **Seated Nude, 1960**
11" x 8½", ink, signed and dated lower left
81. **Nude, 1960**
11" x 8½", ink, signed lower right
82. **Sleeping Nude, 1960**
11" x 8½", ink, signed and dated lower left

Sketch Books

83. 1943—74 pages
84. 1945—62 pages
85. 1950—30 pages
86. 1963—115 pages

Woodcuts

87. Three Birds, 1952

9 $\frac{5}{8}$ " x 25"

Black and white, edition: 15

88. Pilot Fish, 1952

11 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 30"

Black and white, edition: 25

89. Fantail Pigeon, 1953

10" x 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ "

Black and white, edition: 20

Black and brown, edition: 25

Black and blue, edition: 30

90. Night Nude, 1953

9 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 24"

Black and white, edition: 25

91. Strange Bird, 1953

7 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 12 $\frac{3}{4}$ "

Black and white, edition: 20

92. Flight, 1953

7 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 9"

Black and blue, edition: 25

93. Dawn, 1953

7 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 9"

Black and white, edition: 15

94. Nude, 1953

3⁵/₈" x 10¹/₂"

Green, edition: 20

95. Beach Birds, '1954

5¹/₂" x 12"

Blue and white, edition: 25

Black and white, edition: 25

96. Lamb, 1954

10" x 14¹/₄"

Black and white, edition: 20

97. Dancer, 1954

12" x 9⁵/₈"

Black and white, edition: 25

98. Sail Boat, 1954

7¹/₂" x 12¹/₄"

Black and white, edition: 25

99. Birds And Sea, 1955

9¹/₂" x 24"

Blue and white, edition: 20

Etchings

100. Sleeping Baby, 1933

5³/₈" x 7⁵/₈", edition: 100

101. My Wife Sally, 1934

5¹/₂" x 8¹/₄", edition: 100

102. **Young Girl Nude, 1935**
9⁷/₈" x 4¹/₄", edition: 100
103. **Child Cutting, 1936**
5¹/₈" x 6³/₄", edition: 100
104. **Rothko With Pipe, 1936**
7¹/₄" x 6³/₄", edition: 60
105. **Self Portrait, 1937**
7⁷/₈" x 6¹/₂", edition: 60
106. **Sally With Beret, 1939**
7⁷/₈" x 6³/₈", edition: 100
107. **Japanese Landscape, 1939**
3¹/₄" x 7³/₄", edition: 100
108. **Reclining Nude, 1941**
3¹/₂" x 5⁵/₈", edition: 100
109. **Standing Nude, 1941**
14¹/₄" x 7⁵/₈", edition: 60
110. **March With Babushka, 1948**
9³/₄" x 9³/₄", edition: 100
111. **Riders In The Park, 1948**
3⁷/₈" x 5", edition: 100
112. **Man, 1948**
9¹/₈" x 4³/₄", edition: 100
113. **Nude Combing Hair, 1951**
8¹/₂" x 6¹/₈", edition: 90

Lenders to the Exhibition

Mrs. Milton Avery, New York
The Grace Borgenicht Gallery, New York
Associated American Artists, New York
The Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, Massachusetts
The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts
Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Utica, New York
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