
Erin Corley

Funding for the processing and digitization of this collection was provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art

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Collection Overview

Repository: Archives of American Art
Title: Milton Avery papers
Identifier: AAA.avermit
Date: 1926-1982 (bulk 1950-1982)
Extent: 2.8 Linear feet
Creator: Avery, Milton, 1885-1965
Language: English
Summary: The papers of abstract painter Milton Avery measure 2.8 linear feet and date from 1926 to 1982, with the bulk of the collection dating from 1950 to 1982. Almost the entire collection consists of records of the Milton Avery Trust (2.4 linear feet) maintained by Avery's wife Sally, who served as a trustee. Milton Avery's business and personal correspondence (five folders) contains letters from friends and fellow artists, including a few from George Duthuit, Louis Eilshemius, Marsden Hartley, Wallace Putnam, and Mark Rothko. Also found are scattered writings about Avery, price lists, estate records, exhibition announcements and catalogs, and news clippings.

Administrative Information

Provenance
The Milton Avery papers were donated in 1968, 1969, and 1982 by his widow Sally Avery, including a few letters previously loaned for microfilming.

Separated Materials
The Archives of American Art also holds microfilm of material lent for microfilming on reels N68-95, N68-115, N69-63, and 2535 including six scrapbooks, a sketchbook, Christmas cards, exhibition catalogs, and photographs. Loaned materials were returned to the lender and are not described in the collection container inventory.

Alternative Forms Available
The papers of Milton Avery in the Archives of American Art were digitized in 2007, and total 6,149 images.

Materials lent for microfilming are available on 35mm microfilm reels N68-95, N68-115, N69-63, and 2535 at the Archives of American Art offices and through interlibrary loan.
Processing Information

Many of the letters loaned by Sally Avery and microfilmed on reel N69-63 were later donated. These were merged with additional accessions and fully processed, arranged, and described in 2007 by Erin Corley, and digitized in 2007 with funding provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art.

Preferred Citation


Restrictions on Access

The collection has been digitized and is available online via the Archives of American Art's website.

Ownership and Literary Rights

The Milton Avery papers are owned by the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Literary rights as possessed by the donor have been dedicated to public use for research, study, and scholarship. The collection is subject to all copyright laws.

Biographical Note

Milton Avery (1885-1965) was born in Altmar, New York and grew up in Hartford, Connecticut. Around 1905 he began attending the Connecticut League of Art Students in Hartford where he studied life drawing while also working full-time as a factory worker and file clerk. In 1915 he had his first public exhibition and, in 1918, transferred to the School of Art Society in Hartford. In 1924 he met Sally Michel (1905-2003), a student at the Art Students League in New York, and moved to New York City to be closer to her. They married one year later. Around this time Avery also altered his year of birth to 1893, perhaps due to the age difference between him and Sally. After their marriage Sally worked as an illustrator so that Avery could paint full time.

During the early 1920s, Avery’s works were traditional figurative and genre subjects, influenced by American Impressionism. By the mid 1920s, with his move to New York, Avery began to simplify his forms and use broader expanses of flat color. Although his paintings became increasingly abstract, he never fully abandoned representational subject matter, painting figure groups, still lifes, landscapes, and seascapes. By the mid-1940s, Avery’s work was characterized by a reduction of elements and elimination of detail, filled with an emphasis on arbitrary color.

Avery exhibited in a group show at The Opportunity Gallery in 1928 which also featured Mark Rothko and the two became close friends. He became friends with many other artists including Adolph Gottlieb, Barnett Newman, and Marsden Hartley. Avery’s color work was an important influence on many younger artists, particularly Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb, Barnett Newman, Helen Frankenthaler, and other Color Field painters. The Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. was the first museum to purchase one of his paintings in 1929 and to give him his first solo museum exhibition in 1944.

In 1949 Milton Avery suffered a major heart attack and began making monotypes during his recovery. He returned to painting despite periods of ill-health, and his reputation grew rapidly over the next ten years, culminating in a retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York in 1960. He also exhibited along with his wife Sally Avery and their daughter, March Avery Cavanaugh (born in 1932), both of whom were also painters. Avery died in 1965 and left behind an oeuvre of paintings that numbers in
the thousands. His wife Sally managed his estate and the sale of his works to many major museums, and served as a trustee for the Milton Avery Trust until her death in 2003.

Scope and Content Note

The papers of abstract painter Milton Avery measure 2.8 linear feet and date from 1926 to 1982, with the bulk of the collection dating from 1950 to 1982. Almost the entire collection consists of business files maintained by Milton Avery's wife Sally as a trustee for the Milton Avery Trust (2.4 linear feet). Milton Avery's business and personal correspondence (five folders) contains letters from friends and fellow artists, including a few from George Duthuit, Louis Eilshemius, Marsden Hartley, Wallace Putnam, and Mark Rothko. Also found are scattered writings about Avery, price lists, estate records, exhibition announcements and catalogs, and news clippings.

Arrangement

The collection is arranged into 7 series:

- Series 1: Biographical Material, 1964, 1975 (Box 1; 1 folder)
- Series 2: Correspondence, 1935-1981 (Box 1; 10 folders)
- Series 3: Subject Files, 1950-1981 (Box 1-4; 2.4 linear feet)
- Series 4: Writings, circa 1951-1979 (Box 4; 5 folders)
- Series 5: Financial & Legal Records, 1943-1982 (Box 4; 6 folders)
- Series 6: Printed Material, 1926, 1962-1977 (Box 4; 4 folders)
- Series 7: Photographs, circa 1970 (Box 4; 1 folder)

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:
Painters -- New York (State) -- New York
Painting, Abstract

Names:
Avery, Sally
Duthuit, Georges, 1891-
Eilshemius, Louis M. (Louis Michel), 1864-1941
Hartley, Marsden, 1877-1943
Putnam, Wallace, 1899-1989
Rothko, Mark, 1903-1970
Series 1: Biographical Material, 1964, 1975

1 Folder (Box 1)

One folder containing a list of Milton Avery anecdotes, excerpts from reviews, a brief biographical note, a certificate from the National Council of Jewish Women, and a brief list of biographical sources.

Box 1, Folder 1 Biographical Material, 1964, 1975

Image(s)
Series 2: Correspondence, 1935-1981

10 Folders (Box 1)

Correspondence consists of five folders of letters to Milton Avery and correspondence with Sally Avery and the Milton Avery Trust. Letters to Milton Avery consist of letters from people purchasing works of art, including Joseph Hirshhorn, letters from art galleries concerning the exhibition or purchase of artwork, requests for information from researchers or journalists, and several letters of congratulations for the 1960 Whitney Museum of American Art retrospective. Also found are a few letters from friends and fellow artists, including Mark Rothko, Louis Eilshemius, Marsden Hartley, Wallace Putnam, and George Duthuit.

Sally Avery's correspondence, often addressed to the Milton Avery Trust, is primarily business correspondence regarding the handling of her husband's legacy of artwork. Included are letters with individuals, galleries, and museums regarding sales and loans. Other topics include research questions, thanking her for visits, and congratulations for exhibitions. Although most of the correspondence is incoming, there are also scattered copies of outgoing correspondence. A large amount of similar business correspondence is also filed in Series 2: Subject Files.

Box 1, Folder 2  Letters to Milton Avery, 19--, 1935-1947  
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 3  Letters to Milton Avery, 1950-1959  
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 4  Letters to Milton Avery, 1960  
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 5  Letters to Milton Avery, 1962-1964  
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 6  Sally Avery (Milton Avery Trust) correspondence, 1946-1969  
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 7  Sally Avery (Milton Avery Trust) correspondence, 1970-1973  
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 8  Sally Avery (Milton Avery Trust) correspondence, 1974-1977  
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 9  Sally Avery (Milton Avery Trust) correspondence, 1978  
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 10  Sally Avery (Milton Avery Trust) correspondence, 1979  
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 11  Sally Avery (Milton Avery Trust) correspondence, 1980-1981  
Image(s)
Series 3: Subject Files, 1950-1981

2.4 Linear feet (Box 1-4)

Subject files consist of alphabetical business files maintained by Sally Avery for art galleries, museums, collectors, colleges and universities, and other art organizations which exhibited or purchased works by Milton Avery. Files contain a wide variety of documentation, including correspondence between the organization and Sally Avery, loan agreements, exhibition or sales receipts, lists of artworks, price lists, legal documents, and printed material such as news clippings and exhibition announcements. Although most of the files are for sales and loans, some of the files are for art galleries which represented and sold Avery's work, such as the Grace Borgenicht Gallery and Gallery Reese Palley. Also found in this series is a file Sally Avery kept regarding published biographies of Milton Avery. Files are arranged alphabetically by either name or topic and documents are arranged chronologically within each folder.

Box 1, Folder 12  Achim Moeller Ltd., 1973
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 13  Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1968-1969
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 14  Akron Art Institute, 1980
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 15  Aldis Browne Fine Arts, 1978-1980
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 16  Allentown Art Museum, 1971
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 17  Alpha Gallery, 1969-1970
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 18  Alpha Gallery, 1971-1972
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 19  Alpha Gallery, 1973-1974
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 20  Alpha Gallery, 1975-1979
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 21  American Federation of Arts (Milton Avery Retrospective), 1959-1961
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Box 1, Folder 22  American Federation of Arts, 1962-1965
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 23  American Embassy, Prague, 1966-1970
Box 1, Folder 24  Andre Emmerich Gallery, 1973-1974
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Box 1, Folder 25  Arkansas Art Center, 1966
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Box 1, Folder 26  Associated American Artists, 1963-1965
   Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 27  Associated American Artists, 1966-1968
   Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 28  Associated American Artists, 1969-1970
   Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 29  Associated American Artists, 1971-1972
   Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 30  Associated American Artists, 1973-1974
   Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 31  Associated American Artists, 1975-1977
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Box 1, Folder 32  Associated American Artists, 1978-1980
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Box 1, Folder 33  Association of Contemporary Artists Galleries, 1968-1981
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Box 1, Folder 34  Barbara Mathes Gallery, 1978-1981
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Box 1, Folder 35  Bard College, 1970-1971
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Box 1, Folder 36  Biographies of Milton Avery, 1969-1979
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Box 1, Folder 37  Bonfoey Company, 1976
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Box 1, Folder 39  Carl Solway Gallery (Flair Gallery), 1968-1971
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Box 1, Folder 41  Charles E. Slatkin, Inc. Galleries, 1968-1980
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Box 1, Folder 51  Dayton Art Institute, 1969-1971
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Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 57  Donald Morris Gallery, 1972-1973
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Box 1, Folder 58  Donald Morris Gallery, 1974-1977
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Box 1, Folder 59  Donald Morris Gallery, 1978-1980
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Box 1, Folder 62  Everson Museum of Art, 1975-1977
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Box 2, Folder 1  Felix Landau Gallery, 1956-1965
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Box 2, Folder 3  Fontana Gallery, 1969-1980
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Box 2, Folder 4  Forum Gallery, 1980-1981
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Box 2, Folder 5  Galerie Beyeler, 1971-1976
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Box 2, Folder 15  Gimpel Fils, Ltd., 1973-1976
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Image(s)

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Box 3, Folder 18  University of California, Irvine, 1970-1971  
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Box 3, Folder 19  University of California, Santa Barbara, 1979-1980  
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Box 3, Folder 21  University of Texas at Austin, 1975-1977  
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Box 3, Folder 22  Vassar College Art Gallery, 1970-1977  
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<td>Box 4, Folder 1</td>
<td>Waddington Galleries, 1973</td>
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<td>Image(s)</td>
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<td>Box 4, Folder 2</td>
<td>Waddington Galleries, 1974</td>
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<td>Box 4, Folder 3</td>
<td>Wadsworth Atheneum, 1962-1964</td>
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<td>Webb &amp; Parsons Gallery, 1974-1979</td>
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<td>Box 4, Folder 7</td>
<td>Wichita State University, 1974-1977</td>
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<td>Box 4, Folder 8</td>
<td>William Benton Museum of Art, 1975-1976</td>
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<td>Image(s)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Box 4, Folder 10</td>
<td>Woodstock Artists Association, 1977</td>
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<td>Woodward Foundation, 1963-1972</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Box 4, Folder 12  Yares Gallery, 1976-1978
Image(s)
Series 4: Writings about Avery, circa 1951-1979

5 Folders (Box 4)

Writings consist of essays about Milton Avery, including a draft essay by Wolf Kahn for the *Art Journal*, a few poems written by Aaron Cohen describing certain paintings by Avery, and a few notes written by Sally Avery. Also found are a typescript and handwritten draft of a tribute to Avery written by Mark Rothko shortly after Avery's death.

- **Box 4, Folder 13**  
  Aaron E. Cohen, Poetry, circa 1951  
  Image(s)

- **Box 4, Folder 14**  
  Wolf Kahn, "Milton Avery's Good Example," circa 1979  
  Image(s)

- **Box 4, Folder 15**  
  Image(s)

- **Box 4, Folder 16**  
  Mark Rothko, Written Tribute to Avery, circa 1965  
  Image(s)

- **Box 4, Folder 17**  
  Notes by Sally Avery, circa 1970  
  Image(s)
Series 5: Financial & Legal Records, 1943-1982

6 Folders (Box 4)

Found here is a photocopy of Milton Avery's Last Will and Testament, a detailed appraisal of nearly 1000 works of art in the Milton Avery estate, price lists, and a small number of loan forms and sales receipts. Also found is one folder of the legal and financial records of the Milton Avery Estate.

Box 4, Folder 18 Last Will and Testament, 1962
Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 19 Estate Appraisal of Artwork, 1965
Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 20 Price Lists, 1960-1974
Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 21 Price Lists, 1960-1974
Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 22 Milton Avery Estate Legal and Financial Records, 1962-1972
Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 23 Artwork Loans and Sales Receipts, 1943-1982
Image(s)

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4 Folders (Box 4)

Printed Material focuses primarily on Avery's later career and legacy. Included are exhibition announcements and catalogs, news clippings, various brochures, bulletins, and other announcements.

Box 4, Folder 24  Exhibition Announcements, 1966-1973
Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 25  Exhibition Catalogs, 1926, 1966-1977
Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 26  News Clippings, 1963-1973
Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 27  Miscellaneous Printed Material, 1962-1974
(Not scanned)

Return to Table of Contents
Series 7: Photographs, circa 1970

1 Folder (Box 4)

This series contains five photographs of an unidentified exhibition of photography that does not include Avery's artwork.

Box 4, Folder 28  Photographs of an Unidentified Exhibition, circa 1970  
(Not scanned)