
Erin Corley

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

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# Table of Contents

Collection Overview ........................................................................................................ 1
Administrative Information .............................................................................................. 1
Biographical Note ............................................................................................................. 2
Scope and Content Note ................................................................................................. 3
Arrangement ..................................................................................................................... 3
Names and Subjects ........................................................................................................ 3

Container Listing ............................................................................................................. 4
    Series 1: Biographical Material, 1964, 1975............................................................ 4
    Series 2: Correspondence, 1935-1981.................................................................... 5
    Series 3: Subject Files, 1950-1981...................................................................... 6
    Series 4: Writings about Avery, circa 1951-1979............................................... 18
    Series 5: Financial & Legal Records, 1943-1982............................................... 19
    Series 7: Photographs, circa 1970............................................................... 21
Collection Overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Repository:</th>
<th>Archives of American Art</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title:</td>
<td>Milton Avery papers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifier:</td>
<td>AAA.avermilt</td>
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<tr>
<td>Date:</td>
<td>1926-1982 (bulk 1950-1982)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Extent:</td>
<td>2.8 Linear feet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creator:</td>
<td>Avery, Milton, 1885-1965</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language:</td>
<td>English .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary:</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.

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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
Container Listing

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

Box 1, Folder 13  

Box 1, Folder 14  
Akron Art Institute, 1980

Box 1, Folder 15  
Aldis Browne Fine Arts, 1978-1980

Box 1, Folder 16  
Allentown Art Museum, 1971

Box 1, Folder 17  
Alpha Gallery, 1969-1970

Box 1, Folder 18  
Alpha Gallery, 1971-1972

Box 1, Folder 19  
Alpha Gallery, 1973-1974

Box 1, Folder 20  
Alpha Gallery, 1975-1979

Box 1, Folder 21  
American Federation of Arts (Milton Avery Retrospective), 1959-1961

Box 1, Folder 22  
American Federation of Arts, 1962-1965

Box 1, Folder 23  
American Embassy, Prague, 1966-1970
Box 1, Folder 24  Andre Emmerich Gallery, 1973-1974
            Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 25  Arkansas Art Center, 1966
            Image(s)

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
            Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 32  Associated American Artists, 1978-1980
            Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 33  Association of Contemporary Artists Galleries, 1968-1981
            Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 34  Barbara Mathes Gallery, 1978-1981
            Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 35  Bard College, 1970-1971
            Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 36  Biographies of Milton Avery, 1969-1979
            Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 37  Bonfoey Company, 1976
            Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 38  Cape Split Place, Inc., 1978-1979
            Image(s)
Box 1, Folder 39  Carl Solway Gallery (Flair Gallery), 1968-1971
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 40  Charles H. Scott Gallery (Emily Carr College of Art), 1980-1981
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 41  Charles E. Slatkin, Inc. Galleries, 1968-1980
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 42  Cleveland Museum of Art, 1971, 1975
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 43  College of Wooster, 1980
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 44  Comsky Gallery, 1972-1973
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 45  Comsky Gallery, 1974-1979
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 46  Connecticut Fine Arts, Inc., 1973-1979
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 47  David Gallery, 1971-1978
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 48  David Mirvish Gallery, 1967-1969
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 49  David Mirvish Gallery, 1970-1973
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 50  David Mirvish Gallery, 1974-1978
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 51  Dayton Art Institute, 1969-1971
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 52  Donald Morris Gallery, 1958-1964
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 53  Donald Morris Gallery, 1965-1966
Box 1, Folder 54  Donald Morris Gallery, 1967-1968
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 55  Donald Morris Gallery, 1969-1970
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 56  Donald Morris Gallery, 1971
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 57  Donald Morris Gallery, 1972-1973
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 58  Donald Morris Gallery, 1974-1977
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 59  Donald Morris Gallery, 1978-1980
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 60  Edmonton Art Gallery, 1978-1979
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 61  Esther Stuttman Gallery, 1965-1973
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 62  Everson Museum of Art, 1975-1977
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 1  Felix Landau Gallery, 1956-1965
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 2  Fogg Museum, 1972-1974
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 3  Fontana Gallery, 1969-1980
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 4  Forum Gallery, 1980-1981
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 5  Galerie Beyeler, 1971-1976
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 6  Galerie du Jonelle, 1966-1974
Box 2, Folder 7  Galerie Internationale, 1960-1961  
Box 2, Folder 8  Gallery 14, 1960-1967  
Box 2, Folder 9  Gallery Reese Palley, 1964-1965  
Box 2, Folder 10  Gallery Reese Palley, 1966  
Box 2, Folder 11  Gallery Reese Palley, 1967-1968  
Box 2, Folder 12  Gallery Reese Palley, 1969-1970  
Box 2, Folder 13  Gallery Reese Palley, 1971  
Box 2, Folder 14  Gallery Reese Palley, 1972-1974  
Box 2, Folder 15  Gimpel Fils, Ltd., 1973-1976  
Box 2, Folder 16  Grace Borgenicht Gallery, 1951-1957  
Box 2, Folder 17  Grace Borgenicht Gallery, 1958-1964  
Box 2, Folder 18  Grace Borgenicht Gallery, 1965-1968  
Box 2, Folder 19  Grace Borgenicht Gallery, 1969-1971  
Box 2, Folder 20  Grace Borgenicht Gallery, 1972-1974  
Box 2, Folder 21  Grace Borgenicht Gallery, 1975-1980
Box 2, Folder 22  Graphics International Ltd. (Lunn Gallery), 1971-1972
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 23  Graphics International Ltd. (Lunn Gallery), 1973-1974
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 24  Graphics International Ltd. (Lunn Gallery), 1975-1977
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 25  Graphics International Ltd. (Lunn Gallery), 1978-1979
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 26  Greenberg Gallery, 1973-1982
Image(s)

Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 28  Gump's Gallery, 1964-1968
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 29  Harmon Gallery, 1965-1970
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 30  Heritage Plantation of Sandwich, 1977
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 31  Hirschl & Adler Galleries, 1979-1980
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 32  Hirshhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden, 1971-1980
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 33  Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1976-1978
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 34  International Exhibition Foundation, 1973-1974
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 35  International Gallery, Inc., 1964-1965
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 36  Jack Fader Collection, 1971-1975
Box 2, Folder 37  Jane Haslem Gallery, 1975  Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 38  Jarvis Gallery, 1972-1978  Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 39  Joan Whitney Payson Gallery of Art, 1977-1979  Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 40  John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, 1977  Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 41  Katonah Gallery, 1975-1977  Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 42  Kay Kaz Gallery, 1965-1969  Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 43  Lehigh University, 1980  Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 44  Little Gallery (Janet Fleisher), 1973-1974  Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 45  Louisiana Gallery, 1968-1971  Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 46  Louisiana Gallery, 1972-1976  Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 47  Louisiana Gallery, 1977-1981  Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 48  MacDowell Gallery, 1972-1974  Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 49  Makler Gallery, 1960-1967  Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 50  Makler Gallery, 1968-1971  Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 51  Makler Gallery, 1972-1980  Image(s)
Box 2, Folder 52  Marianne Friedland Gallery, 1976-1979
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 53  Mattatuck Museum, 1967-1971
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 54  Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979-1980
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 55  Metropolitan Opera Association, 1977-1978
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 56  Michael Berger Gallery, 1973-1980
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 57  Michigan State University, 1969, 1973-1974
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 58  Mid-American Arts Alliance, 1973-1974
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 59  Minnesota Museum of Art, 1977-1979
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 60  M. Knodler & Co., 1950-1979
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 61  Mobile Art Gallery, 1964-1969
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 62  Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1977
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 63  Museum of Modern Art, 1961-1971, 1973
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 64  New Britain Museum of American Art, 1968
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 65  New York WPA Artists, Inc., 1977
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 66  Noah Goldowsky Inc., 1969-1973
| Box 2, Folder 67 | Paintings & Drawings Ltd., 1964-1977 | Image(s) |
| Box 2, Folder 68 | Parliament Gallery, 1971 | Image(s) |
| Box 2, Folder 69 | Pasadena Art Museum, 1971 | Image(s) |
| Box 2, Folder 70 | Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1976-1978 | Image(s) |
| Box 2, Folder 71 | Phillips Collection, 1965, 1977 | Image(s) |
| Box 2, Folder 72 | Pratt Graphics Center, 1973, 1980-1981 | Image(s) |
| Box 2, Folder 73 | Princeton University Library, 1977 | Image(s) |
| Box 3, Folder 1 | Richard Gray Gallery, 1971-1976 | Image(s) |
| Box 3, Folder 2 | Robert Hull Fleming Museum, University of Vermont, 1976 | Image(s) |
| Box 3, Folder 3 | Rudolph Gallery, 1959-1970 | Image(s) |
| Box 3, Folder 4 | Sears, Roebuck and Co., 1965 | Image(s) |
| Box 3, Folder 5 | Shore Studio Galleries, 1961 | Image(s) |
| Box 3, Folder 6 | Smithsonian Institution, 1972-1974, 1979 | Image(s) |
| Box 3, Folder 7 | Society of the Four Arts, 1977-1978 | Image(s) |
| Box 3, Folder 8 | Southern Methodist University, Meadows Museum & University Gallery, 1980-1981 | Image(s) |
Box 3, Folder 9  Sterling & Francine Clark Art Institute, 1978-1981
Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 10  Strathcona, 1980
Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 11  Summit Art Center, 1975-1977
Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 12  Syracuse University, 1970, 1972-1973
Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 13  Tanglewood Gallery, 1959-1965
Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 14  Terry Dintenfass, Inc. (Contemporary Paintings), 1959-1965
Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 15  Thomas Gibson Fine Art Ltd., 1973-1979
Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 16  Thorne Art Gallery (Keene State College), 1970-1973
Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 17  Tirca Karlis Gallery, 1965-1976
Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 18  University of California, Irvine, 1970-1971
Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 19  University of California, Santa Barbara, 1979-1980
Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 20  University of Oregon, 1968-1969
Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 21  University of Texas at Austin, 1975-1977
Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 22  Vassar College Art Gallery, 1970-1977
Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 23  Waddington Galleries, 1962-1964
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 3, Folder 24</th>
<th>Waddington Galleries, 1965</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
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<td>Image(s)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Box 3, Folder 25</td>
<td>Waddington Galleries, 1966-1967</td>
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<td>Waddington Galleries, 1971-1972</td>
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<td>Image(s)</td>
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<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>Image(s)</td>
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<td>Box 4, Folder 3</td>
<td>Wadsworth Atheneum, 1962-1964</td>
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<td>Box 4, Folder 4</td>
<td>Webb &amp; Parsons Gallery, 1974-1979</td>
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<td>Box 4, Folder 5</td>
<td>Western Electric, Corporate Education Organization, 1979</td>
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<td>Image(s)</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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<td>Box 4, Folder 10</td>
<td>Woodstock Artists Association, 1977</td>
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<td>Image(s)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Box 4, Folder 11</td>
<td>Woodward Foundation, 1963-1972</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
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)*

*Return to Table of Contents*
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)

Return to Table of Contents

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)
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)