

Milton Avery  
American, 1885 - 1965

## *Mountain and Meadow*

1960

oil on canvas

overall: 152.4 x 172.7 cm (60 x 68 in.)

framed: 157.2 x 177.2 x 6.3 cm (61 7/8 x 69 3/4 x 2 1/2 in.)

Inscription: lower left: Milton Avery 1960

Gift of Sally Michel Avery, in Honor of the 50th Anniversary of the National Gallery of Art 1991.52.1

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### ENTRY

In the late 1950s, Milton Avery was at the peak of his career, though his health was deteriorating. He was praised by the influential critics Clement Greenberg and Hilton Kramer and celebrated in a retrospective exhibition of his work at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1960. [1] The landscapes that Avery created during his final years, like *Mountain and Meadow*, constitute arguably his finest paintings. In 1957, while summering in Provincetown on Cape Cod in Massachusetts, he began to produce large-scale landscapes that reflected the influence of abstract expressionism, with reductive forms and heightened color. In December of that year, Greenberg announced that Avery's recent paintings "attest to a new and more magnificent flowering of his art. The latest generation of abstract painters in New York has certain salutary lessons to learn from him that they cannot learn from any other artist on the scene." [2] The most striking quality of Avery's late work is its fluidity between representation and abstraction, which he achieved by reducing nature to an interplay of surface pattern and shape. Curator Barbara Haskell, who organized a 1982 retrospective of Avery's work at the

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*American Paintings, 1900–1945*

Whitney Museum of American Art, described this stylistic development as “poised between objective depictions and non-objective aesthetic issues; by anchoring his work in subject matter while simultaneously giving fundamental importance to formal characteristics, Avery reconciled modernism with his own commitment to recognizable imagery.” [3]

The initial inspiration to paint *Mountain and Meadow* occurred in the summer of 1955, when Avery and his family stayed at the Yaddo artists’ colony near Saratoga Springs, New York. One day, as they were driving near the border of Vermont and Massachusetts, they stopped for a picnic, and Avery sketched the surrounding landscape. The imagery in the resulting painting, made five years after the initial drawings, has been reduced to the point of abstraction, so that the descriptive title is necessary to identify the subject. Avery refined the scene to five large, gracefully patterned, interlocking areas of space. He subtly manipulated and layered his pigments to create shimmering expanses of color. This mottled painting technique creates an illusion of three-dimensionality on the canvas. A consummate colorist, Avery achieved a sense of the verdant green land by applying thin layers of paint in a reduced palette. To an even greater extent than other examples of Avery’s monumental late works, *Mountain and Meadow* possesses a profound sense of serenity that portrays nature at its most majestic.

This painting was donated to the National Gallery of Art in 1991 by Avery’s widow, Sally Michel (American, 1902 - 2003), who was also an accomplished artist. In the same year, the Avery family established the Milton Avery Print Archive at the National Gallery of Art, and in 2002 Michel donated a number of her husband’s sketchbooks to the museum.

Robert Torchia

July 24, 2024

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## NOTES

[1] See Clement Greenberg, “Milton Avery,” *Arts* 32 (Dec. 1957): 40–45; this article was substantially revised by the author for publication in a collection of his writings, *Art and Culture* (Boston, MA, 1961). See also Hilton Kramer’s important monograph *Milton Avery Paintings, 1930–1960* (New York, 1962).

[2] Clement Greenberg, “Milton Avery,” *Arts* 32 (Dec. 1957): 45.

[3] Barbara Haskell, *Milton Avery* (New York, 1982), 156.

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## TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The unlined, plain-weave support remains mounted on its original stretcher. The tacking margins are intact, and selvage edges are present on both lateral sides. The thin off-white ground was brushed onto a longer length of canvas that was then cut at the top and bottom to its present dimensions. The painting was probably stretched after it was completed, as the dimensions of the painting were sketched in by the artist with a black “dry brush” material and cracks formed at the turnover edge when the finished painting was stretched. The contours of the blue form were roughly sketched in with a gray-black material, and then the blue and yellow paint was brushed on thinly. Next, the green form was painted somewhat more thickly, and then the mixture of white, pink, and blue was laid on at the top in a more full-bodied mixture. The painting is in good condition. It is unvarnished. Grime that had accumulated on the unvarnished surface, particularly in the form of fingerprints along the edges, was removed in a 2005 treatment.

Michael Swicklik

July 24, 2024

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## PROVENANCE

The artist's wife, Sally Michel Avery [1902-2003], New York; gift 1991 to NGA.

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## EXHIBITION HISTORY

1963 Milton Avery, Grace Borgenicht Gallery, New York, 1963.

1969 Milton Avery, National Collection of Fine Arts (now Smithsonian American Art Museum), Washington, D.C.; Brooklyn Museum; Columbus (Ohio) Gallery of Fine Arts, 1969-1970, no. 110, repro.

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1976 Milton Avery and the Landscape, William Benton Museum of Art, University of Connecticut, Storrs, 1976, no. 56, repro.

1976 Milton Avery, Drawings and Paintings, University of Texas Art Museum, Austin; Summit Art Center, Summit, NJ; The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC, 1976-1977, unnumbered catalogue.

1976 Vermont Landscape Images 1776-1976, Robert Hull Fleming Museum, Burlington, 1976, unnumbered catalogue, repro.

1977 Milton Avery: Paintings and Prints, Edwin A. Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita, KS, 1977-1978.

1977 Milton Avery Retrospective Exhibition, John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, FL, 1977.

1977 Milton Avery: The Late Years, Katonah Gallery, Katonah, NY, 1977.

1978 Milton Avery, The Edmonton Art Gallery, Alberta; Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff, Alberta; Windsor Art Gallery, Ontario; Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan; Art Gallery of Hamilton, Ontario, 1978-1979, unnumbered catalogue, repro.


1981 Milton Avery: Major Paintings and Graphics, Charles H. Scott Gallery, Emily Carr College of Art, Granville Island, Vancouver, 1981, unnumbered brochure.

1981 Milton Avery: Major Paintings, Grace Borgenicht Gallery, New York, 1981, unnumbered catalogue, repro.

1982 Milton Avery, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh; Fort Worth Art Museum; Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo; The Denver Art Museum; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 1982-1983, fig. 141.

1988 Milton Avery: A Singular Vision, Center for the Fine Arts, Miami, FL, 1988, no. 32.

1991 Art for the Nation: Gifts in Honor of the 50th Anniversary of the National Gallery of Art, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1991, unnumbered catalogue, repro.

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*American Paintings, 1900–1945*

2001 Milton Avery: The Late Paintings, Milwaukee Art Museum; Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach; UCLA at the Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center, Los Angeles, 2001-2002, pl. 46.

2016 Milton Avery's Vermont, The Bennington Museum, Vermont, 2016.

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**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- 1981 Grad, Bonnie Lee. *Milton Avery*. Royal Oak, MI, 1981: 7, 10, pl. 48
- 1982 Haskell, Barbara. *Milton Avery*. Exh. cat. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, and five other venues, 1982-1983. New York, 1982: 174, pl. 141.
- 2001 Hobbs, Robert Carleton. *Milton Avery: The Late Paintings*. New York, 2001: 30, 93, plate 46, 105.
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