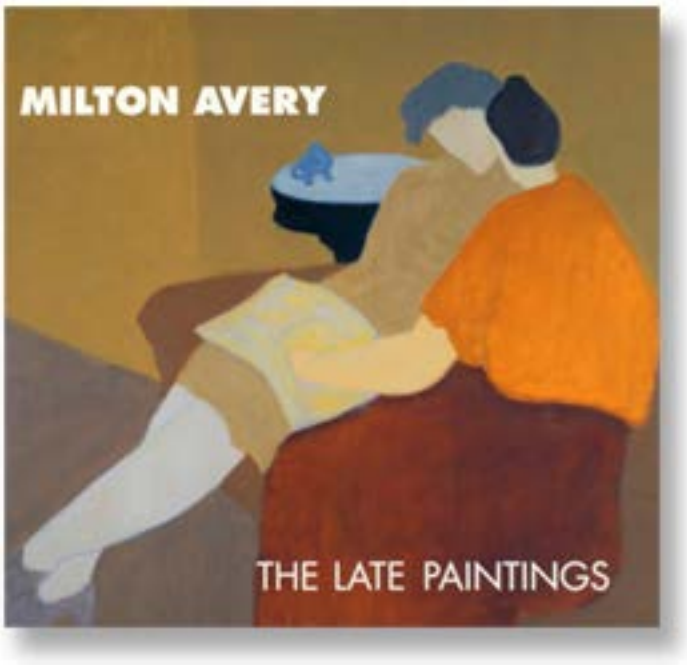

Milton Avery: The Late Paintings. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 2001; pp. 9-10.

The enormously successful 1982 retrospective of Milton Avery's art at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art attracted lines of people outside the museum, often the length of a full city block, and ratified his popular success as a modern American master.[1] Lauded for his bold experiments with color, Avery gained a reputation for paintings in which a wry visual wit joins aspects of realism with abstraction.

Almost twenty years earlier, two of Avery's friends since the late 1920s and 1930s, the highly respected Abstract Expressionists Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko, attested to his enormous stature, and thus paved the way for the Whitney showing. Gottlieb noted the contradiction that Avery's "last works . . . were as fresh as though he were a young painter" while having "the authority of an old master." From this he concluded, "Avery is one of the few great painters of our time."[2] His estimation is indeed high praise, for Avery would still have been considered his competitor. Three years later, at a memorial service for Avery, Rothko delivered the eulogy:

This conviction of greatness, the feeling that one was in the presence of great events, was immediate on encountering his work. . . .

Avery is first a great poet. His is the poetry of sheer loveliness, of sheer beauty. . . . This—alone—took great courage in a generation which felt that it could be heard only through clamor, force and a show of power. . . . There have been several others in our generation who have celebrated the world around them, but none with that inevitability where the poetry penetrates every pore of the canvas to the very last tip of the brush. For Avery was a great poet inventor who invented sonorities never seen nor heard before. From these we have learned much and will learn more for a long time to come.[3]

These high commendations led to the observation by the critic Dore Ashton that Milton Avery enjoyed the rare distinction of being a painters' painter:

I came to understand that painters' painters were those for whom painting was meant not just to solve problems, but to be offered for delectation. . . . Milton Avery . . . published no manifestos, indulged in no polemics and followed his bent imperturbably while all around him artists were agonizing over crucial choices amongst the many possible twentieth century modes of vanguardism. For that reason, undoubtedly, he was considered by many as something of a primitive, a kind of Rousseauan pure soul who did what he did out of innocence. That, of course, was a mistaken view. Avery as a painter was nothing if not sophisticated.[4]

These statements were intended to be generous homages to an enormous and deserving talent. But the fact that they represent a large body of similarly oriented articles and catalogues on Milton Avery should give us pause. These publications extol Avery's prowess as a painter, his poetic color, his piquant forms, and his dazzling wit; however, they do not attempt to explain how his work fits into a historical context. The problem with this type of approbation, focusing primarily on the formal aspects of his art, is that it has removed it from historical analysis. Unfortunately, most writings on Avery have not provided a means for understanding the artistic challenges he posed for himself, the routes he avoided, and the way he often deflected competing aesthetic theories through subtle and witty pastiches.[5] This celebratory literature has also looked at Avery's work as a monolithic whole, so that the changes in his art have been glossed over, while both its participation in some of the social forces of its time and criticism of others have been denied a place in his history.

In order to provide a fuller appreciation of Avery's historical position, this book distinguishes four periods in his work. Born in 1885, he served an extremely long art apprenticeship when he lived in Connecticut and developed a variant on American Impressionism. The first period thus starts between 1905 and 1911 and continues through 1924. His second stage of development, which can be termed his "early mature phase," occurs between 1925 and 1937. At this time he was living and working in New York City and initially came in contact with European modernism. His full maturity commences in 1938, when he made several hundred watercolors on the Gaspé Peninsula in southern Quebec, Canada. During this period he became known as the "American Fauve." This time concluded after the end of World War II, when he had so internalized lessons learned from the Fauves that he was able to move away from their manner. His late work—the subject of this book—begins in 1947, with his retrospective exhibition at Durand-Ruel Galleries in New York, entitled, "My Daughter March," in which he surveyed both his

own development and his daughter's life. This final period, which is notable for its extreme simplification of forms and cogent interplays of realism and abstraction, draws to a close in 1963, when ill health forced Avery to stop painting.[6] It is a remarkable time of exploration during which his artistic forays mined the explorations of the American modernist poet Wallace Stevens.

This book's primary goal is to locate Milton Avery's late works within the context of the contested field of mid-twentieth-century art in the United States. My focus on the late work allows for more extended and intensive discussions of this important period.[7] The artistic context of Avery's late paintings comprises his relationships with his peers; his conversations with competing styles, including the radical revision of French Impressionism in the 1950s; and ways of approaching the post–World War II American anti-Communist political policy and ideology known as containment. In order to access this theater of stylistic options and subtle ideological coercions, I begin by examining the singularly important essay on Avery's art written by Clement Greenberg in 1957. This article maps out the ideological territory in which the artist's late work was created by outlining the historical nexus in which Avery developed and the ongoing discourses to which his work responds. First published in the December 1957 issue of *Arts*, Greenberg's essay was revised in 1958 for a 1961 collection of his writings entitled *Art and Culture*.[8] Later, Waddington Galleries in London used it as the text for Avery's fall 1962 exhibition.

I next look closely at an important discourse that Greenberg's essay does not explore: the place of modern poetics in the formation of Avery's theory regarding the countervailing roles of abstraction and realism. In order to form an adequate picture of Avery's visual poetics, I investigate his art's connections with both Henri Matisse's painting and drawing and Wallace Stevens's poetry. In addition, I consider the direct impact of Stéphane Mallarmé's ideas on the work of Matisse and Stevens and the indirect influence these concepts in turn had on Avery's art. My aim is to fill major gaps in our understanding of Milton Avery's painting, so that it will no longer appear as an idiosyncratic oeuvre, unrelated to the times in which it was created.