

Milton Avery

## 2.2 AVERY, MILTON

1893-1965 United States

### White Rooster (1947)

oil on canvas, 61 1/2" x 50 3/4" (156 x 129 cm)

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Gift of Joyce Blaffer von Bothmer, 1975

### The Artist

Milton Avery was born in Altman, New York, in 1893. In 1905, he moved with his family to Hartford, Connecticut, where he studied art briefly. Avery was essentially self-taught, relying on the adoption of European trends to create an original yet intimate art.

Avery was greatly influenced by the French artist Henri Matisse. Matisse rejected the use of local or descriptive color in his art and sought to reduce objects to their essentials to emphasize overall decorative qualities. Though Matisse is considered an Expressionist by some, he, unlike his German counterparts, did not portray the anxiety or social ills of his time. He sought to create an aesthetic object that heightened one's senses to the beauty that surrounds us.

Following in Matisse's footsteps, Avery turned to the people and scenes of his everyday life for the subject of his paintings. These include many fine portraits of his wife, Sally, also a painter; of his daughter, March, as well as rural scenes he recorded during summer vacations in Vermont and Maine. These thinly painted oils are tender poems constructed with lovely shades of pink, purple, orange, yellow, blue and green.

Avery had his first one-man show in 1928. He was a highly respected artist and was an important influence on the next generation of Abstract Expressionist artists as they continued to explore the powers of color, while often eschewing even the simplest figuration. Avery's art particularly influenced Rothko and Gottlieb. While alive, Avery was given two retrospective exhibitions: one in 1952 at the Baltimore Museum and one in 1960 at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. Two posthumous retrospective exhibitions were held in 1983, one at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo and one at the Minneapolis Institute of Art.

### The Image

In *White Rooster*, Avery draws our attention to a fantasy landscape inhabited by a large rooster and two much smaller brown hens. Avery does not depend solely on his eccentric use of color to draw our attention away from the expectations of realism. In this topsy-turvy world, the rooster, though close to its true color, is particularly massive. In this work, Avery subverts the illusion of a three-dimensional realm to draw our attention, not only on the huge rooster, but also on the flowing shapes that remain on the surface of the canvas. These shapes of intense color, ruffled by an invisible breeze, remind us that a painting is called a painting because it is truly about paint.

### Dominant Elements and Principles of Design

The two dominant elements of art used are:

**Color** In this work, a tree with impossible blue foliage and a gray/blue trunk stands out in front of varying shades of undulating pink that define the landscape. The vivid green in the background seems a much more naturalistic rendering of green trees on rolling mountains, but closer inspection reveals that what is visible is a curving pattern of green paint.

**Shape** All the shapes depicted here are done in curves: the tree, the rooster, the hens. Everything is rounded. Even the sinuous lines in the background suggest hills and space.

The main principle of design used is:

**Dominance** The huge white rooster, enormous in comparison with the little hens and the blue tree, is planted right in the center of the painting. The viewer's eye is irresistibly drawn to him; one's gaze starts at the curve of the tail, slides along the length of the only straight line in the image to stop at the tiny pecking head, not far from the heads of the two hens. The whole image is a hymn to the rooster (to nature? the country? virility? the protector?).

### Suggested Activity

**Theme** Have students work on the theme of hens and roosters, preferably after having shown them some slides of different types of roosters.

**Media** Oil or soft pastels on 12" x 18" (31 x 46 cm) construction paper.