

Samuel Putnam Avery and the Founding of Avery Library, Columbia University

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Introduction

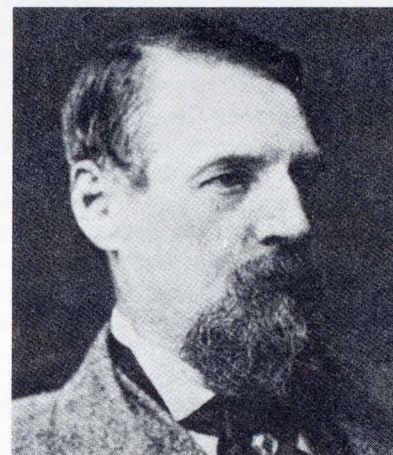
The Avery Library was founded in 1890 by Mr. Samuel Putnam Avery and his wife Mary Ogden Avery as a memorial to their son Henry Ogden Avery. This essay discusses Samuel Putnam Avery's career as an engraver, his transformation into one of the premier art dealers in New York, his patronage of various cultural institutions, the founding of Avery Library, and some of the collections of Avery Library.

Early Life

Samuel Putnam Avery was born March 17, 1822 in New York City, a son of a leather merchant, Samuel Avery, and Hannah Parke Avery. In 1832 his father died in a cholera epidemic, leaving the family in poverty. By 1840 he and his brother Benjamin Parke were apprenticed to learn engraving on copper, and were both employed by the American Bank Note Company. S.P. Avery was officially recorded as an engraver located at 259 Fourth St. in the 1842 New York City Directory. It was at this time that he changed from metal to wood engraving. In 1844 he moved his residence to Brooklyn and opened a new engraving office at 129 Fulton St. In the 1840s newspaper illustrations were rare, but the Mexican War of 1845-47 created a demand for wood engravings of battle scenes, encampments, people and views in the war areas. Avery engraved many of the illustrations in the *Weekly Herald*, the *New York Herald*, and Horace Greeley's *Tribune*. A portrait of Major General Zachary Taylor is representative of his work at this time. In 1847 his first son, Samuel Putnam Avery, Jr., was born.

As Avery's skill and reputation grew, he varied his work. He supplied magazines, including *Harper's Monthly*, and compiled and illustrated several anthologies including *The American Joe Miller* (1853), *Mrs. Partington's Carpet Bag of Fun* (1854), and *My Friend Wriggles*. He also did illustrations for melodramatic and romantic publishers such as E. Long, including *The Life of Helen Jewett*; *The Steward: a Romance*; *Harry Burnham: the Young Continental*; *Mabel or the Child of the Battlefield*; *Woman in All Ages and Nations*;

and *Felina de Chambure or the Female Friend*. In 1856 he was commissioned to engrave the cover of volume 3 of *The Crayon: an American Journal of Art* for which John Durand, brother of Asher B. Durand, was the editor. Through this work he began meeting men who were soon to become prominent artists.



Samuel P. Avery, illustrator, art dealer, and Commissioner of the Paris Exposition of 1867. Photograph courtesy of Avery Architecture and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University.

Art Dealer

In the 1850s, S.P. Avery began to buy paintings and books. He held salons at his home in Brooklyn and also began to attend art auctions. Having followed the precedents of England and France, New York City began regular art auctions in 1824; letters written by Avery to his friends refer to prominent auctions there. By this time Avery had numerous personal contacts with artists. He visited their studios, attended the open houses held Sundays in the Studio Building on Tenth Street, and joined associations. He also started to buy works directly from artists. His second son, Henry Ogden Avery, was born in 1852.

A decisive impetus to Avery's career came from William T. Walters (1820-1894), a Baltimore businessman. In the 1850s the two became friends, and when Walters began to form a collection of American paintings, he needed help from someone on the art scene in New York. He trusted Avery, who introduced Walters to artists, helped him commission paintings and arranged for shipping. Avery was soon helping another Baltimore collector, Colonel J. Striker Jenkins. At the start of the Civil War, Walters fled to Paris where he settled for the duration of the war. There he started to meet artists and began buying French art, not only for himself, but also sending pieces to Avery

for resale in New York, sharing the profits. The international art market was just starting to take shape when Avery entered it in the 1860s. His first art auction was held April 9, 1864 at the Dusseldorf Gallery. The stock was a consignment of over 100 paintings from Walters, which netted \$36,515. Several paintings went for high prices, including Constant Troyon's "Landscape, Coast of Normandy with Cattle" (\$3,150) and Charles Jalabert's "Christ's Walking on the Sea" (\$1,400). By the end of 1864, Avery saw that his true career was no longer engraving, but buying and selling works of art. Russell Sturgis tells us that Avery "handed over his business, his tools and his plant generally to his former assistant Isaac Pesoa" (see Sturgis entry in bibliography section).

In a notice dated December 20, 1864, Avery invited the public to his new address, 694 Broadway, corner of Fourth Street, no.8. The invitation included the names of forty-eight artists whose works would be for sale, including Beard, Bierstadt, Hart, and Vedder. During this time, his friendship with George Lucas, an American expatriate in Paris, was a major influence. Lucas would send Avery art works to sell, splitting the profits. Avery's next auction in 1866 offered a mixture of American and European paintings. One painting, Asher B. Durand's "Thanatopsis," fetched \$1,350, bought by the Gardiner family.

S.P. Avery was named Commissioner of the Fine Arts Division for the Paris Exposition of 1867. It meant both national and international prominence for Avery, as well as much responsibility. Avery stayed in Paris for six months, his first trip abroad. He supervised the assembling of the American collection of eighty-seven paintings, seven sculptures and medals, and twenty-eight engravings and etchings. Forty-five artists were included. While in Paris, Avery was able to meet many French artists and commissioned paintings from American buyers. In relatively short order he laid the groundwork for the wholesale marketing he was to undertake in the 1870s and 80s. He also became acquainted with European art dealers, banks, and transport agents. Avery returned to New York with materials to furnish a new gallery as well as a reputation which made him sought after. He established his home and business at 86-88 Fifth Avenue. His business thrived and letters from clients show that his judgment was valued.

As the role of art grew in New York's social and civic worlds, Avery became increasingly active and prominent. He became a member of the Union League in 1868 and was soon active on their art committee. When John Jay became club president, he asked the art committee to pursue the idea of a "national, i.e. New York, art museum." An open meeting was held November 23, 1869 at which Avery served as Secretary. Speakers included William Cullen Bryant. Avery was among fifty people chosen to draw up a scheme of organization. After months of debate, the "General Committee of the Metropolitan Museum of Art" emerged with John Taylor Johnston as president, and Avery was elected to the Board of Trustees, on which he served until his death.

Avery's many trips to Paris during the 1870s and 80s enabled him to collect art works both for the Metropolitan Museum of Art and his own gallery. The Franco-Prussian War which ended in 1871 had brought ruin to many Parisian artists and galleries, but provided a great op-

portunity for acquiring older works of art. Some of his clients at this time included August Belmont, A.T. Stewart, and William H. Vanderbilt. In the course of a dozen auctions held between 1864 and 1889, he sold more than 1,500 paintings to almost 400 people. Historical, genre, landscape, and religious paintings were the most popular themes in his inventory, which included Meissonier's "General Desais and the Captured Peasant," Bouguereau's "Prayer," Bagniet's "The Bride's Toilet," Duverger's "Prodigal Son," and Barye's sculpture "Juno and the Peacock." S.P. Avery retired from business in 1889, but his gallery continued under the leadership of his son Samuel Putnam Avery, Jr., who had begun to learn the business in the early 1870s while in his early twenties.

Henry O. Avery

It was the death of his second son, Henry Ogden Avery, on April 30, 1890 at age 39 that prompted Samuel Putnam and Mary Ogden Avery to found the Avery Memorial Library in 1890.

Born January 31, 1852, Henry Ogden Avery had completed courses at Cooper-Union Art School and was a student in the offices of S.P. Avery's friend Russell Sturgis in 1870. Sturgis urged Avery to send Henry to the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, where Henry studied from 1872-1879. After his return to New York, he worked for a time in the office of Richard M. Hunt and from 1883 to his death in 1890 he was an independent architect. He was a founding member of the Architectural League of New York, the Archaeological Institute of America, and the New York Society of Architects. He competed for the design of Grant's Tomb in New York and for a pedestal for the Statue of Liberty. His death was much lamented throughout the city. There is a memorial from the Architectural League, a plaque, and a bust at Avery Library.

Avery Library

However, the most lasting memorial was created by his parents in the form of the Avery Memorial Library, donated by them to Columbia University. The letter of conveyance from S.P. Avery and Mary Ogden Avery to Seth Low, President of Columbia College, articulates their wish to "donate the library comprising all volumes relating to architecture and the decorative arts and other professional books, owned by the late Henry Ogden Avery," as well as "sums which may be required to pay for books purchased" and "a permanent fund." It was also their wish "that the books . . . shall be kept together . . . and that they be kept as a library of reference only, and not allowed to leave the library building." The conditions of the endowment were accepted by the Board of Trustees on October 6, 1890. It was the purpose of the library to collect materials from which architects might find inspiration for their work. Hence, historical architecture, rather than construction, characterizes the library. In 1897, when Columbia moved to Morningside Heights from 49th Street, the Avery Library was installed in its own rooms in Low Library, where it remained until 1912 when through the generosity of Samuel Putnam Avery, Jr. the current Avery Library was constructed to honor his parents and younger brother. The architect was Charles

Follen McKim of the firm of McKim, Mead and White. Completed by William Mitchell Kendall after McKim's death, the building was lauded in the architectural press.

Avery Library was not a teaching library. The Ware library of several hundred books from the collection of Professor William Robert Ware (1832-1915) constituted the circulating library for students. In the 1920s, the Fine Arts Library in the Art History and Archaeology Department was founded with books taken from the Avery Library. The first Ph.D. in Art History from Columbia was granted to Meyer Schapiro in 1929. In the 1970s all three collections were brought together in the underground extension of Avery Library.

Within the walls of Avery Library may be found an unrivaled printed record of architectural thinking. Early Renaissance books which have no illustrations include the first architectural book, Alberti's *De Re Aedificatoria* of 1485 (which cost \$12.42 in 1891), the first printed Vitruvius, *De Architectura* of 1486, which was purchased by Samuel Putnam Avery himself in 1898, and the first printed book to contain architectural illustrations, a non-architecture book, Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* of 1499. There are also first editions of Serlio, Vignola and Palladio. In addition, Avery owns one of six copies known to exist of the first architectural book published in the English language, John Shute's *The First and Chief Groundes of Architecture*, printed in 1563. Avery Library had owned all but one of the so-called American architectural incunabula which were books published before 1800. Herbert Mitchell, former rare-book librarian, found the missing one, our copy of Abraham Swan's *A Collection of Designs in Architecture, Containing New Plans and Elevations of Houses, For General Use ...* printed by Bell in Philadelphia between June and November 1775. It was the second book on architecture to be published in the Thirteen Colonies and by far the rarest, being one of only two copies known to exist. Its first owner was Richard Smith (1735-1803), a Philadelphia lawyer and delegate to the First Continental Congress who inscribed the title page on November 15, 1775 dedicating it to John Hancock, President of the Continental Congress. The library also owns the first architectural book published in the United States, *The British Architect*, printed by Bell in Philadelphia in June 1775.

The collection of architectural drawings and archives number approximately 600,000 and includes works by Serlio, Louis Sullivan, A.J. Davis, Frank Lloyd Wright, Hugh Ferriss, Ely Jacques Kahn, and William Lescaze, as well as many contemporary architects. One of the most famous collections is that of the Empire State Building photographs including those of Lewis Hine (1874-1940) taken during construction in 1930. There are also many important archival collections such as Stanford White's letterbooks and Russell Sturgis's scrapbook.

One of Avery Library's strengths is in the periodical literature of architecture. The collections include complete runs of important periodicals of the 19th and 20th centuries, including the *American Architect and Building News*, *Architectural Sketchbook* (Boston), *The Brickbuilder*, *La Revue Générale de l'Architecture et des Travaux Publiques*, *Casabella*, *Oppositions*, *Pencil Points*, *Gatepac*, *L'Esprit Nouveau*, *Wendingen*, and *De Stijl*. The Avery Index, be-

gun as an extension of reference service in 1934, first published in 1963, first online in 1979, continues to index approximately 500 current journals into the RLIN network.

Conclusion

The legacy of Samuel Putnam Avery, who died on August 11, 1904, and Mary Ogden Avery, who died in 1911, lives on in the many institutions they helped to found. The Metropolitan Museum of Art has an archival collection relating to Samuel Putnam Avery, including business ledger books, letters from ca. 100 correspondents, his diary from 1871-1882, and editorials and resolutions upon his death. The Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library has a great deal of archival material relating to the family and the founding of the library.

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