

Calder

Seth Anderson

Honors Art Appreciation

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Alexander Calder - one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century. Whether it be through his famous monuments that stand guard over cities across the world, abstract and thoughtful, or through the intricate wire sculptures depicting everything from circus attractions to farm animals that he created in his younger days, thousands of artists and art fans alike have been affected by his creations over the past century. Proof that not every genius is insane, Calder lived a long, happy life, leaving behind a legacy that stands both tall and proud.

Calder was born in the very small town of Lawnton, Pennsylvania, in 1898, another in a line of artists. Perhaps most notably, his grandfather, Alexander Milne Calder, is credited for having created the sculpture that tops the Philadelphia City Hall.¹ Because of this, from an early age he was exposed to sculpture, including physically, as he posed for his father, Stirling Calder's sculpture *Man Cub* (figure 1) when he was four years old. He went on to sculpt his first piece, an elephant, later that year.²

Throughout his childhood, as his family moved from place to place, back and forth across the country, he would continue to make small three-dimensional pieces of art from various scrap materials he scavenged from nearby wherever his home at the time was. After graduating from high school in 1915, instead of pursuing art, he took his skills in a different direction by studying mechanical engineering at the Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, New Jersey.³ Concerning this decision, he is quoted as saying that he "wanted to be an engineer because a guy [he] rather liked was a mechanical engineer, that's all."⁴ Upon receiving his degree, he began to go nowhere rather quickly. He took up a variety of occupations, none of which fully occupied his attention.

It wasn't until he moved in with his sister and her husband in Aberdeen, Washington that he decided to follow the direction his life had been pointing him toward. Amongst the

mountains and forest scenery he was compelled to ask for a set of brushes and paints from back home in order to recreate the wonderful sights.⁵ Shortly following this period of time, Calder moved back to New York City in order to continue his training as an artist. In 1923 he began studying at the Art Students League, under the tutelage of various experts.⁶ While he learned, he worked as a freelance sketch artist for the *National Police Gazette*, a tabloid publication focused on matters of interest to law enforcement officers. One of his assignments involved illustrating the performances at a Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus. It was at this time that his fascination with the performing arts was piqued, which led to the eventual creation of his famous *Calder's Circus* (figure 2). This work is often considered to be the real beginning of his prolific career and legacy.⁷

In 1926, Calder made the decision to follow even more closely in his forebears' footsteps and spend some time in Paris, which has always seemed to be the greatest artistic hub of Europe. Calder evidently felt the same. "So Paris seemed the place to go," he said, "on all accounts of practically everyone who had been there, and I decided I would also like to go."⁸ There, in addition to crafting the finely detailed set pieces, he would gladly give demonstrations of his work, putting on miniature circus performances for his art circle friends. Then, in 1930, the event which would determine his stylistic path occurred. Calder visited the studio in which resided a Dutch painter by the name of Piet Mondrian, who had covered the walls of his place with large geometric shapes of various colors. When Calder saw these, he was shocked, as the meaning of abstraction first made itself clear to him, and decided that he would like to see these shapes move on their own.⁹ He began formulating at this point the ideas that would become his first abstract sculptures and mobiles.

Among the first of these pieces was *Two Spheres within a Sphere* (figure 3), representative of the planetary bodies and their orbits. This reflects quite well Calder's interest in designing moving forms and their own pathways through space. Calder began experimenting deeper into this concept soon after his first forays in to kinetic sculpture, and once he had found his groove, he began producing them in earnest, quickly refining his techniques and aesthetic. He began to utilize "soaring, outstretched gestures to emphasize movement and energy" in his pieces.¹⁰ This evolution of style can be seen fairly clearly when comparing his works through the early 1930s. Figure 4, for example, shows an early mobile of Calder's, *Object with Red Discs*. It's characterized by a sense of stability, instead of mobility, and here he uses only geometric shapes like the titular discs and the pyramid base. It is well assembled, but feels formative, as if he realized it just wasn't quite what he was after during its making, and thus not as much effort was put into it. In contrast, *Cône d'ébène* (figure 5), represents a more complete idea. The fact that it is hanging in the air instead of grounded by a fixed base aids greatly in reinforcing the idea of mobility. Additionally, the increase of negative space, along with his implementation of more organic shapes, result in a more elegant and refined design.

It was during this developmental period that Calder's friend, Marcel Duchamp, a surrealist painter and sculptor, first christened Calder's works with the term "mobile". In addition to implying movement in English, it also translates as the word *motive* in Duchamp's native French, creating an interesting double meaning. In response to this, Jean Arp, another artist of Calder's circle, asked of him, referring to his non-moving sculptures, "well, what were those things you did last year – stables?"¹¹ It's fitting that two of Calder's friends have the honor of naming his most widely known forms of work, considering how deeply important his friends were to the artist.

Calder continued to develop from here, creating his first outside sculptures in 1934, from his studio in Roxbury, Connecticut. Essentially much larger versions of his earlier works, they were graceful, elegant, as can be seen in figure 6, but were too delicate to hold up well against the outside elements. This only led Calder to further evolve his methods. Instead of creating the full scale piece by himself, he began to instead create small maquettes to test, then enlist the aid of large-scale metal workers to craft the enlarged versions, under his close supervision, of course.¹² His stabile style also matured to better foreshadow the monumental works he would complete in the sixties, including the use of sheet metal, as in figure 7.

Throughout the next three decades his renown increased and his legacy grew. He continued to create more and more epic sculptures, culminating in the monuments of the late fifties, sixties, and early seventies. Over these almost twenty years, Calder was commissioned to sculpt pieces for cities and organizations all over the world. Through *La Spirale* in Paris (figure 8) and *Flamingo* in Chicago (figure 9), his influence and love for art is spread across the globe. What's interesting about these stabiles is that, despite being immobile, they still create a sense of motion, and due to the fact that every angle they can be viewed from looks completely different, they compel the viewer to move themselves instead, thus creating motion. Whether or not this was Calder's intent is unclear, but it can be assumed that the idea of the viewer being such an active participant in the piece, especially if they are unaware of it, would bring quite a grin to the man often described as a happy jokester.¹³

Up until his death on November 11, 1976, Calder made things just for the fun of it. In contrast to the giants he built for public display, he also continued to make small-scale sculptures like the ones from his formative years in the early thirties and all kinds of jewelry and paintings, which he often gave away to friends and family, characteristic of his generous nature. The

quantity and quality of his works have resulted in a great influence on abstract and modern artists the world over. Artists who can be seen to have been affected by Calder's work include such celebrated artists as Willem de Kooning and even Jackson Pollock¹⁴. So great was his contribution that he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Ford in 1977, months after his death.¹⁵

Illustrations



Figure 1

Man Cub (1902)

Stirling Calder

<http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/10354>

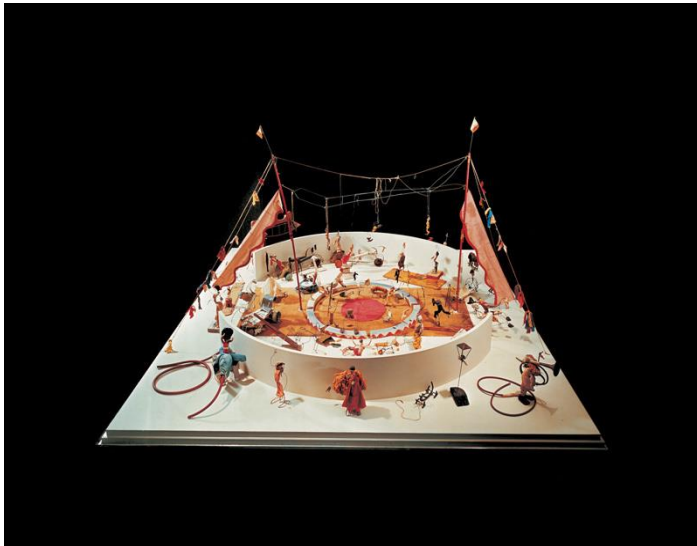


Figure 2

Calder's Circus or *Cirque Calder*

Alexander Calder

<http://whitney.org/Collection/AlexanderCalder/8336195>



Figure 3

Two Spheres within a Sphere (1931)

Alexander Calder

http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/finch/finch10-15-08_detail.asp?picnum=2

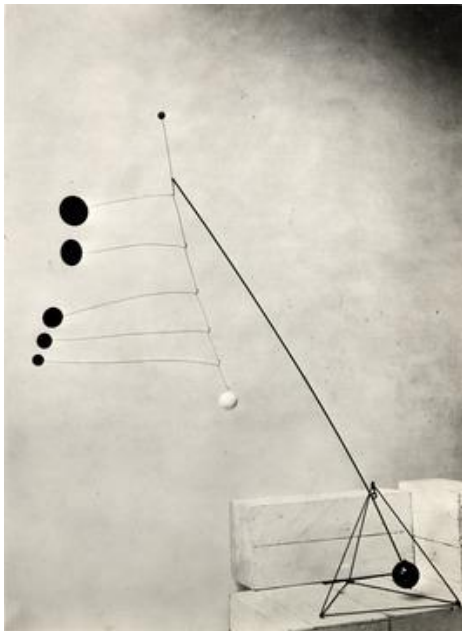


Figure 4

Object with Red Discs (1931)

Alexander Calder

<http://www.calder.org/life/photobiography>



Figure 5

Cône d'ébène (1933)

Alexander Calder

<https://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/calder/realsp/d37.shtm>



Figure 6

Calder with Steel Fish (1934)

<http://www.calder.org/life/photobiography>



Figure 7

Whale (1937)

Alexander Calder

<https://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/calder/realsp/d555.shtm>



Figure 8

La Spirale (1958)

Alexander Calder

<http://www.etab.ac-caen.fr/lyceevalognes/sculpture/SITE%20ESPACE%20MOUVEMENT%20ET%20SON/sculpture%20mouvement%20mental%20r%E9el%20virtuel.html>



Figure 9

Flamingo (1974)

Alexander Calder

<http://www.publicartinchicago.com/chicago-art-in-the-loop-2/li-sculp-6006b-2/>

End Notes

1. Deborah Boyer, "From Sculptor to Mobile Creator: Three Generations of Calder Artists," *The PhillyHistory Blog*, June 25, 2008, March 17, 2015, <http://www.phillyhistory.org/blog/index.php/2008/06/from-sculptor-to-mobile-creator-three-generations-of-calder-artists/>.
2. "Alexander Calder," *Wikipedia*, April 3, 2015, March 19, 2015, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Calder.
3. Rachel Gershman, "Alexander Calder," *The Art Story*, March 31, 2015, <http://www.theartstory.org/artist-calder-alexander.htm>.
4. Seymour Toll, "My Way: Calder In Paris," March 31, 2015, <http://www.pval.org/cms/lib/NY19000481/Centricity/Domain/105/Calder%20Info.pdf>.
5. "Alexander Calder," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Calder.
6. "Teaching the Language of Art Since 1875," *The Art Students League of New York*, April 2, 2015, <http://www.theartstudentsleague.org/About.aspx>.

7. Rachel Gershman, “Alexander Calder,” <http://www.theartstory.org/artist-calder-alexander.htm>.

8. Seymour Toll, “My Way: Calder in Paris,” <http://www.pval.org/cms/lib/NY19000481/Centricity/Domain/105/Calder%20Info.pdf>.

9. “Alexander Calder: 1898 –1976,” *National Gallery of Art*, April 2, 2015, <https://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/calder/realsp/room3-2a.htm>

10. Rachel Gershman, “Alexander Calder,” <http://www.theartstory.org/artist-calder-alexander.htm>.

11. Seymour Toll, “My Way: Calder In Paris,” <http://www.pval.org/cms/lib/NY19000481/Centricity/Domain/105/Calder%20Info.pdf>.

12. “Alexander Calder,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Calder.

13. *ibid.*

14. Rachel Gershman, “Alexander Calder,” <http://www.theartstory.org/artist-calder-alexander.htm>.

15. “Alexander Calder,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Calder.