

CALDER'S PLAYFUL GENIUS

With paper and paint, wire and wood, the renowned sculptor created a new vocabulary for modern art

By Phyllis Tuchman, *Smithsonian*, May, 2001

BY 1973, THE YEAR ALEXANDER CALDER TURNED 75, IT would have been quite a feat for this incomparable American sculptor to remember all the cities, countries and continents where his art was located. His colorful and boldly shaped mobiles and stabiles were ubiquitous. Scores of them were hanging from the ceilings of banking halls and airport terminals or sited by countless corporate headquarters, government agencies and universities. Calder's Circus, the "tiniest show on Earth," as the New York Times once put it, attracted crowds whenever and wherever it was shown--as it still does at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art. And there were bronzes, wood carvings, paintings and drawings, prints, jewelry, kitchen utensils, theater sets, tapestries, rugs, a painted BMW and who knows what else scattered around the world.

WHEN ASKED TO NAME HIS favorite artwork or project, Calder never hesitated, even though he had thousands of choices from a career spanning five decades. He readily cited the acoustic panels he executed in 1952 for the Aula Magna, a concert hall on the grounds of the Central University of Venezuela in Caracas. Ironically, the large ovoid shapes that seem to float across the ceiling and hover near the side walls of this enchanting auditorium remain among the least-known aspects of the artist's legacy. Calder got the commission the way he got so many others--with a bit of bravura. Architect Carlos Raul Villanueva wanted to put a mobile on the terrace outside the Aula Magna; Calder wanted something grander on view indoors. With the confidence of Babe Ruth pointing to where he would hit his next home run, the sculptor said he could design the acoustic panels for the concert hall.

For half a century, upon entering the auditorium when it's illuminated by houselights, concertgoers have been able to feel as if they have entered a multihued, three-dimensional abstract painting. With the hall darkened, the 30-foot elements, which range from deep blue to light yellow, resemble clouds scattered across a night sky.

Alexander Calder was born July 22, 1898, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to Alexander Sterling Calder, a second-generation sculptor, and his painter wife, Nanette. With both a grandfather, Alexander Milne Calder, and a father who were acclaimed artists--the former created the colossal statue of William Penn perched atop Philadelphia's City Hall and the latter carved the figure of George Washington on the arch in New York's Washington Square--you might say Alexander III was to the manner born. But according to his older sister, Margaret, the family lived "in crowded, unattractive quarters with little money and less security. [Mother] could never be sure where or when Father's next commission would come."

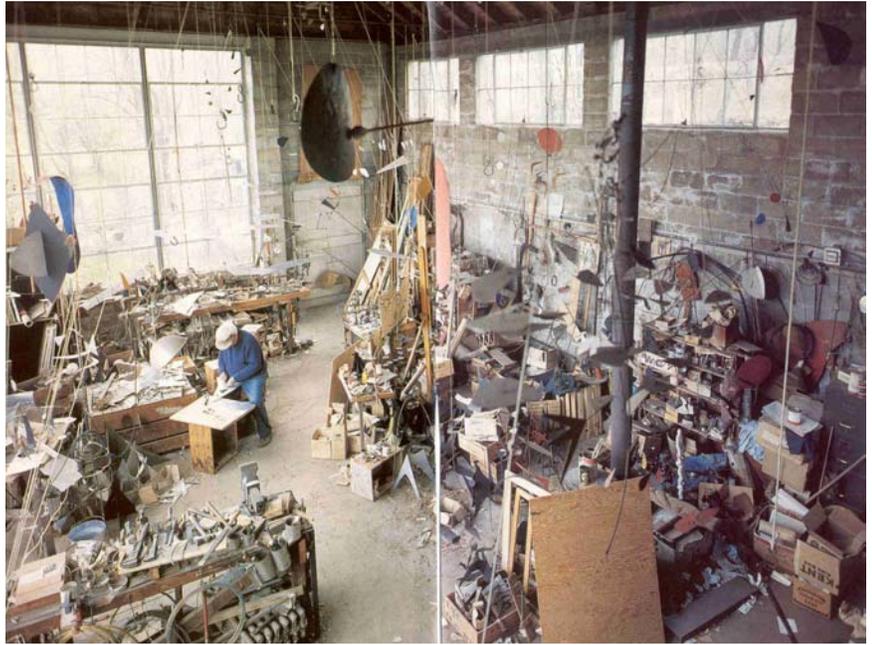


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For a variety of reasons, the family of four was constantly on the move. Before he was 17, Calder had lived in at least ten different houses and apartments in cities from Philadelphia to Pasadena. Warmhearted and fun-loving, young Sandy, as he was called, had his own workroom by the age of 10. Though the two children got a weekly allowance of only 5 cents, they earned extra money modeling for their parents at the handsome rate of 12 1/2 cents an hour. Sandy was about 4 when he posed for his father's 49-inch-high bronze of a nude boy, Man Cub, now in the collection of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts.

From an early age, Calder was intrigued by animals and pageantry. Being precocious and nimble-fingered, he could, moreover, make things to fit his fancy. He created a lion's cage by trimming a milk crate with ribbons and transformed a packing box into a castle with a gated drawbridge, peopling it with royalty bedecked in his specially designed sheet-brass and sealing-wax crowns. The talented boy also improvised several Noah's arks and made a miniature dog and duck from brass sheet as presents for his parents. Among his favorite tools was a gift from his sister--a 70-cent pair of pliers. (Years later, Calder would purchase Bernard pliers by the box load and claim he never left home without a pair.) Following a big storm in Pasadena in 1908, he gathered copper scrap left on the street by repairmen and with it made jewelry for his sister's dolls, umbrella frames and a circle C branding iron like the ones that intrigued him in Oracle, Arizona, where the family last lived. As an artist, he branded his own work with a large C intertwined with an A.



Amid a maze of materials, tools and works in progress, Calder focuses on the project at hand in his airy Roxbury studio in 1963.

In 1915 Calder enrolled at Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, New Jersey, to study mechanical engineering. Classmate William B. F. Drew later recalled how Calder could "look at the sheet with the problem, sketch the answer on it and put it in his inside pocket., to him the solution would be done in two or three steps that took the average boy six or seven." According to Drew, Calder loved puns, and in a Stevens's yearbook, another friend mentioned Sandy's "mischievous" grin, and called him "one of the best natured fellows there is." As for practical problems, the young Calder had some ingenious solutions. If, say, he noticed a hole in a sock, he'd cover the spot on his leg with India ink.

After graduation, Calder worked alternately over the next two years as a draftsman, adviser to a lumber trade journal, efficiency expert, insurance company investigator, traveling salesman for motorized garden equipment, fireman on a ship and store clerk in a logging camp. Never forgetting things that intrigued him back then, the mature artist adapted them to new purposes. He strung cables and pulleys, for instance, about his studio so he could move mobiles and other works as if he were hauling logs. And in countless gouaches, he seemed to be recollecting the riveting image he had experienced on one of his sailing voyages: early in the morning on a calm sea off Guatemala, he had seen "the beginning of a fiery red sunrise on one side and the moon looking like a silver coin on the other."

In 1923 Calder returned to New York. Having relished the drawing classes he had taken the year before from a friend of his father's, he enrolled at the *Art* Students League to study with another family friend, Ashcan artist John Sloan. Calder's other instructors, including George Luks and Guy Pene du Bois, were among the best America had to offer.

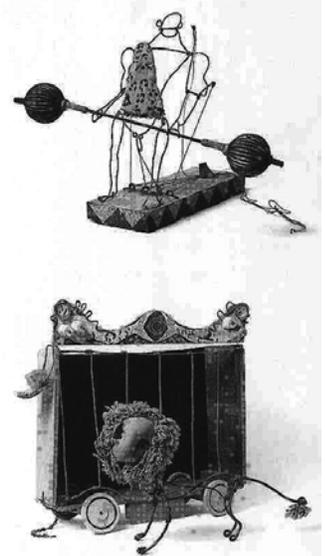
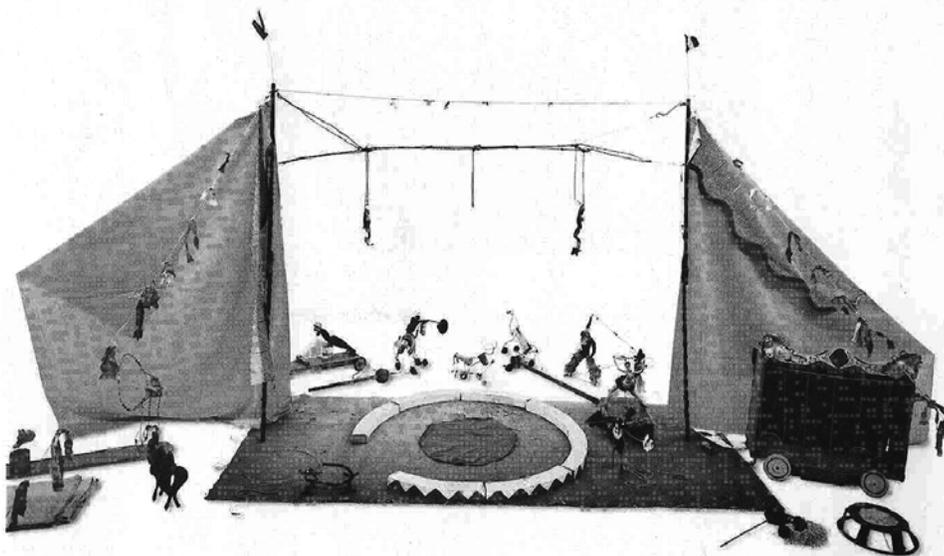
Amid the mayhem of models, easels and sketch pads, Calder, who reportedly was always joking around, created cartoons. When painting, he loved to convey the excitement and open spaces of big tops and cityscapes, his favorite subjects. He'd spend days, even weeks, at Coney Island, the circus, horse shows, boxing matches and the Central Park and Bronx zoos to get the drawings he was doing for the National Police Gazette just right. In 1926 the 28-year-old published *Animal Sketching*, an instruction manual peppered with sage advice. "Animals think with their bodies to a greater extent than man does," he wrote, and reminded readers that "Cows make splendid and inexpensive models" and that when using photographs, they should consult more than one, "as photos are often misleading as to essential features."

Following his parents' example, Calder wanted to complete his art education in Paris. With the promise of a monthly stipend of \$75 from his mother, he sailed for Europe in July 1926 as a crew member on a cargo boat. By the end of August, he had a temporary studio in Montparnasse. Besides taking drawing classes, he designed toy animals with the hope of generating an income from them. He also developed an idea that he had the year before when he created a sundial rooster out of wire. Now he bent and twisted wire into the first of several nearly life-size portraits of Josephine Baker, the popular African-American entertainer. The slender, stylized figures resembled three-dimensional line drawings suspended in space.

Calder was not in Europe long before he returned briefly to New York. Shuttling back and forth between the United States and Europe became his modus operandi, and for the rest of his life, he would try to spend parts of every year in both France and America. By the time he could afford any luxury he desired, he was set in his ways. However, when critic John Russell asked if anything was different about his life, he replied, yes... now he could buy a ticket to New York without worrying.



The artist and a signature work were caught at rest in the foundry in Tours, France, where his large stables were fabricated.



WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK (2)

Fascinated by the spatial relations, balance and movement of the circus, Calder created his own miniature version in 1926, including a wiry weight lifter and a woolly maned lion.

Back in Paris, Calder began staging his Circus--an outgrowth of his passion for toys--for friends and their guests. Someone brought along poet Jean Cocteau one evening; another time, Paul Fratellini, the legendary clown, came along. Calder fashioned his performers from such odds and ends as bits of wire, felt, wood, leather, paper, string, and even nuts and bolts. At first, he packed the miniature cast and its props into two valises. A few years later, he needed five suitcases to store the 70-odd cast members he had created--acrobats, a sword swallower, trapeze artists, a lion tamer, an ax and

knife hurler--along with their props, cages and the circus ring in which many of them risked their lives. Occasionally, two wobbly ambulance attendants would be summoned to carry someone off on a stretcher.

AFTER ANNOUNCING EACH ACT in bellowing tones, the artist manipulated the forms himself. Eventually, performances lasted about two hours and were accompanied by music from a Victrola. Guests, who had been sent linoleum-block invitations personally created by Calder, munched on peanuts as they sat on bleachers he had improvised from champagne crates.

With animal sculptures and toys in vogue on both sides of the Atlantic, Calder met success on several fronts. After exhibiting some of his animated animal sculptures at a respected Parisian art gallery in August 1927, he traveled to Oshkosh, Wisconsin, to show factory executives prototypes for his "Action Toys." Made from wooden door scraps, the animals--a kangaroo that hopped, a skating bear, a goldfish that swam and opened and closed its gills--became animated when pulled across a floor. The executives were favorably impressed and a deal was struck. For a publicity photograph three years later, Calder posed twirling a lasso above his head, with a herd of his manufactured bulls.

Remaining in the States, Calder performed his Circus many times. Unlike Paris, where creative personalities formed his audience, in New York, it was society figures who flocked to his shows. While in New York, Calder exhibited new, larger wire sculptures, and carved from wood a caravan of smaller-sized animals and figures. Among the works from this period are several whose allegorical and classical subjects recall statues by his father. Before turning 30, Calder also began work on an astonishing series of wire portraits of popular personalities--Calvin Coolidge, Jimmy Durante--and of new friends such as artist Fernand Leger. Back in France, he became acquainted with the Spanish Surrealist Joan Miro, and still looking for monetary success, hustled himself shows in Paris, New York and Berlin--all told, four in four months.

Until he met Louisa Cushing James on the boat back to New York in the summer of 1929, Calder looked like a confirmed bachelor. But he became smitten with the grandniece of Henry and William James, and courted the blue-eyed beauty from two sides of the ocean. While his father thought her "rather reserved and undemonstrative," his sister found her "quiet but gay... always ready for a trip or new adventure." A woman of means, she had a small inheritance on which the two could live modestly. They married in January 1931.

The year that Calder met his future wife also marked a turning point in his career. A few months before his nuptials, a friend brought him to the Montparnasse studio of Piet Mondrian, who had seen his Circus one night and wanted to meet him. Mondrian, a gaunt aesthete who shared with Calder a love of dancing, had transformed his atelier into a dramatic environment, with high white walls, light streaming through two large windows, a red Victrola and a series of colored rectangles attached to the walls. It was a place where Calder came to realize that "though I had heard the word 'modern' before, I did not consciously know or feel the term 'abstract.'" The American suggested to the Dutchman that he somehow animate the blocks of yellow, red, blue, black, and white paper. Using the language of engineering, Calder pictured how they could "oscillate in different directions and at different amplitudes." Mondrian, a bit taken aback by Calder's idea, demurred. But for Calder, the experience was transforming. "The visit to Mondrian gave me the shock that converted me. It was like the baby being slapped to make his lungs start working."

Returning to his own studio, Calder began to paint again. For subject matter, he turned to outer space, feeling cosmic imagery had an abstract character. For him, circles and arcs resembled planets in orbit--monochromatic grounds had the look of infinity. After a few weeks, he adapted those ideas to three dimensions, and never looked back.



Off to shop, Calder--who fashioned many of their cooking utensils--and his wife, Louisa, leave their retreat in France.



For the next four and a half decades, Calder mostly made sculpture. He never tired of finding new ways to suspend--from linear bars, circular tracks and triangular towers--every conceivable combination of spheres, disks, cones and other solid geometrical forms, as well as flat biomorphic shapes painted in primary colors. Years later, in a credo-like statement, he explained, "I feel there's greater scope for the imagination in work that can't be pinpointed to any specific emotion. That is the limitation of representational sculpture. You're often enclosed by the emotion, stopped."

IN HIS PRIME, CALDER CLAIMED to make 20 or 30 mobiles a year. "I begin," he once said, "at the small ends, then balance in progression until I think I've found the point of support. This is crucial, as there is only one such point and it must be fight if the object is to hang or pivot freely. I usually test out this point with strings to make sure before bending the wires. The size and angle of the shapes and how to use them is a matter of taste and what you have in mind." When asked how he knew a work was finished, he would blithely say, "When it's time to eat."

CALDER CALLED HIS FIRST SOLO show in Paris featuring abstract constructions in wood and wire, "Volumes--Vectors--Densities." The objects were, in his terms, "spheres, arcs, densities, and stopped motions." Works that swayed led to others turned by hand cranks and, in time, to pieces operated by motors. "Just as one can compose colors or forms," the artist stated in 1933, "so one can compose motions."

With his fine mind, Calder programmed the revolutions that individual forms in his sculptures would take. And during the late 1930s he was delighted when told that Albert Einstein had spent 40 minutes watching the 90 unique cycles of A Universe, one of his works on view in New York. Still, people who can't make heads or tails of $E=mc^2$ respond just as wholeheartedly to a Calder. As Leger, who wrote the preface to his American friend's 1931 show, noted, "It's serious without seeming to be."



A prolific painter of brilliantly colored gouaches, turning out more than 5,000 in his lifetime, Calder routinely worked at his easel in the afternoon. *Black Ringed Blue et Alia* is from 1964.

Calder never lost the capacity to make friends from all walks of life and all camps of art. He carefully acknowledged help received--but had a habit of adding a punch line at the expense of the other party. For example, he always credited the Dadaist Marcel Duchamp for proposing the term "mobile" for the American's art that moved. Nevertheless, when describing the day in his studio when the elegant conceptualist proposed the term for both movement and motif, Calder never failed to note that the fastidious Frenchman had gotten his fingers full of paint when he touched a sculpture that had not yet dried.

Sensitive to the rise of fascism and wanting a peaceful environment in which to raise children, Sandy and Louisa Calder returned to the United States in the early 1930s to find a home. Two hours north of New York City, on Painter Hill Road in Roxbury, Connecticut, they discovered a dilapidated 18th-century farmhouse, complete with a ruined barn, ice

house and 18 acres. It was theirs for \$3,500. Wooden crates used to transport their belongings from France were transformed by Calder into shelves and cupboards in the same way he once conjured up palaces and cages. And over the years, the ground floor became festooned with the metal serving and cooking utensils that Calder made for his wife. Their bedroom was similarly decorated with the pins, necklaces and earrings he also enjoyed creating.

His studios, of course, were always cluttered. Work hung from the ceiling, sat on tables and was stored in comers. The artist had an unorthodox filing system. Richard Marshall, curator of a Calder exhibition currently touring Japan, remembers how, while working on another show back in 1975, he noticed on the floor of the Roxbury studio an element from a "snowflake" sculpture. Says Marshall, "I pointed to it and asked what it was. Calder got a piece from somewhere

else and another part from another corner and put it all together. It was Roxbury Flurry, a classic white mobile from 1948. And in 1975, it was still on the floor."

Louisa Calder once summarized their lifestyle in Roxbury for a reporter: "I'd garden and he'd make things for the house and that's what we did." After rising early and going to the studio, Calder would return to the main house for a simple lunch with a glass or two or even three of red wine. If he'd been working on a mobile, he'd probably spend the afternoon painting gouaches. He also remained a master toymaker--creating a dollhouse with elevators for his two daughters. For his mother's 90th birthday, he made an astonishing confection of layered olive-oil and beer cans topped by four tiny mobiles.

Louisa Calder enjoyed cooking for family and friends. One of her delicacies was butter she made out of quince from their orchard. Calder gained weight, kept it on and developed a distinct manner of casual dress. By 1962, journalist Jean Davidson, who had married Sandra, the older of the Calder's daughters, described his father-in-law as follows: "A big, two-hundred-twenty-pound man, he will be wearing either a red or dark blue flannel shirt and a pair of dungarees, with a large leather belt fastened by a hammered buckle of his making. He is a bit untidy, rather than sloppy, always negligently at ease there is an assurance, a spontaneity, a placid weight in the gaze, that contradicts his costume."

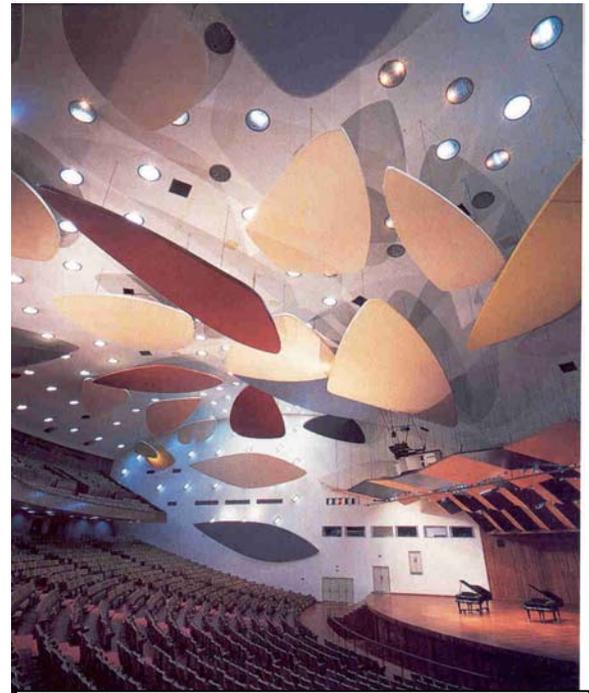
Louisa grew a wide range of flowers, and still had time to hook rugs from her husband's designs. When he wanted to dance, she would accompany him on her accordion. And he enjoyed his neighbors and they, him. Of the times they spent together, playwright Arthur Miller recalled, "The sun shone on his life. What he seemed to want most was to see or hear something delightful His hands were so deft and unhesitatingly sure. He seemed more like someone at play than an artist." One afternoon, when asked about the top of a barn belonging to Miller and his actress wife, Marilyn Monroe, Calder responded with great humor, "That's Marilyn's hot tin roof."

THE CALDERS REMAINED RENTERS in France until they acquired property in 1953 in Sache, near Tours. Surrounded by vineyards, it became a family compound, with several studios and a terrace for displaying outdoor sculptures. Many of Calder's stabiles, the subject of an exhibition opening this month at the Storm King Art Center, an hour north of New York City, were made near Sache. Because so many of these behemoths were commissioned for specific sites--world's fairs, Olympic Games--few have ever been seen together. Most retrospectives feature maquettes a few inches high and photographs of the real thing. For the first time, at Storm King, the real thing will be on view. They are an astounding lot--true feats of engineering, with an architectural presence that draws viewers to them.

Calder, it is clear, marched to his own drummer; no 24 hours were ever alike for him. There was always a new work, a visitor, a trip, another show. In many ways his life resembled the way Jean-Paul Sartre in 1946 famously explained that "what [a mobile] may do at a given moment will be determined by the time of day, the sun, the temperature or the wind."

When Calder died of a heart attack on November 11, 1976, his retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art had been on view for a month. Celebrities had been at the opening gala dinner; hundreds of visitors had poured into the galleries daily; and hundreds of thousands had watched coverage of the show on television. The artist was at the top of his powers. He belonged to a rare species--a person who could touch the lives of young and old, rich and poor, the man, woman and child on the street, or the President of the United States. Learning of Calder's death, Gerald Ford said, "Art has lost a genius." Part of that genius was his ability to transform complex visual images into simple and direct works of art that possess the gift of making us smile each time we see them.

By Phyllis Tuchman, who has been an admirer of Calder's art since seeing the 1964 retrospective at New York's Guggenheim Museum.



The colorful biomorphic forms of Calder's 1952 plywood acoustic panels for the Aula Magna concert hall in Caracas appear to float like clouds above the auditorium seats.