



## CALDER AND ABSTRACTION: FROM AVANT-GARDE TO ICONIC DIDACTICS

Alexander Calder (1898–1976) figures among the most influential and innovative sculptors of the twentieth century. His two most significant forms, the *mobile* (a sculpture made of wire and sheet metal set in motion by air currents) and *stabile* (similar in construction but stationary), are firmly embedded in the lexicon of art history. *Calder and Abstraction: From Avant-Garde to Iconic*, Calder's first museum exhibition in Los Angeles, brings together nearly fifty sculptures made between 1931 and 1975, underscoring the artist's original thinking and revolutionary contribution to Modern art.

Born in Pennsylvania, Calder was the son and grandson of artists celebrated for figurative, traditional sculpture. After earning a degree in mechanical engineering, Calder moved in 1926 to Paris, the epicenter of creative production for international artists, writers, poets, musicians, and choreographers. There Calder created his *Cirque Calder* (1926–31), a miniature circus made with wire and found materials. He often "performed" the circus in his studio, attracting the attention of the avant-garde, who were fascinated with such plebeian spectacles. Calder became friendly with and exhibited alongside Jean Arp, Marcel Duchamp, Wassily Kandinsky, Joan Miró, Piet Mondrian, and the Surrealists and Abstraction-Créationists, who championed abstraction.

In 1930 Calder's work underwent a radical departure toward abstraction following a visit to Mondrian's studio. Calder remembered: "I was particularly impressed by some rectangles of color he had tacked on his wall in a pattern after his nature. I told him I would like to make them oscillate—he objected. I went home and tried to paint abstractly—but in two weeks was back again among plastic materials." After the outbreak of World War II, Calder returned to the United States along with many European artists fleeing the Nazis. Through friendship and shared artistic vision, Calder became one of the émigrés' closest allies. He had brought

from Europe a unique blend of Dadaist, Bauhaus, and Surrealist sensibilities that he expertly translated into a new American Modernist vernacular.

Calder in the 1960s began to create large-scale public sculpture. LACMA was an early supporter of this bold new work, commissioning through the Art Museum Council the sculpture *Three Quintains (Hello Girls)* for the museum's 1965 opening (installed now in the Director's Roundtable Garden). With commissions from cities including Spoleto, Italy; Montreal, Canada; and Grand Rapids, Michigan, Calder continually created iconic sculpture for museum plazas, corporate headquarters, and government offices until his death in 1976.

### **Panels**

Calder met Miró in 1928 and Mondrian in 1930, and the decade that followed would prove to be the most radical of Calder's career, during which he developed both the mobile and the stabile. His early hanging sculptures, with flat and graphic lines, are like diagrams of discrete movable parts stirred by air. In *White Panel* (1936) Calder suspended biomorphic abstract objects of brightly painted sheet metal from an arm attached to a rectangular panel hung on the wall, thus creating a kinetic, three-dimensional painting. The elements dance within the rectangular framework in response to both gently flowing air currents and the winding of the cords with cranks situated above each object.

### **Mobiles**

After visiting Mondrian's studio in 1930, Calder became intent on creating sculpture that moved, impelled by either a motor or by air currents, thereby freeing it from the constraints of gravity and traditional sculptural mass. In 1931, Marcel Duchamp visited Calder's studio, where he was fascinated by one of the moving mechanical sculptures. Calder remembered: "I asked him what sort of a name I could give these things and he at once produced 'Mobile.' In addition to something that moves, in French it also means motive." French Existential philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre wrote one of the most eloquent observations of the sculptor's work. Brought to Calder's Connecticut studio by artist André Masson, Sartre reflected on his experiences with the mobiles: "Although Calder has not sought to imitate anything...his mobiles are at once lyrical inventions,

technical, almost mathematical combinations and the tangible symbol of Nature, of that great, vague Nature that squanders pollen and suddenly causes a thousand butterflies to take wing, that Nature of which we shall never know whether it is the blind sequence of causes and effects or the timid, endlessly deferred, ruffled and ruffled unfolding of an Idea."

### **Early Wire Sculptures**

Calder's sinuous, delicate wire abstractions redefined sculpture by blurring the boundaries of painting, drawing, and three-dimensional art. James Johnson Sweeney, curator of Calder's 1943 solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, described these works as "three-dimensional forms drawn in space by wire lines—much as if the background paper of drawing had been cut away leaving only the lines." Not merely indicating motion, line is itself in motion as it responds to air currents. In *Object with Red Ball* (1931), the spheres dangle from wires that can slide along their cantilever, allowing the viewer to determine the composition's arrangement; Calder's reliance on change in these early works is revolutionary. This group of sculptures also questions how discrete elements can be combined to create a coherent work.

### **Constellations**

Calder's 1940s "constellations" suggesting astral configurations allowed him to organize various elements into abstract arrangements. (Some were cleverly constructed from wood due to the scarcity of metal available during the war.) Such works are the continuation of a theme that had long interested him: Calder maintained a fascination with antique astronomical devices and models of the solar system. Other avant-garde artists, such as Wassily Kandinsky, Joan Miró, László Maholy-Nagy, Piet Mondrian, and Aleksandr Rodchenko, shared this captivation with the cosmos. Calder explained, "[T]he underlying sense of form in my work has been the system of the Universe, or part thereof...What I mean is the idea of detached bodies floating in space of different sizes and densities, perhaps of different colors and temperatures...some at rest, while others move in peculiar manners, seems to me the ideal source of form."

### **Work after World War II**

In his works from 1947-48 Calder blends the mobile and stabile forms, synthesizing issues he had grappled with throughout his career, such as

linearity and three-dimensionality, the abstract representation of nature, and the tension between mass and weightlessness. Organic steel forms support graceful, arcing branches that cut a broad swath as they rotate at an irregular rhythm. Rooted to the floor yet untethered by gravity, these works illuminate Calder's unique ability to encourage the viewer to pause and watch the elegant constructions slowly rotate and flutter. For Calder, "Each element able to move...to come and go in its relationships with the other elements is its universe. It must not be just a fleeting 'moment' but a physical bond between the varying events in life. Not extractions, but abstractions. Abstractions that are like nothing in life except in their manner of reacting."

### **Stabiles and Maquettes**

In the 1950s, Calder turned toward muscular, anchored, yet graceful sculptures termed *stabiles*. In these works, the architectural forms are cut from thick steel. With this stronger material—and the help of foundries and metal shops near his studios in both Roxbury, Connecticut, and Saché, France—Calder was able to construct larger, more durable sculptures that were ideal for public spaces. With commissions from cities all over the world, Calder began a virtually constant output of monumental public sculpture until his death in 1976. Today, encountering Calder's iconic sculpture in the center of a city, in front of a courthouse, amid government buildings, in a bustling airport, or at the entrance to a museum is a hallmark of the postwar public art movement that he helped to invent. The maquettes (or models) and full-scale *stabiles* assembled for this exhibition illuminate the many states of Calder's process.

### **Three Quintains (Hello Girls)**

When the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) opened its doors in 1965, the new complex was punctuated by several large outdoor sculptures, among which was Calder's *Three Quintains (Hello Girls)*. LACMA's Art Museum Council (AMC) in 1962 had organized a "fountain committee" to acquire a significant sculpture for the new Hancock Park location, and its members researched countless artists and conferred with sculptor Isamu Noguchi before offering Calder the commission. Calder accepted in June 1964, after which AMC President Laurelle Burton announced the approved commission: "To have a man of Alexander Calder's prominence be the first to design a

sculpture specifically for the new museum would set the standards for future efforts, on the part of the artists and donors."

Calder visited the site and consulted with the architects, designers, and museum officials through the fall of 1964. The mobiles for the fountain were made in Connecticut at the Waterbury Iron Works and then sent to Los Angeles in late November. Calder returned to the site in mid-December to place the mobiles and oversee their installation. At the AMC's request, Calder also designed a poster to commemorate the museum's official opening on April 1, 1965. As the photographs of the completed work reveal, *Three Quintains (Hello Girls)* is an exuberant fountain, with simple geometric mobile forms floating in the air propelled by water streaming from four jets. The work heralded a new era for Los Angeles as it expanded its population, influence, and cultural sophistication—and marked the first time a Calder sculpture on the West Coast had been specially commissioned for its site. *Three Quintains (Hello Girls)* is on view in LACMA's Director's Roundtable Garden, on the east side of campus.