

CALDER. GRAVITY AND GRACE.

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"Why must art be static? You look at an abstraction, sculptured or painted, an entirely exciting arrangement of planes, spheres, nuclei, entirely without meaning. It would be perfect but it is always still. The next step in sculpture is motion."

Alexander Calder, 1932

The kinetic potential of art was of primary interest to Alexander Calder throughout his career. Employing the language of abstraction, Calder captured movement through a range of structures that offered radical alternatives to the prevailing notions of sculpture and profoundly impacted the history of 20th-century art. On view in the second-floor galleries, Calder: Gravity and Grace traces the development of the artist's unique vision through a selection of more than 65 sculptures created over his five decades of involvement with abstract form. The exhibition evidences how Calder's desire to create an art that would resonate with life led to a constant engagement with the pull of gravity, the circulation of air, and the play of chance.

Born in Philadelphia, Calder was the son of two artists, and even though he was schooled as a mechanical engineer his artistic inclinations eventually prevailed. In 1923, Calder enrolled at the Art Students League in New York, where he studied with Ashcan School painters George Luks and John Sloan. Calder's skill at rendering representational figures won him a job as an illustrator at the National Police Gazette the following year, and in 1925 he was asked by the paper to produce illustrations of shows by the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey circus. This two-week assignment initiated Calder's fascination with this subject and eventually led to his *Cirque Calder*, a performance featuring intricate figures crafted from wire. The artist served as orchestrator, ringmaster, and puppeteer, manipulating the mechanical structures by hand, and the whole was accompanied by music and sound effects. *Cirque Calder* was first performed in 1926 in Paris, after Calder had moved there, and was subsequently repeated on both sides of the Atlantic over the next several

years. Calder remained active in other mediums-painting, drawing, and sculpting-but it was through these performances that he met members of the Parisian avant-garde, including Le Corbusier, Fernand Léger, Joan Miró, Piet Mondrian, and Theo van Doesburg.

Calder's aesthetic was substantially altered by his first visit to Mondrian's Paris studio, in the fall of 1930. Upon viewing the Dutch artist's spare geometric compositions in the isolation of the studio environment, Calder was overwhelmed by the intensity of Mondrian's forms and envisioned them in motion. From this point forward, Calder abandoned the figurative wire sculptures he had made since 1926, employing instead a fully-abstract, sculptural language. In 1931, he joined Abstraction-Création, a newly formed group devoted to nonfiguration, and that same year, in an exhibition at the Galerie Percier, Calder showed a series of abstract works that make reference to the natural world and the laws of physics that govern it. Constructed from wire and wood, many of these works evoke the arrangements of universes. In *Croisière* (1931), thin wires delineate a spheroid volume to which small wooden balls are tethered by wire. The flexibility of the metal causes the wooden balls to quiver, and therefore the sculpture implies the perpetual motion of cosmic gases.

Also in 1931, Calder began to construct sculptures composed of discrete, moveable parts activated by either a hand crank or an electric motor. Marcel Duchamp christened these structures "mobiles," a name that plays upon the word's dual meaning in French, implying both motive and movement. It was autonomous motion that was Calder's primary concern, however, and by 1932 he had begun to create hanging works powered entirely by the wind. Today a vernacular art form, Calder's innovation was, at the time, a major avant-garde achievement, contrasting dramatically with the static sculptural forms that preceded it. Calder's early mobiles are comprised of carved wooden pieces or metal bits dangling on wires from horizontal supports, connected and hung from the ceiling. The pendant ebony forms of *Cône d'ébène* (1933), for example, suspended at varying levels, bob slowly back and forth in response to the wind and the force of gravity.

Calder soon began to use industrial materials in his increasingly elaborate structures, including flat metal pieces, which were sometimes bent or painted. These structures are sculptural counterparts to Miró's paintings of buoyant, biomorphic figures and Jean Arp's amorphous reliefs. *Mobile (Arc of Petals)* (1941) is one of many works from this period whose forms were inspired by organic life. The work features a cascade of painted aluminum "petals"; large, heavy shapes sway serenely at the top of the structure, while agitated "new growth" dips and rocks below. The dancing and spinning of the mobile's disks evoke the intangible qualities of the air that propels them, while its unpredictable response to its environment brings to mind a living organism. In Calder's words, "When everything goes right a mobile is a piece of poetry that dances with the joy of life and surprises."

It was Arp who coined the term "stabile" in 1932 to refer to Calder's early universes that were not motorized. The stabile's form soon became more substantial, cut from sheets of metal that Calder hand painted and attached to one another at various angles. While the parts are immobile, the stabile's dynamic three-dimensional form suggests kinetic potential and demands physical motion on the part of the viewer, who must circulate around the work to view it. Calder also composed a hybrid of the mobile and the stabile—the standing mobile, which consists of a fixed base and freely hanging parts. In *Aluminum Leaves, Red Post* (1941), for example, the stable base supports an intricate system of cantilevers that give the individual "leaves" extraordinary mobility.

Calder conceived of his "constellations" during the years 1942-43, expanding on his interest in the physics of the natural world. The constellations, created during a wartime shortage of sheet metal, were made by attaching hand-carved wooden forms—some plain, others painted—to the ends of rigid steel wires. There were approximately 29 constellations created during this time, and their structures vary considerably. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum's *Constellation* is one of several works that is affixed to a wall; others extend vertically from freestanding bases; while still others contain movable parts.

In 1951, Calder devised a new kind of mobile/stabile combination, related structurally to his constellations. These "towers," affixed to the wall with a nail, are comprised of wire struts and beams that jut out from the wall, with moving objects suspended from their armatures. Sound, which had been an ingredient in Calder's process since 1932, also became a focus of his explorations during this time. Developed around 1948, his "gongs" include a hanging plate and a striker, whose unpredictable movements emit a startling "whang." Color, as well, is particularly prominent in Calder's later works. The artist spoke of mostly limiting himself to the use of black and white because they represent opposite ends of the spectrum. Red followed as his favored hue, for its distinction from black and white, and then blue and yellow, the other primary colors. Although he sometimes used secondary colors, Calder eventually concluded that additional color derivations only served to confuse the aesthetic effect. *Red Lily Pads (Nénuphars rouges)*, installed in the museum's atrium for this exhibition, is a striking example of how the artist used intense color to establish visual presence.

From the 1950s on, Calder's works expanded in size, in part because he was frequently commissioned to design sculptures for outdoor sites or for large atriums. These massive structures engage their environments in a pronounced manner: perforations or openings in solid forms enlist the surrounding space; voluminous mobiles hover overhead; viewers move around, under, and through stables. Often, in creating these large-scale works, Calder would make maquettes in a more manageable scale in order to facilitate refining the forms.

Calder once said, "My purpose is to make something like a dog, or like flames; something that has a life of its own." His abstract sculptures retain a distinct vitality derived from the natural world and continue to engage audiences in new ways. Presented within the contemporary structure of Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, *Calder: Gravity and Grace* offers viewers the chance to reconsider the sculptor's organic forms within an equally innovative and dynamic architectural setting. Not since the 1964 retrospective of Calder's work presented at the Guggenheim's landmark Frank Lloyd Wright building in New York has such a concordance of art and architecture been realized.