

Below: Calder designed brass-wire zarfs in c1940 to serve as handles for Chinese porcelain teacups, protecting fingers from the heat of espresso coffee. His preference was always to improve the function of existing objects rather than replace them with something mass-produced. Right: in Herbert Matter's photograph of 1950, converted cups sit alongside Calder's ebony spoons on one of the artist's handmade coffee tables in the 'big room' at Roxbury



Above left: one of many samba rattles (c1948) that the artist made from tin cans, wooden dowels and pebbles for the couple's celebrated Latin-dance parties, which often went on all night. Above right: when these candles of c1947 are alight, the mobile sheet-metal forms catch the breeze, casting moving shadows on to nearby walls. Opposite: in c1938 Alexander, yawning, and Louisa have lunch with the architect Stamo Papadaki, a close neighbour who had first met Calder in Paris earlier in the decade



# LIFE'S LITTLE TREASURES

At Alexander Calder's home in Connecticut – bought in the early 1930s after he and his wife, Louisa, returned from Paris – few objects remained untouched by the artist's hand. With tireless creativity, he filled the sprawling property with custom-made or cannibalised objects, from sheet-metal light fittings to coffee-tin ashtrays, carved-ebony spoons to a broken-glass dinner bell – domestic gems that are currently on show in Britain. Kaitlyn A. Kramer follows the wire connecting this 'heart-stopping clutter' and Calder's gallery art

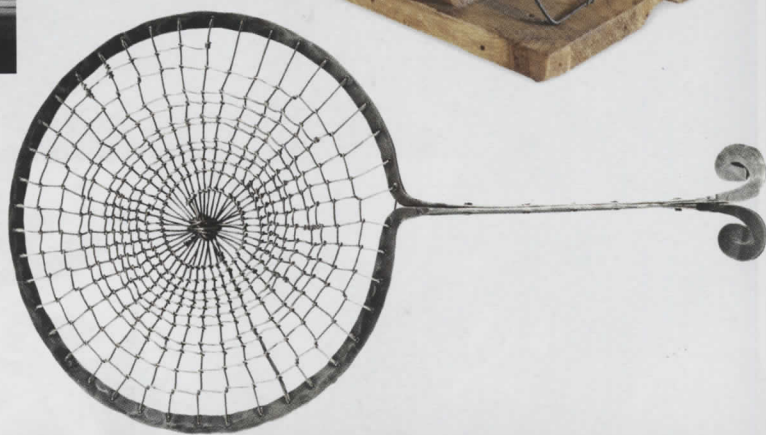




Left: a rack filled with grills and utensils in the kitchen. Below: Calder experimented with various designs to create the perfect prototype toaster. The wire disc on this one, c1942, keeps the slice warm, melting the applied butter



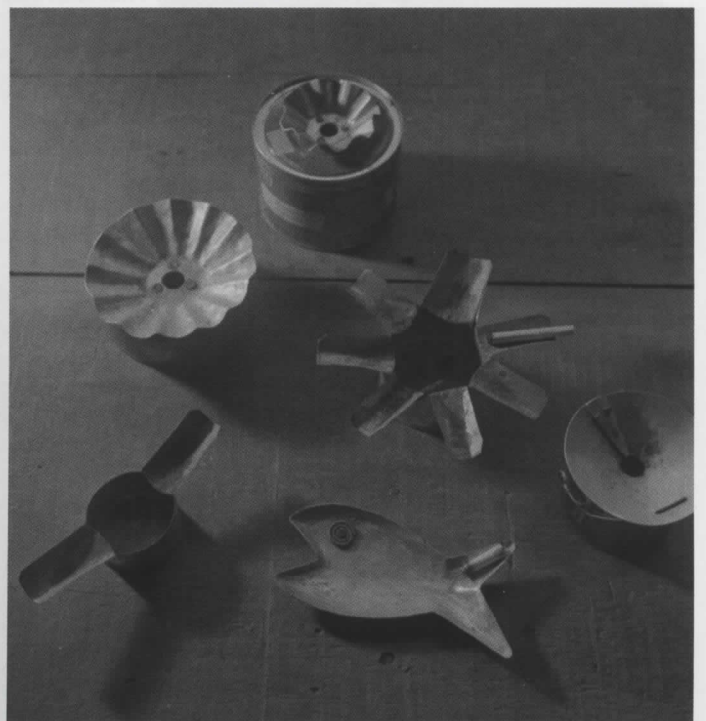
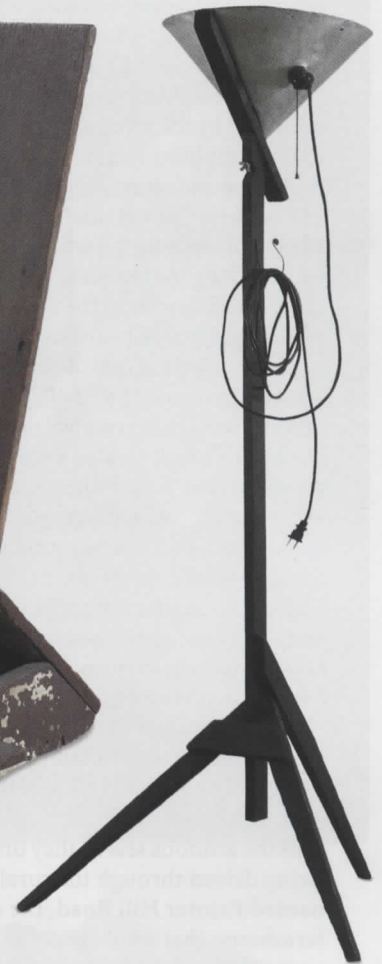
Right: this exquisite milk skimmer with a scrolled handle is reminiscent of a spider's web. The spiral form, made of silver wire, can also be seen in Calder's jewellery. Below: this dinner bell, crafted c1942 from a broken Mexican wine glass, wire and shards of glass, anticipates the artist's mobile *Tines*, made a year later, that features pitchfork prongs found on the Connecticut property. Below right: in 1950, Matter captured the glass-and-wire *Roxbury Fish* hanging in front of the kitchen window, facing quince trees planted by Louisa







Left: Calder's fireside chairs in the 'front room' essentially improve the experience of sitting on the floor, supporting the back. The accordion and mandolin in the corner remind us of the couple's love of music. Below left: the long, straight chair back recalls Rietveld's 'Red Blue' chair of 1918. Below right: a floor lamp, c1935



Top: a fish ashtray (also seen right), c1935, fashioned from sheet metal and wire. Above: made from wooden fragments, this is one of only three chess sets by Calder. The rooks are simply sawn-off sofa legs upturned. Right: this array of ashtrays – many unspillable – designed by the artist captures both his visual wit and his sociability. Louisa and he were generous hosts



**INSIDE A BARN** at Durslade Farm, in the West Country, a game of chess is underway. The pieces, made of wooden offcuts painted red and blue, were handcrafted by American artist Alexander Calder, one of the most influential sculptors of the 20th century. The set is displayed mid-game atop an aluminium coffee table flanked by low wooden chairs, a spot lamp and the artist's studio clogs – all of them Calder-made.

In the exhibition, on view in the converted farm buildings occupied by the art dealer Hauser & Wirth Somerset, Calder's striking mobiles and stabiles are shown among a collection of the household objects he created while living in the countryside of Roxbury, Connecticut. Like his works of art, these domestic items demonstrate the artist's unceasing creativity and authentic way of living. As the photographer Pedro E. Guerrero recalled about his first visit to the house: 'I was about to discover complete happiness in heart-stopping clutter.'

To be a guest in the Calders' home (which is still in the family) is to be surrounded by subtle ingenuity; it's a place where no piece of furniture, kitchen utensil or loo-roll holder was untouched by the artist's hand. Calder, with his wife, Louisa, created an environment that was at once winsome and wholly willed, where every customised serving spoon and door latch perfectly served its function, and was beautiful. 'The Calder households,' writes the cartoonist Robert Osborn, 'are absolutely devoid of any sham. There is not a false note in any place they live. One feels only the simplicity and directness of their lives... and to be in a Calder house is to bask in an analysable beauty which seems more like a living form than an arranged set of contrived objects and walls.'

In the summer of 1933, Calder and Louisa left Paris for the USA hoping to start a family. Their plan was to rent an apartment in New York City, where they would winter, and ultimately settle in a house in the country. In his autobiography, Calder recalls the arduous search they underwent before hiring an agent. Being driven through the rural town of Roxbury, up the aptly named Painter Hill Road, the couple spotted the dilapidated farmhouse that would become their first real home. As Calder wrote of this pivotal moment: 'We walked out in the pasture and saw a great rocky mound on top of a gentle hill. That sealed it.'

The house required copious renovations, which gave Calder the chance to create spaces singularly suited to his and his wife's needs, and to fill these spaces with the myriad objects that would define their way of living. The biggest and sunniest room, originally a kitchen, would become the living room, also known as the 'front room'. The intimate space housed several clever contrivances, from standing mobiles to homemade lamps and chairs.

Calder built his first Roxbury studio adjacent to the farmhouse in an old icehouse. He later converted it into a second, bigger living room after a new studio was built on the foundations of an old dairy barn. This 'big room', where Calder hung paintings by friends and eminent artists such as Fernand Léger, Joan Miró and Wifredo Lam alongside various artefacts he collected, also staged the Calders' famed dancing parties, friends filling the room with cigarette smoke and lively motion. Alexander and Louisa were particularly fond of the samba, a dance they learned on a lengthy trip to Brazil in 1948, and wished to bring back to their community in Roxbury. As Calder later put it: 'We then tried to indoctrinate the countryside.' To add fuel to the revels, Calder fashioned rattles from colourful tin cans, wooden dowels and small rocks for the acoustics, both to accompany the music and encourage his guests to gyrate.

It was from empty tins, too, that Calder created his beloved ash-trays, with ingenious, often 'unspillable' designs that could hold a party's worth of butts and ashes. The *New York Times* art critic John Canaday was especially taken by them on a visit, praising them as functional, decorative and ultimately disposable. 'Although,' he concludes, 'no-one who has ever managed to get away with one has been known to treat it with anything but reverence.'

The playwright Arthur Miller, a Roxbury neighbour, once said of the couple: 'There was something noble in them and in their house.' That nobility could reside in something as innocuous as a coffee pot, altered by the artist with wire fixtures for improved use, and was evident to all who were invited into their home.

This imbuing of household articles with the artist's discreet charm is most evident in the kitchen, described by art critic Hilton Kramer as 'a room that looks today almost more like a fantasy of a country kitchen than an actual place to prepare and consume meals'. Calder constructed cupboards from the large wooden crates in which their furniture was transported from Paris, adorning them with wire handles shaped into a spiral that was unmistakably his. Hanging from these custom-made cupboards and adjoining walls are a party-sized ladle, an intricate milk skimmer, various grills and forks of distinct shapes.

Swiss/American photographer Herbert Matter recorded these domestic details; the pictures attest to the artist's visual language living in these practical objects. Harsh shadows duplicate and enlarge the thin metal forms on the kitchen wall, recalling the cinematic quality of Calder's hanging wire portraits of the 1920s. While the grills and strainers were not meant to be seen as formal works of art, the photographs illustrate the utilitarian objects' grace.

Matter also captures the unremarkable porcelain teacups that Calder upgraded to coffee cups by adding brass-wire zarfs, which curve round the bases and twist into serpentine handles, providing relief from the hot liquid inside. It was common for Calder to repair an object instead of replacing it, preferring to improve on a design than depend on an unreliable, mass-produced substitute. With a deep-blue Mexican wine glass that had lost its stem, he inverted the vessel and fastened wire around the neck, where he set four glass shards to dangle, producing a divine dinner bell. The translucent glass hangs like a mobile, seemingly too delicate to fulfil the object's intended function. However, when activated, glass hits glass and the bell confidently chimes.

At Hauser & Wirth Somerset, the improvised summoner is on display among a selection of Calder's domestic items and many of the masterworks he created during the decades he lived in Roxbury. Between these distinct objects and pieces, a visual narrative unfolds. The dangling glass on the dinner bell alludes to the mesmerising *Tines* (1943) – a mobile composed of discarded glass, a shell, and broken pitchfork prongs that Calder gleaned from his property. When set in motion, the tines occasionally interact, producing gentle and unexpected clinks. Even from detritus, Calder conjures splendour. Throughout the exhibition, it becomes clear that the imaginative environment he fostered in his household propelled his artistic output, as he continued to challenge the conventions of sculpture. On Calder's visionary art, Jean-Paul Sartre wrote: 'He captures true, living movements and crafts them into something.' And that something, like the chime of a glass dinner bell, lingers ■

'Alexander Calder: From the Stony River to the Sky' runs at Hauser & Wirth Somerset, Durslade Farm, Dropping Lane, Bruton BA10 0NL, until 9 Sept. For opening times, ring 01749 814060, or visit [hauserwirthsomerset.com](http://hauserwirthsomerset.com)





Above: the perfect utensil for entertaining, this party-size spoon, c1945, was made from folded sheet metal, held in place by rivets. Right: in Matter's picture of 1938, Calder dances with his daughter Sandra as Louisa plays the accordion outside the clapboard house on Painter Hill Road

Left: Calder made a series of loo-roll holders – this one is from 1949 – in the shape of a hand with one bent finger that supports the paper. With characteristic verve, the hand appears to offer the tissue to the bathroom guest



Left: this perforated-aluminium light fitting in an upstairs hallway redistributes and softens the harsh rays emanating from an exposed bulb. Calder's design has a wonderfully organic quality, evoking a shark's jaw or a moose's antler. Above: a corrugated sheet of metal plus a coffee tin add up to an innovative ashtray