ALEXANDER CALDER: MULTUM IN PARVO

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Alexander Calder moved from the miniature to the monumental and back with more easygoing genius than any other sculptor who has ever lived. He created tiny tabletop standing mobiles with the spider-web strength and delicacy of an Emily Dickinson poem. And he produced stabiles fifty or sixty feet high that have the colossal impact of Melville's *Moby-Dick*. He had a preternatural sensitivity to matters of size and scale, whether the relation of the part to the whole within a single sculpture or the relation of the sculpture to the men and women who looked at it, touched it, and walked around it and sometimes even through it. All of this, however, was only the beginning of Calder's engagement with questions of size and scale, because for an artist these are also emotional matters, and Calder had not only the lyric wit needed to bring off a very small work but also the rhetorical sweep needed to realize a very large one. How he managed such feats of variegated artistic imagination remains one of the mysteries of modern art.

Historians who want to press Calder's constantly mutating achievement into a streamlined form tend to argue that he started small, with the miniature spectacle of the *Cirque Calder* (fig.1) in the late 1920s, and finished big, with monumental works including the 53-foot-high *Flamingo*, installed in 1974 on a plaza in Chicago, dramatically juxtaposed with two buildings by Mies van der Rohe. Such an overview of the career is at best a terrible simplification, for even Calder's smaller works imply immensities, while the success of his very largest stabiles depends on his attention to the smallest detail. That the challenges of small-scale expression concerned Calder throughout his life is made abundantly clear by the works gathered in this exhibition, which were produced over a period of more than thirty years. With Calder there was a constant negotiation between different ideas about size and scale. He himself explained on a number of occasions that the key to his work was disparity. On the most fundamental level he was referring to the juxtaposition of disparate elements in his mobiles, so as to create a complicated and engaging balance. Then again, disparity can be seen as a guiding principle in Calder's work as a whole, for he moved back and forth between much smaller and much larger works, no doubt feeling that different sizes and scales answered different needs and that only when taken together would these disparate expressions reflect the fullness of his experience.

If Calder's lifelong fascination with monumentality came naturally to an artist with an extravagantly extrovert, larger-than-life personality, his feeling for the smaller and even for the miniature object reflected other sides of the man: his commitment to concision, to intimacy, to tenderness. Carl Zigrosser—a legendary connoisseur of prints who happens to have organized Calder's first show of wire sculpture at New York's Weyhe Gallery in 1928—late in life wrote a book called *Multum in Parvo: An Essay in Poetic Imagination*. The Latin phrase—meaning "much in little," "a great amount in a small space"—is highly suggestive. Although Zigrosser was focusing on small prints by artists from Holbein and Altdorfer to Rockwell Kent, he made some observations about the particular power of the smaller work of art that certainly resonate with Calder's achievement. Zigrosser wanted to define "the archetype of brevity," and argued that "abstraction, conciseness, symbolism, and imaginative potential are basic to the concept. A multiplicity of detail is concentrated into a unified principle, the particular is transformed into the

universal, a largeness of meaning is conveyed with the utmost economy of means."[1] Certain small works of art, Zigrosser believed, have a power not unlike the power of mathematical or scientific equations. We do feel that kind of brevity, elegance, and eloquence in some of Calder's smallest standing mobiles, the tiniest of which—it is a work from around 1954 (page 106)—is less than an inch-and-a-half high.

II

Let's get some definitions out of the way. Size refers to something absolute; Samuel Johnson, in his pioneering English dictionary, refers to it as "a settled quantity."[2] Scale refers to a relationship. But because we experience the absolutes of size within a context of many objects of different sizes, we invariably see sizes in relation to one another—which means that size can also imply or suggest a sense of scale. If such talk about size and scale can become a little too theoretical for some people's taste, when it comes to Calder there is at least one thing about which we can be quite sure. A feeling for size, scale, and measure—as well as a recognition of their centrality for the artistic imagination—was Calder's birthright. His father and paternal grandfather were sculptors and his mother was a painter, so that he grew up in a family where there was a great deal of discussion about such artistic matters, discussions that certainly had an impact on this sensitive, spirited, artistic, and mechanically minded child.

Born in Philadelphia in 1898, Calder had his deepest early immersion in questions of size and scale as an adolescent, when his father was directing sculpture projects for the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco. Most of the gargantuan sculptures and sculptural groups destined to decorate the Exposition grounds had been designed by artists back East and would have been nearly impossible to transport across the continent at their actual size. So models of the sculptures were sent to San Francisco, and Calder's father, Alexander Stirling Calder, oversaw a workshop where the models were turned into immense monuments. In his *Autobiography with Pictures*, published half a century later, Calder remarked that he "was very much interested in the pointing machine for enlarging small sculpture." He lovingly recalled the mechanism of this machine, with its two turntables—one for the small model and one for the larger sculpture—and how he was "particularly fascinated by the mechanics, the rotating motions and the parallel needles of the process."[3] It is one of the fascinations of Calder's life that in his later years he would, like his father before him, produce enormous sculptures and deal with the challenges of scaling up small works—precisely the process he had watched so intently as a boy. Calder's grandfather, Alexander Milne Calder, had also produced monumental public sculpture, including hundreds of carvings and a huge bronze statue of William Penn for the Philadelphia City Hall.

My guess is that even as a boy Calder could see that questions of size and scale were both practical matters, facts verifiable through measurements of one sort or another, and also emotional matters, questions of how works of different sizes and dimensions affected the viewer. His father, although best known for his public monuments—among them the *Fountain of Energy* at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, with its fantastical combination of globe, horse, rider, and acrobatic musicians—was also attuned to the charms of smaller works, creating modestly sized figures that have a casual, playful, sometimes erotic quality. Calder's mother, the painter Nanette Lederer Calder, often worked on intimately sized canvases and also created a number of striking figure studies on unusual, vertically elongated formats. Although in later years Calder liked to say that as a boy he had been bored by all his parents' highfalutin' talk about art, it was surely from his parents that he first learned how the small might be made monumental and how in even the largest work attention must be paid to what Calder, in an unpublished statement from 1943, referred to as "fineness and delicacy."[4]

III

Calder made small works for any number of reasons. Many were maquettes, models for much larger objects, sometimes produced as proposals to be presented to architects or clients. This is the case with six works from 1939 that are included in this exhibition, each a mobile with wood, wire, and metal elements mounted on a wooden base (pages 30–31). They were produced for a friend of Calder's, the architect Percival Goodman, as possible elements in Goodman's submission to a competition for a new Smithsonian Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.; Goodman did not win the competition, and the winning design, by Eliel and Eero Saarinen, was never realized. At other times Calder produced maquettes for projects that were already approved, as templates from which full-scale works would be created—in the later years often at the Biémont ironworks in Tours, near the village of Saché where Calder and his wife, Louisa, spent the preponderance of their time in the 1960s and 1970s. Other smaller objects became gifts for friends, while many were made with an eye to collectors who could not afford the larger works or wanted something special to sit on a coffee table or a desk. Then there were works that Calder created as little experiments or *jeux d'esprit,* allowing himself to pursue ideas that did not seem to lend themselves to larger treatment, at least at the moment. Finally, certain small works were designed to be easily transportable, an idea of considerable interest to this artist who loved to travel and indeed spent much of his life moving back and forth across the Atlantic.

If you examine very carefully the works in this exhibition, you will probably sense something of the scientific experimentalist in Calder's approach, for there are times when he is putting his art under the microscope, revealing in the very smallest stabile or standing mobile the same physical properties that inform his largest ones. His approach, mingling a pleasurably speculative spirit with a trained engineer's precision technique, can also suggest a metaphysical dimension in this man who was in many respects so pragmatic. When you look at the tiniest standing mobiles you can't help but begin to wonder how much can be packed into how little. You may even find your mind wandering back to the old theological enigma of how many angels can dance on the head of a pin (an enigma that has sometimes been posed ironically, which would have been fine with Calder). For the inventor of the mobile, who was fascinated by the way objects move through space, the miniature was another way of playing with space, of dramatically shrinking space, of taking what might be vast and rendering it nearly microscopic. Such a shrinkage of space also has an emotional dimension, the power to transform public spectacle into private drama. That for Calder such experiments could be associated with ideas about intimacy and even about love is made abundantly clear if we consider what is perhaps the most extraordinary group of tiny works he ever composed, a set of five standing mobiles that fit in a cigar box, given by Calder to Louisa for her forty-third birthday in 1948 (pages 82–83). Love, whatever its public manifestations, is always in some sense a secret between two people—a big thing for them and a relatively small thing for everybody else. By distilling the designs for five complex standing mobiles, which could easily have been expanded to the dimensions of a city square, into a group of five miniatures, Calder found a powerful metaphor for the immensity of his most private feelings—his feelings for Louisa.

Modern artists, aware of the absence of communal faiths or beliefs strong enough to compel acceptance, are sometimes inspired to invent personal totems, allegories, and myths. During his lifetime, Calder's public works were often embraced as heroic images by a public with little feeling for the statues of gods, kings, statesmen, and soldiers that had once been the preferred ornaments for city squares. At the same time, Calder was not uninterested in developing more personal signs, symbols, and cosmologies, from the rebus-like networks of curiously shaped elements in his constellations of the 1940s (page 55) to the letter forms which he fused into beguiling arabesques for some of the jewelry he made especially for friends. Although he was far too independent a spirit to ever think of himself as

2. Calder's mobile (page 23) hanging in the corner at *Exposition Surréaliste d'Objects*, Galerie Charles Ratton, Paris, 1936. Photograph by Laurence Nadeline

a Surrealist or to pursue some particularly Surrealist interest in the unconscious, Calder revealed his interest in a line of thinking emphasized by André Breton, the poet who really defined Surrealist thought, when he very often referred to his three-dimensional works not as sculptures but as objects. In the 1930s Breton said about what he thought of as Surrealist objects that "they seem odd, bizarre, meaningless and ludicrous to the uninitiated. These objects can acquire meaning and purpose only when they are incorporated into the complete picture of a poetic vision."[5] Among the works in this exhibition is a mobile (page 23) that was included in a show of Surrealist objects organized by Breton at Galerie Charles Ratton in Paris in 1936 (fig. 2), and it is indeed a gathering of odd stuff, primarily bits of broken glass, which when set in motion compose "the complete picture of a poetic vision."

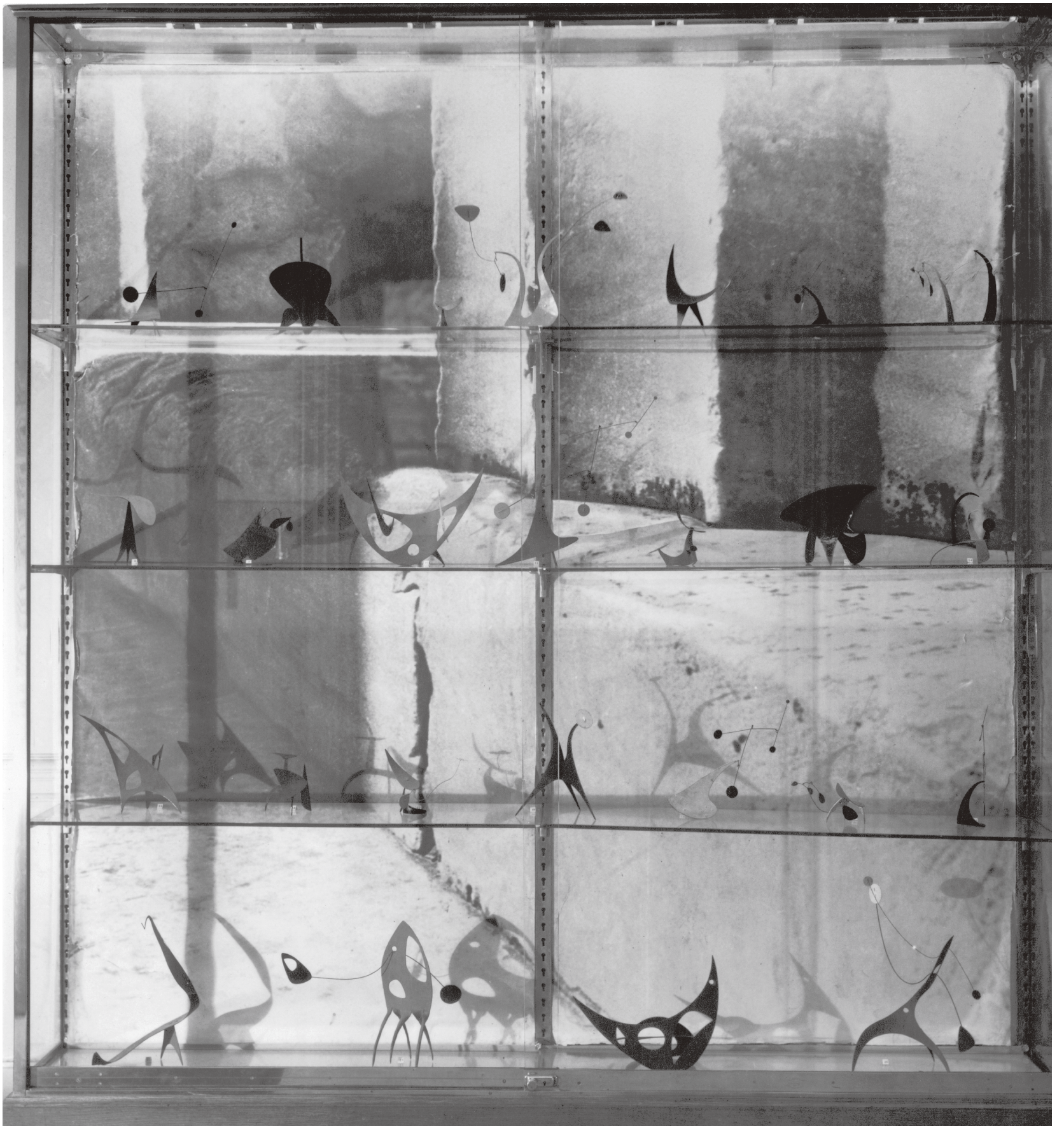
Contemplating Calder's most intimate objects, I can see parallels or affinities with intimate works by some of his contemporaries who also operated in the precincts of Surrealism. Giacometti, with whom Calder was friendly, shared Calder's interest in the tension between the monumental and the miniature, and in the 1940s created some figures so miniscule as to fit in a matchbox, rather as Calder's gift to Louisa fit in a cigar box. Joseph Cornell—who showed for years with the Julien Levy Gallery in New York, where Calder had a brief association—created boxes in which the evocations of the solar system and the incorporation of quotidian objects (a child's brightly colored marbles, a glass for wine or an aperitif) can sometimes seem to parallel Calder's concerns, although there is of course none of Cornell's neurasthenia in Calder's art. Calder's interest in the peculiarity of particular objects and the possibility of combining them to create Breton's "complete picture of a poetic vision" reaches an especially high poetic pitch in *La cuiller* (page105), one of the most unusual works in this exhibition.

Here, the bowl and part of the handle of a spoon—an object Calder probably unearthed in an old dump site on his farm in Roxbury, Connecticut—becomes the gently rocking base for a tiny mobile. The mobile elements consist of two discs and a bit of brass ending in a spiral, bobbing on the top of the handle of the spoon, which Calder has shortened and sharpened to a point. The result is a combination of a found object and a created object, something that might be referred to, with a phrase that Calder's friend Marcel Duchamp used in another context, as a readymade aided. Less than three-and-a-half inches high, *La cuiller* is a double dose of miniaturized monumentality. Taken as a whole, it could be the design for a gigantic monument. But if you focus on the spoon, itself a small thing, it can paradoxically come to seem very large in relation to the weensy mobile suspended at one end. There is something of the spirit of *Gulliver's Travels* in this Lilliputian play.

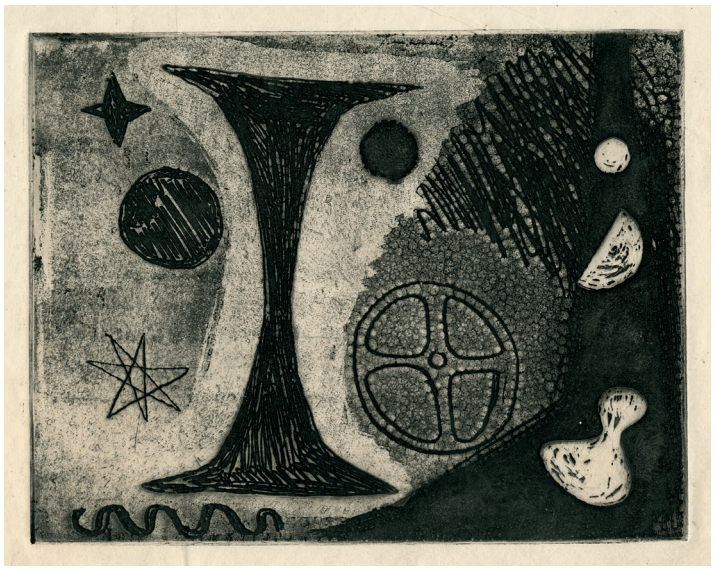
IV

In "Under the Sign of Saturn," her essay on Walter Benjamin and his rapturously melancholy vision of modernism and modernity, Susan Sontag observed that "to miniaturize is to make portable—the ideal form of possessing things for a wanderer, or a refugee."[6] Calder was neither a wanderer nor a refugee, but he was very much a traveler, straddling both sides of the Atlantic through most of his life. Certainly many of his friends were wanderers, refugees, and exiles of one sort of another, and they were always welcome wherever Sandy and Louisa were living. From the late 1920s onward, Calder transported his *Cirque Calder*, a miniature universe if there ever was such a thing, back and forth across the Atlantic in a series of suitcases, beginning with two and ending with five. Duchamp, another transatlantic figure, who soon after meeting Calder dubbed his kinetic objects mobiles, was in the late 1930s and early 1940s putting together a collection of miniature versions of his essential works, which he packed in a limited-edition series of custom-made briefcases and called *Boîte-en-valise*. Duchamp said that his favorite part of the *Cirque Calder* was the packing and unpacking of all the elements, and it seems reasonable that Calder's circus in a valise (or in several valises) was at least one of the inspirations behind Duchamp's *Boîte-en-valise*. Calder was always attuned to the possibility of an art that could be packed up and taken with you—an art that was portable, collapsible, lightweight. In 1944, when a Brazilian friend, the architect Henrique Mindlin, was helping build interest in Calder's work in South America, Calder made a standing mobile for him (pages 58–59) that, as he recalled in his *Autobiography*, "could be taken to pieces—legs taken off, metal feather removed—so he could fly it to Rio without any trouble. I often regret not having made him a cloth vest with pockets, each the color of the part contained."[7] There is delight in the thought of a work of art that can be packed away in the pockets of a vest—call it vest-pocket art.

With the liberation of Paris, Calder was hankering to once again cross the Atlantic and exhibit his work in the French capital. Duchamp was helping Calder arrange a show with the dealer Louis Carré, who had managed to stay open during the Occupation and in the wake of the war was looking to establish himself as a strong supporter of avant-garde art. At a time when the prospect of shipping art across the Atlantic must still have seemed daunting, Calder hatched a plan to make mobiles that would fit into the standard size packages that the U.S. postal service was now shipping overseas by air. As he recalled in his *Autobiography*, "a package eighteen inches long and twenty-four inches in circumference was permissible." Calder figured he "could squeeze an object into a package two inches thick, ten inches wide, and eighteen inches long. Using the diagonal, I could even squeeze in a nineteen-inch element." With a note of triumph he announced: "So a whole race of objects that were collapsible and could be



3. Installation photograph showing *Grand Piano, Red* (page 69), *Alexander Calder: Mobiles, Stabiles, Constellations*, Galerie Louis Carré, Paris, 1946.



4. Alexander Calder. *The Big I*, 1944. Etching. Plate: $6\,^{7}/_{8} \times 8\,^{7}/_{8}$ inches (17.5 × 22.5 cm).

taken to pieces was born."[8] I like the expression "a whole race of objects." There is something wonderfully anthropomorphic here, a sense of the objects as having a curious life of their own, which includes their collapsing, their going "to pieces"—and then recomposing themselves in Paris, the city of Calder's early triumphs, which he had missed so much and now wanted to conquer again. Three works that Calder mailed to Carré—*Shoe with Split Heel* (page 71), *Grand Piano, Red* (fig. 3; page 69), and *Red T with Black Flags* (page 67)—are included here. There are some fascinating glimpses of the gestation of the Carré show, with its many smaller-sized works, in the correspondence of Mary Reynolds, who before the war had been Duchamp's lover and after the war was helping Calder re-establish himself in the Parisian gallery world. Reynolds—who created exquisite bindings for books by her friends—especially admired Calder's smaller works, explaining that she was "devoted to miniatures." And when Carré told her that he was worried that visitors might walk off with the little objects, she jokingly suggested that he glue them onto a moving conveyor belt, speculating that "it was harder to steal an object in motion tha[n] a quiet one!"[9]

Of course, the very idea of taking a mobile apart and sending it through the mail cannot but remind us of the fundamental nature of the mobile, which is always highly variable in its dimensions and its relationship with space. Boxed, a mobile can look rather small. Unboxed, reassembled, hung up, allowed to move freely, the same mobile can become very large. As a mobile moves through space it occupies an amount of space—a volume of space—far in excess of the actual space occupied by its component parts. Jean-Paul Sartre, in his essay for the 1946 Carré show, wrote of the mobiles as being "always midway between the servility of the statue and the independence of natural events. Each of its twists and turns is an inspiration of the moment."[10] For Sartre the mobile's shifting size and scale was related to the uncertain but exhilarating situation of men and women in the modern world. Susan Sontag, when she wrote about Walter Benjamin, who loved to wander through cities and savor the sense of a city as a labyrinth, described space's shifting properties in a way that can also bring Calder's mobiles to mind. "Space is broad, teeming with possibilities, positions, intersections, passages, detours, U-turns, dead ends, one-way streets. Too many possibilities, indeed."[11] The meanderings of Benjamin's imagination were not unlike the meanderings of Calder's mobiles, quintessentially modern in their freewheeling, even risky interactions with the world. And then there is the stabile, which replaces the classical monument's solid volume with planes that command space without devouring it—that thrust through space and settle into space while leaving space open.

V

To the argument of the Greek philosopher Protagoras, that man is the measure of all things, Calder would probably have responded that man is but one measure and that there are in fact quite a few ways to measure the wonders of art and life. In 1944, Calder made a small etching, not quite seven inches high, which he titled *The Big I* (fig. 4). A dramatic arrangement of careening forms is dominated by a single shape—the "Big I" of the title, which is relatively small if its size is judged absolutely, but which takes up an inordinately large amount of space in the composition—suggesting an I-beam, a femur bone, the letter I, and the authorial "I" (as well as the "eye") of the artist who has made the print. Calder often spoke about his interest in solar systems, and among the forms in *The Big I* are planets and stars, the elements of a little cosmology that also includes a wheel and a snakelike squiggly thing. The dynamism of suns, moons, planets, and their orbits fueled images and ideas in Calder's work from the early 1930s to the very end of his life in 1976. And of course to study or even just to think about such things is to be confronted with some of the greatest mysteries of size and scale, as well as with the challenges of measuring the apparently immeasurable. Is the moon very small or very large? It all depends. We know it's very large. But when we see it in the night sky it can be very small, sometimes a mere accent mark or parenthesis. Calder is always pressing us to judge one thing in relation to another. In 1943 he composed a text, not published in his lifetime, to which he gave the title "A Propos of Measuring a Mobile." It is a text that goes off in a number of different directions and in fact contains only one rather specific observation about the proper way to measure a mobile. But when Calder discusses the relative value of different materials (stone, bronze, wood, wire, sheet metal) or the necessity of never allowing mechanical concerns to trump artistic ones, he is dealing with a variety of qualities and characteristics and cannot but find himself measuring their relative value.

Particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, when Calder was receiving a considerable number of major public commissions, there could be a very clear relationship between the small preparatory object and the larger version of a work. But the miniature was by no means always for Calder a prologue to the monumental. The miniature could also be a way of bringing the world down to one's own size. As a child Calder had made miniature jewelry for his sister's dolls. As an adult he made a dollhouse, which is of course a miniature house, for his two daughters, and a child-size, multi-story garage for Rob Cowley, the son of a close friend, the writer Malcolm Cowley. The *Cirque Calder,* which he developed and performed with considerable frequency in the late 1920s and 1930s, was inspired at least in part by the time Calder had spent a few years earlier drawing the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, and thus involved bringing down to manageable dimensions—the dimensions of a few suitcases —the "greatest show on earth." By the same token, some of the smaller standing mobiles and stabiles of the 1950s and 1960s seem an effort, even as Calder's reputation was growing ever larger in the world, to contain all that he was and was capable of in the palm of his hand. Although it is not entirely clear how Calder saw *Small City* (page 113) in relation to a large sculpture called *The City* that is now in Caracas, nobody can deny that *Small City* has its own pocket-sized charm—perhaps as a memory or memento of a sculpture called *The City,* but also as a sort of visual haiku on the theme of urban life, with its juxtaposed, jutting forms and meandering movements.

For Calder, as for artists beginning in the Renaissance and probably earlier, the range of sizes in which he chose to work reflected a sense of the artist as presiding over an imaginative kingdom and being fully in control of all manner of occasions and possibilities. When his 1943 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art was in its initial planning stages, Calder proposed including not only wire sculptures, mobiles, stabiles, and drawings, but also jewelry, toys, lamps, furniture, clothing, and a grill for broiling meat.[12] Although the exhibition as it was ultimately conceived was far less capacious, Calder

was concerned to present the artist—*homo faber,* the man who makes—as a master of all manner of things. This was a very old and very great idea, going back at least as far as Renaissance masters such as Cellini, who prided himself on being able to produce not only a sculpture of Perseus for a Florentine piazza but also an elegant ornament for a prince's table and a decoration for a festivity that would be over in a day. Calder saw the artist as ready to address all humankind's needs, not only the timeless and the temporary—if his wife needed some spoons for the kitchen, he went into the studio and made them—but also the most public and the most private. This man who could produce anything with his fingers—who could turn the little cage of wires around a Champagne cork into a sculpture—loved the intimate possibilities of sculpture, the sense of a sculpture a couple of inches or a couple of feet high as graspable, as taking its place on the landscape of a tabletop or on the top of a television set, as several small standing mobiles did in the Calders' home in Saché.

Calder was a large man who even in his early thirties struggled with diets and visits to the gym. What struck everybody who knew him was the contrast between the heaviness of his frame and the lightness and quickness of his hands, the precision with which, with a pair of pliers, he could produce miracles in the twinkling of an eye: the tiniest, most elegant loops, curls, curves, knots, and interlacings of wire. "The size is tiny and the concept big—much in little," his old friend Carl Zigrosser wrote in *Multum in Parvo.* "The very disparity between large and small makes for tension and concentration."[13] The works gathered together in this exhibition, small in their literal dimensions, keep confounding those dimensions. The relationship between size and scale and big and small in Calder's work remains as multilayered and elusive as the relationship between time and space. Even as he brought the exactitude of his training as an engineer to the measuring of works of art, Calder remained convinced that art's magic was immeasurable. He was thinking big even when he was working small. In his *Autobiography*, Calder spoke of "a line of very small mobiles I occasionally make. I got rather excited making them as small as my so-called clumsy fingers could do them."[14] A square inch could be of as much consequence as a square mile. In the end, it was the imagination that was the measure of all things.

NOTES

1. Carl Zigrosser, *Multum in Parvo: An Essay in Poetic Imagination* (New York: George Braziller, 1965), 11.
2. E. L. McAdam, Jr. and George Milne, eds., *Johnson's Dictionary: A Modern Selection* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1963), 379.
3. Alexander Calder, *Calder: An Autobiography with Pictures* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1966), 36.
4. Alexander Calder, "A Propos of Measuring a Mobile," unpublished 1943 manuscript, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
5. André Breton, "Conversations with S. A. Rhodes," in André Breton, *What is Surrealism? Selected Writings*, Franklin Rosemont, ed. (New York: Monad, 1978), 88.
6. Susan Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1980), 124.
7. Calder, *Autobiography*, 198.
8. Ibid., 188.
9. Mary Reynolds quoted in Paul B. Franklin, "Thanks to Mary, Sandy Met Marcel," in *Etant donné Marcel Duchamp* no. 8: *Dossier Marcel Duchamp & Mary Reynolds* (Paris: L'Association pour l'Étude de Marcel Duchamp, 2007), 212.
10. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Les Mobiles de Calder," in *Alexander Calder: Mobiles, Stabiles, Constellations*, exh. cat. (Paris: Galerie Louis Carré, 1946). Translation by Chris Turner, in *The Aftermath of War: Jean-Paul Sartre* (Calcutta: Seagull, 2008).
11. Sontag, 117.
12. See memo from Monroe Wheeler to A. Conger Goodyear, Alfred H. Barr Jr., and James Thrall Soby, dated January 28, 1943, in Calder file, Museum of Modern Art Archives.
13. Zigrosser, 19.
14. Calder, *Autobiography*, 188.