

Before World War I, circus performers were hailed as rigorous showmen, blending skill, pageantry, and psychological wit. Newspapers and magazines, especially in Europe, employed critics of the circus arts, cabaret, and music hall, who had equal standing to other cultural critics and who celebrated the circus's masterful choreographers. Some of the best performers designed their acts to fail first and then succeed, and they feigned a naturalness that actually required tremendous intention to appear unplanned. With a designed failure, the performance was a specific manipulation of the audience, an artful build of anxiety with, finally, an emotional release.

My grandfather grew up at the end of the golden age of the American circus (1871–1917), and as a young man, he studied the formalities of the circus arts with great intensity. In the spring of 1925, he spent two weeks illustrating the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus in New York for the *National Police Gazette*. When the circus relocated to its winter grounds in Sarasota, Florida, he followed it there and continued sketching. "I was very fond of the spatial relations. I love the space of the circus. I made some drawings of nothing but the tent. The whole thing of the—the vast space—I've always loved it."<sup>1</sup> In his sketches, Calder explored in detail the setting up of the tent, the rigging apparatuses, the ballooning of the giant volumes that defined a grand form in space, and the specialized mechanisms for the actuation of the performances (cats. pp. 52–55). "What I love is pulley acts, where there are apparatuses to build, to manoeuver."<sup>2</sup> The dramatics of performance and the activation of volume were key aspects of

his diminutive *Cirque Calder* (1926–31) and continued to inform his artistic output over the course of his entire career.

To understand the intellectual power of *Cirque Calder* in the 1920s and the revolutionary ways in which Calder transformed art into an alternate experiential dimension is a challenging task. Calder's innovation was to immerse his audience in a live experience with wit, adrenaline, music, and action. Retrospectively, it has become acutely clear that the *Cirque* was at the premiere of *performance* as art. Every presentation was unique, a panoply of spontaneous interactions that unfolded between Calder, his handmade, miniaturized props, and the audience, with sequences fueled by planned failures and fulfillments and the required moments of suspense in between. Legrand-Chabrier, a distinguished French critic of the popular arts, including the circus, wrote five reviews of *Cirque Calder* between 1927 and 1931, highlighting the remarkably lifelike feats of its figures,<sup>3</sup> and James Johnson Sweeney described the *Cirque* performers as having a "living quality in their uncertainty."<sup>4</sup> It was exactly this sense of immediacy that made Calder's circus so compelling—challenging, as it did, the audience's initial expectations.

In its own time, the significance of the *Cirque* was not lost on the Paris artistic community. Calder developed relationships with Jean Arp, Piet Mondrian, Jean Hélion, Le Corbusier, Joan Miró, Jean Cocteau, Fernand Léger, and, most importantly, Marcel Duchamp, among scores of others who came to experience his circus. While support-

ing his inventiveness, Calder's contemporaries also found inspiration in it. Duchamp's favorite part of the *Cirque* was the unpacking of the figures (which came to fill five large suitcases), and Calder's circus, in turn, inspired *La Boîte-en-valise* (1935–41), Duchamp's traveling exhibition of pocket-sized facsimiles of his iconic works. Other reverberations of Calder's rich concentrations were Miró's *Constellations* (1940–41), wartime paintings in which he compressed grand concepts onto small sheets of paper, and Francis Picabia's series of some two dozen *tableaux de poches* (1942), strange and arresting pocket paintings, only a few inches tall, many of which refer to mythological or ancient imagery.

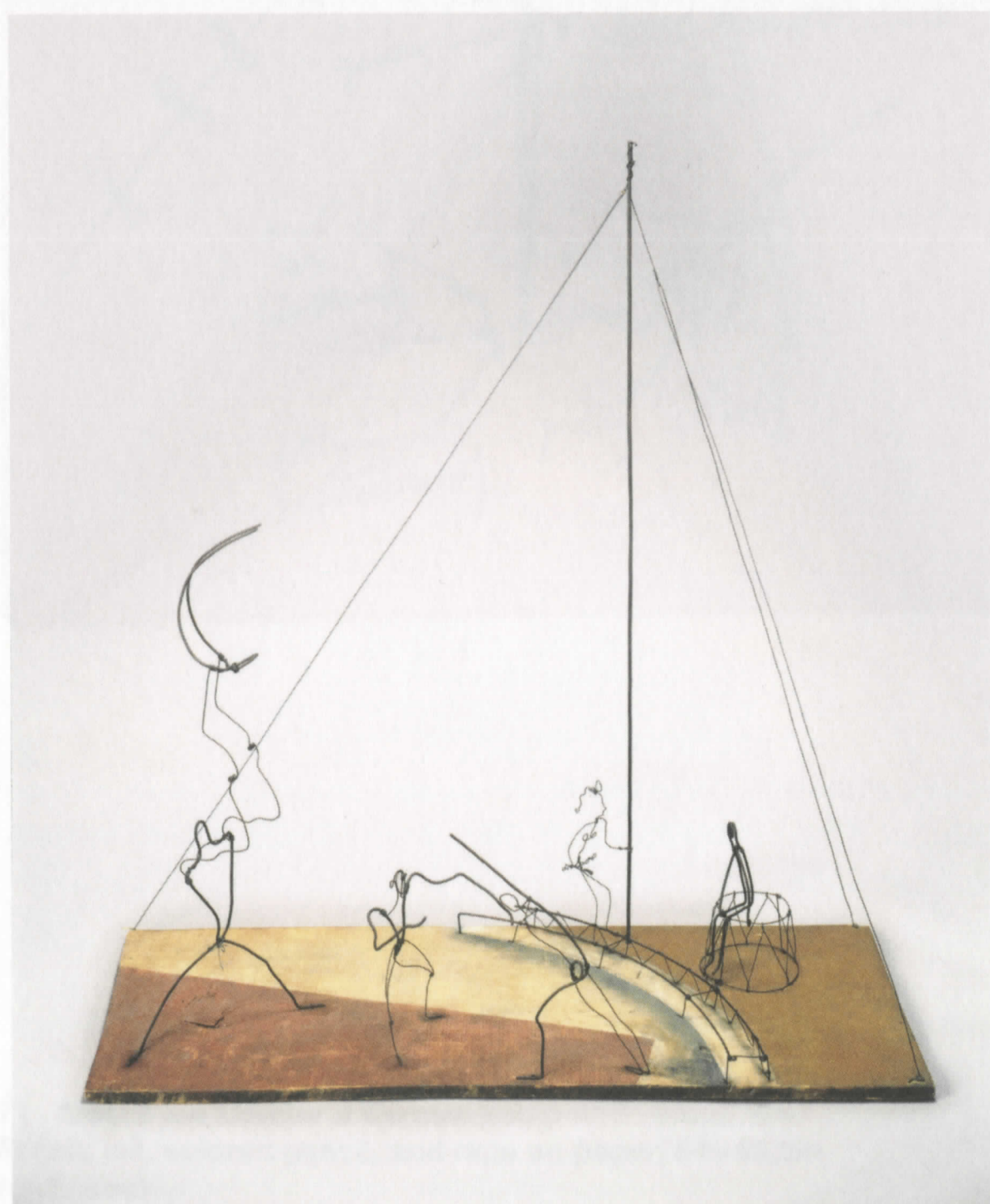
Currently housed in a vitrine at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, *Cirque Calder* can no longer communicate what it once did in those fabled performances of the late 1920s and early 1930s in Paris. The idiosyncratic tools needed to activate the *Cirque* in present time are now, curiously, themselves understood to be the art. Just as with music or dance, activation before an audience is the only way to truly experience the work, or for it to exist, for that matter. It blooms into creation—and then withers until its next performance. The question of ephemerality underscores *Cirque Calder*; with the performer gone, the art exists only anecdotally, through archival materials (articles, photographs, and letters) and through films made decades after the premiere performances.

We have a view now of *Cirque Calder* as complete from conception, yet it was developed and

expanded upon continuously over a period of five years. As it evolved, Calder also devised another completely new art form: wire sculpture, or a line drawn in space with wire. My grandfather eventually harnessed articulation, motion, and time sequence, using wire as his essential medium. He produced, contemporaneously, paintings, wood sculptures, drawings, toys, jewelry, and textiles, all attesting to the sheer range of his explorations. He did not prioritize between vocabularies during these fertile years.

As Calder shifted toward abstraction in 1929, the presentation of action and gesture sculpted in wire developed into the most minimal of lines, suggesting energetic interplay. In works such as *Circus Scene* [1], Calder pushed beyond figuration by expressing the dynamic forces of his figures rather than specific details of the characters. Here, an acrobat, caught in midtranscendence in a hand-to-hand act, quivering in the tension of the moment, is represented merely by two curved wires. A near-palpable vector of energy shoots from his brother's foot—an arced trajectory propelled through space. The use of thick and thin gauges of wire emphasizes my grandfather's reliance on his materials as indications of gesture rather than as a means of literal description. Additionally, the base of *Circus Scene* is painted with forms, precipitating my grandfather's devotion to an abstract vocabulary, which began in October 1930 after his now-famous visit to Piet Mondrian's studio. Calder's revelation in Mondrian's studio, where the environment-as-installation "shocked" him fully into abstraction, was an extension of his focus years earlier

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on the spatial relationships of the circus tent, with its complex rigging systems in place, ready to be called into action.

In 1931, Calder premiered a group of his earliest abstract wire objects at Galerie Percier, Paris, in a show titled *Alexandre Calder: Volumes—Vecteurs—Densités/Dessins—Portraits*. The works in the show, described by the artist as *Sphériques*, *Arcs*, *Densités*, and *Mouvements Arrêtés*, conjured the radiating immensity of a line held in suspended animation, much like a trapezist at the apex of a trajectory. In *Croisière* (cat. p. 145), Calder once again used thick and thin wires to describe the dynamic forces at work. Five years later, he brought this cross-fertilization of the circus world and abstraction to a theatrical climax in *Tightrope* (cat. p. 25), in which four wire forms are delicately perched atop a steel line. At either end is an exotic ebony post, keeping the dramatically long, horizontal line in tension.

“Why not plastic forms in motion? Not a simple translatory or rotary motion but several motions of different types, speeds and amplitudes composing to make a resultant whole. Just as one can compose colors, or forms, so one can compose motions.”<sup>5</sup> The activations of the *Cirque* and the vibratory gestures defining the figurative wire sculptures themselves became the subjects within Calder’s abstract work and the innovations that would follow. Wire was the attenuated antenna that divined unseen and immeasurable forces. Through it, the search for universal truths about matter and the immaterial became Calder’s lifelong obsession.

- 1 Alexander Calder, quoted in Cleve Gray, “Calder’s Circus,” *Art in America* 52, no. 5 (October 1964), p. 23.
- 2 Alexander Calder, quoted in Legrand-Chabrier, “Un petit cirque à domicile,” *Candide*, no. 171, June 23, 1927, p. 7.
- 3 “Legrand-Chabrier” was the pen name of the cultural journalist André Legrand. He began using it in the first decade of the twentieth century, when he and Marcel Chabrier were collaborators.
- 4 James Johnson Sweeney, “Introduction,” *Alexander Calder*, exh. cat., The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1943, p. 16.
- 5 Alexander Calder, *Modern Painting and Sculpture*, exh. cat., Berkshire Museum, Pittsfield, Mass., 1933, pp. 2–3.

[1] *Circus Scene* (1929), wire, wood, and paint, 127×118.7×46 cm. Calder Foundation, New York