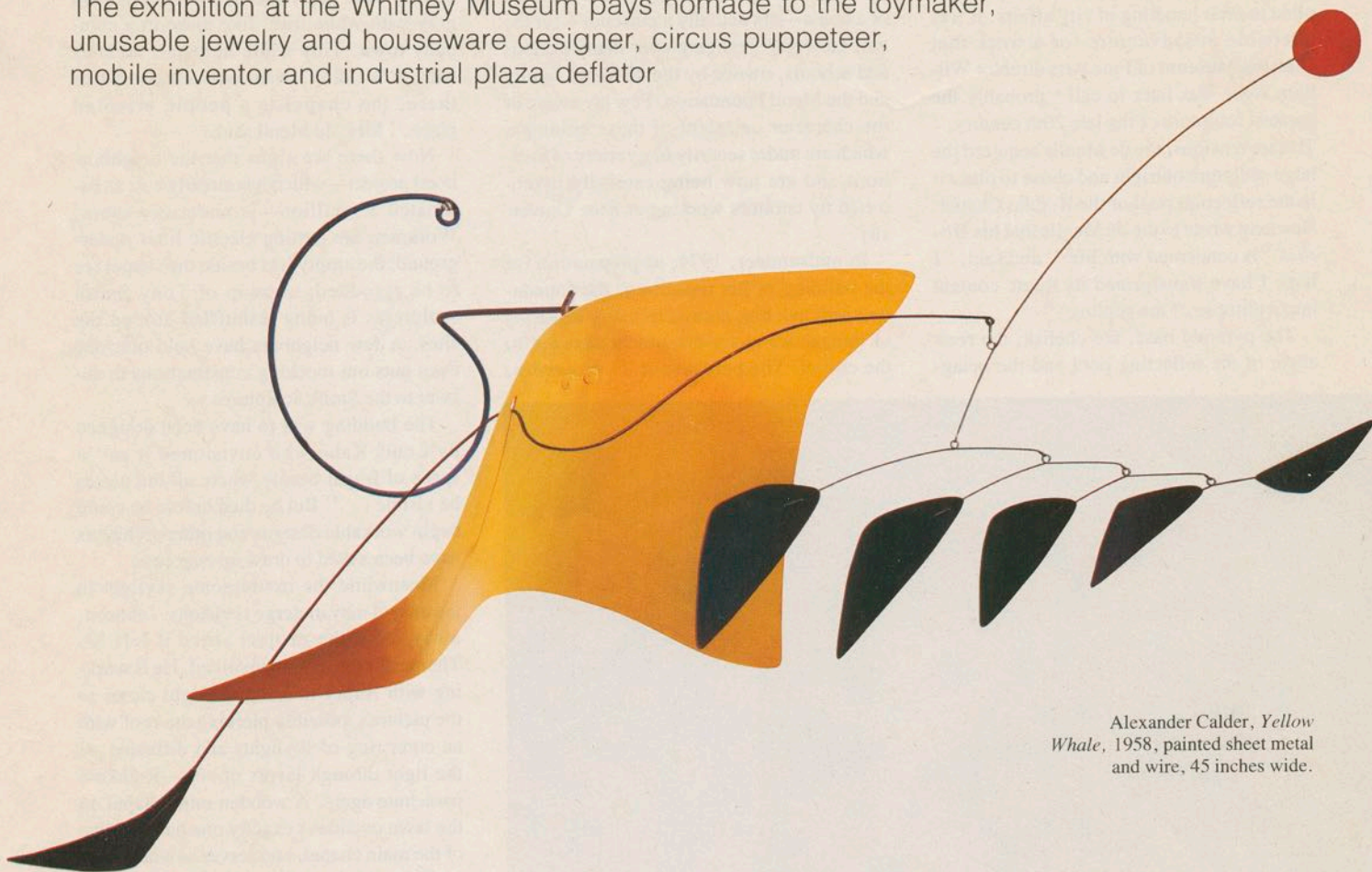


The witty, inventive, anti-monumental “Universe” of Alexander Calder

The exhibition at the Whitney Museum pays homage to the toymaker, unusable jewelry and houseware designer, circus puppeteer, mobile inventor and industrial plaza deflator



Alexander Calder, *Yellow Whale*, 1958, painted sheet metal and wire, 45 inches wide.

by Janet Hobhouse

Alexander Calder in late age looks disarmingly like a man who hates, barks at, snatches toys from, children. Bearish, surly, growling, we see him in the Vilardebo film that accompanies the Whitney Museum exhibition, “Calder’s Universe,” as an enormous, ogreish crank, down on his knees and totally absorbed in the performance of his tiny circus. With bulbous pink fingers he unrolls a tiny red carpet, sets trapezes in order, leads on and off the performers, for whom he also supplies appropriate, well-remembered voices. [Calder died as this issue went to press. An appreciation will appear in the next issue.]

What is most appealing about the man, apart from the delightful incongruities of that enormous-bellied figure crouched over the miniatures, is his total engagement in this make-believe world. Calder’s absorption requires the elaborate pretense of a child that stick-legs are real legs, that a piece

Janet Hobhouse’s book on Gertrude Stein was recently published by Putnam.

of cloth adequately conveys the whole costume, that sound effects don’t approximate but are real voices. This child’s abstraction of things that can stand for other things is characteristic of Calder’s art: a makeshift shorthand rather than a sweeping intellectual condensation of the whole into its essence. It is one of the reasons for the appealing tackiness of his retrospective at the Whitney, where so many of the exhibits are grubby, the motorization unreliable, the bolts and seams indifferently displayed along with the clean lines of the mobile and stabile parts. Achieving the point where the piece in question adequately conveys the intention of its maker is clearly more important to Calder than its final look. The priority is to make something come alive—a circus, a drawing, a mobile, an animal shape—and not necessarily to make something finished. It is a child’s priority, and it contributes to the eccentricity and lack of pomposity of this exhibition.

Calder’s imagery, as well as his method, derive from the experience of the child—not the primitive, naive, or Rousseauian

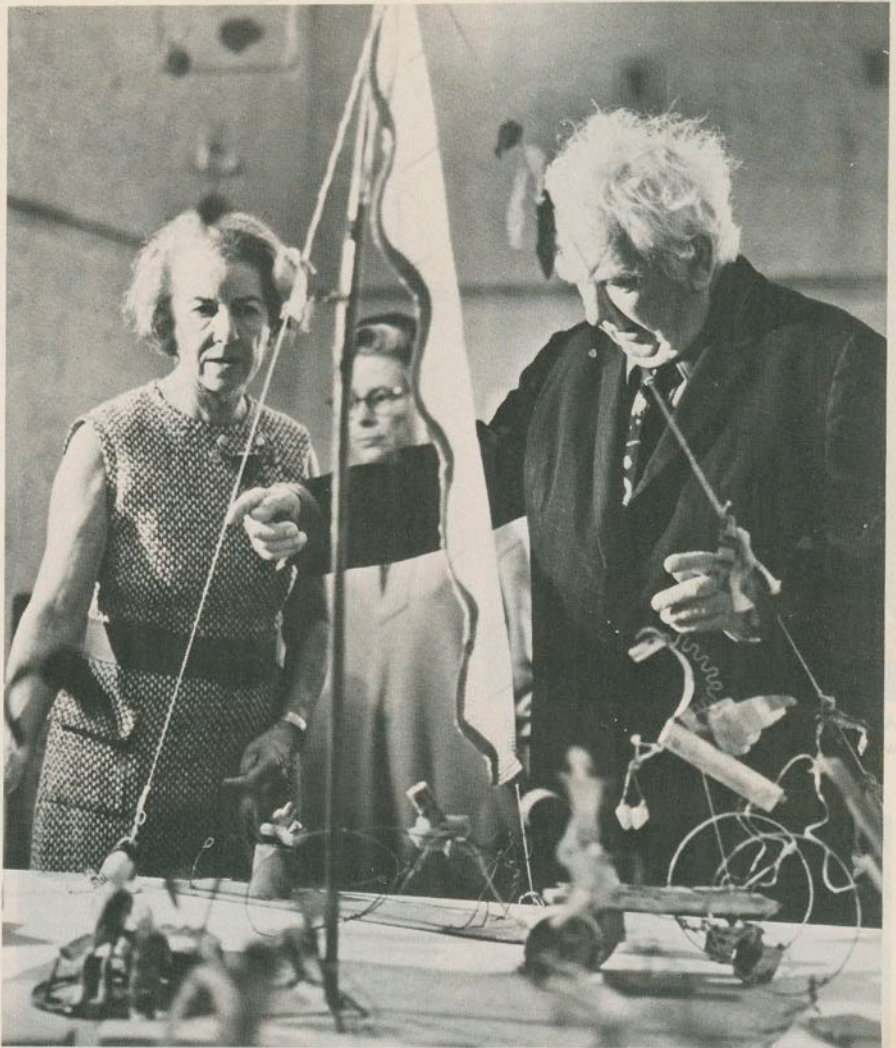
child, but the serious, upright, information-gathering kind, who spends his weekends with books and telescopes, inside museums and homemade chemistry labs, taking machines and animals apart to see how they work. Calder’s abstractions—even those of the Mondrian-influenced period of the ’30s—are rooted in this childhood imagery. Though it derives from nature it is not from nature directly observed, but rather as it is originally presented to children in natural history museums and planetariums. So, many of Calder’s mobiles look like displays of dinosaur or fish skeletons; his stabiles like huge prehistoric animals in display-case poses, his motorized sculpture like planetary maquettes from the children’s wing of a science museum.

The busy, dour-faced child that made jewelry for his sister’s dolls grew to make circus miniatures, wooden toys, fish anatomies and coffee-can birds (Calder’s art seems the product of a lifelong rainy afternoon). His household inventions—the kitchenware, lamp covers, latches and so on—have been praised for their grown-up

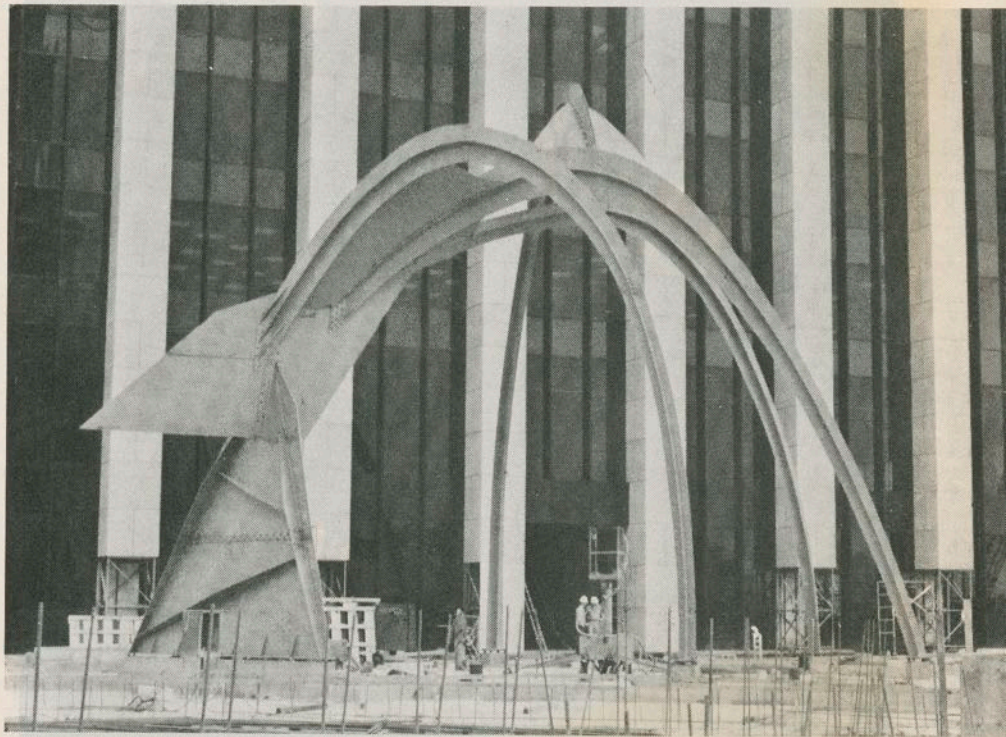
“Yankee ingenuity.” But these are not inventions that improve on the originals: try using and cleaning afterwards a Calder cooking utensil, or avoiding spills and burns with a Calder (metal spring) coffee cup holder. In conception Calder inventions are antithetical to those gleaming contemporary streamlined houseware designs. They are as useful as the miniature brooms or pie pans a child makes to mimic its mother’s; they parody more than they serve and the joy of their making clearly overrides considerations of their future usefulness. The same is true of the Calder jewelry, much of which must surely stab and prod its wearers; certainly by now some of it must have corroded and snapped or finally been confined to nonhuman exhibition space.

The mimicry of the grown-up world of real objects, real postures, runs through Calder’s work and provides it with much of its wit. It was clearly significant to Calder that his father and grandfather had engaged their lives in the pursuit of “high art.” The images of that world—muscle-thighed Indians astride muscle-finned fish, bare-breasted maidens clashing cymbals, city-dominating monuments to William Penn and George Washington—were clearly as much an influence on Calder’s art as the experiments in modernism he witnessed in Paris in the ’20s and ’30s. The relationship between Calder’s art and that of his father and grandfather is maintained by its distance and its occasional hint of parody. Even Calder’s own city-dominating monuments, the great stabiles such as the dinosaur-backed *Teodelapio* in Spoleto, *La Grande Vitesse*, which mocks its site in Grand Rapids, Michigan, *Le Guichet*, which calls attention to the commercial rather than spiritual intent of its site at Lincoln Center, make fun while complying with the finer intentions of the architects whose buildings they enliven. But perhaps in this respect Calder is as much used by architects as they by him: monolithic contemporary building may need this humor to relate it to its human users. Hence the Dubuffets, the Oldenburgs, the King Kongs of contemporary industrial plazas; subtle propaganda that corporate ambition has a sense of proportion, a sense of humor of its own.

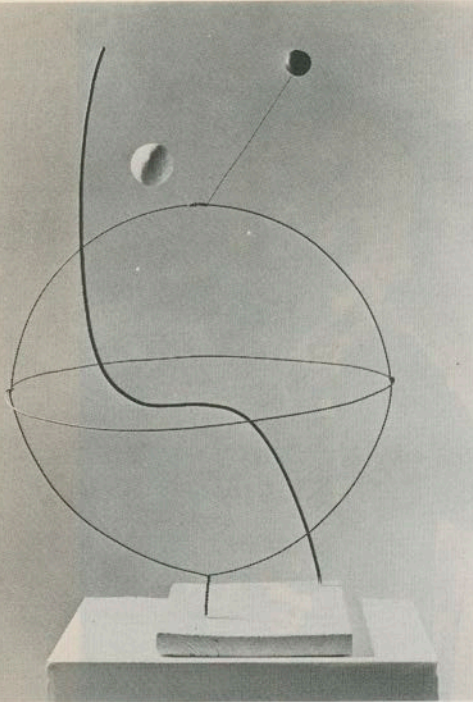
What else can it mean to come from a family of monumental sculptors, to set up as an artist in Paris in the ’20s, to mix with Pascin, Miró, Arp, Léger, and then to produce one’s first sculpture in the form of wire caricatures, to make sculpture an arm of the “low art” of drawing, and not just drawing but single-line cartooning in which there is room for every childish joke from pun to dangling genital? Even the more “serious” work, under the sobering influence of Mondrian, appears to mock its source of inspiration, and the room full of motorized



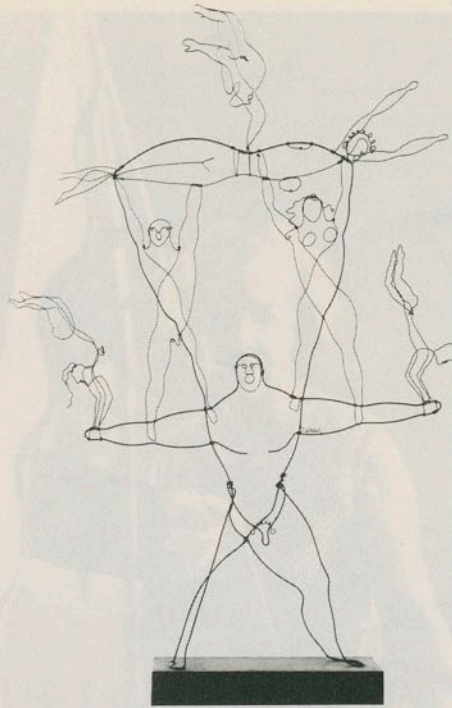
Alexander Calder and Jean Lipman installing *The Circus* at the Whitney Museum in 1975. Photo courtesy of Champion International Corporation.



A Calder stabile, *Four Arches*, being installed at the Security Pacific National Bank in Los Angeles, 1974. Calder’s monuments have added a touch of humor to industrial plazas.



Alexander Calder, *Universe*, 1931, wire and wood, 36 inches high. Collection of the artist.



Alexander Calder, *The Brass Family*, 1929, brass wire, 64 inches high. Whitney Museum.

The New York Times



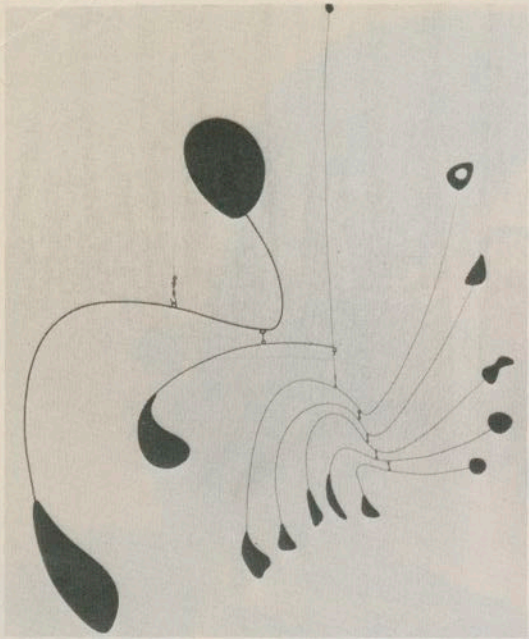
Alexander Calder and Georgia O'Keeffe at the opening of "Calder's Universe" at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

constructions at the Whitney, from Calder's "Abstraction-Création" period, seems an elaborate, though nonetheless homage-bearing spoof on the likes of Gabo, Pevsner, Héliou and the ultra-serious school of Constructivism.

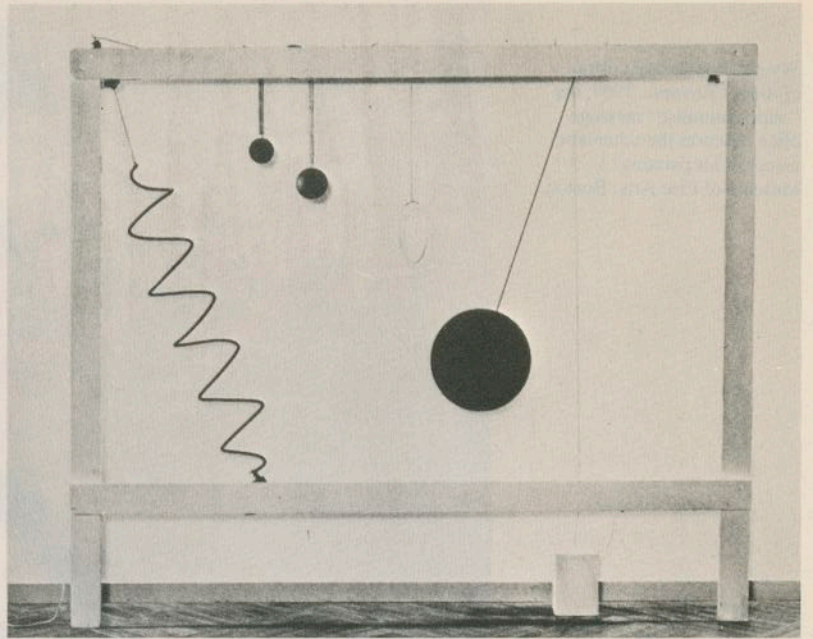
Calder's most famous creations are as anti-monumental as his early wire sculpture, his cartoons, his wooden toys. A Calder mobile intends literally to make light of abstract sculpture, to deny its gravity. The intention is clearly to wed the sketch, the quick invention, to the permanent. Thus permanent shapes are made mobile and Calder surrenders to chance (to the chance movements of air) the relationships between parts that the artist has traditionally sought to render permanent. Calder is the first to renounce the claims of the traditional, laurel-bound, even frontier-pushing, artists of his grandfather's time and his own, and the last to take seriously such claims and poses in other artists. His attitude to his own work, though hardly diffident, is always unassuming: for years he carried his oeuvre to exhibitions in a bale of wire, or stuffed into trunks (in the case of the circus), or posted it to galleries in manila envelopes (in the case of the smaller mobiles). He preferred gouaches to oils when he branched out into painting because gouaches were "fast," and though as a toy-maker, welding-over-seer, mobile-creator he could spend hours engrossed in the making of the object, once it was made nothing could induce him to provide any form of pedestal for it.

So it is a pleasure to have an exhibition at the Whitney paying homage to the toy-maker, unusable jewelry and houseware designer, wire caricaturist, circus puppeteer, mobile maker, industrial plaza deflator, as "America's foremost sculptor." It manages to pay tribute to those qualities in Calder's work which, though imposing and significant, are "fast," inventive, witty, and above all anti-monumental. To the extent that Calder alters the definition of whatever category of object he touches (so much so that who among the flying-nervous would willingly board a Calder Braniff) so he has managed to induce delight in a palace of high-seriousness. ■

"Calder's Universe" is at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York until February 6, 1977, and will then travel to the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, Georgia (March 5-May 1), the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota (June 5-August 14) and the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts (September 14-October 30). The exhibition was organized by Jean Lipman, who also wrote the book that accompanies the show *Calder's Universe*, Viking Press), and sponsored by Champion International Corporation.



Alexander Calder, *Hanging Spider*, ca. 1940, painted sheet metal, wire. Col. Mrs. John B. Putnam.



Alexander Calder, *The White Frame*, 1934, painted wood, sheet metal, wire, motor, 7½ feet by 9 feet. Moderna Museet, Stockholm.



Alexander Calder, *Longnose*, 1957, painted steel plate, 8 feet 2 inches high.