

Calder in London

BY GEORGE RICKEY

The Tate Gallery in London stands on the Embankment a little up-river from the Houses of Parliament. It is a staid institution, founded in 1897 to show contemporary art as a complement to the National Gallery. It is famous for what it shows of Turner and has failed to show of Cézanne. London has no equivalent of the Museum of Modern Art; the Tate, from time to time, in collaboration with the Arts Council of Great Britain, has offered exhibition space to the work of outstanding living artists—a year ago for the most comprehensive show of Picasso's work ever held, for instance, and this spring for Francis Bacon. Last year the painter John Piper proposed to Sir John Rothenstein, Director of the Tate, that his old friend Alexander Calder be given a retrospective show. Rothenstein turned to the Arts Council, and Gabriel White, its director, having enthusiastically agreed, asked that James Johnson Sweeney be invited to select and install the show. So it was done; and the Tate can, for the moment [July 4 - August 12], be breached only by passing two large standing mobiles swinging above the lawn, very slowly, one notes, though the Thames-side breeze is brisk.

The foyer and first two galleries within flatter an American visitor. About half the works on the walls are by his countrymen—Pollock, Rothko, Kline, Gottlieb, Ray Parker, Jasper Johns, James Brooks, Ellsworth Kelly, Lee Bontecou and others, a kind of honor guard for Calder. One passes on to discover, after the dedicated glumness of the American master painters, a sudden cheery optimism and a complete transformation of the drab expanses of the Tate. This is partly due to Sweeney's characteristically whited walls, but mostly to the amiability and good humor, directness and candor, homespun intimacy and warmth, irreverence and occasional wit of the James Thurber of abstraction. Enjoyment illuminates the faces of the visitors—who flock there—and even cracks the crust of the guards, who for once can say "touch" instead of "touch not" and who relieve their own tedium by little touch-it-yourself excursions.

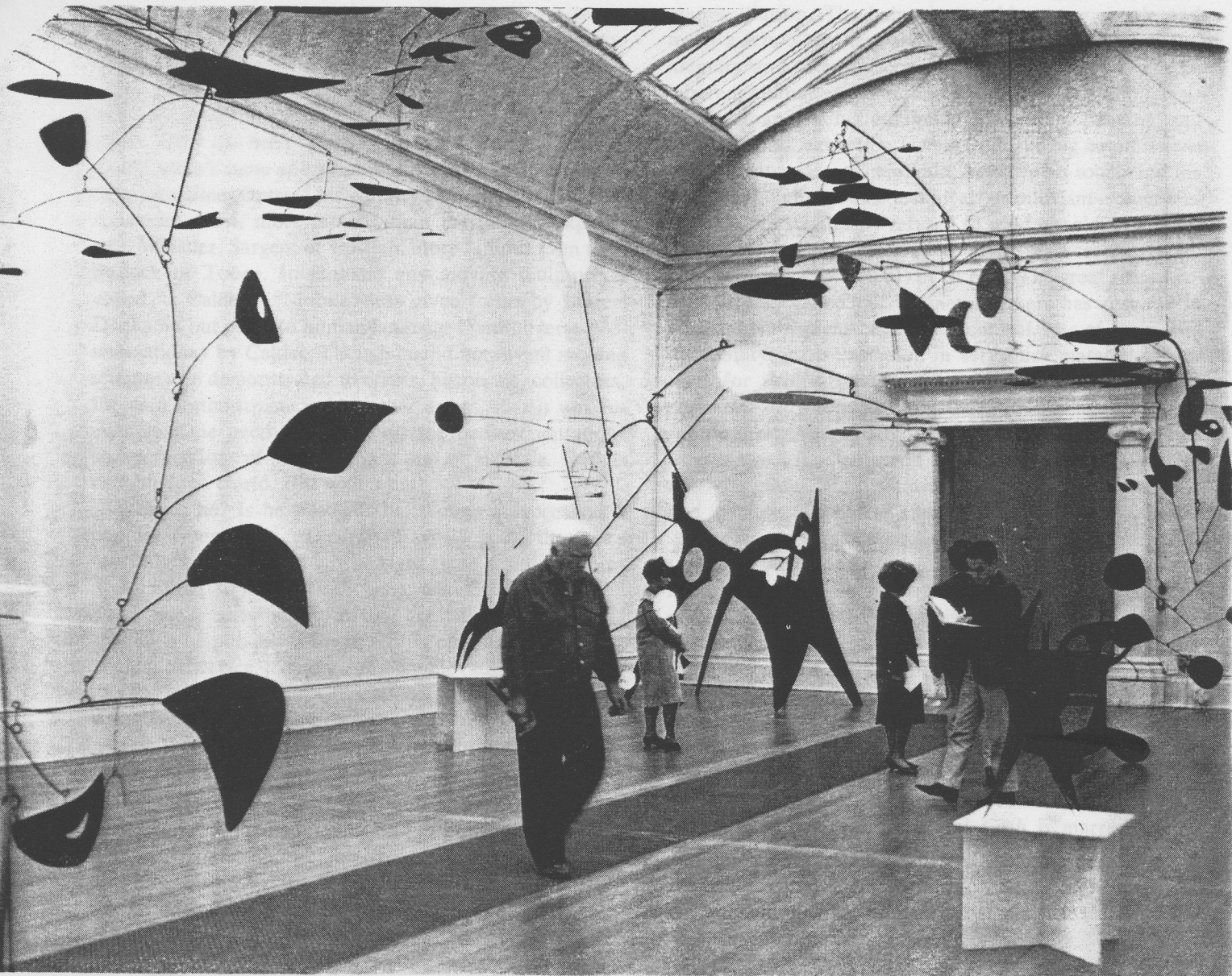
Sweeney has been given six galleries for the eighty works. He begins quite properly with the *Circus* of 1927 and the next year's brilliant wire portraits of such people as Josephine Baker and Cal Coolidge. Calder's pen drawings (some of the books he illustrated are laid out) imitate these and demonstrate that he needs pliers and resistant metal. Here also are some of the female adornments beaten from silver and gold wire and bar, which, in

their combination of weighty opulence with economy of form, are the antithesis of the mobile style whose beginnings stand close by — a motor-driven construction which a guard has to adjust frequently; a hoop surrounding disks and Miróesque solids dangling from strings tied to horizontal rods (a design later to appear in kindergartens and beer ads); and the earliest piece (1932) with a catenary of linked wires terminating in aluminum disks to catch the breeze. This, even with crude linkage and awkward balance, already contains the Calder essentials. It is owned by Sweeney, is prophetically titled *Calderberry Bush* and is to be a hardy perennial for thirty years. Then follow a little abstract motorized ballet (enlarged last year to a gigantic monument outside the Museum of Modern Art in Stockholm) and the first space-articulating wire stables attached airily to the wall.

Thereafter any idea of evolutionary sequence is lost: the work does not fall readily into periods, and Sweeney has deliberately mixed varieties. He has filled the two largest galleries, from floor to ceiling and wall to wall, with hanging and standing, moving and still, black and colored, silent and sounding Calders, achieving a joyous and brimming-over activation of these spaces reminiscent of Calder's own eye-and-ear-filling studio in Roxbury, Connecticut. From this confusion the artist emerges as a lovable person—energetic and industrious, at once ingenious and a little ingenuous, serious at times but too self-reliant to be tragic, more often humorous than witty, never pompous nor snobbish, nor with any pretensions to profundity or obscurantism. The English are delighted and most of the London reviews enthusiastic.

It is nice to be presented as an awfully good fellow, but the price for the artist is high. Each piece is drowned out by the visual din of the whole. If there are related motifs, series, or recurrent themes in his work this selection and installation successfully conceal them. No singling out, no emphasis, no sequences of a growing idea, no contrasts, no chance to contemplate, to respond to poetic thought, or to see slender, meager, sometimes eloquent (and elegant) material in the space it could command — not Calder's, but Sweeney's circus, three rings at a time. *Trop de Calder, pas de Calder*.

Unfortunately there is no example of a large, delicately articulated complex of small components such as that at the Terrace Plaza Hotel in Cincinnati, which is the peak of his mobile style. Missing also are the deliberately mas-



Alexander Calder at the Tate Gallery, London.

sive and awkward "starfish" bronzes, and the cage-like structures of triangulating rods, two significant ventures into a truly three-dimensional style. While there is color to provide relief from the preponderant black and white — the familiar blue, yellow and shipyard red as they come from the can — are his homage to Mondrian — two important aspects of Calder polychromy are absent, both in a sense collage; one is the animal forms he makes out of brightly printed tin cans; the other, ties he makes himself by a sort of appliqué of colored cloth sewn in patches onto an ordinary tie, which, though by far the best paintings Calder has undertaken, enter the exhibition only one at a time, around his neck.

Other paintings could be seen concurrently at the

Brook Street Gallery, where twenty-six gouaches had been installed, of which eighteen have been done in the last eighteen months. These exploit a primitive iconography of circles, spirals, serpents, stars and an occasional scorpion, evenly distributed over the whole surface, in an obvious and paradoxical horror vacui, with crude colors and cruder brushwork. The forms are from Miró, but without symbolism, private or public, and resemble those in his heavier jewelry where the resistance of the gold and silver gives them dignity; here they approach decoration. The few earlier gouaches from ten or fifteen years ago seem more sensitive, personal and independent. Two heads of 1945 developed from linear spirals, reminiscent of Maori woodcarving, are impressive drawings.

What does one look for in a retrospective exhibition — a biography, a backward look at the formative obscure years, a counting of the steps toward Parnassus, an assessment of authority, a fame-claim staked, a revelation which sporadic contacts do not permit? This survey covers thirty-six years and, apart from the few omissions, shows what Calder has been doing all his adult life. And what is that? Calder's fame and place in history have been secure for a long time. Outside his country he is the most famous American artist, more famous than the famous expatriates, Whistler, Sargent or Epstein, more famous even than Pollock or Tobey. In Holland any moving sculpture is called "a Calder." "Mobile" was given to art by Marcel Duchamp but put into human language (with diverse pronunciations) by Calder. Though he did not invent moving sculpture he demonstrated to critics, historians, collectors, the man in the street, and to other artists, that it was inevitable. One need not dwell on the endless imitations and perversions of his inventions and of his style. He has delighted the world. But with what?

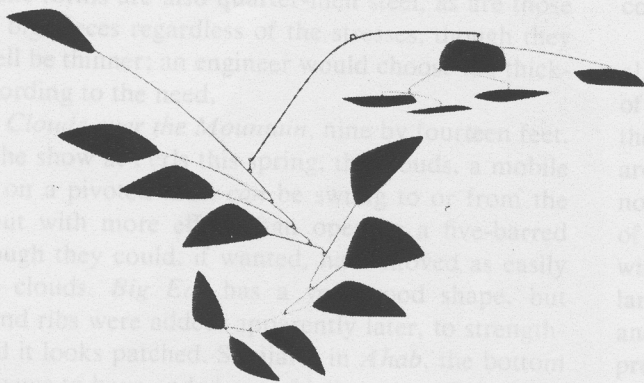
What is he? Is he good? Is he, though a success as a popular entertainer, a superficial artist? Is he the lucky (or unlucky) stumbler on the right thing (getting sculpture into the air) at the right time, who has been trapped by his luck, or is he one of the great innovators of the epoch? Is he possibly a frustrated painter, able, through a mechanical device, to make a reasonable facsimile of sculpture? Why does a lot of Calder seem less impressive than a single piece? Is there a Calder myth?

Yes, there is; in fact there are two: first, that he is an engineer; second, that his mobiles are sculpture. The legend that Calder, a trained engineer turned artist, combines special talents for metalwork with uncanny insights

into balance in a unique plastic prestidigitation is a romantic illusion. The balancing problems are simple and many a schoolboy has solved them; his engineering is elementary and often misconceived. His metalwork can be labored, clumsy and antiquated. Calder seems uninterested in expanding his command of cutting, bending and joining metal, except by farming out the big commissions to professionals — whereupon they lose his touch and the undeniable charm his technical primitivism sometimes imparts. He steadfastly refused to weld or solder or braze his joints; he has preferred to rivet or lace and crimp with wire (like a stapler), or to bolt. The great size of recent pieces carried out by metalworkers has resulted in Gargantuan designs beyond his control, loss of scale, and immobility; gross execution in very thick material substitutes for skillful analysis of engineering problems and economy of means. In his thirty-foot hanging mobile *London*, made especially for the Tate by welders in Paris from a small maquette and not assembled till the exhibition, the plates and rods are far heavier than necessary, and it hangs motionless and red beneath the lofty vault.

In every mobile Calder has the problem of fastening a steel wire or rod to an aluminum plate. In the large pieces he has had welded to the end of the rod a crude rectangle of heavy steel which is then riveted to the plate, where a blacksmith, let alone a machinist, would simply hammer a spatulate end on the rod and rivet that to the aluminum. Subassemblies are joined by a rod which, if long, is bowed by the weight; Calder has stiffened some of these by having another rod welded underneath, an improvised second thought. His metal man could replace this with the single tapered bar he needs, and this has sometimes been done.

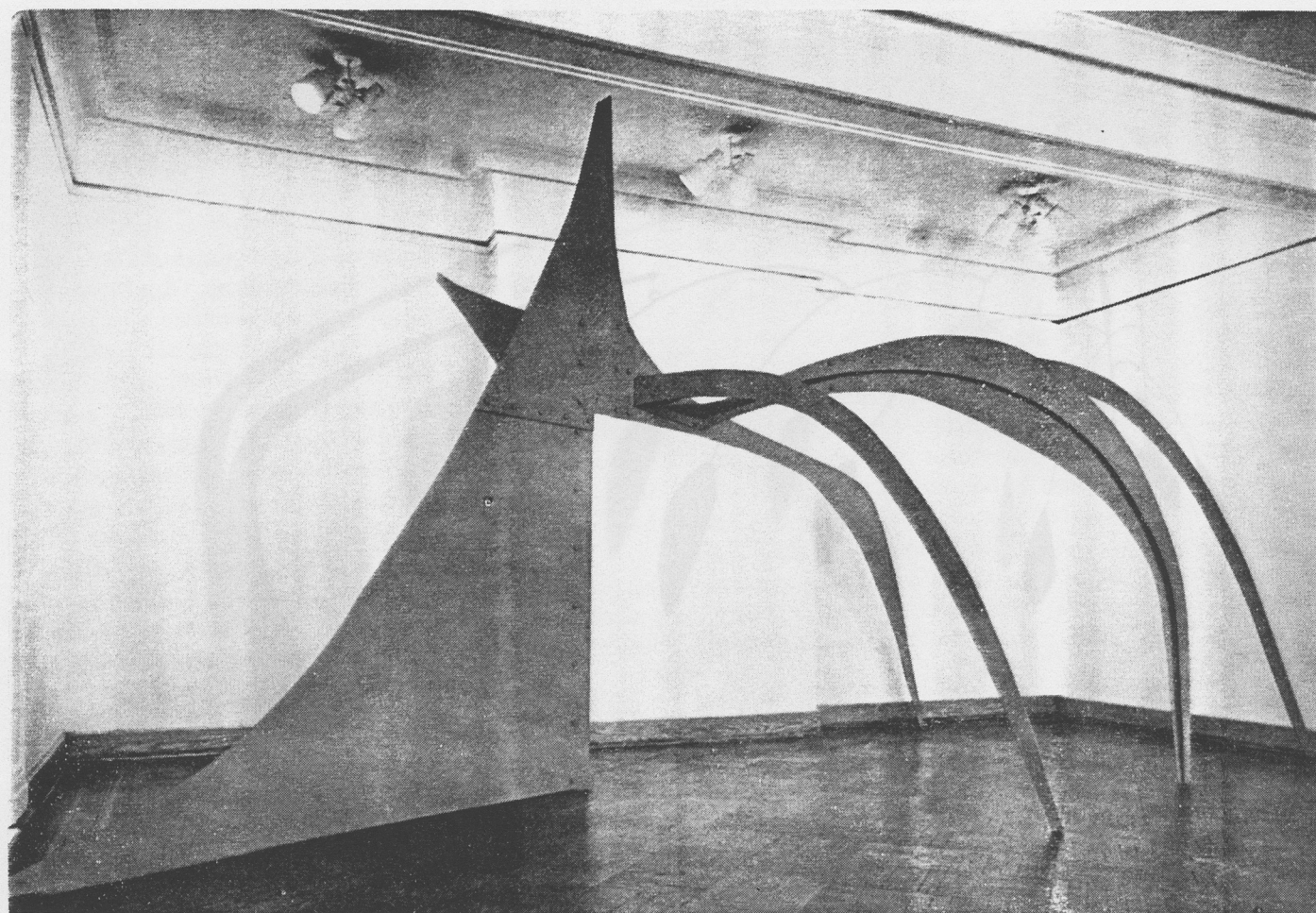
The large and very beautiful *Crab* is marred by the



The "Y" (1960);
courtesy Perls Galleries.



Head (1945);
courtesy Brook Street Gallery, London.



The Crab (1962); courtesy Perls Galleries.

slender legs being too thin (quarter-inch steel) and too meagerly ribbed, so that they wobble if you brush against them. A mobile stabile is worse than a stabile mobile. The large plane forms are also quarter-inch steel, as are those in other big pieces regardless of the stresses, though they could well be thinner; an engineer would choose the thickness according to the need.

In his *Clouds over the Mountain*, nine by fourteen feet, seen in the show at Perls this spring, the clouds, a mobile perched on a pivoted arm, *can* be swung to or from the peaks, but with more effort than opening a five-barred gate, though they could, if wanted, have moved as easily as other clouds. *Big Ear* has a very good shape, but flanges and ribs were added, apparently later, to strengthen it, and it looks patched. Similarly in *Ahab*, the bottom section seems to have ended out of balance, so Calder has added four little pieces of wire and a yoke, completely out of keeping with the rest, pushed four inches along one arm to restore the balance. One can see why he gave up engineering.

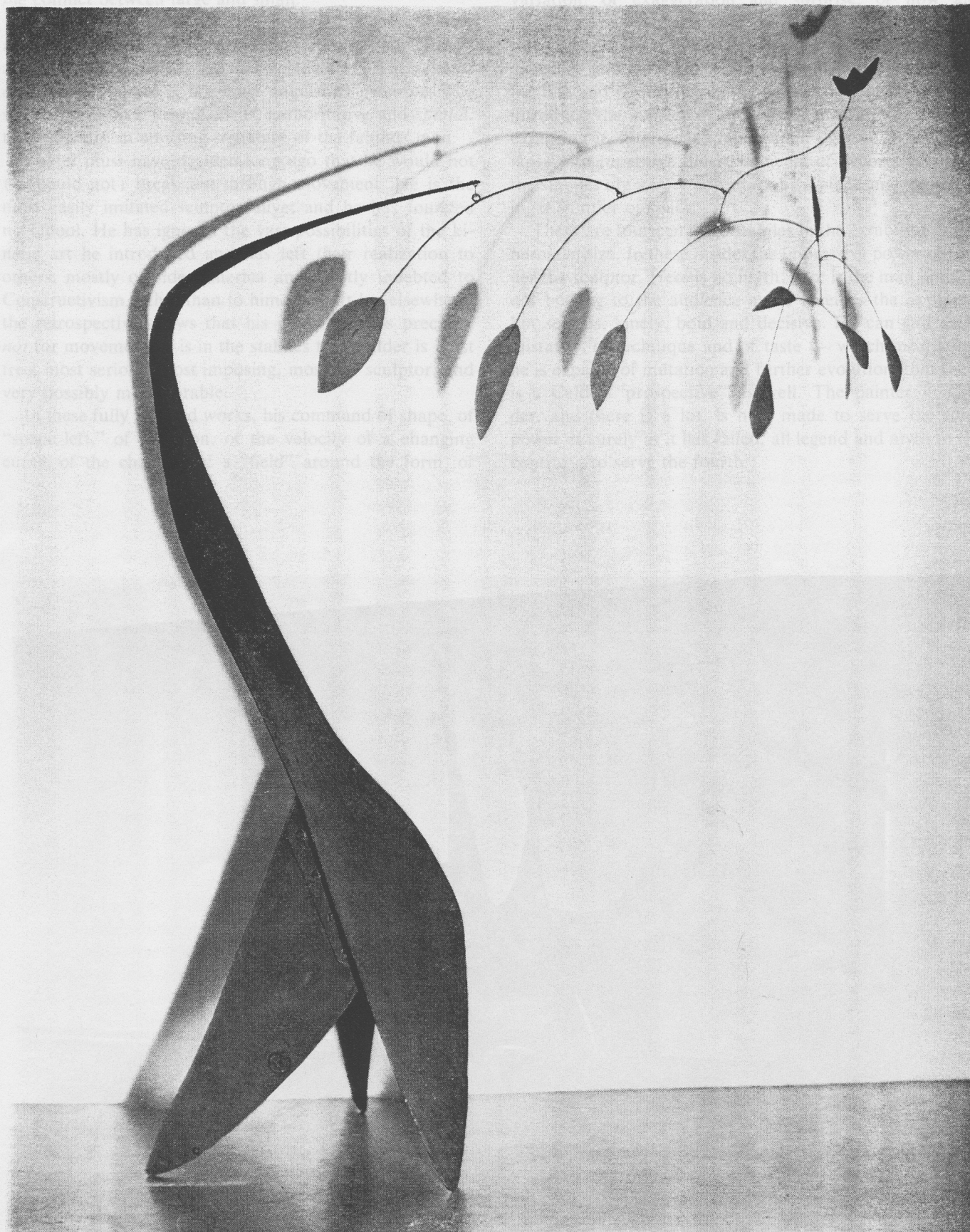
This is not captious discussion of trifles. Calder himself has, in the best of the smaller pieces from his own hand where he could do all his own work, set standards of re-

sponsiveness and elegance. On the scale of a pair of pliers, drawing, rather than engineering, was needed. He then achieved size by combining subgroups, in which each constellation had a shapely profile, into large galaxies.

However, the mobile, even if flexible, is two-dimensional, like a drawing on a rubber sheet. The sinuous tracery of each set of wired profiles may sit contrapuntally against the next, but flat against flat. With the parts swinging around a vertical axis, the galaxy occupies space but does not energize it. Calder has run through the permutations of these wire profiles; yet, apart from some perfecting of wire technology, extension and refinement of his vocabulary of shapes (the Arpesque flame forms are the best), and increased size, he shows very little advance in the expressive use of movement in the thirty years since *Calderberry Bush*. It is not the first time that an artist has been confined by his own invention; it happened to Samuel F. B. Morse. The Master of the Catenaries has become the prisoner of the chain he forged.

Calder appears to have made several attempts to break out: his continuing sorties into painting, the "movable" cast-bronze pieces of twenty years ago, unconsciously in the jewelry and the ties, the few trussed structures which

actually enclose space, in the stables, and in his elegies on the conflict between large and small suggestions of enclosure and exclusion, of repetition with



Red Petals (1942); collection the Arts Club, Chicago.

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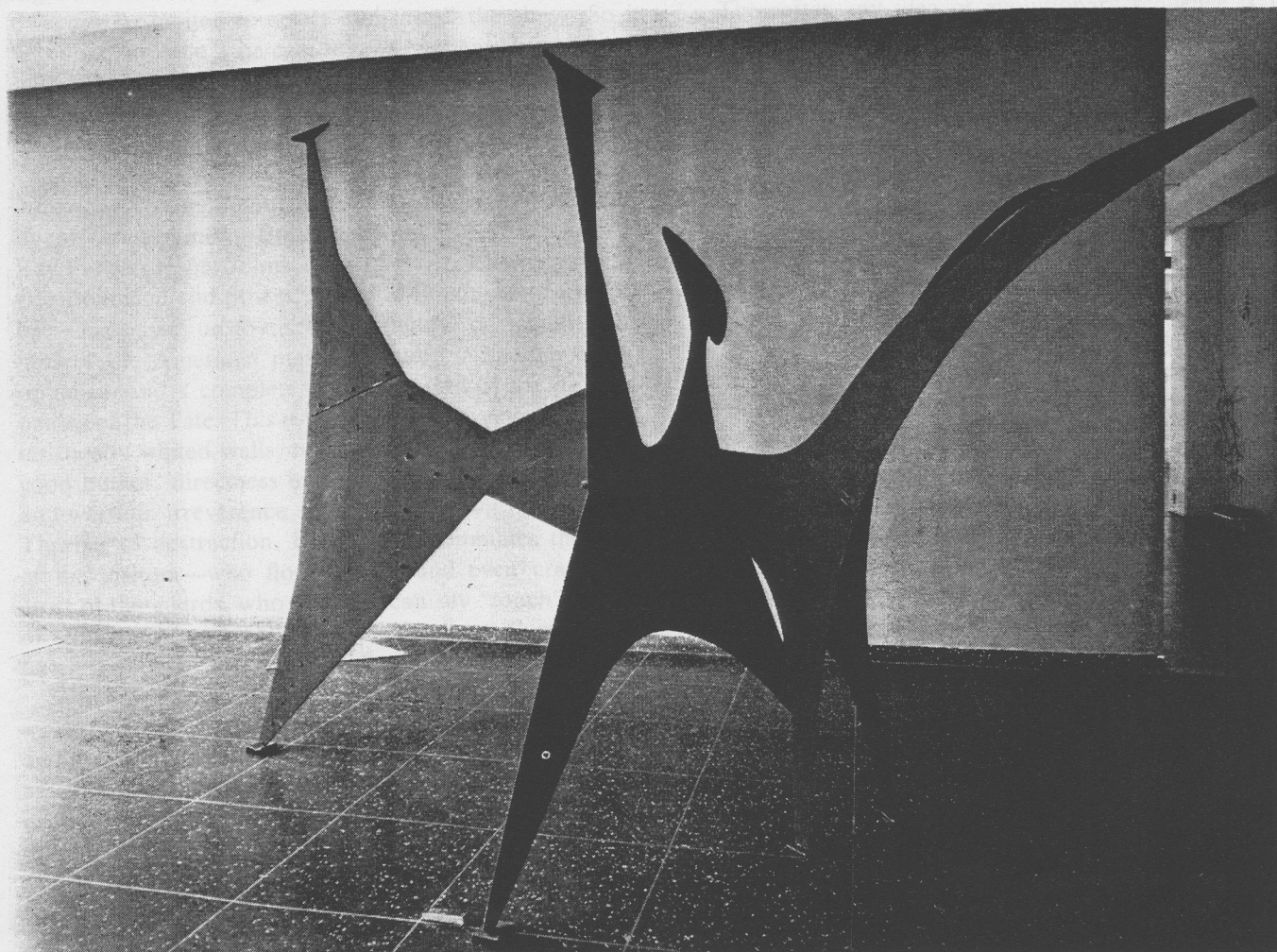
This conflict is epitomized in the numerous pieces where a small mobile is hung on a large stabile — a sculpture and a drawing condemned to live together. The *Clouds over the Mountain* is the most anguished example. The stabile is positive, strong, clear, authoritative and *spatial*; the mobile is an amusing signature of the famous man.

Calder must have decided long ago that he would not (or could not) break out through movement. He is the most easily imitated sculptor alive; and he has founded no school. He has ignored the vast possibilities of the kinetic art he introduced and has left their realization to others, mostly outside America and mostly indebted to Constructivism rather than to him. His gift lay elsewhere; the retrospective shows that his great talent is precisely *not* for movement. It is in the stables that Calder is most free, most serious, most imposing, most the sculptor, and very possibly most durable.

In these fully realized works, his command of shape, of "space left," of direction, of the velocity of a changing curve, of the charging of a "field" around the form, of

suggestions of enclosure and exclusion, of repetition with variation, of exaggeration and surprise, of flow and abruptness, show the master designer. Some wit is there, too, and with a hard edge. We are not amused, we are engaged — and won. Here is the work of an original mind, humble and honest, carving the void. Where the mobiles introduce the subject of movement in sculpture without exploring it, filter space rather than dispose it, and then lapse into repetitive divertissements of decorative shape, the stables are a lofty adventure by a planesman penetrating a frontier of space.

There are fourteen large stables in the exhibition, some heroic in size. In these resides the impressive power of Calder the sculptor. Here is no myth; here is the man himself, not bowing to the audience as he receives the applause, but serious, lonely, bold and decisive. He can still make mistakes, of technique and of taste — which means that he is capable of mutation and further evolution, that there is a Calder "prospective" as well. The painter in Calder, and there is a lot, is here made to serve the third power as surely as it has failed, all legend and myth to the contrary, to serve the fourth.



Black Beast (1940); courtesy the Museum of Modern Art, New York.