



CALDER'S UNIVERSE

by Jean Lipman

The prolific
creator of
the mobile
and the stabile,
explored in
word and color



The color portfolio this month is excerpted from *Calder's Universe*, by Jean Lipman, published by The Viking Press in cooperation with the Whitney Museum of American Art.

It is important to consider, in a general way, some of the influences that came early in Calder's fifty active years as an artist. Young "Sandy" Calder grew up in an art environment; homes were studios, and most of his parents' friends were artists.

Before he was ten Sandy had his first workshop. The origins of some of Calder's basic ideas and materials can be traced to his boyhood. He mentions that Germantown Academy's athletic rival, Penn Charter, had red, blue and black for their insignia, which, he says, "I always found an amusing combination of colors. I still like it today."

The boy who was fascinated by the machinery and movement of San Francisco's gaily painted cable cars eventually made sculpture that moved.

In 1922, as fireman on the passenger ship *H. F. Alexander*, he invented several practical devices, including a baffle to direct breezes into the overheated boiler room where he worked. Calder's fascination with the universe, evident in many of his works, originated on this sea voyage:

"It was early one morning on a calm sea, off Guatemala, when over my couch—a coil of rope—I saw the beginning of a fiery red sunrise on one side and the moon looking like a silver coin on the other. Of the whole trip this impressed me most of all; it left me with a lasting sensation of the solar system."

Of his many "firsts," perhaps the most important is Calder's concept of the universe as the main subject of an artist's work. He once told a *Life* reporter: "The first inspiration I ever

Preceding page: Portrait of a Young Man, c. 1945. Painted sheet metal, 35 $\frac{1}{4}$ " h. Collection of the author. Above left: Aluminum Leaves, 1940. Painted sheet metal, sheet aluminum, wire, 61" h. Collection of the author. Right: Indian Feathers, 1969. Painted sheet metal, rod, 11'4 $\frac{3}{4}$ " h. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of the Howard and Jean Lipman Foundation.



had was the cosmos, the planetary system."

Undoubtedly the most specific influence on Calder's art stems from his study and practice of engineering. He graduated from Stevens Institute of Technology with a degree in mechanical engineering in 1919, and for the next four years had a string of jobs related to various aspects of his studies.

One involved automotive engineering in Rutherford, New Jersey; there was drafting work for New York Edison; map-coloring for a

hydraulic engineer in Bridgeport, Connecticut; fieldwork in Youngstown, Ohio.

Although Calder attended the Art Students League (1923–26), studying under Kenneth Hayes Miller, George Luks, Guy Pène du Bois, Boardman Robinson and John Sloan, the academic approach never made much of an impression. He has always been an inventive craftsman rather than a conventional fine-arts practitioner.

In 1931—the year of his first exhibition of abstract sculpture—Calder

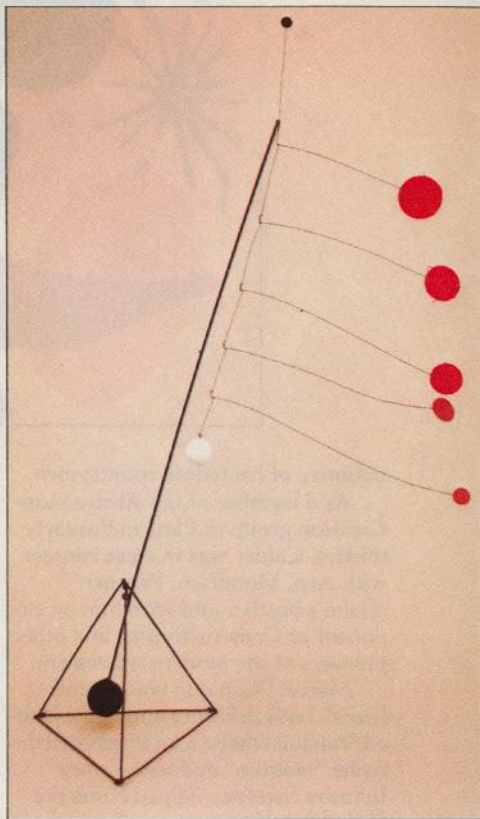




told an interviewer: "Why do I live in Paris? Because in Paris it's a compliment to be called crazy." Calder's decision to live and work in that city—then the creative center of the art world—had far-reaching effects on his development as an artist.

The stimulation of the Paris avant-garde transformed him into a serious abstract artist and, ultimately, into an artist of international stature. It is doubtful that he could have achieved this within the provincial confines of American artistic life at that time, when modern art was, indeed, considered "crazy" by the

Left: *Little Spider*, c. 1940. *Painted sheet metal, rod, wire*, 55" h. Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, New York. Above: *Yellow Whale*, 1958. *Painted sheet metal, wire*, 45" w. Collection of the author. Right: *Calderberry Bush*, 1932. *Painted sheet metal, wood, wire, rod*, 7' h. Mr. and Mrs. James Johnson Sweeney, New York.





majority of his fellow countrymen.

As a member of the Abstraction-Création group in Paris in the early thirties, Calder was in close contact with Arp, Mondrian, Pevsner (Gabo's brother and with him an exponent of Constructivism) and other pioneers of the modern movement.

Marcel Duchamp was a good friend, both in France and in the United States; it was he who originated the name "mobiles" and with James Johnson Sweeney helped name the Constellations.

Calder has described often and in detail his 1930 visit to Piet Mondrian's studio and his subsequent conversion to abstract art. Mondrian is one of the few direct influences he acknowledges; what is interesting about his relationship with the painter is that Mondrian served only as a

Above: *Green Ball*, 1971. Aubusson tapestry, 6'7" x 4'6½". Shirley Polykoff, New York. Right: *Untitled*, 1972. Gouache, 43" x 29". Mr. and Mrs. John I. H. Baur, Katonah, New York.



to the Baur.

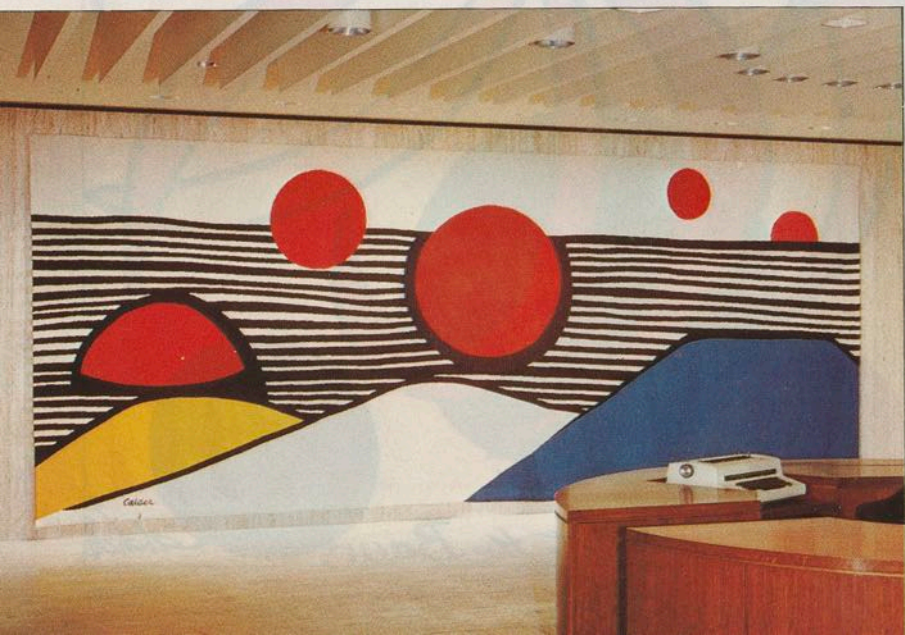
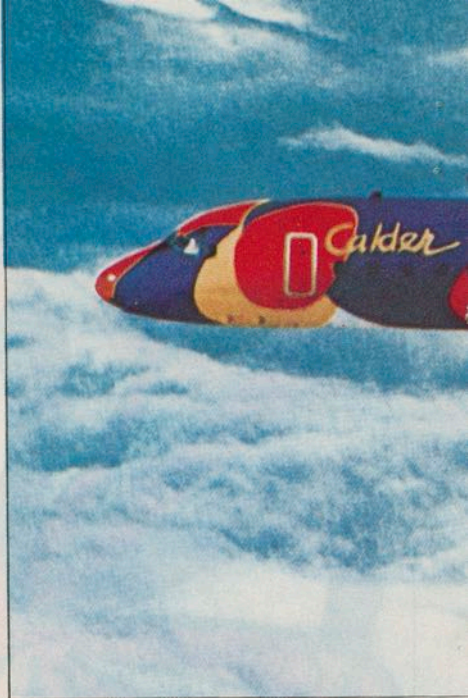
Frida
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point of departure—"a shock that started things."

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Calder has produced an enormous number of drawings, many of them made specifically as book illustrations. Especially noteworthy are three series done in the early years, then packed away and rediscovered recently: the zoo drawings, the circus series and the "space" drawings.

After he went to Paris in 1926, Calder continued to draw, attending classes at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. It was at this time that he began to work with wire. His pen-and-ink drawings, which followed the first wire sculptures, are unique. They are actually based on the sculpture: Calder used lines exactly as if they were pieces of thin wire, drawing nothing that could not have





been twisted out of wire.

The precision, clarity and elegance of Calder's draftsmanship carries over into his three-dimensional work. The relationship between the single-line drawings and the wire sculptures has already been noted, and draftsmanship is an important element of the mobiles and stables as well.

Calder went on to apply the lessons learned from painting to his later sculpture, adopting Mondrian's limited but brilliant palette—the primary colors plus black and white. These were also the favorite colors of Calder's friends Miró and Léger. Today the rich blue, vermilion and yellow of Calder's work have become so closely identified with him that they are sometimes

spoken of as "Calder colors."

Calder's work has pushed sculpture beyond its traditional definitions. He has literally taken sculpture off the age-old pedestal, abolishing the base altogether by hanging his works from ceilings and walls, or letting them sit quite casually on the floor or ground.

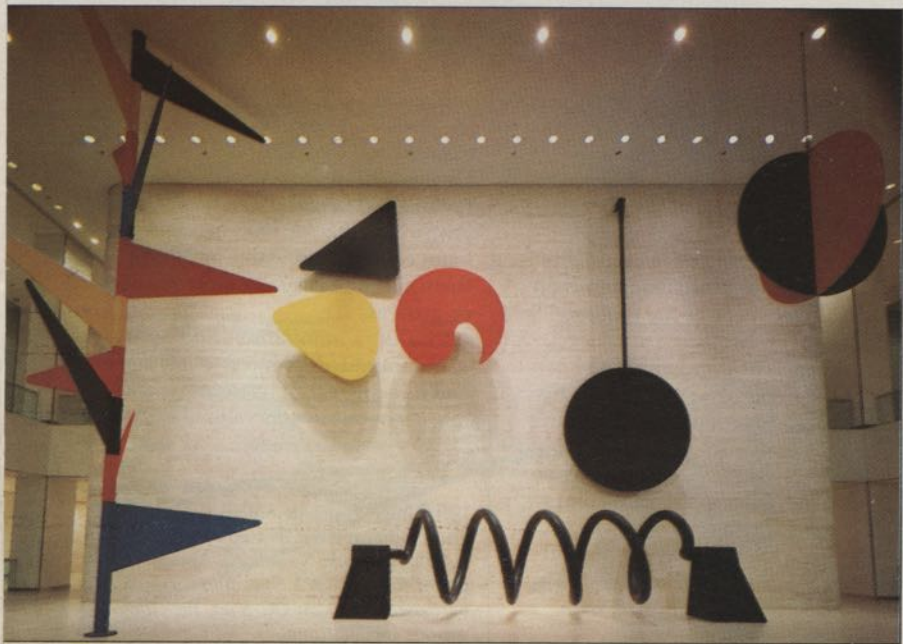
Calder's innovations and hybrids seem unlimited: painted jet planes and a racing car; a terrazzo sidewalk; murals in oil on concrete, silkscreen

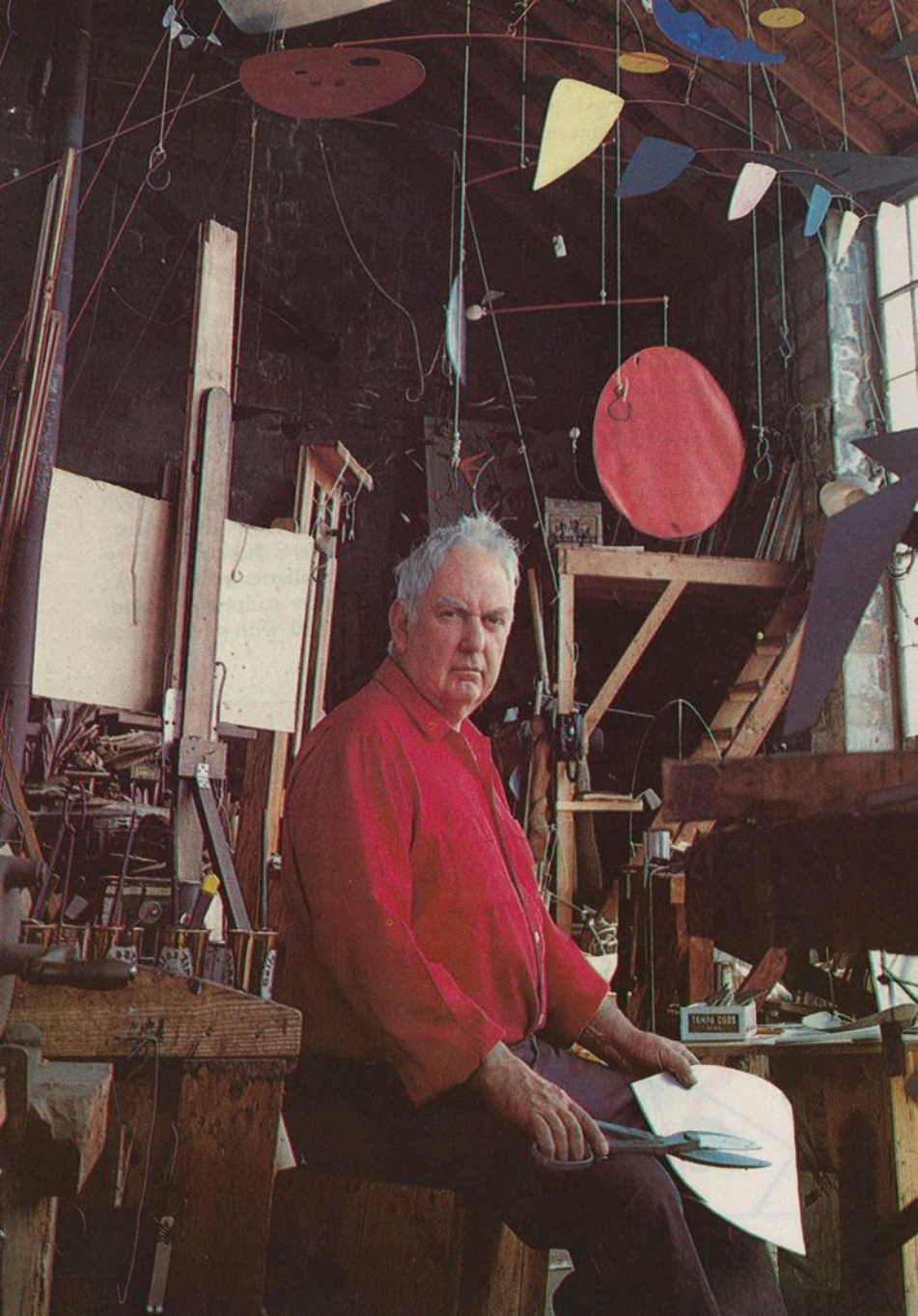
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Left: *Une Floppée de Soleils*, 1973. Aubusson tapestry, 8' x 20'. IBM Corporation, Armonk, New York. Above: *Flying Colors*, 1973. Specially formulated aerospace paint on DC-8 jet, 157' long. Braniff International.



Above: *Le Coq de Saché*, 1965. Tin can, wire, 32" h. Jean and Sandra Davidson, Saché, France. Below: *Universe*, 1974. Painted stainless steel plate, aluminum plate, motors, 33' x 55'. Sears Tower, Chicago. Right: Alexander Calder in his studio in Roxbury, Connecticut.





on canvas; ceramic tile; wallpapers and fabrics; shop-window displays; a huge rooftop painting; a water ballet; a mercury fountain.

There are works made with just about every kind of material: wood, metal, bone, plastic, plywood, porcelain, cloth, paper, leather, wire, string, rubber tubing, corks, buttons, sequins, nuts and bolts, bottle caps, tin cans—and more. In every case the materials are used in new ways to produce original work.

In 1939 he received first prize among 250 entries in a Museum of Modern Art competition for sculpture in Plexiglas—then a new medium.

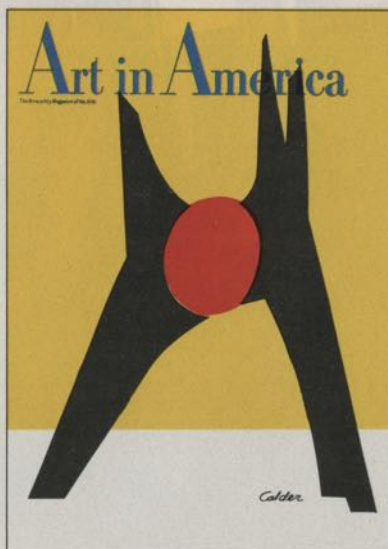
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In the early days in Montparnasse, Calder was called "the wire king." Today, a number of his wire sculptures must be considered—

even when measured against his mobiles and stabiles—among the most original and remarkable sculptural achievements of our time.

Often they were not appreciated, however, and numbers of them, like many of Calder's other early works, were casually discarded or lost by their owners.

Rufus and Leslie Stillman tell of a baby-sitter they shared with the Calders in Roxbury about 1940 who was indignant when, after an evening of child care at the Calders, she was offered "one of those big wire things" instead of her usual \$2. When *The Brass Family* was exhibited in 1929, it was priced at \$500—the highest figure in Calder's show at the Fifty-sixth Street Galleries in New York; the smaller wire sculptures ranged from \$25 to \$50, with portrait heads \$100 each.





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The Brass Family never sold, and Calder kept it in his personal collection until 1969, when he gave it to the Whitney Museum. Its valuation was then \$100,000.

Although not the first to make sculpture move, Calder was the first to create an art of motion.

His experiments with motorized moving sculpture continued until the forties, but the predictable mathematical relationships, exactly repeating themselves, lost their appeal for Calder, who has always valued the elements of chance and spontaneity.

He concentrated his attention on the free-swinging, infinitely variable mobiles, and did not work with

motorization in any significant way until 1974.

He then revitalized some of the basic ideas of his early motorized sculptures and stage sets for a monumentally scaled and magnificently composed moving wall sculpture commissioned for the lobby of the Sears Tower in Chicago. It weighs 16,174 pounds, is 55 feet wide and 33 feet high; the total cost is discreetly placed

Far left: Calder *Flèches*, 1968. *Poster*, 28³/₄" x 20". *Galerie Maeght, Paris*. Left: *Art in America*, 1962. *Poster*, 28¹/₂" x 19". *Collection of the author*. Above: Calder *Paintings/Sculpture/Graphics*, 1972. *Poster*, 24¹/₄" x 29¹/₈". *Hokin Gallery, Chicago*.



at "under a million dollars."

Pinpointing the date of the first mobile is difficult. One of the earliest is *Une Boule Noire, une Boule Blanche*, in which a white wood ball and a black iron ball are suspended above red metal saucers of varying sizes; when the heavy iron ball is given a push, the lighter wooden one skips from one saucer to another, producing a series of sounds.

This innovative sculpture, which incorporates the dimension of both

sound and motion, was made in 1930, the year of Calder's earliest abstract work.

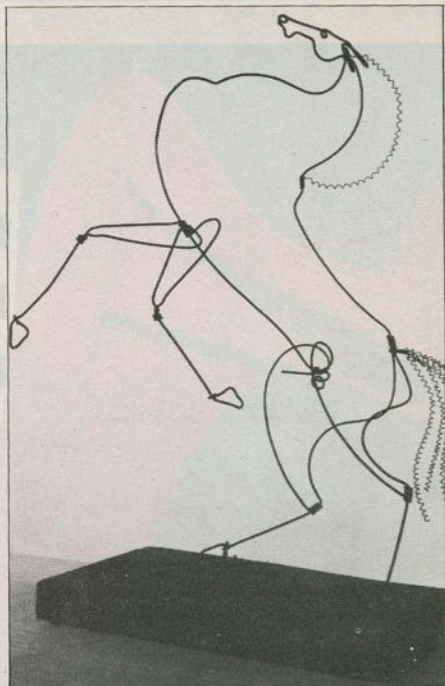
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"Jean Arp said to me, 'Well, what were those things you did last year — stables?'" Calder continues: "Whereupon I seized the term and applied it first of all to the things previously shown at Percier [abstract wire sculpture, 1931] and later to the large stable objects I am now involved in...."

In the late fifties, as large commissions began coming his way, Calder's works outgrew his studios—and his own ability to execute them by hand. He tried out several metal shops in the vicinity of Roxbury and soon settled down with Carmen Segre in Waterbury, Connecticut. Today

Left: *Le Guichet*, 1963. Painted steel plate, 22' w. Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, New York; gift of Howard and Jean Lipman. Below: *La Grande Vitesse*, 1969. Painted steel plate, 55' w. Calder Plaza, Vandenberg Center, Grand Rapids, Michigan. Right: *Stegosaurus*, 1973. Painted steel plate, 50' h. Alfred E. Burr Mall, Hartford, Connecticut; gift of the Trustees of the Ella Burr McManus Fund.





all Calder's large works are executed either at Segre's Iron Works or at the Etablissements Biémont in Tours, near his home in France.

The monumental stables are—with the mobiles and the latest *Universe*—the most impressive achievements of Calder's lifetime of work, but we must not overlook marvelous early pieces such as *Morning Star*, which might be considered a Constellation evolved into a stable.

Today, as Calder nears eighty, the stables continue to be the focus of his attention, growing steadily in scale and grandeur. —

(Editor's note: *Alexander Calder died on November 11, 1976, at the age of seventy-eight, soon after the publication of Calder's Universe.*)

Above: *Man*, 1967. Stainless steel plate, 70' h. Montreal, Canada. Left: *Rearing Stallion*, 1928. Wire, 22³/₄" h. Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, New York.