

Calder: He Gave Pleasure



Children and adults surround Calder's stabile The Crab. Kids love Calder; he once said, "My fan mail is enormous—everybody is under six."

When Alexander Calder died last November at the age of seventy-eight, one of the largest retrospectives of his work had just opened at New York's Whitney Museum, an exhibition that recently left Atlanta and will travel to Minneapolis this summer and to Dallas in the fall. No memorial to the charming Calder, the most popular American sculptor of the century, could be more fitting than this vivacious show with its twirling and dipping mobiles and its monumental stabiles looking like dinosaurs in a Museum of Fanciful History.

For all its exuberant simplicity, Calder's art represents a complex fusion of many elements. In one sense his giant stabiles (one at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology is forty feet high and weighs twenty-five tons) are part of a family tradition of heroic sculpture. His grandfather made the thirty-

seven-foot-tall statue of William Penn atop Philadelphia's City Hall, and his father sculpted George Washington for the arch at the foot of Manhattan's Fifth Avenue.

Seen in another light, Calder's ingenious forms recall the work of Yankee tinkerers. As a little boy he had a studio in the basement, and among his earliest extant works are a tiny saddle and hat he fashioned for his sister's dolls when he was nine. His interest in devising curiosities with wire and pliers never abated, and his first distinctive sculpture was a wire portrait of the jazz singer Josephine Baker made in 1926. Throughout his life he continued to twist metal into jewelry, serving spoons, andirons, door latches, scissors, combs, toys, and a host of other useful or ornamental objects.

Calder's penchant for tinkering was joined to a solid under-

The Red Devil still guards the grounds of Calder's studio at Saché, France.





Calder's circus delights crowds; a film of the artist running the circus is part of the exhibition.

standing of how things work. In 1919 he was graduated from the Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, New Jersey, with a degree in mechanical engineering. This training helped him achieve the delicate balances and subtle patterns of activity in his motorized and air-powered mobiles. As an engineer he also knew how to make massive metal constructions that would withstand the rigors of time and the elements.

Heroic sculptor, tinkerer, engineer—all of these descriptions fit Calder but none suggests how playful he could be. A few years after college Calder had a job in New York as a newspaper illustrator. With his press pass he gained free admission for two weeks to the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus—and this experience shaped the rest of his career. In the mid-1920's he created his own circus and entertained the elite of the Paris and New York art world with performances of his miniature animals, clowns, and stuntmen. Until 1931 he continued to add figures to the circus and it always remained for him a fount of inspiration; as late as 1975 he was turning out new gouaches on circus themes.

His best-known works, of course, are the abstract sculptures he made after 1930. As Calder remarked, "My entrance into the field of abstract art came about as the result of a visit to the studio of Piet Mondrian in Paris in 1930. I was particularly impressed by some rectangles of color he had tacked on his wall in a pattern after his nature. I told him I would like to make them oscillate—he objected."

Calder, fortunately, ignored the objection and went on to invent a whole new genre of oscillating abstractions—the mobile. Mobiles were remarkable not only because they moved but

MARVIN SCHWARTZ; LEFT: KAREN SKELTON



Calder roars along with his circus lion.

Constellation (opposite), a surprisingly intimate wood sculpture, fits in perfectly with the traditional décor of a private home in New York City. As this piece demonstrates, Calder was not only a maker of public monuments and amusing diversions but also a creator of subtle and timeless small sculptures.

also because they were made of brightly colored metal; when Calder first began his mobiles, traditional materials such as bronze and marble were the accepted media for sculpture. Despite his status as an innovator, Calder refused to take himself—or his new form of art—too seriously: once, when asked how he could tell a mobile was finished, he replied, "When it's time for dinner."

For half a century he functioned as a versatile master rivaled in productivity only by Picasso. Calder designed fountains, tapestries, stage sets, dinner plates, wallpaper, sidewalks, hammocks—and in 1973 he began to paint jets for Braniff. Year after year new works (including some two thousand mobiles) poured out of Calder's two studios—in Roxbury, Connecticut, and Saché in southern France. Last fall, just before he died, Calder took to Washington the model for a combination mobile-stabile that will be installed in the Senate Office Building; last year he also designed a mobile for a new wing of Washington's National Gallery. In February a model of his *Salute to Mexico* was unveiled by that country's first lady, and this spring a stabile is to be placed on Mount Herzl above Jerusalem—Calder's gift to the people of Israel.

His sources of inspiration were manifold. Some works he patterned on the cosmos ("The underlying sense of form in my work," he said, "has been the system of the Universe, or part thereof"). Others were derived from the shapes of nature and bear such titles as *Performing Seal*, *Rat*, *Whale*, *Spider*, *Snow Flurry*, *Bougainvillea*, and *Cucaracha*. All are magical. As his friend the French writer Jacques Prévert once remarked, "He gives pleasure, that's his secret."

