

Calder's Wired



for Sound: Applause

BY HENRY J. SELDIS

LONDON — Nothing could better dispel the gloom of a gray and rainy London day, greatly accentuated for me after many days in the brilliant Mediterranean sun, than the gloriously ebullient Alexander Calder exhibition that is the summer fare at the Tate Gallery.

Calder's gay, familiar inventions as well as his more somber, uniquely simple later pieces make him, at the moment, the most welcome American in London. His combination of Yankee ingenuity and cosmopolitan sophistication is matchless, and his stature as one of our time's major creators is reconfirmed in this large retrospective, astutely and lovingly selected and installed by James Johnson Sweeney.

The more esoteric modern art becomes the more sanctimonious are its creators and promoters. In this context Calder, like all great humorists, a

determinedly serious man, offers us an art which is greatly rewarding to every viewer, and on many levels.

"If there were any doubt that modern art, when it wants, can make the spirit dance and sing and laugh, Calder's exhibition at the Tate Gallery would dispel it," writes erudite David Thompson in the London Times.

Playful Exhibit

"It is a playful and joyous exhibition, the largest retrospective there has yet been for the American sculptor whose name will always be associated with the word 'mobiles.'

"The possibility of free, aerial movement, of abstract shapes, linked but independent, jiggling, swaying, and circling in space, has been Calder's great contribution to modern sculpture," writes

Thompson. Constructivists like Gabo had been on to the idea a decade before him, but Calder made it his own, and Duchamp coined the word "mobiles" for the distinctively personal creations he was beginning to evolve in Paris in 1932.

The son and grandson of sculptors in Philadelphia, with early leanings toward engineering, he arrived at his own famous style by way of outline figures in wire, the mechanical toy circus which all of Montparnasse went to enjoy around 1927, and the experience of a visit to Mondrian's studio in that year. Miro and Picasso have also left their mark on Calder's work.

Thompson astutely observes that from these experiences "came the sense of fun, the graceful linearism, the ability to 'place' simple abstract shapes in black, white and primary colors, which are the distinguishing mark of his

style." The movements of nature, both animal and vegetable, have supplied Calder with much inspiration for his abstractions. Even in his latter-day stabiles, massive and immovable, in contrast to his earlier, aerial creations, animal imagery, especially marine imagery, is central to his work as in the superb, 10-ft-high scarlet "Crab" which Sweeney, a life-long friend and supporter of the artist, has purchased for the Houston Museum which he now heads. A sizable Calder mobile should be a must for at least one of the cultural facilities now being built in this area.

Sense of Fun

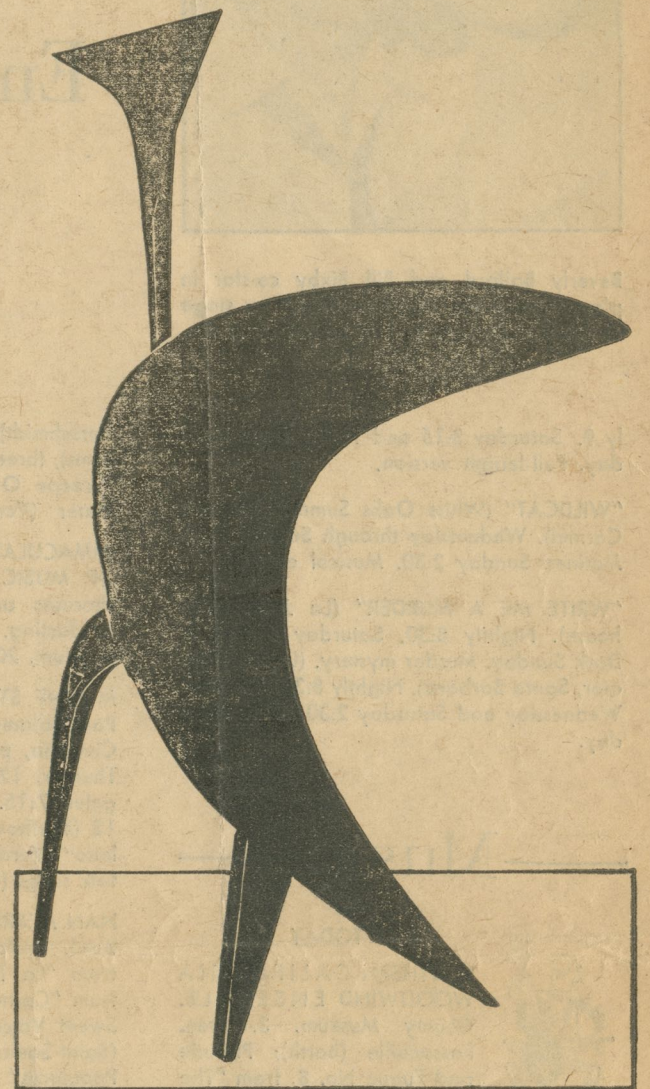
Especially his most recent works, whether mobile or stable, serve to deny the criticism advanced by Nigel Gosling in *The Observer* (London) "that he is really a salon man, a rococo craftsman who should stick to the small and the intimate; in fact that the proper place for these entertaining oddments would be (if many of them were not so cumbersome and heavy) not in the Tate (London's modern art museum) but in the Victoria and Albert Museum, alongside other amusing, elegant objects made for our domestic use and delight."

For an artist whose work has grown so constantly in imaginative freedom, formal discipline and in poetry, this is a rather shabby judgment, happily not shared by the majority of art critics in England or anywhere else.

Halls Are Alive

The vaulted halls of the Tate, usually so overwhelming to the works shown in them, are, for once, alive with the mobiles of Calder in which he suggests nothing, having caught the true, live movements and fashioned them. Calder's works are absolutes and with all their ingenuity they have the unpretentiousness and directness of all great art.

Without turning to the machine itself, Calder manages to show us that the plain metal slabs and bolts which he, as well as



ALEXANDER CALDER STABLE

the engineer, employs a formal beauty of their own which is accentuated not by their utilization but by the practical uselessness they enjoy as ingredients of a work of art.

The plow and the anvil, forms of ships and planes, even an essential solitude and a certain Puritanism are echoes in the most recent and, to me, the most memorable of Calder's sculptures. His utter involvement and frequent profundity are reflected in his credo printed in the Tate exhibition's catalogue:

"I feel an artist should go about his work simply with great respect for his materials . . . Sculptors of all places and climates have used what came ready to hand. They did not search for exotic and precious materials. It was their knowledge and invention which gave value to the result of their labors . . . Then there is the possible handicap of being

overequipped, of having more tools and materials than one knows what to do with . . . Simplicity of equipment and an adventurous spirit are essential in attacking the unfamiliar and the unknown.

Began as Child

"In my own work, when I began using wire, I was working in a medium that I had known since a child. For I used to gather up the ends of copper wire discarded when a cable had been spliced and with these and some beads would make jewelry for my sister's dolls. Disparity in form, color, weight, motion is what makes a composition, and if this is allowed, then the number of elements can be very few. Symmetry and order do not make a composition. It is the apparent accident to regularity which the artist actually controls by which he makes or mars a work."



ALEXANDER CALDER: THE SPIRIT CAN DANCE, SING AND LAUGH