

# THE ALEXANDER CALDER PROBLEM

By JOHN CANADAY

WHAT shall we do about Alexander Calder? Some people, for instance Mona Lisa, stick around and stick around and stick around until you are sick and tired of them, but you have to keep on treating them with respect because they have this terrific backlog kind of thing. But Alexander Calder has stuck around for 66 years now, a large number of them in the public eye, and he presents the more difficult problem of a familiar monument that continues to look as fresh as if it had just erupted before your eyes as a fascinating innovation in an over-familiar landscape.

Alexander Calder has in common with Mona Lisa a somewhat removed and enigmatic air on first acquaintance, although, unlike that rather dull Italian woman, he occasionally opens up with a deep rumbling sound that, after analytical reflection on your part, is intelligible as a corrosive comment on some current pretender or, more simply, as a succinct conglomeration of abstract syllables indicative of pleasure in something like a plant, a piece of wood, an item of food or drink, or just of general well-being. To the person who likes to pin things down, this can be very disturbing.

## A Central Mystery

The most disturbing thing about Calder is that there is no explanation, or at least no explanation that can be stretched out to the length of a column, as to why his art remains invulnerable to the volumes that have been written about it, the hordes of imitators (including children) who have plagiarized it, and the plain business of having it confront you on exhibition every time you turn around. A critic is expected to explain this kind of thing, and indeed draws a salary on the basis that he can do so, but if you are honest with yourself you have to admit that in art as well as in science there is a thing called life that has never been explained, and that all you can do is examine its manifestations and pretend that they add up to the central mystery, which they do not.

## His Guggenheim Show Is a Stunner But What Makes Him So Good?

Calder's innovational importance is easy to pin down: he put sculpture into motion. But in the hands of a lesser man the innovation might have inspired transient interest as a novelty, followed by a justified "So what?"

Calder's stables, too, are easy to talk about. You begin by connecting them with engineering and the contemporary urge to abstract an art from the non-art forms peculiar to our mechanized century. But many sculptors use these forms, and few manage to do more than drain the vitality from the railroad semaphors, the steel girders

and the other elements of our engineered landscape that artists set out to estheticize.

Then there is Calder's wit. It is purely a plastic wit, a wit of form that has nothing to do with intellectual wit, but like all true wit, its essence lies outside any formula that analysis yields. The formula when derived and applied can produce something that should be witty by the rules, but it never is. Calder as a wit reduces you to the conclusion that it isn't so much what he does as the way he does it, bringing you back into the circle where you deduce rules as to how he

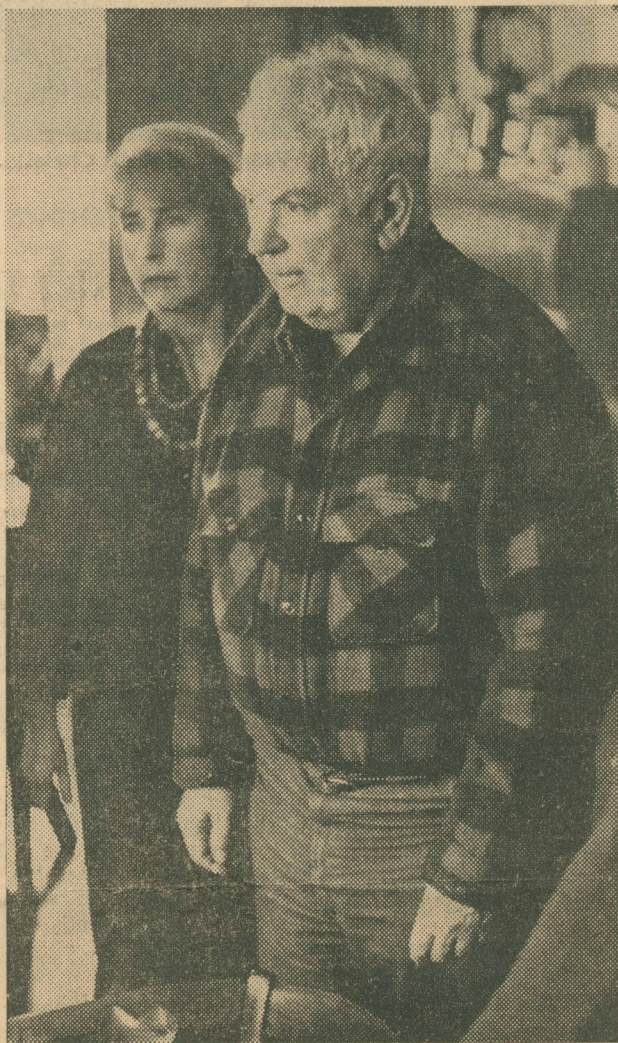
does it for another formula that can yield only pseudo-Calders that fall flat.

As far as I can see, the most important of the tangible, definable sources of the life that invests Calder's art is an absolute harmony between technique and expression, to the point where one becomes inseparable from the other. If this is generally true of successful expression, it holds no less for Calder, and holds more directly than for most artists. The hand of the craftsman is always apparent on the surface of his work and is part of its expressive depth, whether the craftsman is Calder, whose deft twisting of a wire retains the impress of his hand and wrist just as clay may retain the impress of a sculptor's thumb, or the machinists who cut and assemble the heavy bolted metal plates of the stables under Calder's direction from his designs.

## A Central Harmony

Craftsmanship in Calder is never confused with high polish (although in some artists this polish is imperative for a harmony with expression) but is always identified with assurance and appropriateness. Craftsmanship is never overplayed and never undervalued; it never fails expression, yet never substitutes for expression. This healthy balance between workman and creator is comparable to the balance between body and spirit adored by the Greeks—at which point, to no purpose, we could go on to argue that Calder is the soundest contemporary expression of the Greek tradition, with philosophical ponderings on the subject of the machine as our century's standard of ideal beauty as opposed to the Greek ideal of the body.

We could go off on just about any tangent, but we would never get very far in explaining the ultimate quality of vitality from which everything else depends. The big Calder show now at the Guggenheim Museum is a retrospective of an artist who has been established for decades. There is nothing unexpected in it, yet it has all the freshness of a first one-man show by a sensational new talent.



Ted Croner

Alexander Calder (and wife)

"... a familiar monument"