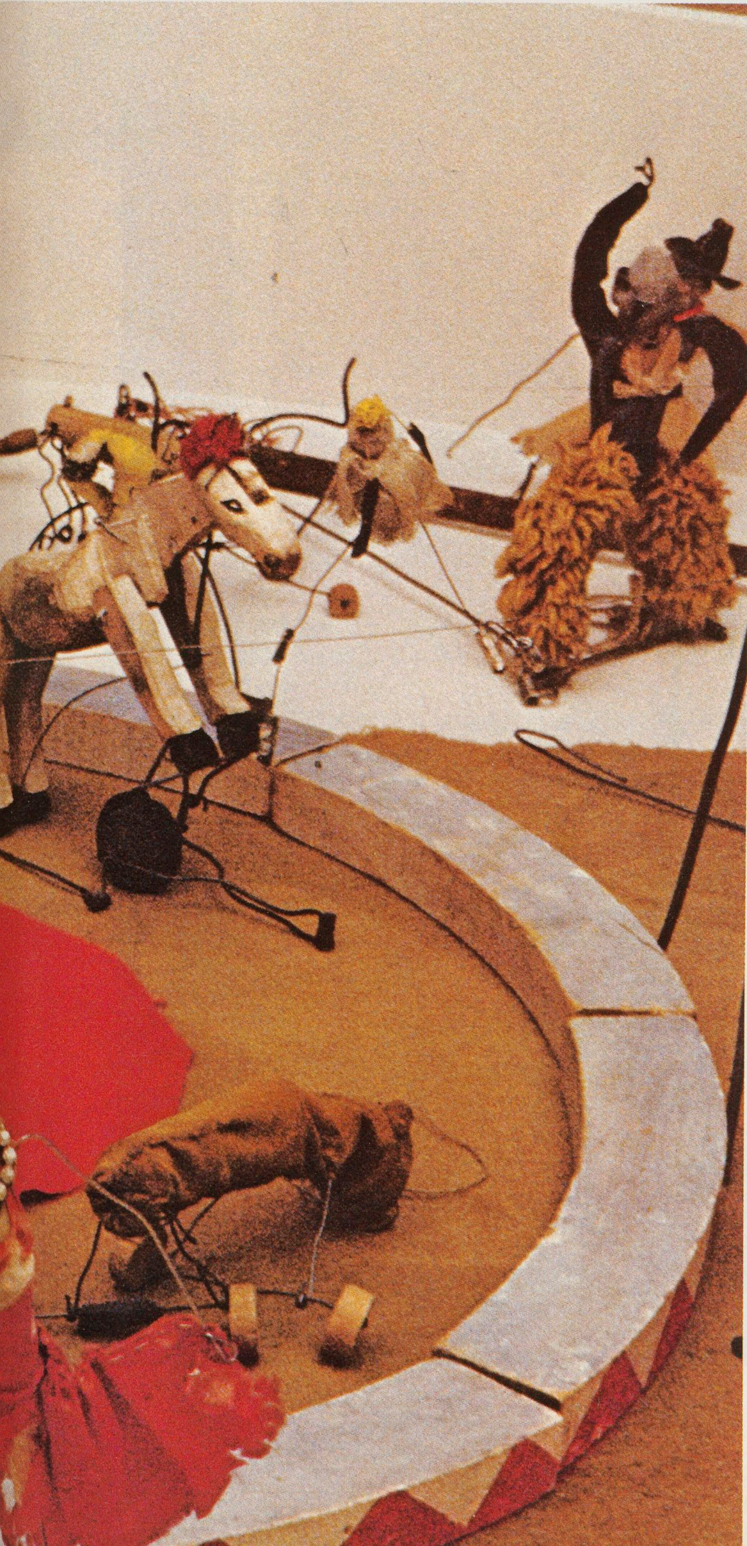
By Piri Halasz

America's own version of Matisse and/or Picasso—'Sandy' Calder

Photographs by Farrell Grehan

A master's retrospective show covers the delicate balance of the mobile, stabile—and all the stops in between



Is there an American, in 1976—himself moderately mobile—who has not, at one time or another, seen a Calder mobile? Almost impossible, if he is a museum-goer; but even if he is not. If he has passed through John F. Kennedy airport in New York, or the Dallas-Fort Worth airport, he may have walked beneath a Calder. Mobiles have been hung in U.S. department stores, offices and banks; a 55-foot-wide motorized wall mobile named *Universe* dominates the lobby of the new Sears Tower in Chicago (p. 77).

And, in other terms of social impact and effect, there is the fact, recorded in dictionaries, that the word "mobile" has another meaning entirely from its adjectival one; it is now a very familiar noun—you might even say that its synonym is "Calder." But Calder also stands for a good deal more than mobiles.

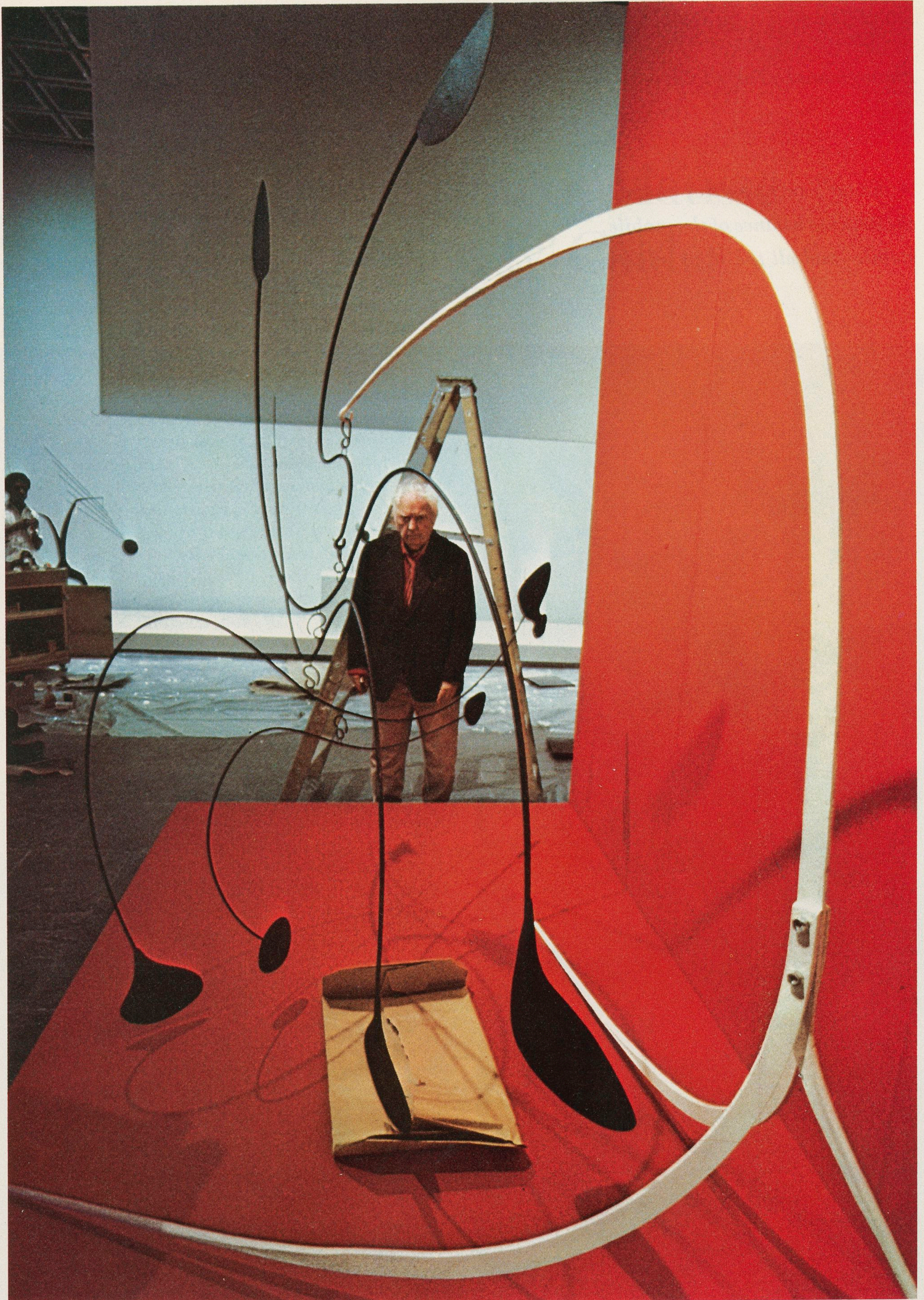
Sprouting in public places across the globe have been his mammoth "stabiles"—brilliantly painted sheet-steel behemoths that perch crablike on the pavement, or toss their heads jauntily in the air, conveying motion and grace although they may rise 60 or 70 feet high and weigh more than 50 tons.

Nevertheless, there are many aspects of Alexander (Sandy) Calder that are largely unknown to the general public. At 78, this bluff, easygoing, droll man lives for most of the year amid the rolling farm country of the Loire Valley in France. Clad in a red L. L. Bean work shirt and faded khakis, he daily disappears into his studio with the zest that has marked him always.

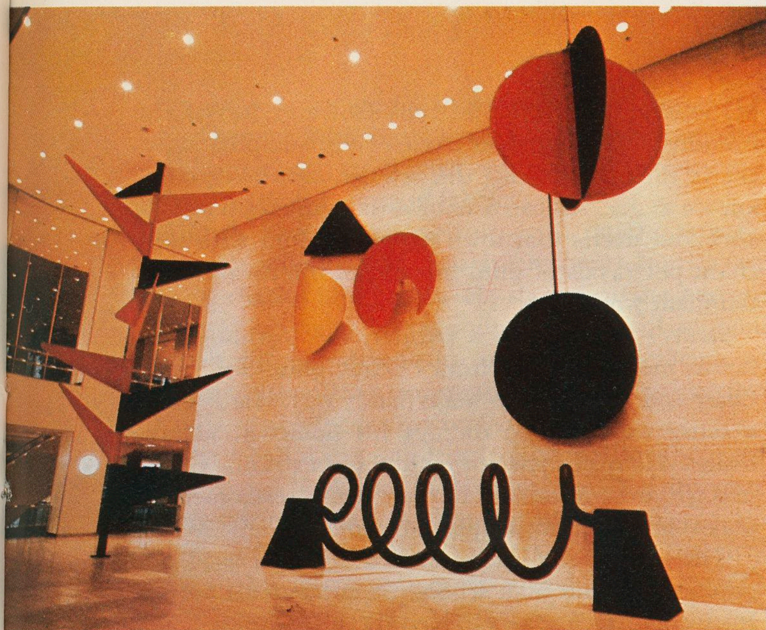
The extraordinary range of his output—encompassing much besides stabiles and mobiles—is also not widely known. Yet Calder is the "complete" artist. Like Picasso, Matisse, Max Ernst or Salvador Dali, Calder has displayed his wit and inventiveness in a staggering variety of media, forms and materials. Not only sculptor, draftsman and painter, he has turned his hand to woodcuts, etching and lithography; to rug and tapestry and even wallpaper design; to the crafting of toys, household objects, and a range of extraordinary jewelry which is highly prized by its fortunate possessors. He is responsible for the flamboyant exterior decorations of not one, but two Braniff International jets.

Piri Halasz, formerly art critic for Time *and a student and writer of modern art history, wrote about Max Ernst in* SMITHSONIAN, *March 1975.*

In heady postwar Paris, the circus was a commentary on fate and folly, a source of inspiration to many artists. Calder's manipulated and vocalized version was a hit among the avant-garde and the eminent.



Sears Tower, Chicago



Universe is motorized, weighs 16,174 pounds, is 55 feet wide and 33 feet high.

The Whitney Museum of American Art in New York has designated Calder its Bicentennial artist, and is currently staging *Calder's Universe.* On view are more than 200 works of art, divided into 17 categories. The objects run the gamut from six kinds of sculpture to stage props for a Broadway comedy, from a photograph of a Calder-designed acoustical installation in Caracas to a BMW car which, painted with Calder's design, raced at Le Mans last year.

After the exhibition closes in New York, on February 6, it will be seen at the High Museum in Atlanta (March 5-May 1); at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis (June 5-August 14); and at the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts (September 14-October 30).

Concurrently, the Viking Press, with the Whitney, has published *Calder's Universe,* the most comprehensive survey yet of his accomplishments, and one which benefits from the artist's warm cooperation in helping with the book and the exhibition. The exhibition is supported by a grant from the Champion International Corporation.

In the many earlier books and articles written about Calder, the point has often been stressed that he is a very "European" artist, an expatriate American who developed ideas for the mobiles—and indeed his entire mature styles—while living in Paris in the 1920s and the 1930s.

In form quite unlike the work surrounding him, Calder nevertheless is a considerable figure, a monument of a man, a force to be reckoned with.

This emphasis, especially in recent years, has served to distinguish him from the late David Smith, who is described as the more truly "American," having achieved his mature style on native soil. Though Smith was born only eight years after Calder, he did not achieve prominence until the 1940s and the 1950s, when New York itself had taken over from Paris the title of "art capital of the world."

Certainly, some of the differences which characterize the work of the two sculptors can be described in terms of two environments. Calder's works have the wit, the gaiety and the streamlined elegance which can also be found in the sculpture of Jean Arp and Constantin Brancusi, two other masters involved in the earlier Paris art scene. Smith's work, on the other hand, possesses the uniquely rugged and uncompromising character which is also the hallmark of the painters of the "New York School"—Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and Mark Rothko.

However, to say that Calder is nothing but Parisian is to do a disservice, not only to him but also to his birthplace. While no artist living in America, prior to 1930, had been able to establish an international reputation, the country nevertheless had a vital and challenging society, with distinctive mental attitudes and ways of looking at things. It also had artists who, while not in themselves perhaps great, understood the nature of greatness.

Rooted in Yankee tradition

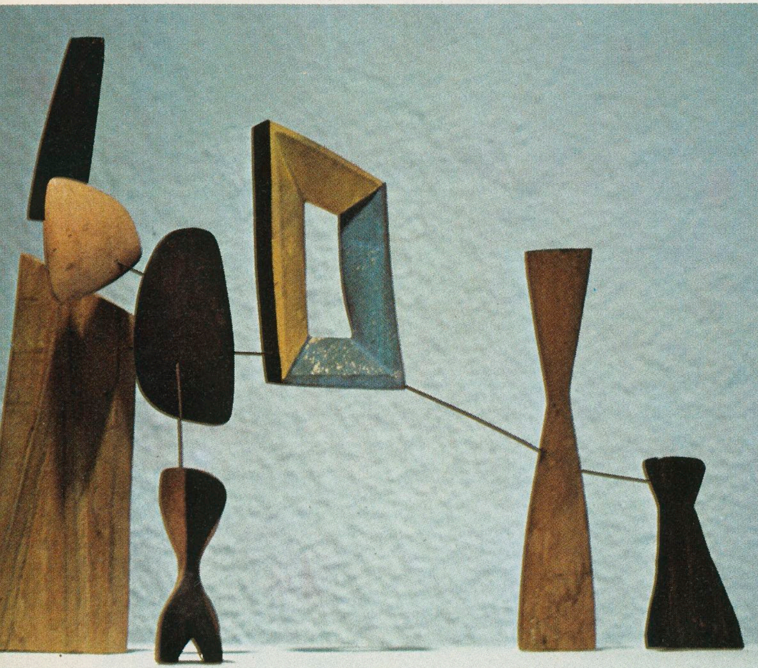
Calder, no less than Smith, benefited from this. He did, in fact, precede Smith in synthesizing an American outlook and experience with European modern styles. *Calder's Universe* is, among other things, a way of repatriating the expatriate—in that it deals with Calder's roots in American artistic traditions, and abundantly documents the Yankee fascination with ingenious inventions which relates the artist in spirit (if not end product) to such diverse geniuses as Thomas Alva Edison and Henry Ford.

At the entrance to the exhibition, visitors are greeted by an 11-by-18-foot working model of the Sears' *Universe,* with its big pendulum oscillating, its huge horizontal helix coiling within itself, and its stately pennants rotating. *Universe,* just two years old, is a fitting introduction not only because it is mechanically one of Calder's more advanced creations, but also because of its title.

Both Calder's father and his grandfather were sculptors. The founder of the dynasty, Alexander Milne Calder, was a Scottish emigrant to Philadelphia; his masterpiece was the 37-foot statue of William Penn that still crowns Philadelphia's City Hall. Alexander Stirling Calder, his son, carried on the family calling

Museum technicians work on elaborate scaffolding to install Calder mobile to its best advantage.

Private collection, Neuchatel, Switzerland



In early 1940s, Calder created a galaxy of tensile *Constellations* of wood and wire—this one in 1943.

of robust and noble public icons. However, he was also friendly with an earthier circle of Philadelphia painters. In the early years of the new century, this group—known as the "Ashcan School"—was to decamp to New York and startle that town's genteel salons with trenchant portrayals of slum life and of the rowdy entertainment world.

Sandy's mother was a painter, too. Although the family moved around, from Philadelphia to the West Coast and back to New York, Sandy was usually given a cellar workshop to indulge his hobby of making things. He made jewelry for his sister's dolls, Christmas tree decorations, and armor out of scrap metal to play at Sir Tristram and Sir Lancelot.

The boy was not interested in a career in art. Upon graduation from high school, he entered the Stevens Institute of Technology in Newark. Receiving a degree in mechanical engineering, Calder knocked around in jobs connected with that field. They bored him. He took a night-school drawing class, but chucked that in 1922 to hire on as a fireman on a ship headed for California.

Learning from the loggers

In Independence, Washington, he got a job making out paychecks at a logging camp. Here he found himself greatly interested in the techniques being used to tame the mountain fastness.

The loggers would scale enormous trees, "top them off," and fasten 200-pound pulleys to their summits. Each tree was guyed with eight steel cables. Another cable, passed through the pulley, was used to wrestle felled logs down the slopes, with the aid of a donkey engine on the ground.

To get the logs across ravines, the loggers strung up a cable between two standing trees, one on either side of a ravine. In retrospect, it is not hard to see these logs, dangling on high, as the prototypes of Calder mobiles, but of course young Sandy was years from being able to distill the visual thrill into sculpture.

He sent home for his paints and brushes, to depict the situation. With money saved from his sawmill job, he returned to New York, and a full-time program at the Art Students' League.

His teachers were the old Ashcan rebels, John Sloan and George Luks and others. The student's first paintings, of construction sites and night cafés, were in the same idiom. Still fond of tinkering, he rigged up a wire rooster sundial for his one-room apartment. He got a job sketching prizefighters and Paavo Nurmi for the *National Police Gazette* ($20 was the pay for a half-page layout).

In 1926, Calder went to Paris. He took drawing classes, but Paris also liberated his passion for tinker-

ing. In his tiny studio in Montparnasse he set up a workbench. With tools from a local hardware store, he made small, articulated animals and people out of wood, wire and scraps of fabric.

They were circus performers: trapeze artists, a sword-swallower, a ringmaster, elephants, lions, a four-horse chariot and others. He started giving performances in his room, for his young friends, with a phonograph playing cakewalks and *Ramona*—racing the chariots around the ring, making the acrobats perform stunts, giving the barker's spiel himself.

Paris had a special place in its heart for the circus. Le Cirque Medrano, in Montmartre, had interested Degas, Seurat, Toulouse-Lautrec and Picasso.

To avant-garde Parisians, in the 1920s, the circus was still a microcosm of *la comédie humaine*. The laughter, the suspense, the competition and the occasional horror seemed more appropriate than ever to the painters and poets of that moment; they were caught up in the afterglow of Dada and the flowering of Surrealism, those twin movements which had made lunatic gestures, nightmares, Freudian double-entendres and humor respectable in highbrow circles.

The circus proved a springboard to Calder. He was emboldened to make deft, wonderfully fluid little figures entirely out of wire: Josephine Baker, Helen Wills, Jimmy Durante, John D. Rockefeller.

Toys for grandchildren

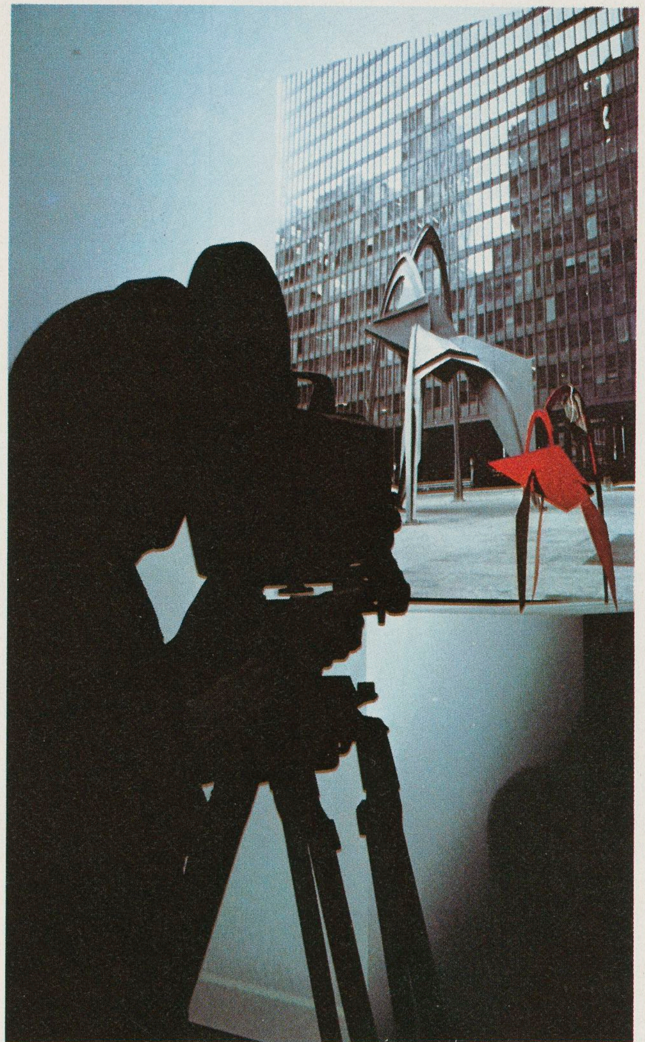
Returning to drawing, he found that the fluid line of wire could be carried over into splendidly vigorous pen-and-ink pictures of circus performers. He also landed a job designing toddler pull-toys for an Oshkosh, Wisconsin, manufacturer. These toys were like some he had made for his sister's children, and they were to have descendants in the 1930s and the 1960s, because Calder was having descendants of his own.

On the liner back to New York, in 1929, he had met a young bluestocking from Massachusetts named Louisa Cushing James, the grandniece of psychologist William and novelist Henry. Sandy and Louisa were married in 1931, and in the course of time produced two daughters, Sandra and Mary, who have had four children in their turn. Some of Calder's gifts to his grandchildren are included in *Calder's Universe:* sprightly little tin birds scissored from ale and coffee cans and Scotch tape containers.

Returning to Paris in 1930, Calder experimented with painting, then returned to sculpture. When his first abstract wire sculptures were exhibited there in 1931, his reputation was made as a major artist.

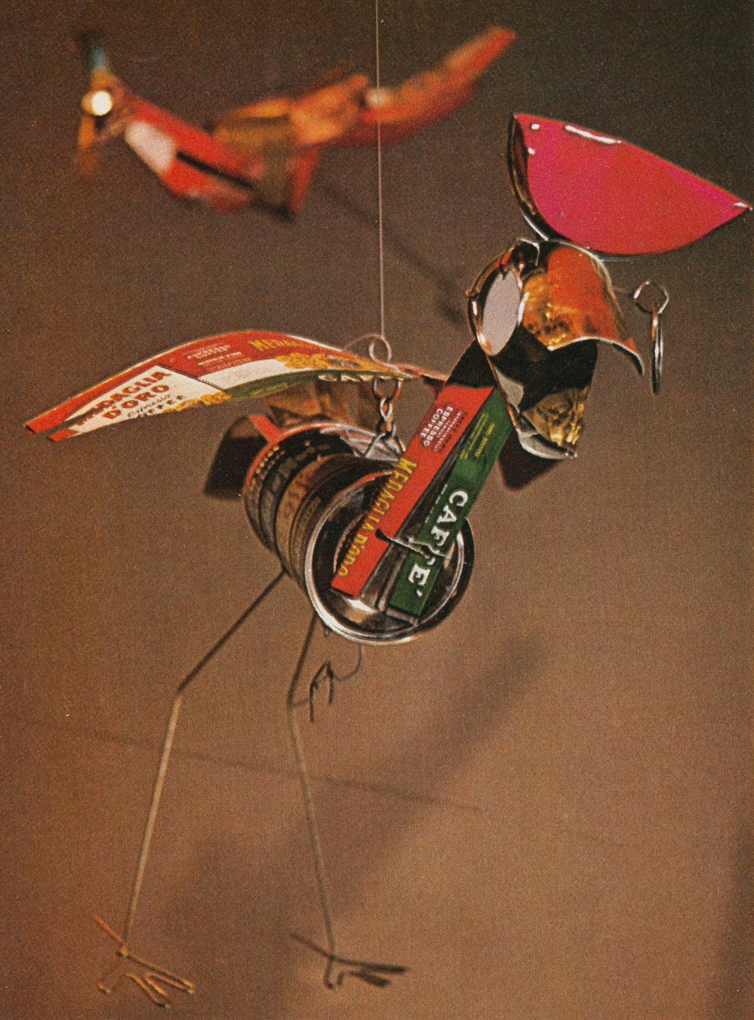
Calder had had a strange feeling in Mondrian's studio on his return: he had felt as though the colored cardboard rectangles should "oscillate." The next year

Federal Center Plaza, Chicago



Scale model of *Flamingo* stands before photo mural of original, 53 feet high, which is in Chicago.

Honored by birthplace, Philadelphia, the artist arrives, appropriately, in "Calderized" jet.



Sense of play is predominant in Calder's character; toys are a part of his work. Here: *Chock,* 1972.

he did a series of wire sculptures that were mechanized and did move (Marcel Duchamp, the father of the Dadas, promptly christened them "mobiles").

Unfazed by frequent mechanical breakdowns, Calder switched to mobiles that were ingeniously cantilevered and balanced so that they derived their motion entirely from the breeze, and had the free, spontaneous movements of life itself.

"Just as one can compose colors, or forms, so one can compose motions," the artist has explained. And what is distinctive about this work, and characteristically American, is the flair with which Calder links technology to esthetics, bridging the gap between art and science in a way foreign to European thinking.

Calder is not the first American artist to strive to unite scientific investigations with art. In the 18th century, Charles Willson Peale was equally famed as a portraitist of Washington and Franklin, and as the founder of the world's first natural history museum. Samuel F. B. Morse is best known as the inventor of the telegraph, but earlier was one of Manhattan's more influential painters. When Philadelphia's Thomas Eakins, painter of *The Gross Clinic* and *The Agnew Clinic,* visited the Universal Exposition in Paris in 1867, he made a beeline—not for the picture galleries, but for the locomotive and machinery exhibits.

Calder himself is probably not fully aware of the heritage which assisted him in utilizing experiences as diverse as fashioning dolls' jewelry or watching small men handling tall trees. But each experience has had its outgrowths. From 1933 to 1953 the Calders settled in Roxbury, Connecticut. Once out of a cramped Paris studio, Calder found his mobiles moving toward the scale of those trees. In 1934, he made his first outdoor mobile, *Steel Fish.*

As a former circus master, it is only natural that Calder should have designed sets and costumes for theatrical undertakings: modern dance productions for Martha Graham in 1935 and 1936, a play starring Gérard Philippe and Jeanne Moreau in 1953, and an ambitious "ballet" of mobiles with electronic music, staged at the Rome Opera House in 1968.

Calder's obsession with perfection in everyday objects has led him to make ladles, lighting fixtures and cupholders for his American home. Rugs? Well, Sandy designs them for Louisa and her friends and Louisa hooks them. Tapestry designs? Of course.

With his appetite for work continuing unabated, Calder's recent output includes a stream of gouache paintings, mobiles and stabiles. Though his monumental stabiles have been commissioned for $300,000 and more, the fact is that Calder works on a monumental scale even when he doesn't have a customer. At Segre's Iron Works in Connecticut, one of two foundries where large stabiles are regularly fabricated, lightly rests the artist's latest whimsy—conceived purely for his own satisfaction: *Flying Dragon*—that is its name—is 56 feet wide and flame-red, an intoxicating sheet metal cross between a dragonfly and a jet airplane. More eloquently than words, it testifies to the continuing ingenuity, humanity and sheer bigness of Sandy Calder's vision.*

One can't compress Sandy into a few words./ Too much of him ....too large...

In his calligraphic handwriting, Robert Osborn (p. 52) salutes Calder, shown (right) in Philadelphia, where his grandfather and his father were also sculptors. The former's William Penn tops City Hall.

* *Calder died on November 11, as we went to press.*

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