



Part of the Calder exhibition.

A Sculptor of Mobiles

Mr. Calder's Joyful Tate Exhibition

FROM OUR ART CRITIC

If there were any doubt that modern art, when it wants, can make the spirit dance and sing and laugh, Mr. Alexander Calder's exhibition at the Tate Gallery today would dispel it. 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". Under the auspices of the Arts Council, and arranged by Mr. James Johnson Sweeney and the artist himself, it ranges from early wire figures and circus toys of the late 1920s to a large mobile called "London" made specially for this exhibition. And the galleries are a-flutter from floor to ceiling with movement.

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. 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 towards engineering, he arrived at his own famous style by way of outline figures in wire, the mechanical toy circus which all Montparnasse went to enjoy around 1927, and the experience of a visit to Mondrian's studio in that year. From these came the sense of fun, the graceful linearism, the ability to "place" simple abstract shapes with black, white, and primary colours, which are the distinguishing marks of his style.

But his mature work introduces another quality, a flow of organic line

which comes to rest in sweeping, placid curves whatever position the sculpture assumes and however sharply punctuated it may be by the sequences of suspended metal plates. As a formal idiom, this reminds one partly of Picasso's linked line-and-dot technique in the *Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu* illustrations and partly of Mirò. It is also full of association and imagery. A suspended mobile such as the "Black Crescent" of 1960 is like a spray of leaves. The trembling in the air is that of foliage, the circling flight of forms that of birds or fish. Marine-imagery becomes particularly strong in some of the arresting, black "stables" (Arp's word for the big, cut-out shapes that stand on the floor) with their reminiscence of ship-yards in steel plates riveted together. The famous "Whale" is not shown, but there is a superb, 10ft.-high scarlet "Crab", and a feeling of waves as well as mountains in one or two groupings of jagged triangles.

Calder's complete avoidance of the "solid forms" of conventional sculpture makes him look often like a draughtsman who has managed to liberate his drawing from the flat page. But modern sculpture has always been as much about space as about mass, and space, in these works, is delicately etched, traced, and articulated in a way which has never made the Tate's great vaulted halls look more airy. For Calder's delicacy encompasses grandeur too, often with an outrageous change of scale from one to the other within the same piece, and it gives the rare pleasure only possible with an art which can be "serious" and beautiful without banishing a sense of humour.