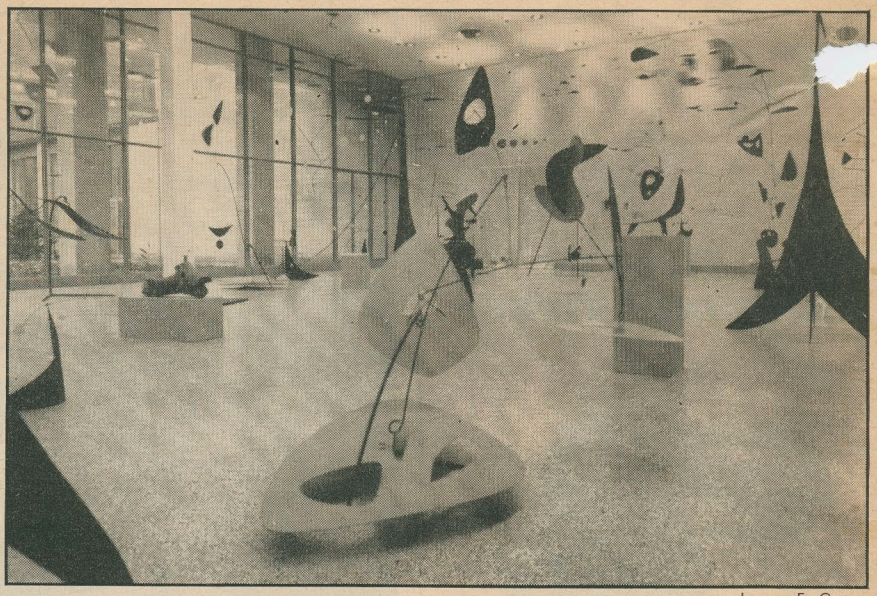
Howard Birch



James F. Coyne

SCULPTOR CALDER & MOBILES-STABILES SHOW AT M.I.T.
"My strongest feeling about anything is disparity."

ART

"With an Eagle"

The Philadelphia Museum announced last week that it had bought a Rubens masterpiece, *Prometheus Bound,* to help celebrate its diamond jubilee. Purchased from a London dealer for a price estimated at somewhere between $65,000 and $100,000, the picture had belonged to the Dukes of Manchester for almost three centuries. Philadelphia Museum Director Fiske Kimball called it "one of the supreme examples" of Rubens' "dynamic energy and bold plasticity."

Rubens, who was fond of the picture himself, once described it more modestly in a letter offering it for sale to a 17th Century collector: "A Prometheus bound on Mount Caucasus; with an Eagle which pecks his liver. Original, by my hand, and the Eagle done by Snyders.* Nine feet high by eight feet wide." Rubens' asking price was also modest: 500 florins (about $145).

Connecticut Yankee

Alexander Calder is a sculptor who puzzles people more than he pleases them, and he pleases a lot of them a lot. The point was proved anew last week by a big show of Calder "mobiles" and "stabiles" at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His mobiles were painted tin and wire contraptions that jiggled and joggled. Some reared nervously from the floor; others hung jittering from the ceiling. One, near the door, featured a padded drumstick that bonged a brass gong in the occasional breeze. Another, *The Blizzard of 1950,* dangled a cloud of white discs from what looked like black coat hangers.

The stabiles, so called because they stand still, were sprawling things made of wire, wood and interlocking cast-iron sheets. One of them looked like a snow plow, bore the proud title *Big Ear.*

Trivial but Difficult. Some M.I.T. students disapproved of the show. "I think everything should be useful or instructive," a physics major said impatiently. "This is neither. In mathematical terms, the stuff is trivial. Given certain conditions, theta as a function of T is completely determined. It can all be boiled down to elliptical integrals."

A cosmic-ray researcher disagreed: "The mathematics is as complex as anything you'd want to find," he said, pointing to the big *Blizzard.* "It would be extremely difficult to determine where any part is going to be ten seconds or ten minutes from now. It could be worked out, but I shouldn't want to try."

Pleased but Befuddled. One of the most frequent visitors to the exhibition was a social science professor who maintains that Calder "represents our culture —the lack of capacity of the universe to be modified by human beings." A little boy, crawling round & round beneath a spinning mobile entitled *Little Blue Under Red,* had a simpler explanation for his enthusiasm: "I like it because it goes round!"

The last explanation is about the only one that "Sandy" Calder himself can accept wholeheartedly. "All I know," he says, "is that they give pleasure to me." Last week, in his 150-year-old Roxbury, Conn. farmhouse, Calder was recovering from an auto accident (he had slammed his car into an immobile traffic island). A burly 52, he radiates good-natured befuddlement, looks rather like a beardless Santa Claus, with a full, ruddy face, frosty eyebrows, tousled white hair and a red flannel shirt to keep out the drafts that whip through his old house and set its mobiles whirling.

There is nothing "modern" about his house, at least in the stiff, sterile, museum sense. It looks like the home of a traveling tinker, cluttered with gadgets, junk and such craft objects as an old cradle scythe, an Algerian blanket, a tom-tom, a coffee table made from a square sheet of aluminum, calabash rattles and rattles made of beer cans filled with pebbles. Somehow, Calder's wife Louisa keeps the

Philadelphia Museum of Art

RUBENS' "PROMETHEUS BOUND"
"Original, by my hand."

* Frans Snyders' collaboration improved the canvas. Lacking Rubens' genius for figure-painting, as well as his grand style, Snyders surpassed the youthful master in picturing birds, animals and fruit.

Courtesy Edward Kaufman, Jr.

BLUME'S PRIZEWINNER
With precision, obscurity.

place livable, and their two children play happily among the mobiles.

Balanced but Unpredictable. Calder never works his mobiles out mathematically in advance. He calculates the delicate balances of each part by the cut-and-try method. "It's like making a patchwork quilt," he says. "You can't predict."

He is baffled both by admirers who think him a social commentator and by those who rave about his humor. "My strongest feeling about anything is disparity—in materials or shapes or sizes. I may think a thing is amusing but I'm likely to be absolutely serious about it." With a self-conscious giggle he is apt to add, "I don't giggle."

The first mobiles Calder made were wood and wire animals that moved in lifelike fashion when pulled about on strings. He designed them for a toy firm when he was down & out in Paris a quarter of a century ago. Next came a circus, composed of wire figurines that rode bareback, swung from trapezes and burst through hoops when Calder, crouched intently on the floor, released the proper springs. He entertained his friends with it, found it furiously lampooned as "Piggy Logan's Circus" in Thomas Wolfe's novel *You Can't Go Home Again*.

Stripped but Appreciated. Considering that Calder's Paris friends included the abstractionists Fernand Léger, Marcel Duchamp, Joán Miró and Piet Mondrian, it is not surprising that he soon stripped his circus of recognizable features, while constantly complicating and improving its visual qualities. In the end, he created one of the most amusing sideshows of modern art, lodged samples of it in half a dozen leading museums.

Calder's first show in Paris struck the French as typically American, reflecting the nation's vast distances and hurry-up psychology. His first U.S. show, in 1932, impressed Manhattan Critic Henry McBride as being the opposite: "It needed the dark, dull afternoons of a Paris winter for its inception, and needed them also . . . for its appreciation." Today, Calder is sufficiently appreciated to make a good living from his art. His sculptures may have a machine-age look, but they are done by handcraft methods, the products of a Connecticut Yankee ingenuity and an untrammeled mind.

Rock Candy

Art tastes do change. When Peter Blume's big, weird, neatly painted *South of Scranton* won the coveted Carnegie International prize 16 years ago, critics clucked and the public pooh-poohed. This year the Carnegie jury went overboard for a yet stranger painting by Paris Abstractionist Jacques Villon (TIME, Oct. 30). The Pittsburgh public, meanwhile, has caught up with Connecticut's Blume. When the ballots were counted, the popular prize went to his entry, *The Rock*.

The symbolism of Blume's picture—a huge, broken rock with scaffolding to the left of it and ruins to the right—is as obscure as his brushwork is precise. Blume, who at 44 looks rather like a dead-earnest Danny Kaye, believes the rock symbol is bound to be enigmatic" (TIME, Jan. 17, 1949). His painting's popularity, Blume confessed last week, had him "very baffled and certainly very pleased."

The Carnegie's retiring director, Homer Saint-Gaudens, recalls that the public "used to spit at 50 yards at a modern painting. Now they say, 'I don't know anything about it—it may be all right.'" Painter Blume had spent three long years candy-coating his enigmatic *Rock* with slick, Technicolored gloss, and the public seemed to like the taste.