To come upon one of Alexander Calder’s works is to come upon a joyous combination of whimsy, mechanics, craftsmanship, and imagination. Considered one of the 20th century’s most inventive sculptors, Calder is best known for introducing movement into sculpture, making it a central element of his work, inventing the now ubiquitous mobile. Arriving there took a long and winding road that also included more traditional art forms, including painting and printmaking.

Growing up during the arts and crafts movement that flourished from the 1880s to 1920, Calder fashioned small sculptures, a talent that was interpreted more as a proclivity for mechanics than art. Years later, while working as an illustrator for the National Police Gazette, an assignment to produce illustrations of a circus turned into a lifelong passion that led to the creation of his elaborate miniature Cirque Calder. Made mostly with wire and connected through an intricate network of string, wire, and other materials, his circus figures moved and leaped as gracefully as their live counterparts. Dubbed by his fellow artists as “drawing in space,” the simple lines of his wire sculptures looked as if the paper they were drawn on had been removed. His so-called “circus performances” were excitedly received both in Paris and the US, especially by the Parisian avant-garde, and led to a solo exhibition of Calder’s wire sculpture in 1929 at Galerie Billiet in Paris.

While these creations were gaining Calder a reputation, he felt he had exhausted their possibilities. A visit to Piet Mondrian’s studio, a space virtually transformed into an immersive work of art, featuring several removable rectangles of red, blue, and yellow on stark white walls, profoundly impacted Calder. It awoke in him a desire to create abstract art, especially moving art, as he envisioned the rectangles on Mondrian’s walls actually moving.

Calder set out on a journey of experimentation in the realm of purely abstract and kinetic sculptural compositions. Through trial and error, he developed abstract tabletop sculptures of movable geometric shapes, mostly spheres, often painted in bright reds, blues, and yellows, and powered by electric motors or hand cranks.

Not content with the predetermined and inevitably monotonous rhythm of mechanical devices, Calder wanted to create works whose movement was unpredictable and at the whim of the winds or a chance touch. The result was what French artist Marcel Duchamp dubbed “mobiles,” that is free-standing works, which hung off a wall or on the ceiling. In contrast, the works that stood on their own base were humorously named by Jean Arp as “stabiles.” Calder’s “mobiles” were so refreshing and inspiring that the existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre agreed to write the essay for Calder’s 1946
exhibition in Paris. He wrote:

“Calder establishes a general destiny of motion for each mobile, then he leaves it on its own. It is the time of day, the sun, the heat, the wind which calls each individual dance. Thus the objects always inhabit a half-way station between the servility of a statue and the independence of nature. Each of its evolutions is the inspiration of a split-second. . . . Calder’s objects are like the sea and they cast its same spell—always beginning again, always new.”

While Calder is mostly recognized as a sculptor, he was also active in a variety of other media. He illustrated books and journals, including a book of line drawings, illustrations for Aesop’s fables. He also created prints and drawings which are considered among the best of the 20th century.

Many of his prints, including the print Very Gay Nose and Ears feature the same simple lines as in his “drawing in space.” Calder also created more than 2,000 pieces of jewelry that border on the primitive and the archaic, mostly made as gifts for friends and relatives. Most interestingly, Calder was also commissioned and painted a Braniff Douglas DC-8-62 airplane with a South American inspired design, as well as a BMW automobile.

About the Artist

Considered one of America’s greatest 20th century sculptors, Alexander Calder was born in 1898 in Lawnston, Pennsylvania, to a family of accomplished artists. His grandfather sculpted Philadelphia’s William Penn statue, while his father’s George Washington at Peace graces the Washington Square Arch in New York. Calder’s mother was a portrait artist who studied art at the Sorbonne in Paris.

As a child, Calder loved constructing objects using such materials as wood and wire, an interest that led him to study mechanical engineering and applied kinetics at Stevens Institute of Technology in New Jersey, graduating in 1919. After a few years at various jobs, he went on to study painting, etching, and lithography at the Art Students League in New York. He simultaneously worked as an illustrator at the National Police Gazette. In 1926, Calder had his first exhibition of paintings at the Artist’s Gallery in New York. That same year, he moved to Paris, where he set up a studio and studied at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, spending the next few years travelling back and forth between Paris and New York.

Paris played a definitive role in Calder’s development as an artist. His work gained the attention of many of the avant-garde artists living there, and he forged friendships with such greats as Mondrian, Duchamp, and others, who inspired him and influenced his work. During one of his many trips across the Atlantic, Calder met his future wife Louisa James, whose family included such luminaries as the author Henry James and philosopher William James. Marrying in 1931, Calder and his wife spent the first two years of their marriage in Paris, moving back to the US in 1933. They settled in Roxbury, Connecticut, in a farmhouse, where they raised two daughters.

In 1943, Calder became the youngest artist to have a retrospective in New York’s Museum of Modern Art. He also had many solo and retrospective exhibitions in the United States and other countries, including at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York; the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago; the Centre Georges Pompidou and the Fondation Maeght in Saint-Paul-de-Vence in France; the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid, Spain; and the Tate Gallery in London, UK, among others.

His work holds a special place at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, where his monumental mobile of 35 tons hangs in the Gallery’s East Wing atrium and stretches down the building’s nine-floor height. On September 11, 2001, the collapse of the World Trade Center destroyed one of Calder’s sculptures that stood in front of 7 World Trade Center. Workers at Ground Zero recovered almost 40% of the work, a piece of which is now on view at the 9/11 Memorial and Museum.

Calder also created many public sculptures, including Flight for JFK Airport, the beautiful and whimsical Universe for the Willis Tower in Chicago, and Spirale for UNESCO in Paris. His largest work Red Sun is a stabile he created for the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City, which stands outside the Aztec Stadium at 25.8 meters tall. Calder died of a heart attack on November 11, 1976.

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