

ALEXANDER CALDER
AMERICAN ARTIST
1898-1976

ALEXANDER CALDER was an innovative artist who loved to have fun. He made imaginative creations in a variety of media, but is most widely known for his sculptures, including hanging and standing mobiles, toys, large public sculptures, and found object works of art.

Calder had a very likable personality. His friends called him “Sandy,” and thought he resembled a good-natured bear. His body was heavy and slow-moving, he had shaggy hair, and his voice came out like a deep growl. Red was his favorite color and he would often wear a red flannel shirt, even to fancy occasions. When people asked him why he was never sad, he answered, “I don’t have the time.”

Calder was born into a family of successful artists. His mobile, titled “Ghost,” is displayed at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, near other family works of art in Philadelphia, PA. Down the street is Logan Square Fountain, which was created by his father, Alexander Stirling Calder. Nearby, atop Philadelphia City Hall, stands the bronze statue of William Penn made by his grandfather, Alexander Milne Calder.

Yet, Alexander didn’t intend to become an artist. He liked tools and machines, and was very adept at math, so he attended The Stevens Institute of Technology in New Jersey to study mechanical engineering. After working several jobs he found dull and tedious after graduation, he decided to enroll in a New York art school called the Art Students League. A teacher inspired him by encouraging him to draw with a continuous, non-stop line. This technique became a hobby, and he spent hours sketching CONTINUOUS-LINE DRAWINGS of animals and people. This later translated into his work sculpting with wire.

Paris was the center of the art world in the 1920s, so Calder decided to go there to study painting. He rented a small room and got to work, but instead of painting, he began building toys based on his fascination with the circus. The toys had movable parts and he made them using found objects such as wire, cloth, cork, leather, string, and wood. He rigged a miniature high wire and trapeze, hung a

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spotlight, and made a red and white striped tent. Then he added cowboys on bucking broncos, ragged clowns, and a wire strong man who lifted weights. When they moved, the tiny performers looked just like the ones he had seen in the real circus. These clever toys attracted the attention of other artists who soon became his friends. He hauled them around in five suitcases, giving circus parties for his friends.

“Calder’s Circus” soon became well-known in Paris and sparked his interest in wire sculpture and kinetic art. KINETIC SCULPTURE contains moving parts powered by hand, air, or motor. He used his knowledge of engineering to create movable sculptures. One of his artist friends, Marcel Duchamp, saw these inventions and called them MOBILES because they could move. His early kinetic sculptures used cranks and pulleys to make them move. Later, his work was more delicate, and they moved needing only the current of the air.

When Calder started showing his mobiles in small galleries, people thought they were clever and amusing, but few people thought them dignified enough to be called art. Yet, people began buying his work for their collections and by the time he was an old man, he was well known throughout the world.

Calder also used his skills in engineering to create STABLES- strong metal sculptures that stand still on the ground but allow you to walk around to explore it inside and out. They are bold and powerful and everyone knows it is there. One of Calder’s stables is a city gate that cars drive under when they enter the city. He would attach long RIBS to stiffen large shapes. He used triangular GUSSETS to make the joints more rigid. There was a lot of problem solving involved in making these massive pieces.

Problem solving was something that Calder enjoyed. He was willing to try anything including making jewelry for his wife, toys for his children, forks, lamp covers, door handles, and whatever else he needed for his house. He designed fabric and wallpaper, and even a decoration to be painted on an airplane. No one taught him how to do these things. Instead, he would figure it out for himself.

Calder died in 1976 at the age of 78. The owner of the art gallery which sold his work called him “a man of one hundred percent goodwill.” His friend, the artist Joan Miró, said he had “a heart as big as

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Niagara and the force of the ocean.” He spent his whole life transforming his wonderfully clever ideas into works of art that give lasting pleasure to us all.

**ALEXANDER CALDER
RESOURCES/BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Books

Alexander Calder: Meet the Artist!, a pop-up book by Patricia Geis, 2014
Roarr: Calder's Circus, Maira Kalman, 1993
Alexander Calder (Getting to Know the World's Greatest Artists), Mike Venezia, 1999
Sandy's Circus: a Story about Alexander Calder, Tanya Stone, 2008
The Calder Game, Blue Balliett, 2012

Websites

www.calder.org (check out the Historic Films under "Calder's Life")
www.nga.gov/feature/artnation/calder/ (virtual tour of exhibit)
www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/calder_alexander.html (catalog of work and locations)

Museums

Washington, DC
National Gallery of Art and Sculpture Garden
The Phillips Collection
Smithsonian American Art Museum
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden

Pennsylvania
Philadelphia Museum of Art

New York
Whitney Museum of American Art
The Museum of Modern Art