



Alexander Calder

Modern from
the Start



The Museum of Modern Art
New York

Cara Manes

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Foreword

It is a pleasure to celebrate, with this publication and the exhibition it accompanies, the unique relationship between Alexander Calder and The Museum of Modern Art. Few artists have played so integral a role in the life of the Museum over a sustained period: enjoying deep (if occasionally bumpy) friendships with curators; collaborating on exhibitions and commissions; and making gifts of his own works to the Museum's collection in an example of exceptional generosity.

We extend our sincere gratitude to Alexander S. C. Rower, President of the Calder Foundation, for his immediate enthusiasm and steadfast support for this project. Rower was a true partner "from the start," and we have benefited enormously from his knowledge and his passion. He and his colleagues at the Calder Foundation made invaluable archival material available, and they were always ready with good advice and ideas.

Cara Manes, Associate Curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture, has investigated the subject of Calder and MoMA with great dedication and ingenuity. *Alexander Calder: Modern from the Start* reflects her sensitivity to Calder's artworks and her insight into how his creative path and our own institutional history have been entwined. She was superbly assisted by Curatorial Fellows Zuna Maza and Makayla Bailey, who participated in all aspects of the research and preparation for the exhibition and publication.

Essential funding for this exhibition was kindly provided by the Kate W. Cassidy Foundation. Ms. Cassidy's ongoing commitment to our exhibition program is profoundly gratifying. The International Council of The Museum of Modern Art and the Jon and Mary Shirley Foundation were also extremely generous in their support, as was The Lipman Family Foundation. The Jo Carole Lauder Publications Fund of The International Council of The Museum of Modern Art and the Dale S. and Norman Mills Leff Publication Fund made this catalogue possible. In addition, we sincerely thank the many individual donors whose gifts sustain the Annual Exhibition Fund.

In 1939 Calder was invited to create a sculpture to hang above the winding staircase of our new International Style building. The spectacular mobile *Lobster Trap and Fish Tail* was the product of that commission, and for more than eighty years it has been an indispensable presence here at MoMA. Our recent renovation has returned that staircase to its original glory—and *Lobster Trap and Fish Tail* continues to reign over it with elegance and exuberance.

—Glenn D. Lowry
The David Rockefeller Director
The Museum of Modern Art

Introduction

John Russell, in *The Meanings of Modern Art*, a treasure of a book written for this museum nearly fifty years ago, declared that “it would almost be true to say that sculpture in our century has been the secret weapon of art.”¹ By this Russell meant that sculpture represented the modern era’s surest means of escape from the orthodoxy of Western European tradition. Whereas in the early decades of the twentieth century, the fact of a painting was clear—a flat canvas on which oil paint was applied with a brush—the assumptions about avant-garde sculpture were far less obvious. Yes, you could make the sort of carved or modeled figurative works that often were called “statues.” But you did not have to. Unlike a painter, who used centuries-old means to craft new pictorial language, the maverick sculptor faced an open field of possible materials, tools, and techniques. Explorations were inspired by cultures beyond those of Europe, and by fields of endeavor, such as industry, outside the parameters of art.

Alexander Calder exemplifies the free spirit of early modern sculpture. And in Calder’s case, the move beyond nineteenth-century sculptural ideals was personal as well as aesthetic. He was the son of a sculptor, Alexander Stirling Calder, and the grandson of a sculptor, Alexander Milne Calder. Both of these earlier Alexander Calders were prominent creators of heroic public monuments, the steady recipients of distinguished commissions that shaped the urban landscape. His grandfather was responsible for the statuary of Philadelphia’s City Hall, most notably the grand figure of William Penn at its summit. Calder’s father continued the public adornment of Philadelphia—with, among other works, the Swann Memorial Fountain on Benjamin Franklin Parkway—and also that of New York, in, for example, the marble figure of President George Washington on the Washington Square Arch. Both of these artists excelled at precisely the sort of work that their descendant and his fellow modernists would render obsolete.

Alexander “Sandy” Calder cheerfully wielded the “secret weapon” of sculpture for half a century: in

the 1920s as a quintessential American in Paris; and from 1933 in New York City, Roxbury, Connecticut, and (from 1953) the French village of Saché, until his death in 1976. Like many sculptors, he had set out to become a painter, following the example of his mother, Nanette, despite having earned a college degree in mechanical engineering. Calder studied painting at the Art Students League in New York, but soon after moving to Paris, in 1926, he became fascinated with making small characters of wire, wood, cloth, and other materials, which he then developed into *Cirque Calder* (*Calder’s Circus*). This work, along with a group of related and various objects, sealed his commitment to three-dimensional activity and endeared him to a broad avant-garde milieu. Calder’s inventions resisted categorization but acquired names, thanks to his friends Marcel Duchamp and Jean Arp (mobiles and stabiles, respectively), and effectively defined their own artistic territory. Over the course of five decades Calder’s objects underwent a complex evolution from the utterly intimate arena of the circus to the monumental works of the 1960s, which return full circle to the civic achievements of his Calder forefathers.

The subject of this catalogue and the exhibition it accompanies is the vital role that Calder’s art played in the early history of The Museum of Modern Art. That Calder would have found himself closely entwined with this fledgling institution makes sense on several levels. He was never interested in the idea of art as an obscure language of the few, so the new museum’s missionary purpose of introducing a wide public to the art of its own time was one he would have found sympathetic. Calder’s connection to an audience differed fundamentally from that of most other artists. *Cirque Calder* came to life only in the presence of spectators, and his early kinetic sculptures relied on the participation of viewers to activate motors or cranks or to galvanize air currents. Before visitor guidelines became as strict as they are today, a museum’s usual “do not touch” mandate would be temporarily retired during a Calder exhibition.

Calder’s performative mentality underlies even his largest and most immovable sculptures, whose animated forms thrive in human company.

Like many of his peers—Henry Moore in Much Hadham, England, for example, or David Smith in Bolton Landing, New York—Calder retreated to the countryside to secure the space he needed for his work. The landscape provided both the inspiration of nature and the opportunity to site outdoor sculptures. His homes—filled with implements and objects that he had designed, adjacent to the spacious studios where he worked—seamlessly merged art and life. Yet Calder’s remove, in northwestern Connecticut and later in the Loire Valley, did not isolate him from the art world. Along with family members, friends, and neighbors, he was provided with essential fuel for his imagination by workmen, fellow artists, art critics, collectors, and curators. Sculpture commissions, exhibitions, and publication projects figured prominently in the general swirl of activity upon which Calder thrived.

MoMA’s extensive holdings of Calder’s work reflect the long and multifaceted exchange between

the artist and our curators and trustees. The collection includes sculptures, jewelry, gouaches, prints, and illustrated books spanning five decades, from the first purchase, in 1934, through a steady number of acquisitions at key moments in Calder’s career and then a bounteous gift of nineteen works from the artist himself, in 1966. Today’s MoMA is inseparable from Calder’s presence. *Lobster Trap and Fish Tail* feels as much a part of the 1939 building by Philip L. Goodwin and Edward Durell Stone as its roof and walls. Over the years, our large-scale sculptures have become beloved inhabitants of The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden. Although this upstart institution has its centenary in sight, and these works are universally regarded as modern classics, the experimental spirit in which they were made continues to define the present-day mission of this museum.

—Ann Temkin
The Marie-Josée and Henry Kravis
Chief Curator of Painting and Sculpture
The Museum of Modern Art

1. John Russell, *The Meanings of Modern Art*, rev. ed. (1974; New York: The Museum of Modern Art/Harper & Row, 1981), 384.

Alexander Calder

Modern from the Start



On December 3, 1930, The Museum of Modern Art, just over a year old, opened its ninth exhibition, *Painting and Sculpture by Living Americans*. Organized by MoMA's founding director, Alfred H. Barr Jr., the exhibition debuted the work of thirty painters and seven sculptors, several of whom had "hitherto been practically unrecognized in New York."¹ Selected by Barr; Jere Abbott, the Museum's associate director; and a jury of four Museum trustees, the works in the show ranged stylistically from Ashcan realism to European-inflected modernism, but they were all largely figurative—painted landscapes, figures, and still lifes, and sculptures carved in wood or cast in bronze.² Although by this point Alexander Calder was well known for his groundbreaking bent-wire portraits, Barr chose to represent his recent work with four wood sculptures of animals and people, all made after 1928: *Man*, *Acrobats*, *Stooping Girl*, and *Cow* (fig. 1); the latter work, he later reported in a letter to the artist, was "one of the most popular pieces in the exhibition."³ Carved from a single piece of wood, the cow's sweet, docile face is obviously naturalistic, but its body is less so, intertwined as it is with its source material so as to appear not to have fully emerged from it. Barr had seen Calder's figurative wood and wire works at New York's Weyhe Gallery the previous winter, where critics had deemed them "amusing" and full of

"pathos," among other favorable—if somewhat trite—characterizations.⁴ Writing to *Cow*'s owner to secure it for loan, Barr urged, "I feel that Calder has been underestimated and frequently dismissed as merely clever. I think such works as the 'Cow' if seriously exhibited would do much to revise popular opinion of his work which has, I think, considerable quality."⁵

At the time of the show's opening, Calder, at thirty-two-years old, was one of the youngest "Living Americans" included, but his life and work experience ran deep and wide. He had grown up in various cities throughout the United States with his parents, both artists, who often relocated the family in order to take various public commissions. He had studied engineering, following the example of a schoolmate, and planned to become a mechanical engineer; worked a number of jobs; taken courses at the Art Students League in New York; and, after a stint as an illustrator for the *National Police Gazette*, taken off for Paris. By the time of the MoMA show, in late 1930, Calder had been living and working in France for the better part of four years.⁶ He had become a part of the city's cultural avant-garde, befriending artists, periodically exhibiting his sculptures on both sides of the Atlantic, and performing his *Cirque Calder*, a complex multiact artwork in which he manipulated dozens of handmade sculptures of the actors and architecture of a miniature



Fig. 1. *Cow*. 1928.
Wood, 12 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 15 × 8 $\frac{7}{8}$ in.
(32.1 × 38.1 × 22.5 cm).
Calder Foundation, New York.
Purchase

circus. The first performances were given for friends and took place in his Paris studio; eventually those friends brought their friends, until the audience grew so large that Calder had to rent out a space and charge a fee for entrance. In October, a few weeks before the opening of the MoMA show, Calder visited the studio of Piet Mondrian, who had recently come to one of the performances. Mondrian had arranged his workspace as an abstract environment, with the main wall covered in cardboard rectangles in primary colors and shades of white, which he could reconfigure into different compositions. “This one visit,” Calder recalled in his 1966 autobiography, “gave me a shock that started things. Though I had heard the word ‘modern’ before, I did not consciously know or feel the term ‘abstract.’ So now, at thirty-two, I wanted to paint and work in the abstract. And for two weeks or so, I painted very modest abstractions. At the end of this, I reverted to plastic work which was still abstract” (fig. 2).⁷ As Calder’s figurative carved-wood sculptures were making their debut on MoMA’s stage in front of a broad American audience, he was also in the midst of a radical shift in his art, from figuration toward abstraction—from an art of observing things in the world toward an art that asks to be seen as a world unto itself.

Calder was able to see *Living Americans* during a short stay in New York that December. Three days before Christmas, he had returned to the United States in order to marry Louisa James, whom he had met on a trans-Atlantic ship the summer before. A few weeks after the ceremony (on January 17, 1931, at James’s home in Concord, Massachusetts), the newlyweds were back in Paris, and a few months later, in late April 1931, Calder’s abstract works were exhibited for the first time, in *Alexandre Calder*:



Fig. 2. *Untitled*. 1930. Oil on canvas,
28 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 23 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (73 × 60.3 cm).
Calder Foundation, New York

Volumes—Vecteurs—Densités / Dessins—Portraits at Galerie Percier (fig. 3). In introductory remarks for the exhibition’s catalogue, Calder’s friend Fernand Léger wrote, “Looking at these new works—transparent, objective, exact—I think of [Eric] Satie, Mondrian, Marcel Duchamp, [Constantin] Brancusi, [Jean] Arp—those unchallenged masters of unexpressed and silent beauty. Calder is of the same line. He is 100% American. Satie and Duchamp are 100% French. And yet, we meet?”⁸

The distinction between American and European art that so interested Léger became an ongoing investigation for Barr. Léger was drawn to Calder’s European sensibility—the “unexpressed and silent beauty” of his abstractions. At the time of *Living Americans*, American, for Barr, meant figurative. But within a year of that show, Calder had changed course. Barr came to view the artist as Léger had, and in him may have recognized a key to

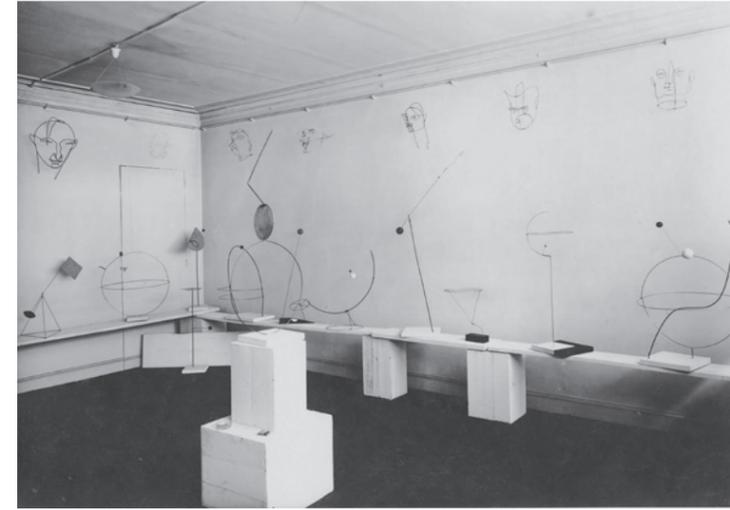


Fig. 3. *Alexandre Calder: Volumes—Vecteurs—Densités / Dessins—Portraits*, Galerie Percier, Paris, 1931. Installation view. Photograph by Marc Vaux

institutional success for a fledgling museum trying to find its footing and its audience: an artist as thoroughly modern as he was utterly American.

In a span of less than six months, Calder had his epiphany in Mondrian’s studio, exhibited his figurative sculptures at MoMA, abandoned figuration, unleashed a prolific outpouring of entirely abstract work, crossed the Atlantic twice, got married, and exhibited new abstract works in Paris, two of which were kinetic. For a critical period during their respective trajectories, Calder and MoMA enjoyed a generative partnership that was forged early and developed steadily, reaching an apex in 1943 with a major midcareer survey. It was a relationship of ongoing reciprocity: MoMA served as a stage on which Calder could play out his many and varied activities, and in turn Calder’s art—vivid, dynamic, and ever ready to be engaged—played a central role in the Museum’s championing of a new public modernism.

This essay chronicles significant points of exchange between artist and institution along this productive arc. For clarity’s sake, each point is introduced by a specific date. This chronological structure differs from that of *Alexander Calder: Modern from the*

Start—the exhibition this catalogue accompanies—which celebrates the objects in the Museum’s collection in a nonlinear and heterogeneous spirit. This history of Calder’s specific engagements with MoMA provides a scaffold for examining the ambition of his multivalent work: to describe the world in an object and to make work that is unbounded, like nature, always in flux.

On December 19, 1934, The Museum of Modern Art acquired *A Universe* (1934, pages 62, 63). Calder made the work during his productive first months in his home and studio in Roxbury, Connecticut, which he had purchased the previous September after the threat of war in Europe had led him and Louisa to leave Paris. It is an early example of Calder’s extraordinary contribution to the history of art in the twentieth century: the “mobile,” a sculpture that moves. *A Universe* is powered by a motor, a technique he had devised three years prior in Paris. It was these early motorized works that had prompted Calder’s friend Marcel Duchamp, during a studio visit in fall 1931, to describe them as *mobiles*, which in French means both “motion” and “motive,” a fitting and satisfying double entendre from an artist famously invested in wordplay.⁹

By 1934, Calder had perfected a means for precipitating movement in his sculptures by air or by a viewer’s intervention, and in the early days in Roxbury he was making works of this nature. Yet he chose to use a motor for *A Universe*, which, along with the work’s open form, marked a return to some of his earlier concerns. Two intersecting circles of wire describe a sphere that is supported with a length of bent iron pipe anchored to a round base.¹⁰ Running through the vertical center of the sphere is an s-shaped piece of wire holding a small white wood sphere; slicing through the wire sphere diagonally is a straight piece of wire attached to an outrigger extending from the base and holding a red wood sphere. A hidden motor moves the

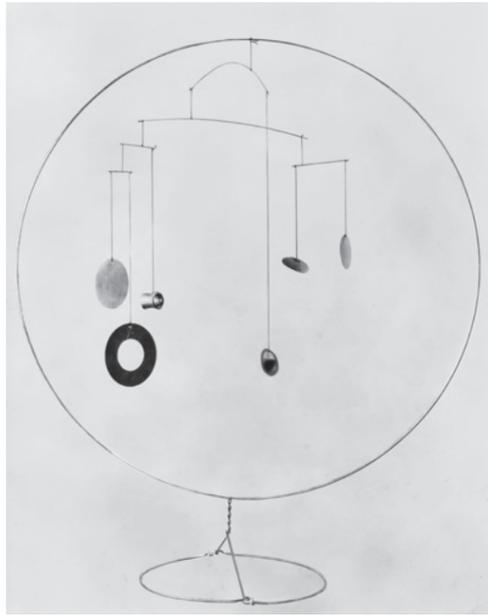


Fig. 4. Untitled. 1934. Wire, sheet metal, and string. Calder Foundation, New York

where it was shown with its motorized mechanism concealed behind a wall. Barr was so impressed by it that he reconsidered the gift of an untitled (non-motorized) mobile that Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, one of the Museum's cofounders, had purchased for the collection a few weeks earlier (fig. 4).¹¹ "I would much prefer to have this second mobile for the museum," Barr wrote to Rockefeller, "and Calder feels the same way about it."¹² An official exchange was arranged, in which the original work was deaccessioned and *A Universe* was acquired.

Of objects such as this one, with what seems to be its science-minded approach, Calder wrote that—paradoxically—their "aesthetic value . . . cannot be arrived at by reasoning. Familiarization is necessary."¹³ And what could be more familiar, and more strange, to a human observer of this artwork than the universe itself? In fact, the work's title suggests an answer, specifying the object as *a* universe rather than *the* universe, with all its attendant forces. This act of relativization may not have been lost on Albert Einstein, who familiarized himself with *A Universe* years later, at Calder's 1943 retrospective.¹⁴ After staring at it for its entire forty-minute cycle, the man who revolutionized our understanding of space and time is said to have remarked, "I wish I'd thought of that."¹⁵

wood spheres along their wires at different speeds in a cycle that takes approximately forty minutes to complete. The work seems at once to defy and depict gravity: its delicate, open wire form hovers as if floating, yet the lines that demarcate it also trace the forces of energy at work upon the object, holding it in space. The comparatively heavy iron pipe supporting this weightless-seeming structure is itself twisted into a loose *s*-shape, as if torqued by external pressure. As the wood spheres follow distinct but interrelated circuits of motorized motion, they variously work with and against gravity, setting the entire shape of the object into flux.

This sculpture was included in Calder's first exhibition at Pierre Matisse Gallery, in April 1934,

On March 2, 1936, Barr opened *Cubism and Abstract Art*, the first of a pair of exhibitions meant to address in "an objective and historical manner the principal movements of modern art."¹⁶ *Cubism and Abstract Art*, with *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* later that year, provided a framework for what he saw as the essential strains of modern art, and together they played a critical role in introducing European modernism to an American audience. Through these shows, Barr attempted to probe the paradox at the heart of MoMA's project: providing a context for difficult art while at the same time making that art accessible to a potentially doubting public.

Cubism and Abstract Art featured nearly four hundred works in various mediums, installed in rough chronological order across all four floors of gallery space in the Museum's townhouse building at 11 West Fifty-Third Street. The exhibition gave material form to what Barr referred to, in the accompanying catalogue, as "the impulse towards abstract art during the past fifty years."¹⁷ To illustrate his claim, he created a chart showing how different movements and aesthetics flowed into and out of each other (fig. 5). The chart, which was printed on the catalogue's cover and has since become a famous (and famously controversial) document, proposed a linear history of modern European art. In his essay Barr employed a metaphor from nature to describe this history's two main trajectories, as currents springing from Impressionism. "The first and more important current," Barr wrote, "finds its sources in the art and theories of [Paul] Cézanne and [Georges-Pierre] Seurat, passes through the widening stream of Cubism and finds its delta in the various geometrical and Constructivist movements which developed in Russia and Holland during the War and have since spread through the World." Barr called this current "geometrical abstract art" and characterized it as intellectual, structural, and rectilinear. The "secondary" current developed from Paul Gauguin and then coursed through Henri Matisse's Fauvism and Wassily Kandinsky's Abstract Expressionism to "abstract Dada," and finally into "abstract Surrealism." He defined this current, which he called "non-geometrical abstract art," as emotional, organic, biomorphic, curvilinear, romantic, and decorative. "Often, of course," Barr went on, "these two currents intermingle, and they may both appear in one man. . . . The shape of the square confronts the silhouette of the amoeba."¹⁹

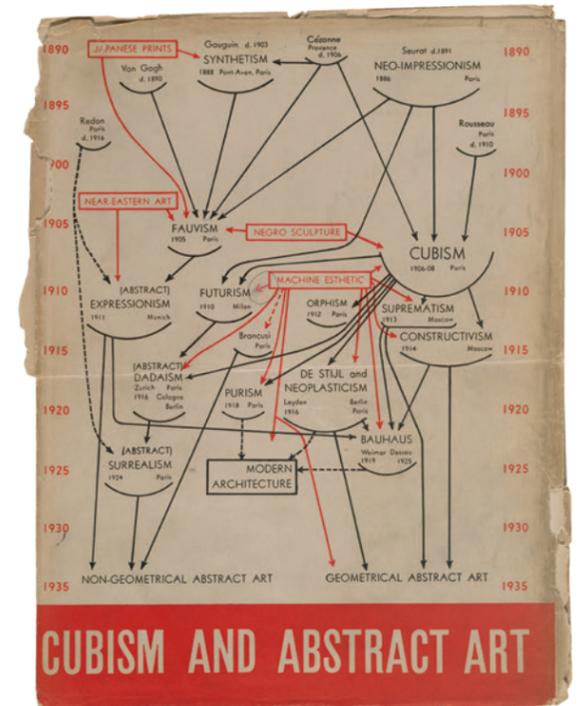


Fig. 5. Cover of the catalogue for the exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art*, by Alfred H. Barr Jr., with Barr's diagram of the origins and influences of modern art, 1936. MoMA Archives, New York

Barr seems to have considered Calder to be one such artist. A mere six years after he had claimed Calder as archetypically American (and therefore, by and large, figurative), Barr placed the artist squarely in an international realm. This time it was Calder's abstract work that was deployed to bring a boldly international modernism into a local context. In a section of the catalogue on younger artists who had inherited and were reimagining the lessons of their forebears, Barr, invoking the "influence of Mondrian and [Naum] Gabo," credited Calder with turning his back on "the popular success of his wire portraits to experiment with mobile constructions built of wire, iron pipe and metal. . . . They display an ingenuity and visual humor quite different from the kinetic constructions which Gabo designed as early as 1922 or [Aleksandr] Rodchenko's hanging constructions of 1920."¹⁸ In Barr's estimation, Calder's antecedents were clearly practitioners of geometrical abstract art. And yet, he continued, "recently Calder has deserted geometrical shapes for irregular quasi-organic forms."¹⁹

Where, then, to fit him? Despite devising a highly detailed installation plan for the galleries, Barr chose to display Calder's work in an interstitial space (fig. 6).²⁰ A mobile from 1936, powered by air, was installed in a stairwell between galleries, hanging above a poster for the German release of the 1927 film *7th Heaven*, designed by C. O. Muller, with no other artwork nearby.²¹ In this sculpture, which was lent by the artist, four metal elements hang from three rods. The elements vary in color and size; in each of the four unique shapes, which are suggestive of natural forms yet entirely nonobjective, flat sheets of metal intersect at right angles—Barr's two currents intermingling in one artwork. According to the installation plan, Barr had intended to include the mobile in the Surrealism section of the show, alongside work by Arp, Brancusi, Alberto Giacometti, Joan Miró, Henry Moore, and others, but in the end he changed course, settling instead on a transitional location.²²

Calder's participation in the exhibition went beyond displaying this mobile.²³ He also lent a work from his personal collection, *Red Blue Chair* (1918–23), by the Dutch designer Gerrit Rietveld, to the design section of the show, and he appears to have assisted in assembling the exhibition, though the details of his involvement are not well documented. His most prominent contribution, however, was an artwork he produced for the building's exterior, a commission from the Museum that functioned as a large and visible banner for the exhibition. Calder made a mobile out of cloth—for him, an early and rare engagement with the material—to hang from a flagpole at the center of the building's uppermost register (pages 70, 71); although the work was not reproduced in the catalogue, Calder called it *Objet volant* (Flying object) in a letter to Barr.²⁴ In it, two asymmetrical fabric pieces—one red, one blue—intersected one another at their

centers, creating four unique lobes, each pierced by a hole. Below, three fabric shapes hung from a horizontal crossbar: a red circle flanked by a slightly larger off-white circle and a much larger yellow teardrop shape. The work—whose shape vaguely resembled a reduplicated butterfly, at once friendly and strange—elicited a variety of responses: in the very early days of the exhibition, a midtown neighborhood association petitioned the Museum to remove the work from the building's facade, complaining, at least according to Calder, that “everyone was going to the museum, and no one to the [speakeasies nearby].”²⁵ This uncommon flying object, hovering over the sidewalk below, turned out to be a formidable advertisement for the show—not unlike the many examples of the New Typography graphics included in the galleries inside, it reconciled the letter and the spirit of its message.



Fig. 6. **Cubism and Abstract Art**, March 2–April 19, 1936. Installation view, with *Mobile* (1936) hanging in a stairwell between galleries. Photograph by Beaumont Newhall. MoMA Archives, New York

On December 9, 1936, *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* opened at MoMA. The exhibition was a deeper exploration of Barr's “secondary” current of modernism, in particular the two means by which the Surrealists conveyed spontaneity, according to Barr: through content, as in the fantastical but meticulously rendered images of Salvador Dalí, Yves Tanguy, and others, and through technique, as in the free-form automatic, or chance-based compositional methods employed by artists such as André Masson and Miró, following experiments “previously carried on by Kandinsky, [Paul] Klee, and Arp.”²⁶

As he had for *Cubism and Abstract Art*, Barr submitted the art to a linear order. The organization of the catalogue's plates made this clear. After three sections tracing Fantastic art from the fifteenth century through the Great War came sections on twentieth-century pioneers: Dada and Surrealism and “Artists Independent of the Dada and Surrealist movements.”²⁷ Calder was grouped in the latter, which was largely made up of American artists, including Peter Blume, Walt Disney, Arthur Dove, and Georgia O’Keeffe. He was represented in the exhibition by two new sculptures. One, *Object with Yellow Background* (1936), is a painted yellow panel with three floating metal objects suspended in front of it. It is a work that reads in both two and three dimensions: the objects are tethered to the plane—and seen from the front, the work resembles a painting—but they exist beyond it as well. The other, *Praying Mantis*, is a standing mobile consisting of a curved piece of carved and painted wood with three metal rods extending out of its center and a four-part mobile at its top (fig. 7).²⁸ The work is doubly suspended: the central white form above the three supporting rods, and the mobile above the central white form. Rising as it does upon leglike elements, *Praying Mantis* seems to invite the projection of naturalistic qualities such as stance and disposition. But this does not necessarily hold: the work's distinct shapes form no whole, but remain staunchly apart. Despite the weightiness of Barr's doctrine, the work conveys a definite lightness.



Fig. 7. **Praying Mantis** (1936), in the exhibition album for **Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism**, c. 1936. MoMA Archives, New York

On May 8, 1939, at ten o'clock in the evening, trustees and special guests sat down to dinner to celebrate The Museum of Modern Art's tenth anniversary. The table was set with an elaborate multisection candelabra designed by Calder for the occasion; it held 120 candles in cups welded to a wire form, and could be arranged as a whole or in parts (pages 82–83; fig. 8). The grandeur of the decor befitted the occasion: MoMA had just spent \$2 million on a new building, designed by the architects Philip L. Goodwin and Edward Durell Stone, to replace its original townhouse. The new six-story structure, made of reinforced concrete with a glass facade, featured state-of-the-art design details, including track lighting, moveable walls, and engineered ventilation. *Art in Our Time*, the inaugural installation, populated the entire building with works from the collection plus many loans, in an effort to present the “achievements of living artists together with the work of certain important masters of yesterday” through “painting, sculpture and graphic arts but also . . . architecture, furniture, photography and moving pictures.”²⁹

Visitors entering the new building immediately encountered Calder's *Lobster Trap and Fish Tail* (page 85), a work commissioned by the Museum's Advisory Committee for the main entrance's grand



Fig. 8. Cover of *The Bulletin of The Museum of Modern Art*, with Calder's candelabra for MoMA's tenth-anniversary Trustees' dinner and celebration of the new building, May–June 1939. MoMA Archives, New York

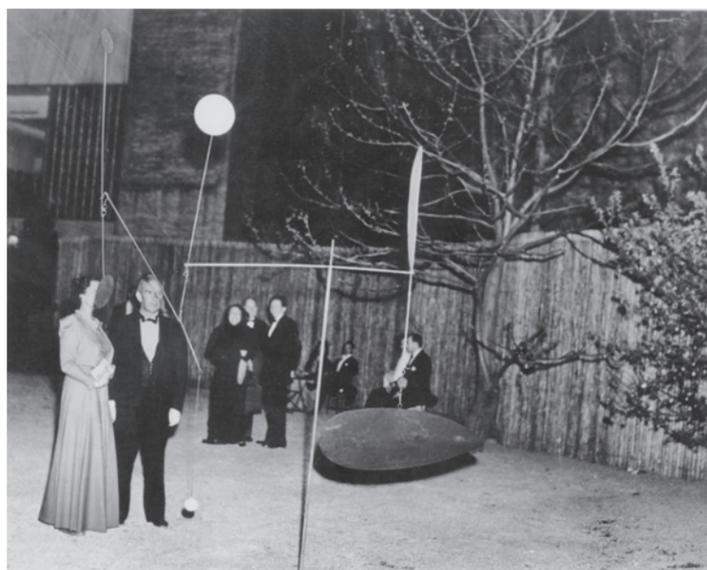


Fig. 9. Calder and Ivy Troutman at a reception, with *Steel Fish* (1934), May 1939. Calder Foundation, New York

staircase, which had been modeled after the one in Walter Gropius's Bauhaus building in Dessau, Germany.⁵⁰ In this mobile three main components are counterpoised in delicate balance with one another: above, an abstract form made of intersecting metal sheets painted red and black; below, extending from two arms, a ribbed wire quasi-ovoid structure on one side and a multipart black-painted sheet-metal mobile-within-a-mobile on the other. Its shapes evoke those in its title, yet it remains an example of striking "rhythmical freedom," as the curator James Johnson Sweeney later wrote.⁵¹ The work—one of the few Museum commissions to be subsequently acquired—has, for the most part, hung in that same location since then. "I don't mind

planning a work for a given space," Calder said decades later, in an interview in the mid-1960s. "I find that everything I do, if it is made for a particular spot, is more successful. A little thing, like this one on the table, is made for a spot on a table."⁵² He was keenly aware of how artworks were informed by context, whether on a friend's lawn, in a corporate park, or on a dinner table. By the time he made *Lobster Trap and Fish Tail*, Calder had already been thinking a lot about "given spaces." Two years earlier he had completed a commission to be shown in the Spanish Pavilion in the 1937 Paris Exposition with Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* and other works: a fountain with flowing silvery rivulets of mercury.⁵³

Outside the Museum's new building, abutting Fifty-Fourth Street, was a garden slated for the display, according to a press release, of "a great variety of sculpture ranging in style from realistic to purely abstract."⁵⁴ In its architectural plan of loose gravel arranged in biomorphic patches (which would be replaced in 1953 with sleek marble), an abstract Calder work stood in stark contrast to more traditional sculptures by Aristide Maillol, Charles Despiau, Gaston Lachaise, and others. Calder lent one of his first outdoor sculptures, a work now referred to as *Steel Fish*, with six painted metal elements on rods set in suspended equilibrium from a central vertical rod (fig. 9).⁵⁵ This sculpture, produced during Calder's first summer in Roxbury, was one of the largest works he had made to date, and it plainly evidences the technical and intuitive experimentation he had undertaken to find its form. Close inspection reveals that he adjusted various components of the work to achieve its final shape and balance, such as a lead ball with S-hooks added to the lowest black element, itself thickened with thin layers of sheet metal. As an open record of the decisions and labors that yielded it, the work contrasts with the flawlessly executed monumental outdoor work of Calder's later career, which often appears to have been realized with ease.

The opening of MoMA's new building was timed to coincide with that of the 1939 World's Fair in New York, when the number of international tourists in the city was sure to swell. Anyone taking in the city's cultural life in spring and summer 1939 would have encountered Calder's work both in midtown Manhattan and at the fair, in Queens. Calder had been commissioned by Wallace Harrison and J. André Fouilhoux, the architects of the Consolidated Edison pavilion, to create a water ballet, "whose acting elements," Calder explained, "are jets of water from 14 nozzles which are designed to spurt, oscillate or rotate in fixed manners and at times as carefully predetermined as the movements of living dancers."⁵⁶ The project was never fully realized, but a row of jets was installed around the pavilion and activated.⁵⁷



Fig. 10. Calder's winning entry for the "Competition for Sculpture in Plexiglas," May 1939. MoMA Archives, New York

Despite the politically fraught backdrop against which the exposition was staged, its tenor was upbeat—a celebration of industrial progress and its effect on contemporary civilization. The chemical company Röhm and Haas sponsored the "Competition for Sculpture in Plexiglas," to bring attention to its newly developed material.⁵⁸ Calder won first prize, and the winning entry was displayed in the fair's Hall of Industrial Sciences: a work in multicolored Plexiglas illuminated by a concealed light source (fig. 10). The jury, selected by MoMA, described it as "equally interesting and strong when seen from any side," and noted that "the use of Plexiglas [rods gave] motion and sweep to the whole design."⁵⁹

On January 28, 1943, Monroe Wheeler, the director of Exhibitions and Publications at MoMA, wrote to Calder, "I hope we shall be able to arrange a comprehensive show of your work in the not too distant future."⁶⁰ Wheeler's dual role—unusual by today's standards—came about during a period of flux at the Museum, one that included Barr being dismissed from his directorial post on account of increasing difficulties with the Museum's trustees.⁶¹ Afterward, James Thrall Soby, a trustee, took over as the director of the Department of Painting and Sculpture and the assistant director of the Museum.

Soby was Calder's dear friend and a crucial early supporter, with some important sculptures by Calder in his personal collection. He had commissioned what was Calder's largest outdoor work at the time, *Well Sweep* (1935, page 67), for the grounds of his house in Farmington, Connecticut, about forty miles from Roxbury: a standing mobile that made use of an old wellhead in front of Soby's modernist house; its funnel bucket was designed to pull water out of the well, an action that changed the sculpture's balance dynamics as the weight of each element shifted. When Soby died, in 1979, he made a bequest of this sculpture and several others by Calder to MoMA: the wall panel *Swizzle Sticks* (1936, pages 68, 69) and other more personal works—including a pair of cuff links bearing his initials (c. 1935, page 86) and three wire sculptures in the shape of a fork, knife, and spoon that Calder gave to Soby after he lost many of his possessions in a divorce (1936, page 65). Soby was an avid photographer and often captured Calder at work and at play (fig. 11).

Despite this strong relationship, Calder was experiencing a mounting frustration with the Museum, and it may have been that Wheeler was proposing an exhibition in order to quell it. Calder had been in touch with Soby the previous summer, detailing all that had “passed between them”—all the work he had made for or shown at the Museum thus far—and cordially but sternly asking for more support, morally and financially.⁴² In his proposal letter Wheeler asked Calder to compile a list of his activities to that point, which included “book jackets, theater posters, newspaper drawings, paintings, wood sculptures of animals and acrobats, ‘wire sculptures,’ circus, wire toys—stuffed toys, what can be done with a tin can, what can be done with one piece of wire, mobiles, sonorous mobiles, stabiles, jewelry, book illustrations, grills for broiling meat, clothing: sweaters, gloves, galoshes, ties.”⁴³ Through Wheeler an exhibition was planned; by early May, it was determined, at Soby's suggestion, that the curator James Johnson Sweeney would organize it.⁴⁴



Fig. 11. Calder dancing with Margaret French, with Louisa Calder on the accordion, at James Thrall Soby's house, Farmington, Connecticut, 1936. Photograph by James Thrall Soby

Among Calder's many MoMA relationships, the most significant was with Sweeney. By the time of the exhibition, Calder and Sweeney had been friends for more than a decade. Sweeney was born in Brooklyn in 1900, to well-to-do Irish immigrants who owned Sweeney and Johnson, a successful lace and textile import company, with headquarters in New York and outposts in Cincinnati and Chicago. After studying literature at Georgetown and then at Cambridge, Sweeney spent time in Paris, where he became acquainted with many of the city's artistic avant-garde, was the editor of the literary magazine *Transition*, and assisted James Joyce on the texts that eventually became *Finnegans Wake*. Calder first approached Sweeney when Sweeney had returned to New York, in a letter dated May 9, 1932, in which Calder explained that he was writing at the suggestion of Léger, and asked him to go see his mobiles on view at Julien Levy Gallery in midtown Manhattan. Their early correspondence found Calder extending invitation after invitation—to come see a performance of his circus, to visit him in Roxbury, to produce a catalogue—which Sweeney often had to decline because of other writing, travel, and curatorial commitments.⁴⁵ Calder earnestly persevered with his appeals. From 1932 to about 1935, as the men got to know one another, Calder made his appreciation

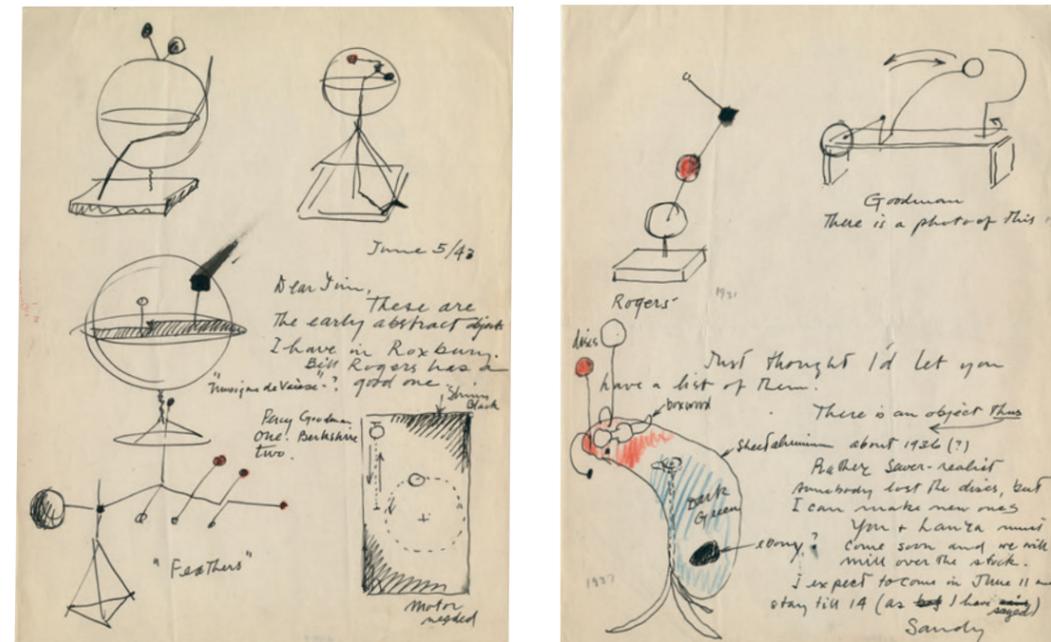


Fig. 12. Letter from Calder to James Johnson Sweeney, June 5, 1943. Calder Foundation, New York

for Sweeney well known through a variety of persistent overtures, such as sending hand-drawn daily timetables for buses running between New York and the Connecticut towns convenient to Roxbury, and invitations for their families to vacation together. Sweeney began most of his responses with some form of regret, whether for his delay in writing or for disappointing news. In a letter of August 11, 1934, Calder jokingly suggested that Sweeney “have the apology made up in the form of a rubber stamp . . . like my letterhead,” which became a running joke in future correspondences.⁴⁶ By 1935, when Sweeney was hired as a curator in MoMA's Department of Painting and Sculpture, they and their families had become close. Apart from a handful of artists who had written about Calder's work, by the time of the MoMA exhibition Sweeney had effectively become the artist's author of record.⁴⁷ He had contributed essays for Calder's first show at Pierre Matisse Gallery, in 1934; for an exhibition of mobiles that he organized at the Renaissance Society in Chicago the following year; and for other various publications including the arts journals *Axis* and *Plus*. He was therefore Calder's natural choice for an essay in the MoMA catalogue.

By mid-May 1943, Sweeney and Calder were in the throes of exhibition planning, exchanging letters on a near-daily basis. The subjects of their correspondence ranged from practical administrative matters to more conceptual questions. Their creative scheming is evident in a letter from Calder to Sweeney, from June 7, 1943, about the budget for the publication, which they had hoped to increase. Sweeney had already offered his \$300 honorarium in an effort to fund an increase in page count, from thirty-two to forty-eight. Calder had heard from Sweeney that “Barr displayed a lively interest in the ‘Horse’ for the Museum [1928, page 51]. Do you think we could bait that catalogue trap with horse-meat, and offer them this in exchange for further expanding the catalogue. Perhaps you could suggest it to Barr better than I. Would you like to try?”⁴⁸ *Horse* did enter the collection that year, but as a purchase with funds from the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest rather than as a gift from the artist. Bliss, one of MoMA's three cofounders, had bequeathed her collection of works by late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century French artists to the Museum, with the idea that they could be sold as needed to create funds for new acquisitions.

Calder and Sweeney conceptualized and executed the show in tandem, although Sweeney maintained his autonomy over the catalogue text, in which he reiterated Barr's positioning of Calder as a truly American artist, "an American speaking an international language, not a regional expression."⁴⁹ From the tenor of their exchange, it is clear that Calder was both guiding voice and willing administrator in the show's organization. Over the course of the summer, he took on a variety of clerical tasks, such as collecting information about his works' insurance values and hunting down their current whereabouts, which would have been at least partially handled by a gallerist, had Calder not also been in the process of dissolving his ten-year relationship with Pierre Matisse. He frequently illustrated his letters to Sweeney with sketches of particular objects for the exhibition (fig. 12), and the show's final checklist suggests that Sweeney often took Calder's suggestions.

In one case, he did not. In a late-August letter, a month before the show opened, while Sweeney was on vacation, Calder suggested a work for inclusion, accompanied by an illustration: *Small Sphere and Heavy Sphere*, begun in Paris in 1932 and shown there, at Galerie Pierre Colle, in 1933 (fig. 13). The work's elements—five glass bottles, a tin can, a wood box, and a brass gong hanging from an iron rod—can be freely arranged by viewers in the area underneath two suspended spheres: a small white wood sphere and a larger (heavy) red cast-iron one, each hanging from the end of a rod affixed with cable to a single point in the ceiling. In his letter, Calder described this work, his first hanging mobile: "One swings the red (iron) ball in a small circle—this movement + the inertia of the rod and the length of thread develop a very complicated pattern of movement. The impedimenta—boxes, cymbal, bottles, cans, etc. add to the complication, and also add sounds of thuds, crashes, etc."⁵⁰ With these words, he described a new system of interlocking features synthesized in a single artwork: ready-made objects, viewer participation and



Fig. 13. *Small Sphere and Heavy Sphere*. 1932/1933. Cast iron, rod, wire, wood, cord, thread, paint, and impedimenta, 10 ft. 5 in. (317.5 cm) high; installation dimensions variable. Calder Foundation, New York. Mary Calder Rower Bequest

intervention, sound, and indeterminacy. Although it was an aesthetic outlier in Calder's oeuvre, this wonderfully strange set of objects nevertheless marked a shift in Calder's practice—toward a new attention to hanging mobiles, and toward vivid engagement with sound and chance as well.⁵¹ Perhaps this was why Sweeney chose not to include it in the exhibition.

In August, Calder convinced a good friend, the Swiss photographer Herbert Matter, to collaborate with him and Sweeney on the exhibition's installation, saying, "Our three minds travel in the same direction."⁵² Matter had left Switzerland in the mid-1930s and come to New York, where he established himself as a graphic designer and photographer for *Harper's Bazaar* and *Vogue*.⁵³ He eventually became the artist's premier documentarian, capturing his work in photography and film over many decades. In 1950 Matter would make *Works of Calder*, with a score by John Cage and narration by Burgess Meredith, in which a young boy (played by Matter's son) finds himself in Calder's Connecticut studio and watches the artist at work on his sculptures.

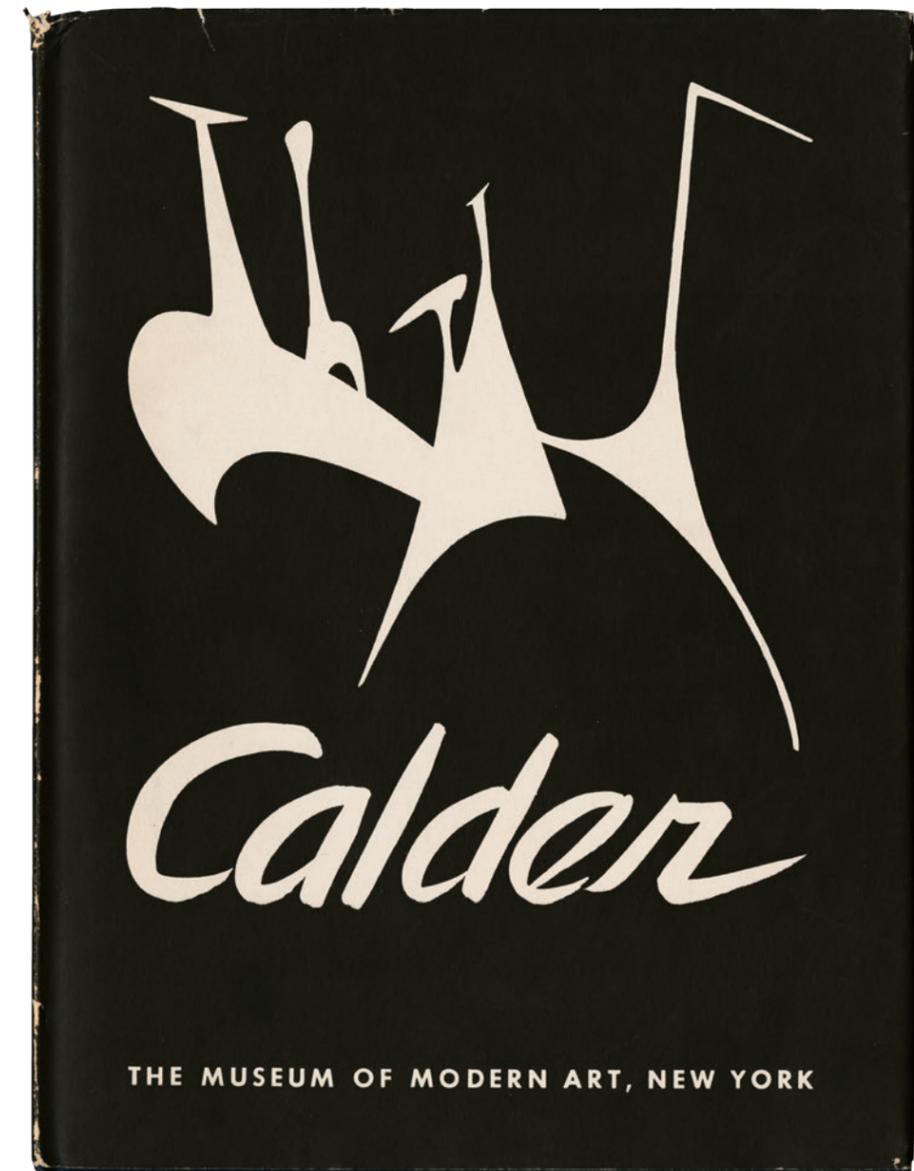


Fig. 14. Cover of the catalogue for the exhibition *Alexander Calder: Sculptures and Constructions*, by James Johnson Sweeney, designed by Herbert Matter, 1943. Calder Foundation, New York



Fig. 15. Marcel Duchamp at MoMA, with *Red and Yellow Vane* (1934), 1943

For the MoMA exhibition, a \$150 consultation fee was agreed upon. Matter was sent a plan of the exhibition space on the Museum's first floor and informed that there was no budget for elaborate construction or painting because of wartime financial constraints. Matter also designed the exhibition catalogue (fig. 14) and, with the art historian Agnes Rindge Claflin, made a public relations-style film of the show.⁵⁴

A photograph of Duchamp taken during installation places him, too, at the scene, although the precise nature of his involvement remains unclear (fig. 15).⁵⁵ Sweeney and Duchamp had known each other since the early 1930s. They had served together on the jury for a salon at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery, and for a time Sweeney had done weekly interviews with Duchamp for a book-length monograph that never came to pass.⁵⁶ Duchamp and Calder had first met in Paris in 1931, introduced by Duchamp's partner, the artist Mary Reynolds, who was a friend of the Calder family, and the two became friends. Duchamp had nursed an interest in curatorial matters long before Calder's MoMA exhibition—and in fact had arranged for the first exhibition of Calder's mobiles, at Galerie Vignon in Paris in 1932. In *First Papers of Surrealism*, which he had organized with André Breton, at Whitelaw Reid House in midtown Manhattan the previous autumn, he had laid out the exhibition's objects, including Calder's *The Spider* (1940), within a tangled mile-long web of string.⁵⁷

There is also a photograph of Tanguy during the exhibition's installation (fig. 16). Calder and



Fig. 16. Louisa Calder, Alexander Calder, James Johnson Sweeney, Yves Tanguy, and Kay Sage at *Alexander Calder: Sculptures and Constructions*, September 1943

Tanguy had been friends since Tanguy and his wife, the Surrealist Kay Sage, moved to Woodbury, Connecticut, in the 1940s and joined the Calder family's Connecticut circle of artists, curators and collectors.⁵⁸ Upon his death, Tanguy left a bequest to MoMA, through Sage, of a small but fundamental group of Calder's works from the couple's personal collection, including an early motorized panel (c. 1934, page 78), a standing tabletop mobile (1939, page 77), and a rare Plexiglas mobile inscribed "Pour 3 ans d'assez bonne conduite" (For 3 years of fairly good behavior)—a jab at Tanguy's attempt to quit drinking (1941–43, page 76).

On September 29, 1943, Calder's monographic exhibition opened at The Museum of Modern Art. It was a memorable art-world event, with celebrities turning up for the opening party (fig. 17), and at least two performances of Calder's circus for an elite group of patrons scheduled during the run of the show (fig. 18). Among the celebrants were some of the European émigrés Calder had known in Paris, such as Léger and Tanguy.

The show, which opened at a point when the United States' extensive engagement in World War II



Fig. 17. Herbert Matter, Marianne Moore, Fernand Léger, Martha Graham, and Calder, at the opening reception for *Alexander Calder: Sculptures and Constructions*, September 28, 1943. MoMA Archives, New York



Fig. 18. Calder performing *Cirque Calder* in the Members' Room, October 20 or 21, 1943. MoMA Archives, New York

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Pages 2–5: Dorothy C. Miller installing **Black Widow** (1959) in The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden, c. 1963. MoMA Archives, New York
Page 4: Calder in his studio, c. 1943. Photograph by Herbert Matter
Page 6: **Lobster Trap and Fish Tail** (1939) installed over the stairwell in MoMA’s lobby, 1949. MoMA Archives, New York
Page 10 and back cover: Calder installing the exhibition **Alexander Calder: Sculptures and Constructions**, 1943. MoMA Archives, New York

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