

February OOM –“Off the Wall”
AHAB, 83.77,
1953, Painted Metal
Alexander Calder
Gallery 100

Artist: Alexander Calder was born 22 July, 1898 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and lived until 11 November, 1976. Both his father and grandfather were sculptors. In 1919 he graduated from Stevens Institute of Technology, Hoboken, New Jersey with an engineering degree. In 1923 he enrolled in the Art Students League in New York City. John Sloan was one of his teachers. Sloan was part of the American artist group known as The Eight and became a leading member of the Ashcan School of realist artists. In 1923 one of Calder's first jobs was as a freelance artist for the "National Police Gazette" sketching sporting events and circuses. One of his assignments was to spend 2 weeks sketching the Ringling Bros. Barnum Bailey Circus. Acrobats and circus performers remained some of his favorite subjects.

In 1926 Calder and his wife moved to Paris. While there he was influenced by the work of Marcel Duchamp, Joan Miro, and Paul Klee. Calder began making 3-D wire "line drawings" of circus performers and such notables as Josephine Baker, tennis star Helen Willis Moody, Fernand Leger, and Calvin Coolidge. At this time he constructed "Cirque Calder", an assemblage of circus performers, animals, and props. The entire assemblage fit into a large trunk. Soon his work was noticed by the art world. In 1928 Calder had his first solo show at the Weyhe Gallery in New York City.

In 1930 Calder visited the studio of Piet Mondrian. Calder said he was "shocked" into abstraction. He was impressed by the pieces of colored paper that Mondrian moved around during his color experimentations. Calder tried abstract painting, but found sculpture was his medium. Calder said that he "... felt painting was too static to reflect our world of movement." He made his first truly kinetic sculpture in 1931. It was Marcel Duchamp who first used the term "mobile". The French term "mobile" has the dual meaning of "moving body" as well as "motive or 'driving force'". He was invited to join "Abstraction-Creation", an influential art group. Members of the group included Jean Arp, Piet Mondrian, and Jean Helion. In 1933, Calder and his wife, Louisa, returned to the US and settled in Roxbury, Conn. where Calder set up his studio/workshop.

The object: "Ahab", one of Calder's largest mobiles, is made of 3 arcs made of steel rods and hung with irregularly shaped, biomorphic disks that interact in 3 dimensions. It measures 177"x 226". The name, "Ahab" refers to the maniacal captain in Melville's "Moby Dick". Calder was the first 20th century artist to make movement a major feature of his art. Sculptors traditionally emphasize mass. The experience of a sculpture is the sum of its surfaces and profiles. On the other hand, Calder's work focused on shape, space, and movement. He sought to "...unfix the traditional stability and timelessness of art and invest it with the vital qualities of mutability and unpredictability." Jean Paul Sartre said of the mobile, "When everything goes right a mobile is a piece of poetry that dances with the joy of life and surprises." Calder said he was never certain how a mobile would behave when the wind struck it. He started with the smallest pieces and worked

up to the largest. He never used a rectangle as he thought the shape was too static. He resisted complicated theories, tools and techniques. For the smaller pieces he used no power tools, did not weld, and used rivets and bolts. For the large constructions he calls “stabiles” he had the pieces fabricated in a foundry with the help of structural engineers. Calder asserts that his stabiles “return to the power of rest.” Even the stabiles are mobile in that they are constructed to be easily taken apart and moved. Calder made numerous “constructs” that combines “stabile” and “mobile”.

Possible tour topics:

Off the Wall: Sculpture at the Institute

Art Since 1950

Mostly Modern

Made in America

Schazm: Arts and Sciences

Why Is The Sky Yellow: Artists' Choices

References:

Object File MIA Library

Lipman, Jean, “Universe” Viking Press excerpt

Oxford Art On Line

Frank, Patrick, “Prebles’ Artforms”

Stockstad, Marilyn, V. 6, p. 1119

MoMA website

Whitney Museum website

Walker Art Museum website

Alexander Calder “Biography” website.

