

Meet the Masters

March Program

Alexander Calder "Lobster Trap and Fish Tail, (1939)"**Artwork Overview:**

(See following page.)

When we look at sculpture we are viewing a three dimensional object. Unlike painting and drawing which has two dimensions, sculpture provides a look at height, width and depth of an object. This is the way the world actually exists, in three dimensions.

The sculptural forms by Calder are examples of 20th century or modern art. The artist used different materials to produce the work of art. Calder pioneered the "form in space", literally floating in space, challenge our perceptions of form and weight. The changing positions of the shapes is an integral part of Calder's design.

Topics for Discussion:

1. Did Alexander Calder use organic or geometric shapes in this sculpture? (organic and geometric)
2. Can tell which part is the lobster trap and which is the fish tail?
3. Do you think this kinetic sculpture moves when a breeze blows through it?
4. How do you think the shapes were balanced?
5. How do you feel when you look at his sculpture?
6. Do you think Alexander Calder liked to make funny artwork? Why?

Hands-on Art Activity: Make a Mobile Sculpture -Shapes in Space

Materials: Colored construction paper (4" x 6")
Pencils
Scissors
Clear tape
String or yarn
Wire or sticks (wire coat hangers)

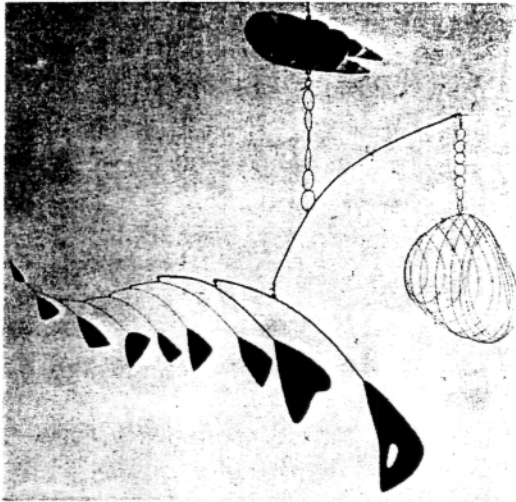
Teacher preparation: Cut lengths of string in advance and provide 4 or 6 per student.

Directions:

1. Students should first draw on the construction paper the shapes they would like to cut out. The shapes can be organic or geometric, but should be of similar size to maintain balance, both visually and physically.
2. Cut out the shapes.
3. Tape string to shapes and then to the wire. You may have to move the string until the mobile is balanced.
4. Hang the mobiles from the ceiling and watch them move.

Sculpture

Alexander Calder, *Lobster Trap and Fish Tail*. (1939)



Alexander Calder (*call-der*), American, 1898-1976. *Lobster Tail and Fish Trap*, (1939). Hanging mobile: painted steel wire and sheet aluminum, about 8-ft.6-in. h. x 9-ft.6-in. diam. Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Commissioned by the Advisory Committee for the stairwell of the Museum. Photograph © 1992 The Museum of Modern Art, New York

The Artist

American Alexander Calder was an inventor and artist at a very early age. His room, according to his sister, Peggy, was "a maze of strings; they pulled up shades and lowered them, pulled the casement windows closed, turned the lights on and off." At the age of five, he was creating wooden animals, wire figures, and jewelry for his sister. His family encouraged him and gave him dressers and chests to hold all the junk and scraps he was constantly collecting. They also gave him workshops in which to tinker, and as the size of his art grew over the years, so did his studios.

Though Calder was trained as an engineer, he went to Paris in 1926 where he studied the unique contributions of European artists of the time whose ideas were breaking new ground. He caught their attention with his miniature animated *Circus*, which used the same ideas and techniques from his childhood, wire sculpting and scrap assemblage. His little wire figures were almost like sculptures whose insides had been cut out, leaving just the outlines.

After a visit to the Paris studio of the artist, Piet Mondrian, he arrived at the unprecedented idea of putting action into art. "I was very much moved by...the walls painted white and divided by black paintings...and I thought at the time how fine it would be if everything there moved. I went home

and tried to paint, but wire or something to twist, or tear, or bend, is an easier medium for me to think in." Shortly after, the "mobile", named by Marcel Duchamp, was born.

When Calder returned to America, he had already gained enormous recognition for his innovative sculpture, and he continued painting, sculpting, and taking immense pleasure from life until his sudden death at the age of 78. He wrote to a friend, "Above all, I feel art should be happy."

The Art

Lobster Trap and Fish Tail was one of Calder's earliest hanging mobiles. Though it may look relatively small, it measures about 8-ft.6-in. high x 9-ft.6-in. in diameter. Its use of organic shapes, primary colors (and black), balance, and movement are characteristic of the mobiles Calder would continue to design. Many people especially enjoy this piece because it suggests more of a subject matter than some of Calder's other mobiles. Is recognizable subject matter important to the enjoyment of a piece of art?

Even though it is still considered *abstract*, the title tells us Calder was playing with a particular idea. Tell the "story" of the sculpture. Where is the lobster? Where is the trap? What makes you think this? What does the other element represent? *One art historian says the element on top is the lobster and the black fan-shaped metal pieces are a school of fish. Children may disagree!* Why do you suppose Calder named this mobile *Lobster Trap and Fish Tail*?

This mobile hangs in a stairwell at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Another element that contributes to the pleasurable viewing of this piece is the inexhaustible play of shadows on the nearby wall. How might the effects of this sculpture be changed in an outdoor setting? *Increased movement due to wind; size, shape, and location of shadows would change with the sun's position; gradual changes of surface due to elements of nature.*

Guided Analysis

Cultural Context:

Major technical advances in the twentieth century fostered innovative ideas. It was during this exciting time that Calder came to prominence. What events in America and the world can you think of that might have contributed to the way art was conceived, created, and accepted? *Many possible*

Alexander Calder, *Lobster Trap and Fish Tail*. (1939)

Responses—two world wars, Russian Revolution, television and computer, mass production. How might these events have influenced the art of the time?

Style:

Traditionally, sculptors have achieved mass and volume by carving or modeling. **Constructivists**, post-revolutionary Russian artists, felt that sculpture should explore time and kinetics (movement). They wanted to make the spectator consider what lay beyond the three dimensions in which sculpture had always been presented, and they wanted to use modern materials and engineering techniques to express this. In this way, we might see a connection to Calder's work with mobiles.

Because Calder tried to achieve accidental or chance movement in the freely-curving organic shapes that were the substance of his mobiles, he could also be connected to the **Surrealists**. Organic shapes, those found in nature, also occurred in the work of Calder's Surrealist friends, Joan Miro and Jean (Hans) Arp.

Do Calder's mobiles fit into either of these styles or was he, in your opinion, created his own style? Explain.

Media and Techniques:

Calder explains his planning and balancing technique simply: "I start by cutting out a lot of shapes. Next, I file them and smooth them off. Some are bits I just happen to find. Then, I arrange them on a table with wires between the pieces for the overall pattern. Finally, I cut some more on them with my shears, calculating for balance this time...You put a disc here and then you put another disc at the other end and then you balance them on your finger...I begin with the smallest and work up. Once I know the balance point for this first pair of discs, I anchor it by a hook to another arm, where it acts as one end of another pair of scales, and so on." Do you think you could create a mobile by looking at one of Calder's and following his explanation?

Activity: Using string, colored cardboard or construction paper, wire, straws, paper clips, and found objects, follow Calder's instructions above to

All of Calder's mobiles are designed to be taken apart and lie flat so they can be stored or mailed. The smallest can fit into a letter envelope!

Subject:

From his engineering days, Calder was familiar with technology and systems of creating balance and counterbalance. His mobiles are delicately balanced suspended sculptures. The organic shapes, made of metal and hinged with links to rods, are so carefully designed and weighted that they catch even the lightest air currents, moving up and down as well as around to make complicated patterns in space. Calder's use of bright primary colors and black and white are a signature of his playful art. Calder said, "When everything goes right, a mobile is a piece of poetry that dances with the joy of life and surprises."

Judgment:

A private collector purchased a Calder mobile, then donated it for installation at an airport. The original colors were black and white, but when it was installed, the airport officials decided to change them to green and gold. Calder was very unhappy and protested the change, but he was told it was no longer his property. Since the mobile was the official property of the airport, do you feel the artist had a right to protest? Did the airport have a right to alter the artist's original work? How would the change affect the integrity and appreciation of the sculpture? What would you do? (Worth noting: Calder sued and won!)

Elements and Principles of Design:

The shapes found in the mobiles of Calder and Henry Moore are described as *organic*, drawing their inspiration from forms in nature. Few shapes in nature are geometric: exact circles, squares, triangles, and so on. But some organic shapes remind us of those of geometry. Look carefully at *Lobster Trap and Fish Tail*. Can you find something that looks like a circle? A triangle? A rectangle? How do the shapes in this sculpture affect each other?

Calder understood that as the air moved the independent shapes, the sculpture would constantly be changing in appearance. How do the shapes themselves create a sense of movement? *Their curves make them appear to have a forward or undulating motion. Some of the shapes resemble an arrow indicating a feeling of direction.* In one word, what mood does this piece evoke for you? How do the shapes and colors make you feel?

Watch a mobile move. Try to see the form created as the shape moves from one place to another. As the mobile arm moves up and down as well, it will make even more interesting "invisible" forms!