

ARTFORUM

Alexander Calder

DOMINIQUE LÉVY

Once Alexander Calder's sculptures began to be sited in Boston; Paris; Spoleto, Italy; Mexico City; and other global destinations, it was apparent that this versatile artist had a knack for thinking big. Now, based on an exhibition at Dominique Lévy, it's equally clear that, throughout his long, distinguished career, he also had a gift for making small-size stabiles, mobiles, and maquettes.

Whether his sculptures are only two inches high or just five inches wide, they all have the hallmarks of work by Alexander Calder. You'll find whimsical biomorphic forms; a palette reduced mostly to red, yellow, blue, and black; and elements that move in a light breeze. They are also marvels of his remarkably imaginative engineering skills. Though they are as serious as a classical-era statue, good Calder's tend to put a smile on your face. Some enchant, others charm; quite a few dazzle with their engineering prowess.

The forty-eight works in "*Multum in Parvo*," which is Latin for "much in little," spanned thirty-five or so years, beginning circa 1934. Only nine were maquettes. Of the rest, five were small enough to fit in the compartments of a specially rigged cigar box, all of which the artist

assembled in 1948 as a gift for his wife's forty-third birthday. There was a mobile weighted down by colored glass and buttons, and a sculpture assembled from bits of wood precariously balanced. Two works represented birds, and several others resembled more eccentric multi-legged creatures. There were works that could easily be disassembled, put into envelopes, and mailed from your local post office. A few had titles that were flatly descriptive, such as *Caged Stone and Fourteen Dots*, ca. 1948, or *Red Toadstool*, 1949. There was even a sculpture made with a spoon that the artist found in 1954, painted red, and set on its bowl so that it could rock in place and animate a tiny mobile tethered to its long end.

Calder's name is rarely linked with Joseph Cornell's, yet both artists, born five years apart, shared a sensibility that engendered wonderment in viewers of their creations. When his sculptures are small, Calder's art is the abstract equivalent of Cornell's. Both were inspired by aspects of European Surrealism, especially as seen at the Julien Levy Gallery, where both had solo shows. As with *Calder's Circus*, 1926–31, which fits into three valises, the art at Dominique Lévy could have been shipped in relatively few containers.

Lately, Calder's solo exhibitions have offered his admirers two shows: the artist's sculpture as well as a display designed by a starchitect. In 2013–14, Frank Gehry, who is based in Los Angeles, created the overall layout, including the niches, pedestals, and lighting, for "Calder and Abstraction," an exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. By creating various geometrically shaped pedestals at different heights for the sculptures, Gehry focused attention on the unique character of each work. In the New York gallery, the father-and-son team of Santiago and Gabriel Calatrava designed biomorphic platforms, pedestals with circular tops, and vitrines with mirrored surfaces so that the artist's tiny pieces would not be overwhelmed by the two long spaces where they were on view. The mirrors also triggered the playful nature of the colorful sculptures. Reflected light added yet another level of animation, and shadows reflected on the two ceilings looked like the Batman logo as recalibrated by Calder.

From the get-go, architects enjoyed working with Calder. It's one reason why his art is so ubiquitous. In fact, an innate sense of scale was part of his familial heritage: Besides being well-respected sculptors, both his grandfather and father made important work for architectural settings (Philadelphia's city hall, public squares, fountains, and the like). This is not the place to make a case for Calder as America's greatest sculptor. But "*Multum in Parvo*" would be a show you'd cite to bolster that claim.

—Phyllis Tuchman



View of "Alexander Calder," 2015.
From left: *Red T with Black Flags*, 1940; *Untitled*, ca. 1940; *Untitled*, 1941.
Photo: Tom Powell