Artist Resources – Alexander Calder (American, 1898-1976)



Calder, 1947 Photograph: Curt Valentin

The Calder Foundation: biography, artwork, exhibitions, essays

Calder family friend Pedro E. Guerrero captured the organized chaos and artistry of Calder's Roxbury, Connecticut studio in photographs between 1939 and 1959. The Tate also shared this exploration of Calder's creativity in a picture essay spanning the 1940s through the 60s.

In 2014, The Whitney Museum of American Art in New York celebrated its holdings of the largest collection of Calder's work in the world with *Collecting Calder*, pairing a selection of seminal sculptures with the artist's lesser known prolific oeuvre of drawings.

Calder's great grandson, musician Gryphon Rower-Upjohn, spoke with *Artsy* in 2014 about the sculptor's little-known percussive experiments and his legacy of musical inspiration in conjunction with an exhibition at the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein–Westfalen in Düsseldorf. "Calder employed sound as he did color—as a means of varying elements and enhancing the disparity within a composition," Gryphon explained. Calder was involved in many projects where sound played an essential role, including collaborations with Martha Graham and Virgil Thomson. The Tate Modern highlighted one such collaboration in 2015, with composer Earle Brown for their exhibition, *Performing Sculpture*.



Calder in his Roxbury CT studio, 1964
Photograph: Herb Weitman

The Whitney's 2017 exhibition, *Calder: Hypermobility* highlighted key sculptures in which Calder intended the performances of movement and sound to be forefronted in an ideal viewing experience. Musical performances and gallery demonstrations of his early mechanized sculptures accompanied the exhibition.

Gryphon also spoke about his great-grandfather's interest in and relationship to music in 2019 at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. In his lecture, in conjunction with the museum's ambitious exhibition, *Radical Inventor*, Gryphon traced Calder's affection for abstract sound from his first mobile, which acted as an instrument for chance musical compositions, to his "sonic architecture" at the Ciudad Universitaria de Caracas in Venezuela, and his mutually influential relationships with musicians and composer. "Beyond his stature as a composer of motion, Calder expanded the vocabulary of sculpture by permitting his mysterious objects' noisemaking capabilities," reflected Gryphon. "An artist who addressed issues fundamental to composers of music, Calder was a visionary of the increasingly blurred intermingling categories of art."

Scholar Jed Peri published the second series in his Calder monograph in 2020: *Calder: The Conquest of Space: The Later Years: 1940–1976*, a follow up 2017's *Calder: The Conquest of Time: The Early Years: 1898-1940*. In an excerpt from *The Conquest of Time*, Peri discusses Calder's first years in Paris and early figurative sculptural explorations, before he embraced abstraction following an encounter with Dutch painter Piet Mondrian's studio in Paris in 1930. In this excerpt from *The Conquest of Space*, Peri discusses MoMA's 1943 retrospective, which Calder credited as catalyst for his success in the United States.



Alexander Calder (American, 1898-1976)
Four White Dots, 1959
Sheet metal, wire, and paint

Private Collection; L2026:69.1

Alexander Calder made major contributions to the development of abstract sculpture in the 20th century. Born into a family of artists, Calder initially pursued a career in mechanical engineering before returning to his artistic roots. His first kinetic sculptures were made in the early 1930s, inspired by the interaction between wire, metal, and the random passing of air currents. **Four White Dots** is one of Calder's "mobiles," crafted in the fish shape that the artist used throughout his career. As he once said: "When everything works well, a mobile is a poem that dances with the joy of life and its surprises."

On view November 18, 2026 – May 30, 2027

Alexander Calder (American, 1898-1976)
Four-Cusped Hypocycloid, 1959
Painted sheet metal

Private Collection; L2026:25.1

Alexander Calder was one of the most prolific American sculptors of the 20th century. Known for his kinetic "mobiles" and static "stabiles," Calder's innovative work was instrumental to the development of contemporary sculpture. Originally trained as a mechanical engineer, Calder enrolled in the Art Students League in the 1920s and soon developed a career that blended his interests in engineering and art. **Four-Cusped Hypocycloid** references a geometric plane curve that results when a small circle rolls inside a larger circle. A hypocycloid curve with four cusps is referred to as an "asteroid," which was first articulated by astronomers in the 17th century.

On view June 10 – September 13, 2026





Alexander Calder (American, 1898-1976)
What Isle Is This?, 1947
Oil on canvas

Private Collection; L2025:62.6

Alexander Calder was born into a family of artists, but he was initially encouraged to study mechanical engineering. In 1922, Calder was working as a timekeeper at a logging camp in Washington State and was compelled to begin painting. Though he later became known for his kinetic sculptures and monumental public commissions, his artistic roots are in painting. **What Isle Is This?** was completed shortly after the chaos and destruction of World War II. It is an unusual composition for Calder—he rarely included figures in his work, and these subjects appear to reference another culture or even something otherworldly—but it still demonstrates his fascination with dynamic movement and color.

On view October 1, 2025 – January 9, 2026

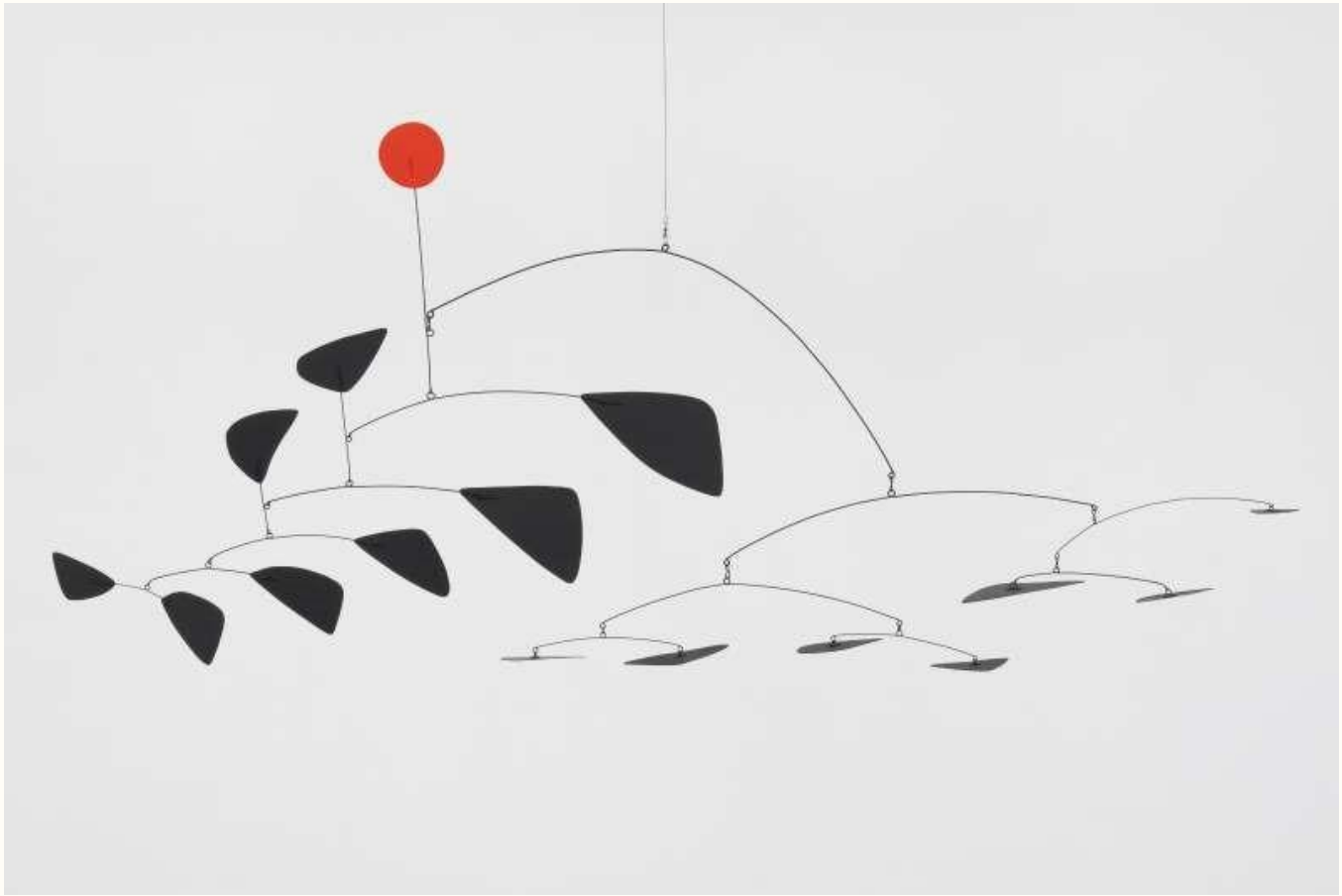
Alexander Calder (American, 1898-1976)
Untitled, 1967
Sheet metal, rod, wire, and paint

Private Collection; L2024:39.2

Born into a family of artists, Alexander Calder pursued a mechanical engineering career before enrolling in classes at the Art Students League in 1920s New York City. After moving to Paris in 1926, the sculptor quickly became known for his wire sculptures, abstract work, and kinetic designs, which revolutionized the medium of sculpture and greatly influenced 20th century abstract art. **Untitled** is a "standing mobile" that balances a kinetic structure of red and blue ovals on a static, geometric base. According to the artist: "When everything goes right a mobile is a piece of poetry that dances with the joy of life and surprise!"

On view October 9, 2024 – January 12, 2025





Alexander Calder (American, 1898-1976)
François Ier, 1954
Sheet metal, wire, and paint

Private Collection; L2024:14.1

On view April 10 – July 14, 2024

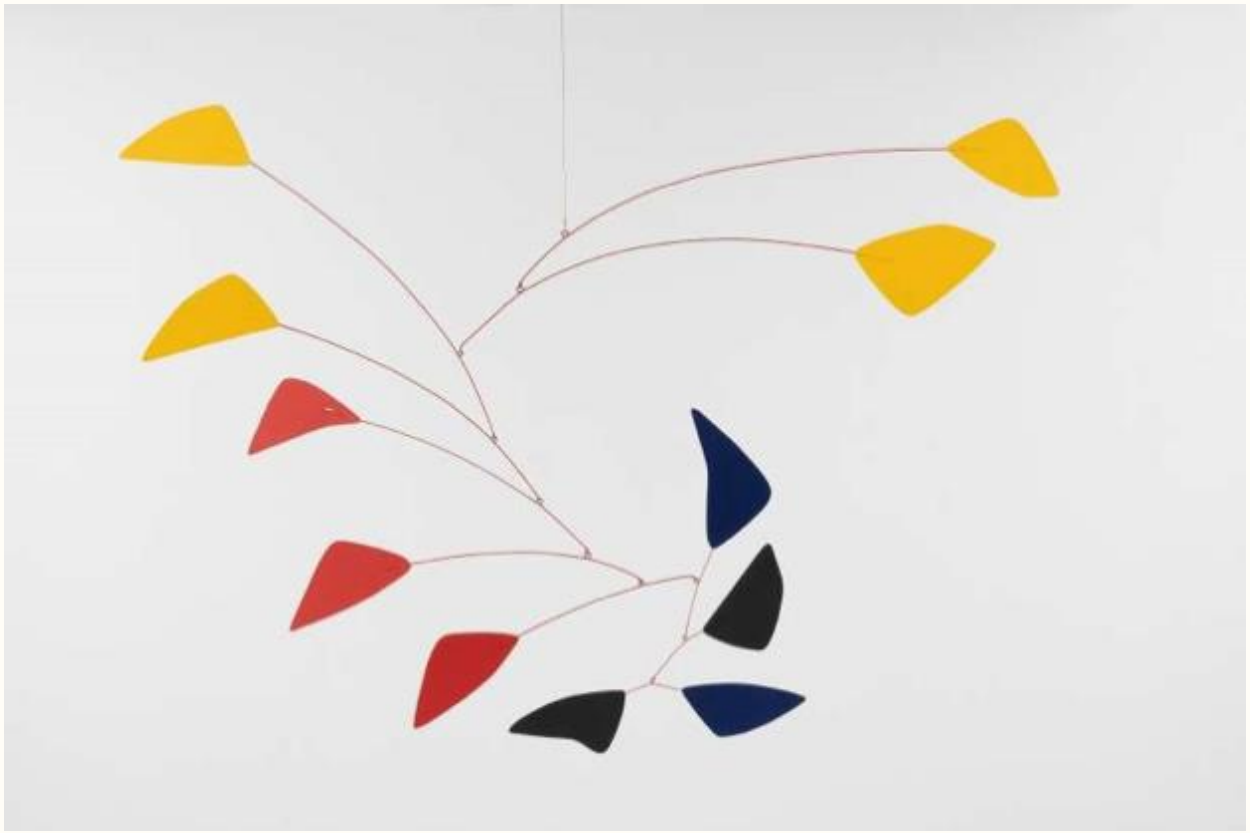
Alexander Calder (American, 1898-1976)
La Lune (maquette), 1963
Sheet metal, wire, and paint

Private Collection, Los Angeles; L2024:7.1

Alexander Calder was one of the most prolific American sculptors of the 20th century. Known for his kinetic “mobiles” and static “stabiles,” Calder’s innovative work was instrumental to the development of contemporary sculpture. In 1963, the artist opened a studio space overlooking the Indre Valley in France to construct large-scale sculptures using industrial ironworks. **La Lune (maquette)** was likely produced in this new studio as a model for the monumental version, which was exhibited at Galerie Maeght in Paris that same year. Calder often turned to the moon and planetary systems for inspiration, saying: “The underlying sense of form in my work has been the system of the Universe, or part thereof. For that is a rather large model to work from.”

On view February 8 – May 12, 2024





Alexander Calder (American, 1898-1976)
Eleven Polychrome, 1961
Sheet metal, wire, and paint

Private Collection; L2023:30.1

American artist Alexander Calder made major contributions to the development of abstract sculpture in the 20th century. Born into a family of artists, Calder initially pursued a career in mechanical engineering before returning to his artistic practice. The sculptor lived in Paris in the late 1920s and early 1930s, where he met avant-garde artists such as Piet Mondrian (1872-1944) and Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968). Mondrian's approach to abstraction inspired Calder's turn to kinetic sculpture and the creation of artworks that Duchamp later termed "mobiles." **Eleven Polychrome** demonstrates both Mondrian's and Duchamp's influence on Calder's career. The primary colors, geometric shapes, and chance movement from air currents realize modernist, avant-garde concepts in three dimensions. As Calder once said: "Just as one can compose colors, or forms, so one can compose motions."

On view April 19 – July 23, 2023

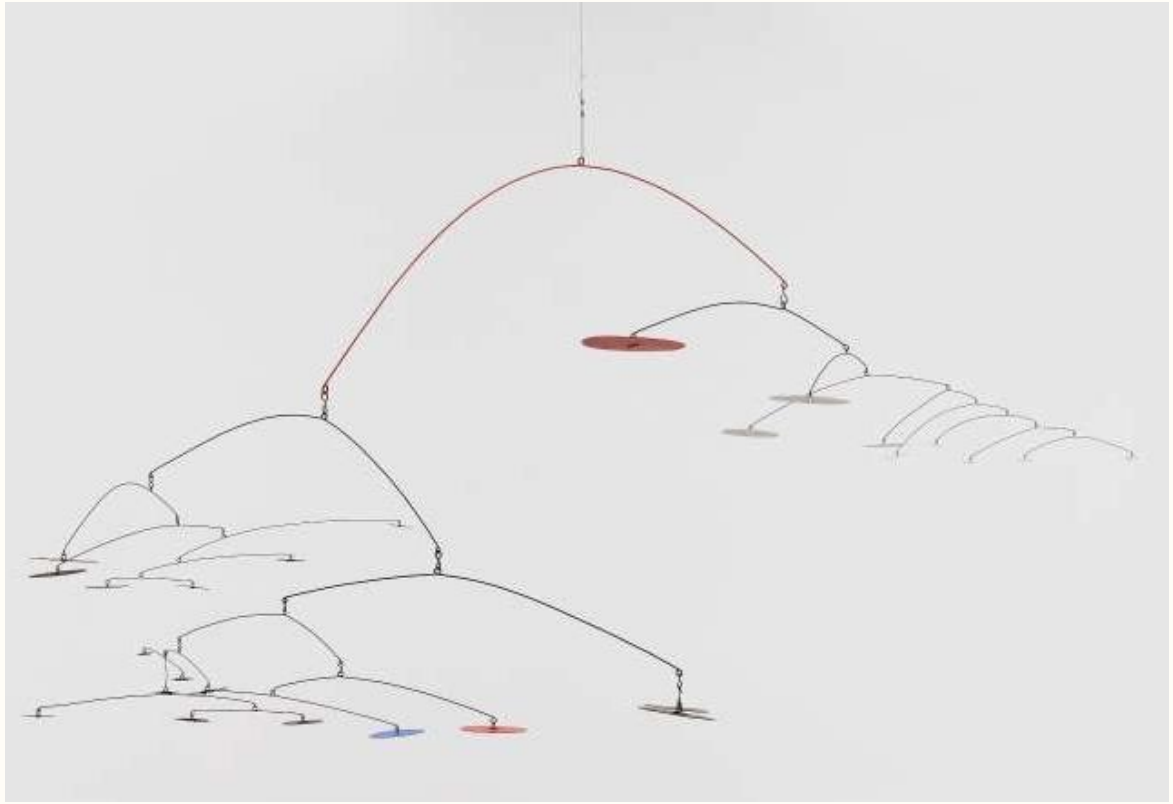
Alexander Calder (American, 1898-1976)
Tableau Noir, 1970
Painted sheet metal

Private Collection; L2022:125.1

"I want to make things that are fun to look at." Alexander Calder grew up with artist parents but was encouraged to pursue mechanical engineering as a career. In the 1920s, Calder decided to return to artmaking. His mobiles and large public-facing sculptures broke from traditional materials and techniques, making a major impact on the development of the medium by reconsidering sculpture as dynamic. The bright primary colors and whimsical forms of **Tableau Noir (The Blackboard)** are characteristic of Calder's oeuvre toward the end of his career. The monumental sculpture was first made in the artist's French studio and was later on display at the entrance to the Smithsonian American Art Museum in 2013.

On view January 19 – April 23, 2023



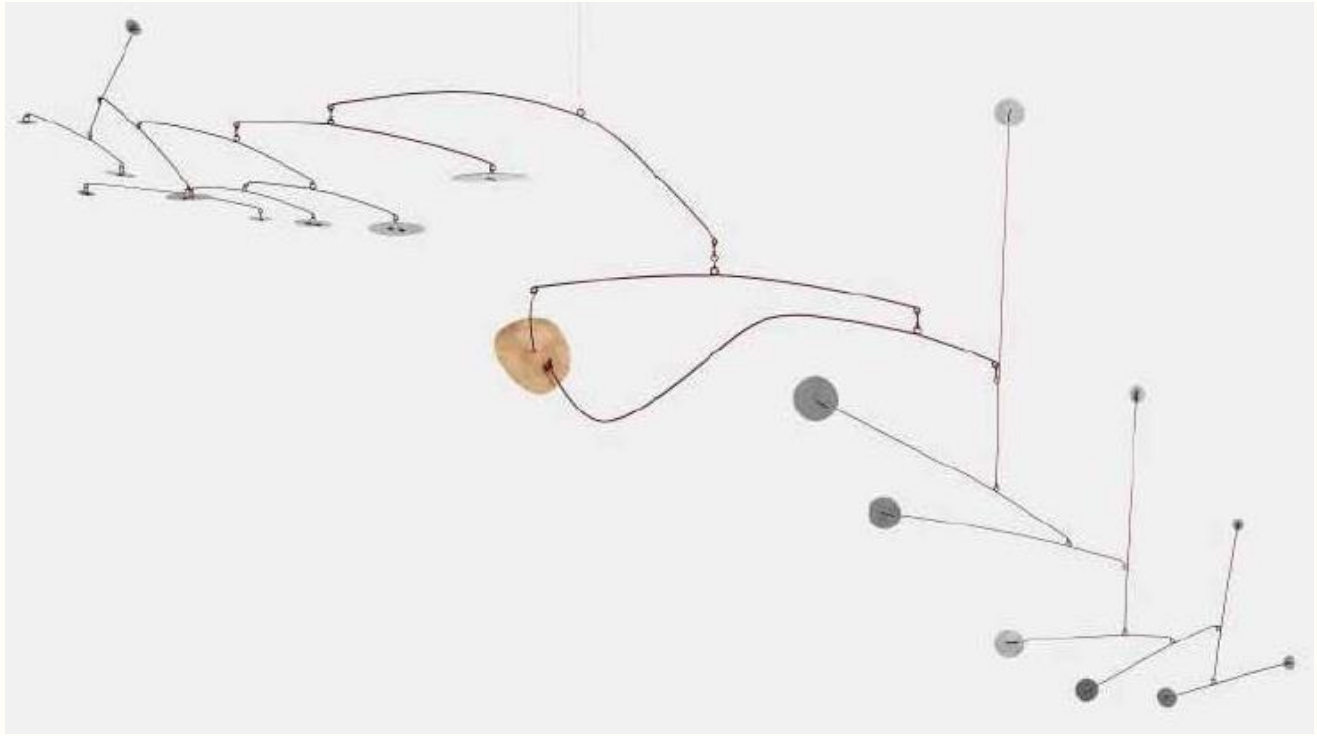


Alexander Calder (American, 1898-1976)
Horizontal, 1956
Sheet metal, wire, and paint

Private Collection; L2020:119.3

In 1930, seven years after enrolling at the Art Students League in New York and transitioning away from a career in engineering, Alexander Calder visited the Paris studio of Dutch painter Piet Mondrian. Calder credited Mondrian's experimentations with shape, space, and color for the abstract turn in his art practice, as figurative wire sculptures gave way to an innovative new aesthetic rooted in motion. Calder's first kinetic sculptures in the early 1930s employed mechanization and motors in a dynamic choreography of wire and metal. These highly performative "mobiles" quickly evolved into delicate hanging constructions and precariously balanced compositions propelled solely by the whims of passing air currents. Endlessly playful, and rarely stationary, such creations as **Horizontal** reward patient and curious viewing as thin pendants of colored sheet metal sway, shift, and revolve from their wire chandelier in a delicate yet robust dance that blends harmony and chance.

On view January 6 – April 11, 2021

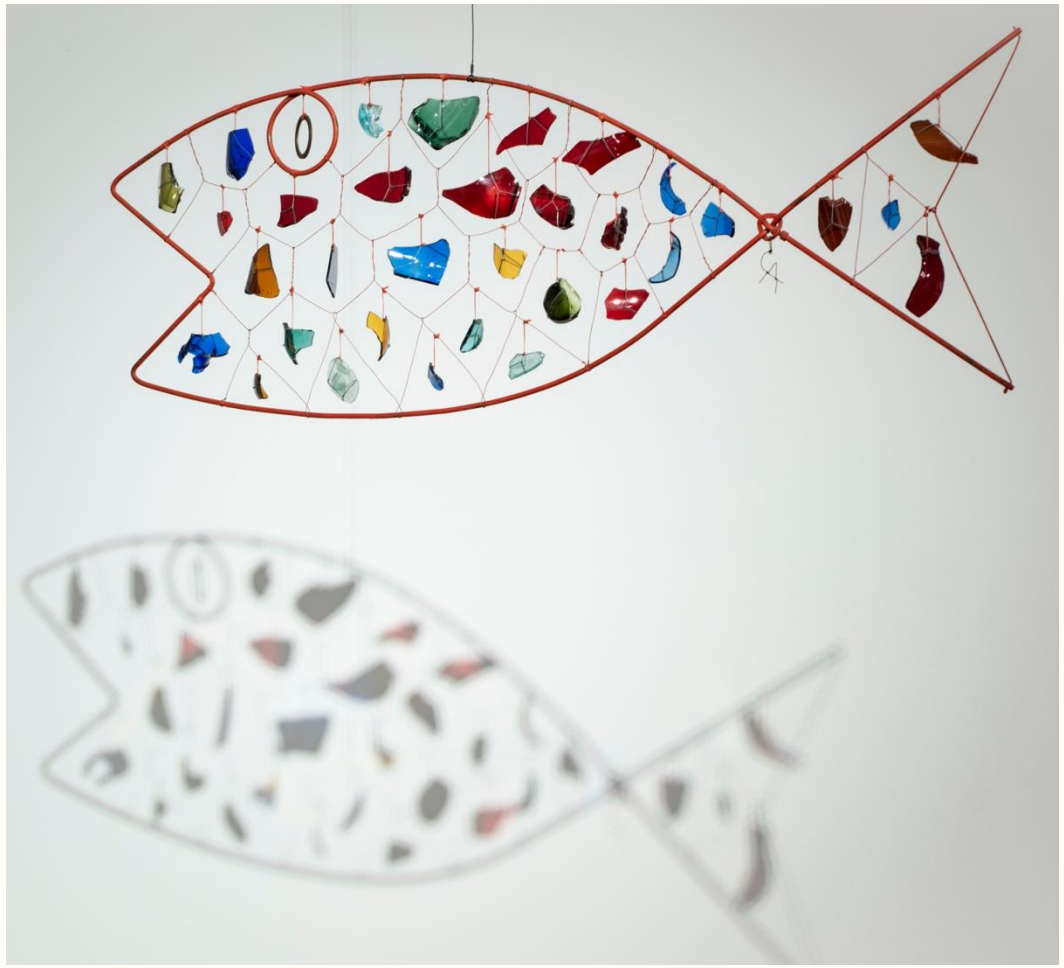


Alexander Calder (American, 1898-1976)
Red Gong, 1951
Brass, sheet metal, wire, and paint

Private Collection; L2020:93.2

Alexander Calder is responsible for some of the most distinctive and inventive sculpture of the twentieth century. With a background in mechanical engineering, Calder approached his artistic practice through an interest in the suggestive potential of wire and metal. Often found hanging from the ceiling or balanced precariously on a base, his pieces –- fondly termed “mobiles” by friend and fellow artist Marcel Duchamp -– are inventive, playful, and rarely stationary. While living in Paris in the 1930s, Calder developed his kinetic aesthetic, which owed inspiration to his time in New York sketching American Big Top circus shows as an illustrator for *The National Police Gazette.* Calder gradually abandoned his early experimentations with mechanized mobiles, favoring the shifting responses to whims of surrounding air currents and the unchoreographed performances of cast shadows. **Red Gong** also conjures musical associations, pointing to the artist’s experimentations in chance compositions with percussive elements in mobiles beginning in the 1930s, refined with a series of “gong” sculptures in the 1950s and ‘60s.

On view September 16 – December 17, 2020



Alexander Calder (American, 1898-1976)
Fish, ca. 1952
Hanging mobile - painted steel rod, wire, string, colored glass, and metal objects

Private Collection; L2019:91.1

Alexander Calder was born into a family of artists – his mother was a painter and his father and grandfather were sculptors – but initially resisted a career in the arts. Instead he pursued a degree in mechanical engineering. After enrolling at the Art Students League in New York in 1923, this background provided the foundations for the signature mobiles that would become the core of his prolific oeuvre. These delicately balanced constructions are hinged together with metal wire and weighted by biomorphic shapes that appear to move on their own, swayed by the slightest breath of air. In each sculpture, the poetic possibilities of motion are an essential element. **Fish** recalls a subject explored in some of the Calder's earliest mobiles and is one of just twelve mature sculptures with this formal composition. Encased by a metal frame and held taught by wire and string, the suspended pieces of colored glass become glittering scales that cast ever-changing compositions of shadows as ambient air currents animate the mobile in unexpected ways.

On view January 15 – April 19, 2020