

ALEXANDER CALDER: A BALANCING ACT

Pre-Visit Activity: Grades 4-6

“I think best in wire.” –Alexander Calder, in a letter to his sister

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Learn about American sculptor Alexander Calder, his work and his great influence on art of the 20th Century and beyond
- Become familiar with the vocabulary of contemporary sculpture and be able to recognize the differences between: abstract and representational, mobile and stabile, organic and geometric forms, two-dimensional and three-dimensional artwork
- Be able to identify primary colors, and become familiar with the elements of art and principles of design
- Create a wire-based animal sculpture inspired by Alexander Calder’s work

VOCABULARY

Abstract, circus, cosmos, elements of art, geometric, icon, illustrator, kinetic, maquette, mechanical engineer, mobile, motion, organic, performance artist, primary colors, principals of design, representational, sculpture, stabile, standing stabile, three-dimensional, two-dimensional, universe

(see glossary for definitions)

WHO WAS ALEXANDER CALDER?

Alexander Calder was born July 22, 1898, in Lawton, Pennsylvania. His father and grandfather were well known **sculptors** and his mother was a painter. Calder is best known for the invention of his **mobiles** and outdoor, large scale sheet metal sculptures, which were called **stables**.

Also known as “Sandy” by his friends and family, he went to college and studied to be a **mechanical engineer**. Later, he decided that he wanted to be an artist and attended art school in New York. His knowledge of engineering would help him with his sculptures later in life.

While in art school, he also worked as an **illustrator** and did some drawings of the **circus** for a newspaper, which he really enjoyed. In 1926, Calder went to Paris, France, and worked with other artists, writers, and sculptors, and soon began working on a new and exciting project!

He made sculptures of circus animals and actors out of wire, wood, cork and bits of cloth. He gave elaborate performances of about twenty separate acts, complete with sound and motion, just like the real-life circus. People all over Paris came to see his circus performances and he became a very popular **performance artist**. Calder decided to go back to the United States to show his circus and it became very popular there, too.

Calder made several designs for toys—small animals and other moving objects—and found a toy company to mass-produce them and offer them for sale. At the same time he was inspired to make wire animal sculptures and wire portraits that looked like real people. Art that looks like real things is called **representational**.

Art that does not look like something real or recognizable and emphasizes the **elements of art**- line, color, shape, texture, and form- is called **abstract**. He was very inspired by the **universe** and nature. Calder decided to make abstract sculptures and he cut wood and metal and bent wire into **organic** or natural shapes. This was a big change in his art. He liked his abstract sculptures and decided they should be in **motion**, so he attached motors to some of his sculptures to make them move (also known as **kinetic art**). He wanted to find other ways to make his sculptures move, so he began to experiment and hang them from the ceiling or attach them to a wall. What do you think happened? The shapes in the sculptures moved and changed positions in the wind! Calder called these new sculptures mobiles and history was made.

ALEXANDER CALDER: A BALANCING ACT

Pre-Visit Activity: Grades 4-6

Calder was pleased with his mobiles and they became very popular. He made sculptures called stables as well. These sat on the ground. Stables did not move and like his mobiles, they looked different from different directions as people walked around them. Some of his stables looked like they wanted to move! Calder also combined two of his art forms and put a mobile on top of a stable. This new art form, called a **standing mobile**, had the moving parts of a mobile, but were attached to a base that did not move.

As he got older, Calder's work got bigger and he began making giant pieces of art for public spaces outdoors. He would plan for the large sculptures in his studio by first making **maquettes**, or small-scale models. The model would help Calder problem solve on how to build his really big sculptures. One of his largest sculptures in Italy is 60 feet tall!

Calder's art made him happy and he loved spending time with his wife, daughters, and grandchildren. He died in 1976 at the same time his work was being shown in a grand exhibition in New York City.

Alexander Calder is considered an American **icon**, one of the most inventive and beloved artists of his time. His sculptural work has influenced artists for generations and continues to grace and delight audiences, and enlivens public spaces around the world.

-Based on excerpts from *The Life and Work of Alexander Calder* by Schaefer, Adam (Chicago, IL: Heinemann Library, 2003).

DISCUSS IT!

Take a look at Alexander Calder's sculpture, *Vache (Cow)*, 1930 (page 6).

- How do you think the cow feels? Why? (*sad, tired, old: expressed through sagging, bent, low lines, elongated shapes and jutting skeletal frame*)
- Would you call this "realistic" or "abstract"? Explain. (*abstract: Calder uses line [art element] as his mode of expression; simplified shapes, no detail*)
- How big do you think this wire sculpture is? (*7 x 9 x 6 in.*)
- Is it flat (two-dimensional), or can you walk around it (three-dimensional)? (*3D*)
- Calder was very influenced by shapes that occur in nature. Can you point out organic shapes? Do you recognize any geometric shapes? (*organic: softly rounded or curved irregular forms*) (*geometric: circles and ovals*)
- What materials did Calder use? What kinds of tools do you think he used? (*wire: pliers, needle nose pliers, wire snips*)
- Calder liked to draw with a single non-stop line, or contour drawing, instead of many smaller lines. He "drew in space" with wire the same way. Looking at this can you tell where the line starts? Stops?
- If you were going to add color to Calder's *Vache (Cow)*, what would you choose and why?

Now look at *Crinkly Crocodile*, 1971 (page 7)

- Color is an important art element in Calder's work. What colors do you see when you look at *Crinkly Crocodile*? (*red, blue, yellow: primary colors*) (*black on tail*)
- How do you feel when you look at this? Do you think Calder's use of color has any influence on the way you feel? (*happy, excited, playful: bright, bold use of color [art element], red on head: scared, angry*)
- How do you think Calder made this piece balance? (*balance: equal distribution of weight, equilibrium*)
- How do you think this relates to nature? (*crocodile, a living thing*)
- Which art elements or principles of design is Calder using? (*art elements: line, shape, form, color, value, space*) (*principles of design: balance, rhythm, harmony, proportion, pattern, contrast, emphasis*)

ALEXANDER CALDER: A BALANCING ACT

Pre-Visit Activity: Grades 4-6

MAKE IT!

Using images of real animals and Alexander Calder's work as inspiration, create a wire-based animal sculpture using the materials provided.

Using a contour drawing as your sketch to work from, use Calder's method of "drawing in space" with wire as you bend, twist and coil wire to form your own wire-based sculpture. Create a piece you would want to see in a museum located in the United States or Europe!

MATERIALS

- Book: *Alexander Calder: The Paris Years 1926-1933* (SAM library)
- Black & white copies of *Vache (Cow)*, 1930 (page 6)
- Color copies of image *Crinkly Crocodile*, 1971 (page 7)
- Images of real animals
- Example(s) of wire-based sculptures (completed by teacher)
- Wire nippers, needle-nose pliers (craft or hardware store)
- 20 gauge galvanized wire (craft store)
- Twisteez (wire ties, art supply store)
- Writing paper for written assignment
- Pencils and erasers
- Kid friendly scissors
- Sketch paper

BEFORE YOU START

Consider:

- When drawing your contour sketches, try not to lift your pencil from the paper!
- Will my wire-based sculpture convey an emotion or a trait typically known to that particular animal? (Ex. Laughing hyena, roaring lion, angry bear)
- What kinds of shapes will I use to construct my animal?
- How will I make all of the pieces work together and balance on their own?
- You may add extra pieces of wire to your sculpture to emphasize thicker lines where needed.
- You may construct parts of your sculpture separately and attach them with bits of wire.
- As you are working, consider how you will make your wire-based sculpture stand. Be creative! (Ex. A tail or trunk is used as support)
- Finished sculptures will be approximately 4-7 inches.

ALEXANDER CALDER: A BALANCING ACT

Pre-Visit Activity: Grades 4-6

HOW TO

First, the instructor introduces all tools and materials and highlights proper use and safety. Next, a demonstration should be given on how to cut, coil, and bend wire..

1. Choose an animal. (*Horse, dog, elephant, cat, giraffe*)
2. Make sketches of your animal using contour line drawing. (*The outline or outer edge [silhouette] of an object, drawn using a single line.*)
3. Now simplify your lines or clean-up your drawing.
4. Using your sketch as a guide, bend and shape wire to form a contour form of the head, neck and body of your animal.
5. Attach additional wire to create width to your sculpture.
6. Continue to build your sculpture by forming additional pieces like a tail, mane or trunk and attach them with bits of wire.
7. You may add extra pieces of wire for stability or create the appearance of heavier lines by layering the wire.
8. Make sure your sculpture is balanced and can stand on its own permanently and without any help! You may need to make a wire base and attach it to your sculpture. Use your imagination!
9. Imagine you are going to exhibit your wire-based sculpture in a museum. The museum will need a written statement from you, which will be placed near your work. Reflect on the process of making your sculpture and write an artist's statement. An artist's statement is a short document written by the artist in first-person, which provides a window into the artist's world. Write as many paragraphs you need to include the following information:
 - Begin your statement with: *My wire-based sculpture is inspired by the work of Alexander Calder.*
 - Why did you choose the animal you did?
 - Briefly describe your favorite part of the creative process you took
 - What feelings do you have about your piece and why?
 - Finish your statement with: The title of my sculpture is _____, and the emotion (or trait) my animal is portraying is _____.
 - Write the title of your sculpture at the top of the page.
 - Put the title and date at the bottom. Then write your full name.
 - Next, list the materials you used to make your sculpture. The dimensions of your sculpture should be listed last (see example below).

Example:

Dancing Horse, 2009

Jane R. Smith
Aluminum wire
2 x 6 x 3 in.

My wire-based sculpture is inspired by the work of Alexander Calder. I chose to create a horse sculpture because I have been riding horses since the age of four. My favorite part of creating my horse was learning how to bend and shape wire. I think it is a fun material to work with. I would like my piece to be a little larger, but it looks like a horse and that makes me happy. The title of my sculpture is Dancing Horse, and he dances because he is so loved.

ALEXANDER CALDER: A BALANCING ACT

Pre-Visit Activity: Grades 4-6

GLOSSARY

Abstract: art that does not look like something real or recognizable and emphasizes the elements of art—line, color, shape, texture, and form—to express its subject

Circus: an arena often covered by a tent and used for variety shows usually including feats of physical skill, wild animal acts, and performances by clowns and animal tamers

Geometric shape: a “regular” form that has straight lines including triangles, squares and circles

Icon: an object or symbol of uncritical devotion

Illustrator: an artist who depicts decorative or visual features intended to explain subject matter

Maquette: a small preliminary model of a planned sculpture

Mechanical engineering: a branch of engineering concerned with the industrial application of mechanics and the production of tools, machinery, and their products

Mobile: (mo-beel) a sculpture that is made of pieces that move, invented by Alexander Calder

Motion: changing position or moving

Organic shape: typically occurs in nature; also referred to as “natural” or “irregular”

Performance artist: someone who presents a nontraditional art form often with political or topical themes that typically features a live presentation to an audience of onlookers and draws on such arts as acting, poetry, music, dance or visual arts

Primary colors: three basic colors with which all other colors are derived: red, yellow, blue. Color is used by artists as one of the elements of art, or the visual language of art

Representational: art that shows the way things look in real life

Sculptor: an artist who makes sculptures

Sculpture: a statue or carving

Stabile: a sculpture that does not move and looks different from different directions

Standing mobile: a stabile that includes moving parts and looks different from all directions

Three-dimensional: refers to artwork that has mass which includes height, width and depth, such as a wire sculpture that may be viewed by walking around it

Two-dimensional: refers to artwork having only height and width, such as a drawing on the surface of a piece of paper which is “flat”

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alexander Calder and His Magical Mobiles by Lipman, Jean and Aspinwall, Margaret. (New York, NY: Hudson Hills Press, Inc., 1981.)

Key Art Terms for Beginners by Yenawine, Philip. (New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995.)

The Essential Alexander Calder by Greenfield, Howard. (New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2003.)

The Life and Work of Alexander Calder by Schaefer, Adam. (Chicago, IL: Heineman Library, 2003.)

WEBOGRAPHY

Alexander Calder (1898-1976). Calder Foundation, www.calder.org

Glossary of definitions. (Merriam Webster), www.merriam-webster.com

How to Write an Artist's Statement. (Self-Representing Artists), www.ebsqart.com/ArtMagazine/za_400.htm

ONLINE RESOURCES

The following web sites not only examine Alexander Calder the person, but also provide useful images of his work.

Calder Foundation

www.calder.org

This site includes complete biographical information clearly divided into periods as well as high quality, full screen images of many of his works accompanying each period.

National Gallery of Art

www.nga.gov/exhibitions/caldbro.shtm

This site offers an excellent online tour of a Calder exhibit at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

www.sfmoma.org

To get to the provided information on Calder, go to the home page and enter “Calder” in the search field. The site contains great quotes and information that accompany the images of his work.

ALEXANDER CALDER: A BALANCING ACT

Pre-Visit Activity: Grades 4-6



Vache (Cow), 1930
Wire
Alexander Calder
American, 1898-1976
7 x 19 x 6 in.

Collection of Jon and Mary Shirley, T2009.56.2

Photo: Julian Calder, © 2009 Calder Foundation, New York / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

ALEXANDER CALDER: A BALANCING ACT
Pre-Visit Activity: Grades 4-6



Crinkly Crocodile, 1971

Sheet metal and paint
Alexander Calder
American, 1898-1976
5 1/4 x 40 1/4 x 6 in.

Collection of Jon and Mary Shirley, T2009.56.34

Photo: Julian Calder, © 2009 Calder Foundation, New York / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York