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The Flight of Tradition: Calder's Work in Bronze

I feel that the artist should go about his work simply, with great respect for his materials... Sculptors of all places and climates have used what came readily to hand... It was their knowledge and invention which gave value to the result of their labors... Simplicity of equipment and an adventurous spirit of attacking the unfamiliar or unknown are more apt to result in a primitive, rather than decadent, art.

—Alexander Calder¹

Alexander Calder consistently worked across a variety of artistic disciplines and in disparate materials, moving fluidly among painting, drawing, and sculpture throughout his career. Undoubtedly, Calder is best known for his innovations in three-dimensional and kinetic art; his name is practically synonymous with the genre he invented — the gravity-defying mobile — which, in turn, is associated with buoyancy and motion. This is the material and conceptual nature of what has become known as Calder's most iconic work. Yet twice during his lengthy, prolific, and wide-ranging career, Calder turned to what might be considered, from an art-historical perspective, *traditional* sculptural materials. In 1930, Calder made more than a dozen small (less than a foot tall) plasters while he was living in Paris, many of which were cast in bronze at the Fonderie Valsuani. In 1944, he returned to the medium and made more than three dozen plasters on a larger scale, about twenty of which were cast in New York.

While these sculptures appear uncharacteristically weighty and solid, they can be also radically dynamic. For example, with only a light touch, *The Helices* (no. 24) moves in a sensuous rhythm. This abstract bronze consists of three parts: a base resembling a candlestick supporting double counter-spiraling helixes, two bronze lassoes — unattached to the central fixture — resting one atop the other. The clockwise and

counterclockwise movements of the two spiraling elements resemble an embrace-like dance, with the larger element orbiting the smaller one. Suddenly the movement of *The Helices* conjures, in three dimensions, Henri Matisse's *La Danse* (1909).

Still this spectacle, this precarious feat of balance, appears as if it could be upset — indeed collapse — at any moment. Achieving perfect fit and balance with individually cast bronze elements requires tremendous technical skill. In Calder's dexterous hands, the lightness of motion pervades even bronze sculpture. And yet remarkably, given how extensively Calder's work has been exhibited and the degree to which art historians have explored his life and career, his work in bronze is rarely seen publicly. To begin to understand these little-known works, it is necessary to consider them within the context of the years 1930 and 1944.

1930

Although this topic is too expansive to treat here, it is important to keep in mind that sculpture as a genre was being subjected to radical changes during the first half of the twentieth century; this period of time witnessed numerous attempts to redefine, regenerate, and reinvent the art form by artists such as Constantin Brancusi, Umberto Boccioni, and Alberto Giacometti. Through his imaginative style and his use of unorthodox and industrial materials, Calder was a pioneer in the ongoing redefinition of the sculptural object.

The year 1930 was a landmark one for Calder personally. He exhibited his now famous *Cirque Calder* (miniature performers made from wire, wood, cork, paper, string, and a spectrum of other found objects) at the Harvard Society of Contemporary Art. Later that same year, Calder's wood sculptures were included in one of the Museum of Modern Art's first exhibitions, *Painting and Sculpture by Living Americans*. On the

Left: *Elephant*, c. 1927; Right: *Éléphant*, 1930

other side of the Atlantic, Calder visited Piet Mondrian's Paris studio in October — a seminal event that spurred his move from figuration to abstraction. A photograph dating to November of 1930 (p. 12) depicts Calder sitting beside an abstract canvas created in the weeks following his visit to Mondrian's studio, inspired by his friend's innovative use of form and space.² Interestingly, *Haltérophile* (no. 2) is also visible in this photograph, sitting high up on a shelf.

It may seem paradoxical that during this initial period of innovation, Calder embarked on a series of ostensibly traditional bronze sculptures. However, Calder's work in bronze could also potentially be viewed as a radical interpretation of his own familial tradition. Calder was born to the sculptor Alexander Stirling Calder, the artist responsible for the statue of George Washington in New York City's Washington Square Park.³ Calder's grandfather, the sculptor Alexander Milne Calder, also created an impressive array of public monuments. Before deciding that he too wanted to be an artist, the young Calder trained to be a mechanical engineer, graduating from the Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, New Jersey, in 1919. When he enrolled at the Art Students League in New York City in 1923, Calder chose to study painting (not sculpture), perhaps in an attempt to distinguish himself from his father and grandfather. It was not until after 1926 (at the age of 28) that Calder moved to Paris and began working seriously as a sculptor.

In 1928 and 1929, Calder had his first two solo exhibitions in New York and Paris, at the Weyhe Gallery and the



Galerie Billiet-Pierre Vorms, respectively.⁴ At the Weyhe Gallery, Calder exhibited caricature portraits in wire of well-known personalities of his day. According to James Johnson Sweeney, when Calder's father saw the exhibition, his "only objection to this wiry kind [of sculpture] was that it lacked the appeal to the sense of touch."⁵ One of the most striking features of the bronze works that followed two years later was an appeal to the sense of touch: Calder's early bronze objects flaunt evidence of the much romanticized artist's hand, and thus have a sensual quality. Calder's much praised wire sculptures do not possess this kind of surface.⁶ And in many ways, Calder's wire artworks relate more closely to drawing than they do to traditional sculpture. This distinction is clear when one compares Calder's wire elephant (p. 14, left) with the plaster version (p. 14, right; no. 13). The group of bronzes from 1930, a body of work that introduced tactility and solidity (in short, the essential attributes of traditional sculpture) into the young artist's practice might be interpreted as his response to his father's comment on his first solo exhibition.

In May of 1930, Calder wrote to his parents from his Paris atelier at 7 Villa Brune: "There is a fine bronze foundry at the end of Villa Brune — so I am going to delve into *cire perdue* [lost wax]."⁷ Shortly after this letter, Calder made thirteen plasters (in the end, he did not use lost wax technique, preferring instead to mold the plaster directly), many of which were cast in bronze at the Fonderie Valsuani.⁸ These bronze objects, haptic and sensual, appear to be the antithesis of Calder's work with wire. Lacking the lightness of this medium, they seem to

call attention to their own materiality. In actuality, Calder does not return to traditional sculpture *per se*, but rather he emphasizes the raw quality of the material he manipulated. The viewer can see the evidence of the artist's work, where he pushed and pulled plaster to create each form. In this regard, Calder's bronze and plaster miniatures might be seen as *sculptures about sculpture* (a true modernist trope); they are not mimetic objects, but rather they celebrate their own condition as art object. Even when working in traditional materials, Calder remains critical of his role as a sculptor — reminding the viewer what issues are at stake for sculpture as a genre.

Calder's turn to so-called *traditional* materials might also be considered a way to challenge his own ingenuity and developing reputation. He had become well known for his wire portraits, his *Cirque Calder* performances, and later, for his mobiles. By the age of 32, Calder had invented several new sculptural genres (wire sculpture, stables, and mobiles); his reputation as an avant-garde sculptor was assured. The pressure to constantly be innovative accompanied this early success. However, like Pablo Picasso, Joan Miró, and Giacometti, Calder continued to move fluidly between sculpture and painting. Even if the bronze sculptures completed in 1930 represent a departure from his work up until this point, they may also be considered the result of Calder's attempt to progress as an artist — to challenge his identity as a technical and conceptual sculptor.

1944

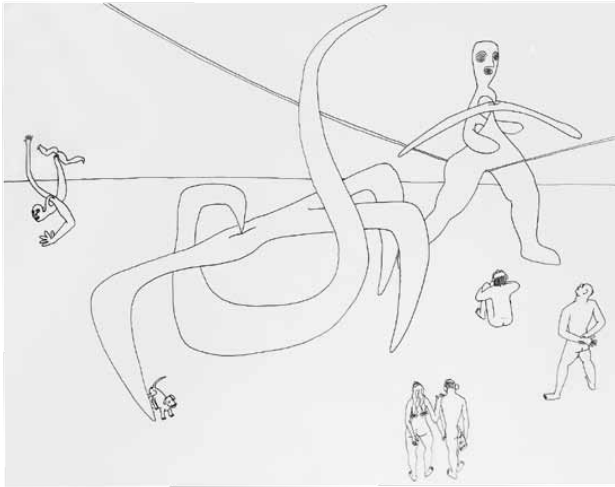
By the 1940s, Calder was a full-fledged, internationally recognized art star. The Museum of Modern Art celebrated his work with a retrospective curated by James Johnson Sweeney in 1943. Following this prestigious event, Calder entered into a period of self-reflection and reassessment, turning once more to bronze. Sweeney would reflect on Calder's psychological state in a 1951 revision of his original catalogue essay:

[Calder] spoke of his worry over becoming ingrown, habit-bound and uninventive. He realized that he developed an ease in the handling of his materials on which he looked with a certain distrust. He was afraid this facility would weaken his expression. To break away from his growing virtuosity he decided to leave his familiar materials, sheet metal, wire, and wood, for a brief time at least and once more take up the study of the human form and its treatment in frank three-dimensionality.⁹

According to Sweeney, Calder perceived his dexterity with materials *familiar* to him as a potential shackle, one that could impair his long-term artistic development.¹⁰ The nature of Calder's work in the period immediately following the retrospective indicates that Calder may have indeed committed himself to working with unfamiliar materials and techniques.

Speaking to this point, it is important to note that the bronzes from 1944 were models for unrealized cast concrete works. In the spring of that year, perhaps in response to the desire Calder expressed to challenge his sculptural practice, his friend the architect Wallace Harrison suggested that Calder create monumental sculptures in concrete for outdoor display.¹¹ At the time, sheet metal was in short supply as a result of World War II; concrete may have been the best alternative given the lack of materials. A later series of photographs by close friend and photographer Ugo Mulas as well as Calder's drawings from 1944 allude to this unrealized intention.

The photographs by Mulas of the bronze sculptures were taken two decades later and they capture the works in deep focus and outdoors (pp. 27, 64, 88, 94, 96). By shooting the sculptures from a dramatic angle, Mulas distorts their scale — making the small works appear as though they are actually monumental sculptures on public display. It is possible that these photographs — beautiful works of art in their own right — were a means of



Untitled, 1944

visualizing the effect these bronze forms could have if they were to be enlarged.

Additionally, in a series of drawings, Calder depicts the same bronze sculptures as well as fictive spectators in various states of contemplation — small figures are dwarfed by the much larger abstract sculptures. For example, in one such drawing titled *Helix Slide* (p. 11), Calder shows a contorted female form sliding down one of the spiraling arms of a giant version of *The Helices* (no. 24) while a man eating a sandwich reclines against a large-scale depiction of *Whip Snake* (no. 22). In another drawing (p. 16), a dog is portrayed relieving himself on the supporting leg of a monumental *Snake on Arch* (no. 21); not only is this a demonstration of Calder's sense of humor, but it also reinforces the artist's intention to enlarge these objects for the purpose of public display.

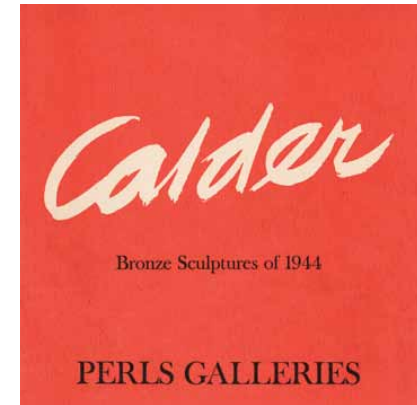
The catalogue for Calder's 1944 exhibition at Buchholz Gallery/Curt Valentin in New York lists nine plasters and sixteen bronzes. At the time, critics thought the exhibition marked a surprising departure from the artist's previous work. And yet they also perceived this change as a development in Calder's preexisting interest in movement. For example, a reviewer writing for *Art News* praised Calder's ability to endow his bronze objects with dynamism of another kind:

Alexander Calder has done something different. The 1943–44 works at Buchholz Gallery have a new sturdiness and vigor, which will surprise many who think of him as the composer of weaving wires and tremulous leaves. These forms are modeled, leaving rough surfaces... Being considerably heavier than formerly, their motion becomes more purposeful, has even a kind of deadly, snake-like feeling of power, notably in *The Helices* and *Octopus*, the latter as lethal a looking object as has been seen in some time.¹⁸

This critic would not be the last to note the importance of Calder's use of bronze to explore other kinds of movement.

Although Calder did not return to the art of bronze casting after 1944, two decades later he had eighteen of his 1944 works re-cast in editions of six at the Roman Bronze Works foundry in Corona, Long Island. These were exhibited in *Alexander Calder: Bronze Sculptures of 1944* at the Perls Galleries in 1969 (p. 17): eighteen bronze sculptures were displayed on pedestals of varying heights in a space. Writing for the *New York Times*, prominent critic John Canaday concludes his review by stating: "The fillip is that the sculptures are not really a

Cover to the catalogue for Calder:
Bronze Sculptures of 1944, Perls Galleries,
New York, 7 October–8 November 1969



departure. Rather, they are a revival."¹⁹ Although these works "failed to catch on when exhibited," this only demonstrated for Canaday "how far we must have come in the last 25 years."²⁴

More than ever before, these two distinct bodies of work expand our understanding of Calder's oeuvre and his resistance to limit his sculptural ambitions. Calder pushed himself to contend with the "unfamiliar or unknown," resulting in work that reveals the humble and self-conscious alter ego of one of the most talented and brilliant artists of all time. By reengaging with traditional materials, Calder formed a constellation of objects entirely his own that remain to this day intoxicatingly beautiful and spellbinding.

1. Alexander Calder, "A Propos of Measuring a Mobile" (manuscript, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1943).
2. See Daniel Marchesseau, *The Intimate World of Alexander Calder* (Paris: Solande Thierry Éditeur, 1989), 361. In addition to befriending Mondrian, Calder crossed paths with other creative intellectuals in Paris including Jean Cocteau, Man Ray, Le Corbusier, and Fernand Léger.
3. Jacob Baal-Teshuva, *Calder: 1898–1976* (Cologne: Taschen, 1998), 6–7.
4. Marchesseau, 361.
5. James Johnson Sweeney, *Alexander Calder* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1951), 22.
6. His work in wire was once praised for imbuing "more grace and beauty into the left hind leg of his lion than many old-timers do with a square yard of canvas and a pail of paint," in "The Art Galleries: One Man and Some Wire," *New Yorker* (14 December 1929).
7. Calder to parents from Paris, 23 May 1930, Calder Foundation archives.
8. Marla Prather, *Alexander Calder (1898–1976)* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1998), 25.
9. Sweeney, 59.
10. Interestingly, Sweeney does not refer to the 1930 bronze or plaster works in his 1943 essay for the retrospective catalogue. In the 1951 reissue of the catalogue, however, Sweeney updated his text to include a reference to Calder's so-called "modeled forms," and included an image of a plaster version of *On One Knee* (see no. 40).
11. *Calder: An Autobiography with Pictures* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1966), 195.
12. "The Passing Shows," *Art News* (15 December 1944), 19.
13. John Canaday, "New Calder Sculptures Offer Heavy Surprises," *New York Times* (11 October 1969), L 34.
14. Canaday, L 34.