

Alexander Calder, MoMA's Household God, Still Holds Sway

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A show drawn primarily from the museum's collection and archives tells the story of its relationship with this early favorite.



Installation view of "Alexander Calder: Modern From the Start" at the Museum of Modern Art. From left, in the foreground, "White Panel," "Gibraltar" and "Apple Monster." ©The Museum of Modern Art; Robert Gerhardt

Where the Museum of Modern Art is concerned, the sculptor Alexander Calder was something like its American Picasso. Both were the precocious children of academically trained artists. Both were shaped by their own life-changing encounter, three decades apart, with the Parisian avant-garde. The Modern exhibited both of them early and often and acquired their work in some abundance – although of course, at MoMA, no other artist comes close to Picasso's numbers. Much of each artist's success was entwined with the museum's; to some degree both were part of the MoMA brand, if in very different ways. For one thing, Calder has been M.I.A. for a while.

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The outstanding exhibition [“Alexander Calder: Modern From the Start”](#) is his first big solo at MoMA since 1969. It is an in-house job that delves primarily into the museum’s Calder holdings and archives to tell the story of its relationship with this early favorite. Several unfamiliar loans from the Calder Foundation fill out the narrative.

It includes the artist’s early toylike sculptures of farm animals and his brilliant wire portraits and jewelry; his famous hanging, gently drifting mobiles; his wall-mounted constellations and earthbound stabiles; and a sprinkling of exceptional works on paper.

The show’s subtitle conjures Calder’s sudden conversion to the new when, on a visit to the Paris studio of the painter Piet Mondrian in 1930 at age 32, he suddenly got what modernism and abstraction were all about. Equally, it signals his rapid ascent into MoMA’s largely European pantheon of artists, where he occupied a niche unlike that of any other American until Jackson Pollock came along.



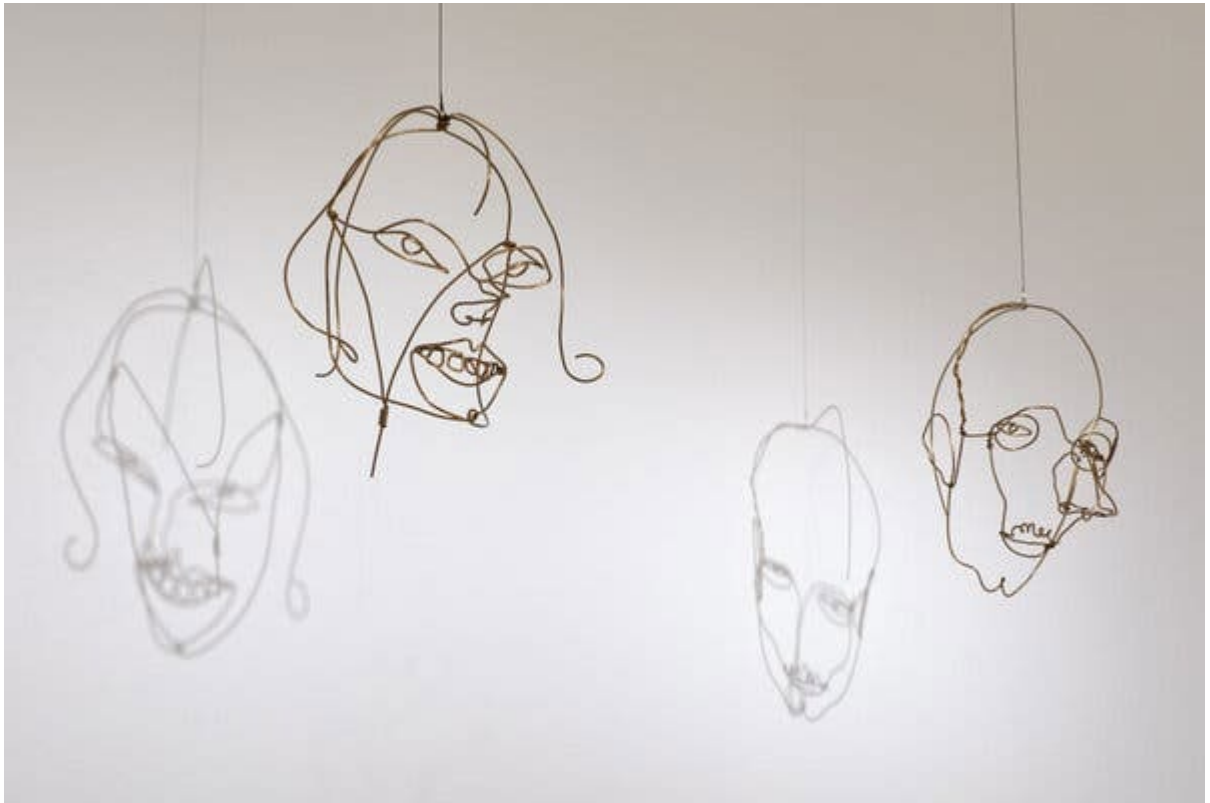
The artist during the installation of his 1943 retrospective. ©Calder Foundation, New York/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

The epiphany and the ascension were connected. Part of Calder's stature at MoMA relates to his having a European pedigree unusual to American artists of the period, because his artistic life truly began in Paris and because he adroitly filtered European strains of modernism through his rustic American sensibility.

After earning an engineering degree in 1919, Calder committed to being an artist and enrolled at the Art Students League in New York, making paintings and also fashioning animals in wood and then wood and wire.

By 1926, Calder was in Paris, where he spent most of the next several years, and where a friend told him to lose the wood and keep the wire. He marshaled his toy-making instincts into a miniature circus of some 100 pieces — ingenious, almost fatally cute — and began to perform the "Cirque Calder" in Paris art circles, making instant fans of Fernand Léger, Marcel Duchamp, Jean Arp and Mondrian.

Calder's MoMA debut came in December 1930, when four of his clunky wood sculptures were seen in "[Painting and Sculpture by Living Americans](#)," a group show that opened barely a year after the museum's inauguration. By then Calder was artistically elsewhere, spurred by Mondrian's example. In fact, he was developing into an omnibus modernist whose work could fit at several spots on the museum's nascent map of advanced styles and mediums. In 1936, for example, he was in both "[Cubism and Abstract Art](#)" in the spring and, at year's end, "Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism" to mention but two of the museum's pioneering shows. He must also have been a hedge against growing complaints about MoMA's European bias.



Left, “Marion Greenwood,” from 1928; and right, “Portrait of a Man,” circa 1928. The linear shadows cast by the brass-wire portraits provide moodier expressions. ©The Museum of Modern Art; Robert Gerhardt

“Modern From the Start” has been organized by Cara Manes, an associate curator of painting and sculpture, and opens with a gallery of large all-black, sheet-metal works — three sculptures, two maquettes from the ‘30s to ‘50s — and then becomes chronological.

The first gallery’s austerity is startling. It may have something to do with the pandemic, but mainly it reminds us that while visual wit is rarely absent, Calder’s work has its dignified, somber side. The next gallery is small, dominated by his remarkable wire works from the late 1920s — including portraits (a full-length rendering of the French-American entertainer Josephine Baker) and several farm animals, among them an elegant sow and a cow in silvery steel wire with three tiny cow pies of coiled brass.

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The contrast between the first two galleries — the big black sculptures and the delicate wire pieces — form a Calder primer. Constructed of several planes of cutout sheet-metal, the sculptures emphasize his control of nuanced shapes, both rounded and straight-edged, and his ability to angle them together so that your interpretations change restlessly among animal, human and abstract as you move around them. The bent-wire pieces speak to his extreme sensitivity to line, including the linear shadows cast by the wire portraits, which provide alternate, moodier expressions.



“Untitled”(1939), left, and “Swizzle Sticks” (1936), which consists of four wood sticks weighted by little balls of lead and dangling before a bright red panel. ©The Museum of Modern Art; Robert Gerhardt

As the show segues into the next gallery, look down and right to see the 1930 "[Shark Sucker](#)," a small clean log that Calder transformed into a fish with a few well-placed bites of an ax and a drilled eye. Call it an adjusted ready-made.

The remainder of the exhibition is one large, loosely divided space that tracks Calder after 1930, examining the different ways he made modernism his own. The first pieces here involve wire, wood, painted spheres and motors (unfortunately, no longer operative). Early examples of kinetic art, they bring out the previously unknown playfulness of Russian Constructivism. They are some of the most lovable abstractions in modernist art history, partly because they are too casually handmade to be purely abstract. They brim with personality, a condition of much of Calder's art. This section starts off with "[A Universe](#)" (1934), a series of several wire circles, two spheres and two S-like wiggles, one in thick black pipe, one in wire. As its title implies, the ensemble forms a small, self-contained universe. It was the museum's first Calder, purchased the year it was made.



"A Universe" (1934) is a series of wire circles, two spheres and two S-like wiggles, an ensemble that forms a small self-contained universe. ©Calder Foundation, New York/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

In the 1930s, Calder reclaimed some of the animal energy of his early pieces for more elegant semiabstract works like the ineffable "Spider" (1939), whose repeating appendages have a corps de ballet regularity that is also cinematic. "[Swizzle Sticks](#)" (1936) leans Constructivist with four wood sticks weighted by little balls of lead, and dangling before a bright red panel, dancing on air. The great "[Gibraltar](#)" (1936) is a Surrealist object par excellence, a small peak of rough-hewed lignum vitae sliced through by a plane of polished walnut that supports two spheres and a crescent, two above and one below.

Flanking "Gibraltar" are two exceptional, if less suave, pieces from the Calder Foundation. From "White Panel" (1936), a big black C curves outward around two robust intersections of painted metal and seems like an off-kilter scientific model. "Apple Monster" (1938), which combines raw and carved wood, painted white, black, red and green, looks as if it's by the great outsider Bessie Harvey.



"Sandy's Butterfly," from 1964, a perennial in the museum's sculpture garden.

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While Picasso became a god at the Modern, Calder was more of a household god. He wasn't above making, when asked, a beautiful mobile for the Bauhaus staircase of the museum's new 1939 International Style building, nor even coming up with a stunningly clever candelabra for the party celebrating its first decade. (It's in this show.)

But the museum's focus on Calder was not constant. In 1943, he wrote to a curator saying that he needed its financial and moral support, which seems to have prompted the museum's large Calder survey later that year. (Tellingly, the Modern purchased its first Pollock in 1943, "[The She-Wolf](#)," made that year.) The artist expressed his gratitude with a gift of numerous major pieces, including — in this show — "Shark Sucker," "Gibraltar," "Spider" and "Sandy's Butterfly," a sturdy, bright perennial in the sculpture garden. The museum's last big nod to Calder was a salute of some 100 works in 1969.

And so here we are. A half-century later, the Modern has welcomed Calder back with a beauty of a show that, over the next several months, will make the world a better place.

Alexander Calder: Modern From the Start

Through Aug. 7 at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street, Manhattan. 212-708-9400; moma.org.