

Calder and Picasso rarely spoke, but their art converses at the High

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"Reclining Nude" by Pablo Picasso. More than 100 pieces by Alexander Calder and Pablo Picasso are part of a new exhibit at the High Museum of Art that demonstrates previously unseen connections between the work of the two artists. Courtesy: High Museum of Art

The work of two giants of 20th-century art is on view through Sept. 19.

Alexander Calder's 23-foot standing mobile, "Three Up, Three Down," guarded the front lawn of the High Museum of Art for 25 years, swinging its bright, red and yellow colors in front of the pristine, white canvas of the Richard Meier building.

On loan from the Calder Foundation, it became so closely associated with the High Museum that the front lawn looked slightly naked when the sculpture was returned to the foundation in 2014.

Now the kinetic artist is back at the High in a big way, as part of a new exhibit pairing works by Calder with works by Pablo Picasso.

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The two artists came from different worlds and rarely met or spoke, but “Calder-Picasso,” curated by their grandsons, finds some striking echoes in their ideas.

Keeping company with each other in this new show, their sculptures and paintings enter a conversation, revealing connections that might have been unremarked until now.

“They are two giants of 20th century art, and they are extraordinarily inventive,” said Ann Dumas, consulting curator of European art at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston. “They thought in new ways, they questioned the whole fundamental notion of what art is and what it’s about.”

Dumas saw the show when it originated in the spring and summer of 2019 at the Musée Picasso in Paris and helped arrange for it to come to Houston, where it will open in October. It opened June 29 in Atlanta and will appear through Sept. 19.

The show was conceived by Picasso’s grandson Bernard Ruiz-Picasso and Calder’s grandson Alexander S. C. Rower. “They were friends and started exchanging pictures, saying what they saw in the other grandfather’s work,” said Claudia Einecke, curator of European art at the High Museum.

“They somehow discovered those connections.” It also traveled to the Museo Picasso Malagá in Spain. Some of the connections are immediately apparent. Calder’s wire sculptures in the series called “The Acrobats” created volumes out of emptiness, inscribing shapes in the air.

Picasso was also focused on the volumes created by the inscribed line. “What interests us most — what is outside or what is inside a form?” he asked.

They were aware of each other, but didn’t comment directly on the other’s art, as far as she can tell, said Einecke.

In 1931 Calder staged a show in the modest-sized Galerie Percier in Paris; Picasso arrived before the opening to introduce himself and see Calder's work. They met again in 1937 at the Spanish Pavilion of the Exposition Internationale in Paris, where Calder's "Mercury Fountain" was installed in front of Picasso's epic "Guernica."

Calder kept a diary of his activities in Paris, and some excerpts are reprinted in wall text at this show. In February 1932 he notes that Picasso came to see his work at the Galerie Vignon, joking that the superstar is looking to borrow ideas.

The show demonstrates striking formal connections in their images. One of Calder's "Constellations" sculptures is shown next to Picasso's "Woman in an Armchair." In both works the artists deploy colored polygons in a matrix of heavy black lines.

"Really their works look so different, mostly, yet there are so many similarities," said Einecke. "The funny thing is Picasso, for once is not the star of the show."

Dumas agrees, pointing out that Calder "holds his own."

There are more than 100 pieces in the show, almost evenly divided between works by Picasso and by Calder.

Some of the highlights include:

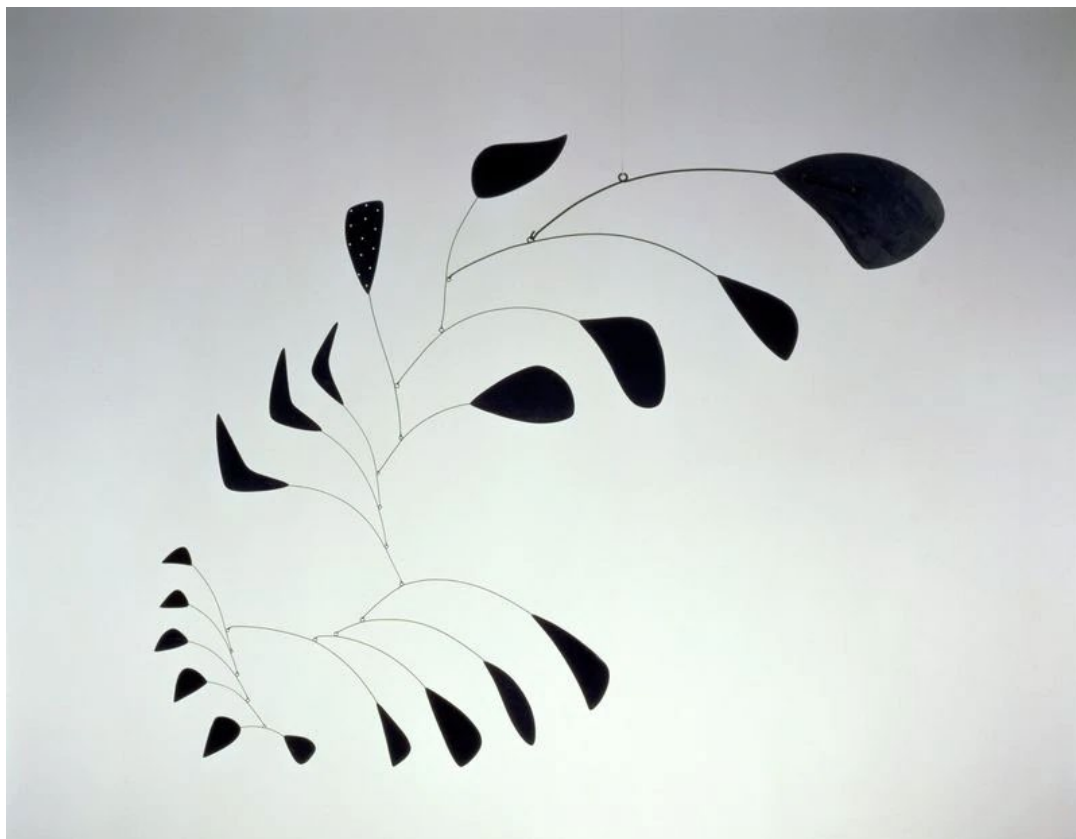
"La Grand Vitesse," Calder



"La Grand Vitesse" by Alexander Calder. Toward the end of his career Calder spent more time on monumental-sized works of public art. Courtesy: High Museum of Art

This bright red sculpture from 1969 with its sinuous lines, served as a maquette for a work about five times the size, commissioned by the city of Grand Rapids, Michigan. This version sits in the last room of the exhibit at the High and is an impressive finale.

"Vertical Foliage," Calder, 1941



"Vertical Foliage" by Alexander Calder. Like Picasso, Calder was relentlessly inventive. He essentially created a new form of kinetic abstract art that was christened the "mobile" by Marcel Duchamp. Courtesy: High Museum of Art

Assembling the graduated sizes of the black, leaf-like elements in this mobile, Calder put the heaviest elements at the top, which made them seem weightless.

"Seven Black, Red and Blue" Calder, 1947



"Seven Black, Red and Blue" by Alexander Calder. More than 100 pieces by Alexander Calder and Pablo Picasso are part of a new exhibit at the High Museum of Art that demonstrates previously unseen connections between the work of the two artists. Courtesy: High Museum of Art

A snake, a star, a carpet tack, three moons, Calder assembled shapes in this large-scale painting much the same way that he would assemble his mobiles.

“Reclining Nude,” and “Woman Seated in a Red Armchair,” Picasso, 1932



“Woman Seated in a Red Armchair” by Pablo Picasso. The artist was focused on “deconstructing,” said curator Claudia Einecke, reducing images to their simplest elements. Courtesy: High Museum of Art

At the center of the exhibit are two paintings that generate strong reactions, this exuberant abstraction of the female figure, and the dark and unsettling “Woman Seated in a Red Armchair” from 1932, with its ominous shading and eerie three dimensional forms.

"Acrobat" Picasso, 1930



"Acrobat" by Pablo Picasso from 1930 creates a flexible figure with a single, continuous bold black line. Photo: courtesy the High Museum of Art

The flattened, improbable figure is created with a single, continuous black line, cutting the negative space into shapes that retain the same charm as the figure itself.

"The Bathers: The Woman with Outstretched Arms," Picasso, 1956



"Bathers: The Woman with Outstretched Arms" by Pablo Picasso, is among the works on display at the High Museum. Photo: Courtesy the High Museum of Art

Picasso reportedly became fascinated with the shadows of figures on the beach, leading to a series of flattened sculptures called "The Bathers." The metal figures appeared as if shadows walked upright.

The blockbuster show serves as a fanfare, marking the relaxing of COVID-19 restrictions and a return to larger crowds at the museum. (Tickets, however, are still timed. Masks are optional for those who have been vaccinated. "The museum is finally feeling very much alive," said Einecke. "The next few months will feel really, really busy.")