

# Paris

From 1926 to 1933 Calder lived primarily in Paris, the center of the artistic avant-garde at the time. There he made a name for himself by making works in wire and wood that gained the attention of, among others, Jean Arp, Marcel Duchamp, Fernand Léger, Joan Miró, and Piet Mondrian, who would become crucial figures in Calder's turn to abstraction. Working within the intellectual and artistic milieu of Paris, Calder pushed through the problems of traditional sculpture and found his mature and independent visual language.

With a series of wire "portraits" from this period, Calder further upended the traditional notion of sculpture as fixed, grounded, and heavy. He used line, the basic tool of an abstract vocabulary, to float shape, levitate it, and remove sculpture from the pedestal. Through these works, Calder evoked volume without being volumetric—then a radical gesture.

# *Art in Our Time*

On the evening of May 8, 1939, a group of trustees and special guests sat down to dinner to celebrate the opening of MoMA's new flagship building, designed by architects Philip L. Goodwin and Edward Durell Stone. Adorning the table was an intricate, ten-part candelabra made by Calder to commemorate the momentous occasion, which coincided with the Museum's tenth anniversary. Calder played a prominent role in the planning and execution of the new MoMA's inaugural exhibition, *Art in Our Time*. He was also commissioned to make a hanging mobile, *Lobster Trap and Fish Tail*, for the grand entrance staircase—and there you will find it, just outside these galleries.

Calder lent one of his first outdoor sculptures for display in the Museum's garden for *Art in Our Time*—an abstract work now known as *Steel Fish* (1934). Through his varied involvement in these events, Calder became inextricably linked to MoMA's identity, right as the Museum was transitioning from fledgling institution to internationally renowned arbiter of modern art and design.

# *Alexander Calder: Sculptures and Constructions*

In the fall of 1943 the exhibition *Alexander Calder: Sculptures and Constructions* opened at The Museum of Modern Art. At forty-five, Calder was the youngest artist to be given a retrospective at MoMA. Organized by James Johnson Sweeney, Calder's friend and steadfast supporter, the show marked an important collaboration in the decades-long relationship between the two men. Calder took on an unconventional role as guiding hand in the show's execution, often adorning his daily letters to Sweeney with sketches of objects he proposed for inclusion.

This mid-career survey evolved to comprise more than one hundred works, which ranged from figurative to abstract and from sculpture to books to jewelry. Featuring a variety of materials (wood, wire, steel) and typologies (hanging sculptures, wall works, works on pedestals), the exhibition provided a comprehensive look at the artist's abstract vocabulary of line, shape, and volume. Calder would later cite it as pivotal in the overall trajectory of his career.

# Large-Scale Sculpture

The sculptures on view in this gallery evidence Calder's career-long exploration of situating works in space. Many of the large steel works originated as tabletop maquettes, such as *Black Beast*, presented here both small and enlarged. Now often displayed outdoors, these works were originally shown in interior spaces, encouraging visitors to engage with them in close proximity.

This viewing experience mirrored Calder's process of making a sculpture, during which he considered its relationship to the body as well as to its environment: "The admission of approximation is necessary," the artist wrote in 1943, "for one cannot hope to be absolute in his precision. He cannot see, or even conceive of a thing from all possible points of view, simultaneously. While he perfects the front, the side, or rear may be weak; then while he strengthens the other facade he may be weakening that originally the best."

# Abstraction

A 1930 visit to the Dutch painter Piet Mondrian's Paris studio—a workspace arranged like an abstract environment—prompted a radical shift in Calder's art: from figuration toward abstraction, or from an art of observing things in the world toward an art that opens up a world unto itself. In this moment, just as Calder's figurative carved-wood sculptures were being debuted at MoMA (such as *Cow* [1928], on view in the previous gallery), the artist began developing the kind of work for which he would become best known: the mobile, an abstract sculpture that moves. With this wholly new art form came a new set of possibilities for what a sculpture might be.

Dismantling the traditional understanding of sculpture as something static, grounded, and fixed, Calder instead made way for a consideration of volume, motion, and space. Some of his earliest mobiles were motor-activated and displayed on pedestals or hung from walls. Others moved freely in response to air currents or viewer intervention and were suspended from the ceiling or placed directly on the floor.