

Exhibition
Alexander
Calder: Modern
from the Start

The weighty lump of lignum vitae (a tropical hardwood) at the center of this sculpture may conjure the famed Mediterranean rock that lends the work the name it was eventually given. Intersecting this rough-hewn mass is a sloping plane of polished walnut, on which sit a painted wooden ball and two vertical steel rods topped with a crescent and a sphere. Calder creates a composition animated by contradictory qualities—the natural and the man-made, atmosphere and ground, heft and buoyancy. As with other works from the mid-1930s, *Gibraltar*'s biomorphic forms recall those of Surrealism; his visual vocabulary of this period is a legacy of that movement.

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Although Calder had worked with wood since the 1920s in Paris, by the 1930s he was primarily experimenting with wire and sheet metal. But during the war “there wasn’t much metal around,” the artist wrote, “so I tried my hand at wood carving.” Each of this sculpture’s wood elements is connected to at least one other with taut steel wire. The Constellation works were completed shortly before Calder’s mid-career retrospective opened at MoMA in autumn 1943. His friends Marcel Duchamp and James Johnson Sweeney, also the show’s curator, played a part in dubbing these sculptures “Constellations.”

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Calder often titled his works after he completed them, and this sculpture's abstract composition of slender, curved wires may indeed suggest the legs of an arachnid. The mobile that forms the "body" of the work carefully balances a large disc and dramatically cantilevered appendages, which slowly flutter in space with currents of air. A steel rod anchors the sculpture, making this a standing mobile. The philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre described Calder's mobile as a "lyrical invention": "Each of its twists and turns is an inspiration of the moment. In it you can discern the theme composed by its maker, but the mobile weaves a thousand variations on it."

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Jewelry making was a part of Calder's artistic practice throughout his life. Many of the pieces here are one-of-a-kind items he made for friends as gifts. One such recipient was James Thrall Soby, a longtime trustee of the Museum and a notable early supporter of Calder's work. The intricately curled brass *J* and *S* cuff links take the form of his initials. When Soby died in 1979, he left these and other works to MoMA, including several on view nearby: the wall panel *Swizzle Sticks* (1936) and three objects (from the same year) in the shape of a fork, knife, and spoon—a gift from Calder after Soby lost many of his possessions in a divorce.

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Cow was included in MoMA's ninth-ever exhibition, *Painting and Sculpture by Living Americans*, which opened in December 1930 and was organized by the Museum's founding director, Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Carved from a single piece of wood, the cow's sweet, docile face is naturalistic, but its body is less so, intertwined as it is with its source material so as to appear not to have fully emerged from it. Writing to Cow's owner to secure it for loan, Barr had urged, "I feel that Calder has been underestimated and frequently dismissed as merely clever. I think such works as the 'Cow' if seriously exhibited would do much to revise popular opinion of his work which has, I think, considerable quality."

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As in this work, Calder often sourced materials for his sculptures from his surroundings, repurposing scraps from everyday objects or other artworks. He also used these materials to fashion household items, such as ashtrays from tin cans, for his home and studio in Roxbury, Connecticut; Calder's was a totalizing environment, one where art and life became indistinguishable. When *Tines* is set in motion, the titular pieces of painted iron occasionally hit one another, emitting a chime. Sound was crucial for Calder, and he took care to consider how his works would interact with one another to produce a range of sonic effects.

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Calder trained as an engineer, and physics informed his art-making practice. This work holds its shape on account of gravity: the length of the steel rods defines the shape of the curves, and each rod is counterbalanced by the disks attached to its end. Rods with lighter disks float up, while those with heavier disks plunge. Different forces act upon the sculpture—gravity, air currents, vibration at the hanging point—setting it in motion. Yet these forces are not evident in the experience of its effects. Rather, the work depends on your perception of its many parts to achieve its full expression.

A hidden motor moves this work's wood spheres along their wires at different speeds in a forty-minute cycle. Calder had begun motorizing sculptures in 1931 in Paris, where his friend Marcel Duchamp was the first to dub these works *mobiles*—French for both “motion” and “motive.” MoMA's founding director Alfred H. Barr, Jr., first encountered *A Universe* at a gallery in New York in 1934, where he was so impressed by it that he arranged for its acquisition—the first of many of Calder's works for the Museum. When Albert Einstein, the man who revolutionized our understanding of space and time, saw it years later at MoMA, he allegedly remarked, “I wish I'd thought of that.”

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In 1936 Calder was commissioned to make this work for the exterior of the Fifty-Third Street townhouse the Museum then occupied for the exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art*. The show attempted to address, in “an objective and historical manner . . . the principal movements of modern art.” The catalogue divided works into two categories—“geometrical abstract art” and “non-geometrical abstract art”—positioning Calder as one of few artists whose work straddled both spheres. Hung high on a flagpole, *Objet Volant* made quite an impression on MoMA’s neighbors—nearby speakeasy owners complained that the fluttering mobile was drawing traffic away from their bars and into the Museum, demanding it be removed.