# ALEXANDER CALDER (1898-1976)

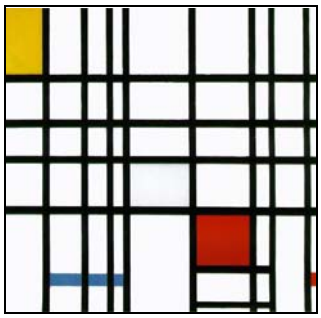
**Who is Alexander Calder?**

Alexander Calder was born in Philadelphia, PA in 1898. His father was a sculptor and his mother was a painter. He is an artist well known for his mobiles and outdoor, large scale, sheet metal sculptures.

**What inspired Alexander Calder?**

At age 2l, Calder earned a degree in Mechanical Engineering from the Stevens Institute of Technology. In 1926, Calder traveled to Paris, France. After seeing the Ringling Brothers, Barnum & Bailey Circus in Paris he made an entire working circus of miniature wire figures. All the animals, people and objects involved in the circus moved and were made of wire. While other mechanical engineers were working to build useful tools and car parts, Calder was designing entertaining wire sculptures.

Calder held wire circus performances for small groups of friends at his house. During these performances he met many famous artists of the time such as Hans Arp, Joan Miro, Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp and Piet Mondrian.



Piet Mondrian
*Composition with Red, Yellow, and Blue*
Oil on canvas, 1921

In 1930, Calder visited Piet Mondrian's studio and was inspired by his use of the three primary colors in his paintings. (Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue; 1921) Calder liked Mondrian's simple geometric paintings and wanted to put the paintings in motion.

**What did he create?**

After seeing Mondrian's work, Calder returned to the United States and invented and constructed hanging sculptures which were a combination of basic shapes and simple colors that moved in space. He was the first artist to create this new type of sculpture that moved "according to the whims of a breeze." After seeing them for the first time, the artist Marcel Duchamp gave them their name, "mobiles." Calder's mobiles draw on elements found in nature.

*The Root*, 1947
Sheet metal, wire, and paint
Collection Calder Foundation, New York

Calder became well known not only for his mobiles, but also for his larger metal sculptures that were eventually termed "'stabiles." His gigantic stabiles were usually constructed of welded and riveted sheets of metal and pointed black. Calder's stabiles are abstract organic forms. Calder's sculpture *Spinal Column* at the Son Die-go Museum of Art is an example of one of his stabiles.
His famous mobiles and giant stabiles are in many cities and museums throughout the United States and Western Europe. His mobile hanging in the National Gallery in Washington D.C. is over two stories high! One of his monumental stabiles in Spoleto, Italy weighs 30 tons, is 60 ft. high and is large enough to fit busses and cars beneath it!

**Why did he make his art?**

*Mobile*
Painted aluminum, 1941
Peggy Guggenheim Collection. 76.2553 PG 137.


Calder stated, "I want to make things that are fun to took at." He was so creative that in his house he engineered a way to open the first floor door and turn on the coffeepot from his bedroom on the third floor.

Calder based much of his work an shapes and objects he observed in nature. His mobiles address movement similar to the wind gently acting upon a tree, its branches and its leaves.

He created mobiles and other moving sculptures which "danced"' with the performers in a ballet performance choreographed by Martha Graham.

Unfortunately, Calder died during his first major retrospective exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. He has left a legacy of mobiles and stabiles in museums and public spaces around the world.

**Online Calder resources:**

The following web sites not only examine Alexander Calder the person, but also provide useful images of his work. The three sites below contain easy to read information and are easy to navigate. The sites may be useful for teachers and students depending on their computer skills and resources.

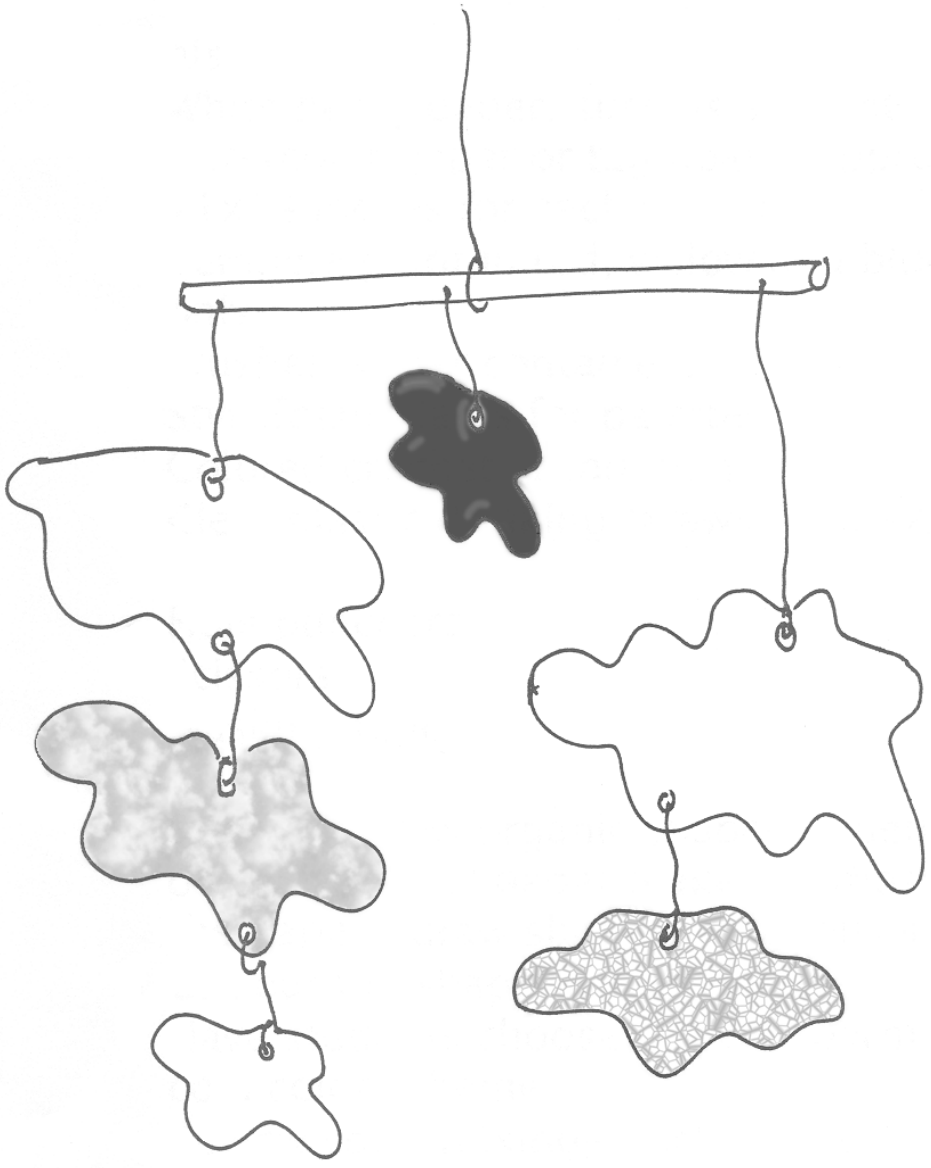
**www.calder.org**
Put together by the Calder Foundation, this site includes good biographical information clearly divided into periods. It includes quality, full screen images of many of his works accompanying each period. This site is the best of the three for complete biographical information and links to other sites.

**www.nga.gov/exhibitions/calder.htm**
This site is an online interactive tour of a Calder exhibit at the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. This site is the best of the three for interacting with an online gallery of images. It's as close to being in the museum as possible via computer. The web site for the National Gallery (www.nga.gov), provides good information for other art topics as well.

**www.sfmoma.org**
This is the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art web site. To get to the Calder information, run a search and enter "'Calder" at the sfmoma homepage. The site contains fantastic quotes and information that accompany images of his work. The site divides his work into seven categories-- childhood sculpture, toys, cirque Calder, wire sculpture, early mobiles, wind-driven mobiles and public programs. This site is the best of the three for images and corresponding quotes and biographical information.

# Alexander Calder Inspired Mobile Project

Project time from start to finish, approximately one hour



**Goals:**

# Be fun to look at
# Use only organic shapes
# Balance evenly when hanging
# Use only warm OR cool colors
# Hang and move in the wind

**Materials:**

! White heavy paper, such as student watercolor paper or tag board, approx. 11 x 14 inches for each student
! Tempera paint in red, yellow and blue only
! Brushes, water containers
! Styrofoam plates for palettes Colored crochet string (thin)
! Clear plastic drinking straws- 1 for each mobile
! Hole punchers
! Scissors
! Masking tape

**Directions:**

Students:
Draw organic shapes in pencil on the sheet of paper-make the most of the paper-draw shapes of various sizes. Cut out the shapes
Have students choose either a warm or cool color scheme
Teachers:
Review color mixing-each of the 3 primary colors will be needed for either

**Color Scheme** -more blue for cool, more red for warm

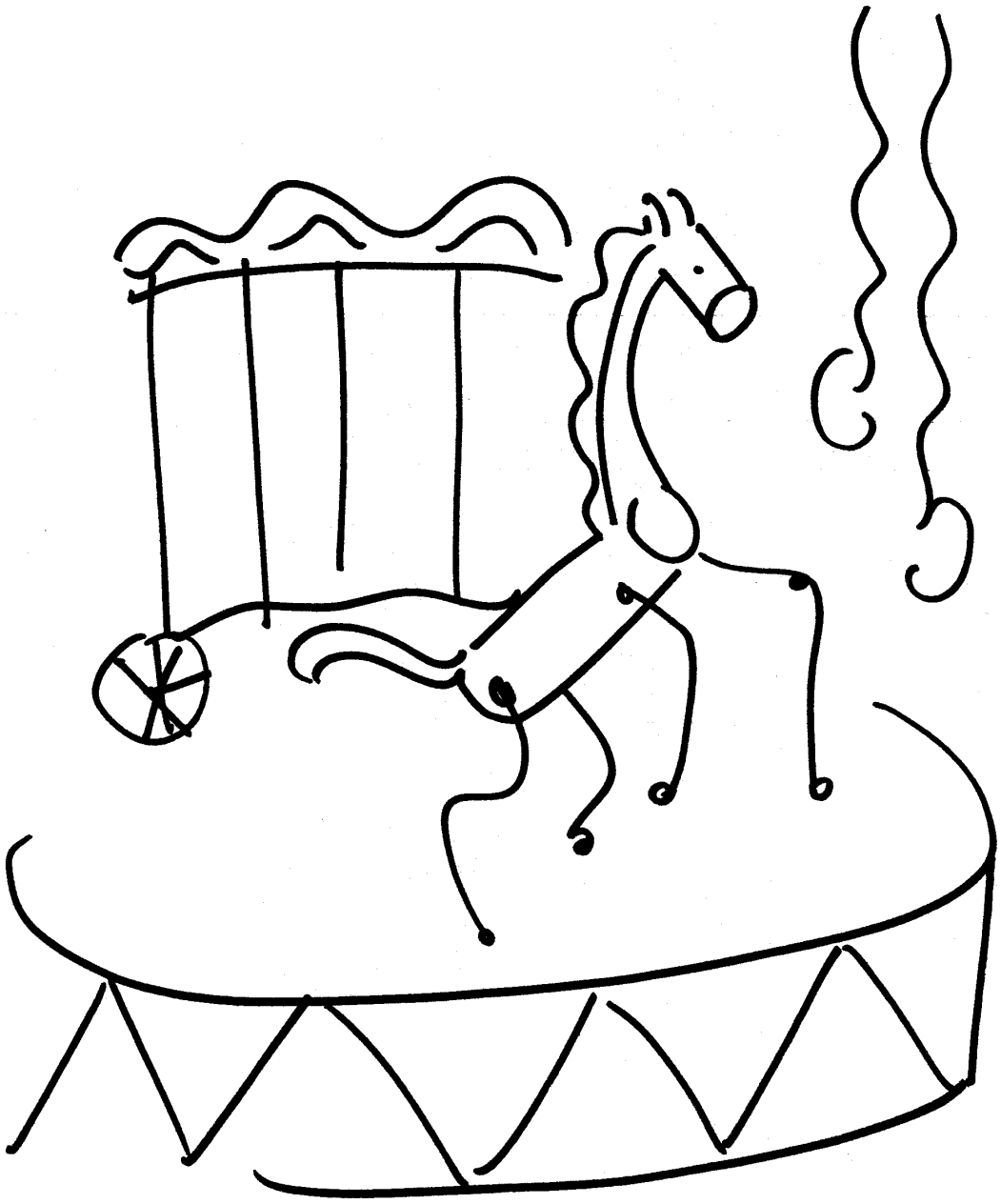
Appropriate amounts of paint should be placed on he border of the palette- leaving the center for color mixing.
Paint one side of the paper on each piece--this allows time for the pieces to dry before painting the other side.
Experiment with painting techniques such as swirling,
dotting, etc... keep the paint application thin rather than thick for faster drying
While paint is drying, cut string-vary the lengths-several for each student.
Punch a hole in each painted piece
Tie string to the painted pieces
Attach the pieces to the straw ( in horizontal position) with masking tape--starting at each end
Add pieces to hanging pieces by inserting string, etc.
Hang the mobile using string tied in the center of the straw-attach to ceiling or horizontal support

*A string can be threaded through the straw with shapes attached at each end.
Additional pieces can be added to these pieces

# Wire Circus Figures
# inspired by Calder's Circus

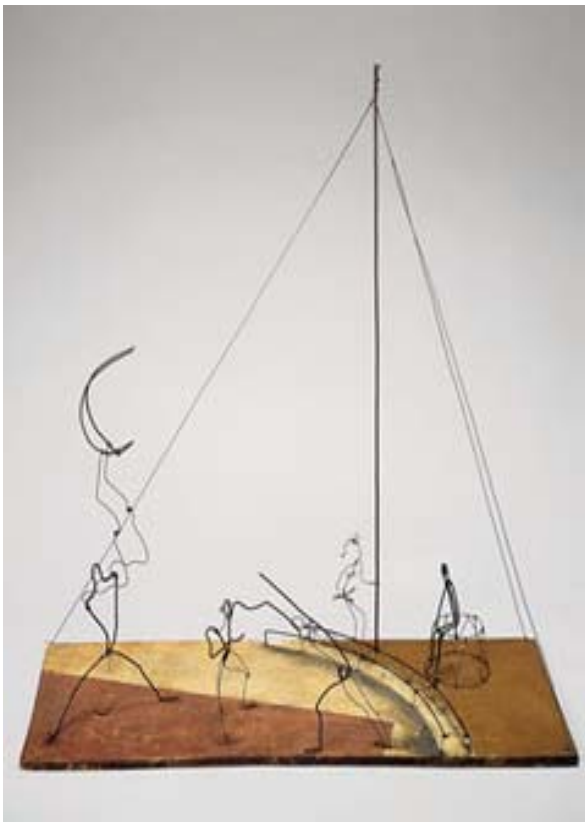
Project time from start to finish approximately one hour

These small (about 4 to 6 inches) wire figures can be embellished with buttons, fabric scraps, paper, colored tape, fun-foam, etc...



**Goals:**

< Create a character (circus animal or circus performer) to be a part of one large circus
< Work cooperatively to create a circus ring (or 2 or 3 rings)
< Work cooperatively to put on a performance



**Materials:**

C Aluminum wire (18 gauge bends well) or plastic coated wire. Twistees brand is great (found in art supply catalogs) or use pipe cleaners instead
C Buttons
C Fun foam sheets-art and craft stores- cuts easily with scissors
C Fabric scraps, felt scraps etc.
C Construction paper scraps
C Tag board for circus ring and walls
C Masking tape (Lakeshore has colored masking tape)
C Scissors
C Yarn, string
C Pencils and paper for sketching
C Markers for decorating the circus ring

**Directions:**

Brainstorm characters--lion tamer, high wire performers, animal trainer, clowns, bears, elephants, horses etc..... Make sketches of figures
Introduce supplies which will be used-this project should use only supplies which can be taped or wired onto the figure. No glue needed!
Demonstrate how large ( or small) the figures will be
Demonstrate how to bend, cut and coil wire
The figure will not be realistic-no face details-they will be " whimsical' more like Calder's own creations
Perhaps a few students could be chosen as the construction crew design and build the circus ring

**Making the circus ring:**

, Cut a large circle for the ring or rings
, Cut strips about 2 inches high for the ring walls
, Attach the walls to the base of the ring with masking tape
, The walls and ring can be decorated with markers if desired

**After completion of the circus-it's time for the performance !**