

MIT List Center

Alexander Calder

Alexander Calder was commissioned to make La Grande Voile, or The Big Sail, for MIT in 1962. Professor of art history, Caroline Jones.

It was intended that you could see this sculpture from the Charles River with its 40 feet soaring into the air, and that it would tie together the MIT campus with its skyscrapers and its radar labs and all of its post-war engineering going full blast to the human parts of the city and to its beautiful environment.

Calder trained as a mechanical engineer, but when moved to France in the 1920s, he began making mobiles, playful sculptures often enhanced with motors to create movement. By the time of this work, his sculptures were often seen as engineering feats. Monumental in size and scale, they still retained the lightness and dynamism of his mobiles. They were dubbed stabiles.

This is a carefully designed piece, so much so that he built a model. They put it inside the wind tunnel at MIT to calculate whether there were any problems with these sails really becoming sails and destabilizing the entire sculpture.

With its 33 tons of bolted together metal, the sculpture's five intersecting flat and curved planes afford visitors the ability to walk underneath the work and contemplate how Calder shaped the space in and around the sculpture. Buried underneath the sculpture is a relic of its era, a time capsule.

In that time capsule, several MIT professors buried things they thought would reveal to a distant future what MIT was about. It included the annual report of the Eastern Standard Oil Company of New Jersey, what we know today as Exxon. It included a Betty Crocker Cookbook. It included the student newspaper, The Tech. Perhaps someday, they'll be able to do a little tunnel from the side and excavate that time capsule without disturbing Calder's sail.