

MIT List Visual Arts Center

Alexander Calder

MEDIUM Sculpture
NATIONALITY American
LIFE DATES Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 1898 - 1976 New York, New York

Descended from two generations of sculptors and a mother who was a painter, Alexander Calder was born in Lawnton, Pennsylvania, in 1898. He studied mechanical engineering at Stevens Institute of Technology, Hoboken, New Jersey, graduating in 1919 with a degree in mechanical engineering. He then worked at jobs ranging from draftsman to logger to fireman on a freighter. In 1922, he took night school lessons in drawing and in 1923, joined the Art Students League where he came into contact with painters of the so-called Ashcan School. He took a job as an illustrator for the *National Police Gazette*, for which he covered circus performances.

In 1926, Calder moved to Paris, where he began to explore sculpture as well as non-commercial drawing. His miniature circus performers attracted the attention of artists as disparate as Joan Miró and Piet Mondrian. In 1930-31, he was adding motors and movement to his wire sculptures, works dubbed "mobiles" by Marcel Duchamp. By the following year, most of his mobiles were set in motion by air currents alone. Artist Jean Arp dubbed his non-moving sculptures "stables." Calder created his *Mercury Fountain*, a moving work involving a stream of mercury striking a metal plate, for the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1937.

By 1943, he received a retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. From that time, he was widely and regularly exhibited and collected, around the world. His works increased in scale gradually, becoming monumental by the 1950s to 1960s. Posthumously executed and installed, his largest mobile is his untitled work commissioned in 1972 for the central court of the East Building of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. In 1977, also posthumously, he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian award granted by the United States. Calder fabricated many of his later monumental sculptures at an industrial ironworks in Tours, France, near his Saché residence. He also kept a studio and house in Roxbury, Connecticut. He died in November of 1976, shortly after the opening of his retrospective exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

