

**Selden Rodman, ed., "Alexander Calder," *Conversations with Artists* (New York: Devin-Adair, 1957), 136–42.**

"I want to make things that are fun to look at."

If it is true, as William Carlos Williams says, that "the pure products of America go crazy," then it is also true that the almost-pure ones, the ones impure enough to absorb America wholeheartedly but sensitive enough to reject, even though unconsciously, the impurities, become the artists. Such a one is Calder. He is the embodiment of such characteristic American traits as canniness, geniality, acquisitiveness, energy, inventiveness, pragmatism. His distaste for theory and concept are American, and so is his dry humor. He has the advantage of having been an American so long through his heritage—both his father and his grandfather were American sculptors—that he can live in France a good part of every year without any sense of expatriate guilt and without becoming in the least bit French. And the fact that he didn't have to make a living was in his case an advantage too: the material ends and pecuniary rewards never meant anything to him. He could, and did, make things solely for the satisfaction of making them. If they were cleanly cut, cleverly arranged and ingeniously related, that was enough. They had to "work." And in his early mobiles, working meant more than balancing and freely swinging; hand cranks and even small motors were employed to give the sculptures a "life" approximating the ubiquitous American machine.

There is a resemblance between Calder's procedure and that of the Wright brothers. It occurred to me when I saw the interior of the sculptor's studio in Roxbury, Connecticut. This was no studio such as sculptors had traditionally worked in throughout the ages. No casts, no marble, no plaster, no armatures. Not a bicycle shop, to be sure, but certainly a machine shop. The floor was deep in steel shavings, wire, nuts and bolts, punched sheet metal. The benches sagged under lathes and power saws. The air was busy with dangling "contraptions," as the brothers in Dayton used to call their experimental warped airfoils and rudimentary engines. But more significantly, I thought, the Wrights too were in love with simplicity, with perfection of motion and economy of means. They began and ended their work *as artists*. Gliding and work with kites came naturally to them. They *appropriated* a small motor and attached it to their wings; but the motor was an afterthought, a sort of concession to the American spirit—they wouldn't be outdone by some mere mechanic. Neither speed nor any of the commercial or military uses of aviation interested them at all. Business killed Wilbur Wright; it also caught up with Orville, reducing him to forty years of taciturn inertia. Calder, under no obligation to make his inventions compete or pay off, was more fortunate.

His home, like the man himself, could only have come out of the twenties. Ten years earlier, Calder would have been a Beaux Arts academician—the American artist was not then ready for such freedom. Ten years later he would have been preoccupied with social significance, or fighting against it angrily—like David Smith. As it was, he could enjoy all the advantages of being a dilettante, a bad boy, an expatriate, without having any of these aspects of his early development prey on his conscience. As a dilettante he could experiment to his heart's content with clever wire caricatures of celebrities and with the animated mechanical clowns and monkeys of his miniature "circus." As a bad boy he could flout the traditions of Philadelphia's Main Line and of generations of "classical" figure makers without a qualm. And, as an expatriate, Calder was supremely fortunate in finding an international style, at the height of its inventive vigor, ready to enrich his particular inventiveness with a wealth of similarly free-floating vocabularies, and eager to accept his unique contribution. Mondrian's vibrating linear geometry, Duchamp's gadgets and approximations of motion, Arp's biologic free forms, Miró's poetic fantasy and pin-headed Freudian protagonists, the glass and plastic "constructions" of Gabo and Pevsner—all were not so much influences as encouragement and justification for the otherwise seemingly wayward trail he was already blazing. Without this community of effort, it is at least questionable whether Calder would have had the confidence to take his peculiar combination of inventiveness and humor seriously. Quite literally he forged, with these assists, his playfulness into a major artistic reflection of his world. Whether the result can be called a major art depends upon the degree of importance one places upon content, for it is surely in this department only that Calder's sculpture may ultimately be considered inconsequential.

Calder himself makes no hifalutin' claims. He is without pretensions. Disarmingly so. Only in respect to the original motivation of his work does he go beyond the simple justifications of having fun and giving pleasure.

A vision of the celestial universe, he told me, started him off. Even before he studied engineering, he had been enthralled by eighteenth-century toys demonstrating the planetary system. "That was in the period when I was playing around with motors; I had as many as fifteen at one time. I felt that art was too static to reflect our world of movement. Then, in 1930, when I visited Mondrian's studio and saw the slabs and strips of colored cardboard he had tacked on his wall, I said to myself, 'Wouldn't it be amusing if they oscillated?' But I *painted* in the weeks that followed, and then made my first 'stabiles.'"

The same preoccupation is just as much with Calder today. Looking through one of my photograph albums, he stopped at a shot of Carl Milles's "Bellerophon" poised horizontally on one foot, in the Des Moines Art Center fountain. He shook his head.

"What's the matter with it?" I inquired.

"He never quite takes off!"

"He's trying hard," I said.

"Too hard. Miró doesn't try so hard as artists like Milles, but he achieves more." And he went on to tell me of a friend who had taken him and Miró to see an almost perfect studio in the South of France, hoping that the Spanish artist, who was at the moment without a studio of his own, might rent it. "Miró wasn't even looking at it. He had found a piece of pale blue cardboard in the bottom of an apple crate and was playing with it delightedly, mumbling, 'Isn't it wonderful!' We never could get him to look at that perfect studio. He'd found what he wanted."

I asked him whether the expression of tragic feeling in such sculptures as Michelangelo's "Slaves" in the Louvre appealed to him at all.

"The lugubrious aspect of such work is eliminated in my approach to sculpture," he said. "But the gay and the joyous, when I can hit it right, are there. Perhaps there's a depth of feeling lacking, as you imply. They call me a 'playboy,' you know." He chuckled. "I want to make things that are fun to look at, that have no propaganda value whatsoever. I'm frank to say that in religious pictures what moves me is the plastic forms or the wonderful colors. Or in Bosch, who is antireligious, I suppose, the endless invention of forms and symbols. My friend Peter Blume wants to say something. I don't. Who comes out best?"

He held up his hands as if to indicate it was a real question. I asked him if he was moved or inspired by forms in nature. His wife Louisa, who is a grand-niece of the philosopher William James, answered for him. "When we drive somewhere, Sandy always notices the beauty of things that most people consider ugly or take for granted. Like derricks, gas tanks, derelict machines covered with rust, bridges." Louisa Calder, though she is already a grandmother, is surprisingly young looking and attractive.

"I do like the dogwood tree," Calder interjected, "perhaps because it has a shape." He looked at one out of the window. "A shape to hang things on. A rose has only the blush of youth. No shape." He returned to the question I had been asking him. "About my method of work: first it's the state of mind. Elation. I only feel elation if I've got ahold of something good. I used to begin with fairly complete drawings, but now I start by cutting out a lot of shapes. Next, I file them and smooth them off. Some I keep because they're pleasing or dynamic. Some are bits I just happen to find. Then I arrange them, like *papier collé*, on a table, and 'paint' them—that is, arrange them, with wires between the pieces if it's to be a mobile, for the overall pattern. Finally I cut some more on them with my shears, calculating for balance this time."

I didn't ask Calder how he knew when a piece was finished. The question had already been asked him on a television interview and appropriately answered—"When the dinner bell rings."

I asked him the same question I had asked Lipchitz: whether he enjoyed doing sculpture on commission, to complete or complement architecture. He did. "The sculptures are often improved by being related properly to site and scale. Once I had to design one that crept up a circular stairwell—a fascinating problem!"

It was a hot day to begin with, and a thunderstorm had made the atmosphere even stickier, so we decided to go for a swim. While searching for a pair of trunks that could be scaled from Calder's enormous girth to mine, we wandered through a good part of the house that seemed to be all on one level: one low-ceilinged room opening into another, and then another, like a telescope, with wonderful diminishing sunlit perspectives animated and made audible by mobiles hung from above which waved and tinkled in the breeze.

I've mentioned already that the house itself seems a product of the twenties. It's hard to say exactly why. The remade Colonial with bohemian touches? The photographs, letters and drawings massed from floor to ceiling on certain walls, even on the doors? The surrealist notes—like a tack through a face in one snapshot?

Calder had bought the lovely old farmstead with its seventeen acres for \$3,000 before northern Connecticut became as fashionable as Westchester County. A nearby farmer makes use of the fields *gratis*. Behind and to one side of the house is the two-floors-high studio, rebuilt out of an old barn. To the other side, and in front of the shallow swimming hole, is a small new house which the artist built for his mother, who is ninety and who spoke to us, vigorous in voice and keen of eye, as we walked back from our swim. I asked Calder if she liked his sculpture. "Well," he said, "let's say that she's gotten over regretting it's not like my father's." The only thing that really kept him from living all year round at his home in France, he said, was his mother, who develops alarming symptoms as soon as he's been away for any length of time. "As soon as I reach the deathbed, she's had a miraculous recovery. Of course our youngest daughter, who's in school at Putney, Vermont, keeps us here too."

We went to the studio to take some pictures. I noticed, among the anvils and welding irons, some objects that had escaped my attention before: driftwood treated as sculpture, roots, marionettes. I asked him whether he thought representational sculpture had any future. "Epstein and Germaine Richier still look alive," he said. I walked over to inspect a mobile made entirely of 'found objects' and he guessed my thought. "It only works if you find something as good as the shape you were about to invent. I've used spoons as well as bits of bottles, but you can usually make something better, perhaps basing your design on what you've found. To come back to your original question about emotional content in sculpture," he drawled, "I believe that in modern work the spectator has to bring with him more than half the emotion. To most people who look at a mobile, it's no more than a series of flat objects that move. To a few, though, it may be poetry. I feel that there's a greater scope for the imagination in work that can't be pinpointed to any specific emotion. That is the limitation of representational sculpture. You're often enclosed by the emotion, stopped."

His wife, who had come in, was surprised to hear him talking this way. "Usually," she said, "Sandy makes jokes out of questions." Sandy grinned through those heavy jowls, a little dourly but cheerfully, as though he might make a joke out of this statement. But he didn't. "His work is his religion," she went on. "He is always expressing his sense of pleasure and his *joie de vivre*. He isn't an unhappy man. He isn't tormented. He enjoys life." She gave him a look of complete devotion.

I looked at Calder, who was looking at her and then at his work. I believed her.