

ALEXANDER CALDER: A BALANCING ACT

Pre-Visit Activity: Grades K-3

“The underlying sense of form in my work has been of the Universe, or part thereof. For that is a rather large model to work from.” –Alexander Calder

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Learn about American sculptor Alexander Calder, his work and his great influence on art of the 20th Century and beyond
- Become familiar with the vocabulary of contemporary sculpture and be able to recognize the differences between: abstract and representational, mobile and stabile, organic and geometric forms, two-dimensional and three-dimensional artwork
- Be able to identify primary colors and become familiar with the use of color as an element of art
- Create a sculptural maquette using color paper and wire inspired by the work of Alexander Calder and his personal connection to the universe

VOCABULARY

Abstract, branches, cantilever, circus, geometric, icon, illustrator, maquette, mechanical engineer, mobile, motion, organic, primary colors, representational, solar system, sculpture, sculptor, stabile, standing stabile, three-dimensional, two-dimensional

(see glossary for definitions)

WHO WAS ALEXANDER CALDER?

Alexander Calder was an American artist. He made drawings, paintings, jewelry and **sculptures**. Calder is best known for his work as a sculptor. He made giant sculptures. He also invented **mobiles**. Mobiles are a kind of sculpture with moving parts. Much of Calder’s work is inspired by the **universe** and by nature.

Alexander Calder was born July 22, 1898, in Lawton, Pennsylvania. His mother was a painter. His father and grandfather were both **sculptors**, and he had one sister.

Alexander Calder was called “Sandy” by his friends and family. Sandy was always interested in building things. He was always taking things apart and using the pieces for different projects. He made a sculpture of a duck when he was 11 years old.

Calder went to college and studied to be a **mechanical engineer**. Later, he decided that he wanted to be an artist. His work as an engineer would help him with his sculptures later in life.

While in art school, he also worked as an **illustrator** and did some drawings of a circus for a newspaper. He really enjoyed drawing the animals and the circus actors. In 1926, Calder went to Paris, France, and worked with other artists, writers, and sculptors. Soon he began working on a new and exciting project!

He made sculptures of **circus** animals and actors out of wire, wood, cork and bits of cloth. He gave elaborate performances of about twenty separate acts, complete with sound and motion, just like the real-life circus. People all over Paris came to see his circus performances and he became very popular. Calder decided to go back to the United States to show his circus. The people in the U.S. liked his circus, too.

Calder made several designs for toys—small animals and other moving objects—and found a toy company to mass-produce them and offer them for sale. At the same time he began to make wire sculptures that looked like real people. Art that looks like real things is called **representational**.

Art that does not look like something real or recognizable and emphasizes the elements of art- line, color, shape, texture, and form- is called **abstract**. Calder decided to make abstract sculptures and he cut wood and metal

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and bent wire into unusual (**organic**) shapes. This was a big change in his art. He liked his abstract sculptures and decided they should be in **motion**. He attached motors to some of his sculptures to make them move, but wanted to find other ways to achieve movement. He began to make sculptures that would hang from the ceiling and the shapes in the sculptures moved and changed positions in the wind! These new sculptures were called mobiles.

Calder made sculptures called **stables** as well. They did not move. They looked different from different directions as people walked around them. Next, Calder combined two of his art forms. He put a mobile on top of a stabile and called them **standing mobiles**. Moving parts of a mobile were attached to a base that did not move.

As he got older, Calder's work got bigger and he began making giant pieces of art for public spaces outdoors. He would plan for the large sculptures in his studio by first making **maquettes**, or small scale models. These models would help Calder figure out how to build his big sculptures. One of his largest sculptures in Italy is 60 feet tall!

Calder's art made him happy and he loved spending time with his wife, daughters, and grandchildren. He died in 1976 at the same time his work was being shown in an exhibition in New York City.

Alexander Calder is considered an American **icon**, one of the most inventive and beloved artists of his time. His sculptural work has influenced artists for generations and continues to grace and delight audiences, and enlivens public spaces around the world.

-Based on excerpts from *The Life and Work of Alexander Calder* by Schaefer, Adam (Chicago, IL: Heinemann Library, 2003).

DISCUSS IT!

Take a look at Alexander Calder's sculpture, *Polychrome Dots and Brass on Red*, 1964 (page 7).

- How do you feel when you look at this?
- Does it look like it would move? (*moves*)
- Do you think this is a stabile or a mobile? (*both: called a standing mobile; also a maquette or model*)
- What is this? Is this recognizable to you? (*abstract: universe, solar system, nature, tree, frond*)
- Calder was very influenced by the universe and by nature. What kinds of shapes do you see? (*organic, geometric*)
- How big do you think this is? (*2" x 6 1/8" x 2 1/4"*)
- Is it flat (or two-dimensional), or can you walk around it (three-dimensional)? (*3-D*)
- What materials did Calder use? What kinds of tools do you think he used? (*sheet metal, brass, wire, paint, wire cutters, metal shears, pliers*)
- Color is very important in Calder's sculptures. What colors do you see here? (*red, yellow, blue: primary colors, also white and brass*) (*note: white is not a color, it is the absence of color*)

Now take a look at Alexander Calder's sculpture, *Untitled (maquette)*, 1947 (page 8).

- How does this image, *Untitled (maquette)*, make you feel? (*sits low to the ground, heavy & dark, presence of large, black chunky pieces*)
- How do you think Calder made this piece balance? (*equal distribution of weight: equilibrium*) (*discuss use of cantilever*)
- If you were to give this a name, what would you call it?

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MAKE IT!

Using the universe and Alexander Calder's work as inspiration, create your very own stabile or standing mobile *maquette* using the materials provided.

Draw shapes that you think would be interesting for your sculpture. Make sure to consider all sides of the final piece. Assemble the pieces using a slot method to create an abstract sculpture (or colored tape if needed). Use small wire rods (or wood skewers) to add branches to your maquette, or to cantilever smaller, more delicate pieces. Let your imagination run wild and create a piece you would want to see in a museum, an outdoor public space, or displayed in a country you have always wanted to visit.

MATERIALS

- Book: *Alexander Calder and His Magical Mobiles* (SAM Library)
- Color copies of image of the universe (page 6)
- Color copies of image *Polychrome Dots and Brass on Red* (page 7)
- Color copies (B&W copies okay) of *Untitled (maquette)* (page 8)
- Pre-cut 3" and 5" wire rods or wood skewers (available at most art supply stores)
- Finished examples of maquettes (completed by teacher)
- Card stock in red, blue, yellow (color on both sides)
- Empty paper towel rolls (one for each student)
- Colored masking tape
- Kid friendly scissors
- Pencils and erasers

BEFORE YOU START

Consider:

- How big (or small) will my maquette be?
- How will I use the universe as inspiration?
- How will I make all of the pieces work together and balance on their own?
- Will I extend or cantilever out from the body of my sculpture?
- Which primary colors will I use?
- Don't be afraid to let parts of your sculpture rest on the floor! (Also, remember that the base of a stabile or standing mobile sits on the ground.)

HOW TO

First, the instructor introduces all tools and materials and highlights proper use and safety. Next, a demonstration should be given on how to utilize the slot method of connecting pieces, as well as how to puncture through paper or cardboard with wire and/or skewers.

1. Cut a paper towel tube to create a base for your maquette. It can be as tall or short as you like.
2. Sketch different shapes on the colored card stock. Use different colors and sizes keeping the universe or solar system in mind.
3. Use scissors to cut out your shapes.
4. Attach shapes with colored tape or cut slots at the bottom of each shape to interlock corresponding slots at the top of the base or paper.
5. Continue to build your sculpture. Don't let the base be the only starting point for adding more pieces.
6. If desired, use the wire rods (or skewers) as cantilevers in your design.

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7. Make sure your sculpture is balanced and can stand on its own permanently and without any help!
8. Using your maquette or model as an example to work from, pretend you are building a large scale version of your sculpture to put it in a museum where lots of people can see it. Reflect on your work and write a descriptive paragraph about your piece and how it relates to the solar system. This is called an artist's statement. There are a variety of ways to put together an artist's statement. This is the format you will use for this activity:
 - a. A title for your sculpture and the year
 - b. Your full name
 - c. The materials you used
 - d. Dimensions
 - e. A descriptive paragraph

Example:

Cosmic Maquette, 2009
Paper, colored tape, wire
Natalie Sloan
5 x 5 x 6

Using Alexander Calder's work as inspiration, I have created a sculptural model called a maquette using red and blue paper. The shapes that I have chosen remind me of the moon and the earth. When I look at it I think about space and how gravity works. The pieces fit together with slots, but I can almost imagine the parts of my sculpture orbiting one another. I would like to build a large version of my maquette and display it on the moon!

GLOSSARY

Abstract: art that does not look like something real or recognizable and emphasizes the elements of art—line, color, shape, texture, and form—to express its subject

Branches: parts that extend out from the main body of a sculpture

Cantilever: a projecting beam or member supported only at one end

Circus: an arena often covered by a tent and used for variety shows usually including feats of physical skill, wild animal acts, and performances by clowns and animal tamers

Geometric shape: a "regular" form that has straight lines including triangles, squares and circles

Icon: an object or symbol of uncritical devotion

Illustrator: an artist who depicts decorative or visual features intended to explain subject matter

Maquette: a small preliminary model of a planned sculpture

Mechanical engineering: a branch of engineering concerned with the industrial application of mechanics and the production of tools, machinery, and their products

Mobile: (mo-beel) a sculpture that is made of pieces that move, invented by Alexander Calder

Motion: changing position or moving

Organic shape: typically occurs in nature; also referred to as "natural" or "irregular"

Primary colors: three basic colors with which all other colors are derived: red, yellow, blue. Color is used by artists as one of the elements of art, or the visual language of art

Representational: art that shows the way things look in real life

Sculptor: an artist who makes sculptures

Sculpture: a statue or carving

Stabile: a sculpture that does not move and looks different from different directions

Standing mobile: a stabile that includes moving parts and looks different from all directions

Three-dimensional: refers to artwork that has mass which includes height, width and depth, such as a wire sculpture that may be viewed by walking around it

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GLOSSARY continued

Two-dimensional: refers to artwork having only height and width, such as a drawing on the surface of a piece of paper which is “flat”

Universe: the entire celestial cosmos

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Key Art Terms for Beginners by Yenawine, Philip. (New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995.)

The Essential Alexander Calder by Greenfield, Howard. (New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2003.)

The Life and Work of Alexander Calder by Schaefer, Adam. (Chicago, IL: Heineman Library, 2003.)

WEBOGRAPHY

Alexander Calder (1898-1976). Calder Foundation, www.calder.org

Glossary of definitions. (Merriam Webster), www.merriam-webster.com

How to Write an Artist's Statement. (Self-Representing Artists), www.ebsqart.com/ArtMagazine/za_400.htm

Universe. (Image: NASA), www.nasa.gov/topics/solarsystem/index.html

ONLINE RESOURCES

The following web sites not only examine Alexander Calder the person, but also provide useful images of his work.

Calder Foundation

www.calder.org

This site includes complete biographical information clearly divided into periods as well as high quality, full screen images of many of his works accompanying each period.

National Gallery of Art

www.nga.gov/exhibitions/caldbro.shtm

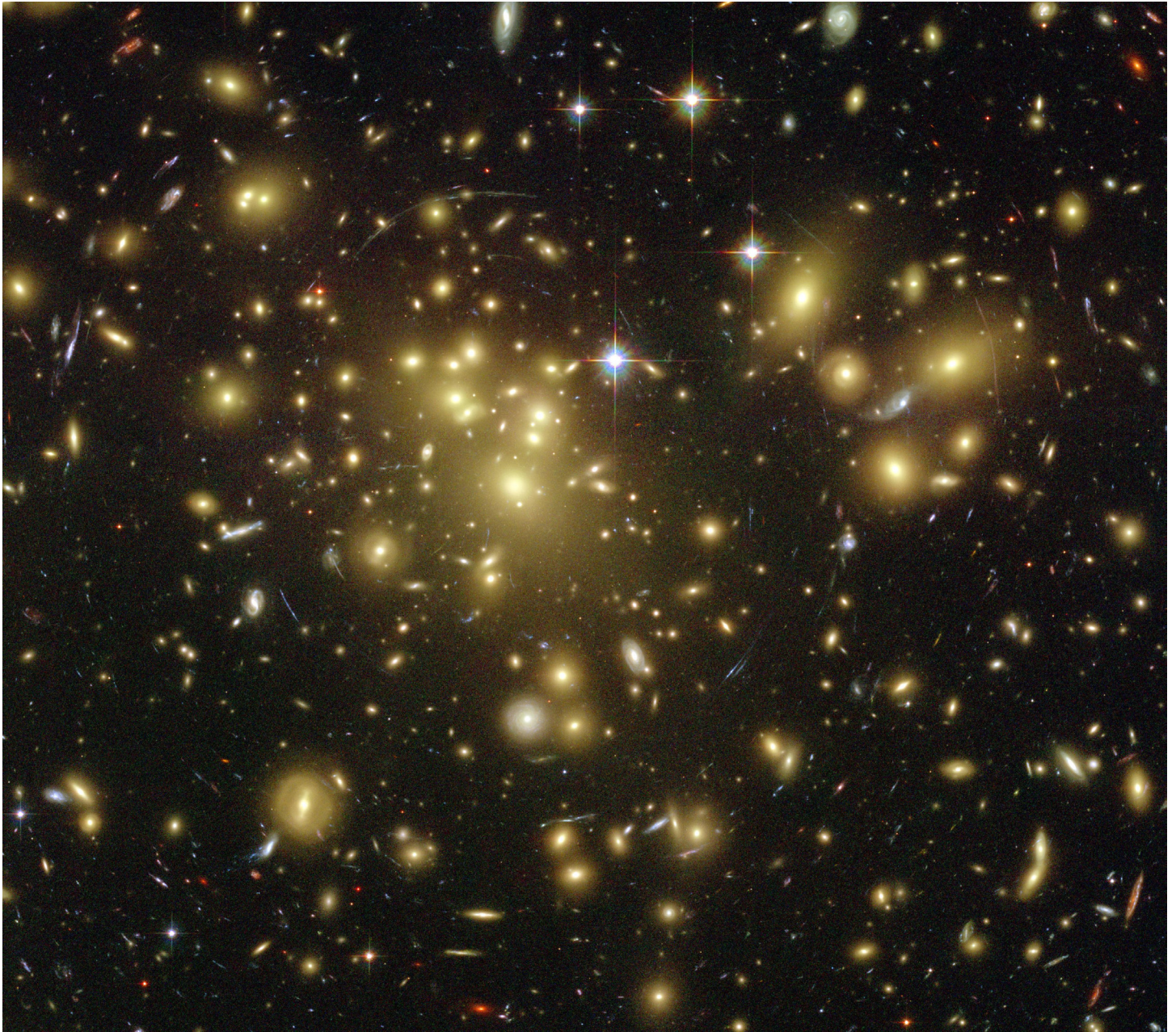
This site offers an excellent online tour of a Calder exhibit at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

www.sfmoma.org

To get to the provided information on Calder, go to the home page and enter “Calder” in the search field. The site contains great quotes and information that accompany the images of his work.

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The Universe

Image: NASA, www.nasa.gov/topics/universe/index.html

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Polychrome Dots and Brass on Red, 1964

Sheet metal, brass, wire and paint

Alexander Calder

American, 1898-1976

2 x 6 1/8 x 2 1/4 in.

Collection of Jon and Mary Shirley, T2009.56.29

Photo: Julian Calder, © 2009 Calder Foundation, New York / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

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Untitled (maquette), ca. 1960

Sheet metal, wire, and paint

Alexander Calder

American, 1898-1976

21 x 9 x 27 in.

Collection of Jon and Mary Shirley, T2009.56.26

Photo: Julian Calder, © 2009 Calder Foundation, New York / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York