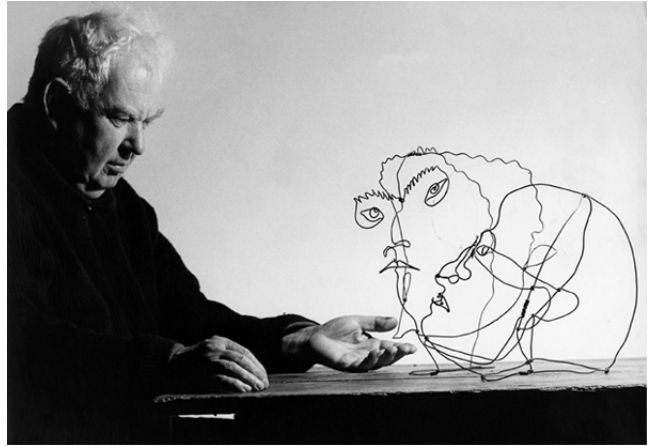


Alexander Calder



Alexander Calder with *Edgar Varese* and *Untitled*, Saché, France, by Ugo Mulas. Gelatin silver print, 1963. Courtesy Ugo Mulas Archives © Ugo Mulas Heirs. All rights reserved. Calder artwork in photograph © 2010 Calder Foundation, New York / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

Technology in Hoboken, New Jersey. From 1915 to 1919 he studied mechanical engineering and applied kinetics with the intention of becoming an engineer.

After graduation Calder was restless professionally and held a variety of engineering-related jobs and, although he found none of them to be particularly satisfying, they contributed to his later artistic endeavors and helped him with his sculptural experiments. While in New York in 1922, he took an evening drawing class from a family friend and soon after, in the fall of 1923, decided to shift to a career as an artist. Calder enrolled in the Art Students League, New York, where he studied drawing and painting from 1923–1926. During this time he found a job as an illustrator for the *National Police Gazette*, a tabloid, and was sent to sketch the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, which led to his lifelong interest in the circus.

In 1926 Calder moved to Paris, where he immersed himself in the rich avant-garde environment that drew artists, intellectuals, and writers from around the world. Calder's reputation and group of artist friends grew due to his popular performance piece, *Calder's Circus* (1926–1931). Inspired by his time sketching the circus in the United States, this mechanized, miniature circus was made of small wire and wood figures operated with cranks and pulleys. Such a bizarre novelty performance drew large crowds and introduced Calder to some of the most famous and forward-thinking experimental artists, including Joan Miró (1893–1983), Le Corbusier (1887–1965), Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), Fernand Léger (1881–1955), and Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), many of whom profoundly influenced the artist's later works. Calder traveled with the piece between Paris and New York, expanding it over the next few years and experimenting with mechanized motion and spatial relationships.

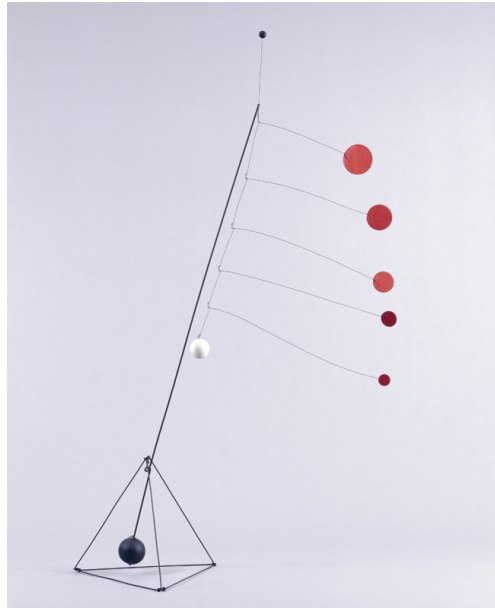
Alexander Calder was born on July 22, 1898, in Lawton, Pennsylvania, into a family of artists. Both his father and grandfather were well-established American sculptors and his mother was a painter, but the young Calder resisted the notion of becoming an "artist," despite his love for making things with his hands.

Calder constructed objects beginning at an early age and was known to play with a pair of pliers, creating small animal figures, game boards, and jewelry for his sister's dolls. His family moved around the United States because of his father's health and search for work, but Calder's interest in tinkering and building followed him and eventually brought him to Stevens Institute of

Calder also created portraits of celebrated personalities out of wire during this time. These whimsical representations were his first sculptures that included movement, and they looked like three-dimensional line drawings made to be suspended from above so that they would sway to and fro.

In 1930 he visited the studio of Mondrian, a Dutch painter known for his graphic geometric abstractions. Calder saw Mondrian's studio full of colored rectangles and immediately had the desire to see them all in motion. Mondrian rejected this suggestion, saying that they already were in motion, but Calder could not let go of the idea. The visit drastically shifted the direction of Calder's work, and he relinquished figural representation dedicating himself instead to pure abstraction. By 1931 Calder began incorporating movement into his abstract pieces through machines and motors. Upon seeing these new works, famed artist Duchamp coined the term "mobile."

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Calder refined this process and discontinued the use of motors, finding them too predictable and high-maintenance. Instead, his mobiles needed elements of chance, such as wind and air currents, to drive their movements. Calder moved back to the United States during World War II and worked mainly with wood, plaster, and found materials due to the short supply of metal. His sculptures continued



Alexander Calder, *Object with Red Discs*, 1931, painted steel rod, wire, wood, and sheet aluminum, 87 1/2 x 52 1/4 x 24 1/2 in., Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase with funds from the Mrs. Percy Uris Purchase Fund, 86.49a-c

to evolve, becoming more intricate and incorporating increasingly organic forms. Calder viewed his mobiles as choreographed dances, and worked with a number of famous choreographers, such as Martha Graham.

As Calder's fame grew, so did the scale of his works. The artist received over 250 public and private commissions, mostly during the second half of his career, many of which were for monumental pieces to be displayed in public spaces and corporate offices. His works were popular because they were a-political and provided a fun and colorful addition to otherwise cold and impersonal spaces. At a time when many other artists focused on grim imagery and political issues, Calder's accessible works were in high demand. In addition to humanizing their environment, Calder's mobiles activated the space without obstructing pedestrian traffic because they were frequently suspended from the ceiling.

By the time Calder passed away on November 11, 1976, shortly after the opening of a retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art, he had firmly established himself as one of the most important and influential artists of the century.

Numbered One To Seven is a perfect example of the mobiles for which Alexander Calder is best known. It dances gracefully in the space, responding to movement and air currents around it.

While Calder was not the first artist to incorporate motion into sculpture, he was the first to create an entire aesthetic language based on motion itself. Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) coined the term "mobile" in 1932 to describe Calder's motor-driven sculpture, *Untitled*. In French, the adjective "mobile" means movable, but also implies something is nimble or quick; as a noun the word means "motive." Calder was amused by the word's double entendre and began using it to describe his artworks.

Calder estimated that he created over 2,000 mobiles in his lifetime and no two were alike. He preferred to work directly with the materials at hand and determine balances and counterbalances as he went, which allowed for spontaneous new combinations to arise. He rarely planned works out beforehand, until his later years, when creating on a massive scale, maquettes were needed.

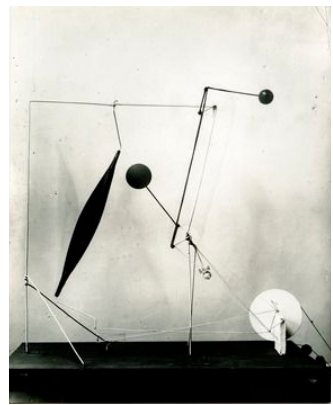
The artist experimented constantly and created many variations of the mobile. Hanging mobiles, like *Numbered One to Seven*, are the most well-known type, but they could also hang from walls or be supported by stands that rest on the floor or on a table. Despite this, all mobiles have certain things in common. They are supported by string or wire and balance objects that move around as a result of chance encounters with wind or another force.

Numbered One to Seven is a combination of circles and shapes that resemble leaves or fins, which add variation to the movement. The flat metal pieces operate in a similar way to the sails on a boat – when air pushes a vertical plate it will move horizontally, and a horizontal plate will move vertically. But the way in which they are hung and balanced makes the movement and interaction between the pieces complex.

Created at a time when Calder was expanding the scale of his mobiles, *Numbered One to Seven* stretches far out into space, but it is still light enough that it can move easily. Calder explained that the small holes in the plates added movement. "When I cut out my plates I have two things in mind. I want them to be more alive, and I think about balance. Which explains the holes in the plates. The most important thing is that the mobile be able to catch the air. It has to be able to move."

The movement and rotation of objects are inspired by some of the systems in our universe. In the 1930s a number of groundbreaking scientific discoveries were made, including the identification of a new celestial body, Pluto. Other contemporary artists, including Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) and Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) shared Calder's interest in the solar system, and they were similarly affected by the scientific revelations. Calder reflected on these developments: "I think at the time [1930] and practically ever since, the underlying sense of form in my work has been the system of the Universe, or part thereof. For that is a rather large model to work from."

Calder was also influenced by dance and choreography. His mobiles tend to be theatrical and need to be observed over lengthy periods of time in order to be fully experienced. The relationships between the floating shapes are comparable to dancers, and he saw himself as a choreographer of the plates. In *Numbered One to Seven*, the smaller spheres and larger leaf-like shapes rotate and dance around one another, constantly changing the spatial relationships. He wrote, "It is this unpredictable yet ordered action, a sort of abstract dance, which intrigues the fancy and makes other explanations superfluous."



Alexander Calder, *Untitled*, 1931, Motorized Mobile; Photograph by Marc Vaux, Courtesy The Alexander and Louisa Calder Foundation, New York

Discussion Questions

What inspired Alexander Calder to create artworks with motion?



How would you describe the aesthetics of a mobile? How do you explain the functionality of a mobile?



Do you prefer Calder's mobiles or his stabiles? Why?

Teachers: go to www.joslyn.org/education for this poster's academic standards and related lesson plans.

Timeline

1890

1898 Alexander Calder is born on July 22 in Lawton, PA

1900



Alexander Calder, *Circus Scene*, 1926, gouache on canvas, 69 3/4 x 83 1/2 in., University of California, Berkeley Art Museum, Gift of Richard B. Bailey and Nanette C. Sexton in memory of Margaret Calder Hayes

1910

1919 Graduates from Stevens Institute of Technology with mechanical engineering degree

1920

1923 Joins the Art Students League of New York

1925 Illustrates the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus for the *National Police Gazette*

1926 Moves to Paris

1927 Returns to the United States; performs *Calder's Circus* for the first time

1930

1930 Returns to Europe; visits Piet Mondrian's studio

1931 Creates first abstract wire sculptures

1932 Marcel Duchamp uses the term "mobile" for Calder's new sculptures

1933 Creates first free-moving mobile without a motor; moves back to New York to escape World War II

1940

1943 Extensive retrospective held at MoMA, NY

1950

1954 Returns to France for the first time since the beginning of World War II

1960

1976 Calder dies on November 11 in New York

1970



Alexander Calder, *Spiral Imaginatif*, Edition: 55 of 90, 1975, color lithograph, 31 x 22 1/2 in., Gift of Gregory Peck, LACMA, M.91.127.5

BACKGROUND: Alexander Calder, *Mobile XLV-III H*, 1955, sheet metal, wire & paint 99 2/10 x 106 3/10 in. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, BA 164

Calder's Circus

Calder's Circus, first performed in 1927, changed the course of Alexander Calder's artistic career. It allowed him to experiment with a group of kinetic objects, provided a source of income, drew attention to his other works, expanded his reputation, and introduced Calder to notable artists who would influence his process.

The circus itself was constructed out of wire, wood, cork, cloth, and other found objects, and included small figures and animals that were moved around the space, interacting with one another or "performing" on their own. Calder engineered intricate apparatuses and machines, bicycles and cars, tightropes and trapezes, all of which functioned almost flawlessly.

While Calder lived in Paris, for 25 francs, audience members were admitted to his apartment where they were invited to sit on old champagne boxes that served as bleachers. He knelt on the ground in order to operate his miniature circus and played music from a phonograph, announcing separate "acts" with different songs. Calder also blew a whistle and made animal noises, bringing the piece to life.

News of the droll performance spread quickly in Paris and attracted increasingly large audiences full of celebrated modern artists eager to escape the cruel realities of the world outside. Calder traveled with his ever-expanding circus between Europe and the United States, packing it away in as many as five suitcases.



Alexander Calder, *Calder's Circus*, 1926–31. Wire, wood, metal, cloth, yarn, paper, cardboard, leather, string, rubber tubing, corks, buttons, rhinestones, pipe cleaners, and bottle caps, 54 x 94 1/4 x 94 1/4 in., overall, dimensions variable. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from a public fundraising campaign in May 1982. One half the funds were contributed by the Robert Wood Johnson Jr. Charitable Trust. Additional major donations were given by The Lauder Foundation, the Robert Lehman Foundation Inc., the Howard and Jean Lipman Foundation Inc., an anonymous donor, The T. M. Evans Foundation Inc., MacAndrews & Forbes Group Incorporated, the DeWitt Wallace Fund Inc., Martin and Agneta Gruss, Anne Phillips, Mr. and Mrs. Laurance S. Rockefeller, the Simon Foundation Inc., Marylou Whitney, Bankers Trust Company, Mr. and Mrs. Kenneth N. Dayton, Joel and Anne Ehrenkrantz, Irvin and Kenneth Feld, Flora Whitney Miller. More than 500 individuals from 26 states and abroad also contributed to the campaign 83.36.1-95

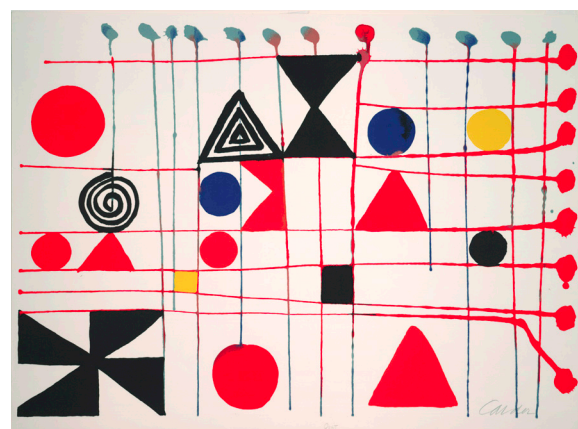
Motion on Paper & Motionless Monuments

Alexander Calder, famous for his sculptures and mobiles, also created an extensive body of two-dimensional works of art. Calder first learned to paint and draw in New York with members of the Ashcan School, an artistic movement characterized by images of daily life in the city's poorer neighborhoods. Calder's works from this period are mainly loose sketches and gritty night scenes. While working as an illustrator for a tabloid to help pay for school, Calder focused on recording or suggesting an observable subject through loose line drawings. It was these line drawings that provided the basis for the various parts of *Calder's Circus*.

After moving to Paris in 1926, Calder created pen and ink drawings that were the equivalent of his wire sculptures, and although they were not drawings for the sculptures, they reflect his interest in space, rhythm, and balance. Humorous subject matter and playful, unexpected gestures indicate an interest in interpreting the observable world with the artist's fresh spin on reality.

After visiting the studio of Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) in 1930 and declaring his dedication to abstraction, Calder briefly turned to paint as a vehicle for non-representational expression. He quickly discovered that he was much more proficient working in three dimensions instead of two, but he never fully abandoned flat mediums, and continued experimenting with gouache (opaque watercolor), pen and ink, watercolor, etching, and serigraphy, among other materials.

Although they are two-dimensional, these works clearly echo the same concepts that the artist was exploring in his mobiles and stabiles including dynamic movement, simplicity of form and color, and spatial organization. Bold and graphic artworks such as *Quilt* (1966), above, gives the illusion of movement with highly contrasting shapes and color.



Alexander Calder, *Quilt*, 1966, arches paper, color lithograph 22 x 29 13/16 in., Gift of the Detroit Institute of Arts, Joslyn Art Museum, 1976.25

During the 1930s Calder began making non-kinetic abstract sculptures, which Jean Arp (1886–1966) referred to as "stabiles," as a response to Duchamp's term "mobile." These pieces were made out of sheet metal and incorporated bolts and other signs of their construction as visible elements. Although static, stabiles have sweeping gestures and cantilevered extensions, giving the same illusion of movement that Calder emphasized when working with other mediums.

In the late 1950s Calder began enlarging the sculptures to monumental sizes. Constructed out of bolted steel, these massive public sculptures used techniques borrowed from shipbuilding and employed Calder's engineering expertise to achieve flawless and sturdy construction. Because the scale of these new works was so enormous, Calder first created small maquettes out of paper or metal and then sent them to facilities where they could be enlarged to their full size of up to sixty feet tall.

Despite any negative associations that the public may have had with the everyday industrial materials, the stabiles came to be sought after by wealthy corporations and individuals because of their graceful appearance, which added a warm and human touch to public spaces. The stabiles appeared to float effortlessly above the ground in defiance of their towering size and crushing weight, inviting passersby to marvel, wander close, and look upwards.

Although Calder is primarily known for his concept of the mobile, his stabiles are scattered over the globe in public spaces, serving as monuments to the artist's multifaceted contributions to the artistic world as we know it today.

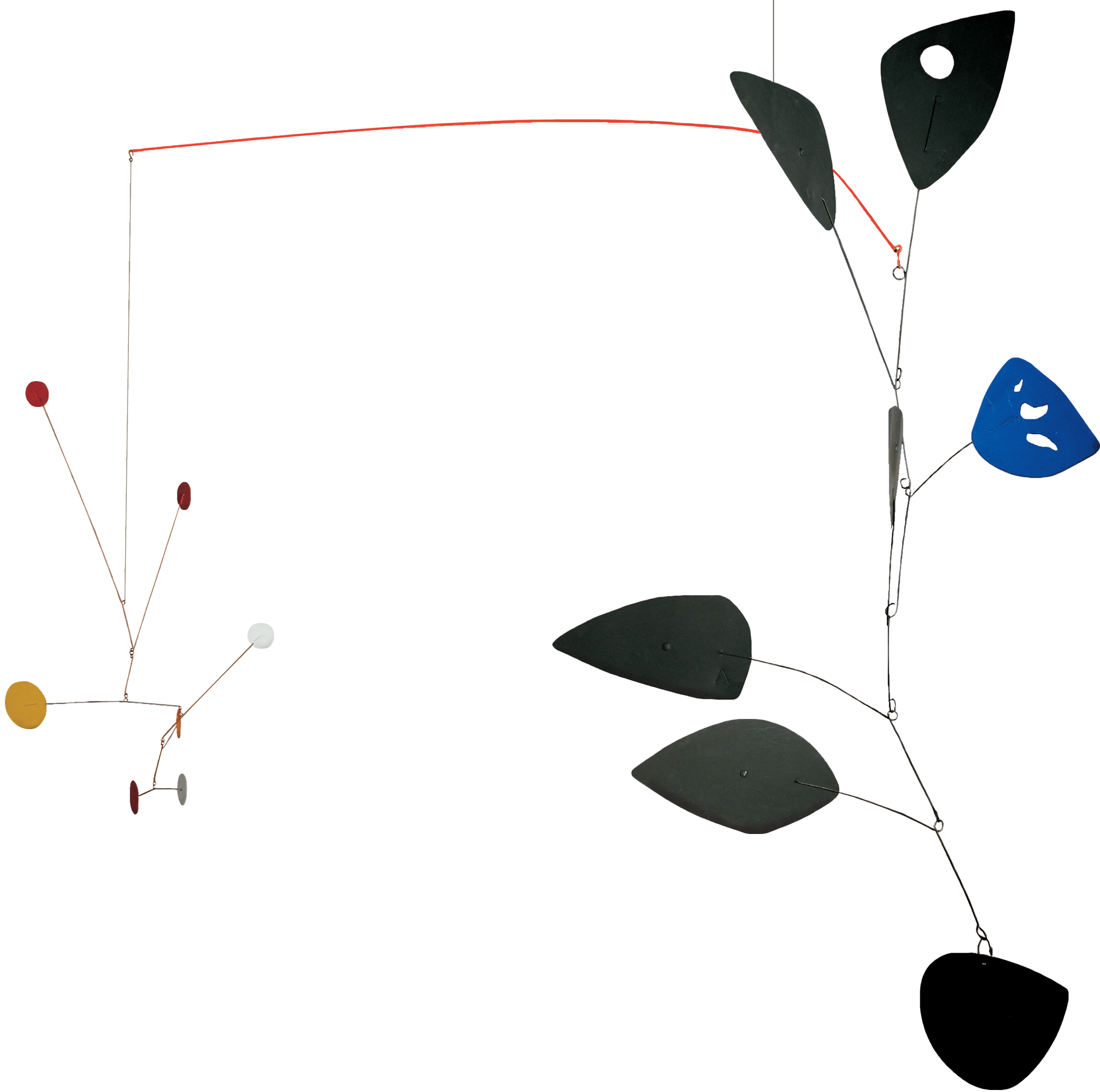
Alexander Calder, *Jerusalem Stable*, 1976, 72 feet long; photo courtesy Tom Powell



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ALEXANDER CALDER (AMERICAN, 1898–1976)
NUMBERED ONE TO SEVEN
1950, PAINTED SHEET METAL AND WIRE

JOSLYN ART MUSEUM® OMAHA, NEBRASKA
Gift of the Joslyn Women's Association, 1978.265