

Revised Sept. 2011

FAMOUS ARTISTS SERIES: **ALEXANDER CALDER (1898-1976)**
"Calder's Circus"
Whitney Museum of Art, New York

Supplies needed:

- * Project supplies: pipe cleaners from supply box
- * Framed print of "Calder's Circus", Mondrian's "Composition"
- * DVD "**Calder's Circus**" from supply box
- * Laminated examples of work from supply box (7 total)
- * ***Roarr: Calder's Circus*** book from supply box
- * Sample mobile from supply box
- * Project sample (two pipe cleaner critters)
- * ***Smiles*** book for reference in supply box

Reference Books:

- * Alexander Calder Taschen 730.92 CAL
- * Calder at Home P. Guerrero 730.92.CAL
- * Calder's Sculpture,

AHEAD OF TIME NOTE: Collect small bits of construction paper for students from teachers' work room. Please make copies of the master "Famous Artists Series" note for the students to take home.

Alexander Calder is an American artist who was born in 1898 and died in 1976. He lived with his wife in Connecticut as well as the south of France. He suffered from an illness called "Parkinson's Disease" which affected his speech and caused him to shake. Oddly, though, when he would work on his art projects, his tremors would cease.

Show laminated picture of Calder as well as "Calder's Circus" poster.

He is known to have produced over 16,000 works of art! He made many things – prints, drawings, jewelry, sculpture, and – most famously- mobiles. In fact, prior to 1931 there was no such thing as a "mobile" – that is a term a fellow-artist coined to describe the works Calder was creating at that time.

Pass around laminated examples of mobiles and and show example of mobile from supply box.

When Calder was a young man, he was assigned by a newspaper to report on a circus that was visiting New York. He became fascinated with the circus performers, and spent days watching and drawing. Soon

after, in 1926, he went to Paris, France and created one of the first “Performance Artworks” (though they didn’t call it that then) – he made a circus, complete with animals, acrobats, ring master and highwire acts. And all of his figures were able to “perform” – Calder would put on performances for friends for entertainment. Interestingly, his work was all made of discarded items – bits and pieces of wire, cloth, yarn, bottlecaps, corks. Calder was the first “recycler”!

In the late 1920’s Calder began to make 3-dimensional figures and “portraits” out of wire. Then, in 1930 Calder visited an artist, Piet Mondrian, who worked in a very orderly studio, with rectangles of painted cardboard pinned to the walls.

Show Mondrian’s “Composition”, then show laminated picture of Calder’s studio.

This was very unlike Calder’s creative environment, and he told Mondrian he would like to see the shapes move. At that point, Calder began to make sculpture with moving parts, driven by motors. However, Calder was dissatisfied with the predictable motion of the machines. Thus the “mobile” was invented. A mobile is a sculpture that is flat and boring when two-dimensional, but when it is hung, it is constantly in motion and constantly changing.

Show the mobile example from supply box again. Hand out the scraps of construction paper to the students. Have them cut or fold the pieces and then one at a time attach them to the mobile clips. Discuss the idea of balance – of having to add and subtract items to find the point at which the items in the mobile will dangle horizontally.

The most important issue for a mobile is balance, or “fulcrum” – the point at which the mobile will balance. Actually making a mobile so that it balances perfectly is harder than it looks.

Calder became very famous, and designed very large mobiles and sculpture for cities. There is a 75 foot long mobile he designed specifically to hang in the National Gallery in Washington DC. In Chicago there are a number of his works – a 25 ton steel “stabile” called “Flamingo” at the Federal Plaza, ***show laminated example of large red “Flamingo” – discuss how the “stabile” weighs 50 tons***. The Art Institute of Chicago has Calder works on exhibit. Keep your eyes open at museums – whenever you see a mobile check to see if it is a “Calder”!

PROJECT:

Today we are going to create our own wire sculpture circus – and then we will make a performance!

Before we start, we will watch a short videotape showing Alexander Calder making his mini-circus.

- **Watch for the animals, acrobats, ringmaster and highwire acts.**
- **See if you can tell what the figures are made of: bits and pieces of wire, cloth, yarn, bottlecaps, corks...**
- **Because of his Parkinson's Disease, Mr. Calder does not always speak clearly, and sometimes he speaks in French. Don't worry about the words...just enjoy the circus performance!**

Play "Calder Circus" DVD for about 10 minutes. Play the part when he is "performing" his circus.

Like many of Alexander Calder's works, our circus figures will be made from wire. In our sculptures, we will use long pipe cleaners as our wire. Calder is the one who made his figures move. Think about how you want your circus figures to move. They can have hinged bodies that jiggle as they walk, or they can swing on wires.

- **Give each student 4-5 pipe cleaners so they can make more than one figure if desired. They might want to create "related" figures, like a lion & tamer or group of clowns, team of acrobats. You can show them the two samples. Please note that sometimes the pipe cleaners are too long for the item the student wants to build and you may have to cut a few for them.**
- **Display the book Roarr: Calder's Circus from the supply box for inspiration**

IMPORTANT: The circus is "performance art" – it does not take form without the artist making it come alive! Please leave 10 minutes at the end for each child's circus performance.

FAMOUS ARTISTS SERIES

ALEXANDER CALDER

Today in class a volunteer parent presented the works of American artist Alexander Calder to your child's class. They learned a little bit about Calder, as well as made an art project in the style of his work. Ask your student about Calder's work – what is he most famous for? Ask them if they recall what a “mobile” is, or if they had a chance to see the movie of Calder's Circus. If you should have access to the Web, the following sites offers very good ideas and tours of Calder's work:

www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/calder_alexander.html
www.calder.org

Cook Library has a childrens' story entitled Molly Meets Mona and Friends by Minnerly which talks about Calder. In addition, the “stabile” Flamingo is located at the Federal Plaza in Chicago, the Sears Tower has a Calder instillation, The Museum of Contemporary Art owns a “stabile” called Performing Seal, 1950, and the Art Institute owns a number of Calder's works.

Sincerely yours,

Art Volunteer