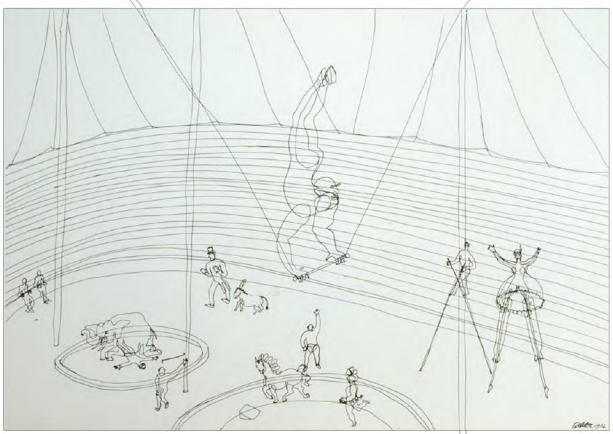
FOCUS ON:

Calder's Circus

The Lithographs



October 19, 2008 - February 15, 2009

Neuberger Museum of Art

Curator's Statement

Alexander Calder loved the circus. In 1964, he produced a portfolio of lithographs based on drawings he created of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus in 1931-32. ***Focus on:* Calder's Circus, The Lithographs** explores the print portfolio and its relationship to Calder's other work on circus themes.

Calder's Circus and the Avant-Garde

Calder's first visual exploration of the circus occurred in 1925. He worked as an illustrator for the *National Police Gazette*, a sports and entertainment paper. When the Ringling Brothers circus came to town, Calder spent two weeks there making sketches to bring to the *Gazette*. Ringling Brothers was a noisy extravaganza of exaggerated movements and boisterous, physical humor. His drawings showed the antics of suspended tightrope walkers, rebellious clowns, ferocious animals, lively acrobats and entertaining side-show acts.

And so began Calder's fascination with circus imagery, which he continued to explore in drawings and other media throughout his life. In 1926 he created his *Cirque Calder*, a miniature, kinetic, fully-functioning circus fabricated from wire, cloth, cork, yarn, wood and other found objects. At first he performed the circus for fun and as a means of modest income. Over time, however, the circus gained serious attention within the European avant-garde. Among the attendees were Piet Mondrian, Jean Cocteau, Joan Miró, Gertrude Stein, Fernand Léger, Theo van Doesburg, Isamu Noguchi, Francis Picabia, Frederick Kiesler, Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp, Jean Arp, and Le Corbusier.

For Calder, inspiration for the *Cirque Calder* came mainly from his recollections of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus and from the Schoenhut Humpty Dumpty Circus toy. The jaunty escapades of Calder's performers echoed the way in which Ringling Brothers clowns engaged in rebellious humor in the vein of Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and the puppets Punch and Judy, all of which Calder knew. Thus, there were aspects of violence in Calder's circus world, but they were humorous and unpredictable in the manner of slapstick comedy. For example, in Calder's performances, acrobats did not always complete their jumps and sometimes fell from the trapeze. On these instances, Calder rolled out a humorous team of paramedics to collect the fallen performer and the show continued. Despite the discomfort suffered by some of the figures, the world of Calder's circus was understood as separate from our own. Freed from concern for the physical safety of these imagined performers, viewers could focus on the comic quality of their exploits.

Figure 1. © 2008 Calder Foundation, New York/Artist's Rights Society (ARS), New York

Calder was peripherally involved with the Surrealist movement in 1924 and beyond. The Surrealists sought to harness the creative power of the subconscious mind in order to achieve the marvelous. They were deeply committed to an ironic appreciation of the brash and vulgar entertainment of the popular theatre, the circus and the circus side-show. Laughter, childhood, dreams, and madness were vehicles for Surrealist artistic inspiration and were themes for Calder as well.

His exploration of the circus as sculpture began by modifying and embellishing a pre-existing circus toy. The Schoenhut Humpty Dumpty Circus was the best-selling toy in America from 1927-1930. Calder added movement and articulation to a Humpty Dumpty Circus that belonged to the children of his friend, the painter Alexander Brook, with whom he shared a studio in the spring of 1926.

Calder had studied mechanical engineering before becoming an artist and this training was evident in his treatment of movement and equilibrium. He explained "I've always been delighted by the way things are hooked together. I love the mechanics of things."[1] In the sculptures Calder's figures hooked together and their joints seemed capable of swiveling. The movements of acrobats, tumblers, jugglers and tightrope-walkers allowed Calder to explore the dynamics and mechanics of the human body. Though in seemingly precarious positions, Calder's figures remained poised and balanced.

Calder's Exploration of Space and Line

In 1926, Calder began to sculpt three-dimensional drawings in space using a continuous length of wire. He first made a sculpture of the performer Josephine Baker; images of circus acrobats, animals and portraits soon followed. These wire sculptures had a tremendous influence on his circus drawings in terms of volume and space. The technique Calder used to create form out of wire effected how he used line in his drawings.

Bringing what he had learned from creating the *Cirque Calder* and his wire sculptures, in 1931 Calder created a new series of circus drawings. A wonderful and curious feature of Calder's line was that he now allowed outlines to run their course and overlap with other objects, if necessary, as in his wire sculpture. In the work *Juggler with Dog,* the dog was shown from a distinct side perspective, yet all four legs were drawn from the same line. The dog's outline looked transparent, as if seen through x-ray.[2] In other cases, too, Calder's lines cut through implied volumes. In *The Handstand with Chair* (Figure 2), a single horizontal line spanned the width of the lower middle register, depicting the break between wall and floor. This line bisected both a male figure in the foreground and a chair in the middle ground. In reality, when a man stands in front of a wall, the wall disappears behind his mass. In Calder's drawings, volume was implied without mass. For Calder, the outlines of the forms were paramount and volumes were rendered as if transparent.

In some instances, Calder employed unusual perspective in these circus drawings. In works such as *Tumbler on Swing* (Figure 1) and *The Circus* (Cover) Calder played with a bird's-eye viewpoint and employed diminution, so that the central acrobats loomed large in the foreground and the clowns and animals standing on the ground were smaller. In other cases, Calder employed the artistic device of diagonal perspective to make the big top seating appear to recede into the distance. Perhaps he referenced both the high vantage point of the acrobats as well as the audience's position in tall circus bleachers.

1 Lipman, Jean and Nancy Foote. Calder's Circus. E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., New York, NY, 1972. p. 42
2 X-radiation technology was invented in 1895 by Wilhelm Röentgen.

The Creation of the Circus Print Portfolio

After their creation in the 1930s, Calder's circus drawings were tucked into storage and all but forgotten as his career advanced. In the ensuing years, Calder continued to explore circus imagery and went on to create his mobiles and stabiles, for which he became famous. It wasn't until three decades later that Calder came across a dusty parcel labeled "Circus Drawings". Upon opening it, he was astounded at the dozens of large drawings he hadn't seen in over thirty years. Subsequently he found another package in his studio in Roxbury, CT and yet another in Saché, France.

Calder showed the drawings to several friends, including Jean Lipman, an art editor, writer and collector, Cleve Gray, an American abstract painter and Klaus Perls, Calder's New York dealer. At the urging of his friends, Calder selected sixteen drawings to publish as a portfolio of lithographs in 1964. Cleve Gray wrote an essay to accompany the portfolio and Joan Miró, a longtime friend and admirer of Calder's work, wrote the preface.

Since their first point of contact in 1928, Miró and Calder had exchanged work, ideas, correspondence and spent many favorable hours together. Their mutual admiration resulted in a dialogue between their works. Calder admitted, "Well, the archeologists will tell you there's a little bit of Miró in Calder and a little bit of Calder in Miró."[3] Like Calder, Miró explored circus and animal imagery in drawings, paintings and sculpture, designed toys that adopted the expressiveness of line drawing, and juxtaposed thin, confident lines against vast expanses of shape to display movement and balance.[4]

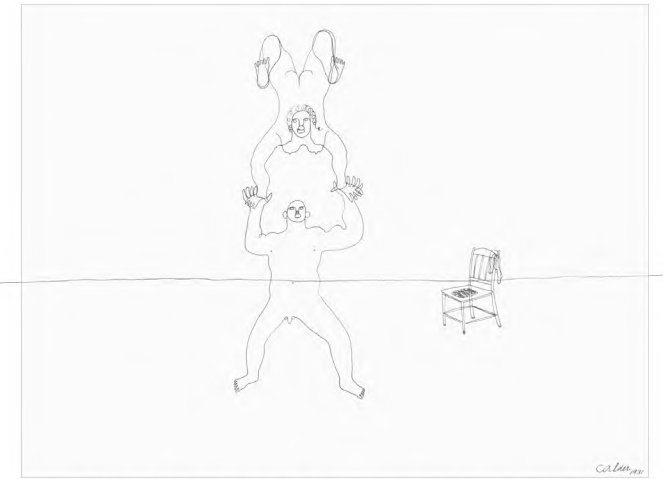


Figure 2. © 2008 Calder Foundation, New York/Artist's Rights Society (ARS), New York

3 Turner, Elizabeth Hutton and Oliver Wick. Calder Miró. Philip Wilson Publishers, London. In collaboration with the Phillips Collection and Fondation Beyeler, 2004. p. 28.
4 *Ibid.* p 32- 34.

In his preface to Calder's *Circus Portfolio*, Miró included a personal anecdote about the charm, wit and humor that he experienced in Calder's circus works. He recounted how, one day in the 1930s, he invited the farmers and workmen of his village of Montroig to watch Calder perform his *Cirque Calder*. They were delighted by what they had seen, "transfixed and totally overwhelmed" as Miró described. In the small town of Montroig, "where the trees, the mountains, the sky, the house, the vineyards, have remained the same. There where the mules have always eaten carobs, and where we have the same warming red wine," Miró, too was transported. There watching the *Cirque Calder*, amid the laughter, cheers and crying babies, Miró found something moving and authentic.[5]

In the essay he wrote to accompany the portfolio, Cleve Gray described his encounter with the gruff, loveable Calder when he persuaded him to produce the *Circus Portfolio.*[6] Calder was notoriously intolerant of interviews, as he hated to theorize or discuss his work. Gray recounted, "I should have known Sandy Calder well enough to realize that it would be difficult to make this laconic man talk about his work . . . I thought if I casually placed before him our photographs of sixteen large drawings selected to make up this *Circus Portfolio*, he might start to reminisce. As a matter of fact, it didn't begin too badly."[7] But it didn't go swimmingly either; Calder revealed little that hadn't been told in the catalog of his 1943 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. But Gray described the circumstances under which the original circus drawings were found and how the *Circus Portfolio* came to be.

The subject of the circus taught Calder the aesthetic of the unfinished, of tension, suspense and surprise. The sparse and delicate quality of the original drawings hinted towards the unfinished. Calder did not apply color or shading, he did not use chiaroscuro to build volume; however, his mastery of balance and line ensured that each drawing stood on its own as a successful, complete work of art. The circus drawings displayed Calder's playful linear quality, the delicate essentialness of his form and his unconventional, lively subject matter. Today, more than seventy-five years after their creation, Calder's depiction of the circus in all its forms continues to delight and amuse.

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5 Turner, Elizabeth Hutton and Oliver Wick, Calder Miró. Philip Wilson Publishers, London. In collaboration with the Phillips Collection and Fondation Beyeler, 2004. p. 33.
6 Cleve Gray's essay was reprinted as "Calder's Circus" in Art in America, October 1964, pp. 22-48.
7 Gray, Cleve. "Calder's Circus," Art in America, vol. 52, no. 5. October 1964, pp. 22-48.

Checklist:

All works by Alexander Calder (American, 1898-1976). From the portfolio *Calder's Circus,* 1964. Offset lithographs on paper printed from the original 1931-1932 drawings. They were produced by Art in America and Perls Galleries; one hundred copies were made. The portfolio is comprised of a boxed group of sixteen lithographs, an additional page with a text by Cleve Gray and a reproduction of a letter by Joan Miró. This page was also numbered and signed by Calder. The sixteen images were simultaneously reproduced in Art in America, vol. 52, no. 5 (Oct. 1964), pp. 23-48.

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Gift of Janet Jaffin

Tumblers
12 3/4 x 17 inches
EL 12.2000.13.01

Juggler with Dog
12 1/2 x 17 inches
EL 12.2000.13.02

Tumbler on Swing
17 x 12 5/8 inches
EL 12.2000.13.06
Figure 1

Trapeze Artist with Animals
17 x 13 3/4 inches
EL 12.2000.13.07

The Circus
12 x 17 inches
EL 12.2000.13.14
Cover

The Wild Beast Cage
14 x 13 1/4 inches
EL 12.2000.13.15

The Handstand with Chair
12 3/4 x 17 inches
EL 12.2000.13.16
Figure 2

Curator Note
The exhibition was organized by Camilla M. Cook under the supervision of Tracy Fitzpatrick, Neuberger Museum of Art Curator and Purchase College Assistant Professor of Art History. Sustaining support is provided by the Westchester Arts Council with funds from Westchester County government and with public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts, a state agency.

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