

On Art

MODERNISM IN A MAJOR KEY

ALLEXANDER Calder died on November 11, not quite a month after the gala opening of the retrospective of his work at the Whitney Museum. As reported in the *New York Times*, the news of his death at the age of 78 drew crowds to the museum who had come "to mourn and stayed to smile." Inevitable as an upsurge of public interest is with the passing of the famous, the idea of Calder more popular in death than in life is almost unimaginable. For many years now a display of his art, no matter how august its setting, has been a carnival event that few people have been able to resist.

Whether or not he was America's foremost sculptor—or, as some would have it, the modern world's—Calder was the supreme master of modernism as wholesome fun. (He himself noted that most of his fan letters came from the under-six generation.) The same might be said of Joan Miró as a painter, except that his work, which Calder's resembles, has its darker moments and a certain erotic flavor. Come to think of it, the most revered 20th-century artists are those whose achievements are leavened with

playfulness. For Calder, art itself seems to have been a form of play, an impression not dispelled by Jean Lipman's *Calder's Universe* (Viking, 351 pp., \$28.50).

Presented as a critical biography, this bright, good-looking volume is really more a celebration of the creative good life by a friend and admirer of the artist. It teems with pictures of mobiles, stabiles, gouaches, drawings, jewelry, a miscellany of designs, domestic objects and gags, as well as photographs of the man and his family at home in Connecticut and France. Well-laced with anecdotes, the text is reasonably informative, and there is a substantial bibliography. In a reversal of the usual procedure, the book formed the basis for the Whitney show, which will travel to Georgia early next year and thence to Minnesota and Texas.

Calder was remarkable for, among other things, being the third in a line of successful sculptors. The first, Alexander Milne Calder, began his career carving tombstones with his father in Aberdeen, Scotland. After a period studying art, he emigrated to the United States in 1868 at age 22, and settled in

Philadelphia. There he produced several monuments, including the eagles and figure groups on the City Hall tower and its crowning glory, the 37-foot-high statue of William Penn, some 20 years in the making.

His son, Alexander Stirling, an even more competent sculptor, was responsible for the Swann Fountain in Philadelphia, the figure of Washington on the arch of New York's Washington Square and Reykjavik's large statue of Leif Ericson. (Incidentally, according to Lipman the older Calder studied with Thomas Eakins at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. Other histories, however, say the son—not the father—was a pupil of the famous Philadelphia artist.)

The third Calder's background—his mother was a portrait painter—seemed to make it inevitable he would be an artist. Nevertheless, all accounts suggest he tried to avoid his fate, if only unconsciously. Though Alexander Calder showed artistic talent as a child, he enrolled at the Stevens Institute of Technology, obtaining a mechanical engineering degree in 1919 and demonstrating considerable aptitude for mathematics. For the next four years he halfheartedly filled a number of jobs, most of them related to his professional training.

Then, in 1923, the 25-year-old Calder faced up to his true métier and signed on at the Art Students' League in New York, remaining there for three years. It was in this period, while doing drawings part-time for the *National Police Gazette*, that he developed an interest in what was to be a major inspiration—the circus. After having had his first show of oil paintings in 1926, the artist took a job as a laborer on a freighter and sailed to France, where he produced some animal carvings in wood and began work on the miniature circus that later became famous.

Though he worked for several years on the circus, enlarging and perfecting it, there is no gauging

how seriously he took the project as a work of art. But in a time when it must have been even more difficult than it is today to distinguish the merely far-out from the innovative, the amused and/or outraged reactions of the cognoscenti to his performing wire figures and animals must have been critical encouragement of a kind.

In any case, the circus helped the young American eccentric meet artists such as Jules Pascin, Miró, Theo van Doesburg, and most important, Piet Mondrian. While Calder felt Mondrian's art would benefit from having the forms move, he was nonetheless impressed and began experimenting with abstract painting himself.

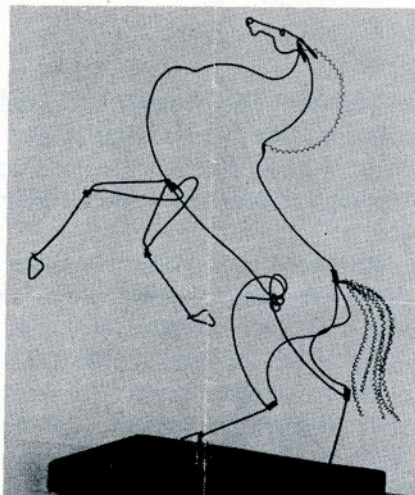
On a visit to Massachusetts in 1931, Calder married Louisa James, a great-niece of Henry, whom he had met a few years before on an Atlantic crossing. Returning with her to Paris, he produced his first show of abstract sculptures, followed by one of constructions operated by motors and hand cranks. Marcel Duchamp named these "mobiles," while Jean Arp suggested the stationary pieces be called "stabiles." Since then there has hardly been a year without a Calder exhibition somewhere in the world, or a major commission for sculpture, theater sets, book illustrations, tapestry designs, and so forth.

It would require considerable research to find a country that has not installed a Calder in a public place or staged a display of his art. Perhaps the most spectacular project came last year when Braniff airlines commissioned the artist to decorate its airplanes.

Calder invariably composed in a major key. The stabiles may be intrinsically less humorous than the mobiles—sometimes even a little threatening—yet their effect is still upbeat and jolly, like that of Jeeps and Caterpillar tractors. Various authorities have commented on how quintessentially American his constructions are; and this, I think, ac-

counts as much for his prestige abroad as at home. These peppy objects painted in prime nursery colors speak of progress, of the machine-as-man's-best-friend. Despite the obvious engineering skill involved, it all looks easy to do.

AMERICAN Calder certainly was, but in a way that now seems dated. Perhaps because the national character—or one's perception of it—has changed, his art begins to look nostalgic. One is made uneasy by the warmth it inspires. It is no longer possible to regard as peculiarly American those qualities Selden Rodman attributes to Calder:



"canniness, geniality . . . energy, inventiveness, pragmatism." Moreover, his—and the country's—"distaste for theory and concept," now seems more like impatience with the theories and concepts of others. It's interesting that this notion should have lasted so long in a nation founded on a theory.

Modernist though he was, Calder projected a faith in the illusions of the past—all those vague feelings of hope that comprised the American Dream in its purest, 18th-century sense. His forms may look like rebellion against the conservatism of his ancestors, yet they convey the same kind of optimism. That Calder talked very little about art and then only in down-to-earth terms, may

well have been because he had little to say. The more one ponders his jokes and offhand observations, the more he seems to resemble the other Calderes as they appeared in their monuments.

All three generations produced sculpture that was an accessory to architecture. The first two lived in confident times and their art confirmed that spirit. The art of the last Alexander Calder, made in a period of cultural disintegration, could confirm what stability there has been, but only with humorous diffidence. It is noteworthy that he felt architects and planners were mistaken when they sited his pieces in natural landscape: "My mobiles and stabiles ought to be placed in free spaces, like public squares, or in front of modern buildings, and that is true of all contemporary sculpture." How right he was, and how old-fashioned.

Lipman indicates that the sculptor, for all his prankishness, took himself quite seriously. For instance, he "wasn't too enthusiastic about the occasional mention of David Smith as America's most important sculptor." On hearing about the collector who had stripped the paint from a Smith, he asked jokingly if it had fallen apart. A singularly inappropriate crack this, considering that his own work—its technical skill notwithstanding—looks decidedly rinky-dink beside the heavy-duty *oeuvre* of Smith. Calder was also capable of Archie Bunkerisms—notably at the expense of Isamu Noguchi's work and Japanese ancestry.

It seems important to comment on the less mythic aspects of this artist, since even before death he was engulfed by the meaningless, all-purpose adoration society lavishes on its heroes. Like Picasso, who has been similarly victimized, Calder was a prodigious artist, a successful businessman and tough personality. This should be enough reason to miss him. He deserves better than Bionic immortality.