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Press Release

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WHITNEY AND POMPIDOU TO PRESENT A NEW LOOK AT CALDER IN *ALEXANDER CALDER: THE PARIS YEARS, 1926-1933*



Alexander Calder with *Josephine Baker* during the filming of a Pathé newsreel, 1929.
Calder Foundation, New York © 2008 Calder Foundation, New York / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

From his first caricatures to the birth of the mobile, exhibition looks at Calder's formative years, when he arrived at his revolutionary notion of "drawing in space"

"Calder's Circus" to be presented in new installation, reflecting its genesis in performance

Wire sculptures include all four extant Josephine Bakers together for the first time, mechanized moving abstractions, some never-before-exhibited animals from Calder's bestiary, and his first ceiling-suspended mobile

Many previously unexhibited drawings on view, including first Paris sketchbook, as well as newly discovered silent film of Calder at work in 1929, New York debut of a film of Calder performing his "Circus," and photographs of artist and his works by Brassai, Kertész, Thérèse Bonney, Agnès Varda, and Marc Vaux

NEW YORK, June 19, 2008 -- *Alexander Calder: The Paris Years* is the first comprehensive, critical look at the formative seven-year period between 1926 and 1933, when Calder, on his way to becoming one of the greatest American sculptors, discovered his own singular artistic vocabulary. A partnership between the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Centre Pompidou, Paris, this exhibition presents a fresh perspective on one of the most well-loved and critically esteemed artists of the 20th century, focusing on the period during which Calder came into his own. The exhibition, co-curated by Joan Simon, Whitney Curator-at-Large, and Brigitte Leal, Curator at the Centre Pompidou, debuts at the Whitney from October 16, 2008, through February 15, 2009, before traveling to the Centre Pompidou (March 18-July 20, 2009). The exhibition's lead sponsor is CIT.

Calder's years in Paris (including numerous trips back and forth to the U.S.) were a time of major transformation. When he arrived in Paris in 1926, at the age of 27, he was a painter and illustrator, specializing in urban realities, not unlike his teachers at the Art Students League, where he had studied between 1923 and 1925. By the time he left Paris to return to the U.S., in 1933, he had evolved into an international figure and a defining force in 20th-century sculpture.

It was during this crucial period in his artistic development that Calder arrived at his revolutionary notion of "drawing in space," a concept that remained central to all of his work throughout his long career. In Paris, he invented a radically new kind of open-form wire portrait, at a time when sculptural portraiture was limited primarily to busts carved in stone or wood, modeled in clay, or cast in bronze. Focusing on Calder's wire sculptures of the period, this exhibition follows from the artist's earliest mobilizing of articulated figures for toys, to the extended cast of his animated *Circus* (made in Paris from 1926 to 1931), to independent figurative sculptures—including the open-form, dimensional wire portraits—and abstract motorized works, and finally to Calder's releasing his line into buoyant, abstract, airborne gesture for his paradigm-shifting mobiles (so named by Marcel Duchamp), works that not only liberated sculpture from mass, but also incorporated movement as a "material" itself.

"CIT is pleased to partner once again with the Whitney Museum as the lead sponsor of *Alexander Calder: The Paris Years, 1926-1933*," said Jeffrey M. Peek, Chairman and CEO of CIT. "Our sponsorship of the Whitney exemplifies our longstanding support of culture in

New York City and in the global cities where CIT employees live and work. We wish the Whitney great success with the Calder show and look forward to the exhibition opening this fall."

The exhibition includes works of art from institutions and private collections from around the world. Among the works from the Whitney and Pompidou collections, both of which are rich in Calder holdings, are the motorized *Half-Circle*, *Quarter-Circle*, and *Sphere* (Whitney, 1932), the standing mobile *Object with Red Discs* (Whitney, 1931), the portrait *Varèse* (Whitney, c. 1930), the animal sculpture *Old Bull* (Whitney, 1930), one of his first suspended wire figures, *Josephine Baker IV* (Centre Pompidou, c. 1928), and the subtly balanced *Requin et Baleine* (Centre Pompidou, c. 1933). These sculptures—and others less well known—are juxtaposed with an extensive presentation of drawings, many of which have not been previously exhibited, as well as films, photographs, newspaper and magazine illustrations, and correspondence. Also included are examples of Calder's toys, some made for the artist's own amusement, and others for commercial production, and the watercolor and gouache drawings for them that include his detailed engineering instructions for their fabrication—echoes of his training and work as a mechanical engineer prior to his art-school studies.

Calder's skill as a reporter-illustrator was evident in his first wire portraits of notable people who were part of the newly omnipresent celebrity culture spanning the worlds of the music hall, café society, and sports arena. The first of his wire portraits was one of Josephine Baker and the other of a boxer dressed in top hat and tails. Capturing likeness and movement, both are emblematic of the phenomenal popularity in Paris of these two recent transatlantic arrivals from New York. *Alexander Calder: The Paris Years* includes, as an ensemble for the first time, all four extant Josephine Baker sculptures. In his multiple views of Baker, Calder shared with many other artists he would come to know in Paris a fascination with this celebrated figure (Mondrian, who was present at her debut in *La Revue nègre*, in 1925, chief among them); Calder joined a roster of artists who paid homage by capturing her likeness (including Man Ray, Henri Laurens, Picasso, Van Dongen, Foujita, in the 1920s, and, in the late 1930s, Le Corbusier).

Calder would also join the many artists for whom Kiki de Montparnasse served as celebrated model and muse, evoking her distinctive profile in wire sculptures several times. One of these (its whereabouts unknown) was made when Calder invited Kiki to pose in 1929

while he crafted a wire portrait for a film. The newly discovered silent film, *Montparnasse: Where the Muses Hold Sway*, a remarkable view of Paris in the 1920s, shows Calder (identified only as “the smart art world’s latest vogue – the telephone wire sculptor”) creating a portrait of Kiki and, in a previously unknown view, with one of his masterworks, *Spring (Printemps, 1928)*, included in the exhibition. The exhibition also includes the sole extant wire portrait of Kiki by Calder, *Kiki de Montparnasse II* (1930), from the collection of the Centre Pompidou. Another Kiki sculpture, *Féminité / Kiki’s Nose*, made around 1930, its whereabouts now unknown, is seen in the exhibition via a contemporaneous image by photographer Marc Vaux, also from the collection of the Centre Pompidou. Among other celebrities and celebrated events that became subjects of Calder’s wire sculptures were *Calvin Coolidge* (1927), *Helen Wills* (1927), *Jimmy Durante* (1928), *John D. Rockefeller* (c. 1927), and Lindbergh’s plane in *The Arrival of the Bremen or The Spirit of St. Louis* (c. 1928). Calder was at Paris’s Le Bourget airport when the record-setting transatlantic flight landed; the sculpture’s title also reflects the first East-West transatlantic flight of the Bremen in 1928.

It was during a visit to Mondrian’s studio in 1930 that Calder became riveted by the dynamic potential of Mondrian’s cardboard rectangles affixed to the walls and, further, an idea for their oscillating movement, which he suggested to Mondrian, who declined the offer. Following this visit, Calder began to paint again, and for a few weeks following “the shock” of this visit, he created a series of geometric abstractions, immediately followed by his abstract sculptures. His movement into abstraction would mark his work for the rest of his career.

Among Calder’s first major exhibitions were those held in Paris. From 1929–1933, his works were shown in such renowned galleries as the Billiet-Worms Gallery, the Percier Gallery, the Vignon Gallery, and the Pierre Gallery. In 1931, Calder exhibited with the group Abstraction-Création, a set of like-minded artists who promoted abstract art throughout Europe. During these important years, Calder created and showed his first abstract wire sculptures, his first motorized sculptures, as well as the “stabile” abstractions, a Calder genre titled by Jean Arp. *Alexander Calder: The Paris Years* examines and evokes Calder’s integral position within the international art scene and his friendships and working dialogues with peers.

Calder's Circus

Calder's Circus, one of Calder's most famous works, a legendary ensemble in its time, and the exhibition's conceptual and performative hub, was created over a period of five years in Paris. Numerous visits by Calder to circuses in the U.S. and in Paris were the catalyst for the artist's first figurative wire sculptures; the aerial play of circus figures informs many of his other works. His miniature *Circus* was a turning point for Calder, an embrace of the most ordinary of materials—wire and string, bits of metal and cloth—and his introduction of movement itself as a "material" for making animated sculpture of many kinds.

This exhibition evokes the original presentation of *Calder's Circus* as a performance. The installation includes the suitcases in which the artist transported his cast of characters, sets and props; Calder carried the *Circus* across the ocean to New York, initially in two suitcases in 1927, and later, as the number of acts and performers increased, in five. These suitcases are in the Whitney's collection, and in exhibiting them along with the many circus components, the realities of the *Circus's* transitory and performative nature are apparent. Also on view are the phonograph records Calder played on his Victrola while giving his *Circus* performances, and the supplies he used when sewing the costumes. This approach addresses a critical aspect of Calder's practice: his position as a performer and a maker of performative sculpture. Stretched out on the floor, animating the work in an early example of "performance art," Calder was ringmaster, narrator, and puppeteer as he set into motion the many acts of his miniature *Circus*, including aerialists, clowns, acrobats, knife-thrower, sword-swallower, and a full complement of Roman chariots for a race finale.

In the early 1970s, *Calder's Circus* was put on extended loan to the Whitney by the artist; in 1983, the Whitney purchased the work as the result of an extraordinary grassroots fundraising project by more than 500 people. It has been on nearly continuous view at the Whitney for the past 25 years and has become one of the centerpieces of the Museum's collection. This exhibition marks the first time since it was acquired by the Whitney that the *Circus* will leave the Museum, when it travels to Paris, the city of its making and earliest performances.

Drawings

The show includes many drawings being shown for the first time. Among them are the following:

- Circus drawings of 1925, made both at Ringling Brothers in New York and Sarasota, Florida. They include abstracted views of the wire structures supporting the circus tents and linear riggings for aerial acts, as well as intimate, realistic character studies of backstage life.
- Drawings (1925–26) sketched while observing animals at the Central Park Zoo and Bronx Zoo as he was preparing his instructional book *Animal Sketching* (1926). Calder wrote the text as well as captured the movement of animals in his pen-and-ink line drawings.
- Calder's first sketchbook, begun soon after his arrival in Paris, in 1926, inscribed with the address of the hotel in Montparnasse where he first stayed. Within are the drawings he made at the nearby Académie de la Grande Chaumière, one of the most famous art schools in Paris, where artists drew from live models.
- Drawings for toys, with detailed instructions for their fabrication, designed in Paris and commercially produced by the Gould Manufacturing Company, Oshkosh, Wisconsin.
- *Notes on Calder's Circus* (1949), is addressed to his wife and daughters and is a large, folded drawing that offers the artist's instructions for precise assembly of the *Circus*.

Film

The exhibition includes rare films of Calder at work: *Sculptor Discards Clay*, of 1928, and the New York premiere of *Le Grand Cirque Calder 1927* (1955), made by Jean Painlevé, who first saw Calder perform the *Circus* during his "Paris Years" and made the film some 25 years later.

Also showing for the first time in the United States is *Montparnasse—Where the Muses Hold Sway* (1929), where Calder is seen as a member of the artists' community of Montparnasse and at work in his studio, creating a wire portrait of the most famous artists' model of the period, Kiki de Montparnasse, as discussed above.

Newspaper and magazine illustrations

A selection of Calder's caricature sketches and other newspaper and magazine illustrations from *The National Police Gazette*, *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, and the *Herald Tribune* highlights Calder's line and his observant eye, and includes subjects that also turn up in his paintings, such as *Six Day Bike Race* (1924) and *Circus Scene* (1926).

Correspondence and other documents

An astute observer of his surroundings and a lively reporter of events, Calder wrote letters to his family from the time he was a child. A selection is included in the show, as are some of the artist's childhood drawings, and toys he made as a youngster, precursors to those he made in the 1920s. In addition, the exhibition includes the scrapbook that Calder kept between 1926 and 1932, which includes reviews and exhibition announcements in many languages.

Catalogue

The catalogue, *Alexander Calder: The Paris Years, 1926-1933*, edited by Joan Simon and Brigitte Leal, is 304 pages with 325 images, including color plates of the works in the exhibition. In addition to essays by the exhibition's curators, Leal and Simon, the book includes contributions from Quentin Bajac, Annie Cohen-Solal, Pepe Karmel, Eleonora Nagy with Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, Henry Petroski, and Arnauld Pierre, and a chronology by Alexander S.C. Rower. A multifaceted portrait of the artist and the period, the book offers new research and analysis of individual works and the contexts in which they were made. The essayists discuss Calder's many innovations during "The Paris Years," chief among them his abstract, motorized, and mobile works. They analyze the extended cast of Calder's animated *Circus*, and include previously unpublished photographs by Brassai and Kertész of Calder and this beloved performative sculpture. They explore the intellectual, cultural, and artistic milieu of Paris in the late 1920s and early 1930s and the contexts of Calder's friendships with Miró, Mondrian, Duchamp, and Man Ray, among others. The catalogue, co-published by the Whitney and the Centre Pompidou, will be published in separate French and English editions, the latter distributed by Yale University Press.

Whitney Live

Objective Suspense: Colin Gee at the Calder Circus

Conceived and performed by Colin Gee (A Whitney Live Commission)

October 2008 - February 2009

In gallery-integrated performances during Museum hours, Colin Gee creates a series of intimate performance experiences, inspired by *Calder's Circus*. Trained at the Lecoq School in Paris and Dell'Arte School of Physical Theatre, Gee is a former principal clown for Cirque du Soleil. With *Calder's Circus* in the background, Gee manipulates abstract forms in an act that focuses on the dynamics of movement, connecting with the public through eye contact, rhythm, play, and stillness.

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About CIT

CIT (NYSE: CIT) is a global commercial finance company that provides financial products and advisory services to more than one million customers in over 50 countries across 30 industries. A leader in middle market financing, CIT has more than \$70 billion in managed assets and provides financial solutions for more than half of the Fortune 1000. A member of the S&P 500 and Fortune 500, it maintains leading positions in asset-based, cash flow and Small Business Administration lending, equipment leasing, vendor financing and factoring. The CIT brand platform, Capital Redefined, articulates its value proposition of providing its customers with the relationship, intellectual and financial capital to yield infinite possibilities. Founded in 1908, CIT is celebrating its Centennial throughout 2008. www.cit.com

About the Whitney

The Whitney Museum of American Art is the leading advocate of 20th- and 21st-century American art. Founded in 1930, the Museum is regarded as the preeminent collection of American art and includes major works and materials from the estate of Edward Hopper, the largest public collection of works by Alexander Calder, Louise Nevelson, and Lucas Samaras, as well as significant works by Jasper Johns, Donald Judd, Agnes Martin, Bruce Nauman, Georgia O'Keeffe, Claes Oldenburg, Kiki Smith, and Andy Warhol, among other artists. With its history of exhibiting the most promising and influential American artists and provoking intense critical and public debate, the Whitney's signature show, the Biennial, has become the most important survey of the state of contemporary art in America today. First housed on West 8th Street, the Whitney relocated in 1954 to West 54th Street and in 1966 inaugurated its present home at 945 Madison Avenue, designed by Marcel Breuer.

Current and Upcoming Exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art:

Polaroids: Mapplethorpe

Through September 7, 2008

Buckminster Fuller: Starting with the Universe

June 26–September 21, 2008

Paul McCarthy: Three Installations, Two Films

June 26–October 12, 2008

Alexander Calder: The Paris Years

October 16, 2008–February 15, 2009

William Eggleston

November 7, 2008–January 25, 2009

The Whitney Museum is located at 945 Madison Avenue, New York City. Museum hours are: Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., Friday from 1 p.m. to 9 p.m., closed Monday and Tuesday. Admission is \$15 for adults; free for members, children (ages 11 and under), and New York City public high school students. Senior citizens (62 and over) and students with valid ID: \$10. There is a \$6 admission fee for a pass to the Kaufman Astoria Studios Film & Video Gallery only. Admission is pay-what-you-wish on Fridays, 6–9 pm. For information, please call 1-212-570-3600 or visit whitney.org