

**FAMOUS ARTISTS SERIES:
ALEXANDER CALDER (1898-1976)**

Supplies needed:

ART BIN:

- Sandy's Circus book, by Tanya Lee Stone
- Project sample of stabile structure
- Sharpie marker, for writing child's name on the bottom of the cup
- Shape samples
- Black pipe cleaners (4 per student)
- Construction paper (red, yellow, blue and black)
- Clear plastic cups (1 per student)

CFA CLOSET:

- Florist foam (1 per student)

OTHER:

- Elmer's glue, from classroom supplies
- Scissors, from classroom supplies

AHEAD OF TIME NOTE:

- Check supplies for foam, pipe cleaners, construction paper and cups
- Ask teacher to have glue and scissors ready for each student to use
- Mark plastic cups with child's name on the bottom (or do this once in the classroom)

PRESENTATION (20 minutes):

Today we are going to learn about the American artist Alexander Calder. We are going to start by reading excerpts from Sandy's Circus by Tanya Lee Stone.

Begin by reading the first three pages of text in Sandy's Circus.

Alexander Calder is an American artist who was born in 1898 and died in 1976. He lived with his wife in Connecticut, Paris, 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. He was most content when he was in the act of *creating*.

Alexander Calder is known to have produced over 16,000 works of art! He made many things including prints, drawings, jewelry, sculpture and his famous hanging mobiles. The Calder Foundation, run by his grandson, is planning to open a museum dedicated to Calder's art in Baltimore, M.D.

Present- [Photo of Alexander Calder](#):

- *What do you see?*
- *Discuss the wire sculptures in front of Calder. What do they look like?*
- *They are sculptures “drawn” by bending and shaping a single wire. As if a line drawing has sprung from the flat page and become a 3-dimensional portrait.*

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 circus performers, and spent days watching and drawing pictures of *Barnum and Bailey’s Circus*.

Refer back to [Sandy’s Circus](#) – read pages 7 & 8.

- *Ask if anyone has ever gone to see the circus.*

In 1926, Calder went to Paris, France where he created one of the first “Performance Artworks”. Refer back to [Sandy’s Circus](#) – show pages 17-23. He made a mini-circus, complete with animals, acrobats, ringmaster and highwire acts. All of his figures were able to “perform” – Calder would move and work the tiny players, putting on circus performances to entertain his friends. Interestingly, his work was all made of discarded items – bits and pieces of wire, cloth, yarn, bottlecaps, corks. Calder was the first “recycler”!

Watch- [Calder’s Circus \(Second video\)](#)

Note: ~ 5 minutes (watch at least the first 3 minutes for the balloon part).

- *Ask students “Do you see what kinds of objects he used for his circus sculptures?”*

In 1930, Calder visited his friend Piet (pronounced Pee-Yay) Mondrian, an artist who worked in a very orderly studio, with rectangles of painted cardboard pinned to the walls. Mondrian’s paintings were as neat as his studio!

Present - [Opposition of lines Red & Yellow](#) by Mondrian:

Calder’s loose, creative environment was very different from Mondrian’s studio and artwork; but he liked Mondrian’s colors and shapes. He used the same colors of red, yellow, blue and black and simple geometric shapes in his work. He told Mondrian he wanted to see those geometric shapes *move*! At that point, Calder began to make sculptures with moving parts, driven by motors. Unfortunately the mechanisms would break down, and Calder was dissatisfied with the predictable motion of the machines.

Thus the “mobile” was invented. In fact, prior to 1931 there was no such thing as a “mobile” – that is a term his friend Mondrian used to describe the works Calder was creating at that time. A mobile is a sculpture that is flat and visually uninteresting when two-dimensional, but when it is hung-up, the sculpture is constantly changing with the shapes in constant, random motion.

Present-Calder's Mobiles:

- *The most important issue for a mobile is balance. The “fulcrum” is the point at which the mobile will balance. Actually making a mobile so that it balances perfectly is a bit harder than it looks.*
- *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.*
- *Mention the random motion of a mobile, hanging and moving with the wind.*

Compare the colorful mobile to the work of Piet Mondrian's picture “Opposition of lines Red & Yellow”.

- *How are these two works of art the same? How are they different?*

Calder became very famous, and designed very large mobiles and sculpture for cities. He designed a 75-foot wide mobile specifically to hang in the lobby of the West Wing of the National Gallery in Washington D.C. Keep your eyes open at museums – whenever you see a mobile check to see if it is a “Calder”!

In Chicago there are a number of his works: A 25-ton steel “stable” called “Flamingo” stands outdoors at the Federal Plaza, The Art Institute of Chicago exhibits several of Calder's and the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art also has a large sculpture shown here:

Present- Circus Stable, Performing Seal, 1950:

- *This sculpture is at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. It is large-scaled and sits on the floor so you can walk around it.*
- *Look at the base. What animal does this look like? What is it doing?*
- *Calder called this sculpture a “Stabile” instead of “Mobile”? Why do you think it's called this? (Discuss the meaning of words stable vs. mobile)*
- *While the base of the sculpture is a “stable” (On the floor, can be walked around), the balls that the seal is juggling are in the form of a “mobile.”*

SUGGESTED PROJECT (about 20 minutes): Calder-Inspired “Stabile”

Show the project sample of the stabile. Today you are going to create your own mini sculpture, Calder-inspired stabile. Show students the materials and give the students a demonstration to complete the project.

We will use a plastic cup and foam for the base of the sculpture, pipe cleaners for wire, and red, yellow, blue and black paper to create the geometric shapes that Calder used in his work. You may decide to use one color or many colors, as Calder did. You may choose to cut one kind of shape, like a circle, or different shapes: a circle, a square, a triangle, a half-circle, etc. You can also cut the shapes in different sizes: small, medium and large.

Directions:

1. Fold each piece of construction paper in half and cut a single shape from each one. (if you cut on the fold, it's easier to match the two sides for gluing, but it will work either way!)
2. Glue shapes back to back onto pipe cleaners, sandwiching the pipe cleaner between the two matching shapes. Use plenty of glue to make sure it sticks!
3. Bend and twist each pipe cleaner in a different, interesting way. Leave about 2" at the end straight for sticking into the foam.
4. Press a piece of florist foam into your cup.
5. Now, stick your pipe cleaners into the foam and bend them as necessary to create balance, both visually and physically. You don't want your sculpture to have too much weight on one side – it may topple over!

Volunteer Note:

- Please final project home with the students.