Alexander Calder

Born: 1898 Died: 1976

- Type of Art: mobiles and standing sculptures
- Mediums Used: wire, wood, paint, metal
- Short History
  - Born in Pennsylvania.
  - Both Mother and Father were artists. His grandfather was a famous sculpture.
  - Spent much of childhood in studios posing for paintings and sculptures.
  - Fascinated by the stars and planets and how machines worked. He was a mechanical thinker.
  - Moved all over the United States as a child.
  - Kept busy by making toys for himself and his sister.
  - He eventually began making mobiles out of abstract metal shapes, wire, and string; then painted them with his favorite colors.
  - Studied mechanical engineering at the Stevens Institute of Technology from 1915 – 1919.
  - Worked as an engineer and also learned drafting. Drafting is creating special drawings of engineering plans.) This is where he developed a love of drawing.
  - Attended night school in New York City
  - Became an illustrator for a magazine. His first assignment was to make drawings of the circus that came to New York City.
  - Traveled to Paris, France in 1926 where he took drawings classes.
  - Just for fun, Calder would make circus characters out of wire, cloth, corks and string. Most of the circus figures he made would actually do things. It was like watching a three dimensional cartoon show.
  - Calder used his mechanical background to begin making movable sculptures of shapes and spheres, which were made to move by using small cranks and motors. Soon he grew bored of the predictability of movement and began making sculptures that would float in the air and move when a breeze blew.
  - In the 1930’s the planet Pluto was discovered. This inspired Calder to make mobiles based on images of the solar system.
  - He later created stabiles, which are stationary cutout metal standing sculptures. Many of Calder’s stabiles are so large, you can walk under them and remind people of gigantic insects, birds, or prehistoric animals.
  - Alexander Calder died in 1976 in New York City at the age of 78. He had become one of the most famous artists of the 20th century. His idea of making fun, colorful shapes move naturally in the air changed the way people thought about sculpture forever.
• Fun facts
  ✓ His nickname is Sandy.
  ✓ His favorite place to go was to the Central Park Zoo in New York City where he drew the animals.
  ✓ One of Calder’s stabiles, The Crab is on display at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston.

• Key Words
  ✓ Mobiles, stabiles, drafting, illustrator, 20th century, predictable
Questions About Art

Alexander Calder
“Mobiles de Calder – Feathers” - 1931

1. What do you think this object is?
   Standing Mobile

2. What type of art is a mobile: painting, sculpture or architecture?
   It is a form of sculpture. Calder’s first mobiles were crank or motor driven, but he tired of them because of their predictability and their tendency to break down. He invented sculpture that moved by themselves or wind. The term “mobile” now refers only to non-motorized sculptures.

3. What makes this object move?
   The mobile moves with the slightest current of air because it is carefully weighted and balanced. The parts move within a carefully planned pattern, constantly shifting in their spaces. Its movement is not predictable.

4. The elements of art are: line, color texture, pattern, space, and movement.
   What elements of art do you see in this piece?
   The colors are red, blue, black and yellow. Calder preferred simple colors and used primary colors with black and white on most of his mobiles. Line can be seen in the extensions. The whole piece of art shows space and movement. Space is created between and around the parts of the piece. The space is fluid and changes with movement. This piece of art, unlike a painting, actually moves in space. The movements of the parts create a transformation of form of the entire piece. Each time it moves, it becomes new.

5. What material do you think Calder used to make this mobile?
   This standing mobile was done in 1931. It is made out of wire, wood, and paint. It stands 38 inches X 32 inches X 16 inches.

6. How do you think Calder made the pieces balance?
   Calder explained, “I start by cutting out a lot of shapes. Next, I file them and smooth them off. Some are bits I just happen to find. Then I arrange them on a table with wires between the pieces for overall pattern. Finally, I cut some more with my shears, for balance this time. To balance, you put a disc there and then you put another disc at the other end and then you balance them on your finger. I begin with the smallest and work up. Once I know the balance point for the first pair of discs, I anchor it by a hook to another arm, where it acts as one end of another pair of scales, and so on up”.