

Body Sculpture Crafted by Calder

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A poet wielding tin snips, cutting torch, hammer and pliers, the American-born artist Alexander Calder (1898-1976) created abstract hybrid sculptures that are part flora, part fauna and part product of the modern machine shop. He defied all expectations of what a sculpture could be.

In 1930, Calder visited Mondrian's Paris studio, where he got the wild idea that Neoplasticism's primary color planes, freed from both the canvas and the right angle, could be set in motion. Mondrian was not pleased. Nevertheless, hanging Calder "mobiles" -- breeze-driven, biomorphic sculptures that dance, bob, cast shadows, and weave -- were born.

Calder, trained as an engineer, believed that most store-bought items were inferior. His answer was to turn every aspect of his life into an extension of his art. Practically every object in the Calder home -- from games, toys and eating utensils to ashtrays, bells, handles and hinges -- was made by the artist. Jewelry was no exception. Calder made roughly 1,800 pieces of jewelry during his lifetime (including his engagement ring to his wife, Louisa), most of which he gave as gifts to family and friends. And, as with his sculptures and domestic objects, Calder's jewelry defied the conventions of what jewelry can be.

The astonishing show "Calder Jewelry," on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art until Mar. 1, brings together approximately 90 of the artist's wearable objets d'art -- one-of-a-kind necklaces, earrings, bracelets, brooches, combs and tiaras. It was organized by Jane Adlin, an associate curator at the Met, along with Alexander S.C. Rower, the artist's grandson and Calder Foundation director, and Mark Rosenthal, an adjunct curator at the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach, Fla., where the show originated. Accompanying the exhibition is a lavish catalog, published by Yale University Press, that features more than 450 of Calder's pieces of jewelry. Illustrated with masterly, up-close photographs by Mari Robeldo, it makes Calder's fantastical creations tangible.

At first sight the Met's galleries feel like typical boutique displays. Filled with vitrines of Calder's jewelry, however, the displays become something quite different. Calder's jewelry feels mythically empowered. The pieces are made of recognizable materials such as wood, wire, gold, silver and sea glass. But Calder was an alchemist and a shaman. His jewelry transforms into whirlpools, butterflies, snakes, stars, teardrops and leaves. The jewelry is magical and alive -- like armor or adornments for the gods. Muscularly taut, Calder's jewelry appears to writhe, wiggle and dance, which shifts the Met's displays from simple vitrines to cages, miniature botanical gardens and entomologists' cases.

If there is one problem with this dazzling exhibition, it is that Calder's jewelry, which needs to be seen on a moving body, is stationary. I want to see exactly how wild and forceful, if not unwieldy, some of these objects

are. I want to see what shadows are cast by a Calder mobile dangling from an ear, or to hear what kind of percussive music it creates.

Still, even fixed as the pieces are at the Met to mannequins and the walls, Calder's jewelry has ritualistic and talismanic power. Much of this has to do with the artist's ability to give broken bits of crockery and shards of glass the qualities of reliquary fragments and precious stones; to imbue wire with the movements of tendrils and wings; and to hammer metals so that they feel as pliant as leaves or as eager as lapping tongues.

"Calder Jewelry" is a fairy tale come to life. One of the first pieces on view is a delicate and gangly brass "Crown" (c. 1940) that rises and showers light like a burst of fireworks. It is basically a simple, crude wire ring, not unlike a child's costume tiara; but it sprouts a bouquet of magic wands each finished with a star-shaped leaf or flower. Calder has bowed these wands outward, creating the illusion of weight and volition.

Nothing in this show remains merely jewelry. And the body, rather than act as a mere support, interacts with Calder's wearable art. Midway through the show is a brilliant "Brooch" (c. 1938) made of brass, wire, steel and glass. Enigmatic, the brooch resembles a flower, a bird in flight and a Ninja star. At its center is a cluster of ruby-red glass beads that suggest berries, ovule and wound. As with many of Calder's pieces of jewelry, the brooch can appear to transform its owner's body into garden or sky. In the brass wire necklace "Harps and Hearts" (c. 1937) miniature harp forms, suspended away from the body, dive through the necklace's strings like animals through hoops. The harps look as if they have leapt out of the wearer's chest -- as if they were plucking and strumming the body. In another large brass wire necklace from 1940, a taut gathering of curlicues spreads out beyond the shoulders and down to the waist. The necklace turns its wearer into an armature for a whimsical yet potentially dangerous Calder mobile.

In practically every culture, jewelry, or adornment, has been the most direct way to demonstrate wealth and power. Portable, wearable and seen sparkling from a distance, jewelry is an art form that allows its owner to flaunt affluence and personality in one fell swoop. Calder understood jewelry's power at the most primal level. To make these truly modern works of wearable sculpture, he borrowed freely from African, American Indian, Pre-Columbian and Hiberno-Saxon forms of adornment.

This vibrant and vital exhibition is the first to be devoted to the artist's jewelry, and what a thrill it is to be immersed in yet another aspect of Calder's genius with form and motion. Calder's jewelry, primitive yet extravagant, intimate and human in scale, is an art perfectly fit for playing and preening.