

ALEXANDER CALDER: THE PAINTER

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Before ever committing to becoming an artist, Alexander Calder was compelled to paint. In 1922, while working as a timekeeper in a logging camp in Washington State, Calder was inspired by the mountain landscape and wrote home for paints and brushes. Soon after, he had along conversation with a Canadian engineer about his career path: “He advised me to do what I really wanted to do—he himself often wished he had been an architect. So, I decided to become a painter.”¹ Celebrated for his mobiles, stabiles, and monumental sculpture, Calder is not commonly referred to as a painter. He invented new forms and adopted new media for his work in three dimensions—startling creative leaps in twentieth-century sculpture—but people often overlook the fact that he was initially trained as a painter and returned throughout his prolific career to experiments in two dimensions. The first exhibition of Calder’s paintings since 1972 at the Perls Galleries, *Alexander Calder: The Painter* presents thirty oil paintings that span five decades, exploring this lesser-known yet imaginative body of work. From early on, Calder’s fascination with movement and space is an underlying constant in his paintings. Informed by classes at the Art Students League, where Calder enrolled in 1923 and studied under artists such as Boardman Robinson and John Sloan, his early depictions of bustling New York City street scenes and events are congruous with the Ashcan aesthetic (pp. 7, 9). Around this time, Calder also used the canvas to capture the spatial relations within the circus tent—as seen in *The Flying Trapeze*, where the acrobats seem to propel forward through space on arced trajectories (p. 11).¹

Through painting, Calder was able to explore dynamic forces in classical abstract compositions that would precede and inform his invention of the mobile. Reacting to a visit in Piet Mondrian’s studio in October 1930, Calder created a couple dozen oil paintings in a non-objective manner and with a restrained palette (pp. 12–17). Most of these do not resemble Mondrian’s pure colors and geometry, nor do they resemble anything else within Calder’s work, as singular representations of his first venture into pure abstraction. From the 1940s to 1950s, Calder made a large number of robust paintings containing discs, biomorphic shapes, and suspended spirals that delve into ideas of space and perception. Alternately from this period is a unique composition entitled *My Shop* (p. 43), showing the Roxbury studio from Calder’s perspective with paintings in various states of completion, including four works in this exhibition. Among them are *São Paulo* and *Santos*, both painted on plywood recycled from shipping crates, recalling the artist’s creative use of discarded material (pp. 45, 47). Calder continued his commitment to the canvas into the 1970s, ultimately producing some 400 paintings over the course of his career. Although his sculpture today steals the spotlight, his artistic achievement was a result in part of his early training and unremitting valuation of line, space, and energetic equilibrium in two dimensions.

¹ 1. Calder, *Calder, An Autobiography with Pictures* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1966), 59.