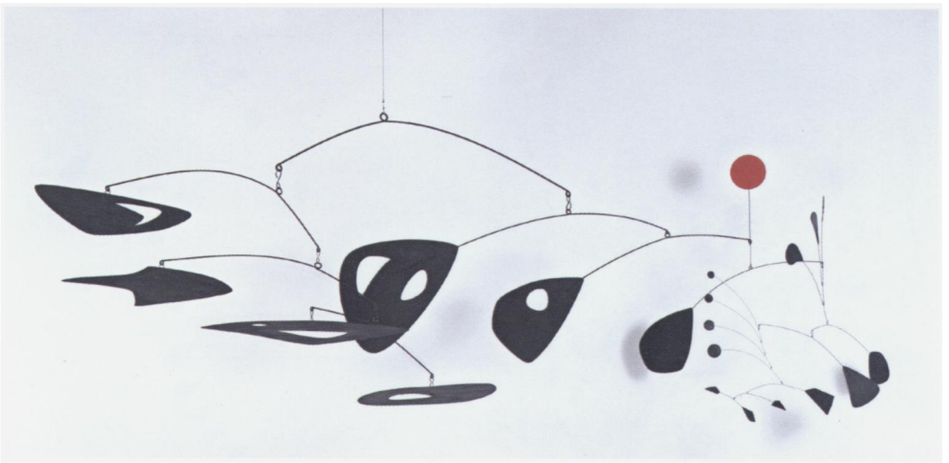
Calder and Miró
Basel

by CATHERINE CRAFT



85. *Twenty leaves and an apple*, by Alexander Calder. 1946. Sheet metal, piano wire, and paint, 122 by 366 cm. (Cincinnati Art Museum; exh. Fondation Beyeler, Basel).

WHEN ALEXANDER CALDER went to Joan Miró's Paris studio in 1928, he found it almost empty. Instead of paintings, there were only a few collage-objects assembled from such materials as feathers, string and cork. Calder found even these puzzling: 'It did not look like art to me.'[1] Nonetheless, he reciprocated with an invitation of his own, and Miró visited the sculptor's studio and watched as Calder, on hands and knees, gave a performance of his antic *Circus*. Miró left without saying a word, but years later he commented, 'When I first saw Calder's art very long ago I thought it was good, but not art'.[2]

Ambivalent first impressions aside, the two artists soon became great friends. *Calder Miró* at the **Fondation Beyeler, Basel** (to 5th September), celebrates their friendship by focusing upon the years of their most active contact, interchange and development, from the late 1920s until 1950.[3] The exhibition's organisers have brought together a stunning array of works with objects paired in ways that highlight shared formal and thematic affinities, such as the preference of both for evocatively biomorphic elements and their use of framing devices to suggest stage-like spaces. A selection of pieces created before the artists' first meeting opens the show, thereby demonstrating shared interests already at work, including a fascination with toys and the circus as well as the use of humour as a means to subvert convention. Attention is also given to their involvement in large-scale public commissions; while opportunities for this type of work were infrequent, Oliver Wick's well-researched catalogue essay traces individual projects, culminating in the construction of a Cincinnati hotel that included a mural by Miró and a mobile by Calder (Figs.84 and 85).[4]

In its exuberant tribute to the artists' friendship, *Calder Miró* is one of the most joyous exhibitions in recent memory, but it is also one of the most exhausting, with an installation so crowded that individual pieces begin to blur together. Even the connection between the monumental Cincinnati works disappears in the profusion of objects hanging on the walls, dangling from the ceiling and rising up from the floor. Many exhibitions have this problem, but here the visual overload masks an apparently purposeful conceptual limitation. Despite the contention that *Calder Miró* is the first project to 'fully document the friendship between the two artists' (catalogue, p.17), a curious reticence pervades every consideration of their work. A passage in Elizabeth Hutton Turner's introductory essay aptly sums up the approach: 'Were Calder's shapes borrowed from Miró or Miró's shapes borrowed from Calder? . . .. No matter: their true originality and purpose lay elsewhere' (p.28).

The reasons for this diplomatic determination to avoid giving precedence to either artist may lie in their exhibition history. Museum curators and art dealers have been teaming up Calder and Miró since the 1930s (the Galerie Beyeler presented a show of their work in 1972), and although the pair enjoyed opportunities to exhibit together, the results were not always beneficial. Calder's lively sculpture was often deployed as an 'initiatory lesson' in Miró's presumably more esoteric work, as when the Museum of Modern Art's Miró retrospective travelled to Vassar College in 1942 (p.289). An equal number of Calder's works were added to the installation with the result that, as a friend excitedly reported to Calder: 'We have never had more fun or more of a gallery success. Your pieces gave just that fillip to the Mirós that got them off being too flat and squiggly . . .. The combination of them worked out marvelously' (p.290). In such comparisons, Miró's work suffered not only from being regarded as cryptic but also from its staid inability to do anything other than sit quietly on a wall. Yet Calder perhaps received worse treatment, with critics and historians often assessing his achievements too lightly, as if he had merely plucked forms from Miró's canvases and set them in motion.

The exhibition takes care to challenge as many of these clichés as possible, less by examining them than by raising and then ignoring them. Calder was still trying to find his way as a sculptor when he met Miró, and, although he identified Mondrian as the catalyst in the development of his kinetic sculptures, he was also always quite forthcoming about Miró's importance to his work. Thus, the question of influence is scarcely irresolvable, although it is not very satisfying in suggesting further insights. Yet the refusal of *Calder Miró* to examine such historical issues more closely diminishes the exhibition's ability to present a more probing consideration of the forces driving either artist's work. Instead, it relies primarily upon an insistent connoisseurship whereby the aesthetic quality of the selected works is left with the responsibility of asserting their creators' equal standing.

Occasionally this strategy works to powerful effect. In one room a densely hung group of Miró's darkly lyrical *Constellations* confronts a number of Calder's small mobiles (Figs.86 and 87). Lit with subdued spots in a room

84. *Mural painting for the Terrace Plaza Hotel, Cincinnati*, by Joan Miró. 1947. 259 by 935 cm. (Cincinnati Art Museum; exh. Fondation Beyeler, Basel).

86. *The beautiful bird revealing the unknown to a pair of lovers (Constellation)*, by Joan Miró. 1941. Gouache and oil wash on paper, 45.7 by 38 cm. (Museum of Modern Art, New York; exh. Fondation Beyeler, Basel).

87. *S-shaped vine*, by Alexander Calder. 1946. Sheet metal, wire and paint, 250 by 175.5 cm. (Eli and Edythe L. Broad collection; exh. Fondation Beyeler, Basel).

otherwise dimmed to protect the works on paper, the mobiles cast shadows that become difficult to distinguish from the solidity of the objects themselves, generating a sensation of weightless intimacy that resonates powerfully with Miró's small gouaches. Such juxtapositions can elegantly reveal the conjunction of shared thematic interests with the visual means to express them, but when such pairings are virtually the only strategy used to articulate historical, conceptual and formal relationships, the repeated effect can be numbing (particularly in a crowded installation), however high the quality of the works.

The complex of proposed thematic relationships between Calder's and Miró's work is impressive within these narrow bounds but contains few deviations from what might be considered a canonical view of either artist. Largely absent is the parallel ambivalence experienced by both upon their first contact with the other's work. At the time they met and during the first years of their friendship in the Surrealist-imbued milieu of Paris, virtually every ambitious artist was seeking a way 'beyond' conventional media and techniques, and they were no exception. Miró had undertaken a vigorous attack on painting, while Calder's development of the mobile initially struck him as so radical a departure from the sculpture he knew that he had no name for it. *Calder Miró* makes much of their interest in public commissions as a way to transcend the conventional boundaries of art, but this dissatisfaction with the limitations of their respective *métiers* took many other forms, few of which are actually considered here.

This is unfortunate, especially since their explorations often took them into each other's territory, with Miró using aspects of sculpture and assemblage as a weapon against painting and Calder conceiving the play of his sculptures' elements pictorially as well as three-dimensionally. A few of Miró's more characteristic later sculptures are included in the exhibition, but there are no *Spanish dancers*, his name for the varied assemblages that Calder had seen upon his first visit to Miró, nor are there any of his collages. Similarly, the paintings Calder made just before the development of his mobiles as he struggled to give form to his evolving thoughts on time, abstraction and movement have been omitted, as have his own assemblages of found objects from the 1930s. Of course, the objection can be made that such works are scarcely the signature masterpieces one expects from either artist. But then again – as Calder and Miró themselves knew – battling clichés, assumptions and limitations often requires unconventional strategies.

[1] A. Calder with J. Davidson: *An Autobiography With Pictures*, New York 1966, p.92.

[2] 'For a Big Show in France, Calder "Oughs" His Work', *The New York Times* (3rd April 1969), sec.1, p.49.

[3] After its showing at the Fondation Beyeler, the exhibition travels to the **Phillips Collection, Washington** (9th October to 23rd January).

[4] Catalogue: *Calder Miró*. Edited by Elizabeth Hutton Turner and Oliver Wick. 312 pp. incl. 135 col. pls. + 150 col. and b. & w. ills. (Philip Wilson Publishers, London, in association with the Phillips Collection, Washington, and Fondation Beyeler, Basel, 2004), Sw.F.58. ISBN 3–905632–30–6.

The Della Rovere

Urbino and elsewhere

by SABINE EICHE

ORGANISED BY Paolo Dal Poggetto, *I Della Rovere*, currently showing at the **Palazzo del Duca, Senigallia**; **Palazzo Ducale, Urbino**; **Palazzo Ducale, Pesaro**; and **Palazzo Ducale, Urbania** (to 3rd October), is touted as an exhibition to 'illustrate for the first time the magnificence of the celebrated dynasty that succeeded the Montefeltro in 1508' with approximately 'three hundred works of art and masterpieces from museums around the world'.[1] It is accompanied by a weighty catalogue including individual entries and over 250 pages of essays on the history, culture, architecture, dress, arms and armour, patronage, painting, sculpture and ceramics.[2]

The challenge of mounting an exhibition on a subject that is more suitable for a lengthy and well-illustrated book was formidable, and, sadly, *I Della Rovere* did not meet it. The visitor who has no more than a working knowledge of the history of the dukes of Urbino will be perplexed to understand the relevance of some of the exhibits, nor will his or her bemusement be alleviated by a spectacle of masterpieces: only a fraction of the objects on display (maiolica excepted) are of outstanding quality, and less than twenty of three hundred works come from 'museums around the world'.

Staged in four parts, the exhibition is divided among the four principal cities of the former duchy. Senigallia, ruled from the end of the fifteenth century by the first Della Rovere lord, Giovanni il Prefetto, introduces the story with 'The Origins of the Dynasty'; in Urbino the focus switches to 'The Dukes, Iconography and Patronage'; Pesaro offers a sampling of 'Patronage in Pesaro. Ceramics'; and Urbania is dedicated to 'Francesco Maria II in Casteldurante. Graphic Arts. Science'. The titles alone reveal one of the main problems of the exhibition, namely that it lacks a single guiding principle to bind the four parts into a harmonious whole.

In Senigallia the coherence of the presentation suffers from the strain of having had to absorb another exhibition, celebrating the five-hundredth anniversary of Julius II's election to the papacy, which was intended to

88. Burial clothes of Giulio della Rovere. Urbino, 1578. Silk, c.160 cm. long. (Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino, on deposit from S. Chiara, Urbino; exh. Palazzo Ducale, Urbino).