

57: Alexander Calder *Untitled Mobile* (1935)

Cynthia L. Culbert

When Alexander Calder created the elegantly restless assemblage of rods and colorful disks known simply as *Untitled* or *Untitled Mobile* he had just started experimenting with the form that would make him an internationally sought-after artist. The mobile became Calder's signature piece and one that he would return to for the rest of his life. During the formative period of the early 1930s, however, Calder had to seek out commissions. *Untitled* was one of his first of these following his return to America from an extended stay in France, as well as one of his first works meant for the out-of-doors anywhere.¹

Calder's *Untitled Mobile* occupied a specific site in a private garden in Rochester, New York, for about forty years before it came into the collection of the Memorial Art Gallery. The owner, Charlotte Whitney Allen, who regularly hosted Rochester's avant-garde at her "chilled glass hour,"² served for sixty-two years on the board of managers of the Memorial Art Gallery, where the library bears her name. With a little prompting from her landscape architect, Fletcher Steele, and from the artist himself, she commissioned the sculpture for a secluded spot at the end of an allée. Steele, a Rochester native whose garden designs include Naumkeag, Mabel Choate's fanciful estate in the Massachusetts Berkshires, had met Alexander Calder in 1932 at one of the first exhibitions of his "mobiles" in Paris.³ Three years later, he introduced Calder to Mrs. Whitney Allen.



Kathleen McEnery Cunningham,
1885–1971

Portrait of Charlotte Whitney Allen,
after 1914

Oil on canvas, 41 ¼ x 35 ¾ in.
(framed dimensions)

Courtesy of the David Hochstein
Memorial Music School,
3.94L

Printed by permission of the
Estate of Kathleen McEnery
and Hochstein School

Steele started working on Mrs. Whitney Allen's garden in 1915 and he would continue to do so until 1968. They became the best of friends and Steele often referred to the garden on Oliver Street, off fashionable East Avenue, as one of his finest works. Mrs. Whitney Allen was very particular about what she wanted in her garden. She did not like flowers, disapproving of the mess they made when they died, so Steele had to work with the other elements of the garden to create interest.⁴ In 1926, he arranged for Gaston Lachaise to create the sculpture (now also a part of the Memorial Art Gallery's collection) that provided the focal point of the garden.⁵ It stood above a swimming pool and was framed by an arch made of brick and a brick wall. This addition served as a major milestone in the completion of the garden but there were still several ideas to be realized: a chain-mail Saracen tent filled the "drinking pit" to the left of the pool in 1938 and a teahouse was planned for the end of the hidden allée that ran behind the garage. The teahouse idea was abandoned in 1935 when Calder enigmatically mentioned, in a letter to Mrs. Whitney Allen: "Fletcher Steele wrote me that the visit that that thing of mine paid Rochester left you in a mood to permit me to prescribe something for a certain corner of your garden."⁶



ALSO IN THE MAG COLLECTION:

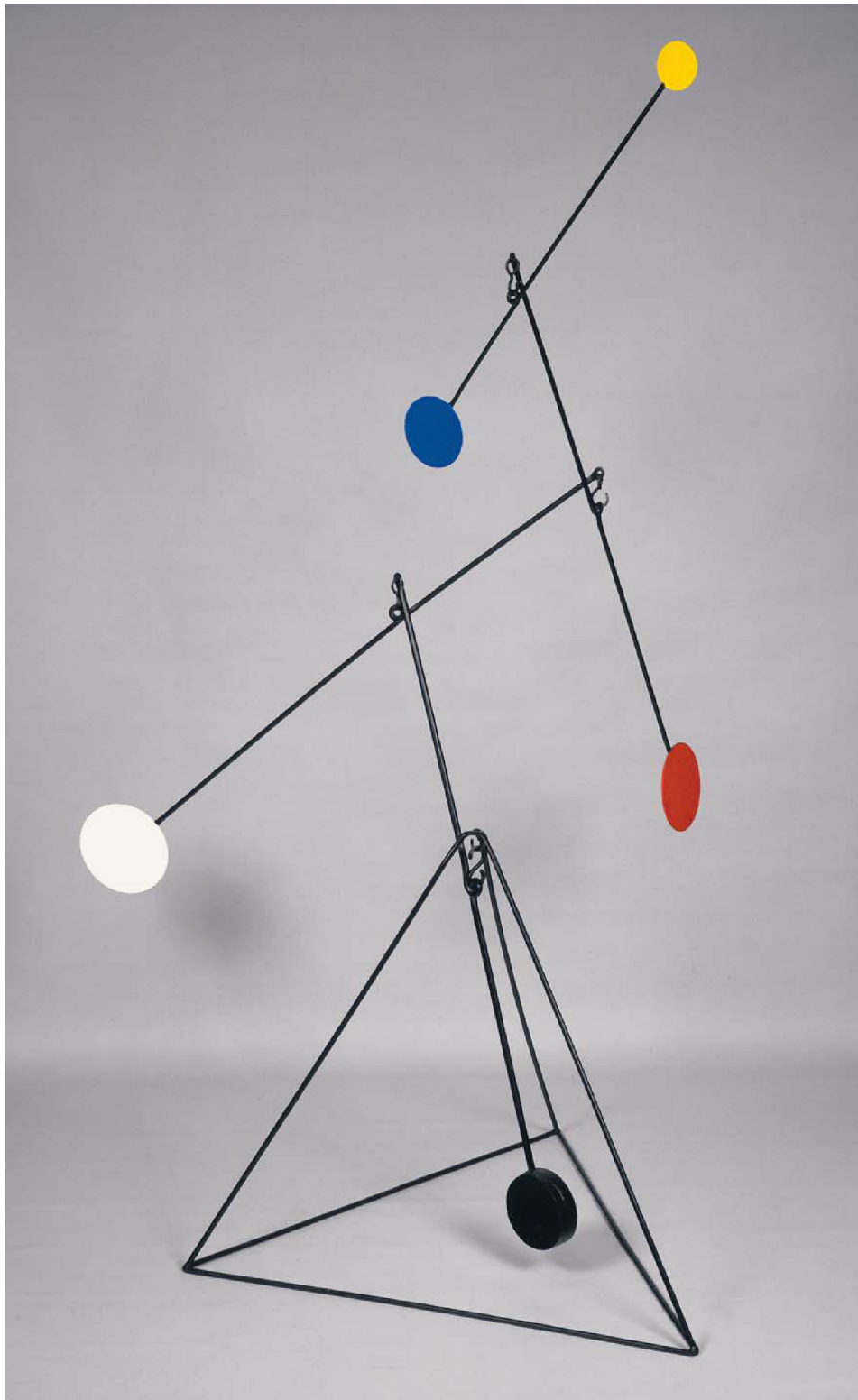
Alexander Calder,
1898–1976

Very Flat, 1926

Oak, 19 x 5 ½ x 1 ½ in.

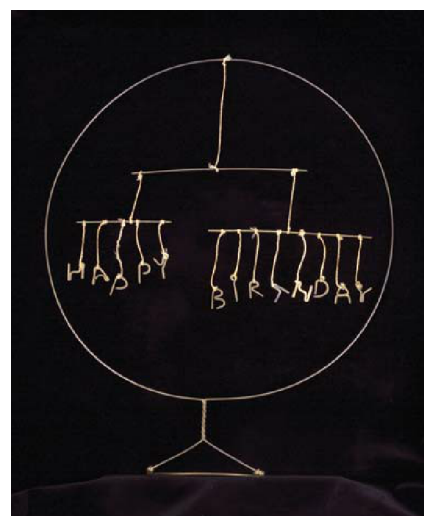
Gift of Charlotte Whitney
Allen, 64.26

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Steele was always searching for exciting garden sculpture—works with interesting silhouettes and substantial mass.⁷ He was quite taken with the work of Calder's he had seen in Paris, which, with its ability to move, met and exceeded his criteria for outdoor sculpture. The silhouettes were not only interesting, but were constantly changing, creating mass out of air. Unfortunately, mobiles were a bit more modern than most of his clients' tastes. But there was a place in one client's garden where it just might work. Bringing an example of Calder's sculpture with him to Rochester, he was able to entice Mrs. Whitney Allen into considering the idea, and then Calder followed up with a series of entertaining letters, which fortunately were saved and housed at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio.⁸

Calder and his wife Louisa returned from an extended residence in France in 1933. Having bought an old farmhouse in Roxbury, Connecticut, and expecting their first child, Calder was anxious to sell some work. He was subtle but persistent with Mrs. Whitney Allen and after nine months she agreed to have a standing mobile made for her garden. During that time, they developed a mutual friendship based on a steady correspondence and Calder's occasional visits to Rochester. Their friendship lasted for many years, resulting in more sales for Calder and some quirky gifts for Mrs. Whitney Allen, including jewelry and a "Happy Birthday" mobile. In a letter that Calder dated in his characteristically whimsical manner "April 1½, 1935," he expressed his thoughts about a mobile for the garden: "I saw Fletcher Saturday....He seemed to think that I ought to make you an object...that one might displace, and then watch it seek to regain its original calm, equilibrium, and peace of mind. I think so too."⁹ In August he gently nudged her again with: "Have you ever decided about the mobile for your garden?"¹⁰ And later that month he wrote: "As to your having one of my things, nothing would please me more, and I would be very glad to do it for any sum you felt you could afford. I think I mentioned a stiff price to Fletcher because I felt he would make me do it over again and again, he seemed so stern in the first letter he wrote me about it. But what if Louisa and I came and visited you for a few days...and I designed it *under your eye*, and made it right in Rochester?"¹¹ The Calderes were in Rochester by late September and they brought the famous *Circus*,¹² now owned by the Whitney Museum of American Art, which Calder performed in Mrs. Whitney Allen's basement to his wife's accompaniment on the concertina.¹³ Over the course of a week, Calder designed the mobile, searched for materials, and found some suitable iron disks in a blacksmith's shop.¹⁴ These he took home to Roxbury to fabricate the mobile, asking Steele deliver it to Mrs. Whitney Allen on his next trip west.¹⁵ Calder had painted it in his typical primary colors, and Mrs. Whitney Allen got her wish: there were no flowers in her garden. The only colors were the green of the foliage, the red of the brick wall and arch, the robin's egg blue of the pool and the bright splashes of the mobile's red, blue, and yellow disks as they gently swayed in the breeze at the end of the allée.



Alexander Calder,
1898–1976
Happy Birthday Mobile, 1935
Brass wire and cotton string,
16 x 13 in.
Gift of Charlotte Whitney
Allen, 68.50
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Calder/Artists Rights Society
(ARS), New York

(Facing page)
Alexander Calder,
1898–1976
Untitled Mobile, 1935
Iron, steel and paint,
105½ x 72 x 41 in.
Gift of Charlotte Whitney
Allen, 64.27
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Calder/Artists Rights Society
(ARS), New York



Alexander Calder,
1898–1976
Earrings, ca. 1930s;
Comb, undated;
Bracelet, undated; *Ring*, undated
Silver, 2 x 2½ in. each;
brass, 7 x 8¼ in.;
brass, 3½ x 2¼ x 2¼ in.;
brass, 1 x 1¼ x 1¼ in.
Gift of Charlotte Whitney
Allen, 60.52.1–2; 78.49; 78.48;
78.50
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(ARS), New York

Calder *Mobile* in Charlotte
Whitney Allen Garden on
the occasion of MAG Gallery
Council's Art in Bloom
Garden Tour, June 17, 2000
Photograph by James Via



In his autobiography, Calder remembers Mrs. Whitney Allen's mobile as "the first object I made for out of doors."¹⁶ This, along with the fact that it was one of his first commissions upon his return to the United States, makes *Untitled Mobile* a key work in Calder's oeuvre, as well as a treasured piece in MAG's collection. It serves as a precursor to the monumental outdoor standing mobiles that would make Calder one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century.

In a rare opportunity for a museum object, the mobile returned for a day to its intended place. On Saturday, June 17, 2000, several members of MAG's staff brought Calder's mobile back to the hidden allée on Oliver Street for the biennial Art in Bloom garden tour. The event highlights area gardens and in the summer of 2000 it featured the city oasis designed by Fletcher

Steele. Several friends of Mrs. Whitney Allen's came out to see the garden again and to share old memories. For the staff, it was magical to see an object they were used to looking at in the middle of a room under artificial light take its original place out in the sun against a backdrop of European beeches. It seemed to come alive. It was just as mesmerizing in the garden when you saw it move as Calder imagined it would be in his early letters to Mrs. Whitney Allen: "that one might displace, and then watch it seek to regain its original calm, equilibrium, and peace of mind."¹⁷

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