National Portrait Gallery Presents “Calder’s Portraits: A New Language”
March 11 through Aug. 14

Best known for his abstract mobiles and stabiles, Alexander Calder (1898–1976) was also a prolific portraitist who created hundreds of likenesses over the course of his lifetime. An exhibition of these works will be shown at the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery March 11 through Aug. 14. “Calder’s Portraits: A New Language” will shed light on an often-overlooked aspect of Alexander Calder’s career and on broader narratives of 20th-century American culture.

In addition to paintings and drawings, “Calder’s Portraits” will feature a number of the artist’s famed wire sculptures. Working with the unorthodox medium of wire, Calder shaped three-dimensional portraits, achieving nuanced likenesses and vivid characters. His inventive technique was referred to as “drawing in space” and reconceived both portraiture and sculpture. A critic writing for the Chicago Tribune in 1929 opined that “the longer one observes [Calder’s sculpture] the more one is convinced … that here is a new language.” “Sculpturing by Wire Is New Achievement of Alexander Calder at Galerie Billiet,” Chicago Tribune, Jan. 29, 1929, Paris ed.

“Calder’s mobiles and sculptures represent some of the highest achievements in 20th century American art,” said Martin Sullivan, director of the museum. “This exhibition explores his lesser-known yet imaginative, portraits offering insights into both Calder’s perspective and his sitter’s personalities.”

Calder’s heads cast evocative shadows, change when viewed from different angles and move if suspended from the ceiling. Because of their mobility and variability, the portraits seem—like their subjects—to have a life of their own. In this way, Calder captured the distinctive personalities of his sitters with humor and sophistication. The exhibition juxtaposes Calder’s works with portraits of his subjects from the National Portrait Gallery’s extensive collection of contemporary photographs, drawings and caricatures by such artist-illustrators as Paolo Garretto and Miguel Covarrubias.

The first section of the exhibition is called “Self as Subject” and features works that trace Calder’s artistic development through self-portraiture. The next section focuses on “constructed
identities” and explores the distinctly 20th-century concept that identity is not singular and stable but multifaceted and formed, or “constructed,” over time. The section titled “The Stage” displays iconic representations of renowned entertainers, including Jimmy Durante and Katharine Cornell. Probing another realm of celebrity culture, “Sports Fans and Icons” includes images of Babe Ruth, Helen Wills and other public figures. Another section focuses on those in the art world, telling the story of Calder’s career through his personal and professional relationships. Calder depicts dealers who sold his work, critics who wrote about it and artists who were his close friends.

Barbara Zabel, professor of art history at Connecticut College, is the guest curator of the exhibition and the author of the 184-page exhibition catalog. Calder’s Portraits: A New Language was published by the Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press in cooperation with Rowman & Littlefield. It will be available in the museum store for $49.95.

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The National Portrait Gallery

The Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery tells the history of America through the individuals who have shaped its culture. Through the visual arts, performing arts and new media, the Portrait Gallery portrays poets and presidents, visionaries and villains, actors and activists whose lives tell the American story. The National Portrait Gallery is part of the Donald W. Reynolds Center for American Art and Portraiture at Eighth and F streets N.W., Washington, D.C. Smithsonian Information: (202) 633-1000; (202) 633-5285 (TTY). Website: npg.si.edu.

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