

# ALEXANDER CALDER

## The Saché houses

TEXT BY LEAH SINGER  
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AND PEDRO E GUERRERO





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Previous spread: François Premier, 1964. Photography by Pedro E Guerrero. © Pedro E Guerrero. Opposite page: Calder and his wife, Louisa, inhabiting the façade of their home, François Premier, 1963. Photography by Ugo Mulas. © Ugo Mulas. This page: Calder in his studio at 14 Rue de la Colonie, Paris, 1931. Photography by Marc Vaux. © Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Centre Georges Pompidou. Next spread: The living room at François Premier, 1964. Photography by Pedro E Guerrero. © Pedro E Guerrero.

The artist Alexander Calder arrived in Europe in the summer of 1926 aboard the British freighter *Galileo*, a fitting coincidence, as Galileo—the father of modern science—was a master of kinematics, the ‘geometry of motion’, and Calder would rise to fame as the creator of kinetic sculptures known as ‘mobiles’. At 27, Calder made his way to Paris, setting in motion his lifelong attachment to France. His interest in going most likely began with the stories he heard about the city from his mother, Nanette Lederer Calder, who studied painting at the Académie Julian. Later, while his parents were living in Paris, his older sister, Margaret, was born. She was affectionately called ‘Peggy from Paris’, and in *Calder: An Autobiography with Pictures*, Calder expressed how exciting it was to have a sister born there.

He was born two years later in Lawnton, Pennsylvania, into a family of sculptors; his paternal grandfather, Alexander Milne Calder, is known for the towering statue of William Penn—founder of Pennsylvania—that sits atop Philadelphia’s city hall, and his father, Alexander Stirling Calder, is responsible for the George Washington figure on the western pier of New York City’s Washington Square Arch.



Calder’s introduction to art began in his father’s studio and on the many trips the family took for the commissions he was awarded. After showing an interest in making things, Calder’s parents gave him his first tools and a workshop—he was eight years old. Here he would make sculptures for his family, including some of his earliest objects in metal such as a rocking duck and a dog fabricated from brass sheets.

Calder would later graduate with a degree in mechanical engineering from Stevens Institute of Technology, but he came to realise that it wasn’t a profession he wanted to pursue. Instead, he went back to his roots and chose to study at the Art Students League of New York with every intention of becoming an artist. After his studies, Paris beckoned, just as it had for his parents.

Once he arrived, he wasted no time; he took art classes at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, established a studio at 22 Rue Daguerre, and he showed his wire sculptures with Salon des Humoristes at the Galerie La Boétie. He then spent several years between Paris and New York, first on his own and later with his wife Louisa—a great-niece of Henry James—who he married in 1931. In this productive period, Calder worked on *Cirque Calder*, a performance featuring circus figures and animals he fashioned from wire and other materials.

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In his new studio, located in the Montparnasse section of Paris, at 7 Rue Cels, he continued staging the circus. At one of the 'circus parties', the famed French clown Paul Fratellini was a guest, and the Spanish painter Joan Miró—who would become a close friend—was so impressed with what he saw, that he later invited Calder to perform at his home in Mont-roig, a town near Barcelona. Calder's circus performances combined a subtle touch with a dynamic outcome, as Calder demonstrates in this scene:

*These are little bits of white paper, with a hole and slight weight on each one, which flutter down several variously coiled thin steel wires, which I jiggle so that they flutter down like doves onto the shoulder of a bejeweled circus belle-dame.*

The performances became an entrée into Paris life and were sought-after by the avant-garde. Calder felt at home with his new friends and counted many as part of his 'gang'—Jules Pascin, Tsuguharu Foujita, Man Ray, Kiki de Montparnasse, and Robert Desnos, among others. However, it was meeting the artist Piet Mondrian that left an indelible mark. Calder often

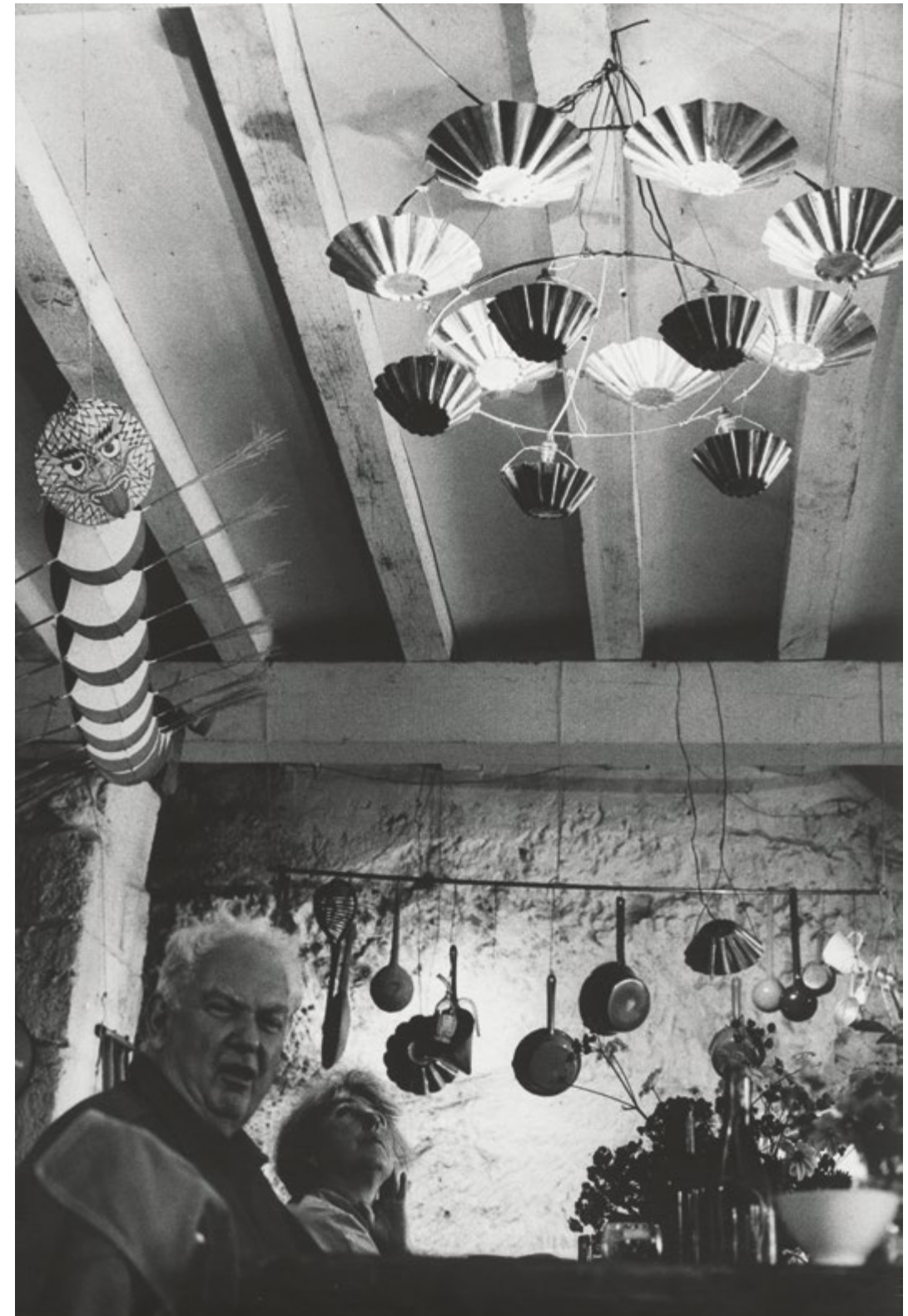


recounted the story of his visit to Mondrian's studio at 26 Rue du Départ in the fall of 1930, and in his autobiography, he described the space itself as a work of art:

*It was a very exciting room. Light came in from the left and from the right, and on the solid wall between the windows there were experimental stunts with colored rectangles of cardboard tacked on. Even the victrola, which had been some muddy color, was painted red... This one visit gave me a shock that started things.*

*Though I had heard the word 'modern' before, I did not consciously know or feel the term 'abstract.' So now, at thirty-two, I wanted to paint and work in the abstract. And for two weeks or so, I painted very modest abstractions. At the end of this, I reverted to plastic work which was still abstract.*

That spring—not long after his visit with Mondrian—Calder had his first exhibition of abstract works at Galerie Percier; Picasso had arranged to see it privately before it opened. Calder placed many of the wire and metal configurations he constructed on square bases that he cut from the wood











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circus bleachers he kept at his studio. Writing in his autobiography, he noted how two of the objects 'swayed in the breeze', foreshadowing the natural approach he would eventually take, allowing the mobiles to respond to the vagaries of the moment: the air currents, temperature, light, and human touch. Fernand Léger wrote the catalogue essay for *Alexandre Calder: Volumes—Vecteurs—Densités / Dessins—Portraits*, introducing him as an equal in mind and manner to the abstract artists of the day:

*Eric Satie illustrated by*

*Calder*

*Why not?*

*'It's serious without seeming to be'.*

*Neoplastician from the start, he believed in the absolute of two colored rectangles....*

*His need for fantasy broke the connection; he started to 'play' with his materials: wood, plaster, iron wire, especially iron wire.... a time both picturesque and spirited....*



*.... A reaction; the wire stretches, becomes rigid, geometrical—pure plastic—it is the present era—an anti-Romantic impulse dominated by the problem of equilibrium.*

*Looking at these new works—transparent, objective, exact—I think of Satie, Mondrian, Marcel Duchamp, Brancusi, Arp—those unchallenged masters of unexpressed and silent beauty. Calder is of the same line.*

*He is 100% American.*

*Satie and Duchamp are 100% French.*

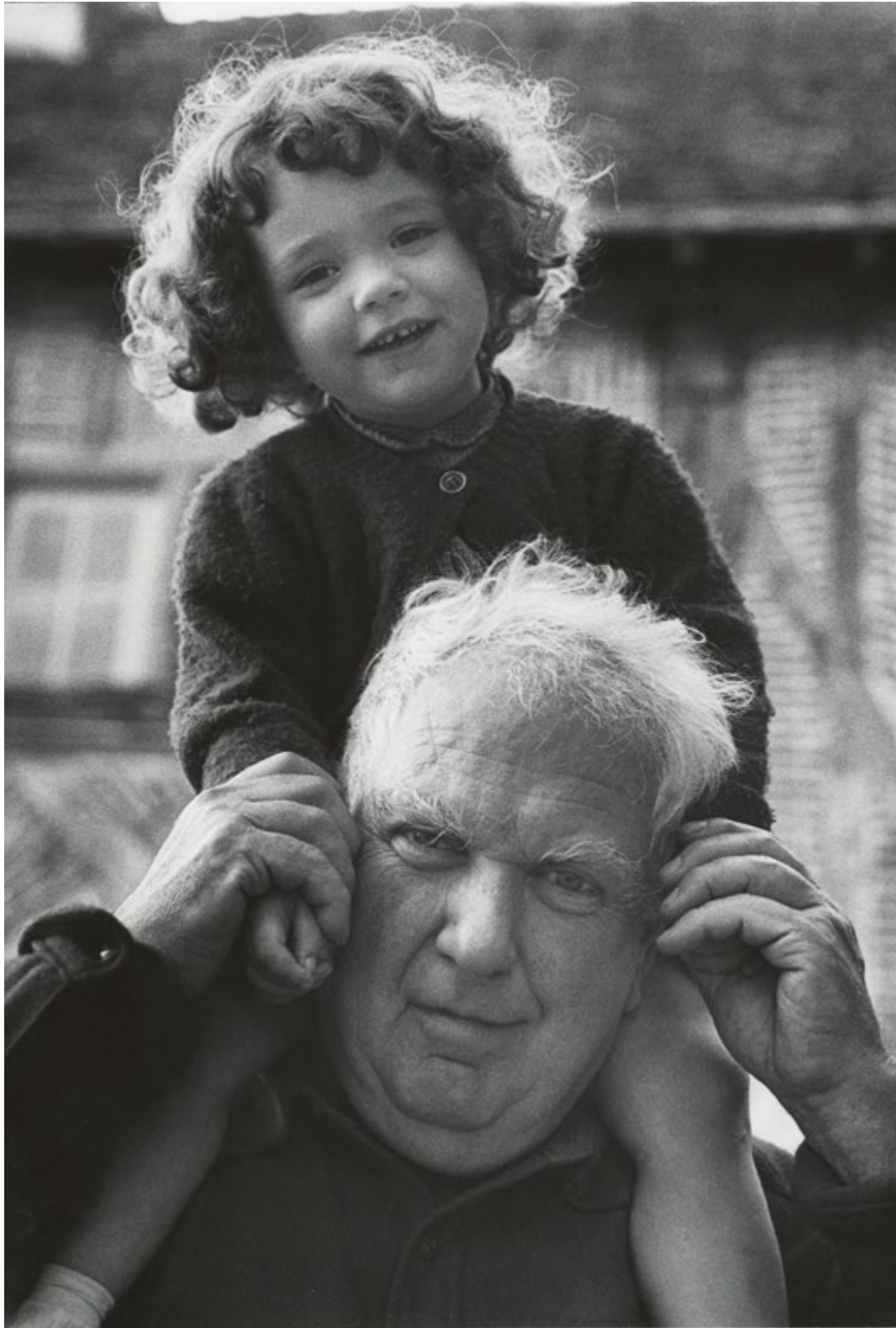
*And yet, we meet?*

A few weeks after the show closed, Calder was compelled to set it up again 'more or less as it was in the gallery', in his home at 14 Rue de la Colonie. With all the interest in the show, Calder wanted to be sure that those who had missed it would have a chance to see his new work. Later, on another occasion, Duchamp paid a visit to the house where Calder kept a studio on the top floor. This is where he saw the mechanised abstract sculptures that Calder had steadily been working on. Duchamp was moved to touch one of them,

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and in his autobiography, Calder remembered that it was still wet with paint. In a photograph taken in the same period, Calder is seen standing beneath a high storage shelf that holds a tangle of sculpture while a mechanised work sits within his reach on the table. Movement was now on his mind and integral to the new work he was creating. It must have pleased him when he asked Duchamp's advice on what to call these new works and he responded, 'mobile'—a word that means both 'motion' and 'motive' in French. In February 1932, Duchamp helped arrange a show of Calder's first mobiles at Galerie Vignon, in the heart of Paris. The exhibition included 15 objects with motors, and another 15 with a variety of moving elements. Duchamp suggested Calder draw the 'motor-driven object' he had liked on the invitation card along with these words:

**CALDER**  
**SES MOBILES**

Alongside all the fertile activity in '30s Paris, there was a parallel anxiety brewing about the rise of fascism. Up until this point, Calder's artwork was not overtly political, but the troubled era spurred him to action, as it did other artists. That was the case with the *Mercury Fountain*—a project for the Paris International Exposition of 1937 that came to him through the Catalan architect Josep Lluís Sert. Calder was well aware of the Spanish Civil War, and he welcomed the opportunity to help in some way. He writes:

*When I saw what was going on in general in this pavilion, which included Guernica by Picasso, I promptly volunteered my services to do something or other for it.*

*Sert was against this, for obviously I was no Spaniard, but later on, when he had received a fountain displaying mercury from Almadén, which looked like a plain drinking fountain, he called me in to get him out of the dilemma.*

This was Calder's chance—he used his design ingenuity and his aesthetic to rescue the project. The artwork is symbolically tied to the Spanish city of Almadén—one of the world's largest producers of mercury—which was under siege by Franco's Nationalist army. The project's intention was to highlight the economic and political threat this situation posed to the republic. Sleek in form, the fountain consists of three sloping black metal troughs that support the movement of the mercury as it continuously flows along. A red disc is fastened to a bowed piece of metal that serves to balance a dangling set of rings from which hangs the word 'ALMADEN', formed from brass wire. When the mercury collides against a black form at the base of the mobile, it causes the disc and the word to be in constant motion. The fountain is now on permanent display at the Fundació Joan Miró in Barcelona.

In a nod to his adopted country, Calder made the mobile *France Forever* (1942) for an organisation—bearing the same name—of French exiles and supporters working on behalf of the resistance. It's a hanging mobile featuring the three colours of the French flag—red, blue, and white—and a yellow Cross of Lorraine, a symbol used by Charles de Gaulle's exiled government during the Nazi occupation. Calder gave the organisation the artwork so it could benefit from its sale. In 2019 it was accessioned by the Musée de l'Armée in Paris, becoming the first modern artwork in its collection.

The Calder family spent the war years on Painter Hill Road in Roxbury, Connecticut, where in 1933 they had purchased and renovated an old farmhouse. And although Calder accomplished a great deal in this period, including the distinction of being the youngest artist to have a retrospective at the Museum of

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Modern Art in New York, he was eager to get back to Paris once the war ended. Duchamp learnt that Calder had been working on a line of small mobiles in his Roxbury studio and suggested he mail them to France for an exhibition. Calder was intrigued by the United States Postal Service's limitations on parcel size, 'So a whole race of objects that were collapsible and could be taken to pieces was born'. He mailed 'quite a stock' in advance to the Galerie Louis Carré. Calder arrived in the fall of 1946 to open *Alexander Calder: Mobiles, Stables, Constellations*. Jean-Paul Sartre, who had visited Calder at his Roxbury home, wrote the catalogue essay and included this observation: 'His mobiles signify nothing, refer to nothing other than themselves. They simply are: they are absolutes'. The opening drew a large crowd—Henri Matisse was in attendance.

For the next several years Calder was busy travelling and having exhibitions; in 1952 he won the grand prize for sculpture at the Venice Biennale and designed the sets for *Nucléa*, a play by Henri Pichette. By 1953, Calder and his family—he now had two daughters, Sandra and Mary—had arrived in Aix-en-Provence prepared for an extended stay in France. On their way to see friends in Brittany, the family went to visit Saché, a commune in the Loire Valley, and ran into Calder's friend and future son-in-law, the writer Jean Davidson. Davidson had purchased a mill house on the Indre River and encouraged Calder to do the same, as Calder recounts in his autobiography:

*Jean immediately said, 'You too must buy a mill'. And he took me in the Allard around the countryside, to look at water mills and windmills.*

*But on the first tour of inspection of his new-found property—he did not exactly know that he had in fact acquired four houses, two others across the road as well as the two on the Indre—we discovered he in fact owned a house called 'François Premier' with a fantastic cellarlike room with a dirt floor and wine press set in a cavity in the hillside rock. At the time one could barely see anything in there, all doors and windows being plugged with loose stones—a typical French custom when a house is abandoned.*

*I thought to myself: I will make mobiles of cobwebs and propel them with bats.*

Calder negotiated a deal to buy François Premier, the house he preferred over any of the mill houses he saw. Davidson owed Calder money for work he had purchased in the past, and he came up with a plan: 'I'll sell it to you for what I owe and you'll make me a few more mobiles'. He left Davidson to hire masons, plumbers, and carpenters to begin the much-needed renovation. François Premier was built into the tuffeau rock, a chalky limestone used in the construction of the renowned chateaus in the region, such as Château de Saché, where the novelist Honoré de Balzac was a frequent writing guest. The remaining caves, left behind from the mining process, were often incorporated into the houses. In photographs of the François Premier kitchen there's a cave structure visible. The set-up of the new house suited Calder, as the modestly sized metal shop, in a former wagon shed, was next door, and his gouache painting studio was across the way. The family moved up to Saché from Aix-en-Provence in February 1954, where the renovation was in process, and stayed with the Davidsons. The house was completed in July. It would be close to 10 years before it became their primary residence. Calder took pleasure in watching the workers take pride in their labour:

*The plumber, Louis Ferry, had not quite finished with the drains and septic tank, and he and his helper would have beautiful déjeuners with the tablecloth on an upturned wheelbarrow, with a bottle of wine and everything else necessary. They even warmed their lunch containers on an open fire.*







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One day, I was fascinated to watch the young mason putting in the ceiling of the lower room. He was standing on a few planks over two wooden horses about five feet high. The horses were so high that he had to crouch. He was attired all in white—white duck suit, white hat, white espadrilles. He held his mortarboard in the left hand, his trowel in the right hand. He would duck even lower, send a trowelful against the ceiling, straighten up, and smear it flat. This went on for some time; it was a beautiful pantomime.

Calder began to make larger sculptures long before he took up residency in Saché. But it wasn't until a trip to Normandy in 1961 to see his friend, the painter Pierre Tal-Coat, that Calder realised he wanted and needed a bigger studio. Tal-Coat had an old monastery and had just built a barn with high ceilings as his new painting studio. Calder wrote about the encounter:

*The size of the studio gnawed at me the moment I saw it, and I became very jealous. So, after our arrival in Roxbury, I immediately wrote Jean at the Moulin Vert, in Saché, asking to have a big studio built as soon as possible.*



The studio Calder designed took 18 months to build. It sits on a hilltop known as Le Carroi near François Premier with views of the Indre River, and it perfectly accommodated the sculptures that Calder realised at the Etablissements Biémont, a foundry in Tours, which fabricated his monumental works. The studio's main purpose was not so much for making art, but rather it served as a place to contemplate and review finished work. For producing metal and gouache work, Calder continued to go down the hill to the François Premier studios. The north end of the studio was reserved for painting, and outside on a stone promontory, the large sculptures were displayed, waiting to be sent off to their prospective homes.

As the François Premier house was situated near the river, it became too damp for the Calders, so after more than a decade in the house, they decided to build a new house on the hill, next to the studio. They relocated there in 1970. Calder supplied his drawings of the house to the architect Jean-Claude Drouin (Jean Prouvé's son-in-law), who he commissioned to draw up the plans. The new house was very different from the cramped 17th-century François Premier; although its style and materials were that of a traditional local farmhouse, it had the feel of a modern home with expansive 20-foot-tall

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windows, and a greenhouse. At two storeys, it had bedrooms on each floor and as at François Premier, all the cooking, dining, and living areas were combined in one long room.

Calder habitually had his studio close to his home so he could have the ease of moving between the two. This was the case in Roxbury, as it was in the numerous studios he had in Paris; there was a deliberate separation between his work and his life. This may partly be why he decided not to have a kitchen or bathroom installed in the Le Carroi studio.

The photographer and writer Pedro Guerrero spent 13 years, from 1963 until 1976, photographing Calder and his family. He published the book *Calder at Home: The Joyous Environment of Alexander Calder*, featuring all three houses, each page exploding with colour and density. Louisa's hooked rugs, using Calder's bold designs, cover many parts of the floor, and mobiles in all sizes vie for space on the ceiling.

At the Roxbury house, Calder was known to build from recycled materials: wooden shipping crates that once held his art became kitchen cupboards, while scrap building materials were turned into stools and tables. By the



time Calder was living in Saché, he was older, with more money and less time to do carpentry. He did however make many of the light fixtures for the Saché houses; visible in Guerrero's photographs, they take on the look of flying-saucer chandeliers made of cake tins, while the standing lamps have beaked conical shades and chicken feet-shaped bases. In the new house he and Louisa continued to live as they always had in all of their homes—surrounded by their collections of art, baskets, ceramics, and a multitude of pots and pans that crowded the kitchen.

Calder didn't live long in the Le Carroi house—about six years—before he died in 1976 at the age of 78. He had just celebrated the opening of *Calder's Universe*, a major retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City.

In 1989 the Calder family and the French government established Atelier Calder, an artist residency program. Le Carroi is currently used to accommodate visiting artists, and the studio building remains an open space where artists can work. François Premier is no longer part of the estate. Recently, grapevines were planted on the hillside where it's dry and sunny, with the hopes of bringing back the vineyards that were once prominent during Calder's days.

