



FREDERIK MEIJER Gardens & Sculpture Park

1000 East Beltline Avenue • Grand Rapids, MI 49525 • 616 957 1580 • meijergardens.org

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CONTACT

Amy Sawade
Public Relations Specialist
616-975-3155
asawade@meijergardens.org

Meijer Gardens Exhibits Alexander Calder's Prolific Work from 1969

Alexander Calder: 1969 – The Fortieth Anniversary of La Grande Vitesse
June 5 – September 7, 2009

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich., — March 30, 2009 — Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park, one of the nation's most significant sculpture and botanic experiences, celebrates the prolific work of Alexander Calder in its upcoming exhibition ***Alexander Calder: 1969 – The Fortieth Anniversary of La Grande Vitesse***. The exclusive exhibition opens to the public on June 5, days before the 40th anniversary of the installation of Calder's iconic *La Grande Vitesse* located in downtown Grand Rapids, Mich. This colossal work was the first public sculpture project funded by the NEA in 1969 and heralded as one of Calder's masterpieces and one of the treasures of public art in the United States.

"This exhibition is a profound moment for Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park, Grand Rapids, and, in truth, the nation," said Joseph Becherer, Director of Exhibitions and Curator of Sculpture. "It is impossible to imagine 20th century art without Alexander Calder. *La Grande Vitesse* and 1969 are critical to his imaginative and influential repertoire."

Among the most innovative sculptors of the 20th century, Calder's work played an influential role in the history of public art in American culture. Commissioned by the City of Grand Rapids and the Kent County Board of Supervisors and funded through a federal grant, the site-specific installation became a watershed moment in art history when it was erected in downtown Grand Rapids on June 14, 1969.

"1969 represents a turning point in public art, as it was the first time the National Endowment for the Arts provided funding for the creation of a public sculpture," said Alexander S.C. Rower, Director of the Calder Foundation. "Though controversial in its time, *La Grande Vitesse* has become a source of pride for Grand Rapids' citizens, and is emblematic of the transformative power of Calder's art."

The installation of *La Grande Vitesse* was the cornerstone of urban revitalization for the now thriving community.

"During this time, Grand Rapids had lost its identity as the "Furniture City" and was struggling to deliver urban renewal," said Nancy Mulnix, co-chair of the committee responsible for commissioning the work. "When 'The Calder' came, the city found the courage and energy to begin a renaissance that continues to this day."

The anniversary of the installation of this colossal work will be a community-wide celebration, however ***Alexander Calder: 1969 – The Fortieth Anniversary of La Grande Vitesse*** at Meijer Gardens is the centerpiece. The exhibition is organized in exclusive collaboration with Calder Foundation and supported through an NEA Grant.

Central to the exhibition will be Calder's own and rarely seen, eight-foot scale model of *La Grande Vitesse*, on exclusive loan from The Calder Foundation. Important loans from the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, the City of Grand Rapids, Grand Rapids Public Library, the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum will highlight the prolific work from this important year in Calder's career.

“Focusing on one year of Calder’s life achievement is a compelling vision for an exhibition, and showing a group of the artist’s works from the same moment as *La Grande Vitesse* will offer audiences a richer experience of his art as a whole,” said Rower.

“The exhibition at Meijer Gardens is founded on the goodwill and vision of many people beginning with Calder Foundation and The City of Grand Rapids. Audiences of every age and experience will enjoy and gain from this important endeavor,” said Becherer.

Further Information

- Images are available upon request. View thumbnail versions here:

http://www.meijergardens.org/media/scms/IMAGES_Calder.pdf

- Interviews with Joseph Antenucci Becherer are available upon request. Please contact Amy Sawade, at 616-975-3155, asawade@meijergardens.org

- Additional quotes are available here: http://www.meijergardens.org/media/scms/QUOTES_Calder.pdf

About Alexander Calder

Alexander Calder (1898 – 1976) was born in Lawnton, Pennsylvania. He was the son and grandson of sculptors. Calder received a degree in mechanical engineering before deciding to become an artist. In 1931, he made his first “mobiles,” or kinetic sculptures. By the mid-1930s, his work was more biomorphic reflecting the organic Surrealism movement. From the mid 1950s forward, Calder focused on monumental sculptures that defined architectural spaces. He eventually found a steel fabricator in France who could create stabiles large enough to walk under. Although based in abstraction, Calder’s objects incorporate references to the natural world, interacting directly with their environments as the breeze moves them and light introduces shadowy images. By the 1960s, he was recognized internationally as among the most profound artists of his generation.

About *La Grande Vitesse*

Alexander Calder’s stabile *La Grande Vitesse* is French for “the great swiftness” or “the grand rapids.” It is widely considered Calder’s most important public sculpture. Commissioned by the City of Grand Rapids and the Kent County Board of Supervisors, it became the first civic sculpture in American history to be financed through a 1967 federal grant given by the National Endowment for the Arts as part of its Works of Art in Public Spaces program. On June 14, 1969, the site-specific stabile was erected in front of Grand Rapids’ City Hall. The installation became a watershed moment in art history and brought revitalization and urban redevelopment to the Grand Rapids community. *La Grande Vitesse* measures 54 feet long, 43 feet high, 30 feet wide, weighing 42 tons. Like many of his sculptures, *La Grande Vitesse*’s steel structure is painted “Calder Red.” Calder Plaza is located at 300 Ottawa Avenue NW, Grand Rapids, Mich.

About Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park

One of the nation’s most significant botanic and sculpture experiences, Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park serves more than a half-million visitors annually. The 132-acre grounds feature Michigan’s largest tropical conservatory; one of the largest children’s gardens in the country; arid and Victorian gardens; a carnivorous plant house; outdoor gardens; and a 1750-seat outdoor amphitheater, featuring an eclectic mix of world-renowned musicians every summer. The internationally acclaimed Sculpture Park features a permanent collection including works by Rodin, Oldenburg, Calder, Moore, Bourgeois and Plensa among others. Indoor galleries host changing sculpture exhibitions with recent exhibitions by Picasso, Degas, di Suvero and Chihuly. For additional information, please visit www.meijergardens.org.

Contact

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