The Magic of Calder

More than 3,600 students file through Nasher exhibit, balancing art and science

BY MELODY GUYTON BUTTS
MBUTTS@HERALDSUN.COM; 919-419-6684

DURHAM — In the eyes of children, Alexander Calder’s “Orange Paddle under the Table” is a feat of magic. The sculpture grows from a single pumpkin-colored paddle suspended below the edge of a table, precariously balanced on a single point by nearly a dozen dainty white circles that appear as blossoms on an upward-reaching curved wire branch.

Yes, there’s magic reflected in the eyes of the thousands of students who so far have filed through the Nasher Museum of Art’s featured exhibition, “Alexander Calder and Contemporary Art: Form, Balance, Joy.” But as a gallery guide explains the science behind the art, one observes wheels turning behind those gazes of wonderment.

The paddle may be heavier than the circles, but it’s closer to the grounded point — or fulcrum, as it’s explained to the oldest students. Juline Chevalier, the museum’s curator of education, likens it to a see-saw for the youngest.

The intricate “Orange Paddle under the Table” is just one of 34 works by Calder — father of the mobile and stabile art forms — on display through June 17 at the Nasher. Alongside his pieces are pieces by seven contemporary artists who have been influenced by the late sculptor.

SEE CALDER/ PAGE C2
“To see the influence or inspiration — whether directly or indirectly — I think is really exciting,” Chevalier said.

While folks of all ages can appreciate Calder’s work, it presents a unique opportunity to connect art with science for students, she explained.

“For us, focusing on [science] helps us get students into the art museum,” Chevalier said. “We know that budgets are tight, and time is tight in the classroom. That can limit opportunities to take field trips, but we can cover several things all at once here.”

Museum guides have led more than 3,600 K-12 students through “Form, Balance, Joy” since it opened in mid-February, and around 6,000 are expected to come through before the exhibition closes.

All K-12 tours scheduled in advance are free, and limited bus scholarships may be available. Teachers who are interested in the few remaining tour slots can visit www.nasher.duke.edu/education.php.

A little more than half of the students who have visited the exhibition are from Durham Public Schools, and others have come from across the state — from Winston-Salem to Fort Bragg. Visiting last week was a group of first-graders from Jeffreys Grove Elementary School in Raleigh.

Jeffreys Grove art teacher Mary Gail Walker worked with one of the school’s science teachers to prepare their students for Calder’s marriage of art and science. From an art perspective, the exhibition appeals to children’s “sense of play” and encourages them to trust their instincts in creating their own work, she said. From a science and mathematical perspective, the exhibition offers a jumping-off point to discuss organic and geometric shapes.

“It correlates so beautifully with the first-grade curriculum in terms of motion and balance,” Walker said. “It’s just the sheer joy of Alexander Calder.”

Calder, born in 1898, was just a child himself when he began experimenting with shapes and motion. He was 11 years old when he presented his parents, both artists, with two of his first sculptures: a small dog and a rocking duck, both made of brass, according to the Calder Foundation website.

After an initial career as an engineer, he devoted himself to his art. He created his first mobile — a kinetic, moving piece — in 1931. His grounded, stationary pieces are known as stabiles. The Nasher exhibition includes several of both styles.

“Form, Balance, Joy” is one of the most popular exhibitions among school groups that the museum has hosted, Chevalier said.

“The work is appealing to so many people,” she said. “It’s accessible.”