

Man in Wire

Alexander Calder never went anywhere without a pair of pliers in his pocket, ready to draw in space with industrial steel wire. Starting in Paris in his 20s, he used them to create nuanced and perceptive wire caricatures of a host of personalities, including **Calvin Coolidge**, **Babe Ruth**, **Fernand Léger**, **John D. Rockefeller** (awkwardly playing golf), and himself. With a twist here and a bend there, Calder made his minimal wire renderings come alive: memorably, for example, in **Jimmy Durante's** prominent profile, with its large head, bushy eyebrows, intense eyes, and exaggerated proboscis. The exhibition "Calder's Portraits: A New Language," at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., from March 11 through August 14, juxtaposes

Calder's wire likenesses with portrayals of the same subjects by other artists.

One of the drawings, by Calder, is of **Jean-Paul Sartre**. Curator **Barbara Zabel** writes in the exhibition catalogue that Calder and Sartre met in the artist's Roxbury, Connecticut, studio in 1945. Calder later invited Sartre to visit his New York studio and gave him a mobile made of Connecticut license plates, entitled *Peacock*.

In 1946, Sartre wrote about Calder's mobiles for the catalogue of an exhibition in Paris. Of *Peacock*, he said: "Sometimes Calder amuses himself by imitating natural forms—he has given me a bird of paradise with wings of iron.

All that is needed is a little warm air, rising out the window, rubbing against it. Clanking, the bird straightens out, spreads its tail, bobs its creased head. It weaves and rocks and then, suddenly, as if obeying some invisible order, it wheels slowly, spread-eagled, on its axis."

Calder's Self-Portrait, 1968.

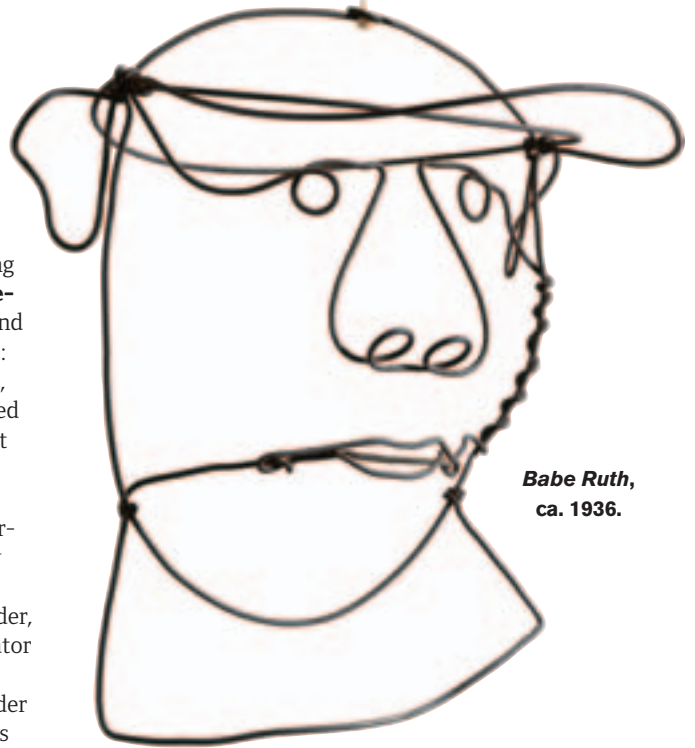
When Sartre's essay was excerpted in *ARTnews*, in December 1947—the title was "Existentialist on mobilist"—**Aline Saarinen**, the magazine's managing editor, commissioned Calder to create a portrait of Sartre. "He submitted two pen-and-ink drawings, one featuring the philosopher with bright spiral eyes, large nose and full lips, and another, in which Sartre is pictured with his omnipresent cigarette, the smoke of which spells Sartre's name," according to Zabel.

The drawing selected by *ARTnews* was the portrait without the cigarette.

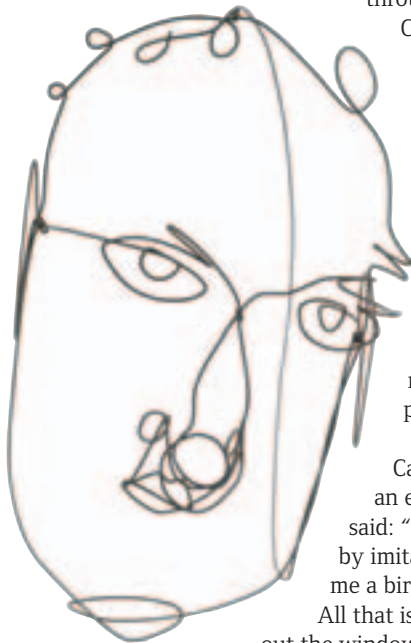
"In light of Sartre's 'blatant anti-Americanism,' especially later during the Cold War, it may seem odd that he would have such unrestrained enthusiasm for an artist who was widely seen by the French as an embodiment of America," Zabel writes.

However, she adds, as **Annie Cohen-Solal** noted in an article in the *Journal of Romance Studies* in 2006, Sartre was for a time fascinated with American cinema, jazz, and literature. His visits to the United States in the mid-1940s served to intensify that passion, Zabel says.

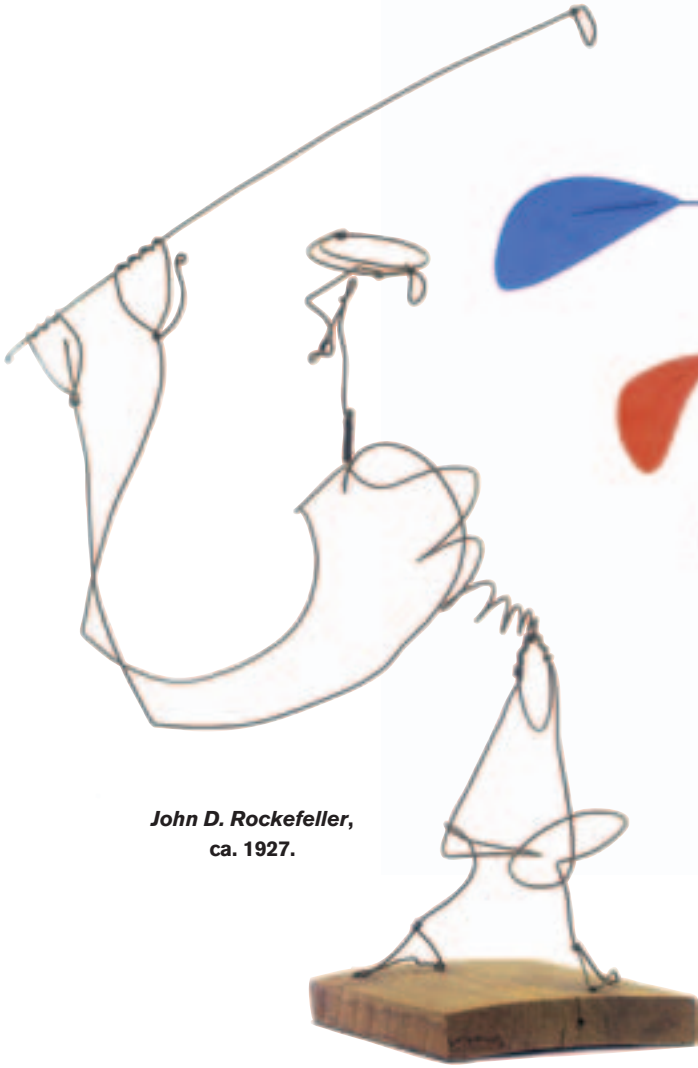
—**Stephen May**



Babe Ruth,
ca. 1936.



Calvin Coolidge,
1927.



John D. Rockefeller,
ca. 1927.



Peacock, 1941.

Two portraits of Jean-Paul Sartre
commissioned by *ARTnews* in 1947.
The image on the right was published
with the philosopher's *ARTnews*
essay, "Existentialist on mobilist."

