



**ALEXANDER  
CALDER  
STEPS ON  
THE GAS**



**On the occasion of the Calder Foundation's unveiling of its recently completed Calder BMW Art Car (Artist's Proof), Robert Rubin recalls the origins of the project.**

*Calder knows there is nothing more serious than play, and that a race car is the most sophisticated toy available to those who aspire to be serious.*  
—François Mathey, Musée des Arts Decoratifs, Paris, 1975

*A mobile is a car without wheels.*  
—The critic Michel Ragon, to Hervé Poulain, c. 1975

Alexander Calder gave the world its first Art Car in 1975. By "Art Car" I mean the series of, now, nineteen BMW's painted by the likes of Jeff Koons, Robert Rauschenberg, Frank Stella, and Andy

Warhol.<sup>1</sup> The Art Car was by no means the first to aspire to "art," or to be the medium of an artist's mark-making or conceptual gesture; Sonia Delaunay painted a Bugatti 35A as early as 1926. In the 1960s, while American Pop artists mostly celebrated car culture, European artists such as the *Nouveaux réalistes* were more inclined to evoke the degradations wrought on society by the internal combustion engine. César crushed cars into cubes. Wolf Vostell encased them in concrete. Others, such as Arman and Jean Tinguely, straddled the divide, creating lyrical art out of automotive detritus.

Calder's response to internal combustion was more literal and radical, in line with his faith in the dynamic power of color, his practice of moving abstracted forms through space, and his preoccupation with the social activation of his sculptures. What better way to achieve social activation than to hurtle your sculpture down the Mulsanne Straight at 200 miles an hour in front of 200,000 spectators, the force of your composition of shapes and colors projected far beyond the "canvas" of the car as it whizzes by?

Cars entered the twentieth century as playthings of the wealthy but quickly, thanks to Henry Ford, became mass-produced appliances, meant to get us from point A to point B. Soon they will even drive themselves. The intrinsically ludic element of movement persists, however: cars will always, somehow, be toys, and racing them is a high-stakes, gladiatorial form of play. Calder himself said of racing, "With its colors, and with the presence of death, it's like a bullfight, but better than war."<sup>2</sup>

*From War Paint to Billboard:  
A Potted History of Race Car Heraldry*

In the beginning, no one gave much thought to what a race car looked like, let alone considered its possibilities as a vessel or container for graphic design.<sup>3</sup> Edwardian cars were rough beasts: platform chassis, engine, a couple of bolted-down seats. Numbering was functional and essential for administering a race, but painting a race car was the last thing anybody thought about. Team and marque badges were discreet affairs, usually applied to the engine cowling or radiator cap. At some point the idea of national colors evolved, and

stripes and arrows became a thing: think tribal war paint. Advertising stickers were an American innovation, first appearing on the side panels of racing cars between the wars. At first they were limited to automotive products, but consumer brands would inevitably follow.

By the early 1970s, car bodies had evolved into what sponsors call "real estate," a term also applied to the jerseys and caps of professional athletes. War paint yielded to revenue opportunity. Before the complete takeover of this real estate by multinationals, Porsche had messed around with psychedelic schemes on its Martini-sponsored cars. These highly entertaining optical experiments were improvised in the garage, where they were spray-painted with an air compressor normally used to inflate the tires. But those were precursors, "art cars" with a small "a."

*Le Ramage Vaut le Plumage  
(She Goes as Good as She Looks)*

Perhaps BMW was already thinking of a graphic competition when it was approached, in late 1974, by the French auctioneer Hervé Poulain with the idea of the Art Car. An amateur racer when not wielding his gavel, Poulain brought a perspective that was more Big Art than Big Tobacco to the intersection of art, spectacle, and the automobile: instead of decorating the automobile with graphics selling the products of a sponsor, why not use an artist's intervention to elevate the automobile itself? And who better than the creator of the *mobile* to launch a program that would in time constitute a mechanical *tour d'horizon* of contemporary art? The Calder BMW is a throwback to a purer era of racing. There was to be no sponsor crap whatsoever on this baby. Calder's paintwork enhances rather than exploits the vehicle. It's a pure homage to movement and speed. Of course, the best advertising doesn't look like advertising. BMW-works driver Sam Posey recalls that corporate brass was very open to "what the project would teach them about their car, to see it from a different perspective."<sup>4</sup>

Poulain's day job may have been auctioneer, but where cars and art were concerned he was a poet. He described the fauve colors Calder employed as "pure, already dynamic in themselves." For him, the car was "an inhabited mobile."<sup>5</sup> The man at the

wheel added a human dimension to its mechanical movements. As for the noise—another dimension whose frontiers in art Calder had crossed, with works such as *Small Sphere and Heavy Sphere* (1932/33)—Poulain cited a famous verse from LaFontaine's fable of the fox and the crow to say that the car sounded (and went) as good as it looked.

Commanding this kind of Gallic eloquence, Poulain had no trouble enlisting either BMW or Calder. Drawing on his racing connections (and the fact that the wife of BMW racing chief Jochen Neerpasch ran an art gallery), he convinced the company to prepare a car for Le Mans that Calder would paint. Poulain brought Calder a commercially available plastic model of the car on which to paint his design, then for a next, intermediate step, a larger, 1:5-scale maquette in fiberglass, purpose built by BMW in Munich. The paint scheme would be applied on the BMW by Walter Maurer, a Munich-based specialist (who would also paint the artist's proof nearly fifty years later). The completed car was sent to Calder's home and studio in Saché, not far from Tours in the Loire Valley. Parked among various non-internally combusted mobiles, the great machine was signed by Calder with a paintbrush.

The Calder BMW was a proper race car that actually raced. One of 19 competition-prepared versions (out of a total of 167 roadgoing units produced between 1973 and 1975) of the "Batmobile"—so called for its aerodynamic rear-mounted spoiler—the 3.0 CSL (Coupé Sport Leichtbau [lightweight]) was a competitive GT racer.<sup>6</sup> In its life before Calder, VIN #2275992 raced several times in 1974, winning first place at Salzburg with Jacky Ickx and Hans Stuck at the wheel. Later in the season, the great Ronnie Peterson—aka "Superswede," two time F-1 runner-up champ—would also drive it, taking pole position at the Nurburgring, though failing to finish. The car's pre-Calder provenance alone makes it a significant historic competition auto.

The car made a cultural pit stop at the Musée des Arts Decoratifs, Paris, before going to Le Mans a month later. There Poulain was joined by two professional drivers: Posey, who had finished in the top ten at Le Mans five times in ten outings, and Jean Guichet, who had won Le Mans a decade earlier

Previous spread:  
Calder BMW Art Car (1975)  
racing at 24 Heures du  
Mans, June 14, 1975. Photo:  
courtesy Calder Foundation,  
New York/Art Resource,  
New York © 2022 Calder  
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Artists Rights Society (ARS),  
New York

Above:  
Calder BMW Art Car (1975)  
and Calder BMW Art Car  
(1:5 intermediate maquette,  
1975), Saché, 1975. Photo:  
courtesy Calder Foundation,  
New York/Art Resource,  
New York © 2022 Calder  
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New York

Right:  
Calder with Hervé Poulain  
holding Calder BMW Art Car  
(maquette, 1975), Le Carroi  
house, Saché, 1975. Photo:  
courtesy Calder Foundation,  
New York/Art Resource,  
New York © 2022 Calder  
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New York



in a Ferrari 250LM. So the car has had five legendary drivers—Ickx, Stuck, Peterson, Posey, and Guichet; has represented four European countries plus the United States; has had multiple pole positions and one first-place finish; and is painted and signed by Calder. That's a tough pedigree to top.

In approaching Calder, Poulain was no doubt inspired by Braniff International Airways' commissioning of the artist to paint airplanes, in 1973.<sup>7</sup> Whereas Braniff had to write Calder an enormous check to entice him to cross the line between art and commerce, for BMW Calder worked free. In return, BMW agreed to conserve and display the car in perpetuity. Under this arrangement, the Calder BMW has avoided the usual degradations that ensue when the factory deaccessions an obsolete road warrior. It has had a transparent, continuous history, as well as a healthy intermittent exhibition schedule at venues from museums to automobile concours.

In the second book of his two-volume biography of Calder, Jed Perl discusses the Braniff episode in considerable detail but mentions the Calder BMW only in passing, as eliciting the same unease in the art world as Braniff's shotgun marriage of art and commerce. For many, including Calder's wife, Louisa, this was the clear, negative verdict on the airplane project. Calder himself seems to have been less conflicted about it, but who wouldn't want to see his art fly by in the sky?

The Le Mans adventure was something else entirely. If Braniff had been a shotgun marriage, the Art Car project was great sex among multiple consenting adults. Calder was one of several artists, including Pablo Picasso, whom Braniff had approached; Poulain never had anyone but Calder in mind.<sup>8</sup> (Picasso died before discussions with Braniff could advance, but he would later suffer the posthumous indignity of his heirs licensing his name for a mass-produced Citroën.) Braniff went under long ago, leaving the two Calder planes to be recycled and then junked. Today the Calder BMW occupies pride of place in the museum at BMW's Munich headquarters.

On the first day of the race, on June 14, Calder was whisked from Saché to Le Mans in the helicopter of Frédéric Chandon de Brailles, heir to the Moët-Hennessy champagne concern. Chandon saw to it that the artist got the VIP treatment at the circuit's Club Moët et Chandon before being cooped back home. Le Mans was the first auto race Calder visited in person and the helicopter ride was probably also his first. One can only imagine the wonder of discovery he must have felt in the presence of all those fantastic machines—among which the Calder car, the most fantastic of all, caused the greatest stir. Posey would recall, "Le Mans is always a zoo, but there were literally hundreds of people around the car, all vying for pictures with or autographs from Calder. When he saw me in my driver's suit, he put his arm around me and said, 'Get me outta here.'" The day before, Posey had driven "one of the great laps of my life" to qualify the car way ahead of every other car in its class. "The Calder car really stood out on the grid, chest high among all those knee-high prototypes," he told me. "BMW gave me the choice of driving that weekend at Mosport with Brian Redman—which would have been a pretty much guaranteed win—or driving the Calder car at Le Mans. The final result notwithstanding, I made the right choice."<sup>9</sup>

Although the Calder BMW ran fifth overall for several hours, it was retired a little more than a



third of the way through the race with mechanical failure. Falling in the immediate aftermath of the oil crisis of 1973, 1975 was not a good year for the Bimmer boys at Le Mans: their highest-placing car came in twenty-seventh (behind nineteen Porsches, no less). The '75 race was derisively referred to as the “Le Mans Economy Run,” due to fuel restrictions.

Calder too was running out of gas. He died a year later, barely three weeks into *Calder's Universe*, his retrospective at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art, where the car was on display. Its presence in the Whitney's Marcel Breuer building was not uncontroversial. A common critique of the show was that it failed to distinguish a hierarchy of value between Calder's art and his other stuff (or, as Perl puts it, between his masterpieces and his follies). Lucky for us the car was there, though, because Calder was able to show it to his then-thirteen-year-old grandson, Alexander S. C. “Sandy” Rower. Sandy asked the obvious question: Can you start it up for me, grandpa? According to him, Calder laughed and said he was going to make one for himself so he could do exactly that.

As the keeper of the Calder flame, Rower eventually made good on his grandfather's intentions. Working with virtually the same cast of characters, including Maurer and Neerpasch, he has executed a true artist's proof, indistinguishable in art-historical terms from VIN #2275992 except for the latter's racing provenance. As Rower puts it, “It's not a replica, clone, copy, reproduction, or 1:1 model. It's the artist's proof my grandfather was entitled to make but never got around to. As in 1975, BMW Group Classic converted a 1974 3.0 CSL road car to identical racing specs. It has the same serial number as the first car, plus the AP designation, as in any unique or editioned artwork for which an AP is made.”<sup>10</sup>

The artist's proof made its debut last summer in the exhibition *Alexander Calder: Minimal/Maximal*, at the Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin, and then appeared at the Bridge, an annual concours on the Long Island site of the former Bridgehampton Race Circuit (where Posey raced on many occasions, including his professional debut with the

Roger Penske team in 1968). It has joined the Calder Foundation's “stable” of mobiles and will be a regular presence on both the art and the concours circuits. This November, the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach will host the car's North American institutional debut.

What's next, Sandy—an operational Boeing 727 in Calder livery? Here's an idea: there was a third plane for Braniff, the “Flying Colors of Mexico,” that never got off the drawing board. I'll bet you can find the right donor plane in one of those airline graveyards in the southwestern desert . . . and I know a guy with an engine.

1. For a complete history of the project see BMW Group, “BMW Art Car,” n.d., available online at <https://www.artcar.bmwgroup.com/en/art-car/> (accessed November 9, 2021).

2. Alexander Calder, 1975, quoted in Hervé Poulain, *Mes Pop Cars* (Waterloo, Belgium: Editions Apach, 2006), 41.

Author's translation: “C'est comme une course de taureaux à cause de la couleur et à cause de la mort. . . . C'est tout de même mieux que la guerre.”

3. For a tongue-in-cheek look at race car graphics see Reyner Banham, “Notes toward a Definition of U.S. Automobile Painting as a Significant Branch of Mobile Modern Heraldry,” *Art in America* 54, no. 5 (September/October 1966): 76–79. For a more straightforward history see Sven Voelker, *Go Faster: The Graphic Design of Racing Cars* (Berlin: Gestalten, 2010).

4. Sam Posey, telephone conversation with the author, November 2, 2021.

5. Poulain, in the film *24 H Du Mans 1975*. Author's translation from the French.

6. The car raced in the GT class—modified road-going, series-produced cars—rather than the faster (and lower) prototype class of purpose-built machines.

7. See Jed Perl, *Calder: The Conquest of Space. The Later Years: 1940–1976* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2020), 510–16.

8. Braniff apparently approached three artists, Calder, Pablo Picasso, and “Mireaux” (presumably Joan Miró). See Thomas E. Mowry Jr., “Flying Colors' Braniff Soars into Flight with their Biggest Promotion Ever,” *Wharton Account* 15, no. 2 (Winter 1974): 21.

9. Posey, telephone conversation with the author.

10. Sandy Rower, telephone conversation with the author, November 4, 2021.

**Previous spread:**  
Calder BMW Art Car (1975) racing at 24 Heures du Mans, June 14, 1975. Photo: courtesy Calder Foundation, New York/Art Resource, New York © 2022 Calder Foundation, New York/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

**This page:**  
Calder BMW Art Car (Artist's Proof, 1975/2021) in *Alexander Calder: Minimal / Maximal*, Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin, August 2021. Photo: David von Becker, courtesy Calder Foundation, New York/Art Resource, New York © 2022 Calder Foundation, New York/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

