

Alexander Calder's "Hollow Egg". AR221

I was immediately attracted to Alexander Calder's "Hollow Egg" (1939) during a recent trip to the Phillips Collection in Washington, DC. The sculpture made me feel weightless, as if I were floating or flying, which automatically made me think of freedom. This can be partially attributed to the materials, metal wire and paint, but at the heart of the viewer's experience is the Collection's decision to place Hollow Egg in a corner of an L-shaped stairwell showcases. This puts the piece in direct view of anyone ascending or descending the stairs and showcases its best qualities, thereby making it more than the sum of its parts and enhancing the viewer's experience in the process.

As a petite woman who loves to get dirty and play with power tools, I have a special appreciation for art that is both delicate and fragile in appearance, yet sturdy and solid in composition. I was especially drawn to Hollow Egg because of the light, airy quality that it possesses, despite obvious structural integrity and strength, and the sense of weightless floating that I felt while viewing it. Calder seems to have mastered the art of contradiction in Hollow Egg with both his choice of color (black and white) and in the way he shaped the material. The piece, which almost appears human in form, except for its tripod base (in and of itself a contradiction), is comprised of criss-crossing metal that seems random until closer inspection reveals that the construction is really quite exact. Ironically, it is this very precision that contributes most to the piece's sense of chaos and the feeling of freedom that I felt in its presence.

The location of Hollow Egg within the Phillips Collection is key to why I found it so compelling. The piece, which measures 54 x 39 x 38 1/8 inches, sits in the corner on the landing in the stairwell. Bathed in light from above, the piece casts a shadow on both walls behind it, which echoes the positive and negative shapes made by the intersections of wire and provides yet another dimension to this three dimensional sculpture. As one moves around the sculpture, the shadows move, too, bringing the piece to life and at times looming over both art and viewer.

Perhaps the real magic, however, is in Hollow Egg's placement in a stairwell. In walking up the stairs, the viewer is first below the sculpture, then at eye-level with it and finally above the piece, offering an ever-changing perspective on both the sculpture itself and its shadow. It is likely that appreciating the piece from varying heights had a significant impact on my emotional response to it, as it is hard not to feel, as you ascend or descend on the stairs, as if you're defying gravity somehow. This unearthly experience is what contributed most to the feeling of freedom and my appreciation for Calder's Hollow Egg.