

Mobiles

by Kathleen S. Johnston '07

David Rome Prize

I.

As I enter the East wing of the National Gallery of Art: angular, pinkish, civic marble, then glass, then intersecting lines and planes, and then a breath-a sudden lightness of form. Primary colors balance and circle each other in a perfect asymmetry in the sun-lit atrium of the museum. My eyes relax. These simple shapes, these bright colors awake in me a vague recollection of seagulls.

Mobile-Noun 1: a structure suspended so as to turn freely in the air.

II.

When I'm overwhelmed at school, I sit quietly on a pew in Manning Chapel until chaos resolves itself into some sort of order. When I'm overwhelmed at home, I walk ten blocks or so to the art museum, nod cordially towards the large mobile hanging in the entrance, and head downstairs to a bench at the back of a small, curved nook above which several smaller and more delicate mobiles float. One is made up of red, blue and yellow discs with holes in their middles. Another is made entirely of red and white circles, all of which hang exactly parallel to the floor and smile down on me like clouds. Some are more vertical and others are horizontally oriented. All spin slowly, hypnotically, orbiting themselves, casting shadows against the immaculately white, semi-circular wall. Sitting there, looking up, it's as though I've closed my eyes while keeping them open.

Mobiles are perhaps the most universally loved subset of modern art. I've watched many visitors from my bench as they watch Calder's mobiles in their elegant rotations, and none have ever scratched their heads or walked away looking confused. There's something wonderfully accessible about a mobile, whether it hangs above an infant's crib or in the atrium of a museum. An art professor may tell you about Alexander Calder's revolution-how, with his mobiles, he fulfilled decades of artistic striving by liberating abstract form from the two-dimensional canvas-and that would be true. Nevertheless, it would be completely unnecessary when appreciating one of Calder's creations. In fact, it would almost be missing the point. In my experience, in front of the mobiles, people rarely speak of art theory. Generally, in front of a mobile, visitors fall silent and are still.

III.

$$\text{Torque} = (\text{distance to center}) \times \text{force}$$

Despite the apparent simplicity of a Calder mobile, its creation was much more complicated than it seems at first glance. I tried to make a simple mobile for an art course three years ago, and it nearly ended in disaster. I spent days collecting my materials: an interesting branch for the connecting beam, silver wire to suspend the hanging elements, a weighty stone for one side, heavier wire bent in the shape of a spiral, and six numbers from the Fibonacci series (1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13-this series is frequently found in the proportions of nature-seashells and galaxies, for example) fashioned from clay. My naïve intention was to create a symbolic harmony by balancing numbers against stone, art against nature. It didn't work out that way. Each time I attempted to position the rock and the spiral of numbers, the mobile toppled one way or the other. Finally, after some sweat and cursing, I achieved a precarious balance between the two. Even then, my final mobile did not rotate peacefully, but instead lurched back and forth. Fortunately, my professor concluded that my mobile's convulsions were appropriate, given my subject matter. I felt humbled and returned to the Smithsonian that winter with a newfound respect for process.

For a mobile to balance (not wobbling, not capsizing) around its focus (generally this is the place where string or wire connects the main arm of a mobile to the ceiling), the combined mass of all of the objects on each side of the focus must be even (thus ensuring that the force of gravity on each side is equivalent), and the same goes for the combined torque. These demands placed upon the artist ensure the mobile's elegance of form, its dynamic tension.

Now, when I contemplate a mobile, I wonder if it's the physics at work that makes it so attractive. Surely there is effort behind these balancing forms. They spin in front of me-my mind wanders to seashells and galaxies.

IV.

Intro to Linguistics is generally a challenge for Translation Concentrators, forcing one to think scientifically when one prefers to think literarily. I valued the course, however, for the instances in which scientific and literary insight went hand in hand. One afternoon, Professor Johnson was explaining the nuances of a syntactical theory by drawing complex upside-down "trees" of branching noun, verb, and preposition phrases. Explaining that the ordering of these phrases was often unimportant, he mused that a "syntax tree" might be more aptly labeled a "syntax mobile," as it is free to move about and change its internal ordering within certain bounds.

Professor Johnson smiled a bit to himself at the cleverness of this observation and proceeded to the next power-point slide, but he had lost me for the rest of that lecture. My mind was experiencing a minor revolution as I imagined words floating in white space. Words with size and mass and color. Words balancing against each other's weight and torque. Words laboriously enchanted. Words endowed with motion.

Poem-Noun 1: a mobile constructed by weighing and balancing words. See **essay**.