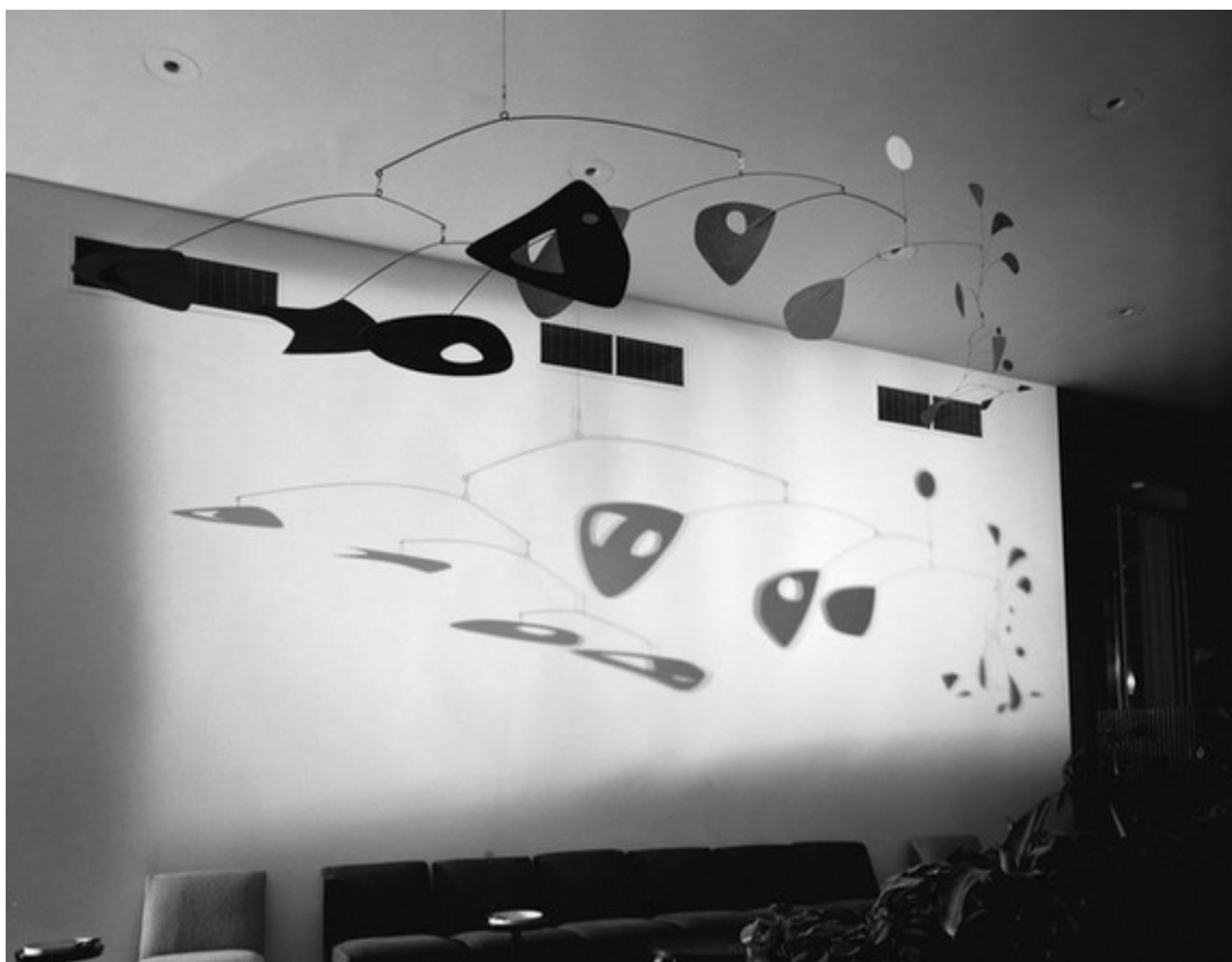


One Minute Modernist: Modern Architecture + Sculpture in Cincinnati

Cincinnati has a rich history of combining architecture and sculpture. In the 20th-century, the city's major Art Deco public buildings, such as Union Terminal and the Netherland Plaza Hotel, had highly integrated programs of architecture and art in which sculpture played a major role.

This integration of architecture and art became more rare in Modernism, but Cincinnati's first major Modernist building, the Terrace Plaza Hotel (by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, 1949), followed Art Deco principles of synthesizing architecture and art (unsurprisingly, as its developers, the Emery family, had earlier built the Netherland Plaza Hotel). The Emerys commissioned notable murals for the Terrace Plaza from modern artists like Joan Miro and Saul Steinberg and, for the hotel lobby, a suspended, metal "mobile," by famous modern sculptor Alexander Calder. Seventeen feet long, it is called "Twenty Leaves and an Apple" and is now at the Cincinnati Art Museum.



Alexander Calder's Twenty Leaves and an Apple, 1946, as installed in hotel lobby. Photograph by Ezra Stoller.

In the early 1950s, when designing the Cincinnati Public Library downtown, Modernist architect Woodie Garber developed a friendship with sculptor Harry Bertoia and commissioned two Bertoia sculptures for the Library's rooftop terrace. One sculpture consisted of metal rods and plates in a screen-like composition, while a second, smaller sculpture of enamel-colored metal plates on rods was intended to appeal to children. These may have been Bertoia's earliest "outdoor" architectural sculptures (his previous examples being inside buildings). Both sculptures sat in shallow reflecting pools and are now in storage.



Bertoia's outdoor sculpture in the Cincinnati Public Library.

In the early 1960s, architect John Garber (no relation to Woodie) of the firm Garber, Tweddel & Wheeler, commissioned Bertoia—who had begun working more frequently with modern architects nationwide—to design a 12-foot tall, tree-like sculpture of gold metal for the altar area of St. John's Unitarian Church in Clifton. The sculpture is positioned so that light from the church's south-facing, clerestory windows illuminate it on Christmas, Easter, and the summer solstice. Garber called St. John's a "heliocentric" building—meaning designed around the sun—and the sculpture is the focal point of the interior.

In the late 1960s, Woodie Garber again commissioned Bertoia for a suspended, metal "Cloud" sculpture that hangs in the lobby of Procter Hall, the College of Nursing, at the University of Cincinnati.

Of these five notable sculptures designed for Cincinnati Modernist buildings, only two are still in their original places: those by Bertoia at St. John's Church and Procter Hall. All these sculptures were "site specific"—that is, created for their particular buildings and spaces. How significant it would be if future restorations returned the remaining sculptures (or facsimiles of them) to their original locations. If so, pilgrimages to these remarkable fusions of Modernist space and sculpture would again be possible.

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