



Then Along Came a Girl Who Was Dancing
Or
A Day in Lugano, the Swiss Way
Shlomit Miky Dan



Lugano LAC Lake Front Piazza Luini © LAC 2015/Foto Studio Pagi

I was visiting Lugano, the Swiss Italian canton that borders Italy, on my way to its lakeside Museum. It was one of those crisp spring days when it felt as if you could almost touch the green slopes of the southern Alps that line the lake. As lover of art and architecture, it seemed a cool, logical choice. [LUGANO LAC Art & Culture](#)



Lugano LAC The View From The Hall ©LAC 2015 - Foto Studio Pagi

My visit began in the fan-shaped white stone Piazza Luini. Facing the lake and the city promenade, in spatial continuity with the museum entrance, it serves as a unique, welcoming open-air foyer.

Once inside, the visual sensation continues. The three-storey glass walls allow views of the lake to flow seamlessly through the sleek, elegant spaces, connecting the visitor to the city centre and its breathtaking landscape throughout the visit. The first impression I had of Ivano Gianola's spectacular architectural design reminded me of Mies van der Ruhe's Barcelona Pavilion of 1929, in its architectural clarity, transparency and use of fine materials. [Mies van der Ruhe Barcelona pavilion](#)

Reflecting the architect's respect for the void, the lake scene is an integral part of the museum's interior: the monochrome palette of smooth walls in green marble slabs, blonde wood and transparent glass creates a sober harmony and at the same time evoking a sense of lightness throughout the visit.. [Ivano Gianola LAC 2017](#)



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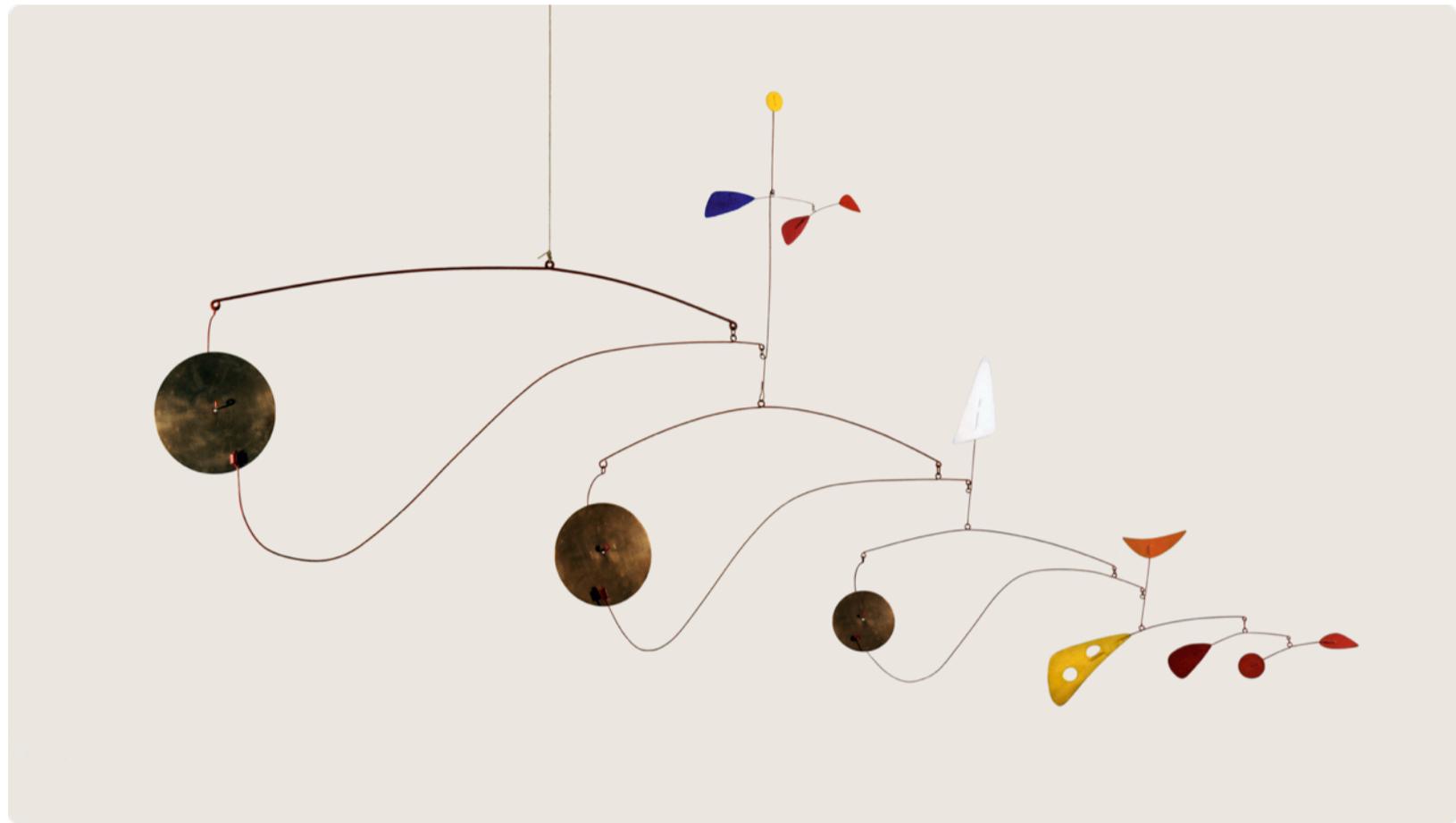
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As I entered the upstairs gallery, the only visitor, I was struck by the view from the horizontal glass wall overlooking the lake and the Alps.



Ausstellungsansicht, "Calder. Sculpting Time," MASI Lugano, Switzerland. Fotograf Luca Meneghel © 2024 Calder Foundation, New York / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

The dazzling light emanating from the silver-blue lake, the white peaks of the Alps with their green slopes sloping down to the lake, had penetrated, flooding the space, uniting inside with outside. In keeping with the visual surprise of the setting, some seats face the glass wall, allowing awe-struck visitors to pause and take in the scene. I was one of them. Even for those of us familiar with Switzerland's spectacular outdoor scenes, the view was breathtaking. Circling Alexander Calder's islands of poetic, rhythmic, airy and seemingly weightless art, a celebration of colour, form and movement bordering on the abstract, I meandered through the silent gallery, changing viewpoints, angles and perspectives. It was like walking through a colourful kaleidoscope in perfect harmony with the landscape. [Lugano LAC Calder Sculpting Time](#)



Alexander Calder *Triple Gong* c. 1948 Kupfer, Metallblech, Draht und Farbe 99.1 × 190.5 × 7 cm Calder Foundation, New York Photo courtesy Calder Foundation, New York / Art Resource, New York © 2024 Calder Foundation, New York / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Then the silence broke as a group of children entered, papers in hand. It reminded me of an earlier visit, when a girl had entered the gallery with her mother, humming and dancing.

Tell me which paintings you like, I heard the mother ask. The girl did not answer. Chirping, she tiptoed around, as if in a ballet, to her own rhythm.

I was amused. It sounded familiar. I used to ask my daughters the same thing at art events. I would encourage them to choose which works of art they liked; to get the tactile feeling of touching a sculpture, a piece of glass; to walk around it, observe how it looked from different angles; to become familiar with the materials from which the works were made; to observe and compare different styles; to notice the subtlety of tones and undertones, to identify small details as well as the central object; to get into the habit of discovering other dimensions, new sensations.

On my way to the museum bookshop, I passed through the huge glassed-in lobby. Situated on one side of the hall, the bookshop looks like a colourful mosaic, contrasting but complementing the elegant, sober interior. It offers books on art, architecture, design, music, theatre, dance and literature in Italian, French, German and English, reflecting the open-mindedness of the Swiss. Books on current affairs and events in various fields are displayed frontally on the shelves to attract the attention of visitors. A large selection of children's books and Swiss-designed toys add to the lively atmosphere.

A piano in a corner caught my eye, as did a large, clear wooden low table with piles of coloured pencils and paper. Children and adults sat around it. Some were drawing, some were talking, some were reading, some were just taking a break from the exhibitions.

It reminded me of my earlier visit when, without thinking, I had joined them, taken a pencil and paper and spontaneously begun to sketch a silhouette, thinking of Elvira, my friend, whose story had made me smile again and again, long after I had first heard it.

I was sketching her image on the paper, when a small hand with a coloured pencil pointed at the drawing. Who is it? a cheerful voice asked.

I looked up: it was the little girl who had danced in the gallery. She was sitting at the table with her mother, and they seemed to be drawing too.

Happy to share the story, they came closer, leaned in and joined in the tête-à-tête exchange.

The story goes like this, I began, with some background.

Elvira, my Swiss friend, who grew up in St. Gallen, the German part of Switzerland, and lives in Geneva, the French part, has 5 brothers and sisters. The youngest, the oldest is over 90, she has seen it all: the whole range of personalities, sibling interactions, group dynamics. All this has sharpened and honed her powers of observation.

A gifted storyteller with a down-to-earth, jazzed-up sense of humour, every meeting with her has the promise and flavour of funny, amusing stories. From time to time, she tells me, she visits each individual, or the whole tribe, as she calls them, at family gatherings. The fact that each of them lives in a different canton is a gift to her. Insisting on returning to Geneva on the same day after each reunion allows her to have fun, avoid family conflicts and enjoy criss-crossing the country with gusto, providing her with a source of funny anecdotes and observations that she likes to share later with a twinkle in her eye.

Her insistence on returning to Geneva the same day after each union allows her to have fun, avoid family conflicts and enjoy criss-crossing the country with gusto, enriching her with a fountain of funny anecdotes and observations that she likes to share later with a wink.

So when Elvira's brother, who is over 90, had his birthday, the siblings decided to celebrate it in his place, up in the mountains, in another eastern Swiss canton. Elvira's sister, who is just a little bit (or es bitzeli - in a Swiss German dialect) younger than 90 and lives in a lower canton, told Elvira (she is the ordering type, Elvira explains with her typical twinkle in eye) to bring two inflated balloons and travel with them from Geneva to Zurich main station, where they would meet. From there they would take another train and then a third, smaller country train, that would take them to the village where the eldest brother lived, to celebrate his birthday.

Noticing my arched eyebrows questioning the logic of the request, Elvira said, Look, my sister, a stubborn but harmless character, is over 90. If this has made her happy, why should I object? Again, the twinkle.

Nobody argues with such reasoning. Not Elvira.

With a good sense of humour and an adventurous spirit, she cycled to the shop in Geneva to pick up the two inflated balloons, then cycled to the Geneva train station and took the train to Zurich, where they had met.

Curious passengers gave her a 'look', she told me later, first at the inflated balloons popping out of my bag, then at me, with a mixture of wonder and amusement.

Then, as the two ladies disembarked from the third, small country train that had brought them to the brother's village with the notable Swiss punctuality, one of the two balloons deflated with a shrill, sad sound. The older sister was furious, disappointed that Elvira could not keep up with the mission.

The two had finally arrived at the brother's house, where they joined the merry party and enjoyed the grilled fish, the 90-year-old brother's catch from the lake in front of his wooden house. With the addition of several glasses of local wine, the cheerful sister had forgiven Elvira or, given her advanced age, forgotten about the balloon event. And I got my share of a good laugh, a memory to savour long after I had heard it for the first time.

When the story was told, Sisi, the girl, as she had told me her name, asked if she could join in the drawing, which she did, whirling around the table in between. Her mother, sitting next to her, drew mountains in shades of blue. We live in the Valais (a French-speaking canton), in a ski resort, where the mountain peaks are silver blue most of the year, she explained, looking at me. It's cold up there, she smiled, pointing to the green slopes of the Lugano mountains visible through the huge glass hall.

I asked her if she would draw my friend's bike for me, as I confessed I was no expert. She did. And Sissi drew the train, with dots for the heads of the commuters in the windows. The drawing took on a life of its own, each of us adding a line here, a splash of colour there, and soon three hands were converging, busily illustrating a colourful picture.

Sissi is taking dance and piano lessons, she continued. We are X Patriots, the international nomadic professionals. My husband was offered a job here and I came to Lugano to get a feel for the place.

Sounds familiar, I said, I too belong to this tribe.

She continued: I heard about Lugano's artistic and cultural offerings, its Mediterranean climate with its palm trees and lush vegetation, its famous cuisine and its welcoming, relaxed atmosphere, she added, and I wanted to taste the water, see how my daughter would feel here, what the museum had to offer children. Pointing to the piano, she said, They told me at the reception that there are Sunday concerts, performed by young talented musicians, open to everyone, in an informal atmosphere, where children are welcome. Sounds promising.

When we had said goodbye, exchanged photographs and addresses, Sisi handed me the drawing. This is my gift to you, she said, encircling me in her own way.



© Sisi, Her Mother, and Miky

As we headed for the exit doors, we heard clapping and cheerful arrivederci's. We turned to discover, to our amazement, that they were coming from the smiling, cheerful Bookshop and Museum reception team, who had obviously witnessed our shared experience. I wondered: Could such a day trip, with such a story, happen anywhere else, but in Switzerland?



Lugano LAC Lake Front Piazza Luini © LAC 2015/Foto Studio Pagi

Standing outside in the bright, sun-bleached museum piazza, I took a long look back at the museum's façade, then turned to look at the spectacular landscape before me. Then it hit me: in a brilliant celebration, the architect had succeeded in inviting nature to be a part of the museum inside, while at the same time allowing nature to gracefully invite the museum to be a 3D work of art within it.



© Shlomit Miky Dan Collection

Some small, puffy clouds had appeared above the mountain peaks. Even they, I thought, were part of Lugano's seductive charm.

