



MARCH 2014

## Exploring Space

Ibram Lassaw | *The Planets*



**VISIT THE BMA**  
and look for more  
metal sculptures in  
the galleries and in  
the outdoor Sculpture  
Gardens.

Ibram Lassaw (American, born Egypt, 1913–2003). Detail, *The Planets*. 1954. Copper alloy on a wire armature. 36 x 38½ x 17⅞ inches. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Charles and Elsa Hutzler Memorial Collection, BMA 1956.293. ©Estate of Ibram Lassaw

We have all seen models and diagrams of our solar system. The most up-to-date of them show eight planets that look like marbles revolving around the sun, each in its own private orbit. Sculptor Ibram Lassaw gives us a different view.

The largest planets in Lassaw's imaginary cosmos look like balloons that have lost a bit of air. They are attached to a bumpy metal framework interrupted by an odd assortment of bulges and spikes. There is, of course, no such framework in outer space, but there are invisible gravitational forces that keep everything in place. Perhaps Lassaw's thin metal threads serve the same purpose by joining all parts of his metal universe together. While utterly unscientific, Lassaw's open and airy structure glitters as if it were lit by the sun.

Lassaw was well-read about astronomy and knew a lot about real planets. As a sculptor he wanted to express the idea that all parts of the universe are connected to each other. The welding technique allowed him to do just that.

After heating and bending small sections of wire, the artist used a torch to weld the pieces together to form a framework. Then he used the same torch to heat a thin rod of copper and run it over the surface of every segment of the wire structure. The melting copper coated the wire, building up a rough, bumpy, and glistening surface that made the sculpture sparkle. With these few materials, Lassaw became a space explorer, creating a universe that expanded to the size of his imagination but remained small enough to fit on a tabletop.

### CHALLENGE FOR STUDENTS

Look for thickened areas of the sculpture where Lassaw used the welding technique to join parts of his wire framework together.

Lassaw wanted people to imagine being inside his sculpture. Make a drawing that shows all the things you would do if you could shrink in size and use *The Planets* as playground equipment. Would you climb up the side? Hang upside down from the cross bars? Squeeze through the narrow spaces? Walk across the thinnest bars as if they were a balance beam?

Compare *The Planets* to a diagram of the solar system at [1.usa.gov/O26o7V](http://1.usa.gov/O26o7V)

See children's views of the solar system at [1.usa.gov/1hTODCW](http://1.usa.gov/1hTODCW)

**PRINT THE IMAGE ON PAGE 2 FOR YOUR STUDENTS.**

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