

Teaching

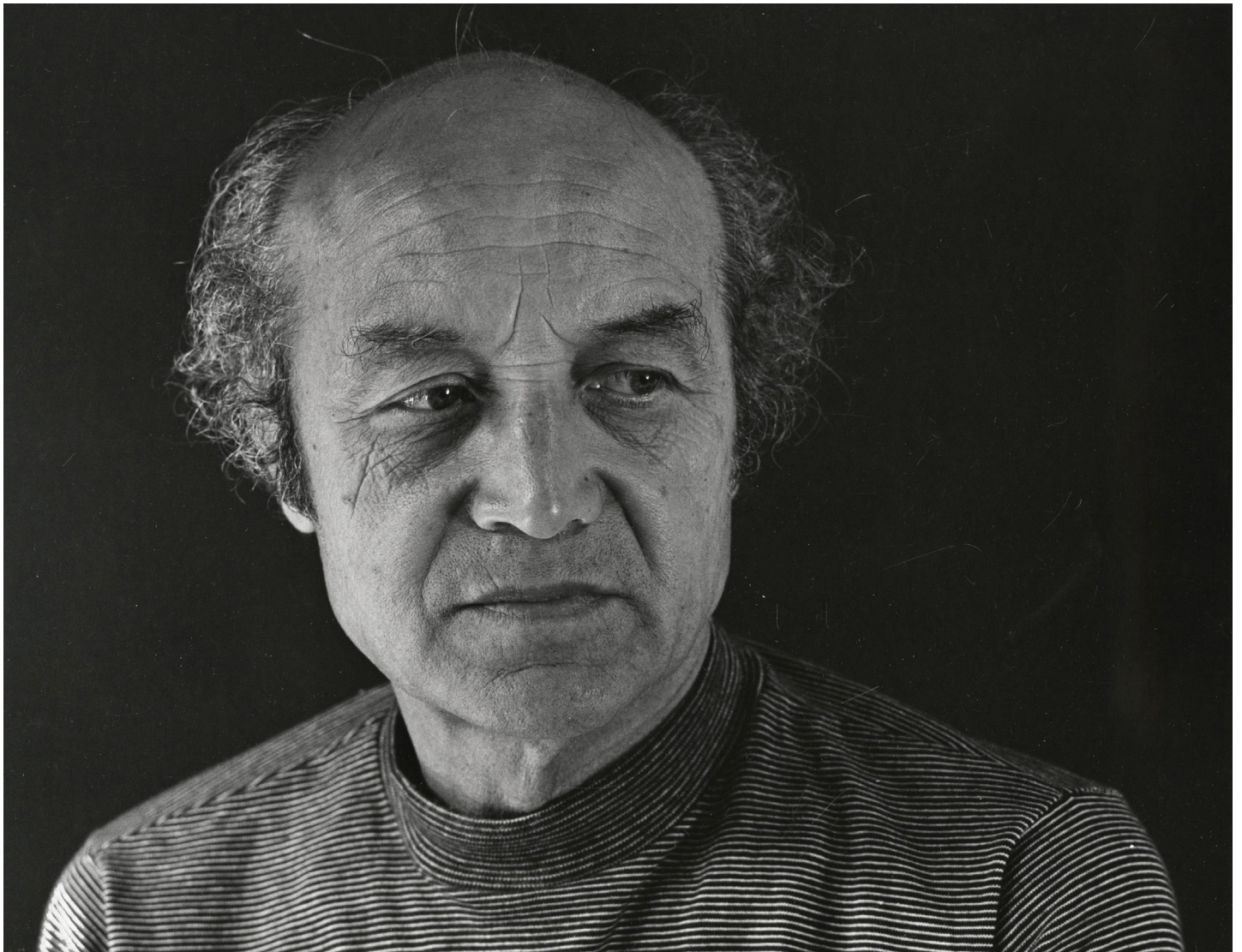
Isamu
Noguchi

ARTIST

Isamu NOGUCHI

(ee-sa-mu no-gu-chi)

野口 勇



Isamu Noguchi, ca. 1975

BORN

1904, Los Angeles

DIED

1988, New York

THEMES

Materials and Process
Nature

“Everything was sculpture. Any material, any idea without hindrance born into space, I considered sculpture.”¹

ART MEDIUMS

Sculpture

ABOUT THE ARTIST AND WORK

Isamu Noguchi was born in Los Angeles in 1904 to an American mother and a Japanese father, who was a celebrated poet. He lived in Japan until the age of thirteen, when he moved back to the United States. Noguchi’s biracial and bicultural upbringing made him feel as though he were living in between the East and West; the balancing of this tension became the subject of his art.

In 1926 Noguchi saw an exhibition in New York of the work of the modernist sculptor Constantin Brancusi and from 1927 to 1929 worked in Brancusi’s studio in Paris, where he began to create his own language of simplified abstract forms. Throughout the 1930s he traveled extensively through Asia, where he studied ink painting with the great painter and calligrapher Qi Baishi in China. Around this time, he also explored Surrealism and set up a studio in New York’s Greenwich Village.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 and the subsequent backlash against Japanese Americans had a dramatic effect on Noguchi, motivating him to become a political activist. Exempt from internment because of his New York residence, Noguchi volunteered his services at a camp in Arizona to improve conditions there by teaching ceramics and Japanese painting. But he left discouraged.² The political divide between the two countries he called home would trouble him throughout his life.

Noguchi returned to Japan in the immediate postwar period and kept a studio near a granite quarry on the island of Shikoku until his death in 1988. Fascinated by traditional Japanese architecture, gardens, and crafts, he was drawn to the Japanese reverence for nature and, especially, for stones. He was also inspired by calligraphy, the way black strokes activated the empty white space of the paper, and by the Zen Buddhist concept of void (*mu*), which sees substance and nothingness as interdependent states of reality.

Noguchi’s sculpture *The Cry* (1959) evokes calligraphic brushstrokes in space and is made from balsa, among the lightest of woods. Its title brings to mind a human cry and invites us to see the work as an attenuated, abstracted human figure, with its mouth open and hand raised. This work reveals Noguchi’s abiding anguish as a witness to the many horrors of the twentieth century while also demonstrating his attempt to transcend them by making simple, often symbolic forms.

1 Isamu Noguchi, *A Sculptor’s World* (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2004), p. 26.

2 “Isamu Noguchi: Biography,” Noguchi Museum, accessed July 31, 2019, <https://www.noguchi.org/noguchi/biography>.



Isamu Noguchi, *The Cry*, 1959. Balsa wood on steel base, 221 × 85.1 × 47.6 cm, including base. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York 66.1812

View and Discuss

→ Look at the sculpture *The Cry* (1959).

Before showing this work, measure a vertical line eighty-seven inches tall on a classroom wall (or have students do the measuring) to get an accurate sense of its scale.

Ask students, “What do you notice about this work?”

→ Noguchi titled this piece *The Cry*. How does the sculpture connect to its title?

Is this the title you would give the work?
If not, what would you call it?

→ *The Cry* is an abstracted representation of a human scream, an attempt to give the expression of an emotion physical form.

Think about how you might show a scream, and then make some sketches of your ideas. Is your conception similar to or different from Noguchi's?

View and Discuss

→ Noguchi was interested in nature and, particularly in this sculpture, the wind.

→ Noguchi produced this work in wood in 1959. A few years later, it was cast in bronze. This edition of six works is in museums and private collections around the world.

How might this have affected his creation of this piece?



Isamu Noguchi, *The Cry*, 1959–62. Bronze, 221 x 85.1 x 47.6 cm, including base. Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, Netherlands

How does the change of material and setting change the impact of the sculpture?

Classroom Activities

Balsa-Wood Sculptures

Although Noguchi frequently worked with marble, granite, and other dense and heavy materials, for this sculpture, he chose balsa, one of the lightest woods, so that he could create a nearly weightless solid sculpture. Balsa is a very user-friendly wood to work with. It is light, soft, and easy to carve, with no need for heavy-duty power saws or sanders.

With the adult supervision and proper instruction, students aged eleven or twelve can experience this medium. There are many websites and instructional videos available on the Internet aimed introducing young people to carving.

Natural Forces

In addition to conveying an emotion, Noguchi's work is responsive to the wind. He selected a very light material, balsa wood, and connected the parts of the sculpture so that they would move with the breeze.

Consider how you might create a work that responds to the wind or another natural force, such as gravity, magnetism, friction, erosion, decay, etc. Sketch your idea and then share it with others.

Activism

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, not only brought the United States into World War II but also set off a wave of fear and mistrust toward Japanese Americans, many of whom were placed in internment camps presumably for reasons of national security. As an act of solidarity with other Japanese Americans, Noguchi volunteered to live in a camp in Arizona, where he stayed for seven months. In the Arizona desert, amid thousands of Americans deprived of their freedoms, Noguchi, a child of an American mother and Japanese father, wrote, "To be hybrid anticipates the future. This is America, the nation of all nationalities." He added, "For us to fall into the Fascist line of race bigotry is to defeat our unique personality and strength."³

Discuss this quote. Do you think a similar injustice could ever happen again in the United States? What would you write in defense of Americans deprived of their freedoms?

Evoke Emotion

The Cry abstractly evokes a human scream.

Choose another emotive action and represent it in any three-dimensional medium. When finished, see if your classmates can guess which emotion and action you tried to depict.

Resources

Websites

- Noguchi Museum. <https://www.noguchi.org/>.
- Smithsonian American Art Museum, *Isamu Noguchi, Archaic/Modern*. <https://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/noguchi>.

Videos

- HiHo Kids. “Kids Meet a Survivor of the Japanese-American Internment.” November 29, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_e1s2kwSPwU.
- Indermühle, Aly. “Noguchi: The Life of a Sculptor.” April 27, 2015. <https://vimeo.com/126101868>.

Articles

- Gharavi, Maryam Monalisa. “Citizen Noguchi.” *Art in America*, December 1, 2017. <https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazines/citizen-noguchi/>.
- Urist, Jacoba. “To Bear Witness to Japanese Internment, One Artist Self-Deported Himself to the WWII Camps.” *Smithsonian Magazine*, January 19, 2017. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/bear-witness-japanese-internment-one-artist-self-deported-himself-wwii-camps-180961853/>

Books

- Altshuler, Bruce. *Isamu Noguchi*. New York: Abbeville Press, 1995.
- Hale, Christy. *The East-West House: Noguchi’s Childhood in Japan*. New York: Lee & Low Books, 2009.

Visit guggenheim.org/teachingmaterials for high-resolution images, audio, and video, as well as additional historical and contextual information about this artist and others featured in *Teaching Modern and Contemporary Asian Art*.

Note: On page 2, the artist's surname is capitalized to differentiate it from his given name. Colloquial phonetic pronunciations are included, rather than versions in the standard International Phonetic Alphabet, to help teachers pronounce names that may be unfamiliar.

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