

# Large Print

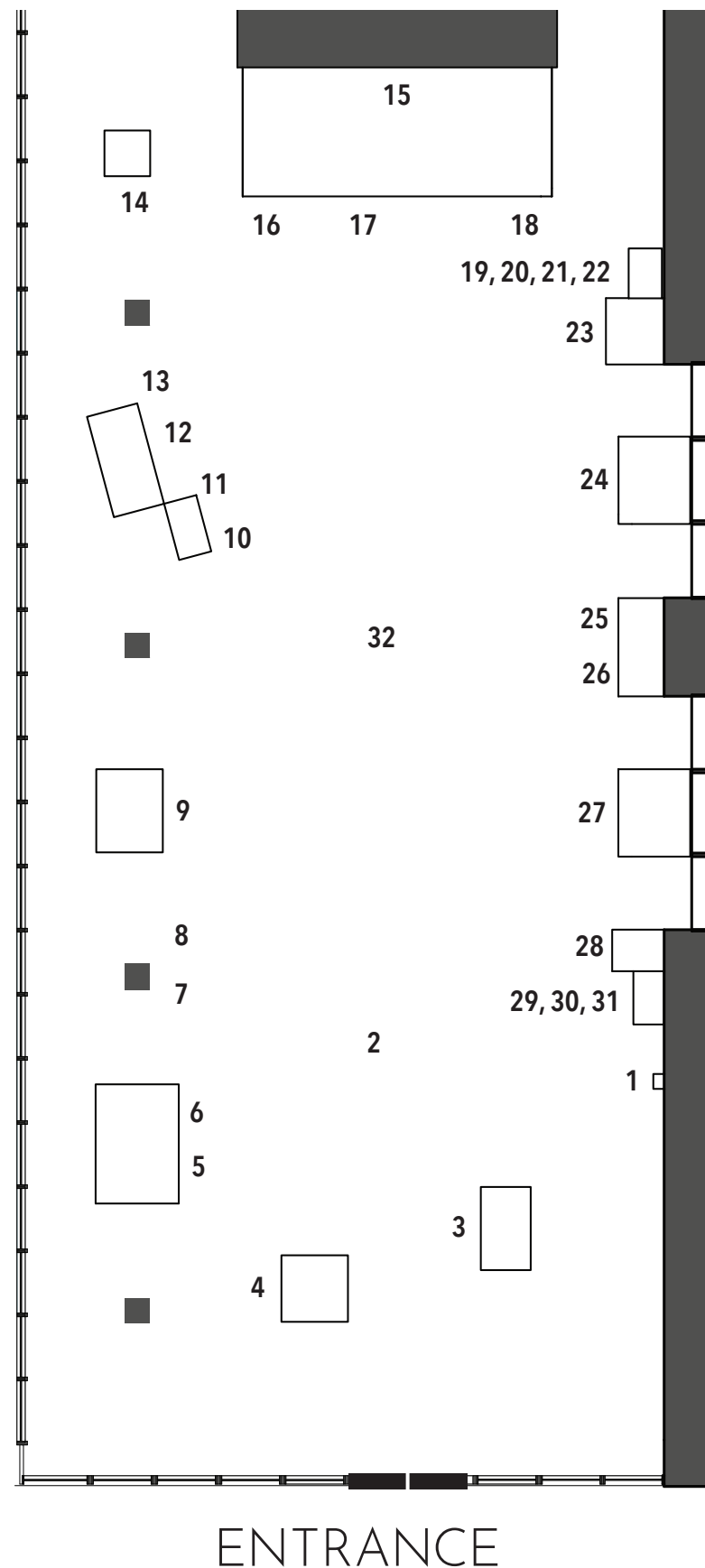


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# ISAMU NOGUCHI: LANDSCAPES OF TIME

*Isamu Noguchi: Landscapes of Time* is co-organized by the Clark Art Institute and The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, and curated by the Museum's Curator and Director of Research Matthew Kirsch and Curator Kate Wiener.

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**You know, one shifts—I do—backwards and forwards. Sometimes I think I’m part of this world of today. Sometimes I feel that maybe I belong in history or in prehistory, or that there’s no such thing as time. . . . If you [can] escape from that time constraint, then the whole world . . . is someplace where you belong.**

Isamu Noguchi

Japanese-American artist Isamu Noguchi made these provocative remarks on the nature of time during a 1972 interview in his studio in Long Island City, New York. This was not the first time Noguchi had reflected on this subject, and it would not be the last. Time is a thematic undercurrent seen throughout his practice, uniting work that spanned a range of materials and disciplines, from his steel and stone sculptures, to his designs for playgrounds, furniture, and dance sets.

Noguchi’s fascination with time was bound up with his broader search for belonging. As an artist of mixed heritage, Noguchi felt pulled between the cultures of the US and Japan, and often described

himself as “belonging everywhere and nowhere.” The artist channeled these feelings into work that transcended social, artistic, and temporal boundaries. In his attempts to escape such constraints, Noguchi forged a hybrid practice through which he could more freely exist, explore, and belong.

This exhibition surveys Noguchi’s perennial engagements with the concept of time, from his early design for a commercial kitchen timer to his late carvings of millennia-old stone. Across these varied works, we can find the artist engaging with time on many levels—human, geological, and cosmic—and in varied forms: as a physical force that erodes material, as the fabric of tradition and history, and as a limitation to be challenged. Viewed as a whole, these works invite us to join Noguchi in his timeless search for belonging and to find new meaning in the blurred spaces that exist between the past, present, and future.

Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988) was one of the twentieth century’s most significant sculptors. His practice was defined by his tireless exploration of material, a commitment to interdisciplinarity, and a belief in sculpture as a vehicle for social change. Noguchi was born in Los Angeles to a white American mother and a Japanese father, and spent his childhood in both the United States and Japan. He later established studios in both countries. In 1985, Noguchi opened the Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum, now known as The Noguchi Museum, in a building adjacent to his studio in Long Island City, New York. Noguchi conceived of the Museum as a repository of his work and record of his thinking, but also as a living resource: a shared space for visitors to come together, reflect, and learn. His studio in Mure, Japan became The Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum Japan in 1999.

1. ***Measured Time***

1932

Bakelite, glass, printed paper, enameled brass

501

2. ***This Earth, This Passage***

1962 (cast 1963)

Bronze

3. ***Time Thinking***

1968

Basalt

501

4. ***Age***

1981

Basalt

Noguchi's lifelong "preoccupation with time" began with his streamlined design for the casing of a commercial kitchen timer in 1932. Over the next several decades, his engagements with time would grow more abstract. In his mid-career work *This Earth, This Passage*, Noguchi explored the passage of time by walking in a ring of clay with bare feet and then casting the resulting form in bronze. The artist's journey is fixed in his trail of footprints yet seems to unfold endlessly in an unbroken loop. In his late basalt works like *Age* and *Time Thinking*, Noguchi found another means of giving material form to the time's passage. The artist delighted in using the most modern of tools on the oldest of materials, engaging in what he called a "meeting from opposite ends of time." Wishing to maintain the evidence of stone's own evolution over time, Noguchi left visible portions of the basalt's ochre-colored skin, a crust that forms as its iron contents slowly oxidize. These works meditate on the cycles of change—both human-directed and geological.

5. ***Spider Dress for Martha Graham's  
"Cave of the Heart"***

1946

Brass wire

504

6. ***Serpent for Martha Graham's "Cave of the Heart"***

1946

Magnesite, fabric, wire mesh, plywood, wood

Groundbreaking choreographer Martha Graham (1894–1991) was one of Noguchi's most important artistic collaborators. Noguchi was frequently commissioned to create sculptural set designs for her dance performances, many of which were modern reinterpretations of Greek myths. For Graham's performance *Cave of the Heart*, a reimagining of the betrayal of Medea and her violent revenge, Noguchi designed this transfixing *Serpent* platform and *Spider Dress* worn by Medea. With each performance, these mythic fragments are inhabited and invested with new life, and the line between past and present is captivatingly blurred.

7. ***Magritte's Stone***

1982–83 (fabricated 2023)

Hot-dipped galvanized steel

502

8. ***Magritte's Stone***

1982–83

Hot-dipped galvanized steel

9. ***Spin-off #2 from Sunken Garden,  
Chase Manhattan Bank Plaza***

1961–64

Naturally-shaped Uji River basalt

Noguchi's sculptures frequently explore the life cycles of natural and industrial materials. In the early 1960s, Noguchi used basalt boulders, carved by the rushing currents of Japan's Uji River over centuries as seen in *Spin-off #2*. Here, Noguchi's presentation of the boulder in its raw, unaltered state highlights the passage of time and reframes the river's erosive power as a creative act. Later, in works like *Magritte's Stone*, Noguchi sought to reveal how an industrially processed material such as steel can also change over time, possessing "its

own secret nature—its own entropy, [and] its own cycle of birth and dissolution.” As evidenced by the two editions of this work presented here—one fabricated in the 1980s and darkened with age, and the other posthumously fabricated in 2019, luminous and shiny—galvanized steel develops an increasingly discernible patina over time, much like an aging boulder. Noguchi delighted in this “new nature,” reminding us that nothing escapes time’s persistent stream.

10. ***Asleep in a Rock***

c. 1966

Marble

11. ***The Primordial Pierced by the Present***

1979

Basalt, stainless steel

12. ***Untitled***

1981

Obsidian, stainless steel, wire, wood

13. ***Untitled***

1982

Jasper, hot-dipped galvanized steel  
Throughout his work Noguchi often mixed stone with steel, regarding this combination as a convergence across time. He explained that while stone embodied “a deeper truth of sculpture, something abiding which is beyond the transience of the day,” metal reflected a “return to the present . . . the comfort of belonging, and transience.” He believed, however, that when these “opposites come together . . . [t]hey do not conflict,” as “[s]tone is the depth, metal the mirror.”

14. ***Slide Mantra Maquette***

c. 1985

Constructed with Giorgio Angeli

Carrara marble

This is a scale model of a ten-foot slide constructed for the 1986 Venice Biennale. Composed of gleaming white marble sourced from the same Italian quarries used by Renaissance sculptor Michelangelo, *Slide Mantra* injects levity and play into the bedrock of the Western artistic canon, reimagining it as a present-day playground.

### 15. ***Sculpture to Be Seen from Mars***

1947

Unrealized model in sand

In the wake of the atomic destruction of World War II, when the fate of humanity felt deeply uncertain, Noguchi devised an earthwork titled *Sculpture to Be Seen from Mars*. The work was never realized, and its model—now lost—is documented only in a single photograph.

Noguchi envisioned this monumental sculpture as a group of massive earth mounds in the shape of a human face. The earthwork was to be so large that it would be visible only from space, with the nose alone stretching one mile long. Directed towards some future form of life in outer space, the work was imagined as an effigy of the vanished human race, which Noguchi believed would ultimately self-annihilate.

### 16. ***Lunar Table***

1961–65

Constructed with Nishimura Sekito  
Granite

### 17. ***Re-Entry Cone***

1970

Swedish granite

### 18. ***Origin***

1968

African granite

In the 1960s and 70s, when space travel came to represent the pinnacle of modern human technological achievement, Noguchi was thinking as much about the past as he was about the future. He once remarked, “I like to think, when you get to the furthest point of technology, when you get to outer space, what do you find to bring back? Rocks!” In these granite works, Noguchi draws connections between the Stone Age and the Space Age. While Noguchi’s *Re-Entry Cone* alludes to a module of a spacecraft that returns to earth following

spaceflight, his incised *Lunar Table* resembles a cross-section of the moon's surface, undulating in a way that suggests the artist may have had Einstein's theories of curved space-time in mind. Meanwhile, his enigmatic black basalt work titled *Origin* prompts reflection on the concept of birth or invention across the vastly different timescales of human and cosmic life.

### 19. **Model for Octetra**

1968

Plaster

*This model was used for full-scale stackable play sculptures, each 44 1/8 x 53 7/16 x 53 7/16 inches, that are still produced and in collections worldwide.*

### 20. **Model for Slide Mantra**

1966

Plaster

*This model was a study for a monumental 10 1/2 feet high functional slide permanently installed in Miami's Bayfront Park.*

### 21. **Model for Sky Gate**

1976–77

Plastic tubing, paint

*This model was realized as a monumental 24-foot-high public sculpture in Honolulu, HI.*

### 22. **Model for Skyviewing Sculpture**

1969

Plaster

### 23. **Skyviewing Sculpture Maquette**

c.1980

Fabricated by Marco Dalessi

Nickel-Plated Steel

*This model was realized as a 10-foot-high sculpture on the campus of Western Washington University, in Bellingham, WA.*

### 24. **Sky Mirror**

1970

Basalt

In 1949, while traveling the world to study cross-cultural sculptural traditions, Noguchi visited India and photographed the Jantar Mantar, astronomical observatories built in Delhi and Jaipur in the eighteenth century. Noguchi appreciated the sites' large instruments not merely as scientific artifacts, but also as abstract sculptural forms. He was deeply inspired by the idea that sculpture could facilitate new means of observing the cycles of celestial bodies, allowing us to better appreciate our place in the cosmos and the relative timescales of human life. Noguchi's public sculptures and play equipment, represented here by miniature models in plaster and steel, chronicle the artist's continued efforts to tilt our gaze skyward through the apertures of his sculptural forms. His interest in the cosmos also animates his work *Sky Mirror*. The work can be read as a type of Stone Age telescope, reflecting the light on its highly polished concave face. Of this work he wrote, "time, which completes all things, brings the sun into its alignment, when stone becomes mirror."

## 25. ***Remembrance (Mortality)***

1944

American mahogany

## 26. ***The Seed***

1946 (fabricated c. 1979)

Fabricated by Treitel-Gratz Co.

Aluminum

## 27. ***Mortality***

1959 (cast 1965)

Fabricated by Fonderia D'Arte Tesconi,

PietrasantaBronze, black patina

In the postwar years, while reckoning with the existential threat of atomic warfare, Noguchi produced a series of works in which interlocking fragments are held tenuously together by gravity alone. While *Remembrance (Mortality)* palpably expresses the fragility of human existence, *The Seed* extends hope that new life might spring from the shards of the past. Noguchi originally constructed *The Seed* using thin sheets of marble, but later reproduced it in highly polished aluminum, recasting

it with a gleaming modernity. In later years, Noguchi continued to create carefully composed yet fragmented sculptures like *Mortality*. He described the hanging components of these sculptures as “arrested pendulums” giving form to his “preoccupation with time (and resonance).”

**28. *Bell Tower for Hiroshima***

1950 (Unrealized model; partially reconstructed 1986)

Fabricated with the assistance of Susumu Sakaguchi  
Terra-cotta, wood

**29. *My Mu***

1950  
Seto stoneware

**30. *Skin and Bones***

1950  
Seto stoneware, wood, hemp

**31. *Ghost***

1952  
Seto stoneware

Noguchi was deeply impacted by the events of World War II, a sentiment amplified by his own complex background as the son of a Japanese father and an American mother. In response to the death and destruction of this period, Noguchi began a series of works that reckon with how we remember the past and memorialize loss. These include his ultimately unrealized proposals for the devastated city of Hiroshima: *Bell Tower for Hiroshima*, a seventy-foot fragmented structure with dangling bells sourced from around the world, and *Memorial to the Dead, Hiroshima*, a cenotaph and underground crypt honoring those killed by the atomic bombs. The latter sculpture, as well as a series of slab ceramic works made around the same time, purposefully allude to haniwa, ancient Japanese burial sculptures that had long interested Noguchi, and which he found solace in remaking in the postwar present.

## 32. Akari Light Sculptures

Models 120A, 125F, 100D, 75D, 70F, 30D, 30F  
c. 1951–76

Paper, bamboo, metal

Noguchi believed in a model of progress wherein one moves towards the future by looking to the past. In 1951, he began producing light sculptures based on traditional handmade Japanese paper lanterns, regarding his new creations as “a true development of an old tradition.” He called them Akari, a Japanese word meaning “light” in the sense of both illumination and weightlessness. Adding electrical bulbs and experimenting widely with the shape of his Akari, Noguchi reimagined the paper lantern as an art form with profound relevance, use, and beauty in the modern age. As much as Akari are meant to express a sense of legacy and tradition, Noguchi also appreciated their transitory character. He explained, “The quality is poetic, ephemeral, and tentative. Looking more fragile than they are Akari seem to float, casting their light as in passing. They do not encumber our space as mass or as a possession; if they hardly

exist in use, when not in use they fold away in an envelope. They perch light as a feather, some pinned to the wall, others clipped to a cord, and all may be moved with the thought.”

The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York