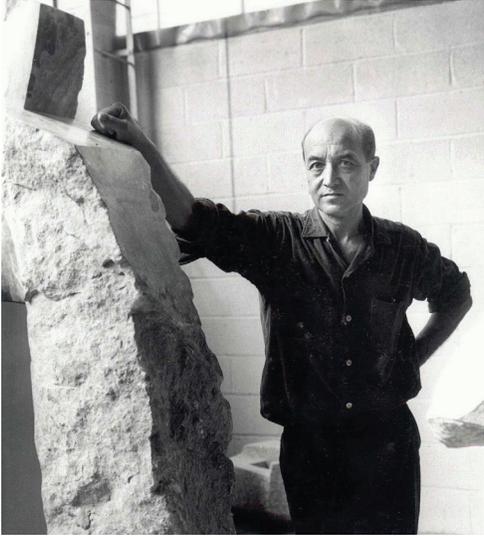


About Isamu Noguchi



Isamu Noguchi was born in Los Angeles on November 17, 1904. His mother, Leonie Gilmour, was an Irish-American writer and teacher who grew up in Brooklyn, New York. His father, Yonejiro (Yone) Noguchi, was a Japanese poet traveling and living in America. Yone left Leonie to return to Japan before Isamu was born. When Isamu was two years old, his mother decided that they should move to Japan to live. Once there, she found that his father had begun a Japanese family and was not interested in helping to raise Isamu. Nevertheless, she settled in Japan, raising Isamu in the town of Chigasaki, just outside of Tokyo.

It was difficult to grow up half-American and half-Japanese in Japan in the early twentieth century. When Isamu was thirteen, his mother sent him to a boarding school in the United States, thinking that his life might be easier there. There he went by the name Sam Gilmour. Noguchi spent three years at LaPorte High School in Indiana. He then went to work with and learn from Gutzon Borglum, the sculptor who would later create Mount Rushmore. Borglum did not think highly of Noguchi's skills and told him he would never be a successful artist.

Noguchi moved to New York City, thinking he would study to become a doctor. He felt drawn to making sculpture, however, and left college to study art. As an artist, he took his father's surname, Noguchi. He found people in New York City who could teach him about modern art, and then applied for a fellowship to travel abroad. With the money from this fellowship he went to Paris, where he worked for Constantin Brancusi, one of the first artists to create sculptures that were abstract. Abstract art does not depict recognizable people or objects, but rather explores form and material in new ways.

After two years in Paris, Noguchi returned to New York City. He began making sculpted portraits (portrait heads) for money, which he called "head busting." He disliked "head busting," and only did it to earn an income and to meet influential people. He made a number of important friends by sculpting their portraits, including George Gershwin and Lincoln Kirstein.

World War II began in 1939, and in December 1941 the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, an American naval base in Hawaii. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, many Japanese Americans living on the West Coast were forced to leave their homes and move into internment camps.

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After the attack on Pearl Harbor, many Japanese Americans living on the West Coast were forced to leave their homes and move into internment camps. People in internment camps lived in terrible conditions— prison-like barracks with no privacy, surrounded by barbed wire. At this time, Noguchi began identifying himself as a Nisei, a second-generation Japanese American. He voluntarily relocated to an internment camp in Poston, Arizona, where he hoped that he would be able to improve camp life. He proposed a design to transform the camp with parks and other public spaces. However, once there, he found no support in the undertaking of any of these projects, and after seven months Noguchi returned to New York.

Noguchi spent a great deal of his life traveling, exploring the world, and learning from expert artists and from traditional art and cultures. In 1930 he learned about sumi-e (ink) painting from the calligrapher Ch'i Pai-Shih in China, and about working with clay from Uno Jimmatsu in Kyoto, Japan. In 1936 he moved to Mexico and created a politically charged mural relief called *History Mexico*. In 1949 he journeyed to France, England, Spain, Italy, Greece, Egypt, India, Cambodia, and Indonesia on a fellowship from the Bollingen Foundation. He explored prehistoric caves, ancient and recent architecture, and gardens. In the 1950s, Noguchi visited Japan, where traditional paper lanterns inspired him to experiment with what he called “light sculpture,” his well-known Akari lamps. In the 1960s, Noguchi began traveling to Italy, visiting the quarries from which the artist Michelangelo had purchased marble, and making a series of marble sculptures of his own.

In New York, Noguchi created a wide range of work, often collaborating with others. He worked with architects to design playgrounds, fountains, and public spaces. He worked with the dancer and choreographer Martha Graham to design sets and props for her dances. He drew on the resources and expertise of Edison Price, a lighting equipment manufacturer, to find ways to create sculpture using bent and cut metal. He also worked with a variety of design companies to create and manufacture coffee tables and chairs, noting that he thought of all of this work as sculpture.

Toward the end of his life, Isamu Noguchi primarily lived and worked in Japan and New York. He kept many of his sculptures, and as an older artist, began to think about how to share these works of art with others. In 1983 he created a museum in Long Island City, New York, that was open by appointment only. He designed this space with a friend, the architect Shoji Sadao. Two years later, this became The Noguchi Museum, a space open to anyone who wants to experience the sculpture of Isamu Noguchi. In addition to this museum, another Noguchi Museum was opened in Mure, on the island of Shikoku in southern Japan. Noguchi died in 1988, at the age of eighty-four.