

GLASS

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LANDSCAPES OF THE MIND

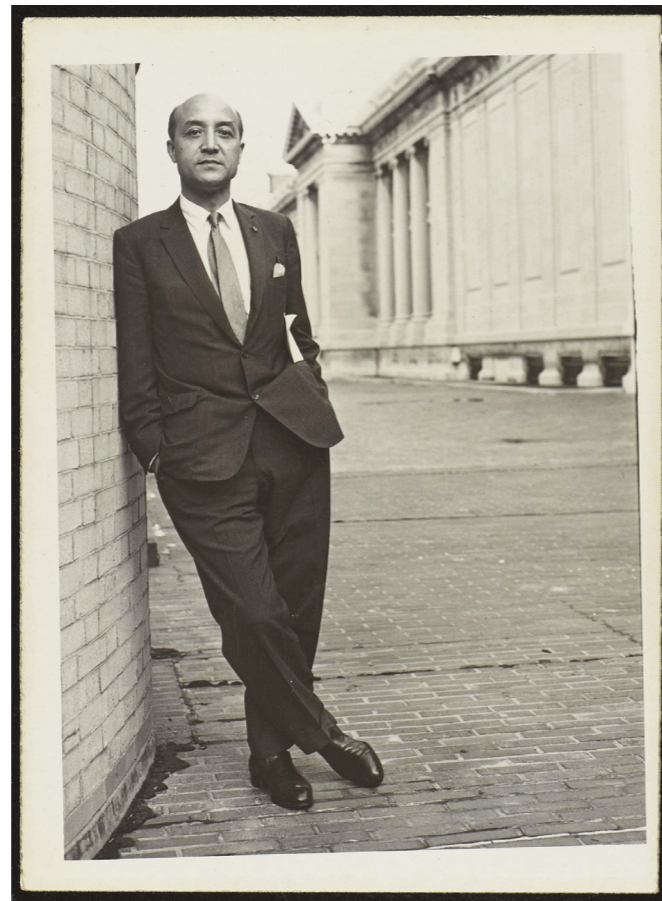
Isamu Noguchi, one of the most influential sculptors of the 20th century, is celebrated this summer in three major exhibitions

Writer ALLIE BISWAS

As an artist who embodied radical modernity as equally as ancient traditions, Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988) created sculptures that were both ahead of his time and indebted to classical methods. Perhaps the reason for his success in a career that spanned some six decades was precisely this flair for integration. Skilled at handling numerous materials and well-versed in a variety of techniques, experimentation always loomed large for Noguchi, who spent his formative years in Japan before returning as a teenager to the US, where he was born. Other than producing sculptures and ceramics that were shown early on, in the 1930s and '40s, at prestigious galleries and museums like New York's Museum of Modern Art and Galerie Maeght in Paris, Noguchi designed gardens and playgrounds, as well as lamps, furniture and theatre sets. His output was prodigious.

Guiding Noguchi's vision was a quest for something real. He believed sculpture should relate directly to the experience of being alive. The objects and spaces he developed were intended for society as a whole, and forever at the forefront of his thinking was the viewer. "In the creation and existence of a piece of sculpture, individual possession has less significance than public enjoyment," he said. "Without this purpose, the very meaning of sculpture is in question."

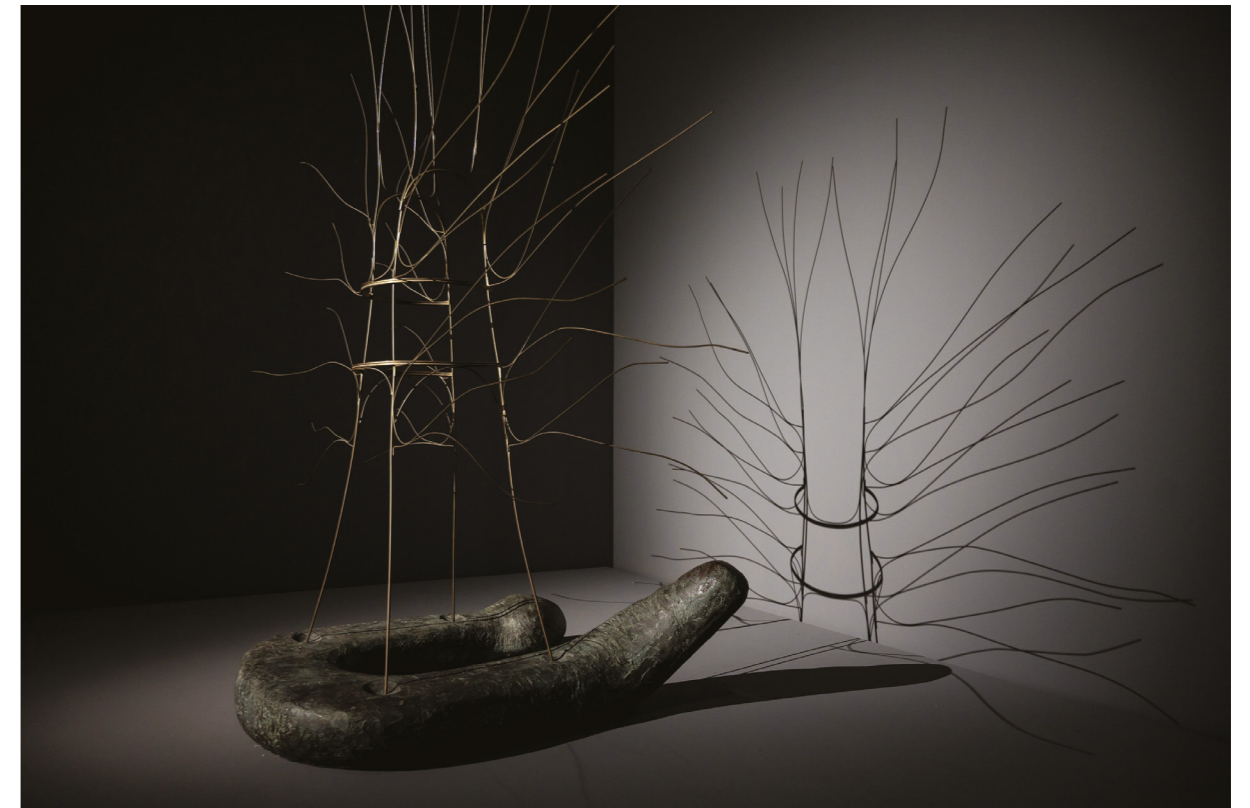
Drawing on an array of artistic traditions, Noguchi's propensity for synthesising forms from different cultures is reflective of his viewpoint as an inveterate traveller. In *Isamu Noguchi: Sculpting the World* at Lille Art Museum (LaM), the artist's trajectory is examined through the important journeys he made throughout his lifetime. The stunning presentation, expertly curated by Sébastien Delot and Grégoire Prangé, includes more than 250 works, and is the first large-scale retrospective of the artist to be held in France.



Isamu Noguchi at the American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York City c. 1962 © INFGM / ARS. Photo © The Noguchi Museum Archives, 146111



'Isamu Noguchi: Sculpting the World', Lille Métropole Musée d'art moderne, d'art contemporain et d'art brut, Villeneuve d'Ascq, France. 15 March – 2 July 2023. © The Noguchi Museum / ARS. Photo © Frédéric Lovino



'Isamu Noguchi: Sculpting the World', Lille Métropole Musée d'art moderne, d'art contemporain et d'art brut, Villeneuve d'Ascq, France. 15 March – 2 July 2023. © The Noguchi Museum / ARS. Photo © Frédéric Lovino



Isamu Noguchi, *Play Sculpture*, c.1965-80. Steel and paint. 111.8 x 261.6 x 261.6 cm.
© The Noguchi Museum / ARS. Photo © White Cube (Theo Christelis)

Starting in 1927, when Noguchi moved from New York to Paris, the exhibition outlines an important origin story: that of the artist's apprenticeship with the pre-eminent sculptor Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957). It was during this period that Noguchi learned how to carve wood and stone directly, resulting in a series of smooth, streamlined objects that mimicked nature. *Globular* and *Red Seed*, both dating from 1928, are displayed next to each other, surrounded by a set of gouache drawings hung on the wall that echoes the organic shapes of the sculptures. Of his master, Noguchi commented: "He was insistent on the right way to handle each tool for the job and material, and on the respect to be accorded to each." The lesson stayed with him and Noguchi would always honour the properties of the materials he used, regardless of the scale of the project.

Soon after training with Brancusi, Noguchi left for China in 1930, where he learned the medium of ink painting, before studying under the master potter Jinmatsu Uno in Japan. After returning to New York and designing his first playground (a proposal that was rejected by the New York City Parks Commissioner), Noguchi designed the stage sets for *Frontier*, a 1935 production by the pioneering American choreographer Martha Graham. The exhibition at LaM highlights the importance of the artist's relationship with Graham, which points to a number of their collaborations, including Noguchi's immense bronze and brass wire construction titled *Spider Dress and Serpent*, which was made for the one-act ballet *Cave of the Heart*.

Noguchi regarded the borders between the different disciplines he explored, whether public park or dance theatre, as "areas of contacts, and not of limitation", which only emphasised his overarching objective to express the atmosphere of a place. The penultimate room in the exhibition emphasises this point with a group of vast, floor-based works that operate in tandem. A sleek rectangular form made from aluminium (*Orpheus*, 1958) stands next to a mighty black granite structure that was inspired by the standing figures seen in ancient Greek sculpture (*Walking Void #2*, 1970). "They are a landscape of the mind" is how Noguchi described such objects.

An exhibition at White Cube in London similarly embraces Noguchi's predilection for contemplating the world around him. *This Earth, This Passage* takes its name from a 1962 sculpture that incorporates the artist's footprints. A shallow mound of clay positioned on the ground was navigated by foot before being cast in bronze. Preserving Noguchi's numerous footsteps, the circular form can be understood as a testament of sorts to his widespread travels. In the two years prior to making this work, the artist visited no less than seven destinations, including Jerusalem, Tokyo, Ise, Kyoto, New Delhi, Chandigarh and Jaipur.

Given Noguchi's desire to place sculpture in outdoor environments (he completed commissions for the Rockefeller Plaza, Yale University and Honolulu Mayor's Office, among many others), it feels particularly apt that three of the artist's minimalist steel sculptures, all made in the last decade of his life, are featured in this year's edition of *Sculpture in the City*. Opening on June 28, *Duo*, *Neo-lithic* and *Rain Mountain* will be installed in St Helen's Church Square in Bishopsgate, London.

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