NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

FINE ART, SCULPTURE

"BETWEEN TWO WORLDS, THE SCULPTURE OF ISAMU NOGUCHI"

by
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INTRODUCTION

Isamu Noguchi has been acclaimed as one of the greatest American sculptors of the twentieth century. Throughout his life he remained active and adventurous in his work, his energy was remarkable and his sculptural career spanned over sixty-five years until his death in 1988 at the age of eighty-five. He kept up an inexhaustible pace and baffled critics with his diversity of approaches. Noguchi worked in clay, metal, paper, plastics and wood but above all in stone, his work ranging from monumental fountains to furniture, sculptural environments to paper lanterns. He was making, designing and exhibiting work right up to his final year.

Noguchi was born in 1904 in Los Angeles to the Japanese poet Yone Noguchi and American writer Leonie Gilmour. At the age of two he was taken to Japan where he was brought up by his mother until 1918. In that year, Noguchi was thirteen, and his mother, recognising the problems facing children of mixed parenthood at that time in Japan, decided to send her son to America to attend a progressive school in Indiana. However, the school became an army training camp and Noguchi was taken care of by its director, Dr. Edward Rumley, who encouraged his growing interest in sculpture.

In America an interest in sculpture took hold and at twenty-one he applied for a grant from the Guggenheim Foundation which would enable him to travel through France, China and eventually Japan. His application form shows remarkable clear-sightedness:

> It is my desire to view nature through nature's eyes, and to ignore man as an object for special veneration. There must be unthought-of heights of beauty to which sculpture may be raised by this reversal of attitude.

> An unlimited field for abstract sculptural expression would then be realised in which flowers and trees, rivers and mountains, as well as birds and man, would be given their due place. Indeed, a fine balance of spirit with matter can only concur [sic] when the artist has so thoroughly submerged himself in the study of nature as to truly become once more, a part of nature, a part of the very earth, thus to view the inner surface and the life elements. The materials he works with would mean more than mere plastic matter, but would act as a co-ordinate and asset to his theme. In such a way may be gained a true symphony in sculpture...
>
> I have selected the Orient as the location for my productive activities for the reason that I feel a great attachment for it, having spent half my life there. My father, Yone Noguchi, has long been known as an interpreter of the East to the West through poetry, I wish to do the same with sculpture.
>
> (Noguchi,1967,p.16)

Noguchi's statement of application articulates two themes which proved fundamental to his work. The first was his close sensibility and sensitivity towards nature, the second, his desire to act as an interpreter of the East to the West, which manifested itself in his ability to hold the two cultures in creative harmony in his sculpture. This thesis shall concentrate on these two areas in relation to his work.

In chapter one, I shall discuss the main differences between Japanese and Western approach to art and indicate which principles Noguchi has adapted for his own work.

In chapter two, I shall look at the Japanese traditional gardens and architecture and discuss the lessons Noguchi learnt from these concerning his conception of space.

Chapter three shall concentrate on Noguchi's fate of living between the two worlds of Japan and America and how this difficult existence has prompted an energy and zest towards finding sculptural expression that combines both parts of his heritage.

In chapter four, I shall concentrate on Noguchi's profound sensibility towards nature and how this translates into his work.

CHAPTER ONE

When Noguchi applied for the Guggenheim Foundation grant in 1926, he expressed his intention of acting as an interpreter of the East to the West through sculpture. Noguchi recognised at twenty-one that his Eastern heritage had some important role to play in his sculptural activities. He had only his childhood memories of Japan to guide him and was asking for the opportunity to re-examine Japan.

Noguchi won the grant and made his first adult trip to Japan in 1931, which marked the beginning of its profound affect on his work. By marrying his Western approach with Japanese philosophies and ideas, Noguchi harnessed the best of both cultures to produce a sculptural oeuvre that pushed him to the forefront of art history.

In this chapter, I shall look at some of the main differences between Japanese and Western approach to making art and discuss Noguchi's adoption of certain Japanese principles.

The difference between Eastern and Western culture, or more specifically Japanese and American culture is vast. Japan's history has been one of independence and isolation from the outside world until 1853, when Commodore Matthew Perry invaded with a quarter of the American naval fleet. The Japanese today are one of the most conservative, socially-bound peoples of the modern industrialised world. Japan has an insular society where individuals conform to an alarming degree by Western standards.

The Japanese approach to making art similarly differs considerably from the Western. Art and craft have only recently become distinguished from each other, a new word being devised in the Japanese language in the nineteenth century to accommodate the Western concept of "fine art".

In the West, innovation and individualism are praised whereas in Japan, group identity is stressed and considered the norm, preferable to an individual expression of ego or a desire to raise oneself above or appear outside of the group. Spiritual themes derived from Buddhism stress that nothing can be isolated or independent of the whole. The notion of affinity and interdependence also translates into the Japanese view of nature and man. In the West, man is seen as dominant over and separate from nature whereas in Japan, an interdependence is portrayed. Man is a part of nature and is regarded as spiritually on a par with nature.

These two points, the traditional lack of individual ambition and the affinity with nature of the Japanese, are perhaps the main areas of difference between the Eastern and Western approach to art. Natural materials are more prevalent in Japanese work than in Western, and notions derived from the Shinto religion promote an awareness of the "voice" or "spirit" within materials which in turn causes a tendency towards working intuitively and allowing the natural materials to "speak" to the artist.

Nobuo Nokamura places the Western expression of extreme egoism, so alien to the Japanese with the birth of Conceptualism.

> With the Conceptualists, whatever the artist thought or did was art. After that it didn't matter what the artist did, what mattered was the right concept. At that point I think the Western world had a problem because modern art history has evolved to this extreme point of individualism. In Japan we don't have any belief in individualism; in Zen philosophy we are part of nature, we are not individual thinkers. (Fowler,1986,p.29.)

The traditional method for learning art in Japan advocated that the student fuse his identity with the mentor and strive to duplicate his work. Modern art colleges are common in Japan today but the deeply rooted cultural opposition to extreme individualism causes problems for young Japanese artists wishing to enter the world art scene. Emiko Tokushigo, who was represented in the 1991 show of contemporary Japanese sculptors in London, A Primal Spirit, expressed this concern saying that she was, "rather envious of Western artists for the intense expression of ego or self."
(Hara Museum of Cont. Art, Tokushigo, 1991,p.92)

Noguchi held an immediate advantage over his Japanese contemporaries who were enslaved by social conventions and traditional or religious philosophies. He was able to utilize his Western ambition and ego and fuse it with the ideas and philosophies of Japan that suited him. In 1982, he expressed his regret that the Japanese themselves did not look more at their own heritage for inspiration, "I feel saddened that Japan does not seem to have the awakening to Japan that Americans have had." He spoke of Japanese artists being trapped in "this sort of single vision where it is only to the future that they look and not to the past." (Ashton,1992,p.264.)

Noguchi's advice, that the Japanese should look to themselves, highlights another problem facing Japan's contemporary artists, whether to embrace Western or Eastern culture and the difficulties posed by an amalgamation of the two. Noguchi felt this problem too in some areas of his work but fundamentally he combined the East and the West sub-consciously in all he did due to his dual-cultural background. His Western heritage provided him with the drive and ambition and belief in self that pushed him and his work forward. However, philosophically and aesthetically his work was closer to his Japanese inheritance. Janet Koplos speaks of contemporary Japanese sculptors as focusing not inwardly on the ego, but outwardly on the world. She notes that most work avoids the solely personal or autobiographical, concentrating on issues beyond the individual that address shared human problems and experiences. I would argue that the same is true of Noguchi, and that although he existed outside of the problems of self-expression of Japan, he had his own distaste for work which played tribute to an artist's ego alone. In conversation with Tim Threlfall he spoke of his ideas of an artist's duty.

"They should look to what they can contribute and always have the conception of art as a public activity and not as a possessively individualistic pursuit of self-centred egoism."
(Threlfall,1992,p.38)

The second major difference between Eastern and Western art stems from their varying attitudes to nature. Amongst contemporary Japanese sculptors there is a definite tendency to work with natural materials such as wood or stone and although a determined religious content in the work is usually denied, sensibilities deriving from Shintoism are often prevalent. In Shintoism, deities or "kami" are believed to inhabit natural objects such as stones and trees and this

reverence for natural materials and the "spirit" within them is often cited by Japanese artists;" I had been seeking a means of expressing the life force of the wood." (Chuichi Fujj) " Every tree has an inherent individualized expression." (Koichi Ebizuka) (Hara Museum of Cont. Art,1991,p.57,43)

Noguchi also seems to have recognised a sense of "spirit" or "life" within the stone. " Sometimes out of despair, when we have given up, the stone itself sends a message." (Noguchi,1987,p.44)

" A rock came from the sea, oyster shells encrusted it, speaking no language known to me. It lay there until one day I began to see or hear its sea voice, the toss of the waves. I nailed it with two drills and captured its shape." (Noguchi,1987,p.44)

The reverence the Japanese hold for nature is portrayed through the religious ideas of Shintoism and Buddhism. In Zen Buddhism, stones and rocks are allowed a supreme position as a synthesis of nature and are constantly used in the Zen meditation gardens.

Zen philosophy holds a profound recognition for the very "thusness" of stones.

Not their goodness or badness, beauty or ugliness, usefulness or uselessness, not even their abstract isness or being, but rather their very concrete thinginess." (Hoover,1977)

Noguchi recognised the quality of stone and it remained his most often and most successfully used material. He said of rocks:

"Nothing is more sculptural than rocks in nature, and they represent the most profound Japanese expression of sculpture." (Noguchi,1967,p.167)

Another very Japanese idea that Noguchi embraced was that of working intuitively. He would have first come into an awareness of this method of expression as the assistant stone-cutter to Brancusi in Paris after winning the Guggenheim grant. Brancusi held many beliefs that Noguchi was to find paralleled in Japanese culture including a reverence for nature, an aesthetic which remained simple and austere and a recognition of the value of working intuitively, "Your hand thinks and follows the thoughts of the material." (Threlfall,1992,p.79)

In Japan, the Zen art of sumi-ink painting is valued as a synthesis of the natural world. The absolute accuracy of the Zen artist's brush stroke can come only from one whose mind and body are one. Thomas Hoover describes the technique, he says that the painting and energy must flow thoughtlessly from deep within, in fact from the Zen discipline of " no-mind."

> The artist never pauses to evaluate his work; the ink flows in an unending flurry of strokes, heavy or sparing, light or dark as required, producing a sense of rhythm, movement, form and the artist's vision of life's inner music." (Hoover,1977,p.114)

Noguchi recognised this approach in his own work, particularly in his late stone works, " It comes from the moment, the moment which may take years." (Noguchi,1987,p.12)

Intuition in the actual making of work is continued through to the appreciation of it in Zen art. In other words, it is considered paramount to a Zen art work's success that it has the ability to create an immediate emotion in the viewer. Zen philosophy maintains that art should be experienced through the senses rather than through verbal description, if reflection or analysis are required, then the Zen art fails. This concept contrasts starkly with the Western art appreciation tradition due

to the fact that much Western art is actually enhanced by critical analysis. Although Noguchi and indeed many contemporary Japanese artists are not striving to create Zen art works, this traditional method of regarding art is still apparent, causing problems for some of Japan's artists wishing to enter into the world art scene because they are unwilling or unable to engage in the West's dialogue of critical analysis. Noguchi said of his work that he wished to avoid the use of the "gimmicky and clever", (Noguchi,1967,p.21) he strove towards a pure approach and aesthetic. To my mind, his work seems to provoke an almost spiritual dialogue of the senses with the viewer. The sculptures that hold the East and the West in effortless harmony, namely the ceramics works of the fifties and his later stone works capture the Japanese sumi-ink paintings' graceful spontaneity and focused energy and do indeed demand an immediate emotional and unconditioned response. (illus.1-6)

In his book, Zen Culture, Thomas Hoover says that "Zen culture's primary lesson is that we should start trying to experience art and the world around us rather than analyzing them. " (Hoover,1977,p.228)

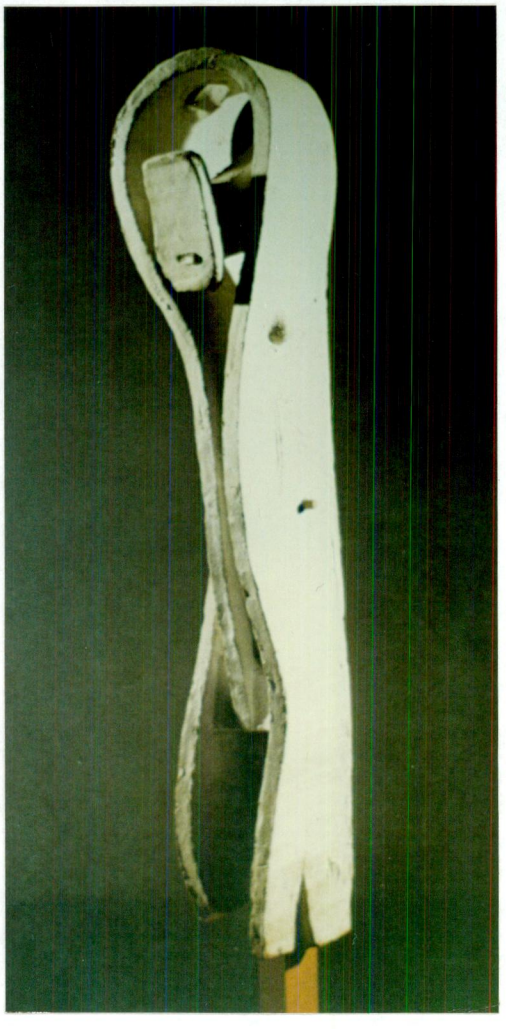
Where Noguchi consciously sought to translate the East to the West, in for example the UNESCO garden in Paris, the work lacks spontaneity, and evokes a sense of over-bearing labour and effort. The ceramic works of the early fifties, made in Japan, have a playful spontaneity and grace to them. They were made at a time that Noguchi was re-experiencing Japan and illustrate the benefit his absorption of that half of his heritage had on his work. His late stone works also capture a Japanese essence, the Japanese love of stone and belief in the spirit of the material is portrayed in a mixture of sensitivity to, and energetic and

almost forceful grasp of the stone. Noguchi's dual-cultural background is held in unique sculptural expression in these works. His advantage has not been in his mixed parenthood as such but in his ability to harness creative energy from both cultures and feed this into his work.

Noguchi recognised the validities in the Japanese approach to making art and adopted certain principles into his own work, namely a sensitivity towards natural materials and the corresponding sense of value and reverence held for them which allows the artist to engage in a spiritual dialogue with the stone, wood etc. Because Noguchi was half American, he was not bound by the deeply rooted social conventions of Japan which naturally effect an artistic approach, namely the traditional lack of belief in the in the individual.

Illus. No. 1

Mrs. White. 1952. Ceramic. 106.7cm. Collection of the artist.

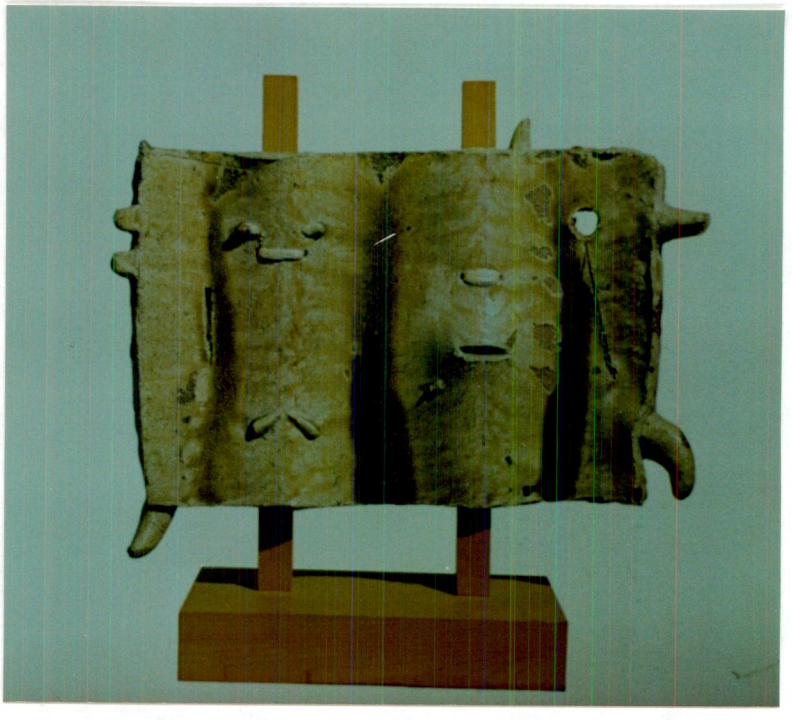


Illus. No. 2

Mr. One Man. 1952. Ceramic, Kasama. 30.5cm. Collection of the artist.

Illus. No. 3

Curtain of Dream. 1952. Ceramic. 27.9cm. Collection of the artist.

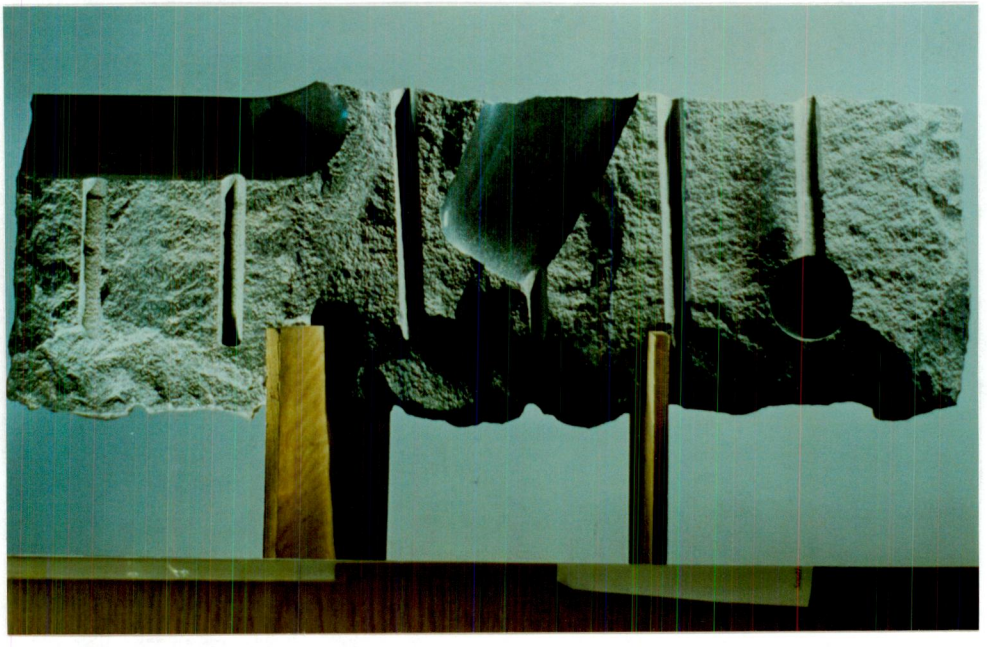


Illus. No. 4.

End Piece. 1970. Granite. 60.3cm. by 167.6cm. Collection of the artist.

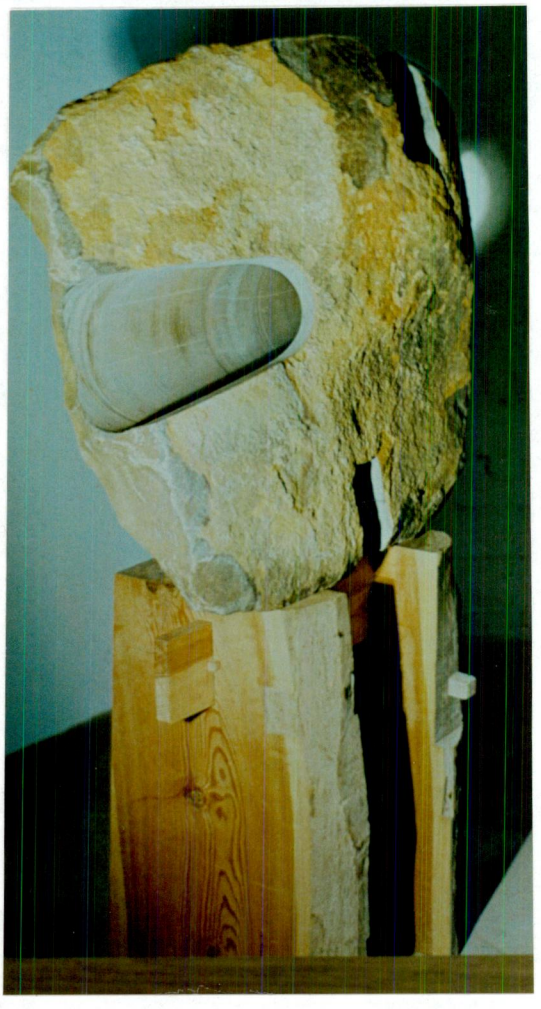
Illus. No. 5.

End Piece No. 2. Swedish granite. 182.9cm. Collection of the artist.



Illus. No. 6.

Untitled. 1976. Basalt with wood base. 81.9cm. by 78.7cm. (excluding base) Collection of the artist.



CHAPTER TWO

Noguchi's decision to act as an interpreter of the East to the West manifests itself in the combination of feeling of the two cultures found in his most successful works. In his environmental work, a Japanese sensibility of space is apparent, drawn from their traditional gardens and architecture.

In this chapter, I shall look at Noguchi's assimilation and interpretation of the Japanese Zen garden in particular, but shall also explore how Japanese traditional architecture and gardens have influenced his conception of space. The Japanese garden captures Japanese appreciation of nature and a sensibility towards space and the placing of elements within that space to create a whole, harmonious environment. Noguchi said of gardens,

> I admire the Japanese garden because it goes beyond geometry into the metaphysics of nature, and our relationship to it: the relation of space to nature, with man either as spectator or as participant. (Hunter,1979,p.154)

The predominant religion in Japan before the coming of Zen in the forth century was Shintoism, a nature worshipping religion which distilled a reverence for nature intrinsic to the Japanese people. The first traditional gardens portrayed this reverence in a celebration of lush plants, mosses, running water and plentitude. A number of deceptive devices were employed to evoke a sense of wild nature within a confined space, allowing a sense of freedom to be preserved. These strategies included the manipulation of perspective through the placing of shrubs or stones combined with dramatic fore-shortening so as to deceive the eye

into a belief in a larger area than is actual. The notion of " borrowed scenery " involved the use of a distant view of, for example, a mountain, which was incorporated into the garden design by cleverly obscuring where the garden ended and the outside landscape began, allowing a smooth movement for the onlooker from garden to surrounding environment. Psychological trickery provoked a belief in the existence of things unseen, by having a water source emerge from a group of shrubs or from behind a stone, willing the spectator to presume that the stream continues into the distance. The garden is made to appear natural through the impression of age and through the hiding of man's deceptions and interference. Certain ideas from this type of garden have been interpreted in Noguchi's work, especially in one of his first gardens, the UNESCO garden in Paris, but undoubtedly his main inspiration has been taken from the Zen dry stone gardens, in particular, Ryoan-ji.

The dry stone garden became popular in the fifteenth century and were intended for meditation and contemplation alone. They were the hallmark of Zen, its aesthetics and theory. Ryoan-ji represents the Zen aesthetics of simplicity, starkness, austerity and spareness and manifests the notion of "yugen" meaning, "a profound suggestiveness and reduction to only those elements in a creative work that move the spirit, with no concession made to the pretty or ornamental."

(Hoover,1977,p.110)

Such theories parallel the aesthetics of many of Noguchi's works.

Ryoan-ji encapsulates the Eastern value given to work which provokes immediate emotional response in the viewer, a notion which acts in antagonism to the Western view which commends theory first and aesthetic evaluation second. Thomas Hoover responds to this Japanese way of seeing in his response to Ryoan-ji speaking of "a spirit that seems

to rise up for those who come into its presence evoking an immediate response. " (Hoover,1977,p.105)

Noguchi recalls his first impressions of Ryoan-ji:

> In viewing this garden one has the sense of being transported into a vast void, into another dimension of reality - time ceases, and one is lost in reverie, gazing at the rocks that rise, ever in the same but different spot, out of the white mist of gravel....one feels that the rocks were not just placed there, that they grow out of the earth (the major portion buried), their weight is connected with the earth and yet perhaps for this very reason they seem to float like the peaks of mountains. Here is an immaculate universe swept clean. (Ashton,1992,p.111)

Noguchi's poetical description re-iterates that Ryoan-ji works as a Zen piece of art because one of the specifications for Zen creative works is that there be no distinction between the sense of "I" and "it" in the viewer. In other words, "one's mind must immediately experience something beyond the work." (Hoover,19 ,p.) Noguchi did not intend to create Zen pieces of art but the Zen philosophy can be interpreted to accommodate the notion of his work standing quite simply as it is, to be valued for its presence and ability to conjure up emotion in the onlooker.

Working in this manner, avoiding the "gimmickey and clever", (Noguchi,1967,p.21) in search of a truer approach and aesthetic, Noguchi took an Eastern intention in art and presented it to the West.

Ryoan-ji is a profoundly sculptural garden, consisting of five clusters of stones which emerge from a sea of white sand. This white sand acts as negative space and activates the stones and their relation to one another, drawing the separate elements together to converge as a whole "immaculate universe". Noguchi traces his sculptural conception of the earth as an active positive element in his work to his Japanese heritage and Ryoan-ji manifests the notion of this positive earth plain. Noguchi's philosophy of space can also be directly linked to Japanese traditional architecture in my opinion.

The traditional Japanese house has been likened to an out-stretched umbrella which provides a place for man to live in amid nature but does not dominate over its natural surroundings. The house is built of natural materials which blend with its immediate environment. The use of semi-transparent paper screens allow a natural light to penetrate the interior. The screens can be removed to reveal a view of an inner courtyard or garden which brings the works of man and nature together in a way that blurs their distinction. The Japanese house and its relationship to its environment is one of harmony, and this harmony and fluidity of space is apparent in Noguchi's public works which express a unity between the sculpture or garden and the immediate environment. Noguchi is critical of "monumental sculpture" which dominates and does not incorporate its surroundings.

> It is the space, or rather the particular place; its totality as a meaningful environment which occupies me....a given space is a balance of elements: the air, the sky, the earth, people, the illusion which together form our awareness. (Threlfall,1992,p.55)

Note the similarity between Noguchi's statement and a description of early Japanese architects:

The early development of architecture is determined by intimate contact with nature. They planned their buildings with reverence to the spirit of the earth, the water and the winds. (Ashton,1992,p.87)

Noguchi's architectural or environmental sculptures are predominantly situated within an urban industrialised domain, but his concept of space speaks of a profound sensibility to nature nevertheless. For example, in his description of his sculpture for the Fortworth Plaza, he uses imagery from nature to describe his intentions, evoking an understanding of the Japanese view of space and convergence of elements. He says it is:

> Like the crest of a wave. The crest does not exist by itself,it is a part of the wave and the wave us made up of foam, water, air, eddies, whirlpools. All of these are part of the wave and the wave itself is released to the rest of the water. So is this piazza one sculpture with a number of elements. (Ashton,1992,p.179)

In 1956, Noguchi began work on the UNESCO gardens in Paris. (illus.8-9) This is his most literal translation of the Japanese traditional garden into a modern sculptural environment. In his autobiography, he speaks of his intentions:

> To learn but still control such a tradition is a challenge, my effort was to find a way to link that ritual of rocks which comes down to us through the Japanese from the dawn of history to our modern times and needs. In Japan, the worship of stone changes into an appreciation of nature. The search for the essence of sculpture seems to carry me to the same end.
> (Noguchi,1967,p.167)

Noguchi hoped that ancient and modern values, East and West, could co-exist in this garden which synthesises both types of Japanese garden and amalgamates their traditions with himself, the modern sculptor. However, the conscious decision to attempt a combination causes the UNESCO garden to appear somewhat stilted. It lacks the ease and fluidity of later environments. In the transmission of art from one culture to another, it is not the forms and materials themselves that are most important but the ideas and sensibilities that lie behind them. UNESCO was a struggle for Noguchi, he requested the help of a group of Japanese gardeners, amongst whom was Touemon Sano, a sixteenth century garden designer from Kyoto. A conflict between ancient traditional and modern sculptural values ensued, Noguchi wishing to reverse many of the orthodox rules of garden design Sano held sacred. For example, Noguchi did not adhere to the notion of disguising man's role in the design, perhaps something to do with his Western egoism:

" But I am also a sculptor of the West, I place my mark and do not hide. The crosscurrents eddy around me." (Noguchi,1987,p.68)

These "crosscurrents" suggest the dialogue between East and West and the difficulties encountered in such a direct interpretation of one to the other. Also, a clash of cultural values was apparent, Sano content to keep his work in the background in keeping with Japanese lack of individualism, Noguchi anxious to show his hand.

Noguchi recognised the problems in his completed design, " the planting I see is too much, or too divergent, but what planting is equal to modern buildings?" (Noguchi,1967,p.167)

In later gardens, Noguchi avoided planting and purified the design to contain stark elemental contouring of space. The later gardens such as the garden for the Beinecke Rare Book Library at Yale University, (illus.10-11) portray a sensibility to Ryoan-ji in their austere, pure aesthetic. UNESCO was too complicated and partly due to the architectural space available, lacks that convergence of elements that Ryoan-ji and later works capture.

The Beinecke garden contains three shapes, a pyramid, a cube and a ring which are situated upon a geometrically paved plane. The entire garden is executed in white marble. Noguchi said that there were at least ten variants of the sun, and that the cube went through stages when it did not resemble a cube at all before he arrived at the finished design.

> Many of these elements were in themselves more interesting than those used. However, nothing could be allowed to detract from the whole. The sun being more plastic could not stand apart from the rest, the cube and the pyramid had each to relate to the other and to the topography as a whole. (Noguchi,1967,p.171)

He described the garden as a, " dramatic landscape, one that is purely imaginary.... Its size is fictive, of infinite space or cloistered containment." (Noguchi,1967,p.170) Beinecke demonstrates his mastery of sculpting an enclosed environment or garden. Noguchi preferred the title of garden for such works as opposed to "sculpture court" because the latter would imply "sculpture in space rather than space which has itself become a sculpture." (Hunter,1979,p.152)

Noguchi's work in the Detroit Civic Center Plaza,(illus.12-14) portrays his ability to blend sculpture with its urban environment in a way that captures the traditional Japanese house's affinity to its natural surround. In 1971, Noguchi was commissioned to create a fountain for

the Civic Center Plaza, funded by a bequest from Mrs. Horace E. Dodge in memory of her husband and son. This was part of an eight acre plan for the improvement of the plaza intended to alleviate the difficult social and racial problems of the area. Noguchi designed the fountain as well as the one hundred and twenty foot "Pylon", but also collaborated with the architect on the entire environment creating a well-planned recreation area. The fountain consists of a ring on cylindrical legs which stand astride a stoned-paved area where children can play in the spray of water in the warm summer months. The water is projected upwards from ground level and combines with water emerging from the steel ring. The fountain echoes industrialised architecture and technological achievement and seems to point towards the future, providing an uplifting and appropriate message in its urban surroundings. Similarly, the "Pylon", soars upwards towards the heavens providing an almost spiritual release and echoing the architecture of the skyscrapers in the surrounding area. It also involves monumental technological achievement, made of gleaming stainless steel, a seven-by-seven square helix that, in ascending to its full height of 120 feet, appears to make a quarter turn, encapturing the feeling of harnessed energy waiting to be released. These two sculptures, existing within the plaza, read as a recreational environment which merges fluidly with its urban surround in a manner which celebrates the technological, industrial and architectural achievements of the city.

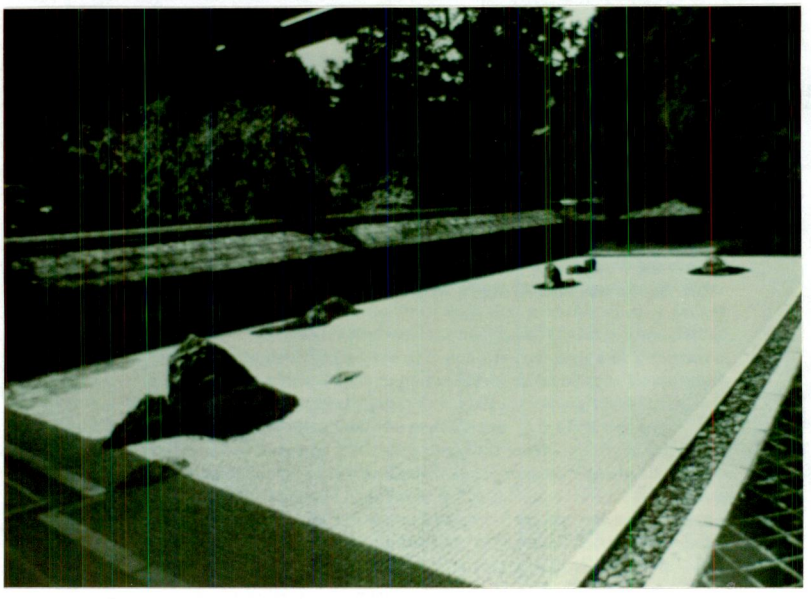
The predominant issue concerning Noguchi in all of his environmental works is to capture the essence of the place itself. The lessons learnt in Japan from the philosophies behind traditional architecture and its relation to its natural surround as well as the concept displayed in Ryoan-ji of separate elements truly combining with each

other to achieve a consummate whole, proved invaluable to Noguchi. He translated these ancient ideas and traditions into his work as the modern sculptor with a sensitivity to both cultures, America and Japan producing work that truly collaborates with its surrounding environment.

> It is the space, or rather the particular place,its totality as a meaningful environment, which occupies me....A given space is a balance of elements: the air, the sky, the earth, the people, the illusion, which together form our awareness. (Threlfall,1992,p.55)

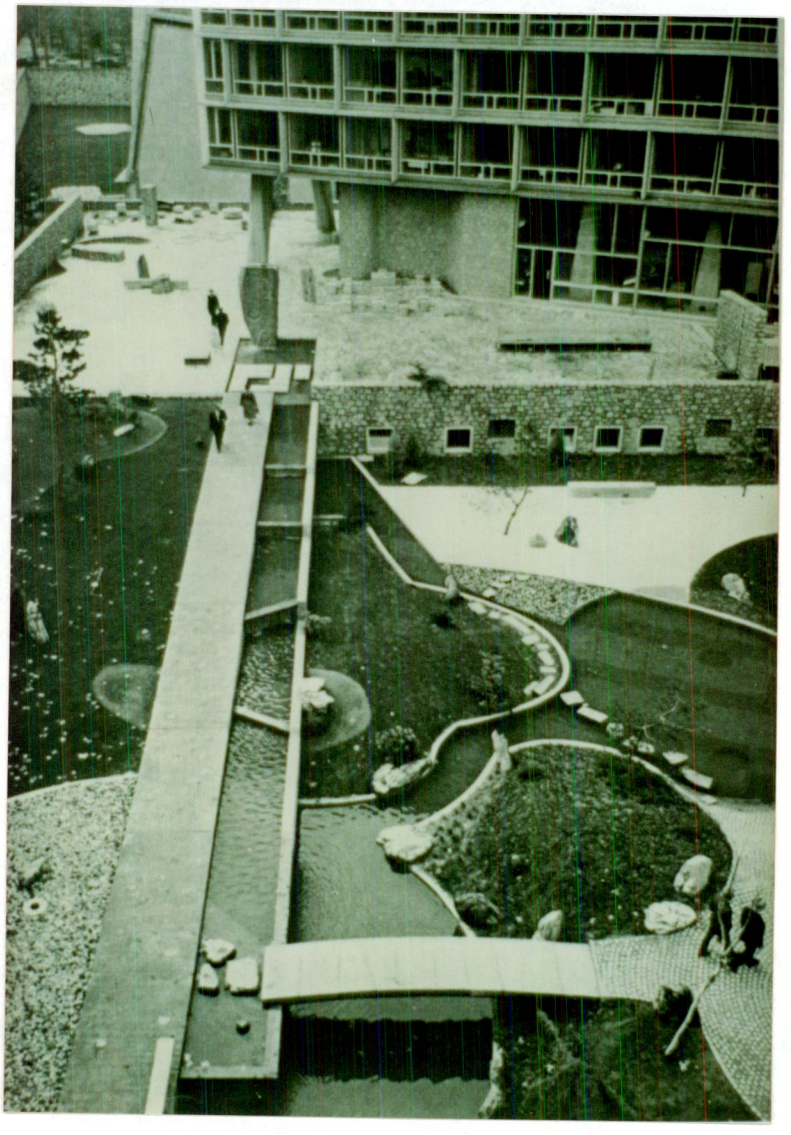
Illus. No. 7.

Ryoan-ji garden, Kyoto, Japan.



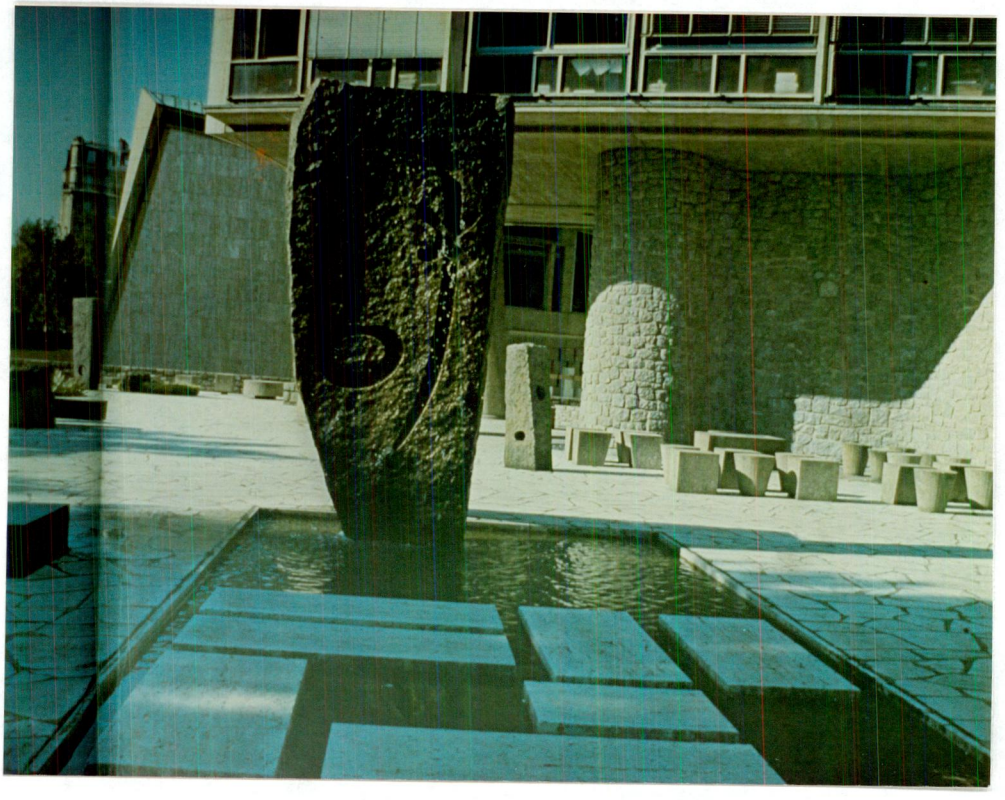
Illus. No. 8.

UNESCO gardens, Paris, 1956-58.



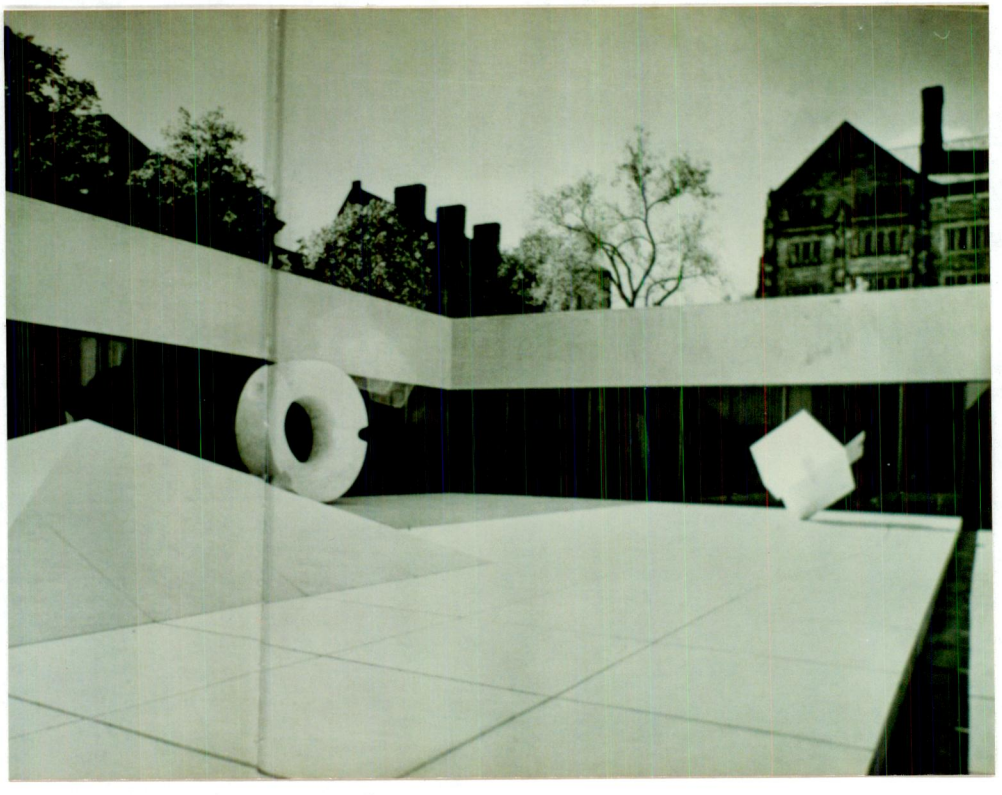
Illus. No. 9.

UNESCO gardens, detail.



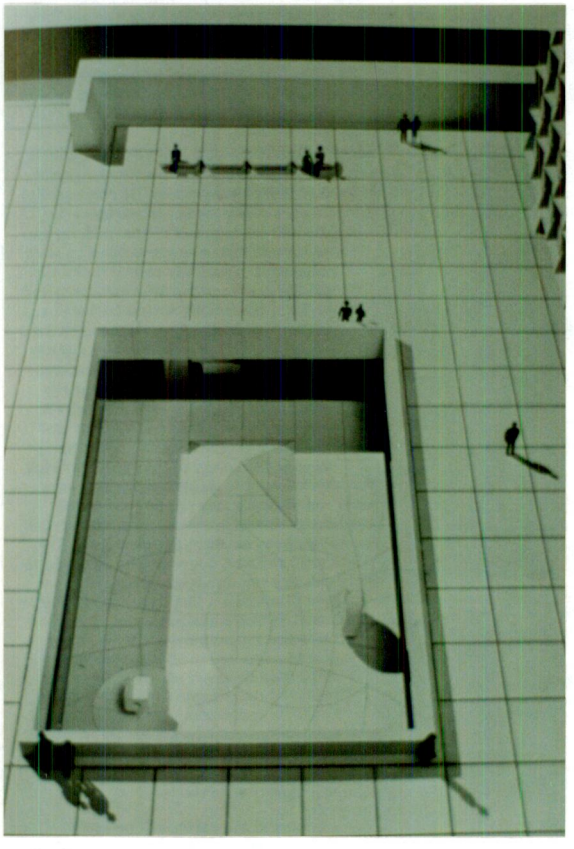
Illus. No. 10.

Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library garden, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. (Skidmore, Owing and Merrill, architects) 1960-64.



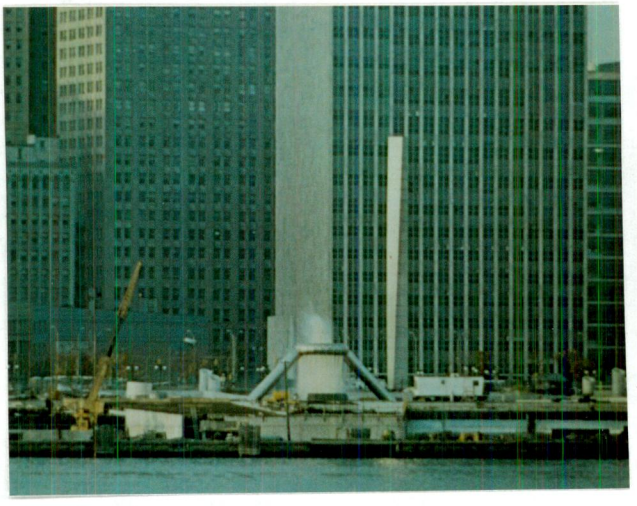
Illus. No. 11

Beinecke Rare Book Library garden, model.



Illus. No. 12.

Detroit Civic Center Plaza.



Illus. No. 13.

Horace E. Dodge and Son Memorial Fountain. 1978.

Illus. No. 14.

Pylon. 1972-76. Detroit Civic Center Plaza. Alluminium. 36.6m.

CHAPTER THREE

> My father, Yone Noguchi, is Japanese and has long been known as an interpreter of the East to the West through poetry, I wish to do the same with sculpture.
>
> (Noguchi,1967,p.17)

When Noguchi expressed his intention of translating the East to the West he was twenty-one. He had spent only eleven years in Japan as a child, the latter five of which attending a foreign school where, as he notes in his autobiography, "I become a foreigner myself, a stranger in the land." (Noguchi,1967,p.13)

In his application form, Noguchi was asking for the opportunity to return to Japan, to learn it's lessons for himself in order to articulate them to America. In this chapter I shall look at how Noguchi,s existence between the two worlds of Japan and America, and his continual search for a place in which he could belong, promoted the incessant energy and zest for work which remained a constant force in his sculptural activity. His synthesis of two cultures placed his work at the forefront of art history, both Japan and America playing their unique and vital roles in his philosophy.

Born in America, Noguchi was moved to Japan at the age of two where he was brought up by his American/ Irish mother, Leonie Gilmour (his father had left them and taken a Japanese wife) In 1918, when he was thirteen, his mother sent him to a progressive school in India. He objected to her decision, "I was to be an American, banished as my mother had decided. No more Japan and the sands of Chiqusaki' (Noguchi,1967,p.13). This bitter remark illustrates his disappointment

and the intense relationship he had held with his mother as a child in Japan did not return. At thirteen Noguchi found himself in America with no mother and no father, torn from the country that had nurtured him and forced to find his own way in America. When he applied for the grant in 1926, he clearly found it necessary to explore the eastern heritage he had been denied.

In conversation with Dore Ashton in later years Noguchi recalls his emotions:

> There was a sort of feeling on my part that my future had some connection with the Orient, probably because I had spent my childhood there, all that I was not completely at home in America or that my faith as an artist at least could not be entirely determined in America.
> (Ashton,1992,p.27)

In the introduction to Noguchi's autobiography, Buckminster Fuller described his friend as a " member of an omni-crossbred world society " and noted that "the remote and complex crossbreeding of Noguchi's European-Asiatic American genes defied his conscious urge to settle down" (Noguchi,1967,p.7) This urge to settle down seemed juxtaposed with a desire to travel across the globe. Noguchi travelled extensively, his first journey to Paris, China and Japan, which was made possible by the grant he won from the Guggenhein Foundation precursing the East, European and American tours he was to make throughout his life-time. This constant movement and restlessness acts as a metaphor for his constant search for a place in which he could belong. He spoke of feeling like a waif, a loner and a stranger. Such emotions arguably pushed Noguchi to submerge himself in his work more profoundly. In a hostile world, we seek solace and Noguchi's solace was his work.

> Because when you become an artist you really come into your own, that is, you find your own place, with no further worry as to whether you are you or another... I think that artists are always making a place of security for them selves you know, their studio becomes their home, their museum. (Ashton,1992,p.17)

Noguchi was not entirely at home in Japan or America, or for that matter, in any geographical place. Throughout his life the two cultures he existed between, fed into his life and inspired work which held them in harmony. Before he whole-heartedly embraced Japanese aesthetics, a sensibility was apparent in his work which Newmann detected.

> For Noguchi; so it seems to me, a background deeply rooted in American psychology is immensely important. Anyone familiar with his portrait sculpture will readily recognise a typically American approach in his direct decisive grasp of each subject. Yet, in the unfinished work there is together with the characteristic American freshness and simplicity, a rare quality of sensibility and sophistication. Call it European, Oriental, or what you will, its significance remains the same. (Ashton,1992,p.14)

Noguchi's "European-Asiatic-American genes", combined with the artistic embrace of his Japanese heritage allowed him an advantage over many. The philosophical argument that those with a dual-cultural background are edued with an advantage over those who draw form only one culture for their creative inspiration certainly applies to Noguchi, as it did to his mentor, Bruncusi. From Bruncusi, Noguchi had learnt many lessons which were reiterated to him in Japan. Brancusi's value of nature

came close to the Eastern view of man and nature working together in harmony. Brancusi also valued intuition in work and his sensibility to the voice within the stone echoes the Japanese Shinto religion which maintains that natural places are the dwelling places of deities therefore commanding a religious reverence for them.

In 1976, Noguchi wrote of Brancusi,

> The memory of childhood, of things observed not taught, of closeness to the earth, of wet stones and grass, of stone buildings or wood churches, hand hewn logs and tools, stone markers, walls and grave stones. This is the inheritance he was able to call upon when the notion came to him that his art, his sculpture , could not go forward to be born without first going back to beginnings.
> (Ashton,1992,p.169)

Noguchi could well have included himself in this statement. As an old man 1982, six years before his death he gave a lecture at the Hakone Japan and US Cultural Center in which he reiterated in the idea which both he and Brancusi shared, 'Look to yourself'.

> The changes that have come over Japan are so complex that I am unable to either condemn or praise them, or even enjoy them. I feel saddened that Japan does not seem to have the awakening to Japan that Americans have had, (he spoke of Japanese artist being less free to develop as individuals than Americans) here in as much as they are artist, they are individuals and yet they are constrained by the fact that they are Japanese and that they are in some sort of single vision where it is only to the future that they look and not to the past. (Ashton,1992,p.264)

Noguchi made his first adult journey back to Japan in 1930. However this trip was fraught with personal problems regarding his estranged father. Before leaving for Japan he received a telegram form Yone Noguchi urging him not to enter Japan using his name. However, Noguchi persisted and met his father with whom he would hold "long,

silent conversations" (Noguchi,1967,p.20) Yone Noguchi became a staunch nationalist writing poems with titles such as, Slaughter Them ! The American and The English Are Our Enemies, and would have had obvious problems with the emergence of his half Caucasian son. However, he introduced Noguchi to several prominent artists in Tokyo but Noguchi had come in search of old Japan, "I wanted on the contrary, the Orient" (Noguchi,1967,p.20). It was his sojourn in the ancient city of Kyoto which was to influence his work most profoundly and his study of the Haniwa ceramics induced his own work in clay. Noguchi has said of clay that he found it a natural medium to work with in Japan but not so in the US. Clay stood for an association with the earth which he attributed to Japan.

Here began a dialogue with materials and the discovery that certain materials such as stone and clay could be handled comfortably in Japan but not in America.

Twenty years after his initial trip to Japan, Noguchi returned once more, searching for its essence. Again he found himself working with clay and in the early fifties, he produced a number of ceramic pieces which are some of his most relaxed and spontaneous works. Noguchi said of clay that, " Like sumi-ink painting, it does not lend itself to erasures and indecision. The best us that which is most spontaneous. " (Noguchi,1967,p.34) These words, as Sam Hunter said, "established the basic dialect of Noguchi's creative impulses between a rationalised Western surface and the more concrete sensual wholeness of his re-affirmed eastern heritage." (Hunter,1979,p.100) The works also portray the difficulties encountered in striving to act as interpreter of the East to the West through sculpture. To the West, Noguchi's ceramics were not considered worthy of the title of "fine art", they were too

playful. In Japan however, the distinction between fine art and craft is far less apparent, the craftsman traditionally enjoying a prestige on a par with that of the artist. These works also captured the Eastern notion of play, intrinsic to the Zen philosophy of life. In her article, The Visible and Invisible Noguchi, Nancy Grove highlights some of the contemporary criticism the ceramics provoked in America, where they were exhibited in 1955 and 1956. Hilton Kramer complained that, "the danger of cuteness has not been avoided." and another critic likened them to, "The ginger-bread cookies of a playful and somewhat inebriated baker." (Grove,1979,p.60)

In translating the East to the West through sculpture, Noguchi faced fierce criticism and misunderstanding concerning the fifties ceramics. His personal battle with materials of the East and West and attempts to fuse ideas from one culture with the materials he associated with that culture out of context, so to speak, remind one of the awkwardness of the UNESCO garden in Paris, where planting and a direct attempt to re-enact a Japanese principle (the traditional garden) resulted in a piece of work which was not entirely successful. The Detroit Civic Center Plaza, on the other hand demonstrates the transmission of a Japanese sense of space, employing materials that relate to their environment resulting in a work that more successfully blends the East with the West.

The ceramics works of the early fifties, (illus.1-3) in my opinion, are successful pieces portraying Noguchi's profound re-absorption of Japan and his affiliation to the earth,

> Why do I continuously go back to Japan, except to renew my contact with the earth....I go there like a beggar or a thief, seeking the last warmth of the earth.
> (Noguchi,1967,p.40)

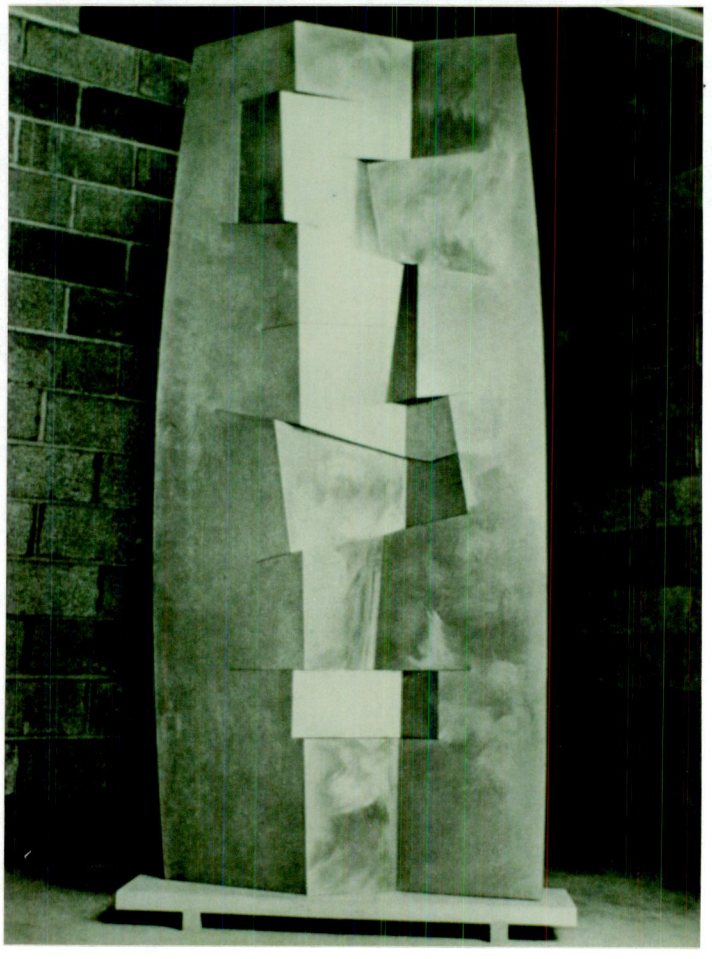
It is interesting to compare the ceramics with a piece made in the U.S. intended to capture the breath-like brushstrokes of the sumi-ink painting. In making the ceramic pieces, Noguchi recalled and was inspired by the same process. Sesshu, named after the master Japanese painter, is constructed in anodized aluminium. (ill.15) No welding was required, the structure relying on inter-slotted folded metal plates. Again, Noguchi was criticised for being too Japanese in his aesthetics and material approach. To my mind, Sesshu portrays a sterility and oppressiveness so far removed from the ceramics. The sensitivity involved in sumi-ink paintings is held in the direct-touch spontaneity of the ceramics but lost in the industrialised cut metal structure of Sesshu. The ceramics seem to portray the spirit of the artist, they are seductively personal, in stark contrast to the formality of Sesshu.

In acting as an interpreter of the East to the West through sculpture, Noguchi faced many problems and opposition in the form of criticism founded on a misunderstanding of Japanese ideals. His decision to re-examine his Eastern heritage, and to embrace its principles in his sculpture, however provided him with a rich inspirational force and an awareness of a culture so diverse from America's prompted a constant dichotomy which pushed Noguchi forever forward in his work.

It is the juxtaposition of his two heritages that has fed his inspiration and continual energy for work in such a diversity of materials and approaches, the amalgamation of the East and the West that gives his work an edge over many of his contemporaries. In his work, the East and West are held, sometimes a little awkwardly, but for the most part, in creative harmony. Particularly in the stone works he produced in later life, an Eastern sensibility seems to emerge naturally and effortlessly from the stone, seeming to confirm that he did indeed achieve his aim to act as an interpreter of the East to the West through sculpture.

Illus. No. 15

Sesshu. 1958. Anodysed aluminium. 243.8cm. Collection Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut.



CHAPTER FOUR

In his application for the Guggenheim Grant, Noguchi expressed his deep sensibility towards nature and noted the role it was to play in his work. He articulated his wish to "view nature through nature's eyes and to ignore man as an object for special veneration" and to "truly become once more a part of nature, a part of the very earth"
(Noguchi,1967,p.16)
What Noguchi was expressing here, at the age of twenty-one, was a recognition of Eastern philosophy towards nature and a wish to follow in this way of thinking.

The conception of nature differs dramatically between the East and the West, the Eastern view emphasising man's position as an integral part of nature, the Western view stressing man's distinction from and dominance over nature. Indeed, a new Japanese word was devised in the nineteenth century to accommodate the Western concept of a nature as separate from man.

In his essay, The Japanese Appreciation of Nature, Yurico Saito identifies two ways in which the Japanese have traditionally identified with nature. The first he describes as "emotional identification". The second is an identification based upon the transience of nature and man alike. Both views rely on the Japanese's affinity with nature as opposed to the Western view of nature as a contrasting force. The "emotional identification" deals with man expressing his own emotions in terms of or by reference to nature. This appreciation of the expressive quality of nature can be seen in the portrayal of sorrow through the depiction of

cherry blossoms in Japanese classical literature. Cherry blossoms are symbolic of sorrow due to their transience which is the main subject of the second traditional way in which the Japanese have valued nature. With the spread of Buddhism in the sixth century, came the idea of the impermanence of everything, man and nature alike. The transience of nature reflects the transience of man. Such ideas explain the Japanese preoccupation with the seasons. Seasonal flowers are used in "ikebana", the Japanese art of flower arrangement, and traditionally paintings of nature were divided up into four seasonal panels.

In speaking of "ignoring man as an object for special veneration" (Noguchi,1967,p.16), Noguchi rejected Western art history traditions which have concentrated on the glorification and exaltation of man and the figure as the aesthetical and literal dominant being or force, especially in the sculpture tradition. Noguchi speaks of giving flowers, trees, rivers, mountains, birds, beasts and man their due place, and almost takes credit as a pioneer in "this reversal of attitude." (Noguchi,1967,p.16) The subject matter in traditional Japanese art and literature, however was predominantly taken from natural objects and phenomena. Where Noguchi differed from the Japanese was in the fact that, while he was drawing his inspiration from nature rather than depicting natural scenes, he infused his sculpture with an essence or feeling for nature. Noguchi had spent all of his adult life in America by 1926, but he showed an enthusiasm to change the sculptural tradition of the U.S. by embracing the age-old tradition of Japan and fusing it with his ambition as the modern sculptor.

As a child in Japan, Noguchi learnt his first lessons from the natural world. Children living in the provinces at that time would have benefitted from a constant contact with nature. In Japan, Noguchi built

his first garden, for which the young child stole a stone from a neighbour's wood. "Each time Haruhiko-san came to call, I expected him to recognise his rock, he never did." (Noguchi,1967,p.12) This early appreciation of the character of or special identity of the rock reflects the Japanese regard for nature in its religious manifestation, that is Shintoism. In Shintoism, deities or "kami" are believed to inhabit natural objects which are in turn worshipped as their dwelling places. The young Noguchi's perceptiveness of the characteristics of his stone, developed into an integral part of his work. He searched with great enthusiasm for the right stone, the stone with the right character for a particular work, as he recalls in his struggle to extricate granite boulders from Mount Tsukuba in 1960.

> There was no road, other than a trail up the rocky woods. However, by then I was so enamoured of the gray-green granite that there was nothing to do but to build a road for the distance of half a mile down which the rocks could be skidded. The biggest was over twenty tons which suggests the amount of work involved.
>
> (Noguchi,1967,p.169)

Noguchi's love of stone never ceased and it remained his most often and successfully used medium.

> However it seems to me that the natural mediums of stone and wood, alive before man was, have a greater capacity, as with the reality of our being. They are as familiar as the earth, a matter of sensibility.
>
> (Noguchi,1967,p.39)

Noguchi's love of stone is a love of its durability and strength, very unlike the qualities traditionally cited as aesthetically pleasing in Japanese art such as cherry blossoms, seasonal flowers, insects, and the moon which emphasise a transitory existence However, I would argue that Noguchi does pay homage to this Japanese concept because, in using

stone and rock and in his philosophical depiction of them, he portrays the transience of man himself. "Alive before man was", goes on to imply alive after man has ceased.

When Noguchi won the Guggenheim Foundation Grant, he travelled first to Paris where through good fortune and determination, he found himself assisting Brancusi who re-enforced many of his perceptions of nature. Brancusi seemed to perceive stone in a way not dissimilar to the Shinto worshipper who would grasp a sense of the "kami" within the rock.

> It is while carving the stone that you discover the spirit of your material and the properties particular to it. Your hand thinks and follows the thought of the material.(Threlfall,1992,p.79)

Noguchi was to echo Brancusi's sensibilities in his own work and thoughts,

> The materiality of stone, its essence to reveal its identity, not what might be imposed but something closer to its being, beneath the skin is the brilliance of matter.(Noguchi,1987,p.26)

Noguchi said of Brancusi that he,

> "like the Japanese, could take the quintessence of nature and distil it." "Brancusi showed me the truth of materials and taught me never to decorate or paste unnatural materials onto my sculptures, to keep them undecorated like the Japanese house." (Hunter,1979,p.35)

The Japanese house as I have discussed was a manifestation of mans relation to nature, man living amongst nature, with the house complimenting its natural surroundings and blending with its environment.

The following quotation portrays Noguchi's personal and deep adoration for nature, written in the early fifties from his house in Kamakura, Japan:

> Here in the hillside at the edge of the rice fields have been spent the days of this year, a segment of Japan. The changing seasons have now made one round. Each day a wonder of discovery to me, so intimate is nature here, not only to the eye, it invades one's being til the memory of all its various sights and noises are like a symphony to be heard at all times.
>
> (Ashton,1992,p.92)

The quotation implies that Noguchi had by this time realised much of what he intended in the Guggenheim application form, "to view nature through nature's eyes", to "so thoroughly submerge[d] himself in the study of nature as to truly become once more, a part of nature, a part of the very earth." (Noguchi,1967,p.16) Also, in his reference to the seasons, and to his whole-hearted appreciation of the nature of Japan he seems to have captured the Eastern sensibility to nature, enabling him to act as an interpreter of the East to the West in relation to his work because almost all of Noguchi's work is a dialogue with the essence of nature.

A sculpture which I believe shows this love of nature profoundly is, "This Earth,This Passage." Fashioned in clay, by the artist's feet, it vividly captures the relationship between the artist and the earth. The sculpture, cast in bronze, depicts a ring which lies on the ground, the integration between the ring and the earth plane suggests an intimacy and the ring seems to hug the ground or emerge from it. Noguchi's sculptural conception of the earth as a positive element in his work was a lesson learnt from the Japanese, from their traditional garden design. Also, clay was a medium that Noguchi associated with Japan. "This Earth, This Passage" combines a sensibility towards the earth plane with a material

which to him suggested the earth, clay."I for one return recurrently to the earth in my search for the meaning of sculpture." (Noguchi,1967,p.39) The earth was for Noguchi a phenomenon he associated closely with Japan, indeed, his inspiration from nature can be traced directly to his Eastern heritage, as he said himself, "Why do I continuously go back to Japan, except to renew my contact with the earth?" (Noguchi,1967,p.40)

Illus. No. 16.

This Earth, This Passage. 1962. Bronze. 114.3cm. Collection of the artist.

CONCLUSION

The intentions Noguchi set himself, in 1926, outlined concerns that were to remain with him throughout his life. The first was to act as an interpreter of the East to the West through sculpture, and the second to "view nature through nature's eyes and ignore man as an object for special veneration." (Noguchi,1967,p.16)

In acting as the translator of the East to the West it was necessary for Noguchi to re-absorb and re-examine his Japanese heritage in order re-learn its lessons. With these lessons from Japan came a sensitivity towards nature which is intrinsic to the Japanese people.

The deep reverence and appreciation of nature in Japan manifests itself in their philosophy of man on a par with nature, allowing nature a significance equal to that of man. Noguchi embraced this philosophy and in doing so fulfilled his desire to "view nature through nature's eyes". In his application he speaks of allowing flowers, trees, birds and man their due place. His work captures the essence of nature and reveals it to humanity.

In acting as an interpreter of the East to the West, Noguchi objectively looked at Japan and interpreted those philosophies and cultural expressions that he felt could push his work forward. His recognition of the significance of Japan in his sculptural activities proved crucial, and his synthesis of Japanese and American culture gave his work an edge over many of his contemporaries.

He was forced to live between the two worlds of Japan and America but this in turn proved to be a stimulus to his work. Noguchi indeed interpreted the East both consciously and unconsciously, the more he absorbed Japan, the more natural his work became at expressing the two cultures of Japan and America in equilibrium, a Japanese approach infused with a western ambition has been the success of Noguchi.

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