

# ISAMU

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# Press kit

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Zentrum Paul Klee  
Bern

Gegründet von  
Maurice E. und Martha Müller  
sowie den Erben Paul Klee

Mit der Unterstützung von:



Kanton Bern  
Canton de Berne



Burggemeinde  
Bern





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25 August 2022

Isamu Noguchi  
23.9.2022–8.1.2023



**Between 23 September 2022 and 8 January 2023 the Zentrum Paul Klee is devoting a comprehensive exhibition to the Japanese-American world citizen and important sculptor and designer Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988). It reveals a radically interdisciplinary oeuvre that brings together art and design.**

Isamu Noguchi is one of the most experimental artists of the 20th century, and one of the most important sculptors and designers of the United States. His varied body of work is marked by a search for the connection between art and life: among other things he made stage sets, light objects, furniture, public gardens and playgrounds. He drew inspiration from past and contemporary cultures: Japanese gardens, astronomic observatories in India or the abstract art of Surrealism.

As a politically committed artist he used his interdisciplinary and intercultural approach to expand the understanding of sculpture. He was not interested in making objects solely for galleries and museums, but in designing spaces for society.

#### **On the exhibition**

Over ten sections, this comprehensive exhibition explores the work of Noguchi, who moved regularly, as a world citizen, between the USA, Japan and Europe, and combined different cultural traditions and techniques in his incomparable work. It is the first extensive show in Switzerland to present the full range of Noguchi's category-defying practice.

The earliest works are brought together in the section **Portrait Heads – Friendship and Collaboration**. It includes figurative works from the 1920s, when Noguchi was at the beginning of his artist career, to the early 1950s. The various different techniques of the portrait busts confirm Noguchi's early skill in the use of different materials, techniques and tools: *'I don't believe in sticking with one medium. I'm afraid of its dominating me and becoming my trademark.'*

In 1927 Noguchi worked as an assistant in the studio of the sculptor Constantin Brâncuși in Paris. There he not only became proficient in the use of different tools but also learned what a sculpture can do in space. In the section **Endless Coupling – Abstractions**, numerous works with shiny surfaces and

biomorphic shapes testify to the lasting impression made on Noguchi by this stay in Paris.

Noguchi found the formal reduction that he learned from Brâncuși, as well as the perfection of his training in his use of tools and natural materials confirmed in the Japanese conception of art. The radical way in which he incorporated techniques from different cultures – traditional and contemporary – in his works is apparent in terracotta figures and mechanically pleated metal sculptures shown in **Global Distillation – Between Tradition and Modernity**.

Noguchi is presented as a political artist in the section **Tortured Earth – Political Commitment**. As a consequence of the burgeoning racism in the United States, which had the most devastating effect on the African-American population, he adopted a committed position against this injustice. Among other things he designed the set for Erick Hawkins' play about John Brown's struggle against slavery. *'Clearly I yearn to bring sculpture into more direct contact with the day-to-day experiences of life.'* Noguchi involved himself in the political and social discussions of the day with designs for monuments and sculptures made after his stays and travels in Europe and East Asia in the early 1930s. Under the title **Social Protest** the Zentrum Paul Klee is showing a selection of his conceptual projects for public spaces that addressed social issues.

Noguchi's love for artistic experimentation and his sculptural interest in technology and science are manifested both in his use of industrial materials and in his new vision of space. He was inspired to engage with contemporary discourses by his lifelong friend, the inventive architect R. Buckminster Fuller. This area is addressed in the section entitled **Expanded Universe – Science and Technology**.

In the 1940s many Surrealist artists fled from Europe to New York. The abstract biomorphic forms of the dreamworlds that they depicted were one inspiration for Noguchi to make what he called his 'Interlocking Figures'. In combining traditional Japanese carpentry techniques with contemporary abstraction, he also processed his wartime experiences of uncertainty and helplessness in these works, to which the section **Interlocking Worlds – Biomorphic Forms** is devoted.

Noguchi had been interested in the desert landscape of the American State of Arizona when he became a voluntary inmate of an internment camp for Japanese people living on the West Coast. Later he captured his impressions of the landscape and its light in a series of works presented in the section **Lunar Landscapes – Light and Lightness**. For Noguchi, light – in addition to the impressions of the desert landscape, also the light of the moon and fire – became a sculptural material. In the 1950s his experiments led to the Akari lamps made of Japanese paper and bamboo. In the Japanese language 'Akari' means both light in the sense of consciousness and lightness in the sense of being or essence, and is thus the ideal name for Noguchi's light sculptures.

In numerous sculptures from the 1960s the artist combined smooth perfect surfaces with roughly carved stone. His visits to quarries in Italy and Greece brought him closer to the essence of marble and different mechanical ways of working it. **New Explorations – Rawness and Perfection** shows the new forms and surface treatments that Noguchi deliberately leaves in tension with one another.

Throughout his career, Noguchi's interest in play becomes apparent in many different media and collaborations. **Playscapes – Ideal Worlds** reveals that as well as different playgrounds Noguchi also made the set element *Jungle Gym* for Erick Hawkins' *Stephen Acrobat* (1947). Central to this is the interaction

and involvement of the public, as visitors can experience for themselves with the *Play Sculpture* placed outside the Zentrum Paul Klee.

### **Noguchi's artistic practice**

Isamu Noguchi was born in 1904, the son of the American author Léonie Gil-mour and the Japanese poet Yonejirō Noguchi. He lived and worked in the United States and Japan, undertook projects throughout North America and in Europe, Japan and Israel, accompanied by extensive travels. In his work he connects ideas from both past and contemporary cultures. Japanese gardens, astronomical observatories in India and the earthen mounds of prehistoric North American cultures resonate in Noguchi's work just as much as the abstract art of the early 20th century or the Surrealist movement. According to time and place Noguchi employed the most diverse materials such as stone, wood, metal, plastic, ceramics, paper and electrical components. He worked both traditional craft and modern industrial techniques.

The furniture that Noguchi designed in the 1940s and 1950s have become design classics. The best known of these are the Akari light sculptures. In his work Noguchi did not distinguish between free and applied art. He wanted to make sculptural spaces in which people perceived space and sculptures in different ways through their movement.

### **Collaboration**

The exhibition is organised and curated by Zentrum Paul Klee (Bern), the Barbican (London) and Museum Ludwig (Cologne) in partnership with LaM - Lille Métropole Musée d'art moderne, d'art contemporain et d'art brut. The exhibition would not have been possible without the collaboration of The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York.

### **Opening**

The opening of the exhibition will take place on **Thursday, 22 September 2022 from 6 pm**. Admission to the exhibition is free on this evening.

### **Curator**

Fabienne Eggelhöfer

### **Assistant Curator**

Myriam Dössegger

### **With the support of**

Kanton Bern, Burgergemeinde Bern, Bundesamt für Kultur, Terra Foundation for American Art, Art Mentor Foundation Lucerne, Phillips, teo jakob

### **Media preview**

We cordially invite you to the press preview with curator Fabienne Eggelhöfer on **Wednesday, 21 September 2022 at 10 am at the Zentrum Paul Klee**.

Please register via [press@zpk.org](mailto:press@zpk.org).

### **Contact**

Anne-Cécile Foulon, Head of Communication & Marketing  
[press@zpk.org](mailto:press@zpk.org), +41 31 328 09 93

### **Individual visit of the exhibition**



We are looking forward to your individual visit to the exhibition. Admission to all exhibitions at the Zentrum Paul Klee is free for media representatives with a valid press card. Please fill in the digital accreditation form which you can either access via [zpk.org/press](https://zpk.org/press) or by screening the QR-Code before your visit.

## Accompanying Programme in English

### Guided Tours

Sunday, 30 October / 4 December 2022, 3 pm

### Digital Offers

An audio guide to the exhibition in German, English, French and Italian can be purchased for CHF 6 at the museum ticket desk

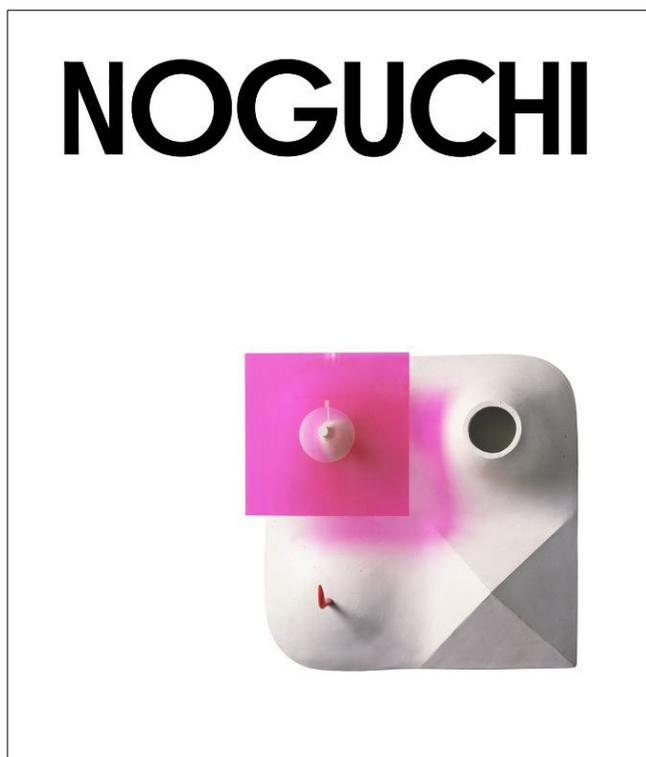
### Offers for families

Tuesday to Sunday, 10 am – 5 pm

Interactive exhibition *Kodomo no kuni. The Land of Children*

Creative and interactive bridge from the studios to the current exhibition at the Zentrum Paul Klee

For families with children from 4 years



Catalogue  
**Isamu Noguchi**

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## Biography

### 1904

Isamu Noguchi is born in Los Angeles on November 17, 1904, as the son of the American writer and educator Léonie Gilmour. His father, the Japanese poet Yonejirō Noguchi, returned to Japan before Noguchi's birth.

### 1907

From 1907, Noguchi grows up in Tokyo and nearby Chigasaki. He helps to build the family house and learns Japanese woodworking techniques.

### 1912

His half-sister Ailes Gilmour is born. She would later dance with the Martha Graham Dance Company.

### 1918

Noguchi travels alone to the United States to attend school in Rolling Prairie and La Porte, Indiana.

### 1922

After graduating from high school, he plans to begin premedical studies at Columbia University in New York. In summer, he completes an apprenticeship with the sculptor Gutzon Borglum in Connecticut.

### 1923

Noguchi lives with his mother and Ailes in New York. He decides to become a sculptor and studies with Onorio Ruotolo at the Leonardo da Vinci Art School.

### 1927–28

Noguchi receives a fellowship to travel to Paris and East Asia. In Paris, he works as an assistant in the studio of Constantin Brâncuși, and then in a studio of his own in Gentilly.

### 1929

Noguchi returns to New York, where he soon collaborates with the architect and inventor R. Buckminster Fuller as well as the dancer and choreographer Martha Graham.

### 1930–31

He travels via Paris and Moscow to China, where he studies traditional brush drawing with Qi Baishi. In 1931, he goes to Japan and studies Japanese culture, gardens, temples, and ceramics.

### 1932–33

Noguchi begins to create industrial designs, large-scale earthworks and monuments, as well as the first of his playground concepts. These designs would remain largely unrealized.

### 1936

Noguchi's text "What's the Matter with Sculpture" is published in *Art Front*. Throughout his life, Noguchi questions the role of art in society and his own artistic practice. In Mexico City he creates a large-scale relief mural. In the 1930s, he is particularly interested in political events and tries to respond to social injustices as an artist.

### 1938–40

He creates a frieze made of stainless steel for the Associated Press Building in Rockefeller Center, New York. This work earns him a degree of recognition in the United States.

**1942**

In the aftermath of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Noguchi is politically active on behalf of Japanese in the United States and Americans with Japanese roots. He voluntarily enters an incarceration camp in Poston, Arizona, in the hopes of improving living conditions there.

**1943**

The first *lunars* (illuminated sculptures) are created. Noguchi experiments with new materials, such as plastic and different kinds of wood.

**1949**

Noguchi receives a travel grant to research the history of sculpture in public and spiritual settings and journeys to France, Switzerland, Italy, Spain, Greece, Egypt, India, Indonesia, and in 1950 to Japan. Over the following years, he lives and works alternately in New York, various European countries, and Japan, with travels and projects across the globe.

**1950**

Noguchi has a studio residency at the Industrial Arts Research Institute (IARI), Tokyo. The first conversations about Noguchi's collaboration on Hiroshima's Peace Memorial Park take place, and although he later designs railings for two bridges there, his proposal for a Memorial to the Dead is rejected by the civic committee. In collaboration with the architect Yoshirō Taniguchi, he designs a garden and a faculty room in honour of his father at Keiō University in Tokyo.

**1951**

Noguchi visits the Ozeki lantern factory in Gifu and designs his first Akari light sculptures. He marries the actress Yoshiko Yamaguchi.

**1952**

The Akari lamps go into production. Noguchi lives with Yamaguchi in Kita Kamakura on the property of ceramicist Rosanjin Kitaōji and creates new ceramic works.

**1953–54**

Noguchi travels through Greece, Egypt, Burma, Thailand, Hong Kong, Macau, Cambodia, Indonesia, and Singapore. His travel grant is extended.

**1955**

Noguchi lives with Yamaguchi in London as well as Paris for two months and designs costumes and stage sets for the Royal Shakespeare Company. Afterward, he returns to New York. He signs a contract with Wohnbedarf AG to distribute the Akari in Switzerland. Noguchi also receives a commission to design a garden for the UNESCO headquarters in Paris.

**1956**

Noguchi undertakes journeys to India and Hong Kong. He and Yamaguchi divorce. He works with different casting processes in iron and bronze.

**1959**

Noguchi's works are on view at documenta II in Kassel.

**1961**

Noguchi sets up a studio and residence in Long Island City, New York after working in friends' studios since his return to New York in 1958.

**1962**

In Israel, Noguchi begins work on the Billy Rose Art Garden, a sculpture garden for the Israel Museum. That summer, he has a studio at the American Academy in Rome, where balsa wood and clay sculptures are cast in bronze.

Near the Pietrasanta marble quarries, he works on marble sculptures.

**1964**

A first solo exhibition in Europe is held at the Galerie Claude Bernard in Paris. Noguchi is represented at documenta III.

**1968**

The first retrospective is shown at the Whitney Museum, New York. Noguchi's autobiography, *A Sculptor's World*, is published.

**1969–71**

Noguchi sets up a studio for large-scale stone sculptures in Mure, Japan (the Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum Japan in posthumously established in 1999 at his studio in Mure).

**1971**

Noguchi proposes a design for Horace E. Dodge Fountain, and the project expands into the Philip A. Hart Plaza for Detroit, Michigan (1971–79), his most ambitious civic project to date.

**1975**

*Playscapes*, a playground designed in collaboration with architect Shoji Sadao, opens in Piedmont Park in Atlanta, Georgia.

**1977–78**

Noguchi designs the foyer for the headquarters of the Sōgetsu School for Ikebana. He is awarded the Gold Medal from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. The solo exhibition *Noguchi: Sculptor as Designer* is held at MoMA. In 1978, the exhibition *Noguchi's Imaginary Landscapes* begins its tour of six U.S. institutions.

**1981**

Together with Shoji Sadao, Noguchi begins the construction of the Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum in Long Island City. It opens in 1985.

**1986**

At the 42<sup>nd</sup> Venice Biennale, Noguchi represents the United States. *Isamu Noguchi: What Is Sculpture?* features Akari light sculptures and the *Slide Mantra*.

**1988**

Noguchi dies in New York City.

## Press images

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#### 01

Isamu Noguchi  
*Akari, Models 27N, 2N, BB3-70FF, BB2-S1, 14A, BB1-YA1, 31N*  
Paper, bamboo, metal  
Photo: The Kagawa Museum  
© INFGM / 2021, ProLitteris, Zurich



#### 02

Isamu Noguchi  
*My Mu, 1950*  
Seto stoneware  
34,3 x 24,1 x 16,8 cm  
Photo: Kevin Noble  
The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York  
The Noguchi Museum Archives, 00212  
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#### 03

Isamu Noguchi  
*Red Lunar Fist, 1944*  
Magnesite, plastic, resin, electric components  
18,1 x 21,3 x 22,2 cm  
The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York  
Photo: Kevin Noble  
The Noguchi Museum Archives, 9864  
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#### 04

Isamu Noguchi  
*Globular, 1928*  
Brass, marble base  
50,8 x 23,2 x 29,2 cm  
The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York  
The Noguchi Museum Archives  
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**05**

Isamu Noguchi

*Lunar Infant*, 1944

Magnesite, wood, electric components  
55,9 x 40,6 x 40,6 cm

The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and  
Garden Museum, New York

Photo: Kevin Noble

The Noguchi Museum Archives, 150797

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**06**

Isamu Noguchi

*My Arizona*, 1943/1978 partly recon-  
structed

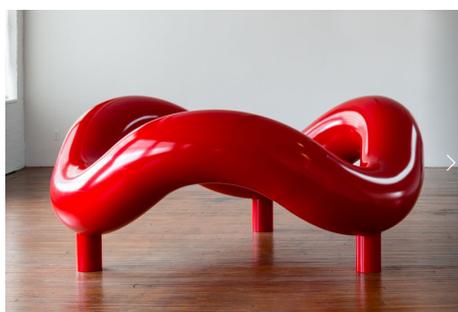
Fibreglass, plexiglas  
46,4 x 46,4 x 11,7 cm

The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and  
Garden Museum, New York

Photo: Kevin Noble

The Noguchi Museum Archives, 00071

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**07**

Isamu Noguchi

*Play Sculpture*, ca. 1965, fabricated  
2017

Steel and colour

112,7 x 261,6 x 261,6 cm

Photo: Nicholas Knight

The Noguchi Museum Archives

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**08**

Isamu Noguchi

*Mitosis*, 1962

Bronze

36,8 x 56,5 x 41,8 cm

The Museum of Modern Art, New York,  
James Thrall Soby Bequest, 1979

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**09**

Isamu Noguchi  
*Okame (Atomic Head)*, 1954  
Iron  
23,5 × 19,4 × 11,1 cm  
The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and  
Garden Museum, New York  
Photo: Kevin Noble  
The Noguchi Museum Archives, 00358  
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**10**

Isamu Noguchi  
*Strange Bird (To the Sunflower)*, 1945  
Green slate  
143,8 × 55,6 × 50,8 cm  
The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and  
Garden Museum, New York  
Photo: Kevin Noble  
The Noguchi Museum Archives, 00113,  
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**11**

Isamu Noguchi  
*R. Buckminster Fuller*, 1929  
Bronze, chrome plated  
33,7 × 20 × 25,4 cm  
Collection Alexandra Snyder-May  
Photo: F. S. Lincoln  
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**12**

Martha Graham with *Spider Dress* and  
*Serpent* for *Cave of the Heart*  
Choreography by Martha Graham, set  
design by Isamu Noguchi, 1946  
Photo: Cris Alexander  
The Noguchi Museum Archives, 01619  
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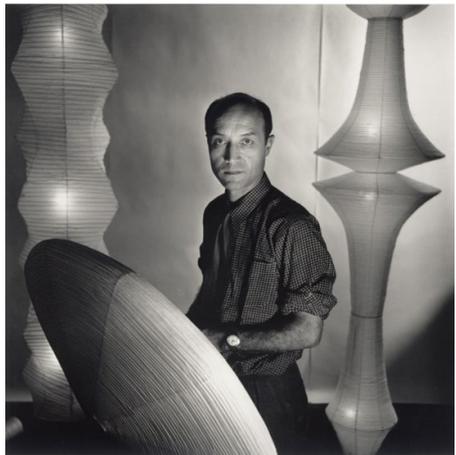
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**13**  
Noguchi testing *Slide Mantra* at *Isamu Noguchi: What is Sculpture?*, US-Pavilion, Biennale Venedig, 1986  
Photo: Michio Noguchi  
The Noguchi Museum Archives, 144398  
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**14**  
Isamu Noguchi in his studio at Gentilly near Paris, 1927  
Photo: Atelier Stone  
The Noguchi Museum Archives, 03716  
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**15**  
Portrait of Isamu Noguchi, 1955  
Photo: Louise Dahl-Wolfe  
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