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THE MATTER OF SCULPTURE

Isamu Noguchi and Early India

ABSTRACT

Isamu Noguchi wrote in 1949 that the site of Mahabalipuram was his "first and most authentic lesson." Between then and his death in 1988, Noguchi visited India at least eleven times. Yet there has been little investigation into the nature of this long and deep connection, and the impact it had on the sculptor's artistic philosophy and practice. The few studies on the topic emphasize Noguchi's interest in the architectural modernity of post-independence India. This essay foregrounds instead the sculptor's enduring interest in the art of early India. Through extensive archival work, it highlights Noguchi's engagement with ancient sites such as Sanchi, Elephanta, and Mahabalipuram, among numerous others, and traces the centrality of the "matter of sculpture" in his approach. As such, he is one of the few sculptors—and perhaps the only one—to have studied, recorded, and theorized the materiality of early Indian sculpture. In looking at and alongside Noguchi, this essay expands the current understanding of the sculptor's work and calls for material approaches to the study of sculpture from early India.

Introduction

Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988) is one of the foremost sculptors of the twentieth century. He is unparalleled in the originality of his formal experimentation, versatile creative choices, breadth of artistic collaborations, and philosophical approach to materials. The richness of Noguchi's oeuvre, spanning more than six decades, has generated significant scholarly exploration of various facets of his artistic output. This literature includes investigations of his exhibition history in North America; his associations with numerous artists, including Constantin Brancusi, Alexander Calder, and Martha Graham; his fascination with the classical antiquity of Greece and Italy; his role in bridging East and West in sculptural practice; and his identity as a Japanese American artist. Relatively less known is Noguchi's longstanding interest in India. Existing studies on the topic emphasize his interest in the architectural modernity of post-independence India. In contrast, this essay focuses on Noguchi's engagement with the sculpture of early India. It illuminates how stonework at ancient sites, including Sanchi, Elephanta, and Mahabalipuram, was a touchstone for the sculptor. Through a study of over two thousand photographs, sketches, and notes as well as correspondence, interviews, and other archival

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documents, this essay demonstrates that the sculpture of early India played an important but overlooked role in Noguchi's artistic philosophy and practice.

In tracing this thread in Noguchi's career, this essay highlights his trip to India in 1949—the first of eleven recorded visits—and contextualizes that experience with discussions of his early pursuits in New York and Paris and his late practice in Japan. While Noguchi visited other places in 1949, including Greece, Italy, and Egypt, the essay focuses on his engagement with the sculpture of early India. As such, it fills a gap not only in Noguchi scholarship but also in art historical approaches to the sculpture of early India; it lies at the intersection of these lacunae. First, the essay sheds light on the significance of early Indian sculpture in Noguchi's thinking and practice, a point that the sculptor described in detail and with much complexity throughout his career. Second, it shows that although the discipline of art history is uniquely suited to study artisans and their artistic processes, these issues, in the case of the sculpture of early India, have received limited scholarly assessment. This is due to the fragmentary nature of the archaeological record, which provides few primary sources, particularly of artistic attribution, with which to write such histories. As a result, the field has focused more closely on issues of patronage and reception rather than questions of making, materials, and method. Noguchi's consistent attention to the materiality of early Indian sculpture—crucially, as a sculptor of stone himself—provides a critical lens through which to apprehend the enigmatic issues surrounding the history of stone carving in early India.

Sculpture in the Studio and Studying Surface, 1920s–40s

Noguchi's interest in stone carving began in the 1920s. In 1923, he joined the premedical program at Columbia University in New York City, only to withdraw after two years. He then began a course in sculpture at the Leonardo da Vinci Art School, located in an abandoned church near Tompkins Square Park. There, he trained in clay and figurative sculpture with the Italian sculptor Onorio Ruotolo (1888–1966), a successful academic portraitist who saw great potential in the young sculptor. It was at the Leonardo da Vinci Art School that Noguchi had his first one-person show of sculpted portraits, in 1924, after which he set up a studio in Greenwich Village. In 1926, he visited an exhibition of Constantin Brancusi's work organized by Marcel Duchamp at the Brummer Gallery. The experience was catalytic for Noguchi. He noted that it "completely crystallized my uncertainties"[1] and propelled him away from clay and figuration, toward stone and abstraction.

The same year, Noguchi applied for a Guggenheim Fellowship to spend a year at Brancusi's studio in Paris, followed by another in India, and a third in China and Japan. His plan of study reads:

> It has long been my conviction that sculpture has been too consistently employed as a medium for the idealization and glorification of man, and while it may be granted that the interpretation of the human figure will always remain its chief objective, I am nevertheless of the opinion that nature offers many another subject which would lend itself to some strange and exquisite sculptural treatment. . . . It is difficult to visualize sculpture in words, especially that kind for which there are but few similes. Some sculptors today appreciate the importance of matter, but are too much engrossed with symbolism. Others[,] who are undoubtedly artists, are interested only in the interpretation of strictly human forms. May I, therefore, beg to recognize no antecedents with this declaration of intentions? As yet, I have never executed any of those ideas, I have rather been saving them as sacred until such time as I should have attained technical confidence and skill. In

> the handling of clay, I believe that I now have the necessary ability. In the technique of stone and wood cutting, however, I feel that I am still deficient. My proposition, therefore, should I be so honored as to receive your fellowship, would include a travel study and production period of three years—the first year to be spent in Paris, where I should endeavor to acquire proficiency in stone and wood cutting, as well as in a better understanding of the human figure. . . . The two following years I propose to spend in Asia, going first to India, then through China into Japan, where I should hold an initial exhibition prior to one to be given in New York.[2]

Noguchi believed that sculpture, which had long exalted the human figure, must include investigations of nature. This exercise would require the sculptor to engage with "the matter of sculpture" in a manner difficult to describe in words; instead, it had to be made. He lamented that sculptors who understood the importance of materiality were primarily interested in creating symbolic works. He knew that while his reflections were theoretically inventive, he lacked the skills and confidence required to execute the work to which he aspired. And so, he embarked on a period of training and travel to acquire them.

In 1927–28, he learned the fundamentals of stone carving in Brancusi's studio, a space he described as "a laboratory for distilling basic shapes."[3] There he trained in using tools to cut stone and make simple bases for sculptures.[4] He recalls helping Brancusi carve one of his sculptural birds using chisels and a *chemin de fer*, a stonemason's plane, to file down the surface in long and confident strokes. Noguchi found that working in stone and with abstraction required him to unlearn the methods of clay and figuration he had studied at the Leonardo da Vinci Art School. He observed that at the heart of Brancusi's distinctive style was "the creativity of the hand, how you hold a saw, what kind of saw you hold . . . not a question merely of the result but of the process."[5]

Although Noguchi admired Brancusi until the end of his life, they had different views about sculptural form and style. Brancusi's work stood at the crossroads of Rodinesque figuration and pure abstraction, and leaned toward the latter. For Noguchi, the notion of style itself was becoming an imposition. He noted, "A purely cold abstraction doesn't interest me too much. . . . It has to recall something which moves a person."[6] He had already begun to depart from portraiture in Paris and was increasingly skeptical of the purely abstract forms he saw around him. While he subtly resisted Brancusi's aesthetic, Noguchi had acquired the crucial technical mastery that he had sought. For instance, referring to sculptural bases, an element he perfected at Brancusi's studio, Noguchi said: "It supplies a fictional horizon. This is the chief reason why I have attempted an integration of sculpture and base; bases that bite into the sculpture, sculpture that rises from the earth."[7] By the time he left Paris in 1928, Noguchi was beginning to think about an abstraction that would push the existing boundaries of stone sculpture and engage more directly with its material qualities. Summarizing this approach, he declared:

> When Brancusi took a bronze casting and started filling it, he eventually got to the inside. I go about it in a different way: I actually split it. I break it. I cut. I go to the jugular. Then I come out again, and it all becomes one. . . . I am constantly on a search to find from stone new possibilities. It is this discovery that stirs my imagination and is most exciting to me.[8]

Furthermore, Brancusi saw little value in travel. He had visited India at the invitation of Maharaja Yeshwantrao Holkar of Indore but found the trip largely unappealing.[9] Noguchi, on

the other hand, was a peripatetic sculptor and possibly one of the most well-traveled artists of his time. He wrote:

> For Brancusi, who I called upon on my arrival in Paris, my proposed trip was utter nonsense. . . . Travel was a waste of time. . . . The past had nothing to teach the present. My trip would be among backward looking peoples. India, which he had visited, was for him a hopeless mess of misery enslaved by the past. There nothing could be accomplished. He had found his own project for the Maharaja of Indore ruined by ineptness and lack of taste.[10]

Although Noguchi received the Guggenheim Fellowship, he did not visit India at this time, as he had proposed. By his own admission, he "got caught in Paris in 1927 and 1928."[11] Consumed by guilt for not having traveled to India, Noguchi dedicated one month to studying Indian art at the British Museum Library in London. At the time, there were vigorous scholarly debates on the history of premodern South Asian art. Alfred Foucher and Ananda Coomaraswamy were engaged in a dialogue on the origins of the figural Buddha image in the first centuries BCE/CE, suggesting Greek and Indian roots, respectively, in the transition from aniconic to anthropomorphic representations.[12] Arriving in London in December 1927, Noguchi swiftly embarked on a study of Indian art, reading texts not only by Coomaraswamy but also by Stella Kramrisch and Max Müller, among others. He likely saw the permanent collection of Indian art at the British Museum, including the Amaravati "Marbles," a corpus of carved limestone railings, pillar fragments, and drum slabs from the ancient Buddhist stupa at Amaravati (ca. third century BCE–third century CE). These pieces are among the earliest stone carvings from the Indian subcontinent and present a combination of aniconic and iconic representations of the Buddha that would have been valuable to Noguchi's evolving thoughts on symbolism and sculptural form.

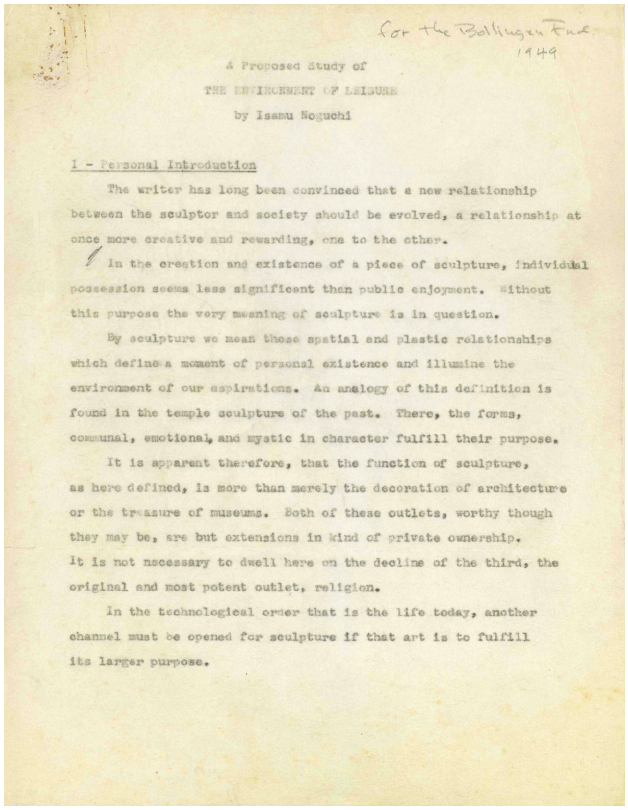
This exposure to the arts of early India did not shape Noguchi's career in the 1920s, but it remained with him until, and throughout, his first trip to India over twenty years later.

Stone, Sculptor, and Society: 1949

Noguchi first visited India in 1949, during the middle of his long career, at a time of success yet unfulfillment. His works had been displayed at numerous exhibitions in North America, most notably in the Museum of Modern Art's *Fourteen Americans* show in 1946.[13] His distinctive sculptural forms delighted most critics except Clement Greenberg, who described the smooth surfaces as having "excessive polish."[14] Although Noguchi was professionally recognized, this period was filled with personal frustration. Mixed reviews, the capitalistic demands of the New York art scene, the economic challenges of the Great Depression, and the ravages of the Second World War led to a growing impatience. He had also lost his cherished studio at 33 MacDougal Alley to property developers (fig. 1). The space had served as a necessary retreat following his voluntary incarceration at an Arizona internment camp in 1942.[15]

This period of creative impasse prompted Noguchi to reevaluate the function of art and the role of the artist.[16] He reflected, poignantly, that "in the world of the airplane and the atom, there must be a role for sculpture beyond the conventional one of individual works of art."[17] He emphasized the urgent need to "enlarge the present outlet permitted by our limited categories of architects, painters, sculptors, and landscapists."[18] To begin this investigation in practice, Noguchi submitted to the Bollingen Foundation a proposal for a book on sculpture that extended beyond pure aesthetics and engaged more directly with lived experience (fig. 2). A passage from his successful application reads:

FIGURE 1. Eliot Elisofon. Isamu Noguchi at his McDougal Alley Studio, New York, 1946. The Noguchi Museum and Archives, 03182 (© Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum/LIFE Picture Collection/Shutterstock)



for the Bollingen Fund
1949

A Proposed Study of
THE ENVIRONMENT OF LEISURE
by Isamu Noguchi

I - Personal Introduction

The writer has long been convinced that a new relationship between the sculptor and society should be evolved, a relationship at once more creative and rewarding, one to the other.

In the creation and existence of a piece of sculpture, individual possession seems less significant than public enjoyment. Without this purpose the very meaning of sculpture is in question.

By sculpture we mean those spatial and plastic relationships which define a moment of personal existence and illumine the environment of our aspirations. An analogy of this definition is found in the temple sculpture of the past. There, the forms, communal, emotional, and mystic in character fulfill their purpose.

It is apparent therefore, that the function of sculpture, as here defined, is more than merely the decoration of architecture or the treasure of museums. Both of these outlets, worthy though they may be, are but extensions in kind of private ownership. It is not necessary to dwell here on the decline of the third, the original and most potent outlet, religion.

In the technological order that is the life today, another channel must be opened for sculpture if that art is to fulfill its larger purpose.

FIGURE 2. Isamu Noguchi. "A Proposed Study of the Environment of Leisure," proposal to the Bollingen Foundation by Isamu Noguchi, 1949. Typescript. The Noguchi Museum Archives, MS_WRI_010_019. (© Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum Archives)

> The writer has long been convinced that a new relationship between the sculptor and society should be evolved, a relationship at once more creative and rewarding, one to the other. In the creation and existence of a piece of sculpture, individual possession seems less significant than public enjoyment. Without this purpose the very meaning of sculpture is in question. By sculpture we mean those spatial and plastic relationships which define a moment of personal existence and illumine the environment of our aspirations. An analogy of this definition is found in the temple sculpture of the past. There, the forms, communal, emotional, and mystic in character[,] fulfill their purpose. It is apparent[,] therefore, that the function of sculpture, as here defined, is more than merely the decoration of architecture or the treasure of museums. . . . In the technological order that is the life today, another channel must be opened for sculpture if that art is to fulfill its larger purpose.[19]

Noguchi believed that a new and meaningful relationship between the sculptor and society was needed: one in which the intention behind creating a piece of sculpture was determined by public obligation rather than private ownership. Without this ultimate purpose, the meaning of sculpture, and concurrently the sculptor's work, were insignificant. What, then, was sculpture? He understood the form as a set of material relationships that reflect both individual life and the larger collective—that is, society. The purpose of sculpture is personal but not private, and its real function extends beyond its use as architectural ornamentation or museum object. Noguchi believed that this characterization applied to the ancient past, where sculpture was both emotional and communal. A new approach was required for sculpture to fulfill—in and of itself—this true civic purpose.

Noguchi received the Bollingen Fellowship and traveled to India in September 1949 via Europe and Egypt. Upon arriving in India, he stayed for a time with the Sarabhai family in Ahmedabad. Ambalal and Saraladevi Sarabhai along with their eight children were a wealthy family in the textile-milling industry and leading art patrons. Noguchi had befriended Gautam Sarabhai at the India League for America in New York, whose meetings on anti-colonial struggle they routinely attended. In a letter to Noguchi, Sarabhai expressed that international artists could play a useful role in promoting India's heritage while simultaneously curbing revivalist currents at the moment of the nation's freedom. Although Noguchi's trip was motivated by a different purpose, his plans were reinforced by the letter:

> The weight of an alien exploitation—political, economic and cultural domination—has at last been overthrown. . . . We are at a crossroads. There are many who would wish us to take the road of Revivalism. There are a few who acknowledge the greatness of an ancient and powerful tradition but still would rather seek a new that imitates. You have at once the understanding and detachment to be able to help us at this moment. Do come to India.[20]

Noguchi's trip came at a critical time in India's history, just two years after Independence and Partition. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of independent India, had set in motion a plan to develop the art and architecture of modern India, part of a constitutional agenda to build a sovereign, socialist, secular, and democratic republic. Noguchi's relationship with Nayantara Pandit (later Sahgal), a niece of Nehru, had ended in 1948.[21] They first met in 1943 at the home of the chairman of the India League of America, whose meetings Noguchi frequented. Pandit was a student at Wellesley College at that time. Their relationship did not last, as Pandit returned to fulfill political commitments in free India, but they remained in

touch until the end of Noguchi's life. In a letter to Noguchi written just three days after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, in January 1948, by Nathuram Godse, a Hindu nationalist and member of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, Pandit wrote: "My uncle [Nehru] is completely broken. For thirty years, he has followed Bapu [Gandhi]."[22] Noguchi would later reflect on the bittersweet timing of his first trip in 1949: "To be in India would have been destiny twenty years before. Now, this was tinged with a sadness."[23]

Noguchi did not ultimately produce any art in India, but prior to his visit in 1948, he conceived a piece entitled *Memorial to Gandhi*. It was a sculpture of a disembodied and emaciated hand, with open palm and bony fingers, outstretched in propulsive hope toward the sky.[24] He had sent a bronze model to Nehru, which resulted in an invitation to design Rajghat, Gandhi's burial place. His plan, however, was rejected on the grounds that it was too reminiscent of Stonehenge.[25] Additionally, one of his last sculpted portraits, made in 1949, was of Nehru, but Noguchi believed it "did not correspond to the image of human viability, or to the public image."[26] Later, in 1957, he collaborated with Japanese architects in a competition to design a park to commemorate the 2,500th anniversary of the Buddha's birth, but their plan won second place.[27]

Despite these unsuccessful projects in India, Noguchi was the first of several international modernists, including Le Corbusier (1951), Alexander Calder (1955), Charles and Ray Eames (1958), Buckminster Fuller (1958), Louis Kahn (1962), and Clement Greenberg (1967), to visit the country following Independence and Partition. Only in 1956–57 did *The Family of Man* exhibition travel to India, and it was as late as 1967 that the *Two Decades of American Painting* exhibition brought works by Jackson Pollock, Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, and others to Delhi; both exhibitions were organized by the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Subsequently, the Triennale India crystallized deliberations on art internationalism only through the 1970s.

Noguchi's trip may be understood as early in the expression of "modernism as a practice of affiliation"[28] and dialogue, rather than influence or inspiration. This period of Nehruvian idealism involved experiments in modern art that were fundamentally transcultural and reflected what Noguchi described as "a new and emerging India."[29] Given his interest in the relationship between the built environment and lived experience, this internationalist approach to the architecture of modern life was for him an exciting prospect.

At the time, several Indian artists and intellectuals were interested in the long history of stone carving, and Noguchi found a kinship with them. He visited Kala Bhavan, the arts faculty at Visva Bharati University in Shantiniketan, established by poet laureate Rabindranath Tagore, who for years had invited visits by thinkers such as Stella Kramrisch in 1922 and the poet Yonejiro Noguchi, Noguchi's father, in 1935–36.[30] Noguchi traveled to Shantiniketan by train from Calcutta (Kolkata). There he met Ramkinkar Baij and Nandalal Bose, who, along with Benode Behari Mukherjee, formed a pioneering group of artists active after the Bengal famine of 1942–43. Noguchi made several portraits of Baij, sketched the artist, described him at length in a note entitled "The Sculptor of Santiniketan,"[31] and reflected, "It is to Ramkinkar that I was drawn, as a person and for my interest in sculpture."[32] He photographed Baij standing next to his *Santhal Family* (1938), one of India's first modernist public sculptures exploring the theme of human dignity in labor and suffering (fig. 3).

Further, the modernist painter M. F. Husain would include in his triptych *Language of Stone* (2008–11)[33] Tagore's appreciation of the long arc of India's stonework, "how the language of stone surpasses the languages of man." This line describes the historical value of stone carving

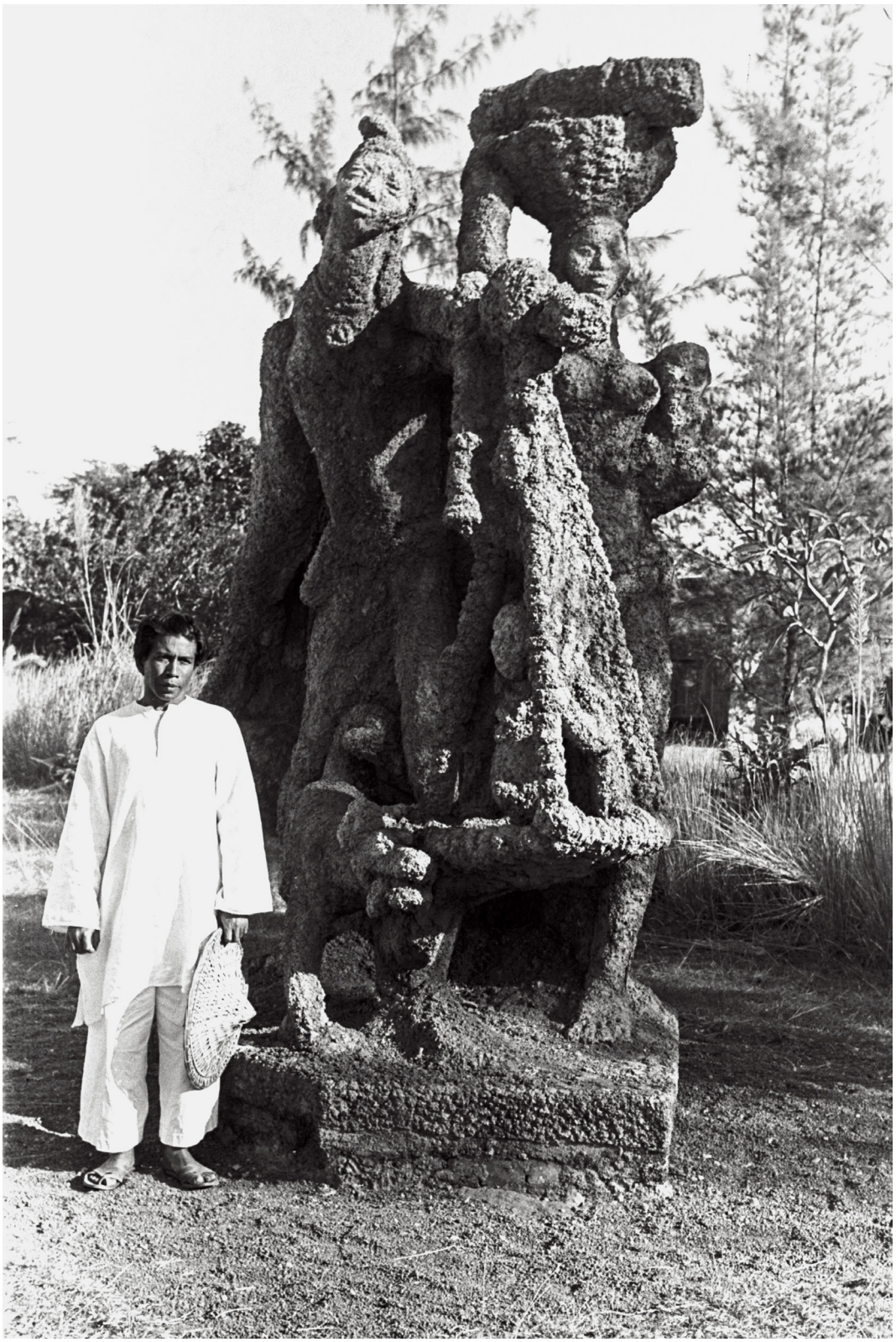


FIGURE 3. Isamu Noguchi. Ramkinkar Baij with his sculpture *Santhal Family* (1938), Shantiniketan, India, 1949. Bollingen travel photograph. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 08437.1 (© Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York/ARS)

in extending across—and bridging—India's linguistic, religious, and cultural divides. Beneath this quotation, Husain added his own interpretation: "Our great master stone carvers, turned the Indian bedrocks from Ajanta-Ellora to Konarack to Khajuraho to Mahabalipuram and in between a column of Qutub Minar, all into a song of Geetanjali." Here, Husain equates Tagore's collection of poems *Gītāñjali* (1910), which explores the conflict between spiritual pursuit and earthly desire, with the stone works of master carvers in different eras and religious contexts. Husain, a member of the Bombay Progressives Group, left India owing to the pressures of Hindu fundamentalism on his creative freedom; it is likely that he found respite in the idea of sculpture as secularism. Noguchi himself reflected on a "secular and contemporary India" as he photographed the early medieval Qutb complex, the late medieval "Mughal structures and gardens,"[34] including the Taj Mahal and at Fatehpur Sikri, and the early modern Jantar Mantars (astrological observatories) of Delhi and Jaipur. His pictures from these places were published in *Portfolio: Annual of the Graphic Arts* (1951) and *Perspecta* (1960), thereby introducing the sculptural complexity of these structures to international artists including Alexander Calder.[35]

Although Noguchi did not complete the book he had proposed to the Bollingen Foundation, his first trip to India was transformative; it proved pivotal to his investigation of the role and function of sculpture in society. He photographed, sketched, and made notes on fifty places of artistic significance. This enriched his experience of viewing sculpture, but more importantly, it clarified his understanding of the materials and methods of their making. Devika Singh has noted that in India, Noguchi "was without a studio" and that his photographs and sketchbooks allowed him to reflect on what he saw there, which served as the basis for his "new sculptural vocabulary."[36] This essay illustrates precisely how Noguchi's archive of India—particularly of early India—made tangible and portable the otherwise immovable sculptural forms, material qualities, and methods of making at ancient sites.[37] These records provide critical new insight into Noguchi's evolving ideas about sculpture, which were ultimately concerned with the "importance of matter."

Sculpture in Situ and the Skill of Hands: Early India and Living Traditions

Noguchi traveled from Delhi to Madras and then to several ancient sites. One of his first visits waws to the Hindu temples of Madurai and Chidambaram, built between the tenth and twelfth centuries CE. He traveled by train from Madras, where he stayed with his friend Uday Shankar, a pioneer of modern Indian dance, who arranged the trip. His journey was informed by a familiarity with the pillared temple hall from Madurai in the permanent collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art and Coomaraswamy's book *The Dance of Siva* (1918), which references the temple at Chidambaram.[38] At Madurai, Noguchi photographed the temple *gopurams*, or pyramidal ceremonial towers, specifically capturing their dramatic height. In one of his photographs, a *gopuram* skews gently into a curve against a cloudless sky (fig. 4). This exaggerated scale was essential to communicate the structure's monumentality. In his notes on Madurai, Noguchi also describes observing a monolithic Shiva lingam, an aniconic representation of Shiva, a form he would photograph on a later visit to Hampi (fig. 5), the capital of the Vijayanagara Empire, where temple ornamentation achieved a heavily elaborated style.[39] Furthermore, at Chidambaram, Noguchi took twenty photographs at the temple dedicated to Shiva Nataraja, Shiva as Lord of Dance, which he described as a "temple of dance, drenched with sun. Its huge surface is entirely populated by figures of the dance, of pale pink sandstone, round of hip and limbs, in joyful abandon."[40] Noguchi was drawn to the illusion of movement achieved in the plasticity of the stone carving, depicting numerous poses from Indian classical

FIGURE 4. Isamu Noguchi. Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India, ca. 1950s. Bollingen travel photograph. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 04431 (© Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York/ARS)

FIGURE 5. Isamu Noguchi. Shiva lingam in Hampi, Karnataka, India, ca. 1950s. Bollingen travel photograph. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 04480 (© The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York/ARS)

dance. The monumental temples of Madurai and Chidambaram offered introductory insights into the fundamental drama, density, and dynamism of early Indian stonework.

His experience studying these temples paled in comparison to the overwhelming impact that another site in southern India had on his evolving philosophy of stone. Referring to the profusion of sculpted forms he had seen at Madurai and Chidambaram, Noguchi reflected: "There is a sameness in the logic of an overextended idea. Not the extemporaneous invention and freshness as in Mahabalipuram."[41] The controlled sculptural repetition of Madurai and Chidambaram was surpassed by the spontaneity of Mahabalipuram.

Returning to Madras in October, Noguchi hired an auto-rickshaw to visit the site. The complex at Mahabalipuram dates to the Pallava period in the seventh and eighth centuries CE and consists of a cluster of carved boulders that dot the Bay of Bengal coastline. Approaching the complex, Noguchi noted the Pancha Rathas (Five Chariots), a group of five monolithic temples carved out of monumental boulders that occur naturally along the shore. These structures have no precedent in early Indian architecture and are considered prototypes for the later temples of southern India, such as those Noguchi saw at Madurai and Chidambaram. His reference to an "outcropping of rock carved in the shape of small temples"[42] shows a keen attention to the close relationship between architecture and sculpture discernible here: the boulders are directly cut, carved, and shaped into monolithic architectural edifices. His photograph of the Pancha Rathas shows a diagonal row of four temples, receding by height into the background, each architecturally distinct from the next but elevated on a shared plinth (fig. 6). A ladder in the foreground leaning against the Dharmaraja Ratha, the tallest of the temples, indicates

FIGURE 6. Isamu Noguchi. Pancha Rathas, Mahabalipuram, Tamil Nadu, India, n.d. Photographic print. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 04406 (© The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York/ARS)

that Noguchi must have examined the distinctive architectural *kudus*, or small ornamental "shrines," sculpted along the tiers of the temple tower. The photograph was taken from the southeastern corner of the plinth, which reveals the unfinished quality of the lower facade, including a boulder rudimentarily cut to be carved, suggesting that the temples were made from the top down. This unfinished quality would be of interest to any sculptor, as incomplete works reveal the processes of stone carving more intimately than finished work.[43]

It is unlikely that Noguchi would have overlooked the many unfinished sculptural elements at Mahabalipuram, particularly in the *Great Penance* relief, about which he wrote, "Truly there can be no direct comparisons."[44] The *Great Penance*, also called *The Descent of the Ganges* or *Arjuna's Penance*, is a bas-relief carved across the surface of two monolithic boulders of pink granite, separated by a natural cleft in the middle. His photograph indicates a keen eye for the varying depths of carving, a cornerstone of the three-dimensionality of sculpture, amplified here by the natural modulations of the rock's surface (fig. 7). The photograph focuses on the relief carved on the right boulder, centering it between two washed-out bands of sky and sand. Noguchi positioned the camera at a slight angle, as though he were encountering a patterned surface, such as lattice or speckled rock. Direct sunlight dapples across the carved surface, creating shadows that further animate the unidirectional movement of the figures as they gravitate toward the central cleft of the stone. Noguchi recognized an unexpected sculptural freedom in the carving, noting, "There is a playfulness about it one does not expect in so vast a composition as it seems almost unplanned and accidental, a trial spot for sculptors."[45] His reflection aligns with scholarship on the unconventional sculptural program of the relief; as Padma Kaimal has noted, "each narrative in this work demands to be traced by a gaze that hops about."[46] Since the *Great Penance* did not serve an architectural or structural function, Noguchi regarded it as an experiment in the distillation of sculpture to its essential qualities:

FIGURE 7. Isamu Noguchi. *Descent of the Ganges/Great Penance* frieze, Mahabalipuram, Tamil Nadu, India, n.d. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 148592 (© The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York/ARS)

> The great sculpture temple of Mahabalipuram is carved directly into the granite boulders that abound around the sandy seashore of this most lovely of spots made timelessly holy. Here was my first and most authentic lesson, or confirmation of what I had suspected: That sculpture is the one art, the one communication which cannot be conveyed as two-dimensional information as with a photograph. There is a residual experience that cannot be gotten in any other way than through physical experience, whether by sight, touch, contact, distance and the ever-changing relationship of volume and space which comes from the continuous changes that time gives, the time of day; that movement gives, or that thought begets. How extraordinary to be so immediately confronted in so pure a form [by] all these facets without distractions. Here was sculpture emergent from the earth, declaring its essence: to live in earth, sea and sky.[47]

He describes the *Great Penance* as a convergence of sculpture and architecture carved directly from monumental granite rock. It was, for him, the first real example of an idea that he had long held but never confirmed: sculpture was a form whose communication required physical experience, especially the senses of sight and touch, which were determined by variations in distance, volume, and space at different times of the day, over time, through movements, and in our thoughts. Noguchi probed the idea that at the heart of the experience of sculpture was its materiality. He was stunned to observe this element in an unmediated way, emerging boldly in its most essential form—that of the earth.

The *Great Penance* faces the sea to the east, where the five-storied structural Shore Temple is located. This temple is not carved from a natural boulder, as in the case of the Dharmaraja Ratha, which it seems to emulate and is one of the earliest structural temples in southern India. It does not exemplify the convergence of sculpture and architecture, particularly one that seems to emerge from the earth itself, and where ancient sculptors would have

FIGURE 8. Isamu Noguchi. Shore Temple, Mahabalipuram, Tamil Nadu, India, n.d. Travel photograph. Isamu Noguchi Archive, 148576 (© Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York/ARS)

FIGURE 9. Isamu Noguchi. Shiva Trimurti, Elephanta Caves, Maharashtra, India, n.d. Bollingen travel photographs. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 04986, 04987 (© The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York/ARS)

gone to the stone rather than bringing the stone to them. However, the temple's distinctive location presented Noguchi with an opportunity to reflect on the relationship of stone, time, and nature. In a photograph, he positioned the temple in the right middle ground, while his primary focus was on the adjoining compound, bordered by a row of sculpted figures of Nandi, Shiva's bull mount, that delineate the space from the sea in the background (fig. 8). The silhouettes of these figures, naturally softened by the rhythmic crashing of waves against the monument, are striking. Noguchi contemplated, "Time and the tides have left this spot guarded only by the seated rows of cows, as irresistibly beautiful as it could have ever been."[48] This evokes his earlier reflection on the sculpture of Mahabalipuram, which he viewed as presenting the "continuous changes that time gives." Here, the stone was not unfinished, revealing its modulation by human hands; instead, it was sculpted down to an incomplete state by the forces of nature. As such, Mahabalipuram offered Noguchi the whole spectrum of the life of stone.[49]

Noguchi continued his study of sculpture in situ at the Elephanta Caves, dated to the fifth–sixth centuries CE, located off the coast of Bombay (Mumbai). The site was constructed through the laborious process of cutting caves into mountain faces, or "living rock," and becoming part of the geological structure. The main cave has a triple-bayed entrance, which gives little sense of the astonishing depth of its interior, excavated more than forty meters into the mountainside. The cave features stone columns, brackets, and beams, which emulate structural elements but are, in reality, monolithic and cut directly out of the rock.[50] Carved on the inner walls of the cave are nine monumental relief panels that depict aspects of Shiva. This includes the three forms of Shiva or Shiva Trimurti: a central, contemplative aspect flanked by a fierce profile on the left, representing Bhairava; and a peaceful portrayal, of Uma, on the right. Carved in full relief, and directly into the basalt rock face, the imposing composition is set deep within a central recess of the cave's southern wall. Noguchi's photographs of Shiva Trimurti show an interest in the "ever-changing relationship of volume and space" and the enlivening of stone surfaces. His photograph captures the three visages at eye level (fig. 9, left). Given that the sculpture is more than twenty feet high, Noguchi must have erected a

FIGURE 10. Isamu Noguchi. Sculptural ensemble depicting Ravana Lifting Mount Kailasha, Ellora Temples, Maharashtra, India, ca. 1949. Bollingen travel drawing. Pencil on paper. Isamu Noguchi Archive, 11030 (Photo: Kevin Noble © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York/ARS)

ladder to photograph it. His picture is bold and tightly composed, barely containing within itself the sheer mass of the sculpted form. Another photograph is more closely focused on the profile of the central aspect (fig. 9 right). Here, Noguchi was less interested in the elaboration of sculpted adornments, which he entirely cropped out, than in the illusion of flesh achieved by ancient sculptors, particularly in the weightiness under the chin and lower lip, and in the texture of skin, communicated through the naturally mottled surface of the stone.

One of the nine panels at Elephanta depicts Ravana shaking Mount Kailasha, where Shiva and Parvati are seated. The panel is severely damaged, but Noguchi sketched the same scene at the rock-cut complex at Ellora, from the sixth–tenth centuries CE (fig. 10). Ellora consists of thirty-four accessible Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain caves excavated from the basalt cliffs of the Chandragiri Hills. All are exquisitely carved. Noguchi's sketch is tightly packed, with no evocation of the cave in which the sculpture is set. It has been accurately argued that "to be able to make sculptures, it is important to know how things work, and in this sense, drawing is a way of looking or seeing . . . it is much easier to draw than manipulate weighty materials."[51] Drawing is an integral part of any sculptor's practice, and Noguchi's sketch is doubly pertinent: he was, after all, a sculptor without a studio. Rather than focusing on iconographic details, he studied the volume and arrangement of sculpted forms, their relationship to each other in terms of scale, and the overall "perception of space," all of which only a sketch allowed him to fully comprehend in an embodied sense, relative to the instantaneous snapshot of the camera.

His attentiveness to sculptural volume and space inspired a related investigation of light in the carving of "living rock." A sculptor must manipulate light against a surface, just as a

FIGURE 11. Isamu Noguchi. Ajanta, Cave 19, Maharashtra, India, undated. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 148538 (© The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York/ARS)

painter creates light-effects within a work, but this is complicated in dark caves. At the fifth-century-CE complex in Ajanta, Noguchi photographed the rock-cut facade of cave 19, which consists of a giant stone window that provides the cave's only source of light (fig. 11). This was an innovative formula devised in early Buddhist architecture for the organization of space through the modulation of light. Depending on the time of day and the season, an appearance of architectural weightlessness was achieved through variations in the light cast into the interior. The earliest caves included timber screens that, during subsequent periods, sculptors replicated in stone. While these original screens have not survived, curved teak ribs are present in the barrel-vaulted rock-cut Buddhist *chaityas*, or prayer halls, of Kondane and Karla from the second and first centuries BCE. These ribs supported the timber screens that diffused light through monumental stone gateways.

Noguchi was gripped by this shift from wood to stone in early India, which was evident from his visit to the ancient Buddhist stupa complex at Sanchi in central India, dated to the third–first century BCE. The development of stone carving and the history of Buddhism are deeply intertwined in the Indian subcontinent, and the main stupa at Sanchi is one of the region's earliest surviving stone monuments. The site provides a unique window into the transition from wood to stone in ancient sculptural practice. The stupa was originally conceived as a simple brick mound, in the first century BCE, but it was subsequently enlarged to include four *toraṇa*s, ornamental gateways; a *vedika*, railing; and other architectural features in stone. The *toraṇa*s at Sanchi display some of the finest narrative carvings anywhere in the world. Yet, Noguchi's photographs reveal a sustained interest in the stone railing. The structure consists of uprights, crossbars, coping stones, and mortise holes carved in the shape of pointed ellipses, all of which are based on wood prototypes. In one of Noguchi's photographs, the railing occupies most of the frame, emerging from the right foreground and curving into the middle ground to create

FIGURE 12. (left) Isamu Noguchi. Stone railing at Sanchi stupa 1, Madhya Pradesh, India, ca. 1950s. Bollingen travel photograph. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 04509 (© The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York/ARS). (right) Isamu Noguchi. Bollingen travel photograph of *torana* and railing, Sanchi stupa 1, Madhya Pradesh, India, ca. 1950s. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 08322.2 (© The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York/ARS)

a circumambulatory path, at the end of which three carved architraves of a *toraṇa* appear in the distance (fig. 12, left). In another photograph, Noguchi captured the railing from a bird's-eye view; here, it zigzags to create an entrance for the circumambulatory path, abutting the *toraṇa* in front (fig. 12, right). This photograph includes Noguchi's shadow in the foreground, pointing to the sculptor's strategic position on the stupa's stone staircase. Noguchi's sketch of the railing further corroborates, with compelling immediacy, his focus on its arrangement (fig. 13). His drawing shows how the crossbars, vertical pillars, and coping stones converge in a corner. On the right side of the sketch, he carefully outlined a cross-section of a vertical pillar that encompasses elliptical mortise holes, an inheritance of earlier woodwork.

Judging from the numerous photographs Noguchi took of the Sanchi railing alone, as well as his detailed sketches of its structure, he seemed to recognize that ancient sculptors were emulating in stone earlier traditions of clay carving and wood joinery. Informally trained in woodworking as a child, he had been sensitized from a young age to the close relationship between materials and structure. He recalled how his mother, Leonie Gilmour, encouraged him to observe Japanese carpenters at work:

> [She] semi-apprenticed me to a local cabinet-maker in Chigasaki. There I learned basic uses of wood tools; to sharpen them, to plane, to saw, pulling in the Japanese way. Of joining and interlocking of beams . . . for me it comes through a childhood experience of knowing that things aren't just painted over, that the structure is part of the design.[52]

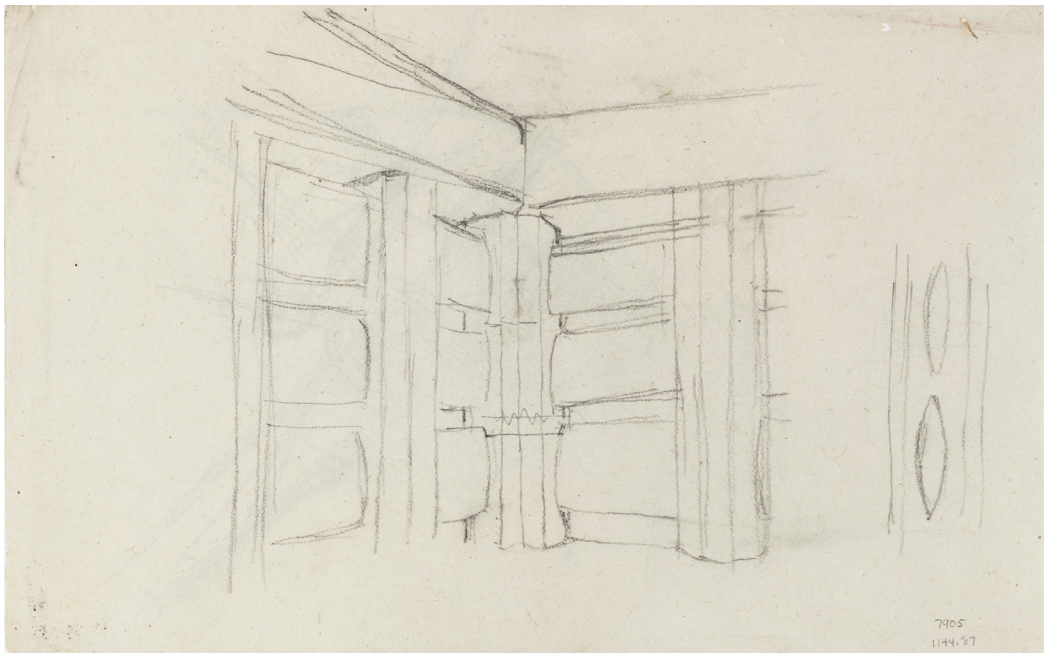


FIGURE 13. Isamu Noguchi. Drawing of a stone railing, Sanchi, India, ca. 1949–50. Bollingen Fellowship. Pencil on paper, 34.6 x 21.9 cm. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 11008 (Photo: Kevin Noble © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York/ARS)

His early experience in Japanese woodwork allowed him to appreciate the skills required to sculpt in different mediums—a technical prowess that distinguished him as one of the most influential sculptors of our time.

In addition to visiting ancient sites, Noguchi was also interested in the long and continuing tradition of stone carving in India. His engagement with Elephanta, for example, extended beyond his first trip. A letter from Malati Tambay-Vaidya, commissioner of tourism, written on June 24, 1975, shows that Noguchi was invited to landscape Elephanta Island under the auspices of a UNESCO project, for which he was recommended by the architect and urban planner Charles Correa.[53] After expressing initial excitement, Noguchi reiterated a few conditions for his acceptance:

> I wonder whether you remember that I mentioned to you some of my thoughts when I last saw you. I said I thought that the approach to the caves should be from the south side of the island, eliminating the use of the present unattractive jetty. I noticed that a road was being built, and I urged that this be not used by automobiles, and of course it must not be paved by asphalt but made as a good well-drained country road is made. I further suggested that the use of cement be avoided entirely and that there should be established instead a stone masons' village. The quarry on the island would be activated and the use of natural materials and the skill of hands promoted. The initial influx of qualified skill could be developed in or imported from the stone worker's school at Mahabalipuram.[54]

The Directorate of Tourism did not approve Noguchi's conditions for redesigning Elephanta Island, and this became one of his many unrealized projects in India. Still, his letter reflects a keen interest in materials and a strong belief in preserving the living tradition of stone

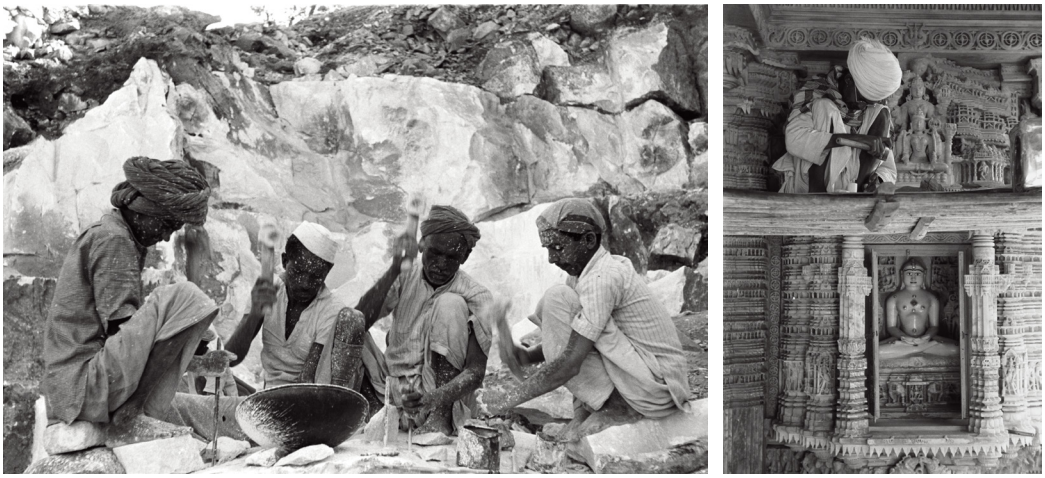


FIGURE 14. (left) Isamu Noguchi. Stonecutters at a quarry in Ranakpur, Rajasthan, India. Bollingen travel photograph. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 08532.4 (© The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York/ARS). (right) Isamu Noguchi. Restoration works in Mount Abu, Rajasthan, India. Bollingen travel photograph. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 08526.2 (© The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York/ARS)

carving—as in the sculptors' workshops at Mahabalipuram—which depended on robust resources to support the technical skill and physical labor required for stonework.

His study of the living tradition of stonework continued on a subsequent trip, where he joined Kasturbhai Lalbhai, a prominent figure in the textile industry and an art patron, on a visit to a stone quarry and to observe stone repairs at the Jain temples of Mount Abu and Ranakpur (fig. 14, left and right).[55] His photographs from these visits emphasize the labor that is involved in the production of stonework. Noguchi seldom included people in his photographs of ancient sites in India, unlike eighteenth- and nineteenth-century colonial views of these places; when he did, they were often of stoneworkers. This is noteworthy since ancient sculptors remain largely unknown today, and his sensibility acknowledges the often-overlooked labor behind these monumental creations.

Noguchi reflected upon the long relationship between people and stone in India:

> India is the best place to learn something about the whys and wherefores of sculpture. . . . What is of interest is the continued use of sculpture, the purpose is still in evidence. . . . I believe that in any reappraisal of the general uses of sculpture, much may be learned from India. Of chief interest is the existence still of this living tradition, there is this intimate participation between people and stone.[56]

He believed that the underlying purpose of sculpture was apparent in India's long and continuing tradition. A reassessment of the function of sculpture, such as the one he had embarked upon, could benefit from a study of sculpture in India. Several years later, Clement Greenberg echoed Noguchi's sentiment about ancient stonework: "Indians were particularly *especially* sculptors. . . . No other tradition of sculpture shows its like. No other tradition shows an equal longevity, not even ancient Egyptian or the Chinese."[57]

The range of places Noguchi visited in India offered the sculptor a rich diversity of theoretical and practical approaches to stonework. While he honed his skills in studios in New York and Paris, it was at early Indian sites that he observed firsthand the dramatic dynamism of sculpture

at Madurai and Chidambaram, the masterful juxtaposition of sculpture and architecture in the "living rock" of Mahabalipuram, Elephanta, Ajanta, and Ellora, and the transference of technique across mediums at Sanchi. In addition, he also visited Bodhgaya, Belur, Khajuraho, Konark, and Shravanabelagola, where sculpture similarly could not be posed within the controlled environment of the studio, gallery, or museum, as modernist sculptors of the time were keen to do.[58] For Noguchi, this was a productive challenge. Reflecting on his experiences, he concluded:

> India is a place that taught me something about various fundamental problems of sculpture. . . . You can still see the raison d'etre of sculpture there. . . . [Indian sculpture] bring[s] the materials at hand to life more effectively. . . . When we rethink the future of sculpture I think that we can learn a great deal from India.[59]

His visits to ancient sites in India were study trips, similar to that of acquiring a technical skill. This fieldwork assisted him in an exploration of the essential characteristics of sculpture, which he observed were primarily mediated by its materiality, and most effectively expressed in early Indian sculpture. As a sculptor without a studio, Noguchi's travel archive captured these developing ideas, upon which he based his later experimentations.

Selecting, Shattering, and Subduing Stone, 1950s–80s

Noguchi's formal experimentations and philosophical approach to materials flourished in his late practice. His early training in clay and marble, in New York and Paris, primed him for later reflections on the sculptural possibilities of the hard stone, such granite and basalt, that he observed at ancient sites in India. In the last decades of his life, the challenge of carving these formidable materials became a central focus of Noguchi's practice. Critic Dore Ashton argued that "his attitude toward granite and basalt, the substances he would increasingly favor toward the end of his life, [were] shaped in the course of his wanderings."[60] Noguchi's trip to India affirmed the fundamental importance of matter, as captured and communicated in his traveling archive, and he subsequently began to put this into practice; after all, he believed that there was in sculpture a residual experience that could not be conveyed other than through its physicality. In his exploration of the fundamental matter of sculpture, he moved beyond looking, thinking, reading, and writing, toward making. To this end, Noguchi drew upon several other experiences, including a UNESCO garden commission, collaborations with Martha Graham, and a complete mastery of tools.

His base for these experimentations was Mure, located on the island of Shikoku in Japan, a stone-producing region rich in raw materials. In 1969, Noguchi established a studio there (fig. 15). This move to Mure would mark the first time he worked with other sculptors, including the young and brilliant Masatoshi Izumi, who belonged to a family of stonecutters and had opened a stone studio (fig. 16, left). Izumi recalled that "[Noguchi] was seeking to make heavy stones look light, hard stones look soft, [and] immobile stones like they were in motion."[61] Izumi also knew local stonecutters who could be employed in the demanding process of polishing and finishing his sculptures (fig. 16, right).

Noguchi's connection with Mure dates back to 1958, when he visited the area while "stone fishing" for a garden commission at the Paris headquarters of UNESCO. This project prompted him to contemplate the structuring of space through the medium of stone. He was particularly interested in the asymmetry of Japanese gardens, which was unlike what he had observed in Italian and French gardens. He knew that stones were considered the bones of the Japanese

FIGURE 15. Unidentified photographer. Isamu Noguchi working in Mure, Japan, ca. 1980s. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 04150 (© The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York/ARS)

FIGURE 16. (left) Unidentified photographer. Isamu Noguchi studying models with Masatoshi Izumi, Mure. Japan, ca. 1970s. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 03996 (Courtesy of Michio Noguchi © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York/ARS). (right) Isamu Noguchi. A stoneworker in Mure, Shikoku, Japan, ca. 1968–88. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 07399 (© The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York/ARS)

garden and the basic shape upon which vegetation could grow. This approach required a precisely conceived balance of stone and plant elements. Noguchi became captivated by the search for stones, and "stone fishing" quickly became a preoccupation. He observed that in the Japanese practice of placing stones, the sculptor must be perceptive to the "alive" and "dead" sides of each stone, not unlike the premise of carving "living rock" in early India.

The concept of the Japanese garden appealed to Noguchi because its fundamental form was sculptural in nature. In this case, the sculptor was both the architect and the landscaper. Noguchi worked closely with highly skilled Japanese gardeners but ultimately conceived the garden as "sculptor's work."[62] He was sometimes critical of the interference from architects in the work of sculptors but was keen to dissolve those boundaries in the manner achieved by the ancient stoneworkers of the *Great Penance* at Mahabalipuram and Shiva Trimurti at Elephanta. He noted, "At some point, architecture becomes sculpture, and sculpture becomes architecture; at some point, they meet."[63]

The UNESCO commission in Paris also marked a shift in how Noguchi sourced stone and the type of stone he sourced. Previously, he had used materials locally available where he was working. His interest in marble, with its smooth and translucent surfaces, spanned the earlier part of his career, taking him to Pietrasanta in Italy, where Michelangelo had acquired stone in the sixteenth century. The sculptor Henry Moore introduced Noguchi to Erminio Cidonio, the manager of Henraux, a company that owned several marble quarries in Querceta, near Pietrasanta. In and around the Henraux workshop, Noguchi observed the age-old practice of wire-cutting stone. Yet, by the end of the 1960s, Noguchi was eager to source and sculpt different kinds of stone. He believed his "Italian period lasted until early 1970, when Erminio Cidonio died," marking his "transition from marble to hard stone."[64]

In subsequent years, Noguchi began using basalt in his works; he also experimented with the sculptural surfaces he had observed on his trip to India. His monolithic *Shiva Pentagonal* (1981) and *Behind Inner Seeking Shiva Dancing* (1975–81) reflect these experiments (figs. 17, left and right). *Shiva Pentagonal* is a sedate silhouette of black basalt. The front-facing plane

FIGURE 17. (left) Isamu Noguchi. *Shiva Pentagonal*, 1981. Basalt, H x W x D: 196.2 x 62.9 x 58.7 cm. Collection of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 153751 (Photo: Kevin Noble © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York/ARS). (right) Isamu Noguchi. *Behind Inner Seeking Shiva Dancing*, 1975–81. Basalt, H x W x D: 255.6 x 121.6 x 68.6 cm. Collection of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 147249 (Photo: Kevin Noble © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York/ARS)

consists of a pentangular lower half, which is angular in form and smooth in finish, and has a finely pitted crown. The surface arrangement of the reverse is interlaced with vertical bands of smooth and rough textures carved along different planes. *Behind Inner Seeking Shiva Dancing*, on the other hand, has a relatively dynamic delineation with jagged lines cut horizontally along the edges of the sculpture, and interspersed with closely pocked surfaces within scooped-out recesses in the stone. In its theme, style, and intent, the piece has been called a "metaphor for his artistic journey to the sacredness of stone."[65] Noguchi recalled the demanding process of cutting the tough material as "an intense dialogue with the possibilities of stone. Rising out of destruction came the dance of Shiva."[66] For Noguchi, process and technique had long been sacred, as he noted in his Guggenheim application, rather than iconography or form. Sculpture was more than pure idealization or symbolism; its value lay in the sculptural opportunities its materiality offered. Both pieces are extraordinarily heavy, made of dark basalt, and carved with a vision to reconcile smooth and textured surfaces into a single monolithic form.

In *Indian Dancer* (1965–66), a delicately cut mannari-granite monolith (fig. 18), Noguchi experimented with sculptural dynamism. The life-size sculpture comprises six distinctly shaped, though closely connected, blocks carved in high relief on different planes of the irregular stone surface. The piece reminded him of Balasaraswati, the celebrated Bharatanatyam

FIGURE 18. Isamu Noguchi. *Indian Dancer*, 1965–66. Granite, H x W x D: 153.0 x 88.0 x 44.1 cm. Collection of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 00579 (Photo: Kevin Noble © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York/ARS)

dancer he had seen on stage in 1949.[67] He said of the performance, "I've never seen anything like it since."[68] While there may seem to be a contradiction between sculpture and movement—the words *statue* and *static* are derived from the same Latin root—fundamental to Noguchi's approach was a desire to represent the "forces that conspire to hold up the figure."[69] *Indian Dancer* creates the impression of movement not only in its formal characteristics but also in the way natural light flashes, flickers, and fades on its basalt surface, heightened by its current placement in the garden of The Noguchi Museum in New York City, where architecture, sculpture, and landscape converge and are exposed to the elements.

In an elaboration of another aspect that contributes to a sense of movement in stone, Noguchi wrote, "Sculptures move because we move."[70] Further,

> A way of seeing, with more active participation than just the eyes, the man who really sees sculpture must move physically to realize its form. The illusion of depth comes from movement, however slightly, or presupposes the possibility of movement, through which the imagination in projected memory completes the illusion within the mind's eye. . . . We may bump into it, bleed from its rough surface, or delineate its contours with our fingers. It is a Thing, tactile and measurable, completely within the dimensions of our own earthly existence. The very materiality of sculpture is perhaps its most evocative aspect—the mystery at the base of matter.[71]

Noguchi believed that the true perception of sculpture required more than just eyesight; a person had to actively move. The illusion of depth is ultimately achieved by a physically

participating viewer who engages with the sculpture's tangible, quantifiable, and earthly qualities—its most fundamental though enigmatic features.

Noguchi's insights into movement in stone were informed by a productive working partnership with the dancer Martha Graham.[72] He visited her studio between 1928 and 1929 to study her innovative approaches to movement, and he first designed a stage for her performances in 1935. This marked the beginning of more than thirty years of collaboration between the artists, spanning over twenty-one projects.[73] Notably, Noguchi's work on Graham's sets was infused with key aspects of Noh performance. He incorporated the idea that small changes in movement could indicate a significant change in time and meaning. His use of rope, string, and knots to "split the air of the stage" in a fundamentally sculptural way was revolutionary.[74] As a sculptor whose work was principally subtractive rather than additive, Noguchi was sensitive to the notion that control over the small procedural choices of stone carving was essential in determining the ultimate meaning and final character of a piece. While his set designs for Graham, George Balanchine, Ruth Page, and others are well documented, his experiments in the evocation of dance in stone, notably in *Indian Dancer*, are less well-known. In an elaboration of the relationship between movement, time, and meaning, he believed that stone became more evocative over time, as reflected in his statement, "With time, *Indian Dancer* has also gained the authority which was so characteristic of her."[75]

In creating pieces such as *Shiva Pentagonal* and *Behind Inner Seeking Shiva Dancing,* Noguchi was exacting about the relationship between sculptor and stone. He viewed stone carving as an "intimate involvement between myself, the selection of stone, the definition of what to do, and the employment of tools and willing collaborators."[76] Upon first encountering a piece of stone, Noguchi contemplated its physical qualities for several days. He wrote, "There is a lesson in humility for me as a sculptor; if rock is better before I touch it, what is there for me to do?"[77] He would then draw on the stone with chalk. After developing a sense of greater certainty, he would clarify the outline with bengara, a red earth pigment; eventually, he would cut and carve the stone. Valuing each step in the measured sequence of stonework, he drew marks where he wanted the chisel to pit. He began early in the day, often working for twelve hours, despite calloused fingers, and his face positioned so close to the stone that his assistants feared he would be injured by flying stone chips.

He was aware that the subtractive process of stone carving did not allow for errors in judgment. This was also a central constraint of rock cutting in early India. He reflected, "No erasing or reproduction is possible, at least not in the way I now work, leaving nature's mark."[78] Furthermore, although basalt was a hard material, it was also brittle. He wrote: "First, the rear half is removed with drill holes and wedges. Afterward comes the carving, splitting with 'genno,' the sledgehammer used for knocking off large hunks . . . no second thoughts are possible."[79] In his later works of hard stone, particularly in *Behind Inner Seeking Shiva Dancing*, "the drill marks, evidence of the wrestling of the stone from the mountain, are still there, and much of the sculpture's shape was given by the shattering."[80] This tension between the destruction of raw stone and its ultimate reconciliation was central to Noguchi's later experimentations and differed from the smooth and polished surfaces of his early career.[81] The curator Matthew Kirsch has noted that, "in its semi-processed state, stone inspired Noguchi as a model to imitate and as a source of contradictions to reconcile in his own sculpture."[82] Noguchi would reclaim "practice stones" in and around Mure for his studio assistants to test point chiseling. Yet the sculptor, who did not seek a sense of perfection, admired accidents of nature:

> Nature is constantly throwing off waste, but this awareness of the texture of the world is lost with the machine. There is so much today which has lost its touch to do with nature, all the quirks and accidents that are so extraordinarily beautiful and so contrary to industrial production. It is, perhaps, through man's intervention that such accidents can still be saved for art.[83]

Noguchi's sculptural inquiries were fundamentally possible because of his mastery of tools (see fig. 1). In his 1926 application for a Guggenheim fellowship, he had noted that he was still "deficient" in his mastery of tools and hoped to acquire the "necessary ability" in the "technique of stone." He learned these skills, and the processes of stoneworking, in Brancusi's studio, which grounded a career characterized by continually sharpening expertise and evolving innovations. "If you fossil a technique," wrote Noguchi, "then you express [only] those things which the technique permits."[84] Over the decades, he developed unparalleled expertise in the seemingly irreconcilable use of both premodern tools, such as the hammer, axe, and chisel, and modern ones, like the welder and acetylene torch. Kirsch argues that Noguchi "did just about everything to a stone that hand and machine tools can do: from surface polishing, to revealing glimpses of stone's interior essence, to turning stones into self-contained structures by creating open chambers within them where light and air could enter."[85] His technical proficiency challenges the idea that an artist works primarily with the tools of their time. It has been rightly pointed out by the poet and critic John Yau that "Noguchi was a modern master who made use of the most ancient of all materials: stone."[86]

The singular effect of Noguchi's technical control was the emergence of a distinct style. His work in the "medium of granite and basalt boulders scored or fractured" created a distinct and instantly recognizable style, although for most of his career, he had been defiantly opposed to the impositions of style on sculptural freedom.[87] It is precisely this consistent rejection of a fixed style that allowed him to undertake material experimentations and philosophical inquiries throughout his working life. Still, his emerging style conveyed an illusion of anonymity. Noguchi had little interest in what he conceived to be excessive artistic manipulations of the natural qualities of the material. He even carved his initials to resemble ancient masons' marks rather than as the signature of a singular modern artist. Architect Buckminster Fuller suggested that "Isamu learned [from the East] there was historically no general concept of 'sculptor' as we know the word."[88] This applies to ancient sites in India, such as Ajanta, Ellora, Elephanta, Mahabalipuram, and Sanchi, where sculptors and their processes remain largely unknown.

The Soulful Solidity of Stone, 1980s

For Noguchi, the choice to carve stone, and his engagement with its materiality, were determined by its endurance beyond the maker's lifetime. In the 1980s, as his health declined sharply, the physical strength required to cut, carve, and complete works such as *Shiva Pentagonal*, *Behind Inner Seeking Shiva Dancing*, and *Indian Dancer* was tremendous. Despite his age, or perhaps because of it, he believed that the challenge of working with demanding stone was a way to make sense of time and establish a kind of permanence. Stone, with its ancient provenance, was for him "our fundament . . . the direct line to the heart of the matter—a molecular link."[89] His concerns about the brevity of life fueled his creativity. In New York, he set up a permanent museum in the Queens neighborhood of Long Island City.[90] He modeled the space after Brancusi's atelier in Paris, which is dedicated to the sculptor's life and work. With the help of the architect Shoji Sadao, Noguchi transformed an industrial space into an oasis, a temple to stone. Writing in the museum's catalog, Noguchi observed, "There is a semblance

FIGURE 19. Shigeo Anzai. Isamu Noguchi's grave in Mure, Shikoku, Japan, 1989. The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum/Zeit Foto (Courtesy of Zeit-Foto © Estate of Shigeo Anzaï)

of eternity, a sense of permanence that is implied by a museum, and a removal from time's passage."[91] The Noguchi Museum, a cultural institution beloved by many New Yorkers today, is one of the first museums in North America to be established by a living artist. The museum displays his works, including *Shiva Pentagonal* and *Indian Dancer*, across 27,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor spaces.

In analyses of Noguchi's contributions, scholars have conceived of his work as a bridge between East and West and, as Ashton notes, an embodiment of "the precise voice that could speak of both the modern and the ancient in the same breadth."[92] Hart calls this characterization "a powerful metaphor, and for more than sixty years, it has been the dominant rubric for understanding [his] life and work."[93] Noguchi acknowledged this dichotomy as a productive force, stating, "My particular advantage, whatever it is, has been this factor of disturbance and conflict, that I live between two worlds and that I am constantly having conflicts of East and West, past and present."[94] Rather than producing a contradiction, the richness of these

experiences contributed to Noguchi's internationalism and conviction that we are a landscape of all we see and know. This essay has explored one of these expansive points of departure.

Shoji Sadao once observed, "To Isamu, the foreign country closest to his heart after Japan was India."[95] Based on a study of passport stamps, travel permits, and hotel receipts, Noguchi traveled to India at least eleven times between 1949 and 1988.[96] He expressed to Anand Sarabhai, nephew of his friend Gautam Sarabhai, that he wanted to leave behind an artistic legacy in India. Sarabhai suggested that he create a contemporary park that drew upon the historic step wells of the Ahmedabad region. These monumental, exquisitely carved public wells feature long stone staircases that lead to a water source three or four stories below ground level. However, during Noguchi's last trip to India in 1985, he became ill and returned to Japan. He died in 1988.

A few years before his death, Noguchi admired a monumental oval boulder of pink mannari granite poised on the summit of a hill behind his Mure studio (fig. 19). He asked Izumi to bury his ashes in a cavity in the stone after his death, drawing a line with red bengara to indicate where and how it should be carved. Although this marking had faded by the time Noguchi died three years later, Izumi carved a hollow chamber between the boulder's horizontal halves and placed his mentor's ashes in it. Hart has said that "his pieces are like time capsules, each encapsulating what he could and could not control: natural formations (stone formations, weathering), industrial formations (quarrying, stone splitting, measuring), and artistic formations (carving, polishing)."[97]

Ruminating on his travels, Noguchi wrote, "The search for India seems to go on and on, and I must say it is an aspect of sculpture I keep searching [for] wherever I am."[98] It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that he chose to have his ashes placed deep in the crevice of a natural boulder, much like a stupa or one of the precariously positioned rocks in the Mahabalipuram complex—the site he believed offered his "first and most authentic lesson."

Conclusion

Isamu Noguchi is one of the few sculptors—perhaps the only one—to have studied, recorded, and theorized the materiality of early Indian sculpture. It played a significant role in his investigation of the essence of sculpture—a point he consistently emphasized but is little known. Noguchi's engagement with this corpus was primed by his early training in Paris and New York, expressed in his later practice in Japan, and enriched by constant looking, reading, thinking, writing, and making. It is best understood as a single, though significant, strand in a larger set of affiliations that he cultivated over the course of a prolific career. Still, the sculpture of early India, one of the oldest and longest traditions of stonework, affirmed with unparalleled immediacy Noguchi's primary concern with the matter of sculpture.

This sheds light on the need for further study on the material characteristics of sculpture in premodern South Asian art history. Research in this field has traditionally revolved around issues of patronage and reception. Yet, the study of patronage—by whom sculpture is commissioned—remains incomplete without investigating who was commissioned to make it, just as the study of reception—how sculpture is viewed—is incomplete without studying how it was made. In other words, the materiality of sculpture is the missing link in our current understanding of premodern South Asian art. It must be considered alongside histories of its patronage and reception. Since the archaeological record provides limited sources of attribution, we must look closely, as Noguchi did, to sculpture itself. For instance, in the emerging approach of environmental art history in the premodern South Asian context, the manipulation of material

is central not only to the evocation of nature in stone but also to the ways it is itself shaped by the evolution of the natural world. However, these types of studies are limited by the absence of sustained scientific analyses on the materials of early Indian sculpture, in contrast to that of the ancient West. Noguchi approached early Indian sculpture as equal to art produced in other parts of the ancient world, particularly in its capacity to provide important historical lessons—beyond demonstrating ritual, sacred space, and religious iconography—about the crucial characteristics and constraints of stone carving. Looking, as he did, beyond the decorative and symbolic function of sculpture can elucidate its fundamental material significance: what it is, why it matters, and how it is expressed, not only in Noguchi's career but also in the history of premodern South Asian art.

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