Reciprocal Debts

A traveling exhibition examines the ceramic sculpture Noguchi made during visits to Japan, where the spark of his interest inflamed a group of young potters.

BY JANET KOPLOS

Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988), born in Los Angeles to an American mother and a Japanese father and raised (from age 2 to 13) in Japan, has typically been seen in the U.S. and Europe as expressing a Japanese sensibility in his work. The Japanese, however, have identified him with New York.

In the '50s, with the aid of a Guggenheim fellowship, Noguchi made his first visit to Japan as an adult. On that short stay, he began to use clay as a final rather than a preparatory material: he modeled some portrait heads and figurines in plaster and then cast them in terra-cotta in the workshop of a traditional potter in Kyoto. After the war, in 1950, he again visited Japan (on a round-the-world trip funded by the Bollingen Foundation) and again worked in clay, this time primarily at a ceramic institute in Seto, an ancient pottery center. He hand-built many works from slabs, and also had forms thrown to his specifications on the potter's wheel. Returning in 1952 for a longer stay, he had an even more extensive involvement, fraternizing with both senior figures in traditional pottery and a number of young avant-garde ceramic artists. That was essentially his last engagement with the material. Altogether he produced about 200 ceramic objects.

"Isamu Noguchi and Modern Japanese Ceramics," an exhibition that originated at the Smithsonian's Sackler Gallery in Washington, D.C., and is now at the Japan Society Gallery in New York, has two questions at its center. One is the nature of Noguchi's ceramic work and its kinship to his better-known stone sculpture, public art, and lamp and furniture design. The other is his relationship with—and effect upon—the young Japanese ceramists he encountered.

At the Sackler, the importance of the latter question was set out in the entrance to the show, which featured both a Noguchi sculpture and one by a Japanese ceramist; the slightly smaller version of the show at the Japan Society confines the young artists to the second half of the installation. One is the nature of Noguchi's ceramic work and its kinship to his better-known stone sculpture, public art, and lamp and furniture design. The other is his relationship with—and effect upon—the young Japanese ceramists he encountered.


Opposite, Noguchi with The Queen (on right), 1931, and Metamorphosis (on left), 1946, in New York, late 1940s. Courtesy Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Inc., New York.


The exhibition is a complex gathering of works by many artists, telling a story and requiring the viewer's constant awareness and comparative observations. Fortunately, however, the objects do not depend on the catalogue to make visual sense. Curators Louise Cort of the Sackler and Bert Winther-Tamaki, an art historian at the University of California, Irvine, begin by chronicling Noguchi's life and work with photos, drawings and ceramic works, including heads of his mother and a Japanese uncle (1932 and '31, respectively) that recall the many portrait heads from which he made a living during the Depression. These and a small sumo wrestler show his hands-on approach to shaping: the details of the plaster modeling carry over into the clay. Noguchi chose to retain the raised lines of the mold seams as evidence of his process.

A more abstract approach to form is seen in *The Queen* (1931), a chess-piece-like structure almost 46 inches tall. Again retaining casting seams, this work suggests character through posture. *The Queen* strikingly relates to ancient *haniwa* tomb figures, evocatively fashioned from clay cylinders, although it differs in being faceless and in lacking garment details. It also recalls some of Brancusi's works; Noguchi had, in fact, briefly apprenticed with him in Paris in 1927. At the same time, as Winther-Tamaki points out, *The Queen* relates to functional vessel forms. He regards this work as an indication that the cross-pollination between Noguchi's sculptures and utilitarian designs—much noted later—was already under way in 1931.

Noguchi's next ceramic phase is represented by the 13½-inch-tall *My Mu* (1950), a modernist squared cylinder featuring precisely cut holes. The cylinder is attached horizontally to three legs that have different tapers, one of which concludes in an amusingly cartoonish little foot. Another work of the same year, *The Policeman*, is a vertical box 14 inches tall that narrows from its open front to its open back, the sides and top perforated with "fingers," knobs and, seemingly, a billy club. Both works
During his third period of working with clay, Noguchi became deeply engaged with the material. He wrote and spoke of the experience as a "close embrace of the earth."

but has a pleasing fluidity, and bare clay revealed at the edges of each strip gives a tactile punch. In other cases, Noguchi makes "pictures" from clay. Much more engaging, however, are the semiabstractions such as Even the Centipede—folded slabs and cut vessel forms with various rods penetrating their walls, attached at regular intervals to a tall post—making a dramatic totem that is moodily lit at the Japan Society. Mr. One Man is supported on three legs—another frequent Noguchi device. The amusing squat form suggests an ebullient person and was nick-named for a Japanese politician. This sculpture rested on the desk of Nelson Rockefeller during his four terms as governor of New York.

**, recall the sculpture of Miró and presage the later work of Okamoto Taro, a friend of Noguchi's and a major figure in postwar Japanese art. They have no precedent in Japanese ceramics. In these and other objects of the time, Noguchi used simple shapes with surfaces interrupted by additions or deletions that are geometric or nearly so. (Perforated enclosures appear in many materials throughout his career.) He tended to use the clay architecturally more than organically.

In his third period of engagement with the material, in 1952, Noguchi had the advantage of prior experience, a number of useful friends and a longer period of time in which to work. He produced a far greater range of objects that more interestingly exploit the malleable substance. Among the varied forms are a simplified mask, tiny pinched-together figures and a column more than 5 feet tall made of smooth stacked cylinders. He also tried a few glazes: the small, screenlike Curtain of Dream, with a greenish Iga glaze, was shown at the Sackler alongside a traditional Iga vase. The range in both size and form illustrates his completely fresh and unrestrained approach to historic materials. Noguchi was seemingly heedless and probably also relatively ignorant of past practices, the knowledge of and respect for which constrained Japanese artists. But he was obviously absorbing information and trying out various clays associated with historical Japanese pottery sites.

Noguchi's ceramic oeuvre outlined, the exhibition begins to introduce other characters, notably the restaurateur known as Rosanjin (1883-1959), who took up pottery because of his dissatisfaction with traditional functional ceramics on the market. Rosanjin worked in old styles with an aggressive panache that won him enormous celebrity in Japan (a nation of rule-followers that tends to celebrate the most flagrant rule-breakers). In December 1951 Noguchi married the Chinese-born singer and actress Yamaguchi Yoshiko (who made Hollywood films under the name Shirley Yamaguchi), and they set up housekeeping at Rosanjin's compound in Kita Kamakura, in the hills just south of Tokyo. Noguchi's studio there was a lean-to on a hill, with one wall of raw earth. The exhibition includes Rosanjin's version of Oribe tea-ceremony ceramics as well as other potters' examples of reworking the classics—an established and respected process in Japan. At the Sackler these works were shown along with some of the antiques that inspired them.

Other sculptures by Noguchi from 1952 include le Lai Chian, a 19½-inch piece named for his wife's most famous song. This piece displays an imaginative use of clay—the dozen slender slices, unexpectedly vertical, seem to sway like undulating water grasses. The glaze is a dull tan color
Yagi’s Mr. Samsa’s Walk caused the same degree of shock in Japan that Peter Voulkos’s savagely stacked monumental clay forms did in the U.S.

An untitled 1952 slab with knobby, fingerlike protrusions that is mounted on a post is one of Noguchi’s more inventive pieces: he bent a long slab of clay into a curve as it stood on edge on a table; after firing, the form was set upright so that it seems to drape. Apartment—a cutaway of three stacked rooms occupied by rudimentary figures—shows that he thought of containers in architectural terms rather than the usual rounded ceramic volume. He couldn’t himself throw on the potter’s wheel (a device that favors cylindrical form), and he seems not to have tried coiling, but most likely he preferred the slab-building method because he had already worked with relatively flat elements (marble meant for architectural cladding, as well as wood and slate) during the ’40s.

Those interlocking works, which were the subject of an exhibition at PaceWildenstein in New York in September, lack the boxy framing of his ceramic slab pieces, but often include perforations and the intruding bone-like parts. One of the 11 works in the PaceWildenstein show was slate; most others were bronzes, one of them cast from a slate original. They consist of from two to 11 elements. A few are identified by title as figurative, and most of the others are graceful biomorphic forms rising from tripod bases.

Noguchi’s Three-legged vase of 1952 takes advantage of clay’s plasticity in positive and negative. It is a small, low table; two of its three legs are hollow and are open at the tabletop plane, and thus can function as vases. This piece would work best for dried flowers or grasses, since it would be nearly impossible to empty water from these containers. Again, it resembles his works in other materials. For the most part, Noguchi didn’t devise new forms in clay, took only limited advantage of its enormous surface variety and made just a few explorations of glaze-color possibilities. Winther-Tamaki, in his catalogue essay, asserts that a key pattern of Noguchi’s working method is “the translation from an expressive language invented in one material to another language devised for a completely different material,” and he calls the ceramic work a “surprising outcome of concepts imported from metal or other materials to clay.”
Generally, Noguchi's ceramics begin to look somewhat stiff as younger Japanese artists fill in the show around him. From the 1950s through the '60s (after Noguchi had abandoned ceramics), the works of these men became far more interesting. Several of the main figures had joined together in a group they called Sodeisha [Crawling Through Mud Association] and published a vanguard declaration. Their purpose was to turn fine craftsmanship toward the ends of contemporary art. They admired Klee, Miró and Picasso. The early '50s was a time of great ferment in Japanese art. Japan having lost the war, its seniority system was suddenly cast in doubt and people looked to learn from the winners. Okamoto and others made intensely political narrative paintings and prints during this period, and the Gutai group leapfrogged ahead, presenting performances and Happening-type events that presaged those in the U.S.

In this atmosphere, Noguchi served as a kind of spark. It would seem, from the evidence of this show, that it was his casual openness to ceramics that served as a crucial endorsement to Yagi and other Sodeisha potters. The celebrated contemporary critic Takiguchi Shuzo noted that while Noguchi became deeply involved in Japanese clay, his output did not satisfy Japanese expectations of "completeness in form along with perfection in firing." Yet it was perhaps his very violation of expectation that helped the younger potters in their efforts to break free. Among the Sodeisha strategies, Cort notes in her catalogue essay, was closing the vessel's mouth or making a vessel with more than one mouth, assembling wheel-thrown components without regard to the vertical orientation in which they were made on the wheel, using clay to frame but not enclose space and sometimes abandoning glaze. These young ceramists established a new category in Japanese art.

continued on page 119


Left, installation view of Noguchi's Even the Centipede, 1952, unglazed Kasama red stoneware, wooden pole, hemp cord. 13 ½ feet high; at the Japan Society, New York. All photos, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Japan Society.
Noguchi and Wilson

continued from page 95

monuments and are seen among stone works of intermediate dimensions, you get a sense of the way Noguchi worked with scale.

The originality of Wilson's interpretation of Noguchi is readily apparent in this third section of the show, as you face a maquette for the Horace E. Dodge and Son Memorial Fountain at the Renaissance Center in Detroit (1971-79). Behind the painted-wood model, water runs down a sheet of glass, suggesting how the fountain looks and sounds. Moreover, through the wall of water you can watch slides of the actual fountain in operation. Noguchi's models are never dull and suggest a heavy machine but also offers a phallic protrusion on one side and a deep circular opening that penetrates the top horizontally. It is both forbidding and exquisitely erotic.

The show ends, as it began in Washington, with Yagi. His 1950 Vase with two small mouths is a squarish potato form with two protrusions arising from a deep depression on one side. It stands on a conical foot and is painted like a Miró, with lines and dots of blue, yellow, red and black on the white surface. Mr. Samsa's Walk (1954) retains the preciousness of pottery scale, but its delicate details have become quite eccentric. A standing loop with numerous tubular extensions, it drastically

ly diverged from Japanese tradition and caused the same degree of shock there as Peter Voulkos's savagely stacked monumental clay forms did in the U.S. in the same decade. Yagi's 1963 Wall is made of tiny worms of clay pressed together to form two standing slabs joined with little tubes that can be seen from the sides. It seems to pulse with life. Yagi used the same constructive method in works that introduced another divergence from tradition: they were fired with pine needles so that smoke deposited carbon in the pores of the clay, and then polished to lushousness. Equally unexpected is his Monument: Queen Consort (1961), a hollow slab standing upright that is marked by ripples near the top, a patch of scribbling or scarring near the center, and a broken protrusion and a gaping mouth near the squared bottom. This stele shape is at once a totemic form, a distorted face and an engagingly tactile object.

Later in the '50s, Noguchi began to make the austere and elegant stone works for which he is celebrated, a type of modernist sculpture that shows his debt to Japanese forms and materials. His experience of "Japanese earth" in his ceramic interludes, coupled with the making of his first garden (for the Reader's Digest building in Tokyo), which introduced him to such Japanese sensibilities as stones having "live" sides that affect their placement in the landscape, contributed to his understanding. The Sodeisha artists retained the modest scale and intimate character of pottery, combined with the details of surface that Noguchi overlooked or declined. At the same time, they adopted a forceful, expressive character that, along with the release from utility, shows their reciprocal debt to the West.

"Isamu Noguchi and Modern Japanese Ceramics: a close embrace of the earth" was curated for the Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., where it appeared [May 3-Sept. 7], by Louise Allison Cort and Bert Waidner-Tanaka, who were also the principal authors of the 220-page catalogue. The exhibition is now at the Japan Society Gallery, New York (Oct. 9, 2003-Jan. 11, 2004) and travels to the Japanese American National Museum, Los Angeles [Feb. 7-May 30, 2004], PaceWildenstein's "33 MacDougal Alley: The Interlocking Sculpture of Isamu Noguchi" was on view in New York [Sept. 12-Oct. 4].

With a touch of mystery, a dose of folksiness, considerable showmanship, cues from merchandising and only a bit of East meets West, Wilson creates a dynamic display of Noguchi's art and design.

respect, not novelty. He stages a great exhibition that allows viewers to discover or rediscover what made Noguchi famous in the first place: good design and elegant sculptural form. The success, perhaps, is due not just to the genius of both artists but also to the affinity of two creative men who both have produced art, stage sets and furniture. And in this instance, Wilson transforms spectators in multiple countries and cultures from passive viewers into active participants.


Author: Phyllis Tuchman is a New Yorker who writes for Smithsonian, Town & Country and artnet.com magazines.