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# Isamu Noguchi's *Fish Face No. 2*

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## 1. Introduction

In 2015, the Ishibashi Foundation acquired the stone sculpture, *Fish Face No. 2* (1983) (fig. 1), by Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988).

Born in Los Angeles, U.S.A., the sculptor, Isamu Noguchi, whose parents were NOGUCHI Yonejiro (1875–1947), a poet and professor at Keio University, and Léonie Gilmour (1873–1933), an American writer, was influenced by both Japanese and American cultures as he produced numerous ambitious works throughout the course of his life. He employed a wide variety of materials, including plaster, terra cotta, ceramics, wood, metal, paper, and stone, but from the 1960s onwards it was his stone sculptures that were to become central to his oeuvre, growing in importance.

This paper will look at the creation of his *Fish Face No. 2*, focusing on the background and his use of basalt during his latter years.

## 2. Noguchi's Involvement with Stone

As a child, Noguchi lived in Tokyo and Kanagawa Prefecture with his mother and half-sister for eleven years from 1907 to 1918. While he was still a student at St. Joseph's College, an international school in Yokohama, he learned Japanese woodworking techniques from a carpenter who was constructing the family home in Chigasaki, and also studied the basics of cabinetmaking under a local craftsman. In June 1918, at the age of thirteen, he traveled alone to the U.S. to pursue his education there, and in 1923, he succeeded in entering the premedical program at Columbia University in New York. From that time on, New York was to become his base in the U.S. The following year, acting on his mother's suggestion, he began to study sculpture in evening classes at the Leonardo da Vinci Art School where he soon distinguished himself. Three months after starting lessons, Noguchi held a solo exhibition in the school's lobby, resulting in him leaving Columbia University to devote himself to sculpture.

Noguchi first started to work in stone at the age of twenty-two, when having received a John Simon Guggenheim Scholarship in April 1927, he traveled to Paris where he became an assistant to Constantin Brancusi (1876–1957). Brancusi accepted Noguchi as an apprentice in the mornings for a period of approximately six months. Regarding his experience of working with stone under Brancusi, Noguchi later recalled:

Brancusi got me started with carving a flat plane in limestone

preparatory to making a base. [...] The carving of stone, however, was new to me. I had no such experience in America and, indeed, the carving process of removal was the opposite of whatever I had so quickly learned of the tricks and easy effect of clay. [...] I did keep at it long enough to be finally entrusted with helping in the beginning phase of carving a marble *Bird in Space*.<sup>1</sup>

Brancusi taught him the proper way to work with each tool for each material, the importance of tasks that Noguchi referred to as 'tedious and troublesome,' and the grueling effort required to achieve perfection.<sup>2</sup> This experience of working with stone was to form the basis of his subsequent studies into the true nature of stone and other materials. During his studies in Paris, Noguchi was to produce abstract sculptures and drawings that exhibited Brancusi's influence.

In January 1931, Noguchi returned to Japan for the first time in thirteen years, staying in Kyoto from May to August, where he was impressed by haniwa (terra-cotta clay statues) and Zen temple gardens.<sup>3,4</sup> Captivated by traditional Japanese gardens and the stones placed in them, Noguchi was to visit Ryōanji and Tenryūji temples many times over the years, and was to say of stone gardens, 'When I saw natural stones laid out in a Japanese garden, I thought, 'Oh, this is "sculpture".' You don't have to do anything to them, it is just the way they are placed or something. The person looking at them is important. If the person don't see them, they are just stones.'<sup>5</sup> 'Looking at Japanese gardens, I felt something. [...] Stones are something in anywhere, and the oldest, the newest and the kind of nature that humans need the most.'<sup>6</sup>

The event that was to increase Noguchi's interest in stones and lead him to work seriously with stones as single works of sculpture, was when he went in search of the stones to be used for the *UNESCO Garden* (1956–1958) (fig. 2), the project at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris. For this project, Noguchi, envisioned the creation a three-dimensional spatial form that would express his admiration and respect for Japanese gardens, and in 1957 he traveled to Kyoto, Kagawa, Tokushima, and Okayama prefectures, together with the garden designer and historian SHIGEMORI Mirei (1896–1975), to search for suitable stones for this project.<sup>7</sup>

After completing the *UNESCO Garden*, Noguchi worked on marble sculptures and gardens that included stone sculptures, such as the Sculpture Garden of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University (1960–1964) and the Sunken Garden, Chase Manhattan Bank Plaza (1961–1964). Noguchi had long wanted to establish a base in Japan where he could

concentrate on stone sculpture and in 1964, he returned to Mure (now Mure-cho, Takamatsu City)<sup>8</sup>, a place he had first visited in 1956, where he was introduced to IZUMI Masatoshi (1938–2021),<sup>9</sup> a stonemason he was to collaborate with on stone sculptures for the rest of his life. In 1969, Noguchi set up an atelier in Mure, close to where *aji ishi*, a type of granite, is quarried, thereafter traveling between his ateliers in New York and Mure while devoting himself to the creation of stone sculptures. Noguchi employed a variety of different types of stone in his work, but since the late 1960s, the majority of his work employed granite, basalt, or andesite, all of which are harder than marble. Noguchi began by exploring new possibilities creating large-scale works in hard granite (*mikage ishi*) or basalt, but since 1981, Noguchi's primary sculptural material [was] basalt, a dense and heavy igneous rock.<sup>10</sup>

### 3. *Fish Face No. 2*

*Fish Face No. 2*, is not the only work Noguchi produced with the title 'Fish Face.' In 1928, during the second year of his studies in Paris, he created a bronze work entitled *Fish Face* (fig. 3). Some of the works Noguchi produced during his time in Paris were somehow destroyed and lost in a storage in Paris and this *Fish Face* was one of those.<sup>11, 12</sup> Created after Noguchi parted with Brancusi,<sup>13</sup> it displayed a geometric form with a stepped surface reminiscent of Brancusi's *The Cock* (fig. 4), and clearly shows the influence of his teacher. In 1945, he also produced a work in black slate, consisting of a combination of five separate components, that is entitled *Fishface* (fig. 5). In 1944, Noguchi had developed the idea of cutting figures out of flat slabs of marble or slate that he then combined to create three-dimensional sculptures that can be classified as Surrealist works<sup>14</sup> and *Fishface* (fig. 5) was one of these. Although they share the same name, the two earlier *Fish Face* works predate *Fish Face No. 2* by fifty-five and thirty-eight years respectively and are very different both in form and the materials employed. Noguchi is known to have often spontaneously come up with humorous names for his works, and we can presume from this that he did not regard *Fish Face No. 2* as being part of a series with these earlier works.<sup>15</sup>

*Fish Face No. 2* presents a combination of three textures: the stone's natural surface, a chiseled surface, and a smooth polished surface (figs. 1 and 6). The combination of these three elements is characteristic of the stone sculptures of Noguchi's later years. The surfaces, particularly the natural texture of the stone's surface, create a primitive feel, while the traces of the quarrying, sculpting and polishing clearly show the intervention of human hands. The abstract form reminds us that both the material used, the stone, and the fish from the work's title, are both the products of nature. The natural surface of the stone is brown, while the carved or polished parts are a mixture of brown and dark gray, this varying color of the different sections being one of the characteristics of the work.

Based on the results of research carried out on the stone by restorer, OIKAWA Takashi, it is believed the material used for *Fishface No. 2* is *datekanmuri ishi*, a type of basaltic andesite.<sup>16</sup> In Noguchi's catalogue raisonné,<sup>17</sup> the works employing *datekanmuri ishi* are simply listed as basalt. *datekanmuri ishi* was one of Noguchi's favorite stone materials in his latter

years and is only to be found on Mt. Okura in Marumori Town, southern Miyagi Prefecture. *datekanmuri ishi* is also known as *doro-kaburi* [mud-coated], since mud adheres its surface when quarried. Noguchi used to visit the quarries in person guided by IZUMI Masatoshi to select the stones for his work, including *datekanmuri ishi*.<sup>18</sup>

The stone for *Fish Face No. 2* was transported to his atelier in Mure, where it was shaped and sculpted and there is a photograph of the work, taken by Noguchi himself, at his atelier in Mure (fig. 7). It was then transported to New York, where it was exhibited along with six other stone sculptures in the solo exhibition: "Noguchi, Seven Stones," at the Pace Gallery, New York, from March 28 to April 26, 1986 (fig. 8). The exhibition catalogue, which features an enlarged photograph of the central part of *Fish Face No. 2* on the front and back covers, included the following "Manifesto,"<sup>19</sup> a statement made by Noguchi on February 18 of the same year for the thirtieth anniversary rededication of the UNESCO Gardens.

#### MANIFESTO

I am challenged by the unknown, by accidents, from which to extricate something beyond preconception. My effort has been to expand this area of challenge.

Looking for rocks to make the UNESCO Garden (in 1956–68), I started to carve granite boulders. I had returned to Japan some years previously with a Bollingen Fellowship on a search for the meaning of sculpture. This I had found in the rocks of gardens as the essential projection of time. Trees pass, the rocks remain, erode. How else may the enduring be manifest? Or sculpture reveal its secret?

Marble was something else again, which comes from water and its chemistry. The tradition of sculpture as I first knew it derived from marble, or more correctly, clay and its reproduction in marble and bronze casting. Both are an artisanage of indirection. With sheet metal came a diagrammatic sculpture which I carved with dissatisfaction in marble and slate.

It was in revolt from all this that my questioning began, that which led me through the many gardens I subsequently made larger than sculpture, environments – sculpture to walk through, a passage of time.

No matter how much time it would take or beyond duplicating, I wished to find out something about sculpture; that which I found missing.

I was fortunate in that my time has coincided with the rapid development of tools. Within our destruction or our saving would be found the needed scope of sculpture—its enduring to define the space of our garden, the earth.

If in a time of triviality such a course seems implausible, all the more reason. Seek the dead center of gravity, seek out of our difficulties the enduring.

Noguchi looked up to the architect Richard Buckminster Fuller (1895–1983) as his mentor and it was from him that he learned that 'the garden is a sculpture of space,' leading him to recognize gardens as being places that links people with sculpture. This relationship between sculpture, and people, as well as with the

environment, was an important theme of Noguchi's creativity.<sup>20</sup>

The other six works that Noguchi presented with *Fish Face No. 2* in the "Noguchi, Seven Stones" exhibition were *Oddisque* (1982, Whereabouts unknown), *Personage III (Ningen 3)* (1984, Whereabouts unknown), *Fullness with Void* (1984, Private Collection), *Olmec and Muse* (1985, Private Collection), *Stone Embrace* (1985, Private Collection) and *Pieta (Mistress Pogany and Brancusi)* (1985, Whereabouts unknown), and all of them sculpted from basalt. In addition, the photographs in the exhibition catalogue and Noguchi's catalogue raisonné<sup>21</sup> show that, with the exception of *Personage III (Ningen 3)* that appears to be entirely polished, the surfaces of the other works all display the same three surface textures as *Fish Face No. 2* described above, which is to say, the natural surface, the chiseled surface, and the smooth polished surface.

*Fish Face No. 2* was later displayed in the exhibition "Enduring Creativity" that was held at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Fairfield County, from April 15 to June 15, 1988. The catalogue for this exhibition states: 'His interference with this black or greenish-black stone tends to be minimal: he will carve or bore into the rock to reveal its interior and to introduce contrast of color, texture, and shadow, but he preserves the rough and rugged quality of the earth-spawned stone.'<sup>22</sup>

#### 4. Isamu Noguchi and Ishibashi Shojiro

Noguchi was attracted to stone, becoming deeply involved in stone sculpting as a result of his work on the *UNESCO Garden*, and ISHIBASHI Shojiro (1889–1976), founder of the Bridgestone Museum of Art, the predecessor of the Artizon Museum, was also intimately involved in this project. He founded the Bridgestone Museum of Art in January 1952, then four years later, in April 1956, he established the Ishibashi Foundation whose core activities are the maintenance and management of the art museum and the promotion of donations and grants for the advancement of art, education, and culture. In June of the same year, the Japan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale opened as the result of a donation for its construction from ISHIBASHI Shojiro and Shojiro attended the Venice Biennale's opening ceremony as a representative of the Japan Pavilion's exhibition.<sup>23</sup> He also attended the 4th General Conference of the ICOM (International Council of Museums) in Basel, Switzerland while traveling around Europe and the U.S. from May to August to observe the state of affairs there in his role as a Advisor to the Minister of Foreign Affairs.<sup>24</sup> Hoping for financial support from the Japanese government to create the *UNESCO Garden*, Noguchi met with Shojiro in Paris on July 7 of the same year and appealed for his cooperation. Shojiro's travel diary for that day states, 'I visited the construction site for the UNESCO building and received a request from Mr. Isamu Noguchi to donate garden stones,'<sup>25</sup> indicating that Shojiro went to the UNESCO headquarters, which was under construction at the time and met with Noguchi. It is possible that Shojiro walked around the proposed site of the *UNESCO Garden* with Noguchi at this time. Shojiro, who believed in the importance of Japan's contribution to the international community through cultural activities promised his cooperation,<sup>26</sup> and the following year, 1957, the Japanese government agreed to provide part of the construction costs.<sup>27</sup> In the same year, the Ishibashi Foundation, which Shojiro

had established the previous year, also provided a grant for 'the construction of the UNESCO Headquarters Garden,'<sup>28</sup> indicating that Shojiro strongly approved of Noguchi's concept for the project. In November 1958, the *UNESCO Garden* was successfully completed. Stones formed the central feature of the garden, creating a connection between Shōjirō and Noguchi, and in 2015, fifty-nine years after their first meeting, the *Fish Face No. 2* stone sculpture became the first Noguchi work in the Ishibashi Foundation Collection. Considering Noguchi and Shojiro's shared passion for art, garden design,<sup>29</sup> and social projects for the public good, combined with the fact that the *UNESCO Garden* was a spatial sculpture centered on 'stone,' this addition to the collection can be said to be extremely significant.

#### 5. In Closing

When it comes to his works in basalt, the older Noguchi became, the more he became prone to preserve the natural form and surface of the stone, as seen in *Fish Face No. 2*. According to Dakin Hart, former Senior Curator at the Noguchi Museum, although Noguchi's late basalt works certainly reflect his aesthetic choices in selecting the stone material, his intention wasn't to force an image out of it. His pieces are like time capsules, each encapsulating what he could and could not control: the natural formations (stone formations, weathering), industrial formations (quarrying, stone splitting, measuring), and artistic formations (carving, polishing).<sup>30</sup> In an interview filmed at his atelier in Mure in 1979–80, the 75-year-old Noguchi said:

'The oldest form of sculpture is stone. The earth comprises of stone. Humans originate from stone and return to stone; we return to the soil. Soil is also a form of stone, powdered stone. That is why I am interested in stone.

You can experience things by looking at them, touching them, eating them, listening to them, bumping into them, and entering them. Sculpture is not merely something to look at, I think it needs to be experienced more deeply.'<sup>31</sup>

Noguchi was a man who could capture the universe in stone, he sought to discover the true essence of stone and the luminescence it contained to give shape to the universality that remains, regardless of the passage of time. He was fascinated by the stone that forms part of the earth from which humans are born and to which they eventually return, and his true creativity lay in his ability to reveal the existence of stone.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Ms. IKEDA Fumi, Senior Advisor of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation of Japan, Ms. MASUDA Mihoko, Curator at the Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum, Mr. Alex Ross, Managing Editor of the Isamu Noguchi Catalogue Raisonné at the Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, Mr. OIKAWA Takashi, restorer, and Mr. Andrew Newman for their generous cooperation in writing this article.

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(Translated by Gavin Frew)

## Notes

1. Isamu Noguchi, "Noguchi on Brancusi," *Craft Horizons* 36, no.4, 1976, pp. 26–28.
2. Isamu Noguchi, "Noguchi on Brancusi," *ibid.* pp. 137–138.
3. "Isamu Noguchi Chronology," *Isamu Noguchi—Connecting the World through Sculpture*, exh. cat., Yokohama Museum of Art, 2006, p. 121.
4. OHASHI Natsuko (ed.), "Isamu Noguchi Chronology," *Isamu Noguchi: Ways of Discovery*, exh. cat., The Asahi Shimbun, NHK, NHK Promotion, 2021, p. 237.
5. Video interview (1986) NHK Archives *Ano hito ni aitai File No. 108* [A Person I Want to Meet File No. 108], NHK. [https://www2.nhk.or.jp/archives/articles/?id=D0009250108\\_00000](https://www2.nhk.or.jp/archives/articles/?id=D0009250108_00000) (last accessed August 23, 2024)
6. Video interview *Isamu Noguchi maboroshi no genbaku ireihi* [Isamu Noguchi: The Phantom Memorial Monument for Atomic Bomb Victims] NHK, 2022.
7. Duus Masayo, *Isamu Noguchi – shukumei no ekkyōsha (ge)* [Isamu Noguchi – A Man Fated to Cross Borders II], Kodansha, 2000, pp. 114, 150, 151, 215.
8. The visit to Mure in 1956 was made on the recommendation of SHIGEMORI Mirei. *op. cit.* note 3, p. 237.
9. *Op. cit.* note 7, p. 216.
10. Roni Feinstein, "Isamu Noguchi," *Enduring Creativity*, exh. cat., Whitney Museum of American Art, Fairfield County, 1988, p. 24.
11. Nancy Grove and Diane Botnick, *The Sculpture of Isamu Noguchi, 1924–1979: A Catalogue*, New York: Garland Publishing pp. 4–5.
12. According to Noguchi, he had a crate made to store some of the tools he used in Paris as well as some of the works he did not bring back to New York in February 1929. The crate was stored with American Express, but when Noguchi returned later he was told that the crate had been destroyed. *Fish Face* in 1928 is assumed to have been in that crate. Interview with Alex Ross at the Noguchi Museum (New York), October, 10, 2023.
13. Noguchi is said to have worked as Brancusi's assistant from the time he arrived in Paris in April 1927 until Brancusi left for Nancy in November of the same year. Duus Masayo, *Isamu Noguchi – shukumei no ekkyōsha (jō)* [Isamu Noguchi – A Man Fated to Cross Borders I], Kodansha, 2000, p. 225.
14. TAKAHASHI Kōji, "The Poetics of Between: On the Sculpture/Space of Isamu Noguchi," *Isamu Noguchi Retrospective 1992*, exh. cat., The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, 1992, p. 13.
15. *Op. cit.* note 12.
16. According to: OIKAWA Takashi, "Research on the Stone Used for Isamu Noguchi's *Fish Face No. 2*" (January 2022).
17. The Isamu Noguchi Catalogue Raisonné, a web-based catalog of works edited by the Noguchi Museum, <https://archive.noguchi.org/> (last accessed August 23, 2024)
18. Interview with IKEDA Fumi and MASUDA Mihoko at the Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum, October 23, 2021.
19. *Noguchi, Seven Stones*, exh. cat., Pace Gallery, New York, 1986, p. 3. First published in Isamu Noguchi, "Manifesto," A statement for the 30th anniversary rededication of the UNESCO Gardens, February 18, 1986. Japanese translation by ETO Yuko.
20. *Isamu Noguchi et Okamoto Taro : «Japon» de deux voyageurs sans frontieres*, exh. cat., Taro Okamoto Museum of Art, Kawasaki, 2018, p. 99.
21. *Op. cit.* note 17.
22. *Op. cit.* note 10.
23. The Japan Foundation's Venice Biennale, Japan Pavilion official website, 28th Venice Biennale International Art Exhibition, <https://venezia-biennale-japan.jp/f.go.jp/j/art/1956> (last accessed August 23, 2024)
24. ISHIBASHI Shojiro, *Jinsei mondou* [Life's Questions and Answers] Kikaisha, 1957, pp. 161–167.
25. ISHIBASHI Shojiro, *Watashi no ayumi* [The Course of my Life], 1962, p. 48.
26. On August 28, 1956, Noguchi reported UNESCO's International Cultural Exchange Officer, Michel Dart, "In his capacity as a government Advisor, Mr. Ishibashi had promised to approach the Japanese government, but first, he recommended doing the proper administrative procedure, which is to submit a formal request to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs through the Japanese Ambassador to France in Paris," *op. cit.* note 3, p. 145.
27. *Op. cit.* note 3, p. 147.
28. The Ishibashi Foundation provided a grant of ¥1,000,000 for 'The construction of the UNESCO Headquarters Garden'. The total cost of the *UNESCO Garden* was approximately US\$24,000, of which UNESCO contributed US\$15,000, the Japanese government US\$5,000, and the remaining US\$4,000 was raised by the Japanese private sector. The Ishibashi Foundation was one of the largest private donors to the *UNESCO Garden*. *50 years of the Ishibashi Foundation, 1956–2005*, Ishibashi Foundation, 2006, p.144. *Op. cit.* note 3, p. 148. UCHIYAMA Naoko, "The Meaning of 'Japanese Garden': Reflections on Isamu Noguchi's Garden for UNESCO," *Center for Comparative Japanese Studies Annual Bulletin*, No. 7, The Center for Comparative Japanese Studies, Ochanomizu University, 2011, p. 131.
29. Shojiro Ishibashi was interested in art, architecture, and landscaping, creating the Suimeisō Garden (Kurume City, Fukuoka Prefecture), Kyūrinso Garden (Fuchu City, Tokyo), Okutama Garden (Ome City, Tokyo), and other gardens. He wrote, 'While business is one of my hobbies, my other interests include art, architecture, and landscaping. [...] I don't know the techniques of garden design. I find peace through contact with the beauty of nature. I am able to relax free of miscellaneous thoughts. I simply plant trees and collect stones in places to create a garden resembling mountain scenery close to where I am, and as it matures with the passage of time, it brings me great pleasure.' *op. cit.* note 25, p. 432.
30. *Isamu Noguchi Tools*, Takenaka Carpentry Tools Museum, 2023, p. 9.
31. Video interview (1979–80), NHK Archives, *Ano hito ni aitai File No. 108*, [A Person I Want to Meet File No.108], NHK, [https://www2.nhk.or.jp/archives/articles/?id=D0009250108\\_00000](https://www2.nhk.or.jp/archives/articles/?id=D0009250108_00000) (last accessed August 23, 2024). Video interview, Isamu Noguchi: Ways of Discovery (Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, April 24 – August 29, 2021), NHK Educational, 2021.

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©2024 The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum/ARS, New York/JASPAR, Tokyo C4764
- fig.2—Isamu NOGUCHI, *UNESCO Gardens, Paris*, 1956-1958  
Photography by Isamu Noguchi  
©2024 The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum/ARS, New York/JASPAR, Tokyo C4764
- fig.3—Isamu NOGUCHI, *Fish Face*, 1928, Bronze (Lost)  
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Photography by Isamu Noguchi  
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