A SCULPTOR’S BRUSH WITH INK: FROM THE FLIGHT OF THE DRAGON TO THE POOL OF THE INKSTONE

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The East Asian aesthetic of brush and ink was typically appreciated in the twentieth century for its deep and fascinating roots in historical practices of painting and calligraphy. A new awareness is emerging, however, of just how profoundly the twentieth century itself shaped views of Asian traditions of ink painting that prevail today. For despite the antiquarian preoccupations of many of its proponents, ink painting was dramatically altered and expanded by the theoretical and experimental efforts of numerous artists and writers throughout Asia and beyond. Starting in the late nineteenth century and continuing to this day, for example, photographers have emulated and extended the aesthetic of ink monochrome landscape imagery with photographic techniques1. And since the mid-twentieth century, abstract painters all over the world have studied brush and ink calligraphy for models of non-mimetic signification and gestural brushwork2. Meanwhile, art historians, critics, and theorists have articulated the relevance of East Asian ink art to agendas ranging from modernist self-expression to cultural nationalism3. Among the least recognized accomplishments of Isamu Noguchi are his innovative contributions to this twentieth-century discourse of Asian-associated ink art, starting with his 1930 gestural figure drawings that are the primary focus of this exhibition, but also including later sculptural works that transformed aesthetic ideals of ink on paper into three dimensions. This essay identifies some of Noguchi’s sources and inspirations in early twentieth-century discourses of ink painting, assesses the significance of his Peking Scrolls to this discourse, and describes his innovative three-dimensional remediations of ink painting in postwar abstract sculpture.

FLIGHT OF THE DRAGON

Although Noguchi’s short intense bout of ink-and-brush figure painting in 1930 was a product of his encounter with Beijing and Qi Baishi, his predisposition for this creative work took form long before his arrival in China. Accounts of Noguchi’s career rightfully emphasize his apprenticeship in Brancusi’s studio in 1927, but he also spent considerable time in 1927, 1928, and early 1930 drawing nude models at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière in Paris. Moreover, in 1928 he traveled to London “to study Oriental matters at the British Museum Library,” where he “saw Laurence Binyon, the curator of prints at the British Museum, quite often.”4 These two European experiences—drawing from live nude models in Paris and conversing with one of England’s leading experts on Asian art—would have significant consequences for his work with brush and ink in Beijing. In Paris, Noguchi gathered with other young artists from all over the
world to draw human figures while observing the poses and physiques of naked hired models. In 1931, the New York Times would admire Noguchi's Paris drawings for conveying "something universal and eternal," praise their line quality for being "as pure as Ingres's and as evocative as Picasso's," and note that they had a much more finished quality than the "notations flung 'on the wing,' like Rodin's." These impressions were triggered by drawings such as Seated Nude: Study in Black (fig. 96), which depicts a female model with deep black patches of moist ink within thin precise contour lines rendered in pen and ink and a few thicker brushed strokes. While most of Noguchi's Paris drawings demonstrate this more finished and anatomically precise approach, he surely also came into contact with the style of rapid gestural figure drawing pioneered by Rodin, alluded to by The New York Times, and widely practiced by subsequent modernists.

Meanwhile, Noguchi's interaction with Laurence Binyon in the British Museum engaged him to a very different constellation of artistic values. When the twenty-four-year-old Noguchi met the fifty-nine-year-old Binyon in 1928, he was surely aware that the latter had been a close friend of his estranged father, Yone Noguchi. Binyon and the elder Noguchi were near contemporaries and their careers paralleled one another for both were well-known poets as well as authorities on Asian art history. In 1903 Yone wrote from London to Isamu's mother, Leonie Gilmour, who edited his English-language writings, that Binyon was one of several men of "literary genius" who were "jolly companions." Having not seen his father since leaving Japan eleven years earlier at age thirteen, Isamu must have been curious to hear Binyon's reminiscences of the Japanese poet. But Isamu would also have surely been eager to hear Binyon's views about Sino-Japanese painting, the primary focus of Binyon's influential book, The Flight of the Dragon, which was published in 1911 as part of the Wisdom of the East series of books intended to serve as "ambassadors of good-will and understanding between East and West." This lofty goal was also associated with Isamu Noguchi's father and further embraced by Isamu himself in his often quoted 1927 statement of his intention to travel to Asia: "My father, Yone Noguchi, is Japanese and has long been known as an interpreter of the East to the West, through poetry. I wish to fulfill my heritage." Binyon's interpretation of Asian painting for the West stressed one of the fundamental ideals of Chinese and Japanese painting, namely the "rhythmic vitality" (C: qiyun; J: ki-in) articulated in the sixth century by Xie He. Binyon explained:

In order to apply the energy of the body to the utmost effect, we must discover a certain related order of movements; and, when this is found and followed, a power comes into play which far surpasses in effect the application of brute strength and muscular effort. We rightly recognize this order of movements as rhythm... Is it not just such a discovered principle in ourselves which is the essence of the impulse towards creation? It is a spiritual rhythm passing into and acting on material things.

The “flight of the dragon”—the title of Binyon's book—was another expression of this rhythmic vitality, because in Chinese thought, he wrote, the dragon was “a spirit which is able to pass out
into all other existences of the world and resume its own form in man." Binyon praised the unique capacity of Asian ink painting to realize this elusive sense of spiritual rhythm, cautioning that the English word “monochrome” was but a “starved and lifeless term” that fails to convey the “marvelous range and subtlety of tones” of Chinese ink. In Binyon’s dualistic thinking, “living ink” was part of a view of Oriental culture defined in opposition to Occidental culture: Sung ink landscape was the classical touchstone of the art of the East, while Western art found its epitome in the nude bodies carved in stone in ancient Greece. Noguchi’s brush drawing in Beijing, however, was to blur this binary, by requisitioning the Asian art of ink painting to render monumental nudes.

To be sure, many Asian ink painters, including notably Qi Baishi, had painted human bodies, but the bodies they rendered in ink were rarely, if ever, painted from life. Even Hokusai’s extraordinary repertoire of human figures shown working and performing in all kinds of poses were not sketched from live models. Hokusai’s figures, explains Inaga Shigemi, were “based more on the physical skill of the habituated hand, trained by the repetitive copying of the master’s model, than on direct observation of nature and the spontaneous capturing of its effects.” Rather than sketch live models, East Asian ink painters often constructed images of the body by combining different types of brushstrokes. This method of figurative ink painting is demonstrated, for example, by a sixteenth-century Japanese painting of Bodhidharma (fig. 98) in the British Museum, where Binyon may well have shown it to Noguchi in 1928. In contrast to the thick, dark, and rough strokes of the Zen Patriarch’s robe, his hair is rendered in softly raked gray strokes, while his eyes and mouth are delineated in sharp thin black contours. But Binyon’s highest praise for this sort of diversified brushwork was reserved for the fifteenth-century Japanese ink painter, Sesshû. Binyon noted Sesshû’s mastery of a “miraculous range,” including “exquisite harmonies,” as well as passages which “amaze us by his power with the brush [for] his strokes are sudden, strong, and vehement.”

BEIJING BRUSH DRAWINGS
In Beijing Noguchi resumed the practice of drawing figures from the observation of posed models that he had mastered in Paris, but now he joined this practice to an exploration of the varied types of Sino-Japanese ink brushwork that he had discovered with Binyon in London. His Nude Man and Boy Reclining (fig. 99) demonstrates his most controlled mode of rendering bodies in a network of thin even contour lines, while his Man and Boy in Circular Tumble (fig. 100) combines dark lines delineating bodies together with thick abstract brushstrokes. Despite the relative regularity of the line in Nude Man and Boy Reclining, this is not the unvarying sort of ink line that Noguchi had drawn with a pen in Paris. Rather, this is a brush line that changes in intensity, thickening and darkening slightly where it defines the man’s shoulders, head, and eyes, but lightening and then temporarily disappearing around his upper arm and elbow, and becoming...
more delicate in defining the boy’s body. This continuous flowing line manifests the kinesthetic qualities often admired by connoisseurs of gestural contour line drawings of the sort pioneered by Rodin. One senses the movement of the artist’s body and how his response to the emerging brush paths on his paper during the process of brushing impacted subsequent brush outlays as much as the appearance of the models posed before him.16

*Man and Boy in Circular Tumble* may well have been drawn from the same models as those who posed for *Nude Man and Boy Reclining*, but Noguchi’s addition of thick abstract brushstrokes onto the figures in the former exemplifies one of the most unusual and experimental aspects of his Beijing brush drawings. As noted above, East Asian ink paintings often combined radically different sorts of brushwork, and sometimes viewers of such works may have the impression of an abruptness in the transitions from rough or dark and thick passages to light or delicate passages delineating different details of the same body. But Noguchi takes this disjunctiveness to a new extreme by overriding the logic of the carefully contoured figures with stormy broom-like sweeps, as though seeking to visualize some force pulsing through their bodies, something akin to Binyon’s “flight of the dragon.”

The juxtaposition of two markedly different brush systems in this drawing suggests an interesting parallel to the dualistic thinking already noted in the East/West rubric used to articulate the aims of Noguchi, his father, and Laurence Binyon. In Isamu Noguchi’s case, however, this East/West duality was sometimes configured as a poignant and even painful statement of his often denigrated status as the son of an Asian father and a European American mother. One rather presumptuous mentor wrote to Isamu in 1930: “. . . I know how to interpret your desire for the Far East… Only a limited number of fibres in your nervous system belong to the Extreme Orient. Most of your physiological functions, including your intestines and your earthly desires, belong to the Extreme West. This is almost tragic.”17 According to Noguchi’s own later account, he prolonged his stay in Beijing instead of proceeding as planned to Japan because he received a letter in Moscow from his father in Japan telling him not to come to Japan using the name Noguchi.18 Thus, it is not surprising that during his months of brush drawing in Beijing, Noguchi was perceived by one who knew him well as “the most lonely fellow I ever had known.”19 Given these circumstances, the brush drawings of the man and boy pair, though rendered from local Beijing residents who Noguchi hired to pose in his studio, seem to be the projection of his personal experience of paternal rejection. Or rather, they redress this rejection with an almost homoerotic image of father-son harmony. In *Nude Man and Boy Reclining*, the man’s body forms a cave-like den of safety for the boy who rests peacefully within this tender shelter. In *Man and Boy in Circular Tumble*, these figures come together in a circular composition of unity, and the overlay of abstract lines seems to visualize an energy that transpires between them.

While Noguchi’s Beijing brush drawings were generally well received in the various venues in the United States where they were exhibited in the early 1930s, critics were divided with regard to the success of his addition of the thick expressive brushstrokes to his figures. One noted that
“the artist has added a broad ribbon of wash, not with any realistic intent, but as a sort of counterpoint to the central composition,” while another criticized “the intervention of shadings that seem indeed only dragged in.”20 To be sure, perhaps due to emotional tension provoked by the subject matter, the abstract strokes in Man and Boy in Circular Tumble intrude on the figures with something of a disruptive force. In the case of Toddler with a String (fig. 18), however, Noguchi succeeds in melding the bursting energy of the child with large cursive calligraphic strokes. These wet gray ink strokes seem to diagram vectors of the child’s dynamic exertions of budding strength.

Much of the impression of Asianness associated with Noguchi’s Beijing brush drawings may be attributed to their hanging scroll format. Painting formats, perhaps even more than styles and iconographies, are “necessarily linked to [...] culturally specific spaces and patterns of behavior.”21 And indeed, the hanging scroll, referred to in English texts by Binyon and others of this generation with the Japanese word kakemono, even when associated with a Chinese painting, was believed to be difficult to export from Japan: “work in kakemono form is seen to much disadvantage when exhibited in numbers strung along the walls of [an American] museum. [They] are best viewed singly, suspended in the recess of the tokonoma, or alcove. A certain seclusion is essential to the enjoyment of their delicate and subtle effects.”22 By defying this view and presenting his brush drawings as kakemono for public exhibition in the United States, Noguchi asserted the Asian locus of their creation, materials and techniques, while obscuring the Paris source of their basis in sketching live nude models.

THREE-DIMENSIONAL REMEDIATIONS OF INK

After leaving Beijing in 1930, Noguchi would never again focus so intently on brush-and-ink drawings based on the observation of live models. Though he did periodically return to ink and brush painting, later works in this medium were typically focused on recording sights while traveling, or planning or illustrating concepts and forms for sculpture and design projects. Despite the proficiency of his early drawing in Paris and Beijing, the primary accomplishments of Noguchi’s career were in the three-dimensional media of sculpture and design. Thus the afterlife of his early intense exploration of brush-and-ink painting is particularly interesting in terms of his remediation of qualities of this two-dimensional aesthetic in materials and forms remote from the world of the ink painter.

Noguchi’s first major postwar sculptures took the form of thin marble sheets jigsawed into curved shapes and slotted together, a scheme suggested in part by the forms of Chinese characters23 (fig. 102). Noguchi reportedly had a photograph of a work of Chinese calligraphy in his studio while creating some of these sculptures and indeed, the perpendicular interlocking of curved stone shapes resembles the combinational structure of a multi-stroke Sino-Japanese character.24 Moreover, Noguchi rendered the forms of some of his slotted stone sculptures in calligraphic ink and brush sketches as illustrations for the catalogue of his 1949 Egan Gallery exhibition (fig. 101).
Noguchi returned to this investigation of the sculptural possibilities of ink-and-brush calligraphy in the 1960s with a group of sculptures consisting of elements that resembled calligraphic brushstrokes more explicitly than his slotted stone pieces of the 1940s. Now Noguchi sliced curved planks from the soft, light-weight material of balsa wood and composed them in abstract spatial arrangements, which were then cast in bronze. For example, Shodô Hanging (fig. 103), much as its title suggests (shodô being the Japanese word for “calligraphy”), consists of three-dimensionalized brushstrokes that hover in space as though a calligraphic character had collapsed and its parts suspended midair before falling to the ground. Such works attempted to import the sense of balanced weight that operates in the virtual space of calligraphy on paper into sculpture where real gravity can only be held in balance by contending with the laws of physics.

Aluminum would seem to be a surprising material for contemplating the Asian art of brush and ink, but this unlikely feat was accomplished in Noguchi’s 1959 sculpture titled Sesshû (fig. 104) after the fifteenth-century ink painter Laurence Binyon admired. This sculpture was part of a series of aluminum sheet works in which Noguchi sought to endow this material with poetic qualities without disguising its associations with industrial efficiency and new technologies. Noguchi’s aluminum sculpture alludes to the revered Japanese ink painter by means of its planar shape and variegated gray color. The shape evokes one of the formats associated with Sesshû’s painting—not the hanging scroll, but the accordion-like relief of the freestanding hinged panels of the folding screen (byôbu). And the dull gray shine of the anodized aluminum surface suggests the gray tonalities Sesshû obtained in ink. One of Noguchi’s sources for appreciating Sesshû’s gray tonalities was surely his friend, the Japanese artist and writer Hasegawa Saburô, who had served as a guide to Japanese culture for Noguchi during his first extended postwar exploration of Japan in 1950. The previous year Hasegawa had described Sesshû’s ink aesthetic as “a dull blurry gray tone” and proceeded to characterize his subjective response to Sesshû’s gray: “it possesses a sorrowful quality that hits with a resonance in my chest and lingers afterwards . . . Then, as I mull over that aftertaste, it softens my heart with a pleasant sense.” Noguchi’s abstract aluminum sculpture would seem to be conducive to an aesthetic experience similar to that which Hasegawa reported upon contemplating Sesshû’s painting.

Stone was the most important material of Noguchi’s late sculpture and, like aluminum, this material might seem irrelevant to ink-and-brush painting. Nonetheless, one of the most dearly treasured tools of the East Asian ink painter was the inkstone (J: suzuri) and reflections on the cultural and aesthetic qualities of this object were critical to one of Noguchi’s most fruitful genres of abstract sculpture, namely the stone landscape table. Like other ink painters, in Beijing in 1930, Noguchi would have ground his ink from a dry cake on a small slab of stone with a reservoir for holding the water used to obtain different concentrations of liquid ink. Many years later, in the 1960s, Noguchi began creating sculptures as low table-like horizontal slabs of granite carved with various protuberances and depressions suggesting landscape forms. Despite their larger size, these landscape tables resemble inkstones in their black stone material as well
as in their horizontal relief. Indeed, the black stone surface of the 1968 Water Table (fig. 107) is
carved with two shallow recessed areas, and when filled with water, they resemble the dark pool
of liquid ink in an inkstone reservoir. Referring to another of his table sculptures, Whetstone of
1970 (fig. 106), Noguchi observed:

A primary use of stone is to sharpen tools. Sumi is made by rubbing charcoal on “suzuri”
(an inkstone). Grinding is a process in carving, as is the final polishing. A whetstone
is of the highest significance.27

Thus the painter’s act of grinding the brick of ink against the wet slope of an inkstone is analo-
gous to the sharpening of a steel blade against a whetstone, and the grinding of stone itself
in making sculpture. Noguchi continued to ponder various associations with what one painter
called “preparing yourself spiritually” through the “ritual of ink making” by rubbing the brick
of ink in the puddle of an inkstone.28 Amidst the rough protruding areas and polished flat areas
of a horizontal stone topography actually titled Ink Stone (fig. 105), Noguchi carved a shallow
depression that closely approximates the well of an inkstone, though it can also be read as the
bird’s-eye view of a pond in a tract of land with flat and hilly areas.29 Thus the grinding of ink on
the stone emerges here as analogous to not only the grinding of the stone in the making of
the sculpture but also the environmental and geological processes that weather and form the
terrestrial surface. Noguchi’s youthful passionate pursuit of the “flight of the dragon” had been
focused on the native bodies that populated his lonely world, but toward the end of his life, like
the legendary Japanese poetess Ono no Komachi, the “flight of the dragon” became the pur-
suit of a position between the microcosmic spaces of art making and the macrocosmic spaces
feared and imagined by the mind:

A mountain wind blows down Osaka’s slope
To moan the certainty of death;
Its message still eludes me.
Yet, when blossoms scatter and leaves fall,
Still in this hut I find my pleasure:
Grinding ink, I dip my brush and write.30
NOTES

1. For but one among many examples of photographers absorbing ink painting aesthetics into their medium, see Long Chisan Photographic: Composite Tradition (Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, 2011).


3. See, for example, Gregory Levine, “Two (or More) Truths: Reconsidering Zen Art in the West” in G. Levine and Y. Lippit (eds.), Awakenings: Zen Figure Paintings from Medieval Japan (New York: Japan Society, 2007), pp. 52-63.


11. Ibid., pp. 33-34.

12. Ibid., pp. 84-85.


17. This letter to Isamu Noguchi is dated June 23, 1930 and signed by “J.V.”, who remains to be identified. Correspondence, 1929-1930, Archives of the Noguchi Museum, New York.


24. Hess’s article reproduces Noguchi’s photograph of the Chinese character attributed to Wu Chang-shih (Wu Junqang, 1844-1927), ibid., p. 35.


27. Isamu Noguchi, Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1987), p. 120.


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