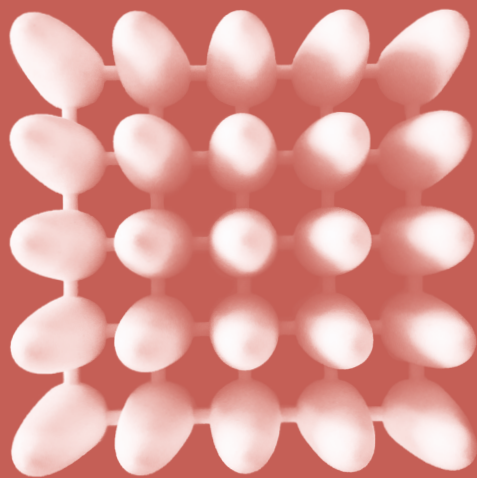
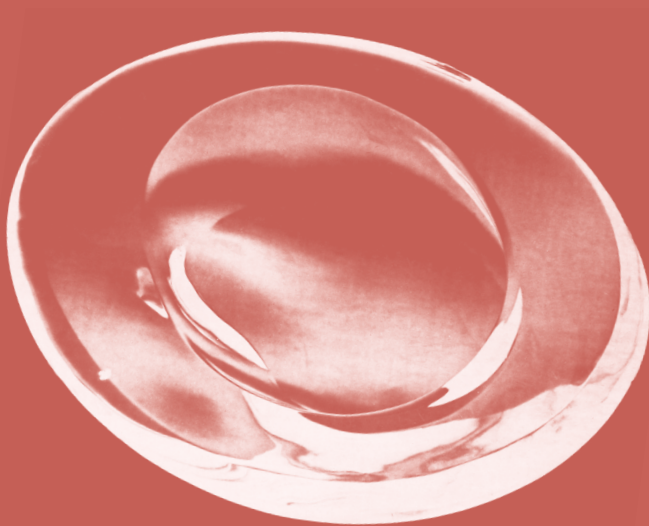


Isamu Noguchi's mid-century plans for "furnishing" the "imaginary abode" of America reached from the domestic scale of the modern hearth—an ideal ashtray—to our symbolic modern front door—a welcoming sculpture for what is now JFK Airport.



In 1944, Noguchi attempted to design the perfect ashtray. He developed two concepts that he tried to have manufactured. Neither went into production, and all of the models and prototypes are lost. This exhibition brings the attempt to life through archival materials, recreations of Noguchi's concepts, and other objects in their orbit.



COVERS "Furnishing" the "imaginary abode" is taken from Isamu Noguchi, "House by Noguchi and Kazumi Adachi." *Arts & Architecture* (November 1955): 26–27.

↗ Opening spread from dummy layout for "The Sculptor and the Ashtray," with text by Mary Mix, c. 1944. Print proofs with hand coloring. The Noguchi Museum Archives.

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noguchi.org



THIS IS THE STORY OF TWO ASHTRAYS. IT IS ALSO THE STORY OF THE MAN WHO MADE THEM AND WHY HIS DESIGNS TURNED OUT THE WAY THEY DID. INCIDENTALLY, IT IS THE STORY OF ALL THE ASHTRAYS YOU EVER BOUGHT, SAW OR USED.

An ashtray is a commonplace gadget for receiving ashes and butts, a surface used to prop cigarettes on while pacing the floor, pounding a typewriter, combing one's hair or drinking a scotch and soda. It is found wherever civilized man and woman are present. But despite its simple function, this familiar piece of apparatus has a thousand faces. It is round, square, oval, oblong; deep and shallow, large and small. It can be made of glass, metal, pottery and fine china. It is the capacious metal bowl-on-a-stand, favorite of men's clubs and smoking cars, which swallows butts through a hinged opening. It is also the tiny etched crystal dish found on mirrored dressing tables, hardly large enough to service one cigarette. It is the chunky glass square which started its career in Orvigton's, finished it in Kresge's. And the hand hammered silver saucer from Taxco, Mexico. It is even the pottery head of Mussolini with his mouth forever agape to receive the carelessly flicked ash.

Why are all these ashtrays so different? Because not one of them is solely, exclusively or simply an ash receiver. Each one is bought for a different reason: for a quality of masculinity or femininity, for snob appeal, for beauty, for the sake of sentiment, as a symbol of luxury, as a joke.

Where do all these ashtrays come from? Many are designed by underpaid hacks who work for novelty companies. Most of them are turned out by draftsmen in glass factories and pottery works. Famous industrial designers have done ashtrays, and occasionally architects design them as part of a particular room. Some of the best ashtrays were never designed at all—the top of an old painted canister, a hollow rock picked up on the road, a fireplace . . .

**these ashtrays
were designed by a sculptor**

SCULPTORS ARE A FUNNY BREED, BECAUSE THEY DON'T MAKE A LIVING LIKE OTHER PEOPLE. IN THE FIRST PLACE THEY HAVE A FEAST OR FAMINE BUSINESS. ONE MIN-

The Sculptor and the Ashtray was inspired by two dummy layouts and a typescript for an unpublished article with that title written around 1944 by Mary Mix (Foley). Mix was an architecture and design writer who worked with George Nelson, then an editor at *Architectural Forum* and *Fortune*. The article, which was apparently written for a new publication Nelson was developing, chronicles Isamu Noguchi's efforts to design the perfect ashtray—or actually two ashtrays, or four, or maybe as many as twelve, depending on how you count them.

Like nearly everyone else in the middle of the last century, Noguchi smoked. It is hard to believe now, but the ashtray was then a near-universal tabletop accessory—"found wherever civilized man and woman are present," in Mix's words.¹ As she explains, this "commonplace gadget" was made and used across the full spectrum of global material culture, encompassing everything from tacky novelty items and marketing swag designed by unknown "hacks" to valuable *objets d'art* conceived by the great artisans of the day.² And, like the chair, which is so often regarded as an essentialist encapsulation of the values of the societies and designers who have—or have not—produced them, the ashtray's ubiquity made it an inherently fascinating prism for revealing cultural values.

Mix's piece documents Noguchi's creation of two groups of ashtray concepts. The first, handcrafted and biomorphic, was developed through a natural-selection-like process of iterative refinement over nine plaster prototypes. These are known from Mix's account and two images in the dummy layouts showing them grouped together. Of the ninth, which Noguchi seems to have considered the finished design in that line of thinking, Mix wrote that it appeared "not as a clever design, but as a natural object which grew inevitably and could be no other way." Both layouts include images of this final version seemingly executed in glass.

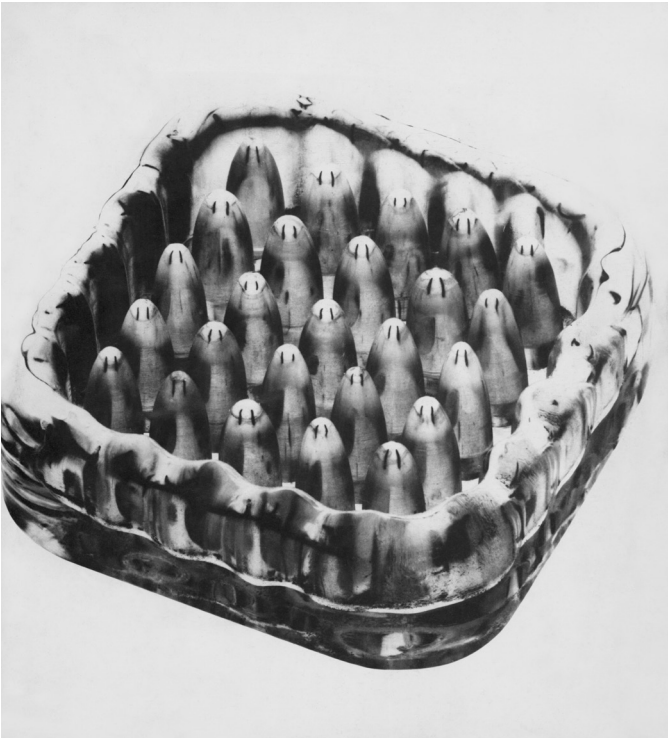
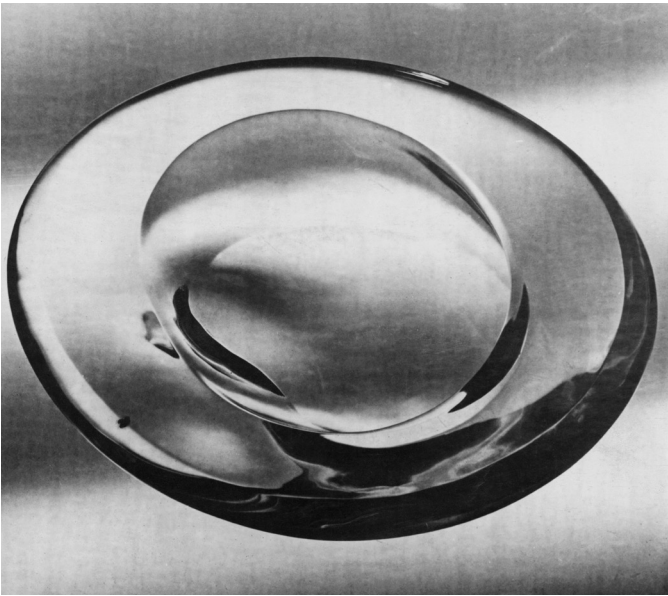
The second concept was a modular design conceived for industrial manufacture—to be produced "cheaply by the million" according to Noguchi, consisting of an array of standing projections, which he described as bullets, arranged in magazines. These bullets were spaced so that they could be used either to hold cigarettes or to extinguish them. Around this basic idea he designed, and prepared patent applications for, three concepts. The first was a freestanding square of minimally connected bullets, "the extinguishing element," that could be inserted into another ashtray, or set in a bowl or on a plate. It was likely meant to be produced in metal. The second was a dismountable,

two-part ashtray in which the same matrix of bullets became a removable bottom. In one of the Mix article layouts, there is a photograph of this concept modeled in plaster, but it was also likely intended to be made in metal. (Multiple copies of the photograph are repeated in a grid to imply mass production.) In the third concept, Noguchi arranged the bullets in more fully connected magazines, which could be loaded side by side into, and easily removed from, the body of the ashtray. Noguchi intended for these to be produced in glass—the magazines in multiple colors—to allow the owner a degree of customization. What unites each of these executions of the bullet concept, as Noguchi makes clear in the patent applications, is efficient use and cleaning.

In a breathless letter to his friend R. Buckminster Fuller, Noguchi requested permission to brand this second family of designs the Dymaxion Ashtray. It is, he explains, a “neat” “gadget” of “unparalleled efficiency.”³ (“Dymaxion”—dynamic, maximum, tension—was a conceptual umbrella for Fuller’s designs based on achieving the “maximum gain of advantage from minimal energy input.”⁴) Mix presents this second concept—in which invention outweighs craft—as a characteristically contradictory counterpoint to the first example—with the pair, she argues, expressing Noguchi’s inherent hybridity. This paradox is expressed in the exhibition in the form of the two ashtrays that appear in photographs of Noguchi’s studio in the 1960s: Bruno Munari’s *Cubo* ashtray for Danese (1957) and a clamshell.

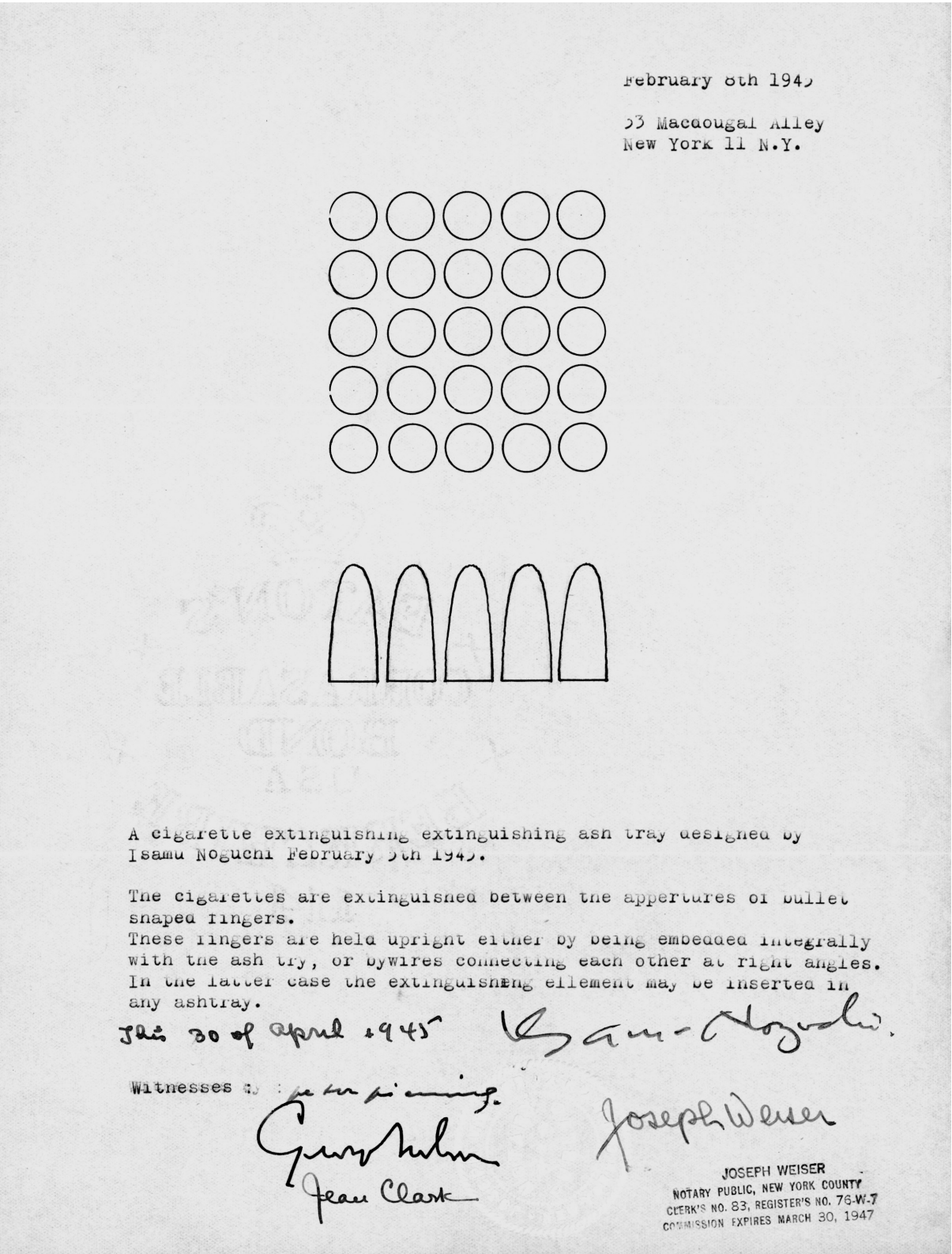
Explaining to Mix why he had abandoned the first design, of which he and Mix had been so admiring just days before, Noguchi rather unfairly calls it a “rehash of every stupid conventional ashtray in the world.” This is in contrast to the second, in which he felt that he had achieved “an American expression of the machine age.” “An artist who doesn’t take advantage” of America’s “facilities for machine manufacture,” he told Mix, “is just a fool!” Despite this, Noguchi did try to find a manufacturer able to execute the first concept in glass. From his letters with Fuller it is clear that he was open to investigating every material possibility, from glass and metal to plastic. But with the severe undercutting of the space beneath the top surface, it proved difficult to make in glass, even by hand—which in any case would have obviated the possibility of mass production. In a letter from the United States Glass Company, which attempted it, Noguchi is advised to modify “the design for practical manufacturing.”⁵

An attorney who reviewed Noguchi’s patent applications for the bullet concept on behalf of a potential manufacturer did not consider the design patentable.⁶ Noguchi nevertheless spent



↑ Illustrations from “The Sculptor and the Ashtray,” dummy layout with text by Mary Mix, c. 1944

→ Isamu Noguchi Notarized design drawing for patent application, February 8, 1945



several years trying (unsuccessfully) to find someone to produce it—only to learn that although he had conceived it specifically for mass production, manufacturers found it too complex. Noguchi generally preferred reality to adapt to him rather than the other way around. As he explained to an interviewer from *The League Quarterly* in 1949:

I am not a designer. The word design implies catering to the quixotic fashion of the time. All my work, tables as well as sculptures, are conceived as fundamental problems of form that would best express human and aesthetic activity involved with these objects.

I have done some work for mass production technique. Here the problem was approached entirely freely and without compromises so far as I was concerned. Art is an act. The act of creating a fundamental form, though it may be disciplined by the fundamental nature of the object desired, is not designing in the accepted sense.⁷

Unwilling to make the changes required to facilitate easy manufacture, Noguchi eventually gave up the hope of getting “an income from such a silly trinket like an ashtray.”⁸

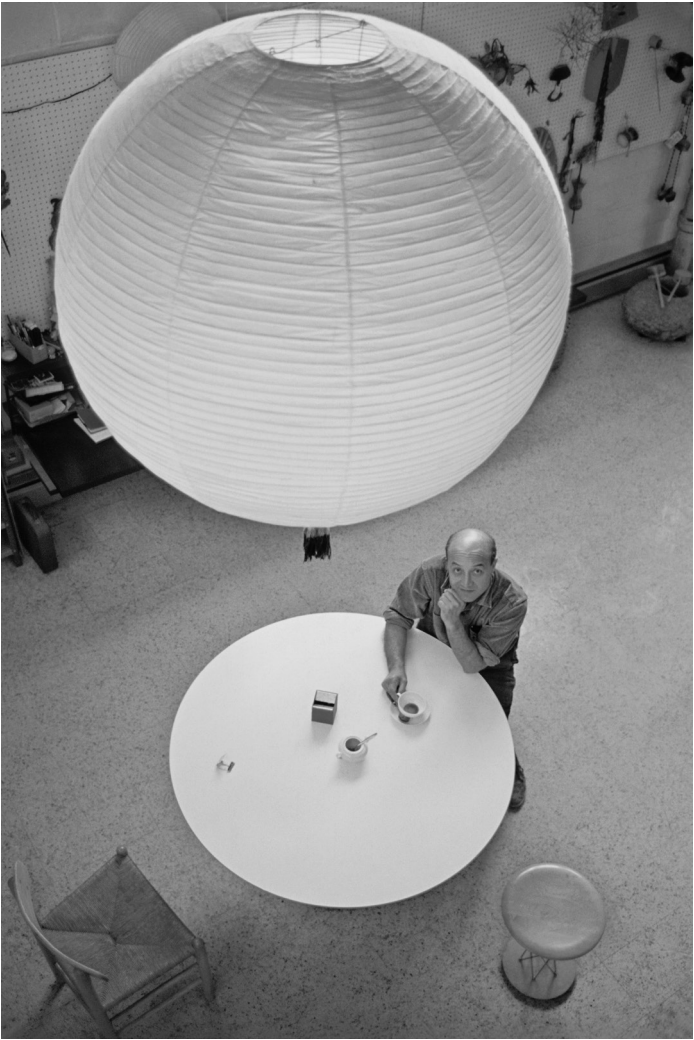
Summarizing Noguchi’s work on these ashtrays, Mix wrote that Noguchi brought “the terrific imprint of his whole personality,” to them, all stemming from his “simple and all-embracing” definition of sculpture as “our whole environment.” All-encompassing perfectly explains Noguchi’s passion for working at the prosaic end of the design/sculpture spectrum. That had always been his aim, as his 1930s designs for weathervanes, a timer clock, and a baby monitor made clear. In the prospectus for Time Design, a company he attempted to get off the ground in 1935, the list of what the company could design and manufacture includes everything from kitchenware and lighting fixtures to pneumatic furniture, homes, railroads, airplanes, automobiles, and sculptural displays.⁹

So what exactly did Noguchi see in the ashtray, besides the opportunity, as he put it, to get rich? He was undoubtedly motivated by the idea of making a thing as empirically blunt as an ashtray to facilitate an activity that produces not one but two archetypal ephemerality: ash and smoke. Smoke played a not incidentally talismanic role in the birth of conceptual art. Marcel Duchamp’s March 1945 cover for the surrealist magazine *View*—which came out about the same time that his friend Noguchi was working to develop the perfect ashtray—features an image of a wine bottle spewing smoke against a cerulean sky.¹⁰ The back cover carries a phrase from one of the famous

scrap-paper notes with which Duchamp changed everything, “Quand la fumée de tabac sent aussi de la bouche qui l’exhale, les deux odeurs s’épousent par inframince” (When tobacco smoke also smells of the mouth that exhales it, the two odors are married by infrathin). Duchamp said that the concept of infrathin could only be explained by concrete examples such as the warmth of a seat that has just been vacated. Maybe no one alive at the time was more sympathetic to the idea of an experiential, ephemeral sculpture than Noguchi, whose entire career was a search for empirically generated intangibles.

Noguchi’s effort to design, patent, and commercialize a perfect ashtray is, as Mix recognized, a remarkably essentialized way to understand the artist’s values. Noguchi was utterly unpretentious about sculpture, even as his ambitions for it encompassed pretty much the whole environment of our existence. In working to expand sculpture’s horizons—and thereby our perspective—he harnessed everything he knew about how to integrate the intimate and the universal through craft and technology; how to convert the bric-a-brac of modern life into foundation stones of culture and civilization; and how to shade habit into ritual. The humble ashtray, a conceptual complement to his light sculptures and a forerunner of his Akari lanterns, was an opportunity to create a global modern hearth. Around it, as one of the illustrations in Mix’s layout suggests, Noguchi thought to reshape the then near-universal social ritual of smoking into something more like the Japanese tea ceremony: a celebration of the value of giving physical coherence, structure, and resolution to space and time shared.

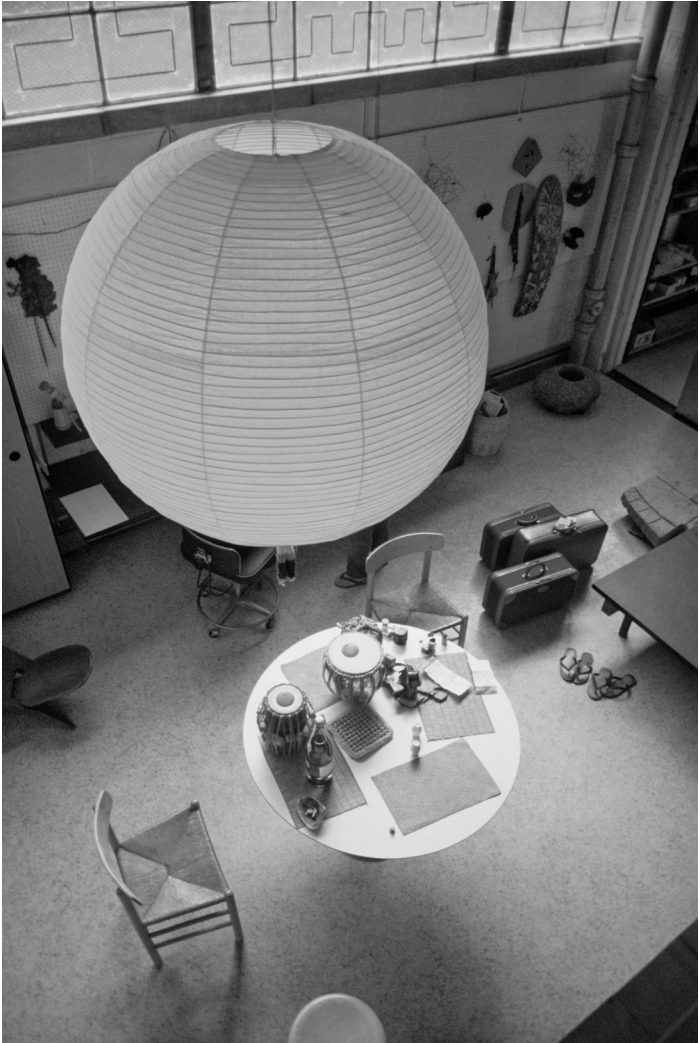
1 Mary Mix, “The Sculptor and the Ashtray,” unpublished, c. 1944. The Noguchi Museum Archives. MS_PROJ_059_009. All subsequent quotations from Mary Mix in this text come from this article.
2 This range was represented in the article, as it is here in the exhibition by a generic glass example and by two novelty ashtrays depicting Italian dictator Benito Mussolini and a college coed.
3 Isamu Noguchi, photocopy of letter to R. Buckminster Fuller, April 18, 1945. R. Buckminster Fuller papers, M1090. Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, CA. Courtesy of Deborah Goldberg.
4 John McHale, *R. Buckminster Fuller* (New York: G. Braziller, 1962), 17.
5 C. D. Barth, letter to Brooke Alexander, July 22, 1946. The Noguchi Museum Archives. MS_PROJ_059_007.
6 The package of relevant patents that Noguchi and the attorney reviewed, with examples of several ashtrays based on those patents, are also on view.
7 Isamu Noguchi, “From an Interview,” *The League Quarterly* 20, no. 3 (Spring 1949).
8 Isamu Noguchi, photocopy of letter to Anne Matta (later Alpert), May 11, 1945. Collection of Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal, Gift of Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark.
9 Isamu Noguchi, photocopy of letter to Edward Rumely [unsigned] with enclosed copy of “Time Design Prospectus,” October 28, 1932. The Noguchi Museum Archives. MS_COR_316_005.
10 Noguchi designed a cover for the Fall 1946 issue of *View*.



Dan Budnik
Views of Isamu Noguchi’s
Long Island City studio
with Bruno Munari’s
Cubo ashtray for Danese
(↑) and clamshell
ashtray (→), 1964



↑ Bruno Munari
Cubo, 1957
Plastic, steel



The Question of the “Bonniers Bowls”

The penultimate and final plaster studies in Noguchi’s development of a biomorphic ashtray seem to have served as models for a pair of cast iron bowls produced and sold by Bonniers, the New York City department store that retailed Noguchi’s Akari lanterns in the 1950s and ‘60s. There is no proof that Noguchi authorized or participated in their production, despite their regular appearance in the auction market following a sale in 2011 in which an example was erroneously attributed definitively to him.

The only known published reference to the bowls, which were included in a 1960 traveling exhibition of Japanese crafts organized by the Smithsonian Institution, is an article in *Interiors* that identifies them as the work of Noguchi’s sometime assistant and friend Tsutomu Hiroi, a young Japanese sculptor who would go on to become Japan’s greatest kite maker.¹¹ The illustration that accompanies the article shows three bowls, one of which is probably a duplicate.¹²

At this time, there is no credible explanation for why these two bowls, produced by Bonniers in Japan, resemble two of Noguchi’s ashtray prototypes. Because none of the nine plaster prototypes exist, it is not possible to perform the physical comparison that would be necessary to establish whether they were cast from the prototypes or modeled after them.

The existing evidence both in and absent from The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum Archives, now fully digitized and full-text indexed, weighs heavily against a Noguchi-authorized connection. The Archives contain no mention of the bowls, despite extensive records relating to Noguchi’s business with Bonniers. Noguchi’s accountant was a punctilious record keeper, and none of the itemized payment receipts in the Archives from Bonniers to Noguchi mentions the bowls. On the other hand, it is equally difficult to imagine how Bonniers—being already in business with Noguchi—could have come to unknowingly produce a version of one of his designs, or that they would have knowingly produced an unauthorized example of one of his designs.

While recognizing that there is almost certainly some connection between the iron Bonniers bowls and Noguchi’s first concepts for a perfect ashtray, without any proof of what that relationship might be, The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum cannot endorse the description of the bowls even as “attributed to” Isamu Noguchi. For the moment, they must remain a puzzle.

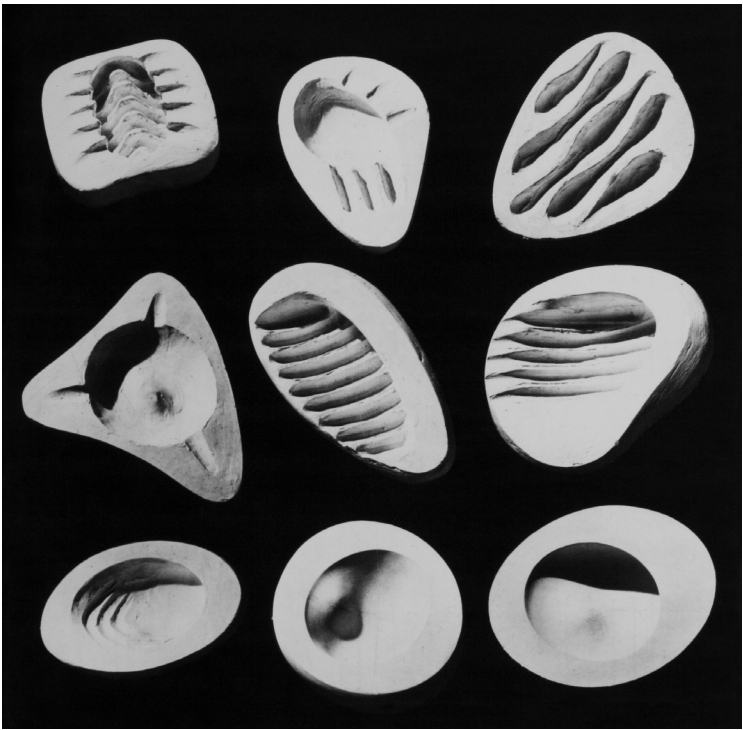
11 “For Your Information,” *Interiors* (November 1960): 22.
12 Only two shapes marked Bonniers are currently known.



↖ Bonniers Bowls / Ashtrays, n.d. Iron Private collection



↓ Photocollage of nine plaster ashtray designs by Isamu Noguchi, c. 1944 Pictured in the unpublished draft of “The Sculptor and the Ashtray”



↑ Edward Weston *Portrait of Isamu Noguchi*, 1935 Gelatin silver print

↗ Dan Budnik Isamu Noguchi in his Long Island City studio with Bruno Munari’s *Cubo* ashtray for Danese (1957), 1964 Digital photographic print from slide

↗ Dan Budnik Interior of Isamu Noguchi’s Long Island City studio with clamshell ashtray, 1964 Digital photographic print from slide

Dummy layout for “The Sculptor and the Ashtray,” with text by Mary Mix, c. 1944 Print proofs with hand coloring

Dummy layout for “The Sculptor and the Ashtray” with placeholder text, c. 1944 Print proofs

All materials from The Noguchi Museum Archives, unless otherwise noted.

Isamu Noguchi Three notarized design drawings for patent applications, February 8, 1945

↗ Bruno Munari *Cubo*, 1957 Plastic, steel

↗ Clamshell Like one in Budnik photograph of Isamu Noguchi’s Long Island City studio

↗ Isamu Noguchi *Cyclone Table (Knoll 312)*, 1957 Plastic laminate, plywood, chrome-plated steel wire

↗ Isamu Noguchi *Rocking Stool in Wire Form*, 1954 Chrome-plated steel wire, birch

↗ Isamu Noguchi *Akari 120A* Introduced 1964 Washi paper, bamboo ribbing

Chesterfield cigarette package, 1940s Inspired by ones in Noguchi’s MacDougal Alley studio

→ 3D prints of three ashtray design variations by Isamu Noguchi: Two-part “bullet” ashtray design, extinguishing element design, and modular ashtray design with swappable colored extinguishing elements, developed from original schematic drawings 1944–45 Produced 2020



↑ 3D print of an ashtray design by Isamu Noguchi, 1944–45 Developed from Bonniers bowl Produced 2020

ARCHIVE CASES Mary Mix, “The Sculptor and the Ashtray,” unpublished manuscript, c. 1944

Alan A. Wells, letter to Isamu Noguchi, March 27, 1946

Irwin D. Wolf, letter to Isamu Noguchi, July 16, 1946

C.D. Barth, copy of letter to Brooke Alexander shared with Isamu Noguchi, July 22, 1946

Cauman and Pfeufer Inc., letter to Isamu Noguchi, October 11, 1948

Isamu Noguchi, reproduction of letter to Buckminster Fuller, April 18, 1945 R. Buckminster Fuller papers, M1090 Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, CA Courtesy of Deborah Goldberg

Buckminster Fuller, reproduction of letter to Isamu Noguchi, May 17, 1945 R. Buckminster Fuller papers, M1090 Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, CA Courtesy of Deborah Goldberg

Isamu Noguchi, reproduction of letter to Anne Matta (later Alpert), May 11, 1945 Collection of Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal Gift of Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark

Mark D. Donohue, letter to George Gallowhur shared with Isamu Noguchi, May 2, 1945

United States Patent Office, various ashtray patents, 1927–44

Anholt Ashtray, patented 1944

Ashtray related to G. Gee patent (1940)

Ashtray related to Boyd patent (1940)

J. Lill Ashtray, manufactured by Vidrio, patented 1932

SHELVES Mid-century ashtray Glass

↓ Bassons Dummy Products *Ram-Bunk-Shus Benito Ashtray* 1942 Plaster, paint



↓ Visibility *Cigarette for One* 2018 Steel Courtesy of Visibility



↑ L.L.Rittgers *Pin-Up Ashtray* 1943 Plaster, paint Courtesy of Allan Ramos



↑ Isamu Kenmochi Various ashtrays for Trend Pacific 1960s Plastic, chrome