

**From the Everyday to the Monumental—Dual Exhibitions
Explore Two Mid-Century Designs by Isamu Noguchi**

***The Sculptor and the Ashtray*
and
*Composition for Idlewild Airport***

February 12 – August 23, 2020

New York, NY (December 18, 2019) – The Noguchi Museum delves into two forgotten projects by Isamu Noguchi, conceived at the height of American modernism. *The Sculptor and the Ashtray* explores Noguchi's efforts to design the perfect ashtray (a near-universal tabletop accessory in that era), and *Composition for Idlewild Airport* traces the story of Noguchi's unrealized design for a monumental sculpture for the new International Arrivals Building at New York's Idlewild Airport (now the John F. Kennedy International Airport). Both exhibitions will be on view February 12 – August 23, 2020.

Noguchi was profoundly in sync with America's mid-century obsession with the power of design to shape the modern world. These side-by-side exhibitions testify to his interest in making sculpture everywhere out of everything. Most notable in his career, and in the contrast between the two projects, is his distinctly non-hierarchical perspective on what constituted a meaningful use of his time. In the mid-1940s, the ashtray, quotidian and ubiquitous—even more than the martini shaker, the radio, or the barbeque—was an example of an object at the center of an existing, predominant social ritual, the shaping of which was then becoming central to Noguchi's conception of how to make socially relevant modern sculpture. In the late 1950s, air travel was a still-developing ritual of modernity, in the process of becoming synonymous with one-world culture.



Isamu Noguchi, *Composition for Arrivals Building, Idlewild Airport*, c. 1956–58.
Model in plaster, faux granite over plaster. The Noguchi Museum Archives.
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The Sculptor and the Ashtray

The Sculptor and the Ashtray was inspired by an unpublished article written around 1944 by Mary Mix (Foley), an architecture and design writer at George Nelson's *Architectural Forum*. It chronicles Noguchi's efforts to design the perfect ashtray. Mix noted that this "common-place gadget" was made and used across the full spectrum of material culture, from tacky novelty items and marketing swag designed by unknown "hacks" to solid-gold *objets d'art* conceived by the great artisans of the day for the coffee tables of monarchs.

Mix's article documents Noguchi's creation of two families of ashtray concepts. The first, handcrafted and biomorphic, was developed through a process of progressive refinement over nine modelled plaster prototypes. These are known from Mix's account, and two images in the article's layouts show them grouped together. Of the ninth iteration, which Noguchi seems to have considered the finished design in that line of thinking, Mix wrote that the ashtray appeared "not as a clever design, but as a natural object which grew inevitably and could be no other way."

The other concept was a modular design conceived for industrial manufacture—to be produced "cheaply by the million" according to Noguchi. It consisted of arrays of standing bullet-shaped projections, to be produced in glass or metal, that could be set into other ashtrays as an accessory, and around which Noguchi designed two complete ashtrays, each with a slightly different scheme for facilitating easy cleaning. Noguchi referred to this version—which he viewed as the result of invention rather than craft—as "an American expression of the machine age." He told Mix that "an artist who doesn't take advantage" of America's "facilities for machine manufacture...is just a fool!" It turned out, however, that the ashtray design was too complex for existing industrial techniques.

The exhibition includes patent applications for Noguchi's second concept, replicas of the designs contained within them, letters between Noguchi and his close friend R. Buckminster Fuller relating to the concept, recently produced exhibition copies of Noguchi (inextant) ashtray prototypes, and the original typescript of Mix's article and two mockup layouts.

Composition for Idlewild Airport

In 1956, Noguchi was invited by the architects Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM) to submit a design for a monumental sculpture for the new International Arrivals Building they were designing for New York's Idlewild Airport, the first large-scale international airport in the world. Four years later, in a 1960 magazine profile of Noguchi written for *The Palette*, Fuller seemed to acknowledge the appropriateness of Noguchi working in the context of an airport, stating, "...Isamu has always been inherently at home—everywhere. He has to-and-froed in his great back



Isamu Noguchi, *Ashtray Prototypes*, c. 1945–48. Plaster. The Noguchi Museum Archives. ©INFGM / ARS

and front yards whose eastward and westward extensions finally merged in world encirclement. ... World airlines pilots ... hold history's travel records. But it is safe to say that Isamu Noguchi is history's most traveled artist."

Noguchi's proposed design, a large, sky-gazing column, was not selected, and the commission went to his contemporary and long-time rival Alexander Calder, who proposed a massive mobile.

Composition for Idlewild Airport will explore Noguchi's design with a variety of related models, maquettes, architectural plans, and archival photographs and documents. A highlight is the recently restored competition model Noguchi executed in plaster, as well as a derivative column he made in Greek marble, which was exhibited in his 1959 exhibition at Stable Gallery in New York. That piece, which remained in Noguchi's collection but was broken at some point and left unrepaired in his lifetime, has also recently been conserved. The exhibition will also feature an exhibition copy of a model of the SOM-designed Lever Brothers Building, now known as Lever House, for which Noguchi designed an unrealized courtyard. That project was the seedbed for the idea Noguchi presented for the Idlewild commission and the inspiration for many stand-alone sculptures, including his variations on Constantin Brancusi's *Bird in Space*, one of which, *Bird B*, is also included in the exhibition.



Isamu Noguchi, *Bird Song* (element from model for Lever Brothers Building), 1952. Plaster, metal. Collection of The Noguchi Museum. Photo: Kevin Noble. ©INFGM/ARS

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About The Noguchi Museum

Founded in 1985 by Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988), one of the leading sculptors and designers of the twentieth century, The Noguchi Museum was the first museum in America to be established, designed, and installed by a living artist to show their own work. Widely viewed as among the artist's greatest achievements, the Museum comprises ten indoor galleries in a converted factory building, as well as an internationally acclaimed outdoor sculpture garden. Since its founding, it has served as an international hub for Noguchi research and appreciation. In addition to housing the artist's archives and the catalogue raisonné of his work, the Museum exhibits a comprehensive selection of sculpture, models for public projects and gardens, dance sets, and his Akari light sculptures. Provocative, frequently-changing installations drawn from the permanent collection, together with diverse special exhibitions related to Noguchi and the milieu in which he worked, offer a rich, contextualized view of Noguchi's art and illuminate his enduring influence as a category-defying, multicultural, cross-disciplinary innovator. noguchi.org | [@noguchimuseum](https://www.instagram.com/noguchimuseum)