

# AKARI LIGHT SCULPTURE

# ABOUT

*This introduction to Isamu Noguchi and his Akari project can be read to students. Visit [The Noguchi Museum website](#) if you wish for a more in-depth [biography](#), [chronology](#), or [akari history](#).*



Portrait of Isamu Noguchi, 1955. Photo: Louise Dahl-Wolfe.

Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988) was a biracial artist born in Los Angeles, California to an American mother and a Japanese father. He spent time growing up in both Japan and the United States. As Noguchi's career as an artist developed, he became devoted to sculpture and expanding the boundaries of what a sculpture could be. He traveled all around the world to research and find inspiration for his art, and frequently returned to Japan. While in Japan during the postwar years, he became interested in ways that an artist could blend **traditional** craft with **modern** ideas and techniques.

During the spring of 1951, Noguchi stopped in Gifu, Japan, where he witnessed the **cormorant fishing** festival and admired the glowing **chochin** (traditional paper lanterns) that decorated the fisher's boats. When the mayor of Gifu heard that the famous artist Isamu Noguchi was in town, he offered Noguchi the opportunity to strengthen the city's declining lantern-making industry. Noguchi took him up on this offer and started sketching ideas right away. His first idea was to modernize the traditional **chochin** by exchanging its candle for a light bulb. He called his modernized **chochin** **Akari** light sculptures.

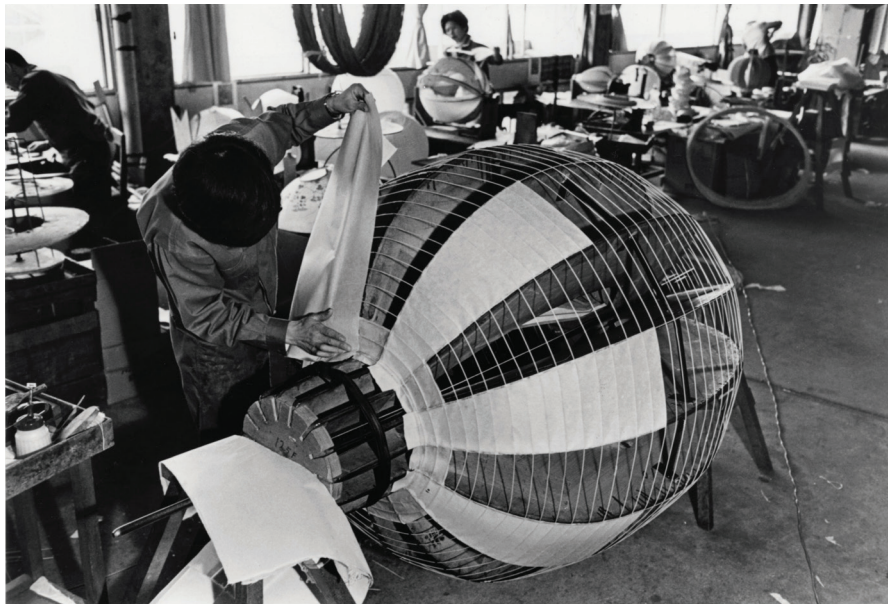
Noguchi soon began a partnership with the family **studio** of Ozeki, which had been making **chochin** since the late 19th century, on his Akari project. He continued creating Akari sculptures with Ozeki for the remainder of his career. In total, Noguchi created over 100 Akari designs. The project still lives on, playing an important role in people's homes, and the **art** and **design** world today.

# MATERIALS AND PROCESSES

Words cannot capture the skillful dance that is the Akari making process. We recommend you show your students [this video](#) of an Akari being created, and then share with them any additional information from this explanation that you think would be helpful.

Akari, the word Noguchi chose for his light sculptures, is a Japanese word meaning light (as in illumination) and also lightness (as in weight). Although the process of creating Akari and traditional *chochin* is similar, Noguchi made quite a few significant innovations.

Like *chochin*, most Akari are constructed around a unique wooden mold composed of vertical slats, arranged radially around the center. The slats are notched along their edges to hold in place a narrow strip of *higo* (cured bamboo), which spirals all the way around the mold to create the collapsible ribbing of each lantern. *Washi* (handmade mulberry bark paper) is laid and glued over the *higo*. The completed lantern is dried with heat lamps. Then, the wooden mold is disassembled and removed from the interior of the lantern through the opening on one of its sides.



Worker at Ozeki Factory constructing Akari, 1978.

Unlike traditional *chochin*, most Akari do not feature a wooden rim (*wa*). Instead, Noguchi designed metal frames and stands to support both the lanterns and their electric light fixtures. Traditional *chochin* would have had sockets for candles. Noguchi also invented new forms with puzzling geometries, asymmetry, and the appearance of randomness. In these ways, Noguchi created Akari to be a “true development of an old tradition.”

# ART OR DESIGN?

*In the classroom activities section of this guide, you will find an activity that invites students to debate the question of whether Akari are examples of art or design. This section will give you background on this decades-long discussion.*



*Isamu Noguchi: What is Sculpture? Venice Biennale, 1986.*

Noguchi always held that his Akari were “valid expressions of sculpture,” but some of Noguchi’s contemporaries wondered whether he went too far in describing his Akari as art. After all, Akari are functional objects, made in multiples. Noguchi insisted against the word “**reproduction**,” for each Akari is a continuation of its original series. Noguchi himself frequently stated that “to start a home all that is needed is a room, a [*tatami*] pad and an Akari.” He felt that the *use* of Akari was integral to the appreciation of their *beauty* and even wrote, “my main purpose has always been art as it relates to life.”

Noguchi consciously sought to disrupt preconceived (typically Western) distinctions between “art” and “design,” by embracing a broad notion of art that included functional objects, a belief validated by his experiences with cultures he learned from during his travels. With this philosophy in mind he created interactive objects and spaces, including stage sets, gardens, furniture, and playgrounds throughout his career.

In 1986, Noguchi was selected to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale. Noguchi titled his exhibition, “What is Sculpture?” and devoted two galleries to Akari, including an enormous orb known simply as Akari 200D (all Akari were titled in such codes of letters and numbers). He was criticized for exhibiting “design” objects in one of the world’s preeminent art exhibitions, but the venerable artist was not deterred. It has been speculated that he was deprived of the Biennale’s Grand Prize as a result of his decision, in spite of his influential career spanning half a century. In Noguchi’s statement about his Venice exhibition, he wrote, “I wanted to show how art--like nature--cannot be limited; that it can keep on changing, and function in the same sense that nature does.”



*Isamu Noguchi: What is Sculpture?*, 1986 Venice Biennale  
June 29, 1986–September 28, 1986.

# VIEW AND DISCUSS

Before discussing the Akari, give your students an opportunity to look at, sketch, and carefully touch your classroom Akari.

- Noguchi traveled the world learning about the connection between people and their objects. Think of and share an object that tells us something about your family's culture.
- Noguchi's artwork was often inspired by his travels, with his most favorite place being Japan. Where is a place you have visited, near or far, that inspired you? What about the place is most memorable?
- In Gifu, Noguchi was tasked by the mayor to modernize traditional *chochin*. Look at Noguchi's Akari next to an original paper lantern. What changes did Noguchi make? Why is it important to modernize designs over time?



Traditional Chochin



Akari 1N

- Noguchi's Akari are so popular that companies all over the world make imitations. What differences can you find between Noguchi's Akari and a similar imitation? What's positive about imitations? What's negative about imitations?
- When discussing his Akari, Noguchi said: "My main purpose has always been art as it relates to life." How are Akari examples of art that relates to everyday life?

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

**Research:** Akari are a type of art that Noguchi wanted people to own and live with in their homes. Visit The Noguchi Museum's [website](#) and look at the large collection of Akari. Notice how the bamboo ribbing varies. There are three different types of ribbing, which are easiest to see in the ceiling models: Model As that are evenly spaced, Model Fs that are slightly irregular, and Model Ds that are very irregular and widely spaced. Along with the various ribbing options, Noguchi created over 100 designs. Which one would you want to live with and why?

**Write:** Noguchi uses words such as 'light,' 'fragile,' and 'magical' to describe Akari. What six descriptive words would you use to describe your class's Akari? Without telling your words to anyone, write each one down on a separate piece of paper. Pair up and use your combined 12 words to create an Akari themed poem.

**Create:** Akari are paper sculptures. How many different things can you do with one single piece of paper? Need some inspiration? Try rolling, ripping, pleating, slotting, notching, and crumpling. After you've experimented with paper, create a paper sculpture. Noguchi described the Akari as "the one thing I've done out of pure love." How might you create a paper sculpture with love?

**Debate:** *Noguchi preferred to avoid traditional classifications of "art" and "design."* As a class, define the word "art" and then define the word "design." Write down whether you think Akari are an example of art, design or both. Create three areas within the classroom, one for each group (art, design, both). After your writing is complete, go to your area of the classroom and share your reason with the other students. Stage a debate between groups about how you think Noguchi's Akari should be classified.

# GLOSSARY

**Akari:** Modern light sculptures, inspired by *chochin*, designed by Isamu Noguchi. Akari continue to be produced in Gifu, Japan using traditional lantern-making methods and materials.

**Art:** An act of human activity often related to aesthetic, conceptual, or emotional expression.

**Chochin:** Foldable Japanese lanterns made from bamboo frames and paper or silk coverings. These lanterns have been used for over 1,000 years to decorate and illuminate shrines, temples, businesses, and streets.

**Cormorant Fishing:** A traditional fishing method that has been used for thousands of years in which fishermen use trained birds to fish in rivers. The fishermen tie cords around the birds' necks, allowing them to eat small fish but encouraging them to return to their boats with large fish.

**Design:** Functional objects, spaces, or ideas that can be used in everyday life.

**Modern:** According to "[MoMA](#)" (n.d.), modern can mean related to current times, but it can also indicate a relationship to a particular set of ideas that, at the time of their development, were new or even experimental.

**Reproduction:** A copy of something such as a work of art.

**Studio:** An artist or designer's workspace.

**Traditional:** Creating or practicing in a long established way.



## Bibliography

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- "What is Sculpture?: Akari from the 1986 Venice Biennale." Exhibition brochure, the Noguchi Museum, 2009.

## Website links

Biography: <https://www.noguchi.org/isamu-noguchi/biography/biography/>

Chronology: <https://www.noguchi.org/isamu-noguchi/biography/chronology/>

Akari History: <https://www.noguchi.org/isamu-noguchi/digital-features/the-history-of-akari-light-sculptures/>

Akari Production: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQ8SbDJ7Cck>