

SELF-INTERNEED, 1942

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This guide was written to complement the exhibition “Self-Interned, 1942: Noguchi in Poston War Relocation Center” at The Noguchi Museum. This exhibition marks the 75th anniversary of Executive Order 9066, a wartime directive that authorized the incarceration of Japanese citizens and American citizens of Japanese heritage living on the West Coast of the United States. On view until January 2018, the exhibition explores Isamu Noguchi’s decision to voluntarily enter the “Poston War Relocation Center.”

The content of this guide will remain accessible beyond the run of the exhibition. The Noguchi Museum will continue to support classroom investigations of Noguchi’s self-internment as an example of one artist’s struggle to navigate the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II.

Recommended for students in grades 5–12, this guide includes an overview of the historical context surrounding Noguchi’s experience, as well as artwork and primary documents related to Noguchi’s time in Poston. We have kept the content as open as possible, in order to encourage teachers to adapt the materials to meet the needs of their students.

For each artwork or document, we have included a large image for use in the classroom, information about the piece, and a suggested writing, art, or discussion activity. The information in the “About” section is intended for teacher reference, although it may certainly be shared with students during or after the activity. Quotations from Isamu Noguchi are incorporated to offer educators connections with, and insights into, the artist’s thought process.

The five works featured:

- “I Become a Nisei” (1942)
- Poston park and recreation area design (1942)
- Letter to Man Ray (1942)
- Letter to George Biddle (1942)
- *Remembrance* (1944)

Supplementary materials and links can be found at the end of this guide.

We welcome your feedback about this guide or about educational resources and programs at The Noguchi Museum. Please feel free to contact us at education@noguchi.org.

SELF-INTERNEED, 1942: AN OVERVIEW

After the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066. Signed February 19, 1942, the order authorized the military to forcibly evacuate Japanese Americans living on the West Coast of the United States. The newly established War Relocation Authority (WRA) began deporting residents first to assembly centers, and then to prison camps.

Approximately 120,000 Japanese immigrants (Issei) and Americans of Japanese descent (Nisei) were forced to leave their homes and their jobs. The WRA forced them into ten prison camps built in deserts and swamplands. Barbed wire fenced each camp, guards stood sentry in watchtowers, and searchlights swept the grounds at night. The inmates lived in barracks with communal bathrooms and dining halls.

Isamu Noguchi voluntarily entered the "Poston War Relocation Center" in Arizona. As a New York resident, Noguchi was exempt from the government's evacuation orders. However as someone who was biracial, the child of a Japanese father and white American mother, the artist remained keenly aware of what was taking place on the West Coast: "I was not just American but Nisei." Noguchi wanted to prevent the prison camps, and help. He met with the commissioner of Indian Affairs in Washington, D.C., named John Collier. Collier oversaw the prison camps because they were built on Indian reservation land. He encouraged Noguchi to move to the camp in Poston, Arizona, to help create an ideal community there. "Thus I willfully became a part of humanity uprooted."

Noguchi arrived at Poston on the morning of May 8, 1942, with visions of transforming the prison camp into a model community. He planned to develop an arts and crafts program, including ceramics and woodworking, to bring back handicraft traditions that he feared the Nisei had lost in the process of Americanization. His barrack assignment: block 5, building 7, apartment A.

However, within a few weeks, his letters reflected his growing unhappiness with the "the intense heat" and "eye-burning dust." Noguchi struggled not only with the extreme conditions, but also with his strained relationships with both the camp's authority figures as well as the inmates.

An established artist from the East coast, Noguchi discovered he didn't have much in common with the people around him who mostly came from farming backgrounds. Although his celebrity status and good looks drew admiration from some, many regarded him with suspicion. "Everything about him was different," recalled one former prisoner. With a private corner apartment and occasional trips outside the camp, Noguchi's privileged status garnered mistrust; many suspected he was an informer.

Few of Noguchi's Poston projects came to fruition – a point of further frustration for the artist. He came to believe Collier's plans for an ideal community sat at odds with the aims of the WRA. The artist doggedly found solutions to many a setback, but with limited supplies and little support, Noguchi believed: "My presence became pointless." He wanted out.

Noguchi entered Poston of his own volition, but soon realized that getting out of the camp would prove more difficult. In late July, Noguchi wrote of his unhappiness to Collier, asking for help to secure release from Poston. His plea initially unanswered, Noguchi began petitioning WRA officials directly. Six months after his arrival in Poston, Noguchi obtained military authorization for a 30-day leave. On November 12, 1942, he got into his station wagon and drove out of Arizona. He never returned.

I BECOME A NISEI

“To be hybrid anticipates the future. This is America, the nation of nationalities.”

— Isamu Noguchi

ABOUT

Identity was a source of personal and professional tension for Noguchi because he was biracial. His mother, Léonie Gilmour, was a white American woman; and a writer, teacher, and editor. His father, Yonejiro Noguchi, was an Asian man from Japan, and a well-known poet. Their affair began when Léonie agreed to edit Yonejiro’s English poetry. Before Noguchi was born in 1904, Yonejiro left for Japan. At two, Noguchi moved with his mother to Japan, where he remained an outsider and continued to be estranged from his father. He returned to America, despite a growing anti-Japanese sentiment, and Noguchi attended high school in Indiana. He made this transition on his own, learning some measure of self-reliance, but with support from a local businessman and his family. (Léonie would return to New York when Isamu was in his 20s.) He remained equivocal about his identity.

On December 7, 1941, Noguchi heard the news on his car radio: Japan had bombed the U.S. Navy in Pearl Harbor. “With a flash I realized I was no longer the sculptor alone,” Noguchi recalled. “I was not just American but Nisei. A Japanese-American.” With race hysteria mounting on the West Coast, Noguchi wanted to help his fellow Nisei. He organized a group called the Nisei Writers and Artists for the Mobilization of Democracy, wrote to like-minded activists to draw attention to the Issei and Nisei’s circumstances, and met with government officials. His activism culminated in his choice to voluntarily enter the “Poston War Relocation Center.”

Noguchi was asked to write an account of the prison camp for Reader’s Digest, a widely popular magazine that culled and condensed stories from other publications. The founder, DeWitt Wallace, offered Noguchi \$1200 for the prospective piece. Noguchi responded with “I Become a Nisei,” which summarizes his experience and critically reflects on his identity in relation to the Nisei. The artist wrote the essay slowly, preparing it for submission in October of 1942. His article was never published, possibly because of the magazine’s conservative nature, and likely due to government censure.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY: EXPLORING IDENTITY

Read: Noguchi wrote “I Become a Nisei” when he was in the “Poston War Relocation Center.” Read the essay:

<https://www.noguchi.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Isamu-Noguchi-I-Become-A-Nisei-The-Noguchi-Museum.pdf>

In the essay, Noguchi reflects on his own identity, as well as the identity of the Nisei (American citizens of Japanese descent). How does Noguchi compare himself to the Nisei? How is he similar? How is he different?

Discuss: Noguchi titles his essay “I Become a Nisei.” He explains his entry into Poston: “A haunting sense of unreality, of not quite belonging, which has always bothered me made me seek for an answer among the Nisei.” What answers or ideas does Noguchi come to?

Research: Watch the video stories in The New York Times series “Hyphen-Nation”:
<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/storywall/hyphen-nation>

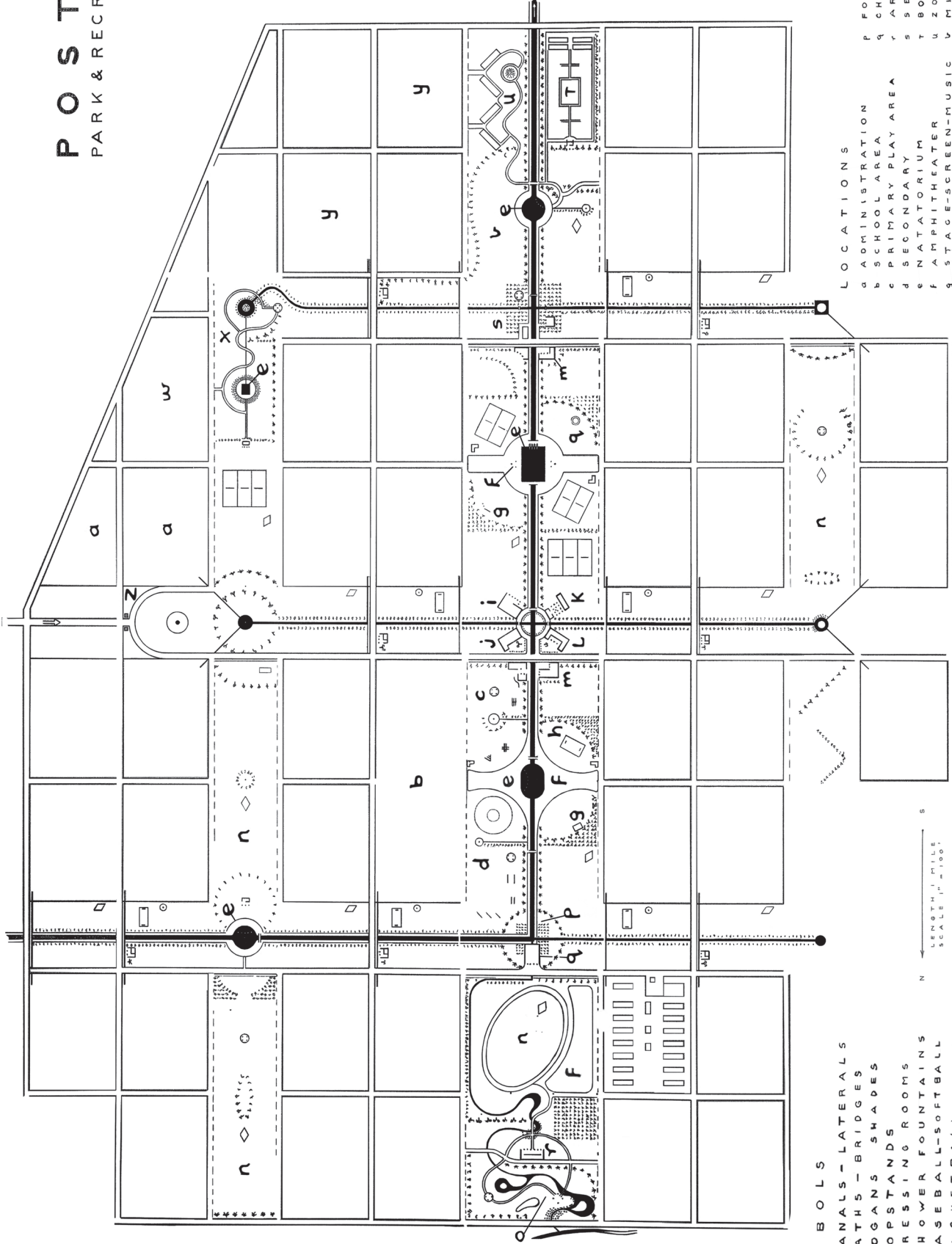
Compare these stories to Noguchi’s essay. What similarities can you find? Differences?

Respond: How would you answer the Times’ questions: “When do you feel most American? Or least?” Provide your answer in writing or drawing. Share your response with a partner.

Reflect: As a group, how would you define American identity? Noguchi defines American identity at the beginning of his essay: “To be hybrid anticipates the future. This is America, the nation of all nationalities. The racial and cultural intermixture is . . . our unique personality and strength.” How does Noguchi’s definition compare to the one you collectively created?

POSTON

PARK & RECREATION



SYMBOLS

- CANALS - LATERALS
- PATHS - BRIDGES
- HOGAN SHADES
- POPSTANDS
- DRESSING ROOMS
- SHOWER FOUNTAINS
- BASEBALL-SOFTBALL
- BASKETBALL
- TENNIS
- MESQUITE-OLIVE-CAROB
- PALMS-DATE-WASHINGTONIA
- LITAMARACK-TAMARISK-WILLOW-CYPRESS
- FIG-LOCUST-COTTONWOOD-ASH
- OLEANDER-JASMINE-PLUM
- GRAPE

LOCATIONS

- a ADMINISTRATION
- b SCHOOL AREA
- c PRIMARY PLAY AREA
- d SECONDARY
- e NATATORIUM
- f AMPHITHEATER
- g STAGE-SCREEN-MUSIC
- h DANCE-GYMNASIUM
- i COMMUNITY CENTER
- j THEATER BUILDING
- k CAFE-RESTAURANT
- l DEPARTMENT STORE
- m MARKET STORES
- n FOOTBALL TRACK
- o JAPANESE GARDEN
- p FOUNDERS GROVE
- q CHURCH
- r ART CENTER
- s SETTLERS GROVE
- t BOTANICAL GARDEN
- u ZOOLOGICAL
- v MINIATURE GOLF
- w HOSPITAL
- x HOSPITAL GARDEN
- y WAREHOUSES
- z GATE

ALL BUILDING ABOVE
 ● THE AMERICAN FLAG

NORTH
 SCALE: 1" = 100'
 LENGTH: 1 MILE

PARK AND RECREATION FOR POSTON

'You are the middle people who will help teach Asia the meaning of democracy. This is construction in a world of chaos.' — [Noguchi quoting John Collier]

ABOUT

Noguchi wanted to help shape the environment of the prison camps in a way that would foster “good will” among the prisoners and engender faith in democracy. With encouragement from a government official, John Collier, he agreed to enter Poston voluntarily, with the aim of developing this ideal community.

The War Relocation Authority (WRA) described the prison camps as “pioneer” communities “where you may live, work, worship and educate your children.” The WRA noted Poston’s potential for farming, suggesting prisoners would “develop a green irrigated valley for their own use.” In contrast to the WRA’s cheery accounts, the reality of the camp was bleak when Noguchi arrived in May 1942.

Built in the Arizona desert, the “Poston War Relocation Center” was gated by a barbed wire fence just like a prison. The camp was divided into blocks, each containing 14 barracks. Each barrack held four 20x30 foot apartments. Each apartment housed a minimum of five people. The people within each block shared communal bathrooms and a mess hall.

The prison camps were still under construction when Noguchi arrived. Frustrated with the government’s plodding pace, he nonetheless mapped out his ideas for the camp. In his park and recreation area design, Noguchi envisioned a series of gathering spaces, tracing along a tree-lined irrigation canal running through the center of the camp. To provide relief from Poston’s repetitive layout, the artist angled structures off the camp’s boxy grid and playfully curved the canal.

Few of Noguchi’s plans came to fruition, although Noguchi found solutions for many of the obstacles he encountered. Without technicians and limited resources, Noguchi enlisted the help of the prisoners to create adobe bricks from local clay. Still, camp officials did not prioritize these projects, and Noguchi came to believe “they wanted nothing permanent nor pleasant.” Without the support he needed, Noguchi could not move forward with his plans, and thus began petitioning for his release.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY: CONSIDERING COMMUNITY

Look: Look at photographs of the “Poston War Relocation Center” (available here: <http://densho.org/>).

Compare: Now look at Noguchi’s plan for a park and recreation area at Poston. After trying to stop the creation of the prison camps, the artist voluntarily entered Poston, hoping to build an ideal community. Looking at this plan, describe the choices Noguchi made. How was he trying to be helpful? How might he have been hurtful?

Discuss: Language describing the incarceration camps have changed over time. Visit <https://densho.org/terminology/> and discuss why the change in language matters.

Create: Consider communities you are part of. Create a work of art about belonging in one of those communities.

Reflect: How do you belong to a community? How does your art show your connection to that community?

5. 7. A. Poston Arizona

May 30 1942

Dear Man,

Thanks ever so much for the note and enclosure.

I'm all right.

This is the wierdest, most unreal situation - like in a dream - I wish I were out. Outside, it seems from the inside, history is taking flight and passes forever. Here time has stoped and nothing is of any consequence, nothing of any value, neither our time or our skill. Our sphere of effective activity is cut to a minimum. Our pre-occupations are the intense dry heat, the afternoon dust storms the food (35¢ a day).

But, maybe this is sence - the world is nuts.

I am trying to start pottery and wood working shops. Also I am supposed to be in charge of landscaping, the department of parks, and the cemetary.

Maybe its the weather that makes everything so unreal.

O ! for the sea !

" " an orrange

Let me know when you wish to come - you may like it.

Love to Juliet

ever

May 30 1942

Dear George,

Your letter just got to me via Man Ray who heard of my whereabouts over the radio. You see I came to Poston which is a resettlement project for the people of Japanese ancestry located on the Parker Indian Reservation. The expectation is that the evacuees will develop the land which will be returned to the Indians at the end of war.

Last month I was in Washington on much ~~such~~ a mission as you suggest. Although I did not have an introduction from your brother I did see a number of people in the Donovan committee, but with no success. Yas. Kuniyoshi does occasional pieces for them in N.Y.. I just didn't seem to get located.

I decided that things being the way they were I might as well dive into one of these relocation settlements to see what I could do to help preserve self respect and belief in America. I came voluntarily, and find myself in as strange a situation as exists, or could exist in a democracy.

This place is the first of the areas which is marked for permanent improvement - this element plus the proposition that a maximum of self government is to be fostered, inside of the military cordon, differentiates it from the temporary reception centers which are not much else than internment camps. Unfortunately here as in all the other camps there is absolute segregation from the rest of America, civil and economic. That this will result in moral irresponsibility for the welfare of America is already showing evidences.

Many of us have asked that there be established tribunals for the examination and subsequent to establishment of absolute loyalty American citizens educated in our schools should be free to leave the camps if they have a job to go to. A procedure such as this was endorsed by the Tolan Committee for certain categories of Germans and Italians but not for Americans if they have Japanese blood. It is very distressing as I feel we should make clear that we are fighting the enemies of democracy, and not our own citizens who unfortunately have the blood of one of our axis enemies, Japan. I understand that neither Germans nor Italians have been moved (excepting of course known subversive elements). Nor is it contemplated to have evacuations in many other part of the country. The Army announces that the removal of the Japanese is purely a California problem.

I am to have a show at the San Francisco Museum in July. If exhibitions such as mine or Kuniyoshi's would help to change the inhospitable attitude of those Western states which refused admission, then I should think the government would help to promote it - alas they are too busy winning the war - maybe they think that race hatred is good for the war spirit. Maybe they are right - it's very sad.

Dont stay away too long, we need you here.

My best to Helaine,

As ever,

Isamu [Nozuchi]

LETTER TO FRIENDS

“This must be one of the earth’s cruelest spots.” — Isamu Noguchi

ABOUT

Japanese citizens and American citizens of Japanese heritage subject to incarceration went through an admittance process on arrival in Poston. After being fingerprinted and required to recite a loyalty oath, they received a serial number and an assignment to one of the camp’s shared “tarpaper shacks.” With a private room and no serial number, luxuries afforded by his volunteer entry, Noguchi’s experience was privileged. Yet, the artist was largely subject to the same conditions and way of life as the other prisoners.

Poston’s hastily built barracks did little to protect the incarcerated from the harsh climate of the Arizona desert. Temperatures soared over 100 degrees in the summer, and dove below freezing on winter nights. With its proximity to the Colorado River, the desert air was, strangely, often thick with humidity. Dust storms frequently swept through the camp.

Life in Poston was regimented. A siren announced 7 a.m. wake up each morning; lights were out by 9 p.m. More than one family would be crammed into a single apartment. Inmates from 14 barracks would wait in long lines to use the shared washrooms and toilets. Each day, prisoners received 37 cents to buy food that was cooked poorly by inexperienced chefs in the mess hall. Many inmates became ill.

Three weeks after he arrived in Poston, Noguchi wrote letters describing his experience to his friends, American artists George Biddle and Man Ray. George Biddle was an artist from Philadelphia whose work spanned many media including painting, sculpture, and printmaking. He’s well known for proposing a government-sponsored mural program, which turned into the Federal Arts Program during President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s administration. Also from Philadelphia, Man Ray was a photographer and painter. He is most well known for developing the artist style, Surrealism, which aimed to revolt against rational thought – and thus against the rules of society that they found oppressive. As Surrealists reveled in the subconscious revelations of dreams, Man Ray may have particularly appreciated Noguchi’s dream analogy described in his letter.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY: WRITTEN REFLECTIONS

Read: Noguchi wrote letters to his friends shortly after arriving at the “Poston War Relocation Center.” At the beginning of his letter to Man Ray, Noguchi makes an analogy, comparing his experience inside the prison camp to a dream. How does he extend this analogy – how is the camp like a dream?

Compare: Noguchi wrote to George Biddle and Man Ray on the same day. How do these letters compare to each other?

Discuss: What do you notice about Noguchi’s mood in these letters? What does he suggest about the prison camp? What specific parts of the letters give you that impression?

Condense: Underline the most important sentence in each letter, then circle the most important word in that sentence. How do these words get to the essence of each letter?

Revise: Noguchi concludes his letter to Man Ray with what appears almost as two lines of poetry:

O ! for the sea !

“ “ an orange

What do you make of Noguchi’s choices – the sea and an orange? Based on the rest of his writing, why might he want these particular things? If you were to rewrite these last two lines for yourself, what would it say?

O! for the _____ !

O! for an _____!

Reflect: What words did you choose? Share your new poem in small groups. Why did you choose these words?



Remembrance

1944

Mahogany

50 1/2 x 24 5/8 x 9 in. (128.3 x 62.5 x 22.9 cm)

Photo: Kevin Noble

REMEMBRANCE, 1944

“A purely cold abstraction doesn’t interest me too much. . . . Art has to have some kind of humanly touching and memorable quality. It has to recall something which moves a person.”
— Isamu Noguchi

ABOUT

Back in New York, Noguchi settled into a new studio space on MacDougal Alley. “The deep depression that comes with living under a cloud of suspicion, which we as Nisei experienced, lifted, and was followed by tranquility . . . I resolved henceforth to be an artist only.” Like many American artists, Noguchi turned to abstraction as a vehicle for expression at this time, thinking that abstraction could be perhaps more universal than realistic forms, which were used for purposes of propaganda.

During this time, Noguchi created a series of interlocking sculptures. The artist made these sculptures in a multistep process. He began by drawing abstract, biomorphic shapes on craft paper. He cut out the shapes and assembled them into small freestanding models. Noguchi enlarged and traced the shapes onto slabs of wood, stone, slate, or marble. He cut the forms using a circular power saw; without glue or nails, he then assembled the pieces into full-scale sculptures.

Noguchi’s interlocking sculptures can be taken apart in two minutes and reassembled in a new location. Art historian Amy Lyford links this process to the realities of Japanese American WWII incarceration. Those who were forced to evacuate packed the pieces of their lives that they could fit into two suitcases, left their homes and jobs, and moved into the prison camps. Lyford argues “Noguchi’s unique movable sculptures might be just the thing for a modern culture on the move, whether ‘relocating’ to a different state for work or being relocated for more overtly political reasons.”

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY: ABSTRACTION, MOOD, AND MEMORY

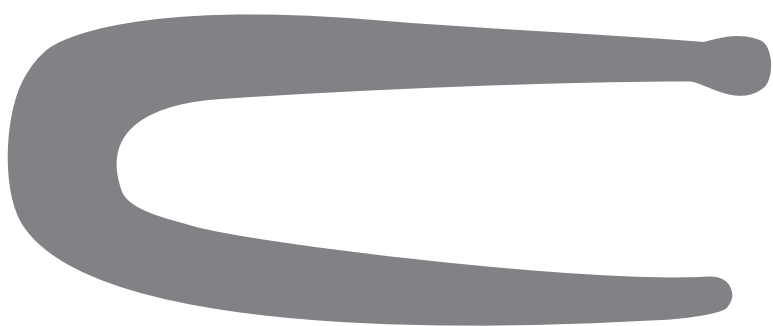
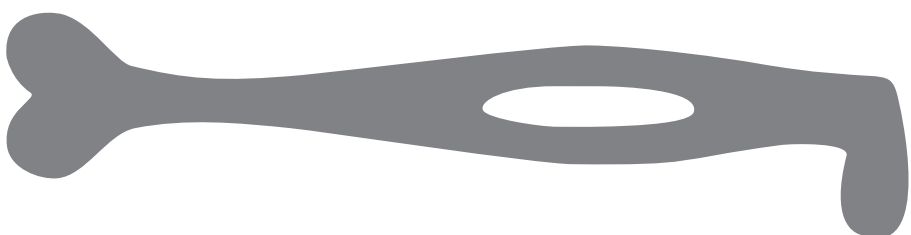
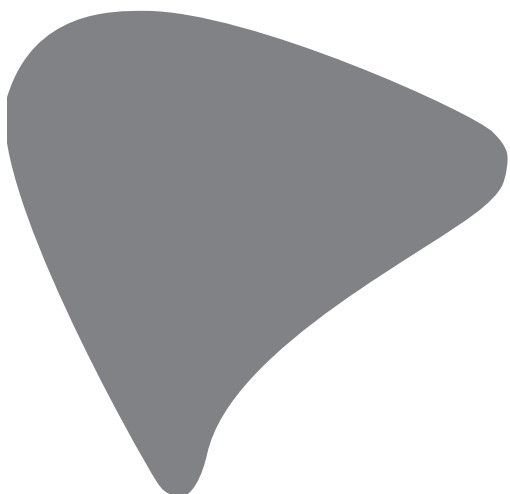
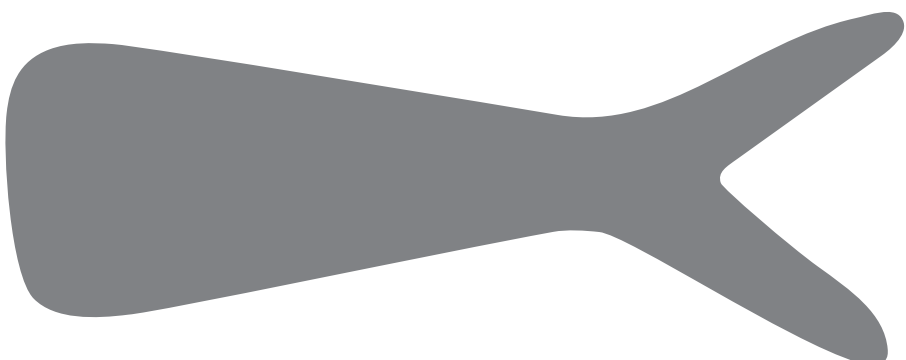
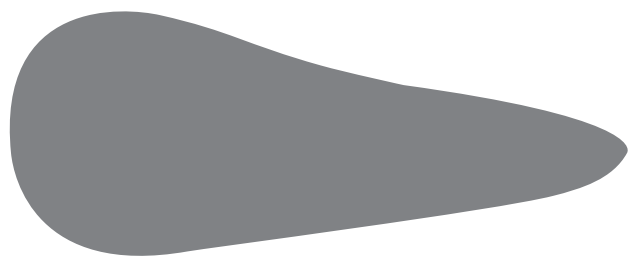
Brainstorm: Abstraction is art that does not show something from the world realistically, but rather uses the elements (line, texture, color, value, and form or shape) to express an internal reality, such as an idea or a feeling. What are some ideas or moods you might convey in an artwork?

Create: Using the template included in this guide, cut out all ten shapes. How might you arrange these shapes two dimensionally to show joy? Sadness? Conflict? Peace? (Use ideas and emotions generated in the Brainstorm activity above.)

Look: Noguchi used these same shapes to create *Remembrance*. What do the shapes remind you of? What do you notice about the way he chose to arrange the shapes? What word would you use to describe the mood of *Remembrance*? Why?

Discuss: Because of its interlocking sculpture, Noguchi could dismantle *Remembrance* in two minutes, pack all of its parts into a box, and then re-assemble it in a new location. Art historian Amy Lyford likens this process to the experience of individuals during Japanese American incarceration during World War II. What new ideas does this interpretation give you about the work?

Extend: If you could reassemble *Remembrance* in a new place, where would you move it?



SUPPLEMENTAL DOCUMENTS

Cemetery Project for Poston Camp (1942)

Poston Typical Block Plan (1942)

RESOURCES

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