In 1962, Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988) began conducting an extended exploration of stand-alone sculpture at open-air workshops and studios adjacent to quarries and stonecutting facilities—first at Pietrasanta, Italy, and then, in 1969, in Mure, Japan. These residencies signaled not only a shift from the isolation of Noguchi’s previous studios to industrial village settings abutting nature but also a creative renewal through exposure to freshly sourced stone. Observing the mechanics of stone being cut at its point of origin, Noguchi witnessed the imprecision involved in fracturing marble and the logistical foresight and skill necessary to make granite cleave somewhat predictably. He arrived at new insights into the inner composition of stone as a natural register of the external and material conditions that shaped it on a geological timescale and as a measure of earthly existence beyond human quantification. This led him to gradually incorporate the life of stone as an overarching theme in his work.

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In its semi-processed state, stone inspired Noguchi as a model to imitate and as a source of contradictions to reconcile in his own sculpture. Relating his failed attempt at negotiating shipment of the “beautiful waste” he saw at black-granite quarries in the south of Sweden during a visit in 1972, Isamu Noguchi was effusive:

“It’s the waste in the world that makes for the beauty of the world, the accidents, the things that people don’t even know about. Nature is constantly throwing off waste and all this awareness of the texture of the world is lost through machine making. There comes man’s intervention where he can still save for art that which is discarded by the machines. So that a lot of what I’m doing is a kind of discovery on my own part and other people begin to see it too.”

Salvaged Time surveys Noguchi’s search for expressive potential in stone, even extending to its afterlife, so to speak, in the many instances when he repurposed fragments and other remainders from his own practice. Sensitive to the particularities of stone from different locales and to the visual evidence of its quarrying and unearthing, Noguchi readily accommodated “the accidents of its being and making’ into his own processes, working with specimens large and small. Noguchi also found and reclaimed stones, either in natural or previously worked and discarded states, and recast them in forms and uses of his own invention.

A handful of works Noguchi made from disused millstones are an excellent example. Found all over the world as common grinding tools, millstones have remarkably complex surfaces, with their radiating furrows for moving grain in and out, and lands, raised areas for grinding. With Variation on a Millstone #2 (1962), Noguchi (quite literally) elevated an altered millstone element beyond its previous utility, reorienting it to an upright position atop a wood and steel-plate base. Variation on a Millstone #4 (1963) appears to be Noguchi’s own sculptural emuliation of the bed-stone element of a millstone, imitating its essential contact with earth, and falling neatly within Noguchi’s established vocabulary of placing sculpture directly on the ground plane. Two Variations were exhibited at the gallery Cordier & Ekstrom in 1965 alongside a carved and polished serpentine form perched on a pane of tempered glass titled Ceremonial Object for Marcel Duchamp (1963–64), a reference to the artist who introduced the concept of readymade objects into art. As Noguchi later summarized his matter-of-fact transformation of these millstones, “I made them mine and I made them sculpture.”

The unique studio arrangement Noguchi enjoyed in Mure aligned the critical puzzle pieces required to enable his exploration of hard stone: state of the art stonecutting tools, access to regional stone of different characters and mineral compositions, and, most crucially, time. There he developed a practice rooted in improvisation, inspired purely by proximity to stone. With no predetermined outcome, Noguchi studied the inherent physical character of a stone before making any contact with it. Everything that followed his initial breakage into a given piece of stone became part of a complex narrative of exploration and discovery.
of an expanded dialogue, one that eventually included the residues of his process.

It is through discovery and especially through mistakes, you might say, you think, “My god, I’ve ruined the whole thing” and then you let it alone for awhile, until you find it’s just another piece of stone and you might as well proceed from there. So it’s amazing how the stone recoups its possibility after you’ve despaired and thrown it away, and it’s beyond you, and the stone gradually comes back to you and reveals, and says, “Look here, you’ve got plenty of stone left.”

Narrow Gate (1981) exemplifies how Noguchi internalized the industrial processing of stone as a creative outlet. The work began its life as an end piece split from a large basalt column at Mure, the kind of rough and irregular discard typically removed from the desirable core mass during the dressing of stone. Noguchi cut this end piece into smaller components before reassembling them into a reconstituted whole. In the placement Noguchi chose for it in Area 1, Narrow Gate is positioned to emphasize the interior face marked by horizontal slashes resulting from stone drilling and splitting, which he further embellished into an even, rhythmic pattern. On its exterior face, Noguchi’s own markings are subordinate to the basalt’s mostly unspoiled outer crust, which acts as an index of how stone ages in nature.

Noguchi did just about everything to a stone that hand and machine tools can do: from surface polishing, to revealing glimpses of stone’s interior essence, to turning stones into self-contained structures by creating open chambers within them where light and air could enter. In Core (Cored Sculpture) (1978), located in the Museum’s garden, Noguchi used a core drill to puncture the basalt’s uneven crown and excavate a central passage extending through its full height; he drilled two portholes into its front and back. Attentive to revealing the unseen essence of stone, Noguchi grew interested in the cylindrical by-products of coring and set them aside in the studio yard at Mure. Incising minimal features on their seemingly uniform surfaces, Noguchi evoked human anatomy, as in the floor piece Core Composition (1982). The diminutive scale and dimensions of these cores also recalled the sculptor’s portrait busts, such as in the imposing countenance of Warlord (1978).

In the same spirit, Noguchi reclaimed the small, ovoid Aji granite stones that he termed “practice” stones, used by his studio assistants at Mure to test their consistency in point chiseling. Noguchi made angled cuts into the stones, sometimes arraying their bisected halves to expose a polished, darker core. In the case of Practice Muse (1978), he incised a fissure that convincingly made the stone look as if it were cut in two, suggesting the latent energy concealed within. At other times, Noguchi left the Aji stones whole (at least seemingly so) and made notches in individual stones to fit them together in clusters recalling natural rock formations.

Many of the titles Noguchi chose for works found in the Museum’s galleries speak to similar transformations, emergences, and states of becoming that resulted from his dialogues with stone—instances when Noguchi felt their matter attained both personal meaning and a sense of finality. As he described it:

The making of sculpture becomes a ritual when the sculptor becomes as one with it and the parts fall into its whole as if in a trance. The residue returns to the earth, or on occasion reappears clothed in new identity.

3 There is no photographic evidence of Variation on a Millstone #4’s only known installation as part of Noguchi’s Stone Sculpture at Cordier & Ekstrom in New York in 1965. No hole is drilled in its rim for the pin of a pedestal, leading The Noguchi Museum curators to believe it is the only Variation meant to be installed in a horizontal orientation. Variation on a Millstone #1 (back cover), another vertically oriented millstone on a wood and steel-plate base, was also shown in this Cordier & Ekstrom exhibition.
4 Noguchi, Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum, 114.
5 Noguchi interview for Venice Biennale, 1986. The Noguchi Museum Archives, MS_WRI_068_001, 12.
6 Noguchi, Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum, 124.
All artworks by Isamu Noguchi  
Collection of The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum

Narrow Gate  
1981 • Basalt  
End piece

Variation on a Millstone #4  
1963 • Granite  
Millstone-inspired sculpture

Variation on a Millstone #2  
1962 • Granite, wood and steel-plate base  
Found and altered millstone

Warlord  
1978 • Granite  
Core

Petroglyph  
1974 • Basalt  
Cored fragment

Core Composition  
1982 • Basalt  
Core

Untitled  
1978 • Swedish granite  
Core

Untitled  
1943 • Driftwood, wood, wire  
Found driftwood

Untitled  
1978 • Aji granite  
Practice stone

Untitled  
1978 • Basalt  
Core

All artworks by Isamu Noguchi
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Salvaged Time focuses on Noguchi’s stone sculpture, but it is also intended as a jumping-off point to discover related works using repurposed material elsewhere in the Museum. One aspect of this repurposing is found in the many adapted solutions for the display of sculpture that Noguchi employed. For instance, while Noguchi used rough-hewn granite discards from Mure as bases for the majority of the heavier stone sculptures in the first-floor galleries, he placed a handful of sculptures on distinctive bases fabricated from pine recovered from an abandoned structure in Japan. The Noguchi Museum’s origin as a private display space, extending the atmosphere of experimentation in Noguchi’s studio, is very much in evidence, although often hidden in plain sight.
The works in Areas 11 and 12 are installed as part of Noguchi: Useless Architecture, on view until May 8, 2022.

Areas 11 & 12

Core Piece #1
1974 - Basalt
Core

Core Piece #2
1974 - Basalt
Core

Asleep in a Rock
1966 - Marble
Altered fragment on base of recycled Japanese pine

Costume for a Stone
1982 - Granite, hot-dipped galvanized steel
Fragment mounted on steel

Reborn Stone
1982 - Granite, corten steel
Fragment on steel base

Horizon Stone
1982 - Granite, steel
Core piece on steel base

Black Cores Recumbent
1978 - Swedish granite
Core pieces

Core Passages
1979 - Basalt
Core basalt

Binary Practice
1978 - Aji granite
Practice stones

Triple Nest
1978 - Aji granite
Practice stones

Areas 9 & 10

Core Passages
1979 - Basalt
Core basalt

Seeker Variation
1969 - Granite
(Probable) end piece on base of recycled Japanese pine

Night Wind
1970 - Basalt
On base of recycled Japanese pine

Black Planet
1973 - Basalt
(Probable) end piece

The Letter One
1969 - Basalt
Altered fragment

Black Cores Recumbent
1978 - Aji granite
Core pieces

Untitled (Core)
1982 - Basalt
Core

Reborn Stone
1982 - Granite, corten steel
Fragment on steel base

On the Perch
1978 - Basalt, stainless steel
Fragment mounted on steel

Asleep in a Rock
1966 - Marble
Altered fragment on base of recycled Japanese pine

Horizon Stone
1982 - Granite, steel
Core piece on steel base
The object numbers in this catalogue correspond to the work’s number in the Isamu Noguchi Catalogue Raisonné (catalogue.noguchi.org) and in the Noguchi Museum’s mobile guide on the free Bloomberg Connects app.

To use the mobile guide, download Bloomberg Connects and open the Noguchi Museum guide. Enter the lookup number to learn more about any of the works on view.