“Subscapes” is a rubric for exploring Isamu Noguchi’s interest in things below the grade of our conscious awareness. His preoccupation with reorienting our perspective towards the unseen is exemplified by his iconic glass-topped coffee table, which is a window onto the largely unexplored domestic universe below the level of chair seats and tabletops. Noguchi developed his own point of view in what he called “the space between,” as well as around palpable yet invisible empirical realities such as gravity and the psychology of space.
NOGUCHI Subscapes

All works by Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988)
Collection of The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York, unless otherwise noted.

Exhibition begins in Area 13
The Noguchi Museum, New York
June 15, 2022 – May 7, 2023
noguchi.org/subscapes

AREA 12 Set for Orpheus (1948)

In sets for Martha Graham ballets such as Cave of the Heart and Errand into the Maze, Noguchi was often asked to create spatial equivalents to the inner recesses of the heart, mind, and spirit: full of things buried, hidden, and repressed.

In making a set for George Balanchine and Igor Stravinsky’s Orpheus—which follows the Greek hero who fails to recover his wife Eurydice from Hades—Noguchi had the opportunity to animate a journey into a literal underworld. Noguchi was attracted to Orpheus’ story in part because of the universality of myths (which exist in many cultures) in which Earth’s surface and interior, representing the known and unknowable, allow for explorations of the relationships between life and death.

Lyre for Orpheus, 1948 (cast 1985). Bronze
Performance still from Orpheus with sets and costumes by Isamu Noguchi, 1948. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 06666


Maquettes for Orpheus, 1948. Photos: Rudolph Burckhardt. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 12861, 12862, 12863, 12864, 12865

“Notes on Orpheus,” n.d.
The Noguchi Museum Archives, MS_BOL_016_003

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AREA 12  Unseen Structures

What does a mermaid’s grave look like? is not a question to which most sculptors would address themselves. But Noguchi was interested in the nature of spaces we can’t see but might imagine, from invertebrate civilizations (Worm Pyramid) to the root systems of large organisms (Floor Frame). As the literal tip of an overlooked iceberg, Worm Pyramid is typical of the zones into which Noguchi hoped to push our awareness—including sunken gardens and womb-like interiors. Such imaginings fueled his thinking about how to redefine and expand sculpture’s proper domain.

Worm Pyramid, 1965.
Granite

The Seed, 1946.
Marble


Seen and Unseen, 1962 (cast 1963). Bronze

Interior of the underground repository of names in Noguchi’s unrealized model for Memorial to the Dead, Hiroshima, 1952. Photo: Isamu Noguchi. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 08838.3

The way that a base changes the relationship between an object and the world was one of the variables that informed Noguchi’s expanded conception of sculpture. This is clear in his glass-topped coffee table, the collapsible frames and bases of his Akari lanterns, as well as in his sculptures that could be bases and ones in which the base is integral to the work. The arrangement of plinths here is inspired by a “garden” of nine irregular marble platforms Noguchi designed for the headquarters of Henraux (a stoneworking company in Querceta, Italy), on which his own and others’ sculptures were made and displayed.
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AREA 11 Architects of the Subscape

Noguchi’s nonconformist sensitivity to the world’s in-between places extended to an interest in creatures and forces outside the scope of most people’s daily awareness. These included the makers of parts of the world we generally don’t see: snakes, worms, centipedes, and even merpeople, as well as the invisible shapers of what we do see, such as tectonic shift, erosion, and gravity.

Spin-off #1 from Sunken Garden, Chase Manhattan Bank Plaza, 1961–64. Naturally-shaped Uji River basalt #514


In Dream – Abacus, 1970. Bardillo marble, Portuguese rose Aurora marble #682

Serpent for Martha Graham’s Cave of the Heart, 1946 Magnesite, fabric, wire mesh, plywood, wood #221

Little She, c. 1969 / 1988 (unfinished). Marble #660


Erosion, 1969. Marble #667

Untitled, 1982. Mikage granite, steel #1011


Downward Pulling #2, c. 1972. Spanish Alicante marble, Marquina marble #678


“Stone fishing” in the Uji River, Japan, for Noguchi’s Sunken Garden, Chase Manhattan Bank Plaza, New York, NY (1961–64). The Noguchi Museum Archives, 07532

Fishbone, 1952. Seto stoneware, black iron glaze #342


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