

This Day in History... November 17, 1904

Birth of Artist Isamu Noguchi



These stamps were issued for Noguchi's 100th birthday.

On November 17, 1904, Isamu Noguchi was born in Los Angeles, California.

Noguchi was the son of Japanese poet Yone Noguchi and American writer Leonie Gilmour. In 1907, he and his mother moved to Tokyo where he was given the name Isamu, which means courage.

Spending much of his childhood moving around Japan, Noguchi was encouraged by his mother to express his artistic side. She let him “oversee” the construction of their new house as well as their garden and later apprenticed him to a local carpenter.

In 1918, Isamu came to the United States for school. He attended school in Indiana and went by the name Sam Gilmour. It was there that he met Dr. Edward Rumley. Noguchi told Rumley that he wanted to be an artist. Though Rumley encouraged him to become a doctor, he supported Noguchi's wishes and introduced him to a friend in Connecticut. That friend was Gutzon Borglum, the man that created Mount Rushmore.

As an apprentice to Borglum, Noguchi didn't receive much sculptural training. But he spent much of his time arranging pieces for a project Borglum was working on for Newark, New Jersey. Borglum also used Noguchi as a model for General William T. Sherman for that project. Noguchi did learn a little about casting from Borglum's assistants, a skill he used to create a bust of Abraham Lincoln. Borglum eventually told Noguchi he wouldn't succeed as a sculptor and sent him away.

Noguchi then traveled to New York to stay with Rumley once again. Rumley provided Noguchi with the financial aid to attend Columbia University as a premedical student. While at Columbia, Noguchi made friends who encouraged him to pursue his dream of being an artist. At their urging, and that of his mother, Noguchi began taking night classes at the Leonardo da Vinci Art School. His work greatly impressed the school's head, and he held his first exhibition within three months.

Not long after, Noguchi decided to drop out of Columbia and commit all his time to sculpture. He got his own studio and began producing portrait busts on commission. This work led him to win the Logan Medal of the Arts, for his contributions to American art. Noguchi also began attending Avant Garde art shows and inspired by the works of Alfred Stieglitz, J.B. Neuman, and Constantin Brâncuși.

In 1927, Noguchi was awarded the Guggenheim Fellowship (despite being three years short of the age requirement) and traveled to Paris. There he met Brâncuși and worked as his assistant for seven months. He created his first stone sculpture and made another 20 from wood, stone, and sheet metal the following year.

Noguchi returned to New York in 1929 and met architect and inventor Buckminster Fuller. The two soon began collaborating on a number of projects, including Fuller's Dymaxion car, which was displayed at the Chicago World's Fair. Noguchi also held his first one-man show when he returned, but when none of his works sold, he decided to abandon the abstract work he enjoyed for portrait busts that would pay the bills. Noguchi was a talented and in-demand sculptor in this area, gaining a number of wealthy and celebrity clients. This work allowed him to raise the money he needed to travel to Asia. While there, Noguchi studied Chinese brush painting and Japanese pottery and also took an interest in Zen gardens and terracotta clay figures.

Noguchi returned to America, but was unable to sell many works because of the Depression. He held another one-man show and sold a few works, which he considered his most successful show, and helped paint a mural at the Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago.

In 1936, Noguchi traveled to Mexico to create his first public work, a mural titled “History as seen from Mexico in 1936.” From there, he went on to create more public works, including a fountain made of automobile parts for the Ford Motor Company's exhibit at the New York World's Fair. He also created a nine-ton sculpture, *News*, for Rockefeller Center. Noguchi then went on a cross-country road trip with fellow artist Arshile Gorky, leading him to Hollywood.

However, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor created anti-Japanese sentiment across the country. Noguchi formed Nisei Writers and Artists Mobilization for Democracy to end Japanese-American internment. He eventually volunteered to go to one of these camps, seeking to improve the conditions within it. He was the camp's only voluntary internee, but was met with opposition from the camp administrators. Noguchi was eventually granted a furlough and left the camp, later having to fight off a deportation order for not returning.

Isamu's experimental work in the 1940s gave him a substantial standing in the New York art scene. This work included self-illuminating reliefs, interlocking sculptures, more public works, and furniture and theater design. By the 1950s, Isamu was a world-renowned artist with large-scale sculptures in major cities around the world. He continued to work until his death on December 30, 1988. His obituary in the *New York Times* called him, “a versatile and prolific sculptor whose earthy stones and meditative gardens bridging East and West have become landmarks of 20th-century art.”

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