Asian Art Museum Presents Drawings, Prints, and Sculptures that Fuse East and West, Past and Present, from Midcentury Masters Noguchi and Hasegawa

In postwar Japan, Isamu Noguchi and Saburo Hasegawa shared an artistic kinship that balanced ancient traditions with modern materials, sparking designs that surround us today.

San Francisco, July 16, 2019 — This fall, Sep. 27 through Dec. 8, the Asian Art Museum will present Changing and Unchanging Things: Noguchi and Hasegawa in Postwar Japan, an exhibition of more than one hundred artworks that tell the story of an extraordinary friendship that helped shape the iconic midcentury aesthetic. In addition to Japanese American Isamu Noguchi’s (1904–1988) renowned paper Akari lamps and instantly recognizable stone, wood and metal sculptures, the exhibition reintroduces audiences to Japanese calligrapher, painter and philosopher Saburo Hasegawa (1906–1957), whose contributions to a range of international artistic movements, including the Beats in San Francisco, have largely been overlooked due to his early death in 1957. Changing and Unchanging Things includes dozens of Hasegawa’s experimental photo collages that have never been displayed publicly and only recently emerged from storage in a Bay Area home.

Hasegawa had worked and studied in Europe during the 1920s and 30s — where he was exposed to many of the same influences as Noguchi, who had worked in the Paris atelier of Constantin Brancusi. Hasegawa spent World War II in Japan, while Noguchi was incarcerated by his own choice for seven months with Japanese Americans at an internment camp in Arizona. These wartime experiences clarified in both artists a desire, in Noguchi’s words, to reorient their work “toward some purposeful social end.” In search of what this reorientation might look like, Noguchi traveled to Japan for the first time in almost twenty years, where he met Hasegawa in 1950. The result was a fast friendship that shaped the men’s artistic legacies.

“In the 1950s, Noguchi and Hasegawa were both interested in synthesizing modern art and modern forms with traditional Japanese aesthetics and materials,” explains Dr. Karin G. Oen, Asian Art Museum associate curator of contemporary art. “Their mutual interest was grounded in themes that they found particularly pressing in the wake of World War II: disintegration and reconstitution, landscape, language, globalization, homogenization of culture, and the lyrical power of abstraction to chart a new course for society.”

Exhibition Traces Japan’s Influence on Midcentury Art and Design

Changing and Unchanging Things: Noguchi and Hasegawa in Postwar Japan offers visitors to the Asian Art Museum a chance to explore some of the most important midcentury art, which continues to influence global design trends, from craft, to interiors, to architecture.

“While Isamu Noguchi is most familiar to American audiences through his paper Akari lamps, as well as his furniture designs,” continues Oen, “what Changing and Unchanging Things clarifies is that these designs — and their now ubiquitous imitators — are part of a rigorous artistic debate about harmonizing modern industrial materials with traditional shapes and concepts.”

Artworks in the exhibition, such as Noguchi’s Akari light sculptures from the early 1950s and biomorphic three-dimensional works— made of wood, stone, ceramic, marble, terracotta, bamboo and various metals — reveal how the artist’s study of Japan’s cultural traditions — and Hasegawa’s sophisticated guidance through this history — gave Noguchi the tools he needed to forge ahead with his unique synthesis of Japanese and Western aesthetics.

Key artworks include Noguchi’s aluminum *Sesshu*, from 1958, whose folding and dappled gray surface recall the Zen landscapes of the celebrated 15th-century Japanese ink painter of the same name; *Calligraphics* (1957), made of iron and wood roped together into a boldly lettered, yet mystically unreadable script; *War*, a roughly textured terracotta from 1952 that fuses the shape of an ancient warrior helmet with the geometry of a budding space age; and a 1953 series of large colorful studies for a Tokyo theater curtain (*Study for Doncho*) painted in abstract shapes on traditional mulberry paper.

Noguchi’s immersion into Japanese culture echoes Saburo Hasegawa’s intensive engagement with *sumi* (ink) painting, calligraphy, traditional-style rubbings and block prints. Many of Hasegawa’s monochromatic works feature the gnomic aphorisms of Zen Buddhism and Daoism, underscoring his enduring interest in ritual and abstraction, which were precursors of the Minimalist art movements of the 1960s.

The results are eye-catching patterns on scrolls and folding screens that seem to spell out a poetry of modern life. Hasegawa called calligraphy “a great treasure house for abstract painting,” and the artist’s work ties in references to his own interests in music and philosophy, including *Great Chorus* and *Rhapsody: Fishing Village* from 1952 (exhibited that same year at San Francisco’s California Palace of the Legion of Honor), and *Pure Suffering* and *The Butterfly Dream*—from *Zhuangzi* from 1956, the year before his death.

*Changing and Unchanging Things* also presents dozens of never-before-exhibited experimental photograms created by Hasegawa in 1953 and recently found by his granddaughter in a box of family photographs. The collages represent a complex process of layering and reshooting arrangements of unexpected materials — broken glass, moveable type, paper, cloth, etc. — on light sensitive paper. The resulting photograms reveal “synthetic avant-gardism at work throughout Hasegawa’s practice, a quality that united him with Noguchi,” explains exhibition co-curator Dakin Hart, senior curator at The Noguchi Museum in New York.

“Noguchi and Hasegawa’s friendship gives us a model for how to continue a thoughtful conversation about art that values multiculturalism,” says Jay Xu, director and CEO of the Asian Art Museum. “The idea of a hybrid or bicultural identity resonates almost universally today — especially in a city like San Francisco. This exhibition teases out the rich artistic possibilities that arise when exploring these nuances and is a reminder that even the most utilitarian objects — that light on the corner of your desk — are part of an important conversation about the right balance of form, function, tradition, and innovation. It’s a conversation that the Asian Art Museum is proud to participate in.”
Noguchi in Japan, Hasegawa in San Francisco

With Hasegawa as Noguchi’s guide and interpreter in postwar Japan, the two artists bonded deeply over their fascination with Japanese philosophy and its spiritual vitality, its aesthetic values of reduction and abstraction, its historical traces across the landscape and what they viewed as its ability to promote a much-needed, socially invigorating cross-cultural exchange. Both men promoted this exchange in their own lives: Hasegawa would settle in San Francisco, where he lived from 1954 (the last year he saw Noguchi) until his death in 1957, while Noguchi would travel back and forth to New York during his extended sojourn in Japan which lasted throughout the 1950s.

“A point of tension for both Noguchi and Hasegawa was their personal negotiation of being multicultural and what it means to be both native and foreign at the same time,” says Oen. “The artworks in this exhibition inhabit that ambiguous territory. They are the output of two prolific, talented artists who were naturally comfortable mixing materials and techniques, and blending cultural influences as diverse as Chinese Daoism and classical music from Europe, Africa, and India.”

Hasegawa received a warm welcome in the United States, first in New York, in 1954, where he lectured and exhibited his artwork, and then in California, where he settled. In the Bay Area, he kindled an interest in Buddhism and practices around tea (sado) as a teacher at the California College of Arts and Crafts and as a resident artist at San Francisco’s American Academy of Asian Studies (now the California Institute of Integral Studies). He became an associate of celebrated poets and Zen practitioners Gary Snyder and Alan Watts, and even conducted calligraphy and tea lessons on the Sausalito houseboat of artist Gordon Onslow Ford and later at his own home in Pacific Heights. Although Hasegawa stood out in Japan for wearing blue jeans, in California he wore Japanese robes as a visible indicator that he was not fully at home in one culture or the other.

Welcomed in San Francisco at a time of growing awareness and positive reception of Japanese art and culture across the U.S., Hasegawa presented his work in a 1955 solo exhibition at Gump’s (better known as a — now-closed — high-end department store, which for many decades had a gallery that featured significant contemporary Asian art), and in a 1956 solo exhibition at the Oakland Museum of Art and another organized at SFMOMA that same year. Hasegawa died of cancer in San Francisco in 1957, though his work continued to be featured in major exhibitions around the country, including MoMA in New York in an exhibition that traveled to Houston and to SFMOMA in 1958.

Note: Due to their extreme light sensitivity, a number of Hasegawa’s works on paper will be rotated midway through the exhibition.
Exhibition Organization

_Changing and Unchanging Things: Noguchi and Hasegawa in Postwar Japan_ is organized by The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York, and made possible through lead support from the Terra Foundation for American Art. Transportation assistance has been provided by ANA (All Nippon Airways Co., Ltd.).

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Publications

_Changing and Unchanging Things: Noguchi and Hasegawa in Postwar Japan_ is accompanied by a richly illustrated, bilingual catalogue published by University of California Press. With essays by curators Dakin Hart and Mark Dean Johnson, as well as other leading scholars, the publication also includes essays by Hasegawa and Noguchi—Hasegawa’s “Noguchi in Japan” (1950) and Noguchi’s “Remembrance of Saburo Hasegawa” (1976).

In addition, an open access companion _The Saburo Hasegawa Reader_ collects a valuable trove of material including the entire manuscript for a 1957 Hasegawa memorial volume, with its essays by philosopher Alan Watts, Oakland Museum Director Paul Mills, and Japan Times art writer Elise Grilli, as well as various unpublished writings by Hasegawa. Available as a free ebook and print on demand from University of California Press.

About the Asian Art Museum

Through the power of art, the Asian Art Museum brings the diverse cultures of Asia to life. Located in the heart of San Francisco, the museum is home to one of the world’s finest collections of Asian art, with more than 18,000 awe-inspiring artworks ranging from ancient jades and ceramics to contemporary video installations. Dynamic special exhibitions, cultural celebrations and public programs for all ages offer rich art experiences that unlock the past and spark questions about the future.
Information: 415.581.3500 or www.asianart.org
Location: 200 Larkin Street, San Francisco, CA 94102
Hours: The museum is open Tuesdays through Sundays from 10 AM to 5 PM. Hours are extended on Thursdays until 9 PM February through September. Closed Mondays, as well as New Year’s Day, Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day.
Museum Admission: FREE for museum members and children (12 & under). $25 for adults and $20 for seniors (65 & over), youth (13–17) and college students (with ID). On Target First Free Sundays and on Thursday evenings, 5–9 PM, admission to the museum is $10. Please check website for updates.

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