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<https://www.wsj.com/articles/changing-and-unchanging-things-noguchi-and-hasegawa-in-postwar-japan-review-beauty-without-borders-11559386800>

## ART REVIEW

# 'Changing and Unchanging Things: Noguchi and Hasegawa in Postwar Japan' Review: Beauty Without Borders

An exhibition at the Noguchi Museum looks at how two great artists navigated the globalized cultural world and were inspired, at home and abroad.



Saburo Hasegawa and Isamu Noguchi at an art exhibition with a painting by Hasegawa featuring a Jomon figure (c. 1950)  
PHOTO: THE ISAMU NOGUCHI FOUNDATION AND GARDEN MUSEUM, NEW YORK / ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS)

*By Lance Esplund*

June 1, 2019 7:00 a.m. ET

*Long Island City, N.Y.*

'Changing and Unchanging Things: Noguchi and Hasegawa in Postwar Japan' is a superb, contemplative exhibition at the Noguchi Museum. It comprises about 90 abstract artworks created between 1950 and 1970: primarily sculptures by Noguchi and calligraphic drawings,

poems and paintings by Saburo Hasegawa. But don't approach this show as a time capsule. It's much more than a stunning installation of two like-minded 20th-century artists who straddled East and West. At this show's heart is an object lesson, a bold challenge to contemporary artists—and to the greater public—that is perhaps more relevant today than when most of its artworks were created more than 60 years ago.

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## Changing and Unchanging Things: Noguchi and Hasegawa in Postwar Japan

*The Noguchi Museum*  
Through July 14, 2019

Co-organized  
by the  
Noguchi  
Museum's  
senior  
curator Dakin  
Hart and San

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Francisco State  
University art professor  
Mark Dean Johnson,  
"Changing and  
Unchanging Things"  
began at Japan's  
Yokohama Museum of Art

and travels this September to the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. But it defies borders. The show asks us to consider—as did Noguchi and Hasegawa—the cultural consequences of globalization. In the exhibition catalog, Messrs. Hart and Johnson write: "As the world effectively shrinks, the pressures of cultural homogenization grow....At any given moment, in any specific place, is there an ideal mix of indigenous and foreign, traditional and modern? Can humanity, community, and creativity continue to work if all of us go global, disconnect from nature, and become rootless?"

These were the shared concerns of Noguchi and Hasegawa—kindred spirits and innovative artists who were naturally compelled to make art that acknowledged their multicultural identities. After World War II, most Japanese artists either defeatedly embraced or turned their backs entirely on Western culture. Rooted in international soil, Noguchi and Hasegawa generated hybrid works that blended, reinvented and furthered Eastern and modern Western traditions.

Noguchi (1904-1988) was born in Los Angeles to an American mother and a Japanese father. A prolific sculptor, painter, architect and industrial and set designer, he lived in the U.S. and Japan, and was an apprentice, in Paris, to the sculptor Constantin Brancusi. In 1950, after an absence of nearly 20 years, Noguchi revisited Japan, where he befriended Hasegawa, with whom he toured the country's cultural sites.



Isamu Noguchi's 'Sesshu' (1958) PHOTO: THE NOGUCHI MUSEUM ARCHIVE/INFGM/ARS

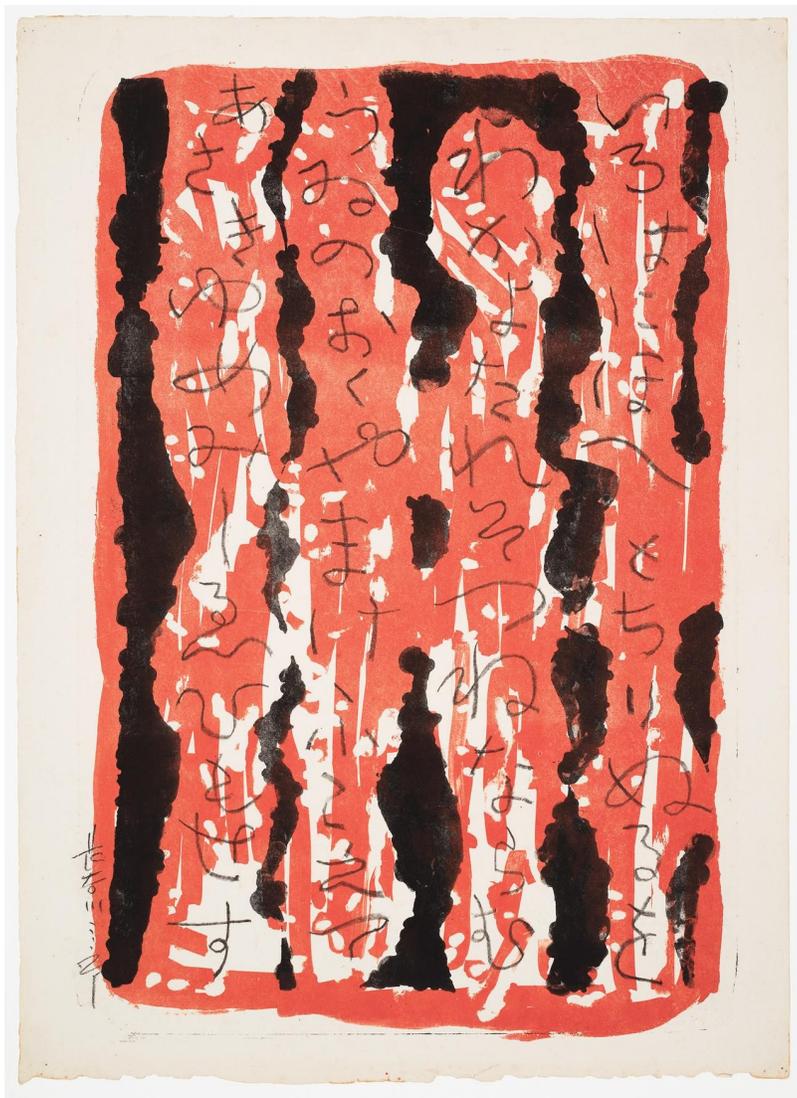
Born in Japan, Hasegawa (1906-1957) studied painting in Paris, in the 1930s, and married a Frenchwoman. In the 1950s, he was widely published, exhibited and well-known in the U.S., where he curated exhibitions and lectured on Asian art and aesthetics and the universality of abstraction. He befriended, among others, the American Abstract Expressionist Franz Kline, whose black-and-white paintings, which Hasegawa revered—and perhaps even emulated—shared the expressive dynamics of Asian calligraphy.

Noguchi and Hasegawa understood the fluidity of artistic influence. And the sense of hybridization—and that artistic borders are porous and impossible, really, to draw and define—is beautifully apparent in “Changing and Unchanging Things.” This show flits between East and West, primitive and modern, figuration and abstraction, text and object, even art and nature.

The exhibition is an immersion in mellow natural and artificial light—from filtered windows, spotlights and Noguchi's softly glowing paper lamp sculptures (a modern reinvention of the traditional Japanese shoji screen). Here are Hasegawa's woodgrain rubbings, his black-ink calligraphic abstractions, painted folding screens and hanging scrolls; Noguchi's studies for theater curtains, sculpted stepping stones and, in the granite floor sculpture “Tsukubai” (1962)—a cross-shaped basin installed in an alcove, like a shrine—the element of water.

Moving among Hasegawa's calligraphic paintings and Noguchi's freestanding biomorphic sculptures—made of wood, stone, ceramic, marble, terra cotta, bamboo, iron, rope and bronze

—is akin to walking through a Japanese garden or a forest inhabited by ritualistic objects and strange organic beings. Its artworks resemble ancient relics, vessels and ruins, Surrealist abstractions and totemic figures, yet also are precursors to the spare, Asian-influenced American Minimalism of the 1960s.



Saburo Hasegawa's 'I-Ro-Ha (The Japanese Syllabary)' (1954) PHOTO: THE NOGUCHI MUSEUM ARCHIVE/INFGM/ARS

Noguchi's and Hasegawa's works harmonize and extend each other's language, while reaching

far beyond the exhibition's physical boundaries. Hasegawa's abstract calligraphic paintings "Symphonic Poem—Fine Day" (1951), "The Harmonious" (1953) and "The Butterfly Dream—From Chuang Tzu" (1956)—whose characters' movements echo the flight of a butterfly—speak to many of Noguchi's works, including his "Calligraphics" (1957), an abstract sculpture comprising two stacked forms skewered vertically on a rod like meat on a kebab. But they also suggest a spine and its vertebra, a sculpture by Brancusi or Jean Arp, as well as traditional Asian calligraphic characters. And Noguchi's slightly buckled planar aluminum sculpture "Sesshu" (1958), whose title refers to a Zen Buddhist scholar, relates to Hasegawa's (and traditional Asian) folding screens and prefigures the abstract sculptures of Americans David Smith, Ellsworth Kelly and Michael Heizer.

“Changing and Unchanging Things” reintroduces us to the genius and importance of Hasegawa and his relationship with Noguchi. More important, in our globalized, market-driven era of ironic appropriation, it demonstrates what it means to create truly beautiful and deeply meaningful artworks born of cross-pollination and multiculturalism.

—*Mr. Esplund, the author of “The Art of Looking: How to Read Modern and Contemporary Art” (Basic Books), writes about art for the Journal.*

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