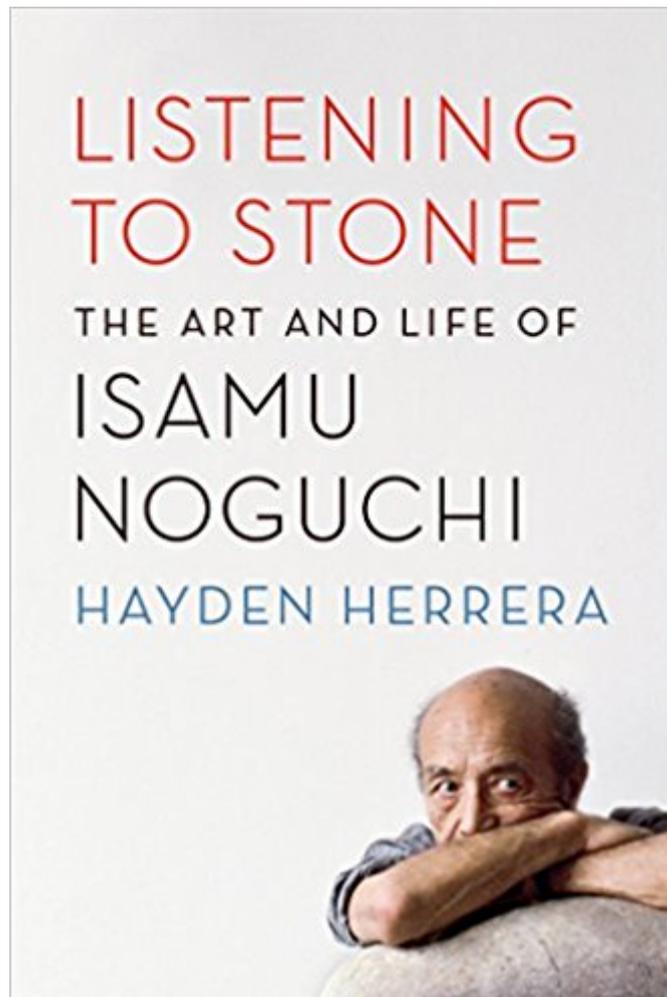


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# Listening To Stone: The Art And Life Of Isamu Noguchi



## Synopsis

A master of what he called "the sculpturing of space," Isamu Noguchi was a vital figure for modern public art. Born to an American mother and a Japanese father, Noguchi never felt like he belonged anywhere and spent his life assembling identities in his statues, monuments, and gardens. He traveled incessantly from New York to remote Japanese islands, from Paris to Bangladesh, synthesizing aesthetic values. The result--massive sculptures of interlocking wood, Zen-like gardens of granite, and stone slides--is now seen as a powerful artistic link between East and West. Drawing on Noguchi's personal correspondence and interviews with artists, patrons, assistants, and lovers, Hayden Herrera creates another compulsively readable biography of one of the twentieth century's most important artists. Noguchi was elusive, forever uprooting himself to reinvigorate what he called the "keen edge of originality." Yet Herrera locates this man in his friendships with artists like Buckminster Fuller and Arshile Gorky, and in his affairs with women like Frida Kahlo. Herrera reveals his playfulness and his intense immersion in his work, from designing sets for Martha Graham to creating the Noguchi Museum in Queens. A rich meditation on art in a globalized milieu, *Listening to Stone* is a moving portrait of an artist compulsively driven to reinvent himself as he searched for his own "essence of sculpture."

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Preparing to lead tours of Noguchi's works at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden this fall, I found this biography an extremely helpful resource. It is clean and clear, if a bit prosaic. Herrera leans heavily

on Noguchi's own autobiography and seems to draw little from other sources, save a few still living individuals close to the artist, including Noguchi's last lover. The book is best when it maps narrative to image, and the inclusion of some wonderful hard-to-find photos is one of the book's strongest attributes. The book also is especially adept at detailing virtually every lover of import the artist had, including Frida Kahlo (about whom Herrera has also authored a biography), which makes for some saucy reading. The major struggle I faced was the implication that there was a seemingly precise turning point when Noguchi turned from starving and struggling artist to overnight success. This is not, in fact, an accurate portrayal of Noguchi's arc. I don't fault Herrera for failing to capture the trajectory or finding the inflection point, for, in fact, I don't believe there was one. But I'm not sure why she seems to have decided she needed this in the telling of the tale. Another peculiar aspect to the story, related to my primary misgiving, is that Herrera seems to paint Noguchi as a critical failure, even into the 1960s, when he was anything but. On the one hand, he was receiving, she points out, retrospectives and major commissions around the globe. Yet, she routinely depicts reviews of the artist's work that carried harsh judgments or worse. I suspect Herrera selects this approach to continually cast her subject as an underdog, but it creates the peculiar impression that Noguchi was not an accepted artist when he clearly was.

So interestingly researched and written, this book kept me engaged, but I did not finish it with more respect for the man, as his foibles, illogic, and nastiness were revealed, oh so gently. The author's admiration, and the world's accolades, do carry through, but so does his character. She tells gracefully the sequences and connections of what she found out, very elegantly. One justification she (and he) continually brings up for his bad behavior is his 'mixed blood'. Really? Really? Like the rest of us Americans do not have mixed blood, only him, and this gives him carte blanche to kick over the stone lanterns and bonsai brought from Japan by the Japanese gardener, Sato, hired to help, whose family had been making gardens in Japan for sixteen centuries because he did not like their placement? yes, the author uses the word 'kick'. We are tiresomely asked to forgive his sense of cultural displacement because of his dual blood line, as if his duality is merely attributable to his having been brought up in two countries, yet has it not happened for most of us to get here? This is not merely racial, as it has more to do with national identity [USA vs Japan], and although the subject is painfully explored, his dismissal by his father must have been far more important to him. The mother was a wonderful, large spirited, broad and deep thinking woman, it appears; lucky for him, and he credits her, later with the source of much that is good in him and his ideas: 'she would have approved'; though for a good amount of his youth he seems not to have appreciated her

wisdom.. He was good at dissing. It was interesting that he did not carve the rock on some (many?), did not cast the ceramic on a wheel, but merely directed, sometimes from across the sea.

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