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Isamu Noguchi

By JULIEN LEVY

NOGUCHI was at one time apprenticed to that genial, rude and impressive sculptor, Constantin Brancusi, who used often to say, "It is not the *things* that are difficult to make, but to put ourselves in condition to make them." Noguchi knows what this means. He was born with many gifts—all but the proverbial silver spoon—endowed with precocious facility as a sculptor and draughtsman, with striking good looks and an attractive personality. With one or another of these assets he could not but find it easy to "make things." Many artists and almost all very young men would have been content. But Noguchi, because of ambition, or modesty, or sensibility, has been lured into the wilderness of artistic and spiritual experiment, where success is more richly rewarded, the chances of error are infinitely multiplied and technical facility becomes a very secondary aid. That is why he is today less of an accomplished artisan—and so much the more significant as an artist.

It is no fault of Noguchi's that his reputation is not of longer standing, and all to his credit that it has now become so firmly established. He was born in 1904, which is to say that he is just twenty-eight years old, with almost no past but insistently promising a future. He was born in Los Angeles. His father was Japanese and his mother American—Yone Noguchi and Leonie Gilmour. This mixed parentage may have contributed to a certain "bi-polarity" of attitude which characterizes his work. He is always attempting a

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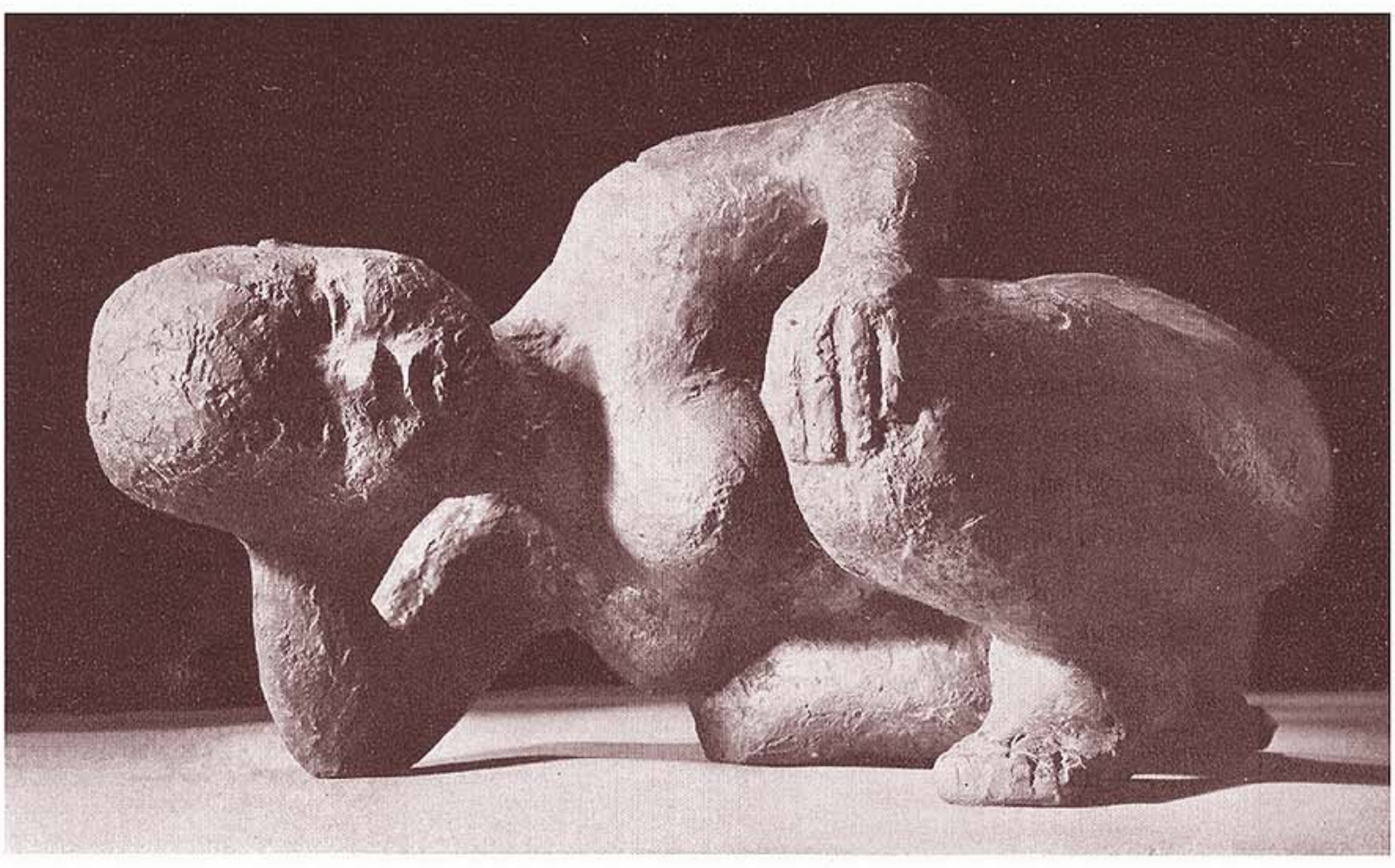
nice balance between the abstract and the concrete, the relating of fact to meaning, while specifically he exercises a vigorous interpretation of oriental and western aims.

When two years old, Noguchi was taken to Japan and for several years experienced the normal life and education of a Japanese boy. He attended Japanese kindergarten and two years of grammar school. Later the tenor of his studies was suddenly changed and he was sent to learn English among English-speaking companions at St. Joseph's College in Yokohama, his father intending that he should return to live in America. Eventually he transferred to an "experimental" school in Rolling Prairie, Indiana. This somewhat disparate and intermittent education, by reason of which he was three times set back in class and was seldom able to feel that he really "belonged," could not but have had its effect on a sensitive boy. It might have made him morose and repressed, or merely shy. Instead, he became the more alert and ingenious, landing always like a cat on his feet, adaptable almost to a fault. His discipline, self-imposed, proved to be expansive rather than repressive — which may account for many virtues and some of the faults in his present work.



Young Girl Reclining on her Elbow, by Noguchi

Upon graduating from high school, Noguchi wished to become an artist and was offered the opportunity to work with Gutzon Borglum. After an unsatisfactory six months of apprenticeship, he was convinced by his friend, Dr. E. A. Rumely, that he was best fitted to be a surgeon. (It was Dr. Rumely who, much against his own judgment, had introduced Noguchi to Borglum.) At the time there seemed no signal factor to determine the choice between the two careers. Noguchi was bright and perceptive; he had unusually strong, agile, sensitive hands, appropriate for either sculpture or surgery. He had been unhappy working with Borglum and so in 1923 he entered Columbia University and enrolled for pre-medical courses, which he continued through the following year.

However, during the second year at Colum-

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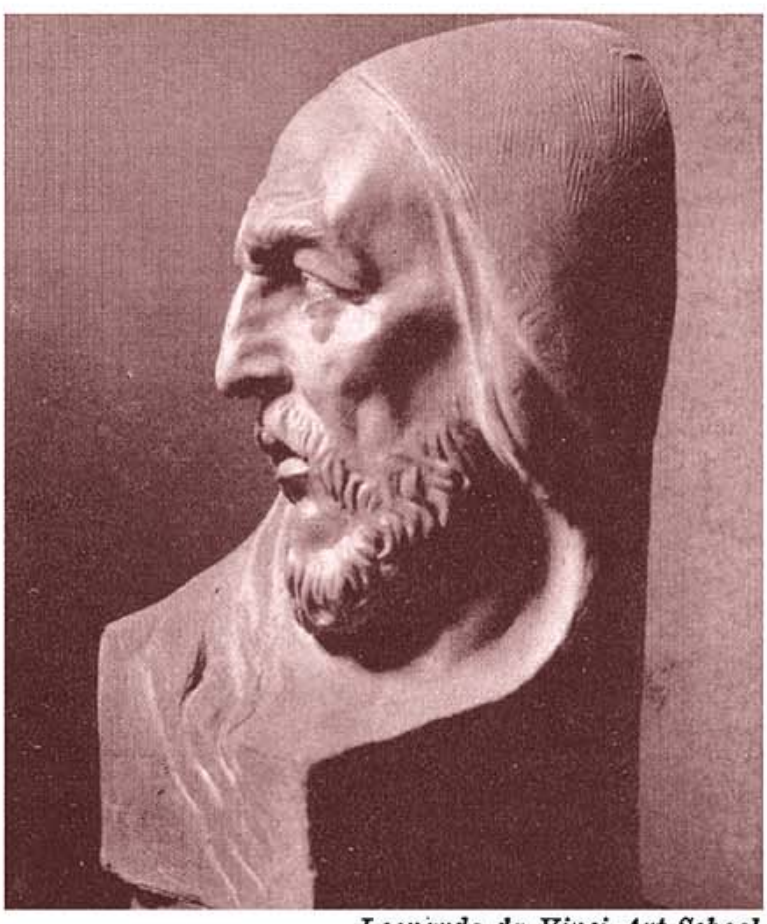
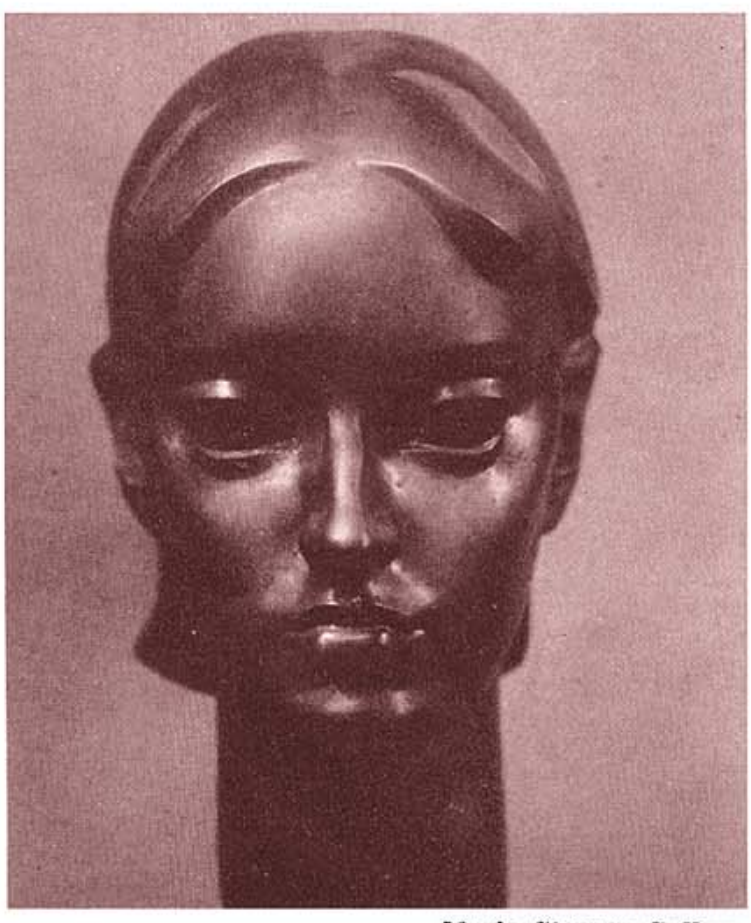
Noguchi



Leonardo da Vinci Art School

Noguchi's first sculpture



Marie Sterner Gallery

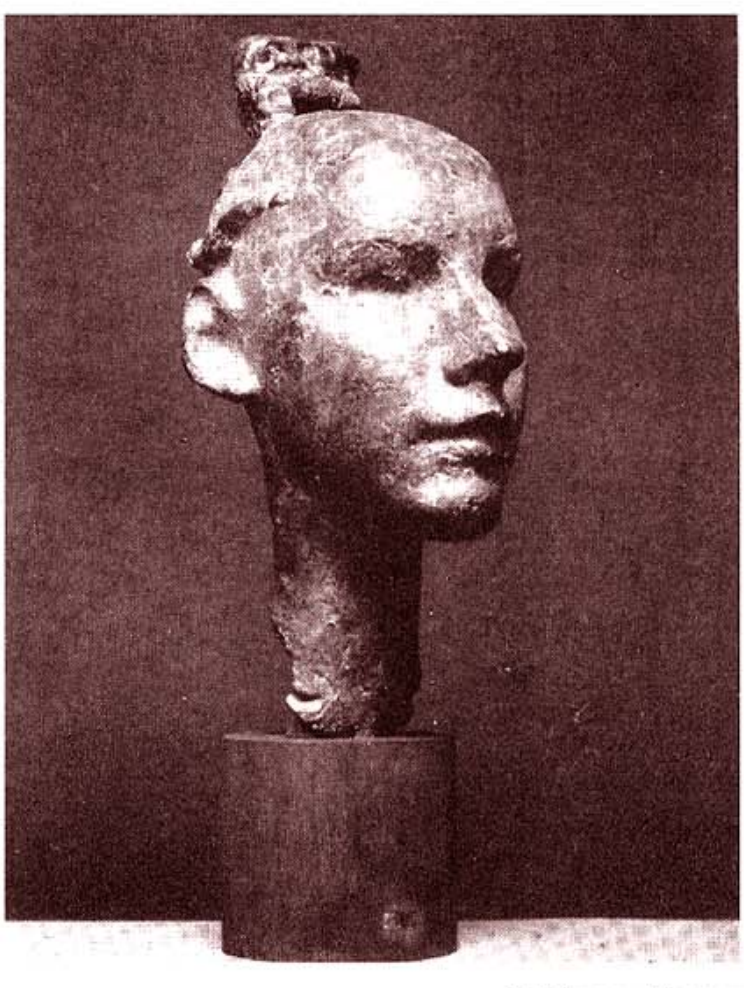
Cast-iron head by Noguchi

bia he was again studying art, attending an evening course in sculpture at an art school on the lower East Side. His first work there proved immediately and astoundingly proficient in the accepted academic manner. The director of the school, Onorio Ruotolo, detected a record-breaking talent in Noguchi and begged him to continue at the school—in fact, paid him to continue, or at least engaged him as a general assistant, offered him the hospitality of his own home and the use of his studio, devoted considerable time to teaching him, until Noguchi could turn out orthodox sculpture with ease and precision. Noguchi left Columbia. The following year saw him installed in his own studio at 127 University Place, where he continued working until awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1927.

He went immediately to Paris, but not to continue his studies in academic fashion. He was avid now for an understanding of the modern point of view, for talk with modern painters and sculptors, visiting every exhibition of abstract art there might be. I met him in Montparnasse that year. He was working as an assistant in Brancusi's studio, a laboratory for distilling basic shapes. The atelier is a fantastic place. Crowded with Brancusi's shapes, it is a private jungle of Brancusi's own. Everything is white. Whatever isn't marble or plaster is covered thickly with marble dust. Brancusi wears a white smock and has a white beard and a white dog, and any stranger shortly is rendered indistinguishable by the white dust that falls over him.

Reinhardt Galleries

Scott Rumely, by Noguchi



Whitney Museum

Ruth Parks, by Noguchi

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Noguchi

Marie Sterner Collection

Abstraction in metal by Noguchi

understanding of style. He showed me a small figure in bronze which he had made, the study of a man kneeling, one leg stretched out, the man about to rise—a very unpretentious study, but in very adequate fashion it combined a precise knowledge of abstraction with a lively realism. Duchamp-Villon could do this magnificently, but he died, unfortunately, before completing more than a half-dozen statues of first importance. I thought then that Noguchi might have the making of another great sculptor.

He commenced a series of portrait heads, which eventually were exhibited at Marie Sterner's Gallery in February of 1930, and later at the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art and at the Chicago Arts Club. In these Noguchi worked purposefully towards a combination of the abstract with representation. The portraits were forceful and precise, and the likeness unmistakable. At the same time, each was an object of plastic importance in itself, an object that the impartial observer might enjoy as well as the person more directly concerned, the subject of the portrait. In addition, Noguchi was discovering a means of applying the formal elements of sculpture to enhance the psychological implications of a portrait. Everything, from the general outline to the most minute details of texture, was significant of his estimate of his subject. The choice of material, determination of scale, even the shape of the base, all were part of the general consideration, so that, if the portrait were featureless, there should still remain a sort of impression of the subject.

Noguchi has pursued and intensified this stylized conception, so that it becomes most apparent in his most recent work. In the portrait of his uncle, now exhibited at the Museum

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of Modern Art, the shape is symmetrical and self-contained, the scale is lifesize, the material is terra cotta, baked in an open kiln in the oriental manner, the texture is infinitely wrinkled and infinitely brittle. The head of Suzanne Ziegler, in the recent exhibition at the Reinhardt Galleries, is of very light, weathered oak, painted white, very pale, and the shape attenuated and asymmetrical. The head of Buckminster Fuller is of aluminium, highly polished, designed no doubt to indicate the modern texture of Mr. Fuller's mind and his capacity for reflection. Noguchi's ability as a sculptor is more than equal to such a *tour de force,* but unhappily his perception of character is not always sufficiently penetrating.

In the spring following his first exhibition of portraits, Noguchi was able to leave for a trip to the Orient whch he had been contemplating for some time. His catholic taste embraces a variety of sculpture, from the archaic Greek to the work of Lehmbruck, whom he considers "spiritually more vibrant than Maillol," but he has a particular affection for the Chinese figurines of the Tang dynasty. When he went to China, he studied these, searching also for the source of the innumerable forgeries encountered everywhere, hoping to study with the forgers and in this way acquire a portion of the ancient technique. The trail ended in Japan, where, after a reunion of some duration with his father, Noguchi made the acquaintance of a certain Mr. Uno Jinmatsu, notorious for the quantity of false Tang figurines he could dispose of, not only to tourists, but to museums. Noguchi worked five months with Uno Jinmatsu in Kioto, using the potter's wheel and baking terra cotta in an open kiln, learning to paint the terra cotta, before baking, with stone powder and water glass to preserve the color. He executed some of his finest work to date, including a group of vase forms that were merely turned on the wheel but are so direct and at once subtle and monumental, that one sometimes wishes he would forego some of his more ambitious projects and give us more of these comparative "trifles."

Returning from Japan in 1931, he exhibited his sculptures at the John Becker Gallery and his drawings at Demotte's. I have not considered his drawings sooner because he is primarily a sculptor. Yet his drawings are fine and worthy of independent attention. They are not the usual drawings of a sculptor—cartoons for projects destined to be fully realized in subsequent statues. Here is another proof of Noguchi's "bi-polarity" of approach, that he

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Noguchi
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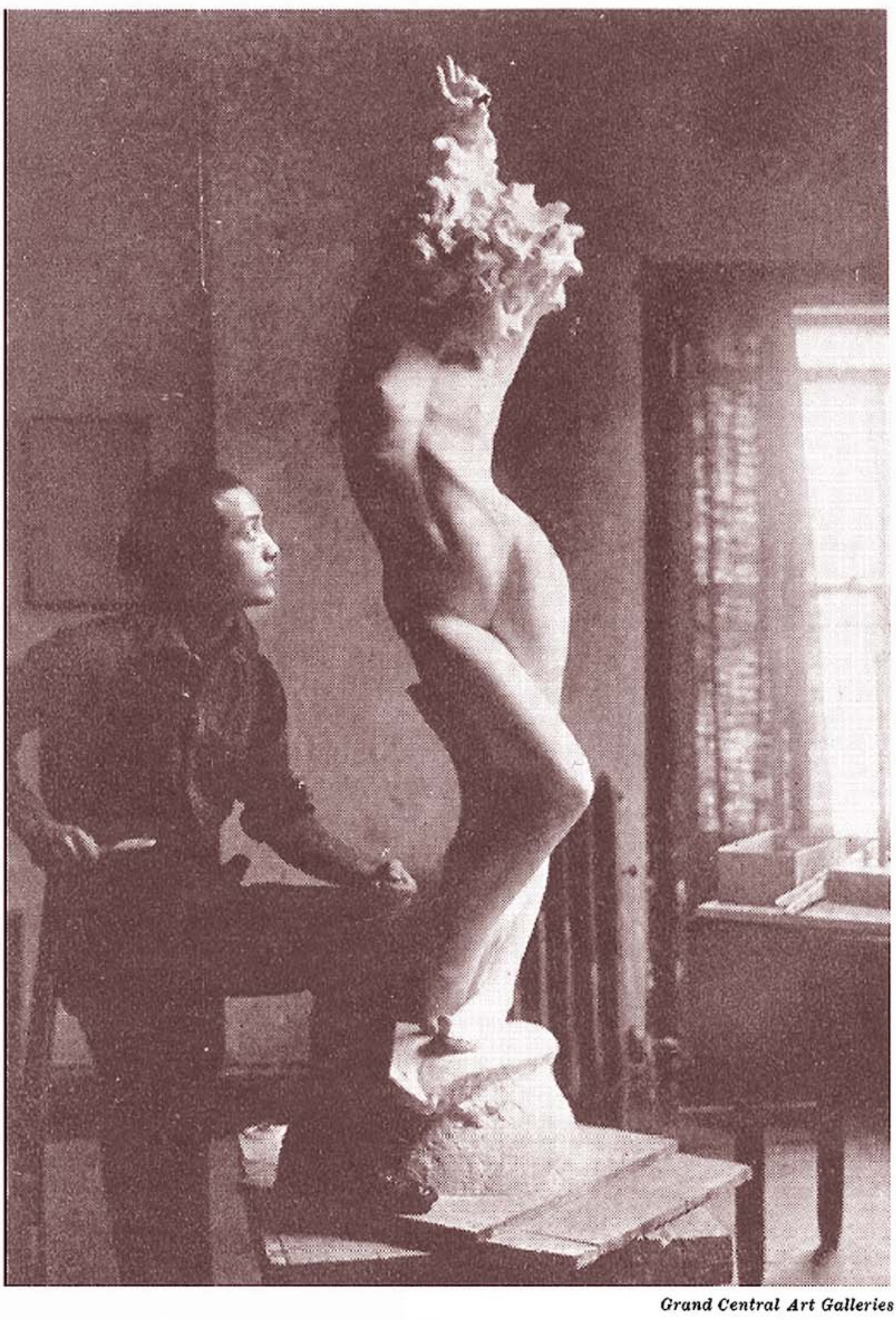

Grand Central Art Galleries

Noguchi and his "Undine" (1926)

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Noguchi

John Becker Gallery

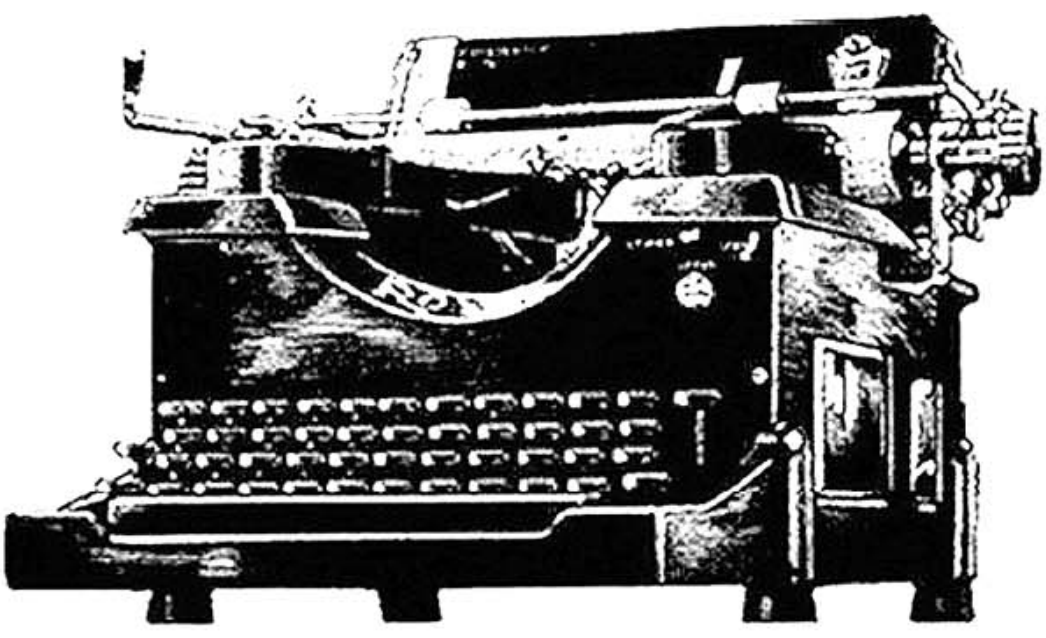
Seated Figure, drawing by Noguchi

Reinhardt Galleries

Scroll drawing by Noguchi

Shi and executed numerous brush drawings on silk scrolls. These latter offer a decidedly modern and occidental statement in spite of the oriental technique, and again a skeleton of abstraction qualifies all the representational elements.

An exhibition of Noguchi's drawings and sculpture has just concluded at the Reinhardt Galleries. It is too recent to be discussed with any perspective, but one cannot fail to note that Noguchi has taken a new departure with such statues as *Miss Expanding Universe*, the *Garden Figure* and the *Draped Torso* in aluminium. These new figures seem only half-realized, amorphous. At first glance, Noguchi appears to have lost connection with the logical continuity of his past progress, but one cannot predict toward what end this tangent may lead.



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