

# Basic Detail Report



## **Title: The Balance Stone**

Date: 1978

Primary Maker: com.gallerysystems.emuseum.core.entities.RecordXPerson@3ec61

Medium: Sculpture; Granite and basalt

Description: In the late 1960s Isamu Noguchi established a studio in Japan on the island of Shikoku, in an area known for stone carving. Noguchi had first visited Shikoku in 1956 in search of stones for his garden at the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris, and he returned looking for a craftsman to work with him on the monumental granite sculpture "Black Sun" (1969) for the Seattle Art Museum. He was referred to a stonecutter from the village of Mure, Masatoshi Izumi, with whom he developed a working relationship that would last twenty years. Izumi built a studio compound for Noguchi consisting of a large outdoor work yard encircled by a dry-set stone wall, two reconstructed "kuras" (storehouses) for work and display, and an ancient samurai house moved from a nearby town for the artist's residence. During the last two decades of his life, Noguchi spent about six months each year at Shikoku working with Izumi and his crew of stonecarvers at the dramatic site overlooking the Inland Sea. It is in Mure that he carved the large basalt and granite works, including "The Balance Stone", that are arguably his greatest sculptural achievement. Before Noguchi began to work in Mure, most of his carving had been done in marble. Because marble is softer and easier to carve than granite and basalt, these new

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materials slowed down Noguchi's pace of carving and focused his attention on stone in a new way. Stone became a symbol of nature, and carving became a metaphor for the human confrontation with the temporal for our intersection with historical, geological, and astronomical time. In this late work Noguchi addressed the kind of metaphysical issues to which he was drawn through physical engagement with a symbolic material rather than by means of referential or narrative imagery. Focusing on the stone itself, Noguchi often left part of the rock's surface unworked, revealing where it had been torn from the earth or displaying its rich natural "skin." He employed different textures chosen from a vocabulary of surface treatments, each of which also had a different color, untouched natural exteriors, areas of small chisel marks, ragged edges where one stone had been broken from another, and smoothly polished surfaces. The colors that he found in basalt are the most striking, with its rusty brown "skin" and deep hue that emerges with polishing, as in "The Balance Stone". The Balance Stone has an interesting history, for an earlier incarnation of this sculpture included an additional element sitting in the V on what is currently its uppermost stone. This "balancing" of three elements atop one another is probably what suggested the title, but Noguchi had removed the third part by the time the sculpture was shown in his seventy-fifth birthday exhibition, at New York's Pace Gallery in 1980. The process was wholly characteristic of his working method, in which he would continue to examine his sculptures and to make changes, even after a piece was considered finished. The resulting two-element sculpture presents a deep polished V at the top, exemplifying what Noguchi called his "investigation on the inside . . . a kind of research into the stone." (1) Although Noguchi came to Mure to carve large sculptures of granite and basalt, he underwent back surgery in 1978 and was temporarily unable to work at that scale. While convalescing he began to create smaller pieces, often taking as his material the egg-shaped stones of Agi granite on which local stoneworkers practiced their chisel marks. The Balance Stone dates from this period, but its ovoid element is of basalt. Where he did not leave the natural skin untouched, Noguchi used power tools to cut and polish, freely employing new technology along with the traditional chisel and hammer. This conjunction of apparent opposites suggests another meaning of the title "The Balance Stone", a sculpture that balances the organic and the geometric, the ancient and the modern, and the hand and the machine as effectively as it does one element atop the other. It thus alludes to a central aspect of Noguchi's career, which held such oppositions in tension and drew energy from contrasting impulses. More than a formal feature of his sculpture, the omnipresence of oppositions is tied to Noguchi's mixed ethnicity, being American and Japanese. Never feeling entirely at home in either culture and experiencing racial intolerance in both, Noguchi sought a kind of resolution in a peripatetic internationalism. The notion of balance was crucial to his course, both in issues of national identity and in his work, which juggled landscape, interior, and theater design with sculptural practice. "The Balance Stone" is more than a fine small sculpture of the artist's last decade, for it can be taken as a

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symbol of the balancing of the psychological and artistic forces that generated his oeuvre. BJA Bibliography: Isamu Noguchi, "A Sculptor's World" (New York: Harper and Row, 1968); Sam Hunter, "Isamu Noguchi" (New York: Abbeville Press, 1978); Isamu Noguchi, "The Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum" (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1987); Dore Ashton, "Noguchi: East and West" (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992); Bruce Altshuler, "Isamu Noguchi" (New York: Abbeville Press, 1994); Bruce Altshuler and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, eds., "Isamu Noguchi: Essays and Conversations" (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994). NOTES: 1 . Noguchi, quoted in Sam Hunter, "Isamu Noguchi," in "Isamu Noguchi: Seventy-fifth Birthday Exhibition", exhib. cat. (New York: Andre Emmerich Gallery and Pace Gallery, 1980), n.p. Dimensions: 10 1/4 x 20 x 11 in.