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Note

Isamu Noguchi and the Peking Drawing of 1930

Robert J. Maeda

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Throughout the article, Chinese place names and personal names are romanized according to their most familiar form and may not reflect Pinyin romanization.*

The precipitous siege of China's capital city Nanking by the Japanese Imperial Army in December 1937 led to the horrific massacre of thousands of its citizens in the following months, an atrocity which still reverberates in the history of that period. The tumultuous events of the week-long siege that began on Monday, December 6, were reported in a tersely written, day-by-day summary in the "News of the Week in Review" section of the Sunday *New York Times*, December 12, 1937. On Thursday, December 9, General Matsui of the Japanese Army demanded the surrender of Nanking by noon the next day, "else the city's 'historic relics and spots of beauty' would be destroyed." When the deadline passed with no surrender, Matsui unleashed a massive military offensive. By week's end, Japanese soldiers had pierced one of Nanking's city gates and were engaged in house-to-house fighting. "Fierce fires raged in the city, and Japanese officers prepared to toast their victory with iced champagne."¹

The dire news from China served as a stark backdrop for an art auction sponsored by the Chinese Women's Relief Association to raise funds for China's defense. The auction, which was held on Sunday, December 5, at New York's Park Lane Hotel, was recounted in the same section of the Sunday *Times* under the heading "Art for China's Sake":

*Chinese merchants of the city contributed precious objects to be auctioned—such as a Ching dynasty vase and a Chien Lung tree of amethyst, lapis lazuli and jade. But the greatest interest focused on a picture of a Chinese woman nursing her child, drawn and contributed by Isamu Noguchi. A Chinese merchant of Broadway, K. C. Li, bid on the drawing for \$70. Then he offered to triple that price if Mr. Noguchi would explain publicly why he, a Japanese-American, chose to help the Chinese cause. The artist, obviously embarrassed, complied. He spoke of humanity's artistic debt to China and said: "I give this drawing as my way of showing the world that not all Japanese are militaristic." Later in the evening a raffle was held for an American-made automobile. Thousands of stubs were on view in a huge transparent jar as a little Chinese girl, in the presence of the Chinese Ambassador to the United States, thrust her tiny hand into the mass to pick a winner. The winning ticket belonged to Isamu Noguchi.*²

Isamu Noguchi, *Mother and Child*, 1930. Ink on paper, 192.3 x 105.8 cm (75 x 41 ¼ in.). Collection Lannan Foundation, Santa Fe

我從偉大的中華民國，學習生命的藝術，
 今天我要將這亞洲大陸，忘記日本文化的根源，
 我不願意忘記我藝術的宗師。
 大中華的子孫呀！你們生在多難的時空中，
 更能養成愛和平而抗戰果的性情；
 你們是將來的創造者，為中華建立新的運命！

野口勇識

一九三八年三月九日紐約



Given the explosive military events occurring in China, one can easily imagine the highly charged atmosphere of the exchange between Li and Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988) (fig. 1) at the auction. After such a tense encounter, it may have seemed to some in the audience a crowning irony when Noguchi's name was announced as the winner of the new automobile; to others the winning ticket held by Noguchi, who was described in the article as "one of America's greatest sculptors," may have symbolized Chinese and Japanese Americans uniting against fascism.

Reading the newspaper account today, sixty years after the event, arouses curiosity about the fate of the drawing and the state of Noguchi's emotions that day. What happened to the drawing? Did K. C. Li accept Noguchi's explanation and triple his bid? Was the thirty-three-year-old artist speaking as much in sadness as in anger about Japan's imperialist actions against China since he had spent his childhood in Japan and was the son of the famous Japanese poet Yone Noguchi, who still resided there?

About three years ago Professor Yuji Ichioka of the Asian American Studies Center at UCLA, aware of my research on Isamu Noguchi and his father,³ asked me to comment on a Noguchi ink drawing titled *Mother and Child* and dated 1938 in the Lannan Foundation in Los Angeles, specifically, a Chinese inscription signed by the artist and affixed with his seal. I was sent only a photocopy of the inscription and an English "translation" by Noguchi; no reproduction of the drawing was sent.

From the moment I examined the inscription on the Lannan drawing and compared it to Noguchi's "translation," I suspected that it might be the work that had been auctioned off to K. C. Li in 1937. The sentiments expressed in the inscription correspond with what Noguchi was reported to have said at the auction. Furthermore, the Lannan drawing's subject of a mother and child was a plausible description of a woman nursing her child, the theme of the auction work. But what was puzzling was that the inscription is written in Chinese, a language Noguchi had studied briefly in China but never acknowledged knowing. Did this mean that the drawing was not an original, or had Noguchi consented to have someone else transcribe his thoughts on the drawing in Chinese? Even without seeing a reproduction of the work I suspected it was one of a series of ink drawings that Noguchi had done in China in 1930 while studying under Ch'i Pai-shih, a noted Chinese painter. But if so, why was it dated 1938? With insufficient data about the Lannan drawing, I nonetheless wrote Professor Ichioka and conveyed my hunch that it might be the work auctioned off in 1937.

To corroborate my suspicions, I recently contacted the foundation and was sent reproductions of the Lannan drawing with pertinent archival materials.⁴ Much to my delight my intuitions proved correct. K. C. Li⁵ had indeed been the owner of the drawing until 1959, when he gave it as a gift to his friend Mr. Lannan.⁶ The picture, a line drawing of a woman nursing her child, was in a style consistent with the figurative studies done by Noguchi in Peking in 1930 (frontispiece).⁷ In the lower right portion of the drawing near the foot was the faintly written name "Isamu" followed by the date 1938, which had been clearly altered from the original date of 1930 (fig. 2). Beneath the name and date is a small, handwritten circle with a bisecting line inscribed with letters and numbers, the significance of which remains unknown but which may have been used by Noguchi as an identifying code since it is used in a similar fashion on his other Peking drawings. The Chinese inscription, placed in close proximity to the figures in the upper right-hand corner (fig. 3), reads:

I am a follower of great China and I have learned from its great art. Today intruders are attacking the Asian continent, forgetting their cultural roots. I don't want to forget my art's

- 1 Isamu Noguchi in his studio, Gentilly, France, ca. 1928. The Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Inc.



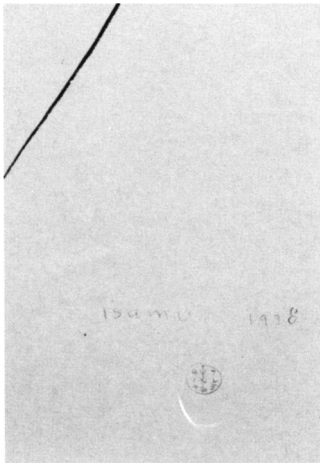
teacher. Oh children of great China! You live in the most difficult of times, yet you can still nurture peace and resist violent attack; you are the makers of the future and builders of a new Chinese destiny. Written by Isamu Noguchi, [Noguchi's Chinese seal], 1938, March 9, N.Y.

The calligrapher who wrote the Chinese inscription for Isamu cannot be easily traced now that both Noguchi and K. C. Li are dead.⁸ Neither the Lannan Foundation nor the Noguchi Garden Museum in Long Island City possesses data regarding this matter; indeed, the Lannan Foundation seems never to have questioned the authenticity of the inscription since the drawing was given to Mr. Lannan by Mr. Li accompanied by the artist's English "translation" of it, the text of which reads:

From great China we once learned the art of life. Now with Western tools, apt pupils, we torture the earth that gave so much. But China's future is in her children who growing into manhood in times like these gain character to love justice and resist tyranny [sic].
(Seal) Isamu Noguchi

Comparing the two texts reveals a similarity in meaning but a discrepancy in expression and language, a conundrum perhaps but one which is overshadowed by a desire to learn if Noguchi was not only the titular but the actual author of the thoughts expressed in both inscription and translation.

The ideas and sentiments expressed in the inscription are those of Isamu Noguchi, a certainty proven by an interview of Noguchi about Japan's invasion of China that was published in the *New York World-Telegram* on December 3, 1937, two days before the auction. The interview article is titled "Japanese-American Artist Fears for Old Peiping"



2 Detail of *Mother and Child* (page 84), signature and date

3 Detail of *Mother and Child* (page 84), Chinese inscription and seal

and was subtitled “Victors will ruin that ancient city, Noguchi says.” Although it was Nanking, not Peking, that was being poised for attack by the Japanese that first week in December, Noguchi’s anxieties about the potential destruction of the old city that he visited in 1930 and loved so well must have prompted the interview.⁹ But he clearly wanted to put the Japanese aggression in a larger context as the following quotation demonstrates:

*Virtually all Japanese art springs from Chinese roots. . . . The essential Japanese attitude toward life—the love of contemplation, the affection for nature—comes from China, too. But Japan, overcome by a capitalistic-military group, has developed a frantic spirit of nationalism, whereas China has never believed that progress lies along the path of power. Japan should love China for what China has given us. It is tragic that instead Japan has set about the methodical business of maiming and slaughtering her people.*¹⁰

Throughout the interview Noguchi conjures up Peking in a series of haunting and poetic images that illustrate how fully he identified with the city and its people. In contrast to the relaxed and civilized character of the Chinese, Noguchi characterizes the Japanese as being soulless and humorless efficiency experts who, if victorious, would destroy the basic humanity of their victims.

Most importantly for our understanding of the Lannan drawing the article concludes with a reference to the auction two days away and the work that Noguchi has contributed. In an illuminating statement explaining his choice of a drawing showing a Chinese woman nursing a baby, Noguchi said:

*That, I think, is a symbol of China—a woman nursing a baby. . . . Nursing a baby, while overhead roar the Japanese planes with bombs to destroy them. It is tragic that Japan, which owes everything to China, should have fallen so completely under the capitalistic-military group that demands this bloodshed.*¹¹

The *World-Telegram* article leaves little doubt that Noguchi was the driving force behind the Lannan drawing inscription. He not only chose the drawing for its symbolism but also emphasized its visual theme in the inscription’s reference to China’s children, who by nurturing peace would build a new Chinese destiny.

The Lannan drawing and the series of works to which it belonged carried profound personal and artistic resonances for Noguchi. To understand what these were we must turn to his 1968 autobiography and his reminiscences of the years 1930–31. In the spring of 1930, Noguchi was returning to Paris after a year in New York raising money to continue an interrupted trip to Asia, a journey begun in 1927 under the auspices of a Guggenheim travel grant. Noguchi’s application for the Guggenheim specifies why he wanted to go to Asia to pursue his sculpture studies:

*I have selected the Orient as the location for my productive activities for the reason that I feel a great attachment for it, having spent half my life there. My father, Yone Noguchi, is Japanese and has long been known as an interpreter of the East to the West, through poetry. I wish to do the same with sculpture.*¹²

Noguchi’s reference to his father (fig. 4) in his grant proposal may have been made with mixed feelings of pride and anger; pride in the fame of his father’s literary accomplish-

我從偉大的中華民國，學習生命的藝術；
 今天侵略者蹂躪這亞洲大陸，忘記日本文化的根源，
 我不願意忘記我藝術的宗師！
 大中華的子孫呀！你們生在多難的環境中，
 更能養成愛好和平反抗殘暴的性情；
 你們是將來的創造者，為中華建立新的運命！

野口勇識

三八年三月九日紐約

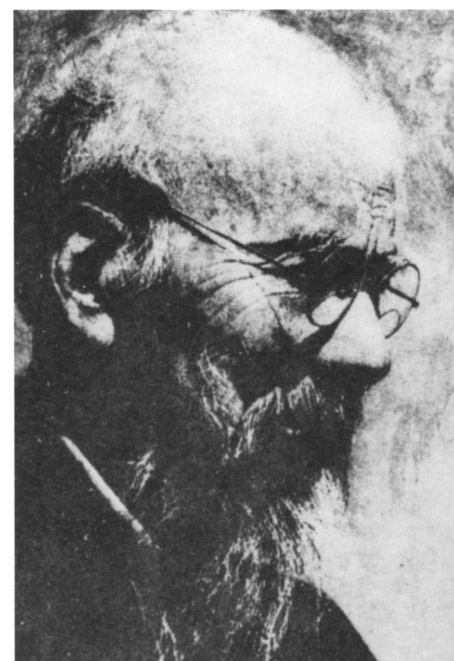
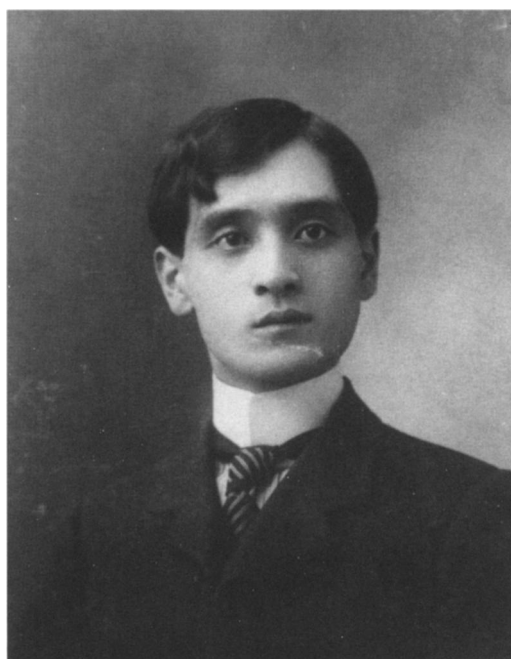
ments, anger at Yone's abandonment of his mother for another woman. Most hurtful of all was the emotional distance that Yone had created between himself and his son from Isamu's childhood on.¹³

In July of 1930, just before he was preparing to leave on his long rail trip to Asia, Noguchi received a letter from his father suggesting that he should not come to Japan using his name. Noguchi was left in shock from the news of the letter but it was too late to stop his travel plans. He decided to go to Peking instead. "If my father did not want me, Peking had heart and warmth to spare. There must be a habit of welcome to the stranger."¹⁴ The warm ambience of Peking led Noguchi to spend eight months of "splendid living" there.¹⁵ Among his greatest pleasures was making enormous figure drawings "with fantastic brushes and expressionist flourishes upon [China's] incredibly beautiful paper."

*How ashamed I was of my limitations when I visited the painter Chi Pai Shi, whom I had adopted as teacher. That autumn he painted grapes for me and some pale narcissus with the inscription "Who says that flowers have no passion." A painting, he said, is incomplete without a poem and without a seal. He first became famous for his seals, this carpenter who became a greater painter. He gave me mine.*¹⁶

Noguchi's training under Ch'i Pai-shih (1863–1957) (fig. 5) in Peking may have left as deep an impression on the young artist as Constantin Brancusi had in Paris, since both Brancusi and Ch'i were charismatic artists. Ch'i Pai-shih rose from an impoverished farming family to become a venerable and beloved traditional painter. As an artistically gifted but sickly child, Ch'i was apprenticed to a

- 4 Isamu Noguchi's father, Yonejiro (Yone) Noguchi, 1904. The Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Inc.
- 5 Ch'i Pai-shih (1863–1957), date unknown. Considered one of the last great traditional artists in China, Ch'i Pai-shih is known for his painting, poetry, and calligraphy. Illustrated in *Ch'i Pai-shih* (Kowloon: Swindon Book Co., 1973), p. 152
- 6 Isamu Noguchi, *Standing Female*, 1930. Hanging scroll; Chinese paper and inks; height: 182.9 cm (72 in.). The Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Inc.

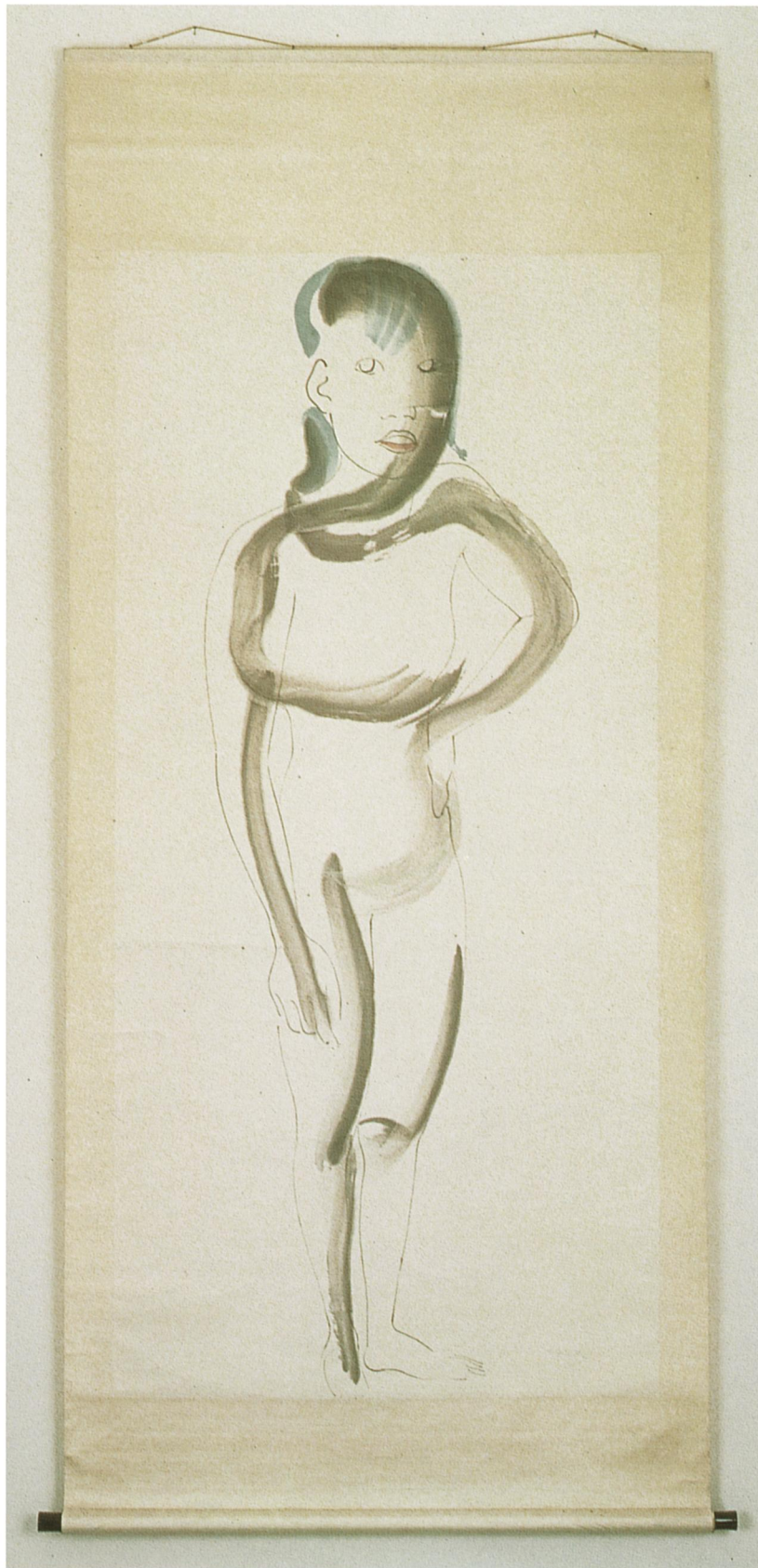


carpenter, a fact that Noguchi notes in his autobiography quite possibly because as a child in Japan he too had been apprenticed to a carpenter. Like Ch'i, Noguchi's artistic talents were early recognized and nurtured by his mother, Leonie Gilmour, who raised Isamu singlehandedly.

When Noguchi met Ch'i Pai-shih, Ch'i was already in his late sixties but was indefatigable. He gave painting lessons to beginners and masters alike.¹⁷ Obviously, Noguchi fitted neither category, despite his embarrassment about his "limitations." His two years in Paris (1927–28) were primarily devoted to his sculpture studies, but like so many other American artists he also spent much time creating model drawings at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. The fluidity and ease of the figurative drawings he did in Peking reflect his Parisian training, but what is surprising about the best of Noguchi's Peking works is their mastery of Chinese brush technique, the ability to let the ink flow from the brush in rhythmic accord with the contours of the figure being drawn. Since handling the brush is basic to Chinese painting technique, we can assume that this is what Noguchi learned from his Chinese teacher. He also had to learn the process of Chinese painting when executing his drawings:

*He drew them unrolling the scroll as he drew. When one considers that the scrolls are in some cases six feet long and the figures almost life size, that the movement is always circular and completely rhythmic, it is with quite a feeling of respect for Noguchi's power as a draftsman that one views them.*¹⁸

The "expressionist flourishes" (fig. 6) Noguchi applied to many of his figure drawings were inspired by the spontaneous washes in Ch'i Pai-shih's paintings (fig. 7). However, Noguchi's sweeping gestural strokes with an ink-loaded broad brush often obscured rather than enhanced the figures beneath and are the least successful of his borrowings from the Chinese tradition, although to Western eyes these exuberant "flourishes" may have been the most "Chinese" element of all in Noguchi's Peking drawings.



In 1937 the Lannan drawing undoubtedly evoked in Noguchi's mind many bittersweet memories. Foremost among his sweetest recollections must have been the lovely interlude he had spent in China seven years earlier, absorbing its ancient cultural atmosphere and learning painting from a sympathetic and learned master. After he left Peking to go to Japan, Noguchi would write in his autobiography that "it would only be a temporary absence," that he would "return to learn the art of the brush, learn how to be with nature, how to live."¹⁹ Mingled with these fond memories must also have been the painful memory of the letter he received from his father. In his Guggenheim application the young Noguchi showed that he wished to emulate his father in bridging East and West through art. Implicit in his proposal was the hope that his father might welcome him home as a son. The letter from Yone disabused him of such a notion. When Noguchi left China for Japan in 1931, he had no intention of seeing his father; however, a Japanese reporter on board the same ship recognized him and broke the news in the press that Yone Noguchi's son was on his way to Japan. He could not avoid seeing his father.

The meeting of father and son proved difficult for both. Yone's explanation for the letter that had upset Isamu so terribly was that Yone's pregnant Japanese wife objected to having Isamu visit Japan bearing his famous father's name. Whatever hopes Isamu may have had for reconciliation with his father evaporated in the "long silent conversations" they had together.²⁰ After Isamu left Japan to return home to the States in 1932, he never saw his father again.

In the summer of 1938, shortly after the Chinese inscription was added to the Lannan drawing, Yone Noguchi initiated a public exchange of letters

- 7 Ch'i Pai-shih, *Pumpkins*, ca. late 1920s. Hanging scroll; ink and color on paper, 135 x 35 cm (53 ¼ x 13 ¼ in.). Dr. Joseph Goldyne, San Francisco



with his friend and fellow poet, the great Indian writer and Nobel Prize winner Rabindranath Tagore, in which he defended Japan's military incursion in China and its "Asia for Asia" policy.²¹ The fervor with which he supported Japan's imperialist cause was in striking contrast with his son's equally fervent condemnation of it. In his autobiography Isamu would later laconically write about his father, "[He] like others, was swept up in the nationalism of the war."²²

In retrospect, the Lannan Foundation drawing was donated by Noguchi at a time when he and many other American artists were using their art for social and political protest. But for Isamu Noguchi the storm clouds of war that were hovering over Asia touched home much more directly than for the majority of his countrymen, as the Lannan inscription so clearly shows. In its outcry against Japanese militarism the inscription foreshadows Pearl Harbor and Noguchi's decision to join in solidarity with thousands of his fellow Japanese Americans who were forcibly removed from their West Coast homes by their own government and placed into internment camps.²³

Notes

- 1 *New York Times*, Sunday, 12 December 1937, sect. 4, p. E2. For a recent study of the Nanking Massacre, see Iris Chang, *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).
- 2 *Ibid.*, sect. 4, p. E1.
- 3 I am writing a biography of Isamu Noguchi and his father.
- 4 The drawing is now kept in the Lannan Foundation in Santa Fe. My thanks to Kathleen Merrill, Director of Art Programs, Lannan Foundation, for providing me with archival data and reproductions of the drawing. I also wish to thank Amy Hau, Administrative Director, The Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Inc., for providing me with invaluable information about Noguchi's drawings and photographs for this article.
- 5 K. C. (Kuo-ching) Li (1893–1961) was a wealthy and influential Chinese American born in China. A leading authority on tungsten, Mr. Li was also active in civic and philanthropic work and served as adviser to the Chinese Embassy in Washington during World War II.
- 6 J. Patrick Lannan (1905–1983) was director of the ITT Corporation for thirty-six years. As a patron of the arts, Mr. Lannan established the Lannan Foundation to provide financial help to needy artists and writers. He also founded the Museum of the Lannan Foundation in Lake Worth, Florida. He and Isamu Noguchi were long-time friends, and Lannan collected other works by Noguchi in addition to the present drawing.
- 7 According to Bruce Altshuler, Noguchi made about one hundred of these drawings. See Altshuler, "Isamu Noguchi: Early Drawings from Paris and Beijing," *Drawing* 16, no. 4 (1994): 76.
- 8 It is possible that K. C. Li himself inscribed the drawing for Noguchi.
- 9 Peking (present-day Beijing) was China's capital until 1928, when the Nationalist Government moved the capital to Nanking. Peiping was the name of Peking when it was not China's capital.
- 10 Jack Foster, "Japanese-American Artist Fears for Old Peiping," *New York World-Telegram*, 3 December 1937.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 Isamu Noguchi, *Isamu Noguchi: A Sculptor's World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 17.
- 13 For a discussion of Noguchi's relationship with his parents, see Robert J. Maeda, "From Shape and Shadow: The Mother and Father of Isamu Noguchi," *Amerasia Journal* 22, no. 3 (1996): 104–20.
- 14 Noguchi, *A Sculptor's World*, p. 20.
- 15 Dore Ashton points out that Noguchi never fully explained in his memoirs or later interviews why he chose to go to Peking or why he was given such a warm welcome by "friends" whom he had not known before. See Dore Ashton, *Noguchi East and West* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), p. 28.
- 16 Noguchi, *A Sculptor's World*, p. 20.
- 17 Jung Ying Tsao, *The Paintings of Xugu and Qi Baishi* (San Francisco: Far East Fine Arts, in association with the University of Washington Press, 1993), p. 213.
- 18 Inez Cunningham, "Noguchi as Master of Long Scroll," *Chicago Evening Post*, 8 March 1932.
- 19 Noguchi, *A Sculptor's World*, p. 20.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 Ikuko Atsumi, ed., *Yone Noguchi: Collected English Letters* (Tokyo: Yone Noguchi Society, 1975), pp. 225–30.
- 22 Noguchi, *A Sculptor's World*, p. 13. See also Ashton, *Noguchi East and West*, p. 23, in which Noguchi is said to have compared his father to the Japanese painter Tsugouharu Foujita (1886–1968), who became famous in Paris in the 1920s and like Yone "was one of those people indirectly responsible for the war—patriotic, you know."
- 23 For a discussion of Noguchi's voluntary internment in the camp at Poston, Arizona, see Robert J. Maeda, "Isamu Noguchi: 5-7-A, Poston, Arizona," *Amerasia Journal* 20, no. 2 (1994): 60–76.