

Noguchi in Mexico

International Themes for a Working-Class Market



Sculpture can be a vital force in our every day life if projected into communal usefulness.

—Isamu Noguchi (1935)

Isamu Noguchi, *History as Seen from Mexico in 1936, 1936*. Tinted cement, concrete, and brick, 22 x 2.2 m (72 x 6.5 ft.). Abelardo L. Rodríguez Market, Mexico City

In early 1936, Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988) incised his name and date into fresh cement that covered a sculptural mural he had just completed for Mexico City’s Abelardo L. Rodríguez Market (frontispiece). In terms of its material, formal language, and iconography, Noguchi’s monumental relief was a revolutionary achievement. Not only was it his first fully realized public project, but it was (and remains) part of the complex and interwoven history of twentieth-century public art in Mexico and the United States. Historians of Noguchi’s career have paid the mural little attention, perhaps because of its early date and distant location, but also because its overt leftist symbolism interfered with the image of

an artist freed from representational (and explicitly political) content and with postwar art historical narratives that emphasized abstract expressionism. Although later in life Noguchi would remember this experience as “morally significant,” he was critical of his foray into proletarian imagery, speaking “self-deprecatingly of his participation in the revolutionary life of the Mexican intelligentsia,” and regretting including the clenched fist of a worker in the mural. Following this lead, art historian Sam Hunter dismissed Noguchi’s Mexican relief for its “dated character and naive social idealism.”¹ But that same “idealism,” unfettered in an environment with few bureaucratic constraints, inspired him to create what remains one of



the most innovative and important works of public art from the 1930s.

Noguchi was one of several American artists who created murals in Mexico during that turbulent decade. They were beneficiaries of a dynamic art world open to visiting talents and of a progressive political and social atmosphere that meant new patrons, public and private, and increased opportunities. A few Americans had worked as assistants to Rivera in the 1920s, including Ione Robinson and Pablo O'Higgins, whose 1929 decorations for an open-air theater in Durango constituted the first independent mural completed by an American in Mexico. Between 1933 and 1936, during a boom in mural painting unequalled since the early 1920s, a total of eight Americans worked on major murals in Mexico. Besides Noguchi and O'Higgins, these include Howard Cook, Marion and Grace

Greenwood, Ryah Ludins, Reuben Kadish, and Philip Guston.² Most were profoundly influenced by Diego Rivera and, to a lesser extent, José Clemente Orozco. Noguchi was no exception. Many of the iconographic elements in his relief can be traced to the work of his Mexican counterparts. Noguchi's adoption of abstraction, however, had no real precedents in Mexican public art; it was derived more from his intimate familiarity with European modernism and, perhaps, traditional Japanese art than from contemporary projects by Mexican muralists. Although David Alfaro Siqueiros was much less influential than Rivera or Orozco in creating an iconographic language, Noguchi's crucial choice of cement as a primary medium signals important debts to the third of the "très grandes," who vehemently advocated that modern art required modern materials and techniques.

Noguchi's Mexican relief was also deeply informed by ongoing debates in both the United States and Mexico about the role of the artist in the heated political climate of the mid-1930s. In late 1935, he was one of the early signers of the call for an American Artists' Congress, thus allying himself with those seeking a collective response to the fascist threat. Indeed, his Mexican relief reveals full support for the Communist Party's institution of a Popular Front against War and Fascism at the Seventh Comintern in August 1935. Given the conservatism of New Deal arts agencies, the lack of independent left-wing patrons, and the general absence of large buildings in the United States with vast wall space, few American artists working in the United States had the opportunity to explore these critical issues, and never on a grand and public scale.³

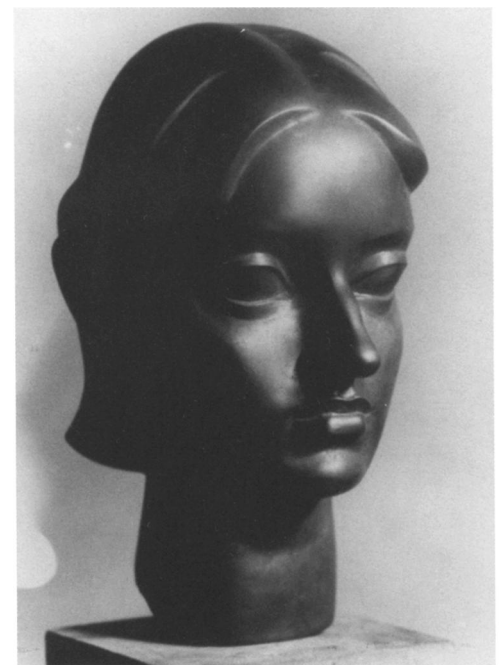
Noguchi arrived in Mexico at a time of heightened tensions within the country's art world. Although most leftist American artists unconditionally praised the Mexican mural movement as an important radical precedent, the "movement" itself was a topic of serious debate in Mexico. Several artists closely affiliated with the Communist Party, including Siqueiros and the members of the newly founded League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists (Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios, or LEAR), dismissed the murals of the previous decade as insufficiently "public" and inadequately "revolutionary." According to these critics, these 1920s murals, like Rivera's famous frescoes in the Ministry of Public Education and the National Palace in Mexico City, had tended to consolidate the power of the government rather than call for social and political change.⁴ In a series of ensuing debates, Siqueiros also sought to discredit Rivera's "errant" allegiance to the International Left Opposition, headed by Leon Trotsky, and to challenge Rivera's continuing

hegemony on the national and international art scene.

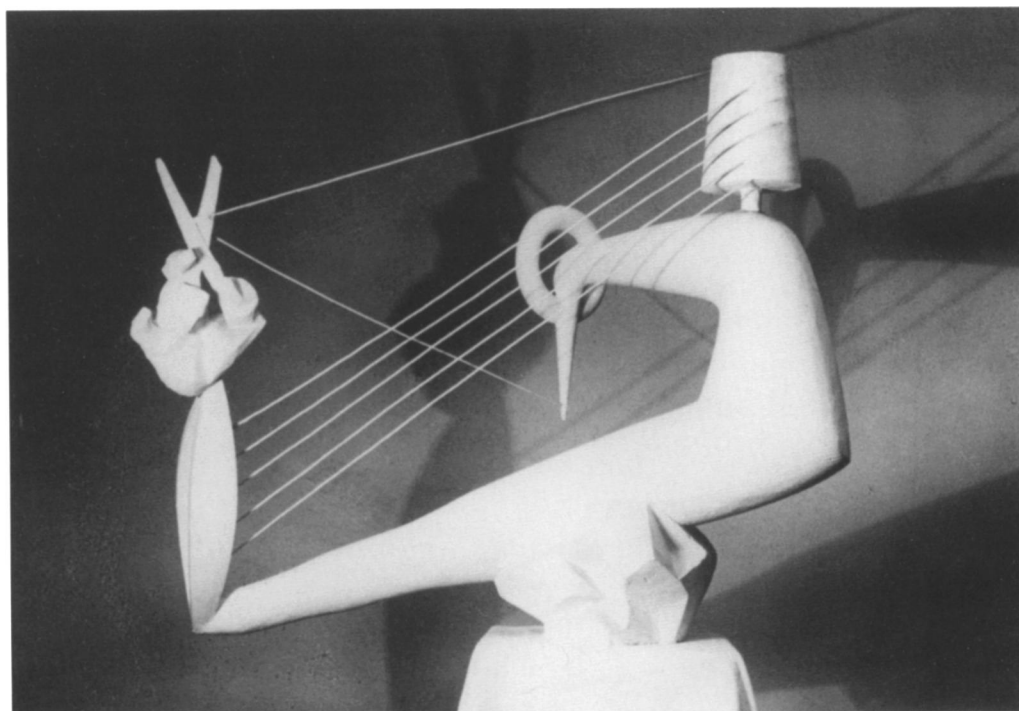
In the Rodríguez Market, Noguchi would use public art as an antagonistic, rather than conciliatory, force. Combining modernist abstraction with a didactic message that he believed would be easily understood by his working-class audience, Noguchi attacked the evils of industrial warfare, capitalism, and fascism, and hailed the benefits of science, agriculture, and working-class cooperation. As an American working in Mexico, who rejected references to his immediate surroundings, Noguchi confirmed the vitality of muralism as an international, not simply national, force. As his original title—"History as Seen from Mexico in 1936"—indicates, Noguchi chose to record no single place or event, but a vantage point.

Seeking Stars in the Night

In early 1927, after receiving a Guggenheim Fellowship, Noguchi traveled to Paris, working as a studio assistant to Constantin Brancusi for six months before continuing on to Japan. Around



- 1 Isamu Noguchi, *Marion Greenwood*, 1929. Cast iron, 20.3 cm (8 in.) high. The Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Inc., Long Island City, New York
- 2 Isamu Noguchi, *Carl Mackley Memorial (United Hosiery Workers' Memorial)*, 1934. Plaster model, dimensions unknown. Location unknown



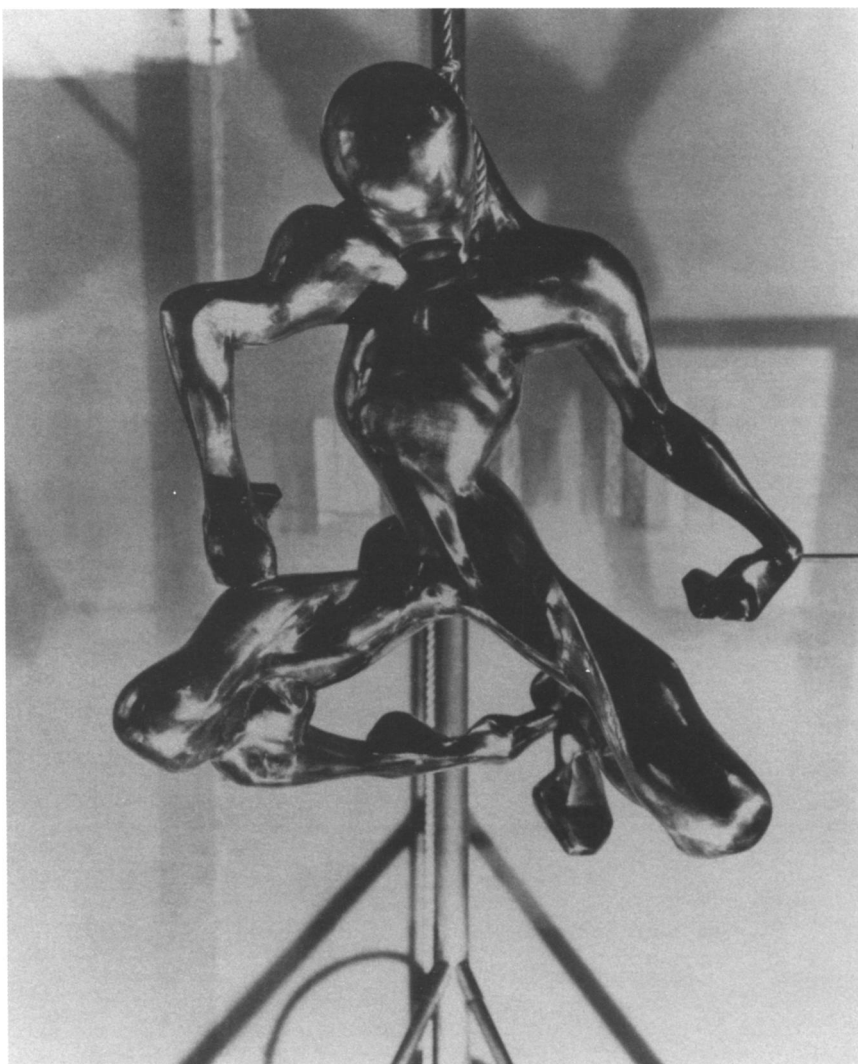
1928, after his return to New York, he turned to studio portraiture as a means of earning income. His subjects included the young American painter Marion Greenwood, whom he had met at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière in Paris. Although Noguchi's portrait of Greenwood (fig. 1) provides no clues, the two artists were apparently involved in a romantic affair at the time.⁵

In the early 1930s, Noguchi's erratic economic situation reflected both the disastrous conditions of the Depression and the continuing wealth of many of his patrons. A statement from his 1968 autobiography, *A Sculptor's World*, poetically avoids an overtly partisan position:

These contrasts of poverty and relative luxury made me more and more conscious of social injustice, and I soon had friends of the Left. But Left or Right, it was a communion with people I was interested in. Portraits were a gregariousness. . . . But I wanted other means of communication—to find a way of sculpture that was humanly meaningful without being realistic, at once

*abstract and socially relevant. . . . My thoughts were born in despair, seeking stars in the night.*⁶

Noguchi joined the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) in New York on December 27, 1933. The next year he submitted designs for three monumental sculptures—*Monument to Ben Franklin*, *Monument to the Plough*, and *Play Mountain*. The first was a tall array of symbols related to Franklin's discovery of electricity. *Monument to the Plough*, an immense cultivated earthen pyramid topped by a stainless steel plow, to be situated on a Midwestern prairie, was a radical assault on the traditional boundaries of public art. A concrete playground for New York City, *Play Mountain* was only slightly more practical. Any hopes he may have had for the success of these proposals were dashed by bureaucratic reticence to his utopian ideas and his own unwillingness to compromise. After he left the PWAP, Noguchi produced a memorial to labor leader Carl Mackley (fig. 2), which was intended for a community housing



3 Isamu Noguchi, *Death (Lynched Figure)*, 1934. Monel metal, wood, metal and rope armature, 99 x 74.3 x 53.3 cm (39 x 29 1/4 x 21 in.); height of armature 89 in. The Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Inc., Long Island City, New York

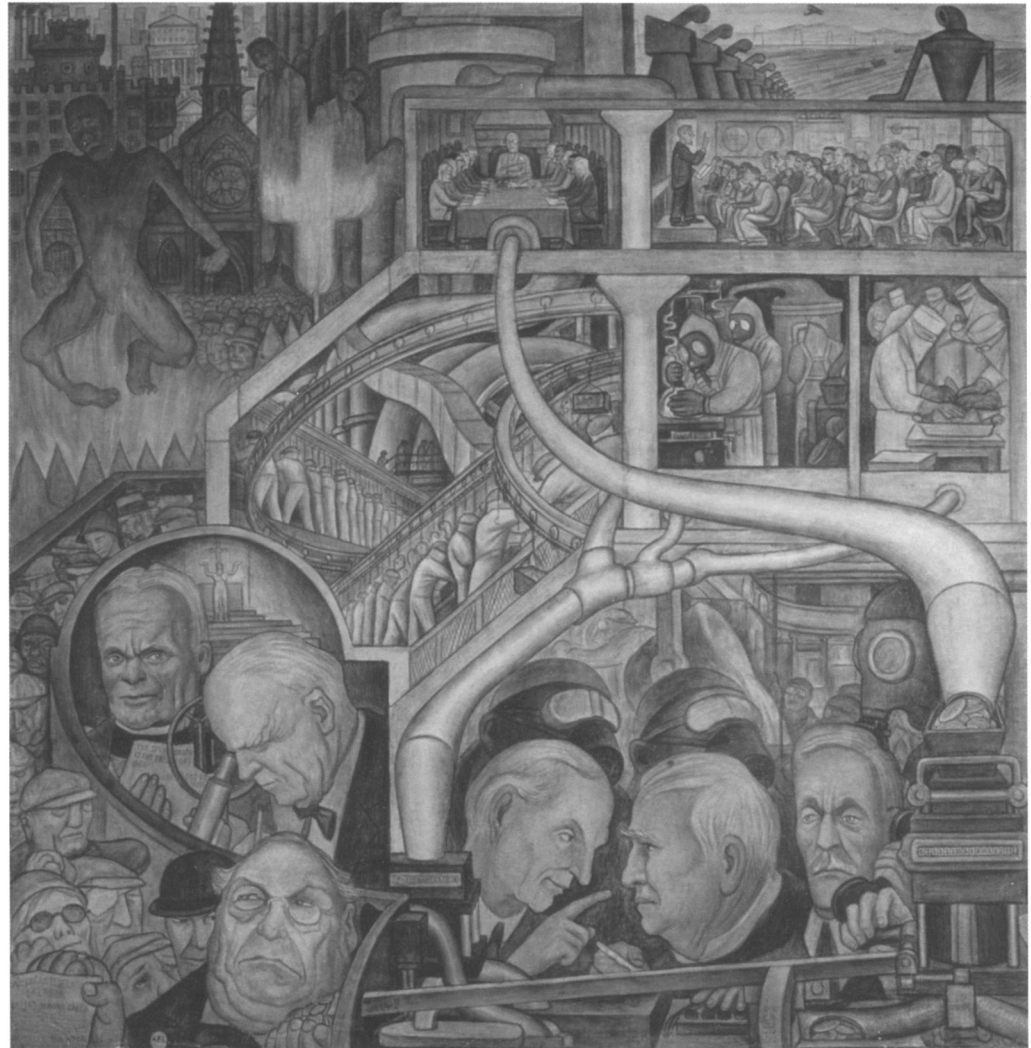
development in Philadelphia, jointly sponsored by the American Federation of Hosiery Workers and the Roosevelt administration. The trade symbols of the union—a sewing machine and a hand with scissors—hardly seem controversial, but the sculpture was never installed, for unknown reasons.⁷ In these works, Noguchi made tentative steps toward an art that would be both “abstract and socially relevant,” though neither his patrons nor audience were ready for the results. Yet this brief examination of this period reveals the foundation for some of the conceptual and visual strategies he would adopt in Mexico; unlike most of the other Americans who found commissions there,

Noguchi would arrive already embarked upon the path of public art.

In a 1935 exhibition at the Marie Harriman Gallery in New York, Noguchi exhibited models for these projects, along with several sculptures that further testified to his efforts to create an art of social importance. One sculpture, entitled *Black Boy* (around 1934, location unknown), was carved in ebony. Another, *Death*, or *Lynched Figure* (fig. 3), cast from a metal alloy, remains the most famous and frequently discussed of Noguchi’s early sculptures. Both show a concern for the plight of African Americans, shared by many artists of the time. According to Noguchi, *Death* was based on a photograph published by the International Labor Defense, a radical legal-aid group. The twisted figure is similar to the one in Rivera’s *Modern Industry* (fig. 4), part of the fresco cycle he had just completed for the New Workers’ School in New York.⁸ Surprisingly, Harriman refused to exhibit Noguchi’s *Birth* (1934), a white marble sculpture of a mother in labor, apparently because it transgressed social proprieties without offering a “redeeming” political message. Noguchi’s proposals for large public monuments revealed social concern not through their iconography, but mainly because they were theoretically intended for mass audiences. Even his sculpture for the Philadelphia hosiery workers, while perhaps alluding to the stress of labor, lacked any didactic message. In *Death*, however, he brought the gallows into the sacred space of the gallery.

The negative response of several leading critics, including a racist attack by critic Henry McBride, persuaded Noguchi, already wounded by his experience on the PWAP, to change course. Years later, with more than a trace of bitterness, he wrote: “That settled it! If what could be taken seriously as art precluded a search beyond the accepted purposes and dimensions, what was I to do? I wanted

- 4 Diego Rivera, *Modern Industry*, 1933. Portable fresco panel, 183 x 180 cm (72 x 70.8 in.). Private collection, Reproduction authorized by the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura, © 2001 Banco de México, Fideicomiso Museos Diego Rivera y Frida Kahlo

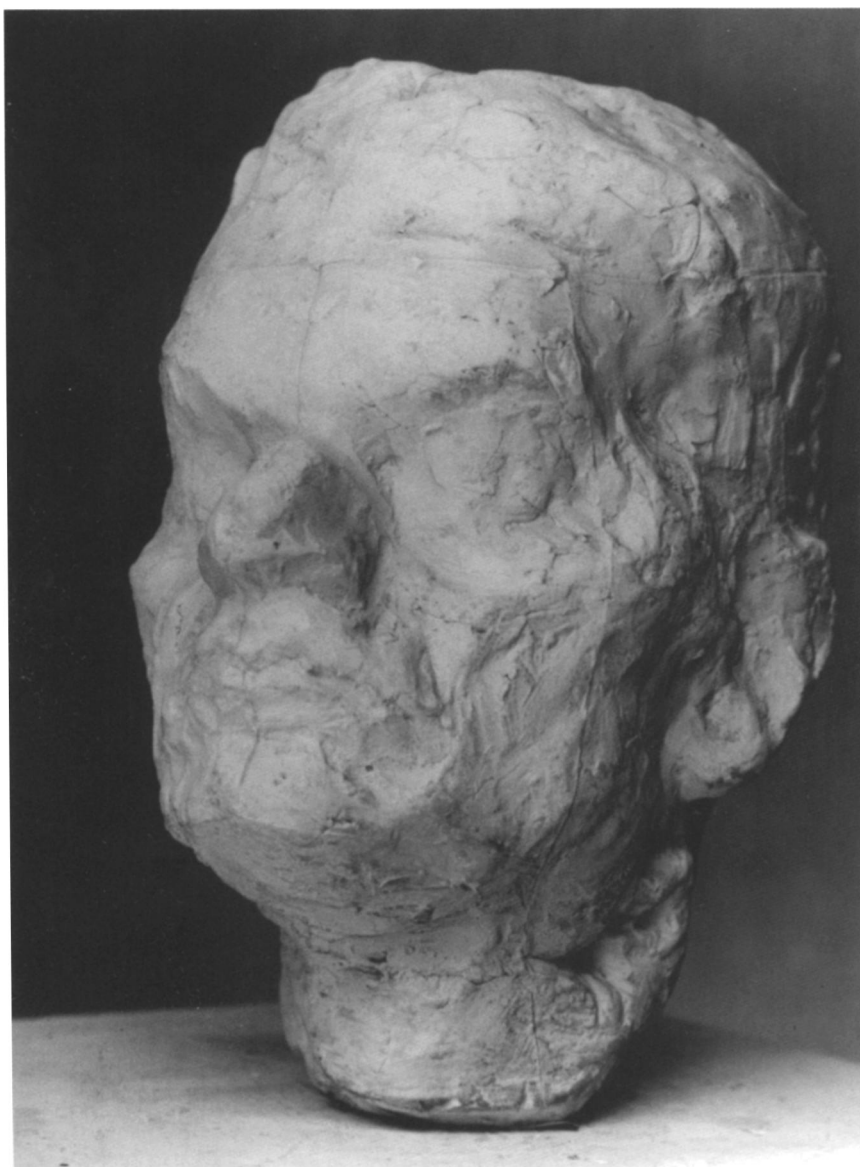


widening horizons and a way of art to seek for myself. I determined to have no further truck with either galleries or critics.”⁹

After failing to join the WPA’s Federal Art Project, because his income as a portraitist disqualified him from the need-based program, Noguchi escaped to Los Angeles. He worked on further portrait commissions, and met the modernist architect Richard Neutra, who suggested he design a swimming pool for the house Neutra was building for film director Josef von Sternberg. This project was also shelved.¹⁰ From California it was but a short step south of the border, and Noguchi had probably planned, or at

least considered, a journey to Mexico before leaving New York, largely because of Marion Greenwood. There is little doubt that he knew of the murals she had just completed in the provincial Mexican cities of Taxco and Morelia, since both works were widely reviewed in the press. In addition, Noguchi and Greenwood may have seen each other and discussed Mexico in New York in mid-1934, when, on a return visit to the United States, Greenwood herself had joined the PWAP.

In addition, like many artists with an interest in social concerns and public art, Noguchi had plenty of opportunities for learning about the achievements of other



5 Isamu Noguchi, *Head of Orozco*, 1931. Terra cotta, 31.1 cm (12 ¼ in.) high. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Albert M. Bender Collection, Gift of Albert M. Bender

participants in Mexico's "mural renaissance." Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros were all living in the United States in the early 1930s, working on mural commissions and exhibiting their work. Orozco had completed his frescoes at New York's New School for Social Research in January 1931, and exhibited at the same New York gallery as Noguchi, who had sculpted Orozco's head that same year (fig. 5). In addition, a victim of bureaucratic censorship himself, Noguchi surely shared the opinions of New York artists

who protested the destruction of Rivera's RCA Building mural in Rockefeller Center in February 1934 as an assault on artistic integrity.¹¹ Later, in Los Angeles, Noguchi's contact with Neutra and von Sternberg, both of whom knew Siqueiros, may have given him insight into the murals that Siqueiros had completed there in 1932. Indeed, for an artist living on either coast in the early 1930s, it was hard to escape—in person or in the press—the trail of the "très grandes."

Noguchi's difficulties in New York, his contacts in Los Angeles, and his relationship with Greenwood all served as catalysts for his trip to Mexico. His insights into the use of new materials, particularly concrete; his early experiments with abstraction; and his exploration of the limits of socially conscious subject matter helped determine the contours of his 1936 Mexico City relief.

A Wall to Sculpt

With the money earned while living and working in California, Noguchi left for Mexico sometime in the latter half of 1935, driving a car borrowed from his close friend, the inventor and architect Buckminster Fuller. In his autobiography, Noguchi called this an "exploratory trip," and mentioned only that after arriving in Mexico City, a "group of artists working in the Indian market of Abelardo Rodríguez offered me a wall to sculpt if I would agree to the same rate of pay as they were receiving for painting fresco, so much a square meter. I joyfully accepted." According to Greenwood, the artists "got Rivera to get the government to let him in on" the project.¹² Noguchi had finally obtained the space and the independence that he had previously been denied.

This "Indian market," as Noguchi called it, was one of Mexico City's most important urban renovation projects of the 1930s (fig. 6). Located in an old



6 Antonio Muñoz (architect), Abelardo L. Rodríguez Market, Mexico City, 1933–34. Reproduced in *Informe Presidencial y Memoria del DDF* (Mexico City: 1934), n.p.

working-class district a few blocks from the city's Metropolitan Cathedral, the massive building was designed to replace congested street markets with a modernized sanitary facility and offer social and cultural services, including a daycare center and theater. In keeping with the neighborhood, the architect adopted a modified version of the colonial revival style, combining plastered walls, arcades, and heavy ornamental stonework with soaring iron vaults over the market itself. Financed by the Departamento del Distrito Federal (Department of the Federal District, or DDF), the branch of the federal government charged with running the capital, the market was named in honor of interim president Abelardo L. Rodríguez at the close of his term in November 1934. Promoted by the regime as a noble effort to bring the fruits of the revolution to the city's poor, the market actually honored a wily capitalist (as governor of Baja California, Rodríguez had made a fortune as a bootlegger and casino investor) whose executive authority was limited by ex-president Plutarco Elías Calles, who overshadowed national politics between 1928 and 1934.

On arriving in Mexico, Noguchi joined nine other artists already at work

in the building: Mexicans Ramón Alva Guadarrama, Angel Bracho, Raúl Gamboa, Antonio Pujol, Pedro Rendón, and Miguel Tzab, and Americans Pablo O'Higgins and Marion and Grace Greenwood. Because of his late entry, Noguchi avoided the bureaucratic difficulties that had plagued his colleagues since early 1934, when negotiations to decorate the building commenced. In fact, he began his relief after Lázaro Cárdenas assumed the presidency on December 1, 1934, legalized the Communist Party, and, most importantly, after Cárdenas broke with the *callista* machine in mid-1935 and embarked upon a "revitalization" of the revolution. Nevertheless, it would be misleading to interpret Noguchi's mural simply as reflecting Cárdenas's radical political program. In fact, his administration valued press and print propaganda over murals. Rivera and Orozco, for example, received only one federal commission each between 1934 and 1940. Rather, as the absence of his name from any official documents related to the Rodríguez Market indicates, Noguchi was operating in a sort of bureaucratic limbo. He came in at the end of an ongoing collaborative program whose roots lay in the former regime, which had used public art

more openly as a smokescreen for conservative politics, and whose messages were inspired less by any particular bureaucrats than by LEAR's radical discourse. Not surprisingly, O'Higgins and Pujol, the informal leaders of the market project, were among that organization's founding members.¹³

Noguchi benefitted from a generous donor, Mexico's major cement manufacturer, the British-owned Cementos Tolteca.

In a short article Noguchi sent to *Art Front* soon after completing his relief, he provided little information about these political complexities, emphasizing instead that "all designs required approval by the group and [were] more or less cooperative in layout although not in conception or execution."¹⁴ While the market murals were not planned as an integrated whole, and show a broad range of formal strategies, they reveal mutual influences and concerns, and are unified, in part, by their iconography. In Noguchi's mural, this collaborative spirit surfaces not only in his acceptance of the shared political themes—the opposition to war, fascism, and capitalist abuse—but also in numerous symbols (fat capitalists, red flags, canons) that appear throughout the market. The murals-in-process provided Noguchi with a wealth of visual material from which to extract details for his own project.

Noguchi was given a broad horizontal wall on the second story, directly facing the twin stairwell that Marion and Grace Greenwood were painting. This area had previously been assigned to the two sisters, who offered the space to Noguchi not only in the spirit of cooperation, but also because they had too much surface

area to cover by December 31, 1935, the deadline specified by their contract. Like the other artists, Noguchi would have to work with the idiosyncrasies of his site. Windows interrupted the wall at regular intervals, and the surface was not entirely flat. Because the main body of the market building is roughly octagonal, each "corner" consists of parts of three walls. Elevated about a meter from the floor to prevent damage from passersby, Noguchi's relief forms a dense horizontal band that runs across the entire central wall and shorter sections of each adjacent wall, framed by limestone pilasters at each end. He apparently worked on the mural mainly in November and December 1935, finishing sometime in early 1936.

Because the payment rate for each artist was based on the costs of working in fresco, Noguchi realized that any sculptural project would have to conform to the commission's financial as well as spatial limitations. Unlike his plans for *Monument to the Plough* or *Play Mountain*, he was no longer working in the abstract, but within specific boundaries set in advance. In *Art Front*, Noguchi described the procedure he ultimately followed:

*First, the sketch was enlarged onto the brick wall. Then bricks built in where thickness was required, then carved in and out. This took about two months. After this, cement, large marble aggregate, and lime was thrown on and the forms defined. The final coat contained fine aggregate color and cement mixed dry to assume accurate color when applied with a trowel and polished.*¹⁵

Noguchi's choice of cement as a basic material was hardly fortuitous. While in New York, he had already considered working with concrete in *Play Mountain*. The material is more practical and less expensive than stone or stainless steel, especially for large-scale works. In the same article, Noguchi also advocated rejecting

traditional sculptural techniques in favor of modern technology:

*We must become familiar with the modern ways of handling plastic and crystalline matter (the spray-gun, pneumatic hammer, etc.). For any given work we should use that precise material best suited to its size, to cost and durability. . . . The scientific method is necessarily the cheap method. The cheap and quick method will rescue sculpture from preciousness.*¹⁶

By no stretch of the imagination could cement be considered “precious.” It was a logical choice for an artist searching for a “cheap and quick” solution, as evidenced by its widespread use in building construction.

Siqueiros must have partly inspired Noguchi’s use of this nontraditional material. His choice of words, in fact, echoes those used by Siqueiros in his famous 1932 lecture at the Hollywood John Reed Club. Siqueiros scorned the plaster and brushes of traditional fresco, promoting their replacement with “white water-proof cement,” pneumatic drills, blow torches, and air pistols. Siqueiros believed that these new technologies would provide a more durable and modern alternative to a medium unchanged since the Renaissance. Noguchi never mentioned or quoted this lecture directly, but he could have heard about it while in Los Angeles, and may have seen what remained of Siqueiros’s two concrete-based frescoes at the Chouinard School of Art and the Plaza Art Center.¹⁷

In his 1936 article, Noguchi also promoted the use of color in sculpture as “an element which greatly enhances its appeal to the average man.” Although Noguchi limited himself to red, black, gray, and white, perhaps to economize, the fact that the relief was not monochrome was itself innovative. However, rather than apply paint to a wet concrete surface, as Siqueiros had done in Los Angeles,

Noguchi blended pigments with powdered cement before adding water, then spread this wet mixture as a thin layer over the concrete and brick foundation. In his lecture Siqueiros had mentioned this method of applying previously colored cement to the wall by means of a compressor: “This procedure permits the creation of incomparable plastic materials. Its physical resistance has no equal; it is even stronger than that of fresco painted over cement, since here the color is an integral part of the entire surface.”¹⁸

But if the compressor was modern, the technique was not. Mexican builders had long used colored cement as a durable alternative to paint. In 1930, Mexican artist Alfredo Zalce may have been the first to use this traditional process in a modern work of art. Sent by the Ministry of Public Education to paint an exterior mural for a rural school in the state of Mexico, Zalce was inspired by local masons he observed covering the dome of a church with red cement. Pujol also used concrete in one section of his mural in the Rodríguez Market to “increase its resistance.” But Noguchi’s method was more architectural than painterly, and it most closely resembles an even more avant-garde appropriation of traditional Mexican building techniques that he must have known about. In 1930–31, architect Juan O’Gorman applied thin coats of white cement mixed with bright red and blue pigments to the exterior walls of the functionalist studios that he designed for Rivera and Frida Kahlo in the Mexico City suburb of San Ángel.¹⁹

To supplement his limited funds, Noguchi benefitted from a generous donor, Mexico’s major cement manufacturer, the British-owned Cementos Tolteca, whose corporate patronage was no surprise. Tolteca’s eponymous trade magazine promoted the use of concrete in the construction industry, and strongly encouraged the adoption of international-style architecture in Mexico. Tolteca’s



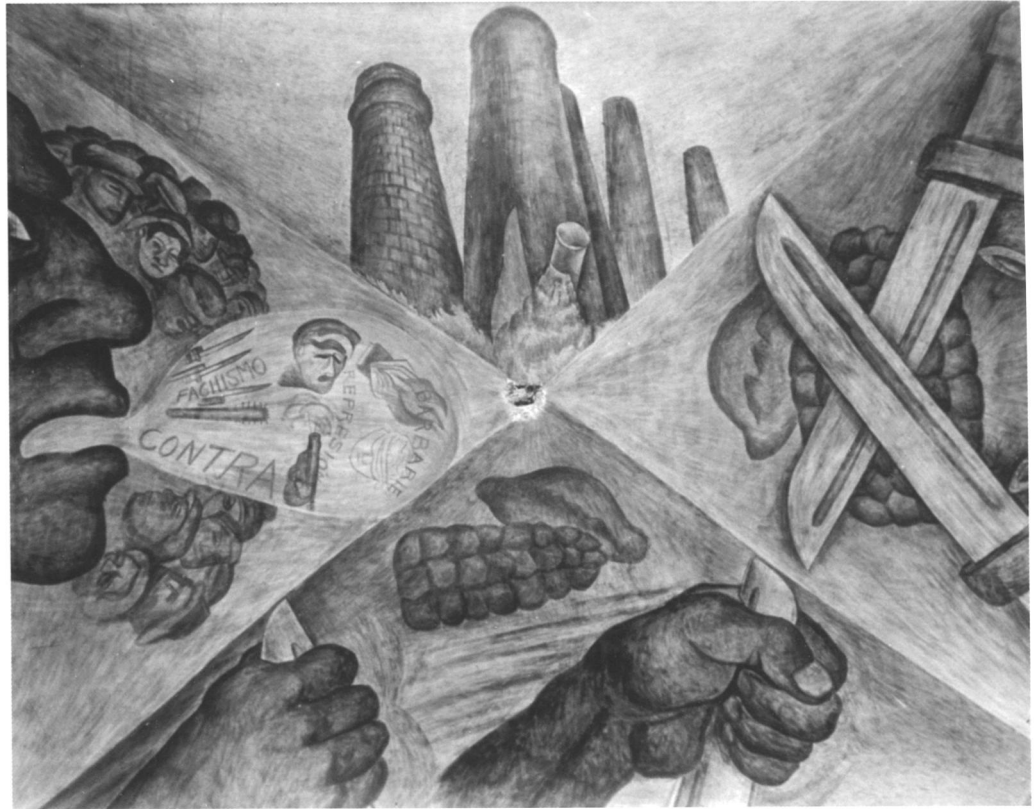
7 Manuel Alvarez Bravo, *Cement-Triptych 2* (also known as *La Tolteca*), 1931. Photogravure included as insert in *Tolteca 21* (January 1932). Author's collection

advertising manager, Federico Sánchez Fogarty, designed a sophisticated propaganda campaign to counteract the opposition of traditionalist architects and others who supported the neocolonial style, such as that of the Rodríguez Market itself, as more authentically “Mexican.” Like Noguchi, the modernists favored concrete for its economy and durability; the traditionalists countered that imperialist interests (including the foreign-owned Cementos Tolteca) were forcing this “alien” style on the country.

To further this publicity campaign, Cementos Tolteca embarked on some of the earliest Mexican instances of corporate sponsorship of the arts. In 1931, the company constructed an ultramodern cement factory in an outlying district of Mexico City, and sponsored a competition in which painters and photographers were required to depict it in some way. Manuel Alvarez Bravo’s semiabstract composition of a solid concrete wall rising above a mound of gravel (fig. 7) won first prize in photography. His collagelike combination of raw material and product in a single frame reflected the futuristic self-image the company wished to promote.²⁰ How Noguchi first made contact with the Mexico City-based company is not known. Either Rivera, one of the jurors, or Pujol, winner of the fourth prize in painting, could easily have introduced him to Sánchez Fogarty. It is also possible that the multitasking (and English-speaking) O’Gorman, whose buildings used Tolteca cement and who had taken first prize in painting for a portable fresco panel, played a crucial role.

Cementos Tolteca sponsored another, lesser-known artistic event in July 1935, around the time that Noguchi arrived in Mexico. Sixty panels in *cemento pictórico* (pictorial cement) by Manuel Baumgarten and Ernesto F. Sánchez were exhibited in a temporary space on Avenida Madero, the capital’s principal commercial street. In an interview in the popular weekly *Todo*, Baumgarten, an engineer, connected the discovery of this new technique to the ongoing debates between Rivera and Siqueiros over the future of mural painting. Baumgarten sided with the latter, noting that traditional fresco was “antiquated” and praising Siqueiros’s experiments with cement and commercial enamels. Following the path of Mexican sculptors like Oliverio Martínez, who had also been working in cement, Baumgarten, Sánchez, and others developed a cloisonné-like process, in

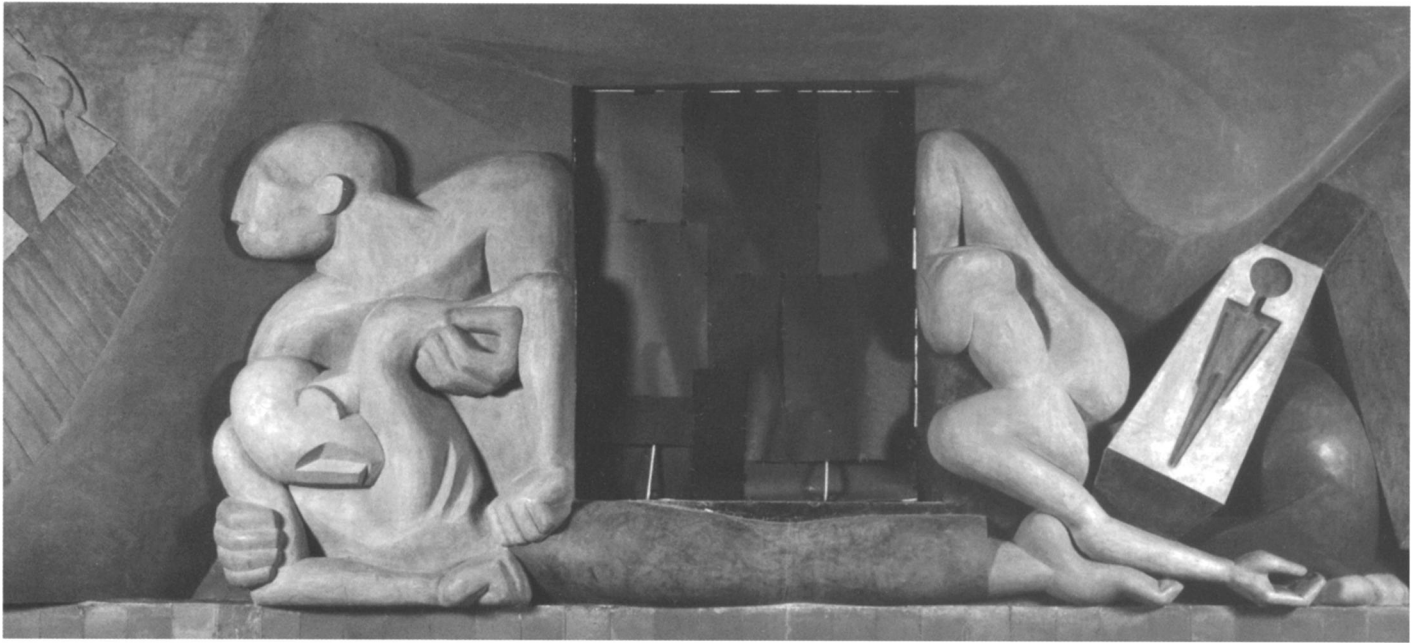
- 8 Pablo O'Higgins, untitled ceiling vault, 1934–35. Fresco, 365 x 490 cm (144 x 192 in.). Abelardo L. Rodríguez Market, Mexico City



which fields of colored cement were poured into metal molds. Published illustrations reveal that the panels were figurative renditions of traditional Mexican subjects. Curiously, having developed what *Todo* called the “pictorial technique of the future,” the artists shied away from abstraction.²¹ Though the art would soon be forgotten, Cementos Tolteca had once again proven the versatility of its product. Whether used to build roads or homes or transformed into art, cement, suited to the streamlined curves and efficiency models of the 1930s, symbolized a departure from the past.

Noguchi’s sculptural relief embraces this modernity not only through medium but also through form, departing sharply from the traditional frescoes elsewhere in the building. His work stands out from the wall about fifty centimeters in some sections, providing a dynamic sense of depth. Although sculptural relief alone was hardly revolutionary in the history of

public art, no modern Mexican artist had worked in this format. In addition, Noguchi’s advocacy of direct carving, something he learned from Brancusi, took on special meaning in a country where a key aspect of the mural renaissance was the artist’s self-definition as merely another worker. Although O’Higgins had already converted isolated elements into potent symbols in his frescoed vaults (fig. 8) in the patio of the same market, Noguchi made more radical leaps, pushing in three dimensions, cropping and simplifying as much as possible. The result was an original and brilliant synthesis of abstraction and social realism, the two opposing forces of American art in the 1930s. In the Rodríguez Market, Isamu Noguchi created a monument that is, on the one hand, about the irremediable distance between the forces of good and evil, and, on the other, about repairing the breach between avant-garde modernism and didactic representation.



9 Isamu Noguchi, *History as Seen from Mexico in 1936* (center detail), 1936. Tinted cement, concrete, and brick. Abelardo L. Rodríguez Market, Mexico City

History As I Saw It

Like any complex work of art, and especially one that spans over twenty meters, Noguchi's relief can be read in a variety of ways. These multiple readings—shaped by the work's architectural context, formal positioning of elements, chronologies, and explanatory texts—are not mutually exclusive, but complementary, forcing the careful viewer continually to modify his or her interpretation. Noguchi's audience originally gained access to the mural from one of the two stairways located directly in front of it, thus approaching it from the center and then turning to either side. Formally and iconographically, the left half communicates a sense of tranquillity and spaciousness. Benevolent images of agriculture, industry, and science, and of proletarian victory and maternal tenderness are isolated in carefully delineated geometric planes. By comparison, the right half reads as a mass of dark and overlapping symbols of fascism, warfare, and oppression. The mural can be seen as a Manichaeian contrast between peace and war, order and chaos, and socialism and

capitalism—the political “Left” and “Right.”²² Furthermore, elements mirror each other, such as the two pairs of figures placed over each lateral window—a mother and child to the left, a capitalist and skeleton to the right—that generate further oppositions: birth versus death, fertility versus destruction.

Although Rivera was then under attack by hard-line communists (including O'Higgins) for his Trotskyite sympathies, few could avoid the precedents he had established. In Noguchi's mural, iconographic details and the overall framework reveal conceptual parallels with some of Rivera's most important projects. The abrupt shifts in scale of composite parts, like the two enormous hands on either side of Noguchi's relief, had been standard in Rivera's work since his murals at the National Agricultural School in Chapingo. Noguchi may also have been inspired by Rivera's most recent mural *Mexico of Today and Tomorrow* (1935), located on the north wall of the National Palace, in which Marx, holding the *Communist Manifesto*, stands between a Mexico City laid waste by present-day warfare (to the right) and an idealized

semiurban landscape representing the communist future (to the left). Noguchi set up the same opposition, with his centrally positioned red flag standing in for Marx himself (fig. 9). And like Rivera, whether in *Mexico of Today and Tomorrow* or in *Man at the Crossroads* (1934), his recreation of the RCA Building mural for Mexico City's Palace of Fine Arts, Noguchi stacked the deck—there would be no question as to which political option the viewer should choose.

In two laconic passages from different publications, Noguchi described the mural beginning at the right:

Now our "now" includes not only the present with the residue of the past, but the future lived already in our minds. Hope here is reality in another place, and if not in another place then in another time. . . . Capitalism everywhere struggles with inevitable death—all the machinery of war, coercion, and bigotry are as smoke from that fire. Labor awakens with the red flag. And youth, through education, will see the world creatively more abundant, and with equal opportunity for all.

He modified this description in his autobiography:

At one end was a fat "capitalist" being murdered by a skeleton (shades of Posada!). There were war, crimes of the church, and "labor" triumphant. Yet the future looked out brightly in the figure of an Indian boy, observing Einstein's equation for energy.²³

These texts also suggest a chronological dimension to the iconographic program. The images of war and fascism at the right apply to the "present with the residue of the past," while the boy at the far left represents the future. This right-to-left approach, counter to the flow of texts written in European languages (though not to works of art in general), is reinforced by the positioning of several

elements—especially a whip and a fallen cross to the right of the central window and the profile of a worker to the left—that lead the viewer from right to left. One might even speculate that Noguchi conceived of the mural as an extended horizontal scroll, or even a slightly folded painted screen, both traditional Japanese formats that require a right-to-left reading.

Because Noguchi's Mexican relief is multivalent, closer formal analysis helps further unpack his ideas and sources. In the abstracted view of Wall Street's New York Stock Exchange Building and Trinity Church, placed at the far right margin, Noguchi depicts the financial and religious foundations of the scenes of political violence that follow. His inclusion of two cannon barrels echoes Marion Greenwood's and O'Higgins's representations of militarized imperialism (fig. 10) in their nearby murals.²⁴ Over Noguchi's first window, an overweight capitalist is locked in combat with a skeleton, partly influenced by José Guadalupe Posada's popular satirical prints featuring skeletal figures. This is a graphic depiction of the class struggle, perhaps, or a mating ritual between death and capital. The three black gun barrels with bayonets mimic the capitalists' black sleeves and white fists, creating a witty parallel between the lethal "arms" of the military and the arms of those who profit from their production and use.

Noguchi next placed a cascade of elements related to "the machinery of war, coercion, and bigotry," rendered in the context of fascist aggression and religious oppression. With tightly massed elements primarily in gray and black, this is the most obscure part of the work, as if purposefully concealing sinister forces. A whip, carved into the wall and resembling a blood-red vein or the root of some sinister plant, passes through the primary symbols of European fascism, suggesting that capitalism nourishes Nazi Germany

- 10 Pablo O'Higgins, *Capitalism and War* (lunette), 1934–35. Fresco, 200 x 490 cm (79.2 x 192 in.). Abelardo L. Rodríguez Market, Mexico City



and fascist Italy, or vice versa. A tank moves upward behind a line of marching soldiers, represented as a diagonal of helmets and bayonets. Here, Noguchi explicitly refers to the murals facing his own. The same juxtaposition of swastika, tank, and soldiers appears to the right of the round window on the west wall of Marion Greenwood's mural (fig. 11), while the fallen miners with pickaxes at the lower margin echo similar figures in both sisters' works.

Noguchi may have derived the fallen cross that crushes humanity from Orozco's iconoclastic image of Christ destroying the symbol of his martyrdom, one of the most famous panels from his 1932–34 cycle for Dartmouth College (fig. 12). As in Orozco's mural, Noguchi's cross may symbolize the oppression of the organized Church, underlined by the gaunt body of a man at the

base, his head resting on an open book, perhaps referring to censorship or corrupted knowledge. A ghostlike figure standing for the souls of the victims of war, an ox skull symbolizing sacrifice, and a coffin heighten the bleak atmosphere. These elements give way to the billowing red banner or flag, subtly carved as if it were draped across the window, which serves as a transition to the left side of the mural. Unlike the flags and banners that appear again and again in the market (and in many of Rivera's previous projects), there is no text or slogan to direct us—color alone makes the political point. Although the man to the right of the window appears defeated or fearful, those to the left symbolize a thematic shift. A man with a pronounced ribcage is supported by "awakening labor" (to paraphrase Noguchi), who grasps his arms as if to lift him out of the chaos.



- 11 Marion Greenwood, *The Industrialization of the Countryside* (detail), 1935. Fresco, 4.1 x 14.2 m (13.5 x 46.6 ft.). Abelardo L. Rodríguez Market, Mexico City

The stronger looks off to the left, to the idealized and utopian scenes that follow, symbolic of the proletariat's emerging revolutionary impulse.²⁵

In the left half of the mural, Noguchi blended images related to agriculture and industry, the farmer and the worker, the twin foundations of socialist society. Tractors plowing a field, machine-age symbols Rivera used in the frescoed stairwell of the Ministry of Public Education,

signal the future "industrialization of the countryside." Steel girders may represent electrical towers or oil derricks, metonyms for key industrial sectors soon to be nationalized, but in 1936 still in the hands of foreign capital and the subject of passionate debate. Above an enormous red fist rises a factory block, surmounted by three chimneys. Here again, Noguchi abstracted a section of Marion Greenwood's mural, enlarging the fist of a militant

- 12 José Clemente Orozco, *The Epic of American Civilization: Modern Migration of the Spirit*, 1932–34. Fresco, 300 x 320 cm (120 x 126 in.). Baker Library, Commissioned by the Trustees of Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire, © Familia Orozco Valladares, Reproduction authorized by the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura



worker to monumental scale, but preserving almost exactly her rendition of the factory behind him. A white propeller-like form, the only vertical division in the entire work, may symbolize the beneficial products of the factory. It also subtly refers to Brancusi, especially his *Bird in Space* (1928). In a field with sprouting plants, farm implements become the benevolent “weapons” of farmers. Several diagonals in the final left section, emerging from diverse vanishing points, appear like rays of sun, though they could also refer to “pure” geometry and mathematics, an understanding of which is essential to both agriculture and industry. A

beaker and test tube symbolize chemistry, while cells or organs clearly represent biology. Reminiscent of the work of Hans Arp, these forms provide early evidence of Noguchi’s interest in surrealist biomorphism.²⁶ Above the left window are a reclining mother and her infant, the second of two pairs that mirror the themes of his two controversial 1934 sculptures, *Death and Birth*.

Einstein’s equation for energy is the only “text” in Noguchi’s mural, alluding not only to scientific knowledge but also to education, the tools of reason that transform the world.²⁷ A counterpoint to the fallen cross at the right, the equation,

together with other scientific and technological images, can also be interpreted as statements of the new “religion” of the future. Forming the left margin of the work, a young Indian boy looks out at the equation, as if learning from it and from the mural’s entire social and political dialectic spread out before him. Standing in profile, he echoes the shape of a Greek *kouros*, a further gesture to international rather than local symbolism, and a premonition of Noguchi’s abstract *kouroi* of the 1940s.

Among historians there has been some confusion about the meaning of Noguchi’s relief. In several sources, including his autobiography, the mural is titled either *History of Mexico* or *History Mexico*. Martin Friedman, for example, described the mural as “encapsulating the history of the Mexican revolution,” while Dore Ashton referred to it as a “mural about Mexican history.”²⁸ However, although Noguchi explicitly refers to the United States and Europe, there are no overt symbols of Mexico anywhere in the mural.

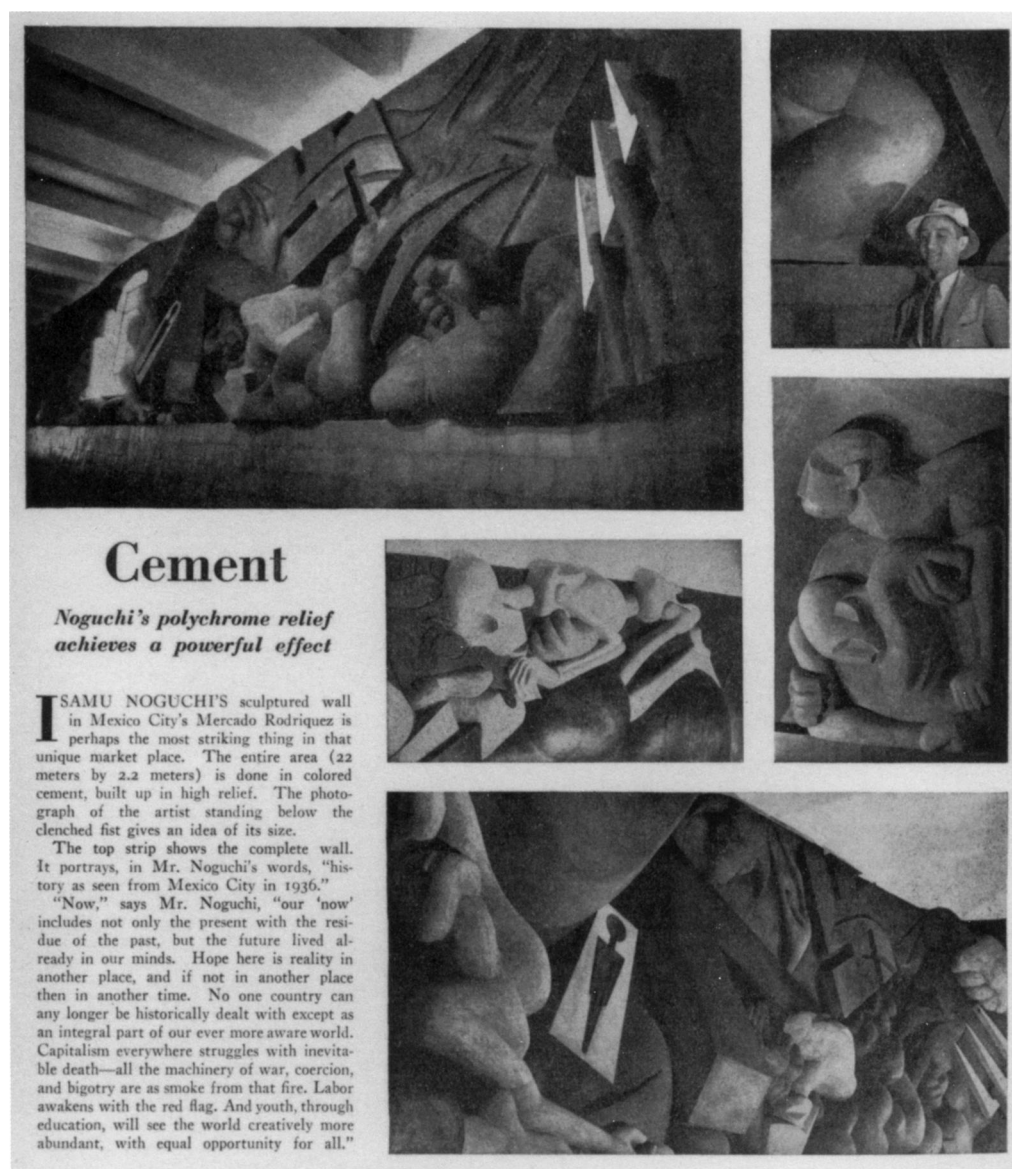
In two articles published soon after the work was completed, Noguchi provided a more precise title that better explains his intentions. In *Art Front*, he clarified that “the subject matter is the general one of ‘against war and fascism,’ specifically, ‘History as seen from Mexico in 1936.’” *New Masses* used a similar phrase when it reviewed his Mexican project (fig. 13).²⁹ Though Noguchi clearly titles the mural *History Mexico* in his autobiography, he clarifies that it “was history as I saw it at that time, from Mexico.” In fact, Noguchi’s mural is more about general historical forces than anything specifically national. Workers, red flags, factories, and fields, even the Indian boy are tropes of postrevolutionary Mexican art, including the murals elsewhere in the market. But the fact that these elements find such resonance does not mean that they or the mural are “about” Mexico. If one views

the mural as Noguchi indicated, as an interpretation of historical, political, and social events seen from his particular vantage point—Mexico in 1936—then the relief takes on a new and richer meaning, with international, rather than simply local, relevance. In addition, the title highlights the sophisticated view that history is always determined by context.

Noguchi’s Mexican relief provides evidence of the focus on “central and universal emotional experiences” that, as Ashton has noted, exemplified much of his career. His mural demonstrated his opposition to artistic practice based solely on local conditions. “No one country can any longer be historically dealt with except as an integral part of our ever more aware world,” he wrote. Noguchi also criticized sculpture whose “subject matter, whether imaginative or realistic, has no relation to life of today.” Instead, sculpture should deal “with today’s problems,” drawing on science (both “micro- and macro-cosmic”), dream imagery, and the “aspirations, problems, sufferings and work of the people.”³⁰ Apart from the surrealist-influenced emphasis on dreams, this language seems to reflect concerns similar to those of Rivera’s RCA mural. Indeed, Noguchi’s mural in the Rodríguez Market represents a similar attempt to divorce public art from a Mexican context, to address aesthetic and political issues that are valid internationally. His formal innovations, however, allowed him to break the spell of the “très grandes,” whose influence weighed heavily on many of his compatriots.

In addition, Noguchi may have believed that the use of semiabstract motifs furthered his political cause. In the wake of the Popular Front, American artist Stuart Davis had begun theorizing about the role of abstract art in a left-wing context of revolutionary change, placing “abstract painting in direct opposition to the destructive forces of totalitarianism and

- 13 Article on Noguchi's relief published in *New Masses* (detail) (September 15, 1936), p. 10. The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven



reaction." For Davis, the freedom inherent in abstraction was linked specifically to the ideals of a democratic society. That abstract art was an anathema to both Stalin and Hitler certainly influenced and supported Davis's view, although most left-wing artists actually practiced some form of social realism. Davis, in fact, attacked the social realist strain of public art, which he described in terms of "Mexican muralism, the allegorical worker of bulging muscle and Greco-Roman profile, the fetish of fresco, etc."³¹ Noguchi was less blunt in his writing, but

he too may have felt that abstraction furthered his antifascist message. In any event, *New Masses* published a photograph of the artist standing proudly in front of the red fist that he would later regret, a demonstration of his social and artistic commitments, at least in 1936.

Noguchi's mural was almost as poorly understood as his PWAP projects. His projection of a utopian future may have been considered politically suspect by some on the Mexican left, given the slow pace of revolutionary reform in Mexico. In his 1937 evaluation of the murals in

the Rodríguez Market, artist (and LEAR member) Carlos Mérida gave Noguchi's contribution faint praise. He admitted that it was "the first time that a sculptor has attempted a decoration containing a social theme in high relief on a wall in Mexico," but added that, while it was a "very interesting experiment, the results are more a form of modern advertising than a work of art."³² Mérida may have been referring to the "either-or" dichotomy of the relief, although because of Noguchi's connections to the publicity department of Cementos Tolteca, perhaps he was not far off the mark in noting the mural's similarities with more commercial work. Indeed, by the mid-1930s, modernist motifs had been as extensively incorporated into advertisements in Mexico as they had been in the United States. Mérida's position vis-a-vis Noguchi's style, however, is particularly surprising, given Mérida's own move to geometric abstraction in the same period. But at least Mérida acknowledged the work. Three decades later, in an influential and encyclopedic history of Mexican mural painting, Antonio Rodríguez avoided any discussion at all of Noguchi's relief.

Perhaps Mexico was not ready for such a daring combination of modernist forms and left-wing politics. In a 1978 interview, Pujol articulated what most of his contemporaries surely felt at the time: "[O]f course, [Noguchi] had worked in New York in a world so much more up to date than our own, and in comparison, I now realize that our situation was more underdeveloped, we weren't at the same level and we didn't know about such advances."³³ Pujol understood, perhaps, that Noguchi's previous experiences, not only in New York but in Paris and Japan as well, had set him on an independent course, free of the formal influence of the Mexican school. Noguchi certainly had no direct followers in Mexico. As is often the case in the history of art, however, his

experiments would circle back to inspire the same artist who had influenced him in the 1930s. The next major Mexican project that resembled Noguchi's three-dimensional mural was Siqueiros's *The People for the University, The University for the People* (1952–56), a bright semiabstract mosaic relief on the exterior of the Central Administration Building on the new campus of the national university in Mexico City.

Little else is known of Noguchi's eight-month stay in Mexico. Working out of a rented studio, he completed several portrait busts of members of the American community (including Vice-Consul Kent Levitt and his wife, and industrialist William Douglas) to earn funds for his return to the United States, since the little money he had earned had all gone to pay for his materials. While still engaged with his mural, he began a brief affair with Frida Kahlo, which ended when Rivera discovered their secret apartment. But even if the Mexican relief was neither a financial nor critical success, he would later insist that "I was able to shout and do what I pleased, and I was happy. . . . have never regretted having had the opportunity of executing what was for me a real attempt at a direct communication through sculpture, with no ulterior or money-making motive."³⁴

Conclusion

At the close of the 1930s, Noguchi saw the installation of two sculptural reliefs that represented his last efforts to use recognizable subject matter in a public context. Despite his frustrating experience with the PWAP, he accepted a commission from the U.S. Treasury Department's Section of Fine Arts, the most conservative of the New Deal art projects, to decorate the U.S. Post Office in Haddon Heights, New Jersey. In

- 14 Isamu Noguchi, *The Letter*, 1939. Tymstone, 167 x 86 cm (66 x 34 in.). U.S. Post Office, Haddon Heights, New Jersey
- 15 Isamu Noguchi, *News*, 1939–40. Stainless steel, 6 x 5.1 m (20 x 17 ft.). Associated Press Building, Rockefeller Center, New York



The Letter (fig. 14), a small relief panel shaped from a cementlike material called Tymstone, Noguchi isolated a simple, lyrical image of a woman, pen in hand. Although the postmaster and others complained, most surely thought that this allegory of literacy, this symbol of the communication guaranteed by the benevolent U.S. mail, was innocuous. Like so many New Deal mural projects, it was designed to confirm rather than change public opinion.

Noguchi also won a competition to decorate the entrance to the Associated Press Building at Rockefeller Center in New York. In *News* (fig. 15), five heroic representatives of the media surge forward, tools of their trade in hand. These powerful, but politically neutral, workers fit perfectly within the decorative expectations of the mural's corporate patrons, expectations that Rivera had unsuccessfully tried to overcome in 1933.³⁵ Conciliatory rather than aggressive, floating rather than grounded, decontextualized rather than rooted in a broader discourse, these two works form a sad postscript to the promise of Noguchi's Mexican experience.

Noguchi's *History as Seen from Mexico in 1936* was more than just a youthful foray into revolutionary modernism before the Moscow Trials later that year, which suppressed socialist opposition to Stalin, and the assassination of Trotsky in 1940 turned so many fellow travelers back toward the center, before the Cold War drove social realism underground.³⁶ The mural was also more than a synthesis of his earlier formal and material experiments, more than a mere foundation for the achievements that would follow. In a working-class market in downtown Mexico City, Noguchi's powerful reconciliation of abstraction and ideology still provides evidence of what an American artist could achieve when given the freedom to translate the political and aesthetic options of his time into a public monument that continues to speak to the problems of our time. Fascism may be a distant threat, but the costs of war and the dangers of industry, the dreams of science and the benefits of the soil remain topics of debate, as history unfolds, seen from Mexico or anywhere, at the start of the new millennium.



Notes

I would like to acknowledge the advice and assistance of Esther Acevedo, Dore Ashton, Olivier Debroise, Amy Hau, Diana L. Linden, Robert Plate, and the colleagues, students, and friends who have visited Noguchi's mural with me. Their observations were crucial, if sometimes unrecorded.

- 1 Dore Ashton, *Noguchi East and West* (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1993), pp. 64–66; Sam Hunter, *Isamu Noguchi* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1978), p. 62.
- 2 For details, see James Oles, "Walls to Paint On: American Muralists in Mexico, 1933–1936," Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1995; *Las hermanas Greenwood en México* (Mexico City: Conaculta, 2000); and "The Mexican Murals of Marion and Grace Greenwood," *Out of Context: American Artists Abroad*, Carol Salus and Laura Fattall, eds. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, forthcoming). Pablo O'Higgins (1904–1983) was the adopted name of Paul Higgins, who arrived in Mexico in 1924 to work as Rivera's assistant. None of the other artists ever worked directly with Rivera.
- 3 In a noteworthy and perhaps unique exception, Ben Shahn's Jersey Homesteads mural (1937) includes anti-Nazi images, though in relatively small detail; see Diana L. Linden, "Ben Shahn, The Four Freedoms, and the SS *St. Louis*," *American Jewish History* (December 1998): 420–21. Cécile Whiting's *Antifascism and American Art* (New Haven: Yale U. Press, 1989), perhaps because of an overly narrow view of "American art," omits discussion of explicit antifascism in murals by Mexicans in the United States and by Americans in Mexico. For a recent corrective, see Anthony W. Lee, *Painting on the Left: Diego Rivera, Radical Politics, and San Francisco's Public Murals* (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1999).
- 4 Rivera would adopt a much less conciliatory position in his 1930s murals, and the meanings of "muralism" became more diverse. For a further discussion of these issues, see Esther Acevedo, "Dos muralismos en el mercado," *Plural* 11 (October 1981): 40–50; Olivier Debroise, "Action Art: David Alfaro Siqueiros and the Artistic and Ideological Strategies of the 1930s," *Portrait of a Decade: David Alfaro Siqueiros, 1930–1940* (Mexico City: Museo Nacional de Arte, 1997), pp. 50–53; Alicia Azuela, "Public Art, Meyer Schapiro and Mexican Muralism," *Oxford Art Journal* 17:1 (1994): 55–57; and Maricela González Cruz Manjarrez, *La polémica Siqueiros-Rivera: planteamientos estético-políticos, 1934–1935* (Mexico City: Museo Dolores Olmedo Patiño, 1996).
- 5 Robert Plate, interview with author (1994). A few terse letters from Noguchi to Greenwood provide evidence of the affair. Marion Greenwood Archive, East Hampton, New York, courtesy of Robert Plate.
- 6 Isamu Noguchi, *A Sculptor's World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 21.
- 7 Of these four projects, only the Franklin monument was built, in Philadelphia's Fairmount Park, fifty years later. On Noguchi's PWAP trials, see Avis Berman, *Rebels on Eighth Street: Juliana Force and the Whitney Museum of American Art* (New York: Atheneum, 1990), pp. 346–48; on the housing development, see "Coöperation in Philadelphia," *American Magazine of Art* 27 (November 1934): 613.
- 8 On Noguchi's source, see Nancy Grove and Diane Botnick, *The Sculpture of Isamu Noguchi, 1924–1979* (New York: Garland, 1980) p. 24. For the general context, see Marlene Park, "Lynching and Antilynching: Art and Politics in the 1930s," *Prospects* 18 (1993): 311–65; Helen Langa, "Two Antilynching Art Exhibitions: Politicized Viewpoints, Racial Perspectives, Gendered Constraints," *American Art* 13 (spring 1999): 11–39. Neither author discusses the lynched figures in the New Workers' School, which predate most of the images by American artists; see Diego Rivera and Bertram D. Wolfe, *Portrait of America* (New York: Covici-Friede, 1934).
- 9 Noguchi, *A Sculptor's World*, p. 23. McBride's article and Noguchi's reaction to it are discussed in Ashton, *East and West*, p. 53.
- 10 See Isamu Noguchi, *The Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum* (New York: Abrams, 1987), pp. 146–47.
- 11 The "furor over Diego Rivera's 1933 murals for Rockefeller Center confirmed Noguchi's suspicion that art that addressed social needs or reflected social truths was unwelcome." See Nancy Grove, *Isamu Noguchi: Portrait Sculpture* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press for the National Portrait Gallery, 1989), p. 15.
- 12 Heyden Herrera, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1983), p. 200. Noguchi later recalled that "the Guggenheim Foundation had loaned me \$600 for my second trip there, and I sold my car to get back." It is unclear what he meant by "second trip there," as there is no evidence that he went to Mexico before 1935. He may have meant his second trip sponsored by the foundation. According to Sally Stein (personal communication), the \$600 "loan" was probably the sort of informal grant that Henry Allen Moe, the secretary, awarded to needy applicants. See Noguchi, *A Sculptor's World*, pp. 23, 24; and Marion Greenwood, transcript of interview with Dorothy Seckler (1965), p. 12, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
- 13 For details, see Oles, "Walls to Paint On," pp. 228–47; Acevedo, "Dos muralismos," pp. 44–50. The change in *cardenista* strategies involving propaganda is discussed in J. H. Plenn's *Mexico Marches* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1939), pp. 332–41.
- 14 Isamu Noguchi, "What's the Matter with Sculpture," *Art Front* 2 (September–October 1936): 14. *Art Front* was published by the Artists' Union.
- 15 Ibid. Because the relief is superimposed on the original interior surface, Noguchi's later recollections that he "carved a wall" or was "chopping deeply into the massive brick wall" are somewhat misleading. I have found no surviving sketches or models for this project.
- 16 Ibid. Rivera also advocated the use of new materials, though never so stridently as Siqueiros. See Diego Rivera, "The Revolutionary Spirit in Modern Art," *Modern Quarterly* 6 (October 1932), republished in *Social Realism: Art as a Weapon*, David Shapiro, ed. (New

- York: Frederick Ungar, 1973), p. 54. The extent to which Noguchi, while in Paris, may have seen sculptural murals in concrete remains a topic for further research.
- 17 See David Alfaro Siqueiros, "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva" (1932) in Raquel Tibol's *David Alfaro Siqueiros: Un mexicano y su obra* (Mexico City: Empresas Editoriales, 1969), pp. 108–9. The links here are even more intricate. Neutra was the architect of the Chouinard School of Art, and Siqueiros had consulted with him on the use of concrete as a base for his mural; see Laurance P. Hurlburt, *Mexican Muralists in the United States* (Albuquerque: U. of New Mexico Press, 1989), p. 207.
 - 18 Noguchi credited O'Higgins and Antonio Pujol with providing "suggestions and advice as to color." See Noguchi, "What's the Matter with Sculpture," p. 13; and Siqueiros, "Los vehículos de la pintura," p. 110.
 - 19 Alfredo Zalce, interview with the author (1993); Antonio Pujol, interview with Esther Acevedo (1978), transcript courtesy of Esther Acevedo; architect Victor Jiménez, interview with the author (2000).
 - 20 See James Oles, "Modern Photography and Cementos Tolteca: A Utopian Alliance," *Mexicana: Fotografía Moderna en México, 1923–1940* (Valencia: Instituto Valenciano de Arte Moderno, Centre Julio González, 1998), pp. 273–75.
 - 21 Jorge Piño Sandoval, "El cemento pictórico," *Todo 2* (6 August 1935): 10–11.
 - 22 Carlos Mérida signaled this reading in *Frescoes by Various Artists in the Rodríguez Market* (Mexico City: Frances Toor Studios, 1937), n.p.
 - 23 See "Cement," *New Masses* (15 September 1936): 10; and Noguchi, *A Sculptor's World*, p. 23.
 - 24 There is also a striking resemblance here to Rivera's *Imperialism* panel from the New Workers' School.
 - 25 Noguchi's geometric renditions of the human face, which are somewhat different from his earlier portraits, may indicate the influence of contemporary Mexican sculptors Germán Cueto, Oliverio Martínez, or Luis Ortiz Monasterio. The flanking figures may also loosely recall Michelangelo's *Night and Day* from the tomb of Giuliano de' Medici (conversation with Chad Coerver, 1997).
 - 26 In Noguchi's proposal of around 1937 for a mural for the Medical Building at the New York World's Fair, the test tube, beaker, and spiraling pipe reappear, along with more realistic images of body organs. See Grove and Botnick, *The Sculpture of Isamu Noguchi*, plate 147. Rivera had also emphasized cellular biology in *Man at the Crossroads*, but in the context of both good and evil.
 - 27 Noguchi's interest in the theory of relativity as a symbol of science in its most positive aspect was shared by Rivera and others. Noguchi specified in his autobiography that "in answer to my request, Bucky Fuller had sent me a fifty-word telegram explaining the equation. However I could also appreciate the sardonic humor of the man who used to come by to watch me work, saying that $E=mc^2$ really meant Estados=Muchos Cabrones² ('the State equals Many SOB'). See Noguchi, *A Sculptor's World*, p. 23.
 - 28 Martin Friedman, "Noguchi's Imaginary Landscapes," *Design Quarterly* 106/107 (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1978), p. 88; Ashton, *East and West*, p. 300; Noguchi, *A Sculptor's World*, p. 23.
 - 29 Noguchi, "What's the Matter with Sculpture," p. 14. *New Masses* gives the subtle variant: "History as Seen from Mexico City in 1936."
 - 30 See Ashton, *East and West*, p. 120; "Cement," p. 10; and Noguchi, "What's the Matter with Sculpture," p. 13. Such passages indicate the influence of surrealist practice and resonate with the "social surrealism" of artists like Peter Blume and Walter Quirt.
 - 31 See Stuart Davis, "Abstract Painting Today" (1939), *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project*, Francis V. O'Connor, ed. (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1973), pp. 120, 126. On Davis, see also Whiting, *Antifascism and American Art*, chpt. 3. Davis had been a close friend of Noguchi since the late 1920s; see Ashton, *East and West*, p. 64.
 - 32 Mérida, *Frescoes in the Rodríguez Market*, n.p. I have found no contemporary reviews of this project in the Mexican press.
 - 33 Pujol, interview with Acevedo (1978).
 - 34 A photograph of the studio is illustrated in Grove, *Portrait Sculpture*, p. 18. As far as I have been able to determine, no other work of this period is currently in Mexico. The affair with Kahlo is documented in Herrera, *Frida*, pp. 200–1. For the quote, see Noguchi, *A Sculptor's World*, pp. 23–24. Given the square meters he covered, Noguchi should have received about nine hundred pesos for his project, but the bureaucrats in charge apparently refused to pay him for work done after December 31, the expiration date of a contract he had never signed. After some bargaining, he was given three hundred pesos, less than the thousand pesos that he had spent of his own money. See Julio de la Fuente, "Insistimos en nuestro programa de reivindicaciones en el arte," *Frente a Frente* 5 (August 1936): 19. *Frente a Frente* was the official magazine of LEAR.
 - 35 See Robert Linsley, "Utopia Will Not Be Televised: Rivera at Rockefeller Center," *Oxford Art Journal* 17:2 (1994), pp. 48–61. Noguchi's third public sculpture of the late 1930s, the Ford Fountain, installed at the New York World's Fair, was more abstract than either of the reliefs discussed here; see Noguchi, *Noguchi Garden Museum*, p. 148–49.
 - 36 In his autobiography, Noguchi recalled that after returning from Mexico, "I became involved in an artists' union that I later dropped when it was overrun by those interested more in the political angle of attacking the WPA than in art, or the furtherance of art as I saw it." See *A Sculptor's World*, p. 24.