The Museum of Modern Art

11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019 Tel. 956-6100 Cable: Modernart

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Contact:
Linda Gordon (212) 956-2648
William Grant (212) 956-7504

NOGUCHI: THE SCULPTOR AS DESIGNER, an exhibition devoted primarily to akari--sculpted paper lanterns--by Isamu Noguchi is on view in the second-floor Goodwin Galleries at The Museum of Modern Art from November 11 through January 8. The exhibition has been directed by J. Stewart Johnson, Curator of Design, Department of Architecture and Design.

The exhibition, which also focuses on the akari lanterns designed since 1951 also includes his sculpted furniture. In these the artist traps light in paper, expressing qualities of lightness and fragility. Constructed of wrinkled white paper made from mulberry bark, called Mino, over thin bamboo ribbing, their "very lightness questions materiality," comments Noguchi, "and is consonant with our appreciation of the less thingness of things, the less encumbered perceptions."

Noguchi's earliest experiments with light were in the "Lunar" sculptures he developed in the early 1940's, upon leaving a Japanese internment camp in Arizona. He settled in a studio in Greenwich Village, but after Arizona, New York seemed "dim and muted." Since sculpture in urban areas could not be lit naturally by the sun's rays, he decided to incorporate artificial light within his sculpture, making the objects provide their own illumination. Working with magnesite, he was able to build thin, hollow structures, into which he placed electric light bulbs.

In 1943 Noguchi made his first real lamp, using translucent plastic, then later put his light source within an inverted paper grocery bag, an approach similar to his most recent and simplest akari. But, it was not until 1951, that he developed his akari, a Japanese word meaning light as illumination, as well as lightness in weight. That year, on a visit to Japan, he was impressed by the distinctive

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lanterns made in Gifu. Their frameworks were constructed of a single strand of bamboo wound in a spiral, rather than the usual series of separate graduated bamboo hoops. Making the most of the skills of the Gifu lantern makers, Noguchi began to design lanterns with abstract shapes that could be used as general illumination in the home.

During the last 25 years, Noguchi's designs for akari have undergone many transformations, from simple globes to intricate columns composed of prismatic shapes or rough stacked blocks. Most recently, he has all but eliminated the bamboo structure beneath the skin of his lanterns. Reducing them to the barest essentials--sheets of paper hanging loose beneath an open square of bamboo--he has allowed them to move by the breeze.

Four of his most recent designs are currently available in the Museum's Bookstore.

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