

*Body Si(gh)ting: Noguchi, Mexico and Radical Dance*

*By*

*Ellen G. Landau*

*Dept. of Art History and Art, Mather House*

*Case Western Reserve University*

## *Body Si(gh)ting: Noguchi, Mexico and Radical Dance*

In this paper I identify explicit links between Japanese-American artist Isamu Noguchi's unusual 1936 cement relief, *History as Seen From Mexico 1936* and the radicalization of depression-era dance in New York City. Created for the Mercado Abelardo Rodriguez in Mexico City, Noguchi's design, fostered under the auspices of Diego Rivera but also influenced by Jose Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros (famed Mexican muralists) has typically been marginalized in accounts of the sculptor's career.

Noguchi's acclaimed series of stage sets for Martha Graham's dance company was initiated immediately prior to this project in Mexico's capital and, as I will show, this experience strongly influenced the latter's presentation and iconography. These stage designs have mostly been studied by dance historians, and the passion for Mexico Graham and Noguchi shared has not adequately been factored into evaluations of their long and successful collaboration. Graham's famous 1944 dance production *El Penitente*, for example, reflects her fascination with rituals observed when a Guggenheim grant allowed her to spend time in Mexico studying the land and observing its people.

Graham and Noguchi's respective studios were in the same Manhattan building for a time in the early thirties. Noguchi's half-sister Ailes Gilmour, a member of Graham's troupe during this period, performed simultaneously with semi-professional leftist dance groups whose members considered dance a weapon in class struggle. Numerous parallels—in organization,

bodily metaphor, and polemical content—link the style and iconography of his *History as Seen from Mexico 1936* to this socialist dance dialectic.

Watched and absorbed by Noguchi during daily practice sessions, Martha Graham's highly original percussive kinesthetics and bold emotive effects were both re-configured and politicized in the sculptor's Mercado relief.

Art historians have noted Isamu Noguchi's repetition at the Mercado Abelardo Rodriguez of Mexican Communist symbols, a reflection of Marxist imagery in wall designs by American and Mexican painters elsewhere in the building. As I will show, Noguchi's Mexican mural provides, much more importantly, crucial early evidence of the premises underlying his attraction to theatricality and bodily movement, a fundamental component of his life-long aesthetic. This enthusiasm (interrelated with his Japanese roots) contributed significantly to Noguchi's development of a more meaningfully inclusive and spatially innovative concept of abstraction.