

PART III

Selected Letters to Isamu Noguchi



## Selected Letters from Hasegawa to Isamu Noguchi, 1950–1951

**Letter to Noguchi, August 24, 1950**

5955, Fujimiga-oka, Tsujido  
Fujisawa City, Kanagawa-ken, Japan  
August 24, 1950

Fragments.<sup>1</sup>

Ryokan (1758–1831)

Son of a town mayor and Shinto priest. Born Echigo—northern and darker side of Honshyu (main) island facing Japan Sea.

One day, when he was a boy, his father scolded him rather severely, and Ryokan stared at father reproachfully, then father told him that a child who stares at parents reproachfully will become a turbot. Very late that evening, Ryokan was lost, whole family was very anxious. At last his mother found him sitting lonesomely on a rock at sea shore. Seeing his mother, Ryokan asked her “Have I not become a turbot yet?”

Ryokan’s father was very good at Haiku but not at business.

At the closing years of his teen age, Ryokan became a Zen priest by his own will. He has been away from home for twenty years. He respected and admired Dogen (1199–1253)—the most profoundly philosophical priest of Japanese Zen, founder of *Sodo* (Soto) sect. “Contemplation for contemplation’s sake” was the leading doctrine of Soto sect. Most severe on one’s own self—especially on one’s behaviors. *Shinki* (Rules for daily life) must be obeyed till the minutest details—manners to eat, cook, handle foods and drinks, to take bath, to clean the room, how to wash, how to clean teeth, how to do in water closet, etc . . . (Most of the origins of *Temae* and *Cha-no-yu* come from this *Shinki*.) Dogen (another of *Shobo-genzo*) was the deepest thinker, most learned man and the hardest self-torturing priest. Ryokan had hard twenty years in the tradition of Dogen, some times in big temples and some times lonely in a hermitage.



FIGURE 2. Hasegawa and Noguchi with Hasegawa's painting *Music of Moonlight* (Dogu) at the Fourth Art Group Exhibition (Bijutsu Dantai Rengo Ten), Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, 1950. The Noguchi Museum Archive.

1796 Ryokan came back to his country, and stayed there through the rest of his life, always in a simple hermitage (moved twice). Contemplation in living is the idea of Zen,—meaning contemplation in sitting, walking, working, playing, eating, drinking, writing, painting . . . so forth. Ryokan seems to be a man who realized this ideal.

Ryokan disliked the poems by professional poet, cooking by professional cook, writing by professional calligrapher, and a priest who 'smells' priest-like.

Ryokan liked the poems of Kanzan (a crazy man who lived near a big temple and who came to the temple often to fool the priests. His poems scattered about in the mountain forest were collected and edited as *Kanzan-shi*—Chinese, Tang Dynasty).

Ryokan's poems (Chinese *Kan-shi*) are in the manner of Kanzan. Ryokan disobeyed the rules of poems very often.

Ryokan liked '*Manyo-shyu*' Japanese poems—collection of poems by Emperor, princes, officials, soldiers, peoples . . . by everybody, and folk songs, etc . . . from same epoch as *Haniwa* (with same kind of charm and beauty of *Haniwa*.)

Few people paid any attention to *Manyo-shu* at the time of Ryokan, people preferred more elaborate modern style. Ryokan's poems (Japanese *Waka*) have thus classical grandiose beauty and charm.

Ryokan respected Basho and made *Haiku* too but much less than *Kanshi* and *Waka*.

Ryokan liked folk songs and knew many of them well and tried to make some new ones too.

Ryokan was learned in Chinese Classics of both Confucious and Lao-tse schools and Japanese Classics beside with Buddhist texts.

Ryokan admired Innocent and Fool. His name Ryokan means Good and Generous. The pen name he used very often was Tai-gu, which means Big (Great) Fool.

Ryokan liked to play with children. He was very good at *Mari-tsuki* (Ball play) and *Ohaji-ki* (a game to scatter and collect small shells or stones), and was proud of the fact. He played eagerly. One day he was playing hide and seek, he was hiding behind a straw heap, children went home without finding him, but Ryokan stayed there over night. Next morning a farmer found him and wanted to talk to him; then Ryokan stopped him "Shih . . . I am playing hide and seek."

Ryokan preached very seldom, still people liked to have him and invited him often to stay. The whole atmosphere became so agreeable any time and place when he is there. He keeps quiet and comes and goes as he likes. A family asked Ryokan to come and give advice to the son who was a naughty play boy. Ryokan came, stayed a few days, said nothing to the son and was going to leave. The son came to help Ryokan to find the waraji (straw shoe). Then the son felt some drops of water falling on his back; he looked up and found Ryokan's eyes full of tears. The son and Ryokan looked at each other a while, and R. gone. The son became a gentle and agreeable young man. (Ryokan himself had been a play boy before he became a priest.)

People used to ask him to write, and he did whenever he feels, at any place with any brush on any paper. When he doesn't feel to write, he did not. His style of writing derives from *Kana* of Fujiwara-period and *Sasho* (free quick manner) of Kaiso (Chinese Tang Dynasty). He used to write with finger in the air. He wrote a very big beautiful sign board for an *Ameya* (Candy Shop).

One night a burglar came to his hermitage, Ryokan pretended to be fast asleep, having [not] found anything else the burglar pulled the quilt. Ryokan let him to do. Ryokan stayed in bed without quilt and began to feel very cold. He got up, looked at the moon and made a Haiku:

*Nusubito ni torimoko sare shi*  
*mado no tsuki.*

(Oh, the burglar forgot to rob the moon  
of my window.)

A bamboo grew through a broken part of his cabinet. It reached the ceiling and Ryokan wanted to make a hole there so that the bamboo [could] grow through it.

He took a candle and tried to burn a part of the ceiling, as the result he burnt the whole cabinet.

Near the end of Ryokan's life, a young and pretty nun came to visit. She admired him devotedly. She looked after Ryokan who became old and ill. They made poems together—questions and answers in verses. Ryokan was asked to live downtown, he accepted, and there he died peacefully.

After a century passed, people of Echigo speak about “*Ryokan-sama*” as though he is living forever with them.

*HOCHO* = Kitchen knife

*HO* means a cook

*CHO* is name of a man

*HOCHO* literally means Mr. CHO a cook, but today, kitchen-knife is called *HOCHO* in Japan. (Seldom, kitchen-knife is called *Nagatana*—Vegetable sword).

Story of *HOCHO* is written in *Soshi* (Chinese classic in the line of Lao-tse).

When CHO dissect and carve a cow, the sound was a music and the poses and gestures were a dance. An emperor saw him and asked him the secret. CHO replied that he never forces.

Blade of a knife is very thin, and if one knows well, he can always find enough place to put this thin blade in, he never needs to force. Some cooks use out his knife in one month, but CHO's knife stayed sharp and brilliant for years. When CHO sees a cow, he sees where to put the blade . . .

(Today, few Japanese knows why they call their kitchen knife *HOCHO*—hence the tragedy of modern Japan and perhaps that of modern world.)

Basho (1643–1694)

“Learn from pine about pine,  
learn from bamboo about bamboo.”

Being asked about the secret to give lightness to Haiku:

“Look at what children do.”

“My art is like a fireplace in summer and a fan in winter. It is useless.”

*Zeami* (or *Seami*)

(Greatest *NOH* Player and composer, 15th century.)

About the ideal of beauty to be expressed in *NOH*: “Aim at a flower blooming from (out of) a massive rock.”

Rikyu (1522–1591)

(About the secret of good *CHA-NO-YU*)

“Warm in winter and cool in summer. That's all.”

*MO NO KAITEOHGI HIKISAKU WAKARE KANA.*

Basho.

(Having written some lines on a fan, and tear it in two—this is a departure in early autumn. Basho.)

**Letter to Noguchi, September 9, 1950**

Tsujido  
9 September 1950

Dear Isamu- san,

How are you feeling back in New York? We are missing you so much, Fumiko (Mrs. Inokuma) has written to me that she looking forward for next spring and sure I do too. But, at the same time, I am wishing very strongly that you settle down quickly and begin great work there. What I am longing for is to see the photos of your next work,—good health to you and good work for you, Isamu- san!

From Haneda I went to Nishida's to see ^a new big painting by Hiro and I liked it very much and learnt a lot from it. I am ~~very much~~ grateful to know that you are going to help them all the same.

I regret that I could do little for you here, and still that was all the best I could.

I regret also that I can work so little and so badly when we—Japanese—have much to do for the art and life of modern world. I am all alone here because—as you noticed it—I like Sesshu, Rikyu, Basho and Ryokan far too much. But I will continue to walk my way—though very slowly; you gave me the courage to do and I am really grateful for that. Let me know when you have the time to spare, about the activities of your and other true artists there\*; I hate to imitate but, I love to learn. I will write often to you too. (if you please do not mind my bad English and writing.)

Please do not forgot to tell to M. Marcel Duchamp that there is a fellow who respects him in Japan. Keep the Sesshu scroll and kakemono always with you with good care, please.

I will try hard to make good Chinese-ink drawings on the fine papers you kindly gave me.

I will go and see your mother in Nakano soon.

Whole of my family send their best regards to you.

Good health and good work, Isamusan! again + again.

*Yours sincerely,  
Sabro*

Saburo Hasegawa  
5955 Fujimigaoka,  
Tsujimi, Fujisawa City,  
Kanagawa- ken, Japan

**Letter to Noguchi, October 18, 1950**

Oct. 18th. 1950

Dear Isamusan,

Nishida family is very grateful to you and so am I with them.

Thank you very much for your letter and Katchina. Katchina is living with us happily being loved by all my family. Katchina, the relief on broken black tile and

the carved old kettle cover make a charming ‘trio’ in our living—dining—sleeping room.

After Haneda, I have never been to Tokyo and worked at home. As the result my big painting (‘A family with the cat’—calligraphic painting) became a mess. It is exhibited at Ueno now, and no critic dared to say any word neither for nor against it.

I am going to start a new life—as I am completely alone, poor and sick now. First of all I will have a one man exhibition of calligraphic paintings and drawings this winter (with Chinese ink on the papers which you gave me.)

It is a beautiful season now—autumn is my favourite and best season in Japan. Every morning I take a walk around my house, little wild flowers in meadows enchant me and I love the cats with whom I meet who are taking their morning walks too.

Katchina trio is longing to have you with them next spring.

Best regards from my family,

*Yours sincerely,  
Sabro*

I suppose you have received the magazine of calligraphic art. (‘Sho-no-bi’—Beauty of Calligraphy) It is published by a young and studious group who intend to achieve the renaissance of calligraphic art. Their ambition must be led rightly. Please give them your valuable advises very frankly. (Next time, I will add some explanations in English.) They are very new friends to me too, but I find a sincere and good will among them.

I beg you to be kind and generous to them, please. (Sabro.)

#### **Letter to Noguchi, January 12, 1951**

5955 Fujimiga-oka, Tsujido  
Fujisawa, Kanagawa-ken, Japan  
January 12th, 1951

Dear Isamu san

Thank you for your letter dated January 1st which pleased me and my family so much. We have celebrated New Year very happily with Katchina and were wondering how you have been getting on. It is such a great joy for all of us to know that you are as energetic as ever and have been working so hard. I am glad also to know that the magazines of calligraphy pleased you. Calligraphy interests me more and more everyday, and beauty of Chinese ink and paper fascinates me strongly. I have started this year working on abstract drawings in Chinese ink, and am planning to have a one man show of them this spring; if you let me know the date of your arrival here beforehand I will wait to invite you there—because you were the first to encourage me in this line. There has been a splendid exhibition of



“*Nanga*” (Chinese ink paintings) at Ueno Museum last autumn. Taiga-do, Buson, Tessai-Tomioka and others were shown at their best, and I missed you so much visiting this exhibition often. I feel very certain now that I am destined to continue their way.

Unpleasant news are heard day and night through radio and papers here too. But Zen, Laotse, Teism or *Haiku* help us much in keeping peace of mind in uneasy days—this is my belief through the experiences during the last War. Simplified life, absolute pacifism, resistance through non-resistance (does this sound queer?), etc . . . I believe that the best of “Orientalism” must play bigger roll in the life of modern world. Don’t you?

But unfortunately, very very little of good “Orientalism” is left in Japan now,—perhaps there are more true “Orientalists” abroad than in Japan; so, it is not an “Orientalism” any more. I am looking forward for your arrival here in March, and am preparing for our trip to Echigo (home country of Ryokan), you have to spare a couple of weeks for it and I will do my best to give you real “leisurely and reflective” days then.

Please send your article in “Art News” to me and give me the permission to translate it. I am sure it will enlighten us much.

One of my friends has asked me to help him in making a film on Japanese gardens, and as we have just begun to make plans for it, if you ever join and help us we will very gladly change or enlarge our present plan. (I hope this plan will realize though it does not look easy to do.)

I am very anxious about the photos of “Dogu’s” (stone age statuettes) which you have taken at the Ueno Museum. Did they come out well?

There are too much to write to you.

Good health and good work for you, Isamusan!

Expecting to hear from you soon. (I will write to you again very soon too.)

All of my family send their best regards to you.

*Yours sincerely, Sabro*

## Letter to Noguchi, January 18, 1951

5955 Fujimiga-oka, Tsujido  
Fujisawa, Kanagawa-ken, Japan  
January 18th, 1951

Dear Isamu-san,

How do you like these “*HAIKU*”?

“*SEIKO-UDOKU*” (Fine day’s labour in the farm—rainy day’s reading at home), to do both properly is the ideal of a civilized man since 2,000 years ago in China and in Japan. *SEIDO-kai* (“Fine day’s labor in the farm” group) is a group of young men in the village on Lake BIWA’s shore where I had stayed five years during and

after the War. Most of them are the sons of farmers and were soldiers. I became a friend for them after the demobilization and opened my studio and library to them, and taught them *HAIKU* and English. We used to have the group's *HAIKU* party every month regularly, they made such an amazing progress and looked to miss me very much when I left them on December 1949. They continue their *HAIKU* meeting till now under the leadership of a town doctor to whom I have asked to take my place. Here are some of their *HAIKU* which I have received this morning. I love them, and I can be proud of them.

- 1) *SHISHIMAI NI TSUKU KORA TSUZUKI*  
*HANANA-MICHI*. By Kikuo Okada  
 meaning  
 Lion-mask dancers are leaving a village,  
 Children are funning after them,  
 Along the path in rape-seed flower meadows
- 2) *MEYANAGI NO KISHI O HANARURU*  
*WATASHI KANA*. By Minoru Suzuki  
 A ferry-boat is leaving slowly  
 The bank where  
 Willows are beginning to bud.
- 3) *SHIBARAKU WA HIGE NAMETE ITE*  
*CHICHIRO NAKU*. By M. Suzuki  
 A cricket  
 After licking its whiskers a while,  
 Begins to chirp.
- 4) *NIIZUME NI NIAU KASURI YA*  
*HANA TSUBAKI*. by Soichi Nishigawa  
 KASURI (Black and white cotton kimono) suits well  
 To my newly married wife  
 Who is standing beside the camellia in blossom.
- 5) *HARUSAME O TE NI UKETE TATSU*  
*HOTOKE KANA*. By Taichiro Kanazawa  
 A Buddha (statue) stands  
 Receiving the spring rain  
 With his open hand.
- 6) *ASHIMOTO NI SHIRANUKO NO IRU*  
*TAKIBI KANA*. By Hisatsugu Suzuki  
 While enjoying a bonfire,  
 I found suddenly an unknown child  
 Enjoying it with me at my knees.

- 7) *TSUYU SUZUSHI KYONO KEIKONO*  
*HANA O KIRU*. By H. Suzuki  
 A cool dewy morning  
 I cut some flowers  
 To bring to the flower arrangement lesson of this afternoon.
- 8) *SEMISHIGURE SHITEIRU NAKA O*  
*KISHA JOKO*. By Susumu Kanazawa  
 The chorus of cicadas sounds  
 Like heavy rain.  
 The train is climbing slowly uphill.
- 9) *KOZO UCHISHI KUGI NI*  
*FURIN TSURUSHI KERI*. By Masuo Tokuda  
 I hang the wind bell (to enjoy the summer breeze)  
 To the nail which I have driven in  
 Last year. (at the same season)
- 10) *HI O KESEBA BETSUNO HI AKAKU*  
*HAHA YONABE*. By M. Tokuda  
 I turned off light  
 Found another light bright  
 Under which mother is working nights.

“*NICHI NICHI KORE KOJITSU*” (Every day is a good day)—this was another big ideal of the civilized men of the Extreme Orient. To the man who can keep peace in mind always, every day is a good day. It needs the strongest mental strength and the most modest and ever lasting endurance. But, I like this word as did our ancestors. *WARE WA TADA TARU O SHIRU* (I know only to satisfy) *KOKKI* (Conquer over one's self) You have seen and made *TAKUHON* prints of these calligraphic reliefs at my home. I made them in the village in my struggle to attain the ideal. And these young men were my friends then. *RIKYU* (Teaism) and *BASHO* (Haiku) were always my leaders and I found spirits of Teaism and Haiku in that poor village; there have existed a tradition of Haiku continually in this village since *BASHO* and the fathers and grandfathers of the young men have been *HAIKU* poets, and each house of the village has a small garden in the manner of *KOBORI ENSHU* (design of *KATSURA* Palace is attributed to him) as it was near to the native village of *KOBORI ENSHU*. Still, this village is not an exceptional one, if one try one can find many like this. And, the young man (a good farmer) who cuts dewy flowers (*HAIKU* No. 7) is taking the lessons of flower arrangement, *UTAI* (*NOH* music) and calligraphy, and he is not an exception either. I will try to show you the country life of Japan during your next visit to us, and you will find what *RIKYU* and *BASHO* had found and left there. *RIKYU*'s *TEAISM* and *BASHO*'s

*HAIKU* were built on the simplest beauty which they found in the country life, and that kind of beauty and the art of these men remain there together.

Atomic bomb or any bomb of new kind or a revolution will kill me or my family or both, but I will try always to keep peace in my mind till then. I believe in Progress too, but, real progress of mankind will be found only in the equivalence of the Material and the Spiritual, and we are in a very very primitive state today all over the world. One day in very far future, mankind will attain this Progress, till then, numberless men and women have to strive to be the truly civilized men and women, and the power of these people will bring Peace on earth. We have to maintain this tradition and deliver it to our descendants. What used to be done by Religion has to be done by Art of real Civilization.

“Water seems to be the weakest being. Water obeys to the forms of vases, square, round or any other forms.

Water penetrates into the lowest parts on earth.

And the power of water is the strongest on earth.” (Laotze)

Shake hands, Isamusen.

Hoping you could guess what I meant to say through my bad English,

*Yours truly, Sabro.*

I have met Guen-san (Inokuma) and have heard that you told to Michio-san to come to U.S.A. as quickly as possible. I assure you that it is the only and the best solution. Michio-san has to go abroad and study there. And, one day he will be able to find what your father and you have found in Japan. Tomiji-san and Mama were worrying so much about Michio-san, and I was telling to them that if he could ever go to U.S.A. quickly it will be best. Now I can tell them not to worry too much.

Please kindly remind me to Kirayama-san, if he is staying in New York.