

Benesse Art Site Naoshima: How It All Began

Benesse Art Site Naoshima is the overall name for activities undertaken by the education and publishing company Benesse Holdings and the associated Fukutake Foundation to promote regional development through art, mainly on the three islands of Naoshima, Teshima, and Inujima in the Seto Inland Sea. The activities comprise art museums, including the Benesse House Museum and the Chichu Art Museum on Naoshima and the Inujima Seirenscho Art Museum on Inujima, community art projects and facilities, and works of public art exhibited throughout the islands. Most of the art is displayed in the open air or in facilities designed with the Inland Sea landscape in mind, and is site-specific, meaning that it was created specifically to be viewed and experienced in a certain place.

The project was initiated in 1989, when a campsite called Naoshima International Camp was established in the southern part of Naoshima. The site, the development of which was supervised by architect Ando Tadao (b. 1941), included traditional Mongolian yurts (round tents) set up on the premises for visitors to overnight in and a sculpture by the Dutch artist Karel Appel (1921–2006). Naoshima International Camp provided a spark for the project, which had sought to achieve educational and cultural aims through the display of art in the natural surroundings of Naoshima, and inspired further art-themed community development on the island.

The next step was the opening of the Benesse House Museum, an art museum and hotel designed by Ando. Artworks gradually came to be displayed both inside and outside the museum, providing an impetus for adding art to the island landscape. Works were commissioned from artists including Sugimoto Hiroshi (b. 1948) and Yayoi Kusama (b. 1929). In 1998, the Art House Project was initiated in the Honmura district, where old houses were restored and artists invited to turn these structures into works of art that draw on the history of the community.

The idea of site-specific art was taken even further with the opening of the Chichu Art Museum, another Ando Tadao creation, in 2004. Built underground to achieve a symbiotic relationship with the surrounding nature and to avoid disturbing the panorama of the Seto Inland Sea, the museum exhibits works including the “Water Lilies” series by Claude Monet (1840–1926), which is here illuminated only by natural light. Another piece on permanent display is “Open Sky” by James Turrell (b. 1943), which lets visitors look up at the sky through a square ceiling window.

Benesse Art Site Naoshima has expanded to the nearby islands of Teshima and Inujima, and has since 2010 co-organized the Setouchi Triennale, an international art festival that takes place throughout the Inland Sea region every three years.