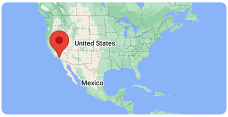
Ruth Asawa, A Working Life

Ruth Asawa (American, 1926–2013) was a pioneering modern artist best known for her innovative abstract wire sculptures. Born in California to Japanese immigrants, Asawa was affected by her experiences as a Japanese American in the twentieth century, which impacted her opportunities and her reception as an artist. Many reviews of her work—from the earliest exhibitions to her last public commissions—often invoked her Japanese heritage as if it would unlock the meaning of her art. Asawa, however, regarded herself as a “citizen of the universe,” saying, “I don’t think of myself as Japanese. I think of myself as somebody with an idea, a human idea rather than an ethnic idea.” Indeed, her sculptures—which achieve a transcendent blend of complexity and simplicity, light and shadow, form and space—communicate a uniquely expansive vision.

Asawa grew up on a farm in in Norwalk, California; the family’s work was laborious, but brought Asawa into direct contact with nature from an early age. The influence of organic forms, such as plants and flowers, on her art is unmistakable. Asawa was the middle child of seven siblings. All of the children worked on the farm and attended school six days a week, including Japanese school on Saturdays, where they studied calligraphy. This gave Asawa her first experience with a brush and ink.

“Sculpture is just like farming. If you keep at it, you can get quite a lot done.” – Ruth Asawa

The attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 and the U.S. response had a calamitous effect on the lives of Japanese American families, including the Asawas. Asawa’s father was forcibly taken to an internment camp in New Mexico, and the rest of the family was detained first at the Santa Anita Racetrack where the teenage Asawa studied drawing with interned Walt Disney Studio artists Tom Okamoto, Ben Tanaka, and Chris Ishii. The family was later relocated to the Rohwer War Relocation Center in Arkansas.



Upon graduating from Rohwer High School in 1943, Asawa attended Milwaukee State Teacher's College, with the hope of becoming an art teacher. Although she completed her coursework, she was told that it would be dangerous for her to fulfill her student teaching requirement because of anti-Japanese sentiment. Without practice teaching, she was unable to receive a degree. She was subsequently granted a small loan from a church in Hawai'i and enrolled in Black Mountain College in North Carolina.

United States
Gulf of Mexico

Years later, once Asawa was an established artist, she was sent a notice stating that the Milwaukee State Teacher's College wanted to recognize her as one of their most distinguished alumni. She replied by requesting the Bachelor of Arts degree she'd been denied, which she finally received in 1998.

Asawa studied at Black Mountain College from 1946 to 1949. She worked under the instruction of her mentors Buckminster Fuller and Josef Albers.

Albers urged his students to challenge the eye through the use of color and line and to explore figure-ground relationships. Later, Asawa attributed her transformation as an artist to Black Mountain College, Albers, and Fuller—all major forces in the history of American art. In 1947, during a trip to Mexico, Asawa witnessed local villagers constructing baskets using a wire-looping technique. Upon returning to the United States, she began experimenting with this technique, and soon developed her signature sculptural style.

“I liked the idea that the relation between outside and inside was interdependent, integral. Also, that you can use the same idea to make many different things. That appeals to me more than using many different ideas.”—Ruth Asawa

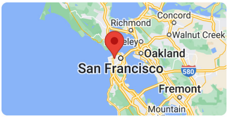
In 1949, Asawa moved to San Francisco, where she married the architect Albert Lanier, whom she’d met at Black Mountain College. For Asawa, art and life were inseparable; she integrated her working studio into their home, and established an international reputation as a sculptor while raising six children. Asawa spent the rest of her life in San Francisco. Her deep ties to the city, manifested through her numerous public commissions and her dedicated efforts to create art programs in the public schools, culminated in the city and county declaring February 12, 1982, as Ruth Asawa Day, an acknowledgment of her significant contributions to the city as an artist and teacher.

"I was interested in the economy of a line, making something in space, enclosing it without blocking it out. It's still transparent. I realized that if I was going to make these forms, which interlock and interweave, it can only be done with a line because a line can go anywhere."—Ruth Asawa

As a sculptor, Asawa developed a deep understanding of and respect for the intrinsic properties of her materials. "Each material has a nature of its own," she said, "and by combining it and by putting it next to another material, you change or give another personality to it without destroying either one. So that when you separate them again, they return back . . . to [their] familiar qualities." Scholar Karin Higa wrote of Asawa's work: "Not only does the exterior become the interior and back again, but the material contains simultaneously its past and future states. This becomes the ultimate metaphor for understanding Asawa's Japanese American heritage. It is embedded in all of her work and at the same time is also always fluid, moving from one state to another while remaining essentially itself."

Often, Asawa's forms are suspended from the ceiling, where they hover between stillness and barely perceptible movement, challenging viewers' perceptions of light and shadow, transparency and volume. "A line," Asawa once said, "can enclose and define space while letting the air remain air."

In 1960, the de Young museum presented a solo exhibition of Asawa's looped-wire sculptures and drawings. In 2005, Asawa helped design an installation of her sculptures for the lobby of the Nancy B. and Jake L. Hamon Education Tower in the museum's new building. This permanent installation displays her diverse experiments with wire forms, which resonate with the spaces and textures created by the building's architects, Herzog & de Meuron.



Sculpture was Asawa's primary medium, but she also worked in drawing, painting, and printmaking. Like her three-dimensional sculptures, many of her works on paper explore notions of positive and negative space and recall organic forms. In 1965, Josef Albers recommended Asawa for a fellowship at the

Tamarind Lithography Workshop in Los Angeles, the most famous printmaking workshop in the country.

Throughout her life, Asawa was committed to public service on behalf of artists and arts education. She served eight years on the San Francisco Art Commission, was appointed to Jimmy Carter's Commission on Mental Health and served on its Role of the Arts committee, and became a member of the National Endowment for the Arts task force on the education and training of artists. Governor Jerry Brown asked her to be on the California Arts Council for a two-year term. She also served on the National Crafts Planning Project of the National Endowment for the Arts. Her advocacy was focused on individual artists and small arts organizations where small amounts of money could do a great deal of good.

Asawa's vision for San Francisco's School of the Arts (SOTA) was directly connected to the artistic heartbeat of the city. Asawa worked tirelessly to enhance art programs in the school, inviting artists to work directly with students, fundraising, advocating, and even planting and tending gardens so that students could experience the value of nature as a source of inspiration and beauty, as it had been in her own life. In 2010, SOTA was renamed the Ruth Asawa San Francisco School of the Arts. "Artists don't give up," Asawa was fond of saying. "They keep trying, experimenting, creating, until they get where they are going."

Many of Asawa's public commissions can still be seen throughout the city. Some of her best-known works include the Andrea mermaid fountain at Ghirardelli Square (1968), the San Francisco Fountain at the Hyatt on Union Square (1973), the Origami fountains at Buchanan Mall in Japantown (1976), the Aurora fountain in Bayside Plaza (1986), and San Francisco State University's Garden of Remembrance (2002), which commemorates the imprisonment of Japanese Americans during World War II.

Golden Gate National Recreation Area
Emeryville
80
Oakland
San Francisco
Alameda
1

Beyond the city limits, Asawa's legacy in modern art endures. Today, her work is found in the permanent collections of numerous museums across the country. Upon her death, in 2013, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco Curator of American Art Timothy Burgard wrote, "She was a pioneering post–World War II modernist whose works have transcended the multiple barriers she faced as an Asian American woman artist working with traditional 'craft' materials and techniques. She lived to see all of these confining categories challenged and redefined."

Credits: Story

To view Ruth Asawa's works in person, plan your next visit to the de Young museum.

All content adapted from: Asawa, Ruth, and Daniell Cornell. "The Sculpture of Ruth Asawa: Contours in the Air." San Francisco: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 2006. All artworks © Estate of Ruth Asawa

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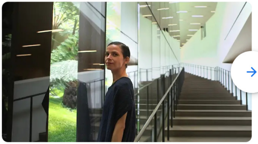

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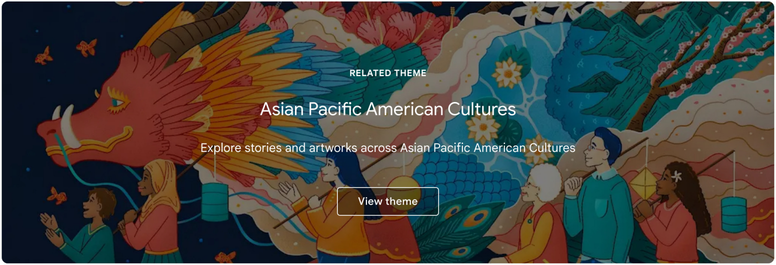

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