



*Permanent installation
De Young Museum*

Ruth Asawa

They use the repetitive rhythm of basketry to create delicate, sinuous forms that were, at first, considered as mere craftwork. Today, no one doubts that this work is art—it's in museum collections, commands impressive sums at auction, and has been featured on US postage stamps. Of course, these are the sculptures of Ruth Asawa.

Ruth Asawa was born in Norwalk in 1926, where her Japanese immigrant parents raised fruit and vegetables. The patient nature of farm work—of stringing beans, for example—may have predisposed her to the painstaking handwork of her chosen art media. As a girl, Asawa made bracelets from baling wire; her feet dangling from the back of a truck created dirt patterns not unlike the shapes of her structures.

The Depression was hard, but the war years were worse—Asawa's family was interned, along with thousands of other Californians of Japanese descent. Released after 18 months, Asawa attended a summer course at Black Mountain College, the incredible incubator of mid-century artistic talent. Her early graphic works display the repetition, and the positive and negative space, that will also characterize her sculptures. On the college farm, baling wire was plentiful.

In Mexico, Asawa discovered a method that suggested the potential of simple wire. Incorrectly described as crochet, her method involves series of looped e's made from one long piece of wire. She soon understood that such looped wire structures could support weight and retain form. Paul Klee famously "took a line for a walk" in his drawings, but Asawa did more when she used a line—one piece of wire—to make a three-dimensional object, a transparent, plant-like organism both rigid and supple, of metal and air, of substance and shadow, inside and out at the same time.

Asawa's sculptures are complex and daring. They are art.

Her works were recognized early on, photographed by Imogen Cunningham for the cover of *Arts and Architecture* in 1952. Designs evolved over time; her tied-wire sculptures, inspired by plants, magically recall the process of coiling a basket. She did electroplated sculptures, cast works, and many public commissions in San Francisco, including the whimsical Ghirardelli Square fountain, modelled on a breast-feeding neighbor, which shows a more personal side to her art.

Asawa was a tireless advocate for arts education, and helped create the San Francisco School of the Arts, which was named for her in 2010. She died in 2013.



To Learn More:

Everything She Touched: The Life of Ruth Asawa, Marilyn Chase, Chronicle Books, 2020

Ruth Asawa: Life's Work, Tamara Schenkenberg, Yale University Press, 2019

The Sculpture of Ruth Asawa: Contours in the Air, Daniell Cornell, University of California Press, 2006

American Women Sculptors, Charlotte Rubinstein, GK Hall, 1992

To See More:

De Young Museum, SFMOMA, San Jose Museum of Art, Oakland Museum of California, Cantor Arts Center, LACMA, Getty Museum, Norton Simon Museum, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, MoMA, Whitney Museum of American Art