

Artist Resources – Ruth Asawa (American, 1926 – 2013)

[Asawa's artist website](#)

"I always begin from the insides, working on the surfaces....so that the interesting thing is that the outside surface becomes the inside surface of the next form," Asawa [discussed her process and technique](#) in an excerpt from Robert Snyder's 1978 film [Ruth Asawa: Of Forms and Growth](#).

The [de Young Museum in San Francisco](#) was host to the first complete survey of Asawa's career in 2006, bringing together 54 sculptures and 45 works on paper with archival notebooks and photographs. [Tour the virtual galleries](#).

Asawa and her husband Albert Lanier reflected on their experiences at Black Mountain College, artistic process, and life in San Francisco in an [oral history](#) with the Smithsonian Archives of American Art in 2002. "It you take material you like and you know how far you can take it from what is traditional to do...you like to take it another step...that interests me. And it can be any material. It doesn't have to be wire. It just has to be able to do that. I think that that's an important thing." [The Bancroft Library](#) also published a significant in-depth oral history with Asawa from the 1970s.

David Zwirner Gallery in New York celebrated their new status as [representatives of Asawa's estate](#) in 2017 with a [solo exhibition](#) exploring the artist's talent in painting and drawing alongside seminal sculptures. In early 2020, the gallery's London space celebrated Asawa's first major gallery exhibition outside the United States, [Ruth Asawa: A Line Can Go Anywhere](#).



Asawa, 1954  
Photograph: Nat Farbman

[Juxtapoz Magazine](#) spoke with two of Asawa's daughters, Aiko Cuneo and Addie Lanier, in 2018. "I think her private work was always the most important and the most fulfilling. This became particularly evident at the end of her life. She had the most intellectual energy, memory, and emotional interest in her personal work, as well as an unwavering confidence that her work was important, original, and worthy of recognition," They reflected. "At the same time, she felt that, as an artist, she had a responsibility to contribute and participate fully in her community. Given the chance, I don't think she would have done it any other way."

The [Pulitzer Arts Foundation in St. Louis](#) provided Asawa with her first retrospective beyond the west coast in 2018 with 80 works including over 60 sculptures – a showcase [The Washington Post hailed](#) as "the year's most beautiful exhibition." Digital resources of the exhibition include installation photographs, an [audio guide](#), and an [interview with curator Tamara H. Schenkenberg](#) on *The Modern Art Notes Podcast*.

In 2021, [Modern Art Oxford](#) will become the first public institution in Europe to host a solo exhibition of Asawa's work, exploring her self-given title as a "citizen of the world," her conviction that art could have a higher purpose in the world, and being an artist was just one facet of a happy existence, which also included having a family, participating in her communities, and being socially engaged.



Asawa, 1957  
Photograph: Imogen Cunningham

Ruth Asawa (American, 1926-2013)

**Untitled (S.845, Wall-Mounted Tied Wire, Open-Center, Five-Branched Form Based on Nature), 1976**

Wall-mounted sculpture—bronze wire

Private Collection; L2021:181.1

Born in rural California, Ruth Asawa began her artistic practice in the early 1940s while detained in Japanese internment camps with her family in Santa Anita, California and Rohwer, Arkansas. After her release, Asawa made her way to Black Mountain College in North Carolina, which was known for its progressive and avant-garde approach to artmaking and pedagogy. The artist reflected: “I was told that it might be difficult for me, with the memories of the war still fresh, to work in a public school. My life might even be in danger. This was a godsend, because it encouraged me to follow my interest in art.” **Untitled (BMC.129, In and Out)** was produced while attending Black Mountain College, which proved to be formative in Asawa’s artistic approach.

In 1947, the artist visited Toluca, Mexico with the American Friends Service Committee and learned looped-wire techniques from local basket makers. The artist was inspired by organic forms and processes, which manifested in open-form compositions using tied wire in the 1950s. This series of **Untitled** sculptures are early explorations into wall-mounted and hanging sculptures in Asawa’s long and prolific career. To Asawa: “What I was excited by was that I could make a shape that was inside and outside at the same time.”



*On view January 25 – May 2, 2022*



Ruth Asawa (American, 1926-2013)

**Untitled (S.633(a-c), Trio of Hanging Reversible, Open-Window Form Sculptures)**, c. 1956

Hanging sculpture—sterling silver wire

Private Collection; L2021:181.2a-c

*On view January 25 – May 2, 2022*

Ruth Asawa (American, 1926-2013)

**Untitled (S.237, Hanging Six-Lobed, Interlocking Continuous Form)**, ca. 1958

Hanging sculpture—enameled copper and brass wire

Private Collection; L2021:189.1

*On view January 25 – May 2, 2022*





Ruth Asawa (American, 1926-2013)

**Untitled (S.302, Hanging Two-Section, Open-Window Form)**, ca. 1954

Hanging sculpture—brass wire

Private Collection; L2021:164.1

*On view January 25 – May 2, 2022*

Ruth Asawa (American, 1926-2013)

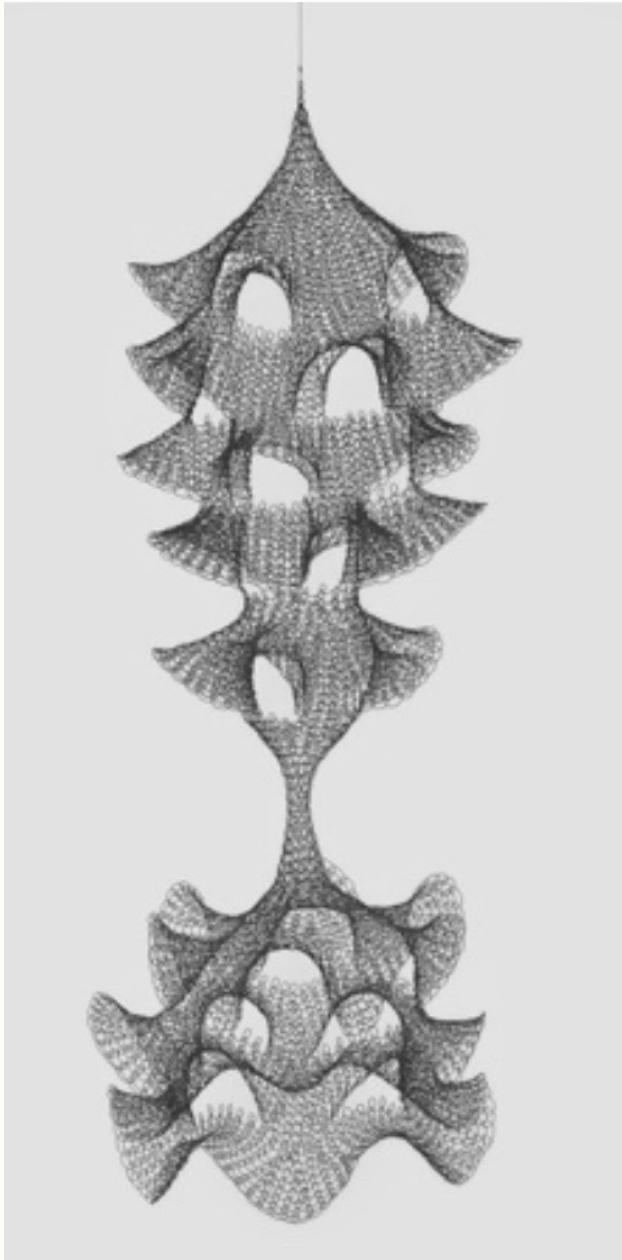
**Untitled (BMC.129, In and Out)**, ca. 1948-1949

Oil and paper on board

Private Collection; L2021:164.2

*On view January 25 – May 2, 2022*





Ruth Asawa (American, 1926-2013)

**Untitled (S.786, Hanging Two-Sectioned, Open Window Form)**, ca. 1954-58

Galvanized steel wire

Private Collection; L2021:20.1

Ruth Asawa began weaving during the summer of 1947, when she joined Josef and Anni Albers—her professors from Black Mountain College—in Mexico. Artisans in a village outside Mexico City taught Asawa to knit, using traditional textiles as well as wire. From her earliest artistic exploits sketching as a child to years as a student and mature careers as a teacher, painter, printmaker, and sculptor, Asawa was a collector of influences, styles, and techniques. “I think it’s important to have a relationship with the past and the present and not just be modern or old, or anything like that. I think it’s good to be part of everything,” reflected Asawa in 2002. Her looped wire sculptures, seen here in a phenomenal example, merge mature interests in structure with a life-long delight in drawing patterns inspired by plant forms, shells, insect wings, and spider webs. The branching, flowering composition of the *open window form* also corresponds with the *tied wire sculptures* Asawa began creating in 1962, which explore the complex geometry of desert plants and trees.

*On view March 24 – June 27, 2021*

Ruth Asawa (American, 1926-2013)

**Untitled (S.401, Hanging Seven-Lobed, Continuous Interlocking Form, with Spheres within Two Lobes), ca. 1953-1954**

Hanging sculpture-enameled copper and brass wire

Private Collection; L2020:97.1

“Whether it’s a craft or whether it’s art. That is a definition that people put on things,” Ruth Asawa reflected in 2002. “You take an ordinary material like wire and... you give it a new definition. That’s all.” Asawa began making wire sculptures in the 1947 after learning the technique for looped wire baskets in Toluca, Mexico while studying at Black Mountain College. Though she showed her growing oeuvre in New York during the 1950s and executed a number of public art commissions, she remained largely an outsider in a commercial gallery system that did not know how to market a woman of Japanese descent, a dedicated mother and artist, and a specialist with materials and forms that challenged a tidy definition of “fine art.”

Asawa has only recently gained significant recognition beyond the California Bay Area, where she raised six children and helped found San Francisco’s public high school of the arts, (now called the Ruth Asawa San Francisco School of the Arts), all without interrupting her continuous experimentations with wire, electroplating, and cast sculptures; drawing and lithography; and public commissions. Her sinuous wire works achieve their “continuous interlocking form” through a single piece of wire, achieving a series of nested lobes that merge exterior and interior surfaces with ever-increasing complexity.

*On view October 7, 2020 – January 10, 2021*







Ruth Asawa (American, 1926-2013)

**Untitled (S.592, Hanging, Single Lobe, Three-Layered, Continuous Form within a Form),**  
c. 1958

Copper wire

Private Collection; L2020:30.2

Consistently innovative and curious across a range of mediums, Ruth Asawa is remembered as a sculptor, educator, and arts activist. As a second-generation Japanese American, she was interned with her mother and siblings in California and Arkansas for eighteen months during World War II. Art became a reprieve during this formative experience, shaping her path as a student in Milwaukee and later at the influential Black Mountain College in North Carolina. After a trip to Mexico in 1947, she began adapting traditional basket-weaving techniques and experimenting with industrial materials like copper and steel.

This wire sculpture is a virtuoso example of Asawa's signature "form within a form" technique, in which she uses a single line of wire to hand-loop sequences of nesting biomorphic orbs. Asawa garnered inspiration from nature, materials, weaving techniques, and what she famously referred to as "the economy of a line, making something in space, enclosing it without blocking it out." As she reflected late in her career: "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."

*On view September 2 – December 6, 2020*