

Ruth Asawa

Born 1926, Norwalk, California, U.S.; died San Francisco, California, U.S., 2013



Ruth Asawa knew she wanted to be an artist from the time she was a little girl. During World War II, she and her family were imprisoned in internment camps set up by the U.S. government for Japanese American people. It was there that she first studied art, taught by artists who were also living in the camps. Asawa believed that art is for everyone, especially young people, and she passionately promoted arts education in public schools. In 1982, she founded what is now called the Ruth Asawa San Francisco School of the Arts, a public high school.



Ruth Asawa, *Untitled* (S.114, Hanging, Six-Lobed Continuous Form within a Form with One Suspended and Two Tied Spheres), ca. 1958.

Ruth Asawa is perhaps best known for her wire sculptures, which she thought of as three dimensional line drawings in space. She made her sculptures from ordinary, industrial materials such as copper and brass wire, and pioneered a technique of looping a single wire into graceful, wavy, billowy shapes, like you see in the sculpture on the opposite page. This wire technique was inspired by a trip to Mexico, where a craftsman taught Asawa how to loop a basket. For other wire sculptures, she began with a bundle of wires that she divided and tied into branching forms. Though Asawa's sculptures suggest things like waves, jellyfish, plants, and trees, they do not represent specific objects.

Fun Fact!

In 1982, the city of San Francisco declared February 12 Ruth Asawa Day. There are many public works by Asawa in and around San Francisco, including multiple fountains, which earned her the nickname "Fountain Lady."

Explore

Describe the lines in this sculpture. Are they thin or thick? Curvy or angular? How would you describe the shapes in this sculpture? What do you see that makes you say that?

What questions would you ask the artist about how she made this artwork? What challenges might she have faced while creating it?

What does this work of art make you think of? If you could give this sculpture a different title, what would it be?

Create

This artwork, which is suspended from above, casts shadows that echo Asawa's ideas about her sculptures as line drawings.

Find an object and place it on the space below. Shine a light on the object so you can see its shadow. Trace the shadow. Move the light source so that the object casts different shadows or try different objects—solid objects, objects with holes or gaps that let light shine through, objects that cast shadows that look like many lines. Trace those shadows below.



Front cover image: Ruth Asawa, *Untitled* (S.114, Hanging, Six-Lobed Continuous Form within a Form with One Suspended and Two Tied Spheres), ca. 1958 (detail); collection SFMOMA, Phyllis C. Wattis Fund for Major Accessions; © Estate of Ruth Asawa.

For more information about this work, check out sfmoma.org/artwork/2014.794.