

Ruth Asawa: Wizard With Wire

A new retrospective celebrates the late San Francisco artist's extraordinary passion for the arts

By [Elizabeth Fishel](#) | September 30, 2025 | [Arts and Entertainment](#)

Long before anyone talked about how to combine work and family, the late artist Ruth Asawa, best known for her wire sculpture, was a mother/artist extraordinaire.

So it was fitting that the centerpiece of the recent San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) retrospective of her life's work was the recreation of her San Francisco living room from the Sixties. The elegant, arty space symbolized the blending of her creative practice and her family life, the two domains as interwoven as the wire strands in her intricate, looped artworks. Her abstract, swaying pieces were suspended from the room's ceiling, made to cast picturesque shadows on the wall, the way they did in her original family home.



Ruth Asawa drawing in her San Francisco home studio, California, 1994. Artwork © 2025 Ruth Asawa Lanier, Inc., Courtesy David Zwirner

On opening night, 30 of her descendants hung out in that familiar space as they used to do when Asawa was alive, at home with the recognizable wood paneling, comfortable seating and cozy rug.

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Although Ruth Asawa was well known in the Bay Area during her lifetime — and the recipient of a commemorative stamp in 2020 — now, twelve years after her death in 2013 at 87, this remarkable artist is being re-introduced to a wider national and international audience. After the retrospective at the SFMOMA, the show travels to the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in

New York (October 19, 2025 - February 7, 2026), and from there, internationally to the Guggenheim in Bilbao, Spain and Fondation Beyeler

in Basel, Switzerland.

Her Own Art Form

This Japanese American, multi-talented artist raised six children (born from 1950 -1959) while pursuing a life of creative work and arts advocacy. Asawa was an original who invented her own art form and used it in endlessly inventive ways. Some sculptures were the looped-wire of the suspended pieces, biomorphic-shapes within shapes, like ships within bottles, and others were tied-wire, mostly straight wire artworks that came together into tree-like forms. Her complex technique was variously dubbed "knitting with iron," "crocheting without needles" or "drawing in three dimensions." In the busy hubbub of an eight-member household, working with wire was like using "worry beads," observed her daughter Aiko Cuneo at a presentation about her mother's life.

Shaping the wire was so challenging that the artist covered her fingers with masking tape to protect them from cuts, but she persevered across six decades to produce a huge body of work: hundreds of pieces were included in the retrospective.

Among the family guests on the opening night was Asawa's grandson Henry Weverka, the son of her daughter Addie and the seventh of her ten grandchildren. Weverka became the president of the family organization, Ruth Asawa Lanier, Inc. in 2021 and is now the spokesperson for all generations.

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In an email interview after the opening, he discussed his influential bond with his grandmother:

"Whenever I went to my grandmother's house as a child we always made something — art, food, puppets, bouquets, etc. She wanted us all to grow up to be capable, hardworking people who could build a flower bed for a friend or make a meal for a group of fifteen. I feel very blessed to have learned so much from her, my grandfather, my mother, my aunts and uncles over the years, and will continue to pass that knowledge along to my two sons. They will grow up tending to the same [garden](#) my grandparents made together starting in 1960, which I think is a very special thing, especially in San Francisco."

An Extraordinary Ordinary Person

"An artist is an ordinary person who can take ordinary things and make them special," Asawa once said, and that remark is a fitting epigraph to the survey show.

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"I love that quote," said the show's co-curator Janet Bishop in another email interview. "On the one hand, it expresses how humble she was, as, at least to my mind, artists are hardly ordinary. It also speaks to her artistic resourcefulness and the ability to see the potential in almost any material."

Indeed, Asawa was no ordinary person. She was the fourth of seven children born to Japanese immigrant farmworkers and she grew up on a truck farm in southern California. She watched her parents

toil 20 hours a day, a work ethic that she inherited. She was 16 when her family's life was upended in 1942: they were incarcerated under Executive Order 9066, first in horse stables at the nearby Santa Anita Racetrack and then at Rohwer War Relocation Center in Arkansas.

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In spite of the severe hardships, the young Asawa was incarcerated with three former Disney artists who led art lessons, encouraged her gift and showed her how professional artists work. Throughout her life, she would continue to turn adversity into advantage. Her biographer, Marilyn Chase, even speculated that the wire the artist used as her primary creative material was a "swords-into-plowshares metamorphosis" that referenced the wire barbs enclosing her as a teenager.

After Asawa graduated from high school in the camp, she attended Milwaukee State Teachers College, then Black Mountain College in North Carolina, a hub of avant-garde experimentation. There she studied with artistic midcentury luminaries like Josef Albers, Merce Cunningham and Buckminster Fuller. There she also met architectural student Albert Lanier who would become her husband in 1949. After their mixed marriage (Lanier was white) anti-miscegenation laws made it necessary for them to leave the South and move to San Francisco.

Mother/Artist

In 1961 the couple purchased a house in San Francisco designed by noted local architects Walter Ratcliff and Alfred Jacobs, and as illustrated by the living room in the exhibit, Asawa began to weave motherhood into her artistic life.

"My home was and is my studio because I wanted my children to understand what I do and be there if they needed me to make a peanut butter sandwich," she once remarked. She launched dozens of child-centered art projects on the kitchen table, like dough ornaments for Christmas, and recruited her children to help in the garden and in carving elaborate redwood doors that once were installed at the home's entrance.

Says Janet Bishop: "One of the many impressive things about Asawa was how clear her life's priorities were. Family and art were both fundamentally important to her, and highly interconnected. She liked working amidst the comings and goings of the family, often enlisted her children in art projects, and always encouraged their creativity. As soon as they were old enough to sit at the table, for instance, she began teaching them origami. And if they were bored, she'd send them down to her shop to make things."

Ruth Asawa with schoolchildren in the garden of her San Francisco home, California, c. 1990s. | Credit: Artwork © 2025 Ruth Asawa Lanier, Inc., Courtesy David Zwirner

This early homegrown arts education made a lasting impression on her offspring. Many of her children, grandchildren, and even a great-grandchild make art either professionally or for pleasure.

Baskets, Masks and More

Asawa drew constantly throughout her life, filling over 300 sketchbooks and many more loose papers with drawings. Like many creative geniuses, Asawa was skilled in a variety of media — besides the hanging and tied wire artworks, she made wire portraits, like the one of her friend the photographer Imogen Cunningham sitting on a cake pan base. She fashioned prints out of potatoes, made large, dazzling origami paper sculptures, and baskets out of copper and steel wire, inspired by basket weaving she'd observed on a trip to Mexico in 1947.

"One of the many

Albert remained her helpmate throughout, doing the math and mechanical drawings for her

impressive things about Asawa was how clear her life's priorities were. Family and art were both fundamentally important to her, and highly interconnected."

elaborate pieces. Henry Weverka gave a special shout-out to Albert's important role in their partnership:

"When my grandparents were engaged to be married at Black Mountain College in 1948 and sought the blessing of their mentor Josef Albers, Albers gave it, but made my grandfather Albert promise to always support my grandmother in her work, which he did. He helped with numerous exhibitions and public commissions over the years and was very clearly proud of everything she

was able to accomplish. He was also an incredible architect and artist in his own right."

Another of Asawa's specialties was plaster-casting the faces of family and friends and creating decorative masks from them that she mounted on the exterior wall of her house. The process was elaborate: a cardboard frame and a layer of Vaseline went on the face before the plaster was poured; later clay was added to the plaster mold. But people were honored to be asked to participate and usually said yes.

In an interview before an exhibit of hundreds of Asawa's masks at Stanford's Cantor Arts Center in 2022, her granddaughter Aiko Sofia Weverka recalled having her face cast when she was about three and a half years old. Her grandmother's confidence made her feel like, "Oh, this is just a routine thing that grandparents do!"

And grandson Weverka, who recently became a father to a second son, comments that the ritual has continued to this day. "My aunt Aiko and uncle Paul made casts of both my sons' hands and feet last week," he reported.

Public Artworks

Asawa also created many acclaimed public artworks, nine from the '60s to the '90s. Her first commission was a joyful, outdoor fountain in San Francisco's Ghiradelli Square that prompted people to call her "the fountain lady." Titled "Andrea" (1966-68), the piece showcases two life-size mermaids, cast in bronze, one nursing a baby and one holding a lily pad with a frog sitting on it. Other small frogs frolic amid the plumes of water creating a playful atmosphere.

When asked at the end of her life about what was her most important legacy, she answered, "The schools."

One of her most political pieces, dedicated in 2002, was the "Garden of Remembrance" at San Francisco State University in honor of the 19 Japanese American students there who'd been incarcerated during World War II and denied their degrees. In 1998, those students were awarded honorary degrees, and Asawa, an honorary doctorate. With two landscape designers, the artist

created a contemplative garden, featuring a waterfall spilling into a tranquil pond, surrounded by blooming azaleas and cherry trees; ten massive boulders represent the camps where Japanese Americans, like Asawa and her family, were imprisoned.

According to Bishop, the public installation she would most recommend visitors see is Asawa's "San Francisco Fountain" at Union Square, which was commissioned by the Hyatt Hotel in 1970 and completed in 1973. The Fountain is made up of thousands of little bread-dough figures made by hundreds of participants of all ages that Asawa configured into panels and had cast into bronze. Explains Bishop, "The resulting portrait of San Francisco's urban landscape is both a wonderful post-[Summer of Love](#) era

time capsule in its details. And it fully embodies Asawa's generous, collaborative spirit."

The Schools

In addition to her astonishing productivity as an artist, this many-hatted creator also taught art and was an arts advocate in San Francisco's public schools. She co-founded the Alvarado School Arts Workshop in 1968 that brought professional artists into public school classrooms to teach art, gardening, music and theater. In 1982, she was also instrumental in the creation of the first public arts high school in San Francisco, which was later renamed the Ruth Asawa San Francisco School of the Arts in her honor in 2010. When asked at the end of her life about what was her most important legacy, she answered, "The schools."

Assessing what inspired Asawa's lifework over six decades, Weverka reflected:

"I think it was her curiosity and eagerness to learn. She is so often referred to as simply a "sculptor," but her body of work across so many different mediums is astounding, and she seems to have excelled at nearly everything she did whether it was sculpture, drawing, painting, printmaking, arts advocacy, motherhood, etc.

"One of the questions I get asked the most is "How could she possibly achieve all of this during one lifetime?" and frankly, I don't know the answer to that question. To her, art was life and life was art, there was no separation between the two."

Elizabeth Fishel is the author of five nonfiction books including *Sisters* and *Getting To 30: A Parent's Guide to the 20-Something Years* (with Jeffrey Arnett). She has contributed to numerous magazines including *Vogue*, *Ms.*, *New York*, *The Writer*, and *Oprah's O*. She has written for *Next Avenue* since 2014. [Read More](#)

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