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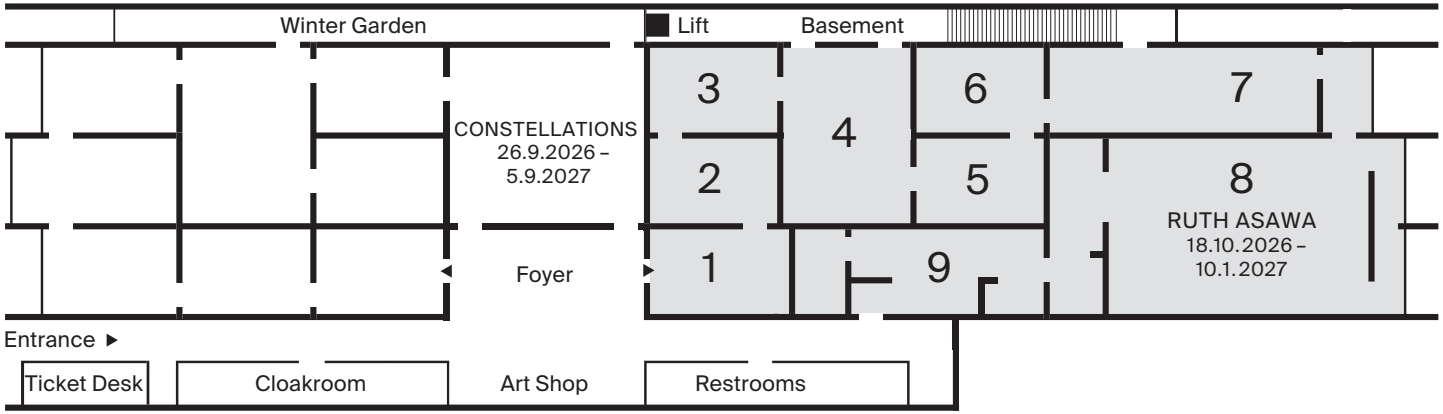
# Ruth Asawa

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## 18 October 2026 – 10 January 2027

Cover:
Ruth Asawa
*Untitled (S.573, Hanging Five-Lobed, Multi-Layered Form with One Hyperbolic Form Interlocking with Two Half-Hyperbolic Forms, Two Concave Forms at the Bottom, and One Convex Open Form at the Second Lobe)*, 1954 (detail)
Enameled copper and iron wire, 161.3 x 50.8 x 50.8 cm
Collection of Deborah and Andy Rappaport
© 2026 Ruth Asawa Lanier, Inc., courtesy David Zwirner
Photo: Sibila Savage, © 2015 Sibila Savage Photography

# Exhibition Floor Plan



## Introduction

This is the first comprehensive retrospective ever devoted to Ruth Asawa (1926–2013) in Europe. Over the course of a career spanning more than 60 years, the US-American artist of Japanese ancestry produced a richly diverse body of work comprising looped-wire and tied-wire as well as bronze sculptures, drawings, watercolours, paintings, folded paper reliefs, prints and public works.

Ruth Asawa is among the great rediscoveries of recent years. Her filigree looped-wire sculptures are held in particular esteem – Asawa transformed a simple, everyday material into fascinating sculptures and objects, establishing a distinctive and influential position in 20th-century sculpture. Her work blurs the boundaries between art and craft, action and contemplation.

In parallel, she produced a rich body of drawings, moving freely between figuration and abstraction. Two threads run through Asawa's work: her interest in the perception of space and her more or less straightforward references to the natural world.

The retrospective features more than 200 works from all periods of the artist's career. It also sheds light on Asawa's life and on her advocacy for art education, which had a lasting influence on schools in the San Francisco Bay Area.

## Biography

Ruth Asawa was born in 1926 in Norwalk (California, USA) into a family of farmers. Her parents, who had emigrated from Japan, fully involved their seven children in their agricultural work from an early age. Asawa thus soon developed a sense of hard work and a close connection to nature.

After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 during World War II, the Japanese American population faced intense discrimination. Like many others, in 1942 the Asawa family was transferred to an incarceration camp. This is where Asawa first came into contact with professional artists, taking classes run by detained Walt Disney animators. Her calling as an artist dates back to this early experience.

From 1946 to 1949, Asawa studied at the legendary Black Mountain College in North Carolina, among others with former Bauhaus teacher Josef Albers, who became her mentor. This is also where she met her future husband, fellow student Albert Lanier. In 1949, Asawa joined Lanier in San Francisco in California, where she continued to develop her looped-wire sculptures. Next to her work as an artist, together with Lanier she raised six children.

Beginning in the late 1960s, Asawa carried out several public commissions for fountains and memorials. She also played a significant role as an ardent advocate for art education in schools in the San Francisco Bay Area.

In the mid-1980s, she was diagnosed with lupus, which complicated her sculptural practice. Her creative drive in no way diminished, she focussed her energy on drawing. Ruth Asawa died in 2013 at home in San Francisco.

## Room 1

**1 Untitled (BMC.52, Dancers), ca. 1948/49**
Oil on paper
Private collection

Ten cell-like shapes float against a vibrant yellow background, like so many abstracted depictions of human figures. Their body and their raised arms, locking above their head, delineate separate spaces of contrasting colour. In the upper section of the image, one small figure holds its arms open. This painting belongs to a series of depictions of dancers, which Ruth Asawa produced over the course of her studies at Black Mountain College in North Carolina (1946–1949).
Many different approaches fed into the experimental nature of teaching at this progressive liberal arts college. During Asawa's years as a student, teachers such as the architect Richard Buckminster Fuller, former Bauhaus artist Josef Albers, as well as the dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham brought a rich variety of impulses to the curriculum. This interdisciplinary approach allowed the young artist to explore the relationship between body and space from various angles – an interest she soon extended to three-dimensional space, as in her early looped-wire sculpture *Untitled (S.264, Hanging Two-Lobed, Single-Layered Continuous Form)*.

## Room 1

**2 Untitled (BMC.58, Meander – Curved Lines), ca. 1948**
Ink on paper
Private collection

This early ink drawing throbs with the pulsating rhythm of meandering lines – wave-like, they swell and shrink again, densify and drift apart. Partial fillings with black and purple ink play with the relation between positive and negative space. Depending on how we focus our gaze, the background shifts to the foreground and vice versa.
Ruth Asawa first encountered the meander form while studying with Josef Albers at Black Mountain College, where she engaged deeply with the perception and representation of space. The prehistoric motif sparked her interest in ornamental and rhythmical patterns, variations of which frequently feature in her work, as seen in many of the other works displayed in this room, all of which were produced during Asawa's years as a student at Black Mountain College.

## Room 2

**3 Untitled (S.691, Wall-Mounted Paperfold with Horizontal Stripes), 1951**
Ink on paper
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York,
gift of the Cuneo Family

This relief-like wall piece shows how Ruth Asawa transposed her engagement with space and spatiality from two into three dimensions. As a child, she had learned the Japanese paper folding art of origami. She was able to draw on this knowledge when studying the materiality and the properties of paper in Josef Albers' class. Various folding techniques allowed her to craft three-dimensional objects from two-dimensional paper while retaining the material's inherent qualities. Asawa thus succeeded in establishing a bridge between her drawings and her sculptural work.
Many years later, in the 1970s, she was to return to this approach to design several fountains on the basis of paperfold models.

## Room 2

**4 Untitled (AB.029, Continuous Form within a Form), 1956**
Acrylic on Masonite
Private collection

In this painting, a game of surface and depth, positive and negative space, figure and ground, unfolds before our eyes. Depending on one's perspective, the arcs may be read either as a body or as surrounding space. The shift in colour from purple to green creates an additional sense of depth. It seems as though the staggered arrangement of increasingly large arcs could extend endlessly, beyond the edges of the picture. The title of the work establishes a connection with the looped-wire sculptures Ruth Asawa herself described as "continuous form within a form". Many of her sculptures consist of several spherical or drop-like shapes that enclose one another. They were typically made from a continuous surface of wire mesh, working from the inside out – before one form was closed, Asawa would direct the weave outward to execute a new, outer form, with which she would enclose the first form. An example of this technique can be found in *Untitled (S.393, Hanging Single-Lobed, Three-Layered Continuous Form within a Form*), also on display in this room.

## Room 3

**5 Untitled (PT.005, Plane Tree), 1959**
Ink on coated paper
Collection of Tad Freese and Brook Hartzell

In parts gossamer thin, in parts darkly pooled, the liquid paint forms into an almost abstract depiction of a gnarly tree trunk. The vividness of the motif is conveyed by the expressive brushwork and the spontaneous flow of paint, eased by the coated paper.
This work is displayed alongside other drawings from a series Ruth Asawa began in the late 1950s, inspired by a plane tree grove in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, where she regularly spent time drawing. She often used traditional sumi ink, with which she was familiar from the calligraphy lessons she had taken as a child at a Japanese school in Norwalk, California. Produced as solid sticks, this ink allows painters to freely determine the ratio of pigment to water by adjusting the ink grinding process, using the different paint densities to suit their needs. Asawa's early exposure to calligraphy is also manifest in her mindful and deliberate treatment of interstitial and surrounding spaces.

## Room 4

**6 Untitled (S.270, Hanging Six-Lobed, Interlocking Continuous Form within a Form with Spheres in the First and Second Lobes), 1951**
Brass and iron wire
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, gift of Howard Lipman

The loosely wound wire loops of this suspended sculpture allow us to glimpse the nested organic forms within. A vibrant relationship is established between the inside and the outside. This transparency, combined with light and shadow, gives rise to a distinct dynamic organisation that challenges our spatial perception.
Ruth Asawa learned this wire looping technique from craftspeople during a trip to Toluca, Mexico in 1947. At first, she created small free-standing baskets, before using the technique for suspended sculptures also composed of simple forms. Over time, the works became increasingly complex and technically elaborate, as she began to overlap and interweave several different volumes. In doing so, she consistently developed the forms from the inside out, in accordance with the principles of organic growth.
Asawa always used common industrial wire made of various metals, most notably iron, brass and copper, sometimes in combination – as seen in this work.

## Room 4

**7 Untitled (S.633a–c, Hanging Group of Three Reversible, Open-Window Forms [Seven Tiers, Six Tiers, Five Tiers]), ca. 1956**
Sterling silver wire
Private collection, Beverly Hills

This trio of filigree looped-wire sculptures was featured in an exhibition at the Peridot Gallery in New York shortly after its creation. It is one of only few works consisting of several elements hanging side by side. It is made of silver wire, a valuable material Ruth Asawa used only rarely.
Asawa developed her own terminology to describe the various shapes of her sculptures. This work features the “open-window form”, which she discovered by chance during the repair of a wire sculpture, when a surface unfurled as she cut open the wire mesh. These rippling shapes of outward-curving, open areas of mesh appear in her work from 1954 onward. In this room, the characteristic window forms can also be found in the sculpture *Untitled (S.161, Hanging Two-Sectioned, Reversible Open-Window Form).*

## Room 6

**8 Desert Flower (TAM.1469, Black Reverse), 1965**
Lithograph
Private collection

In 1965, Ruth Asawa was awarded an eight-week residency at Tamarind Lithography Workshop in Los Angeles, allowing her to explore a medium entirely new to her. During this time, she produced 54 different prints that vividly manifest her deep curiosity and eagerness to explore new paths.
More than half of these works are devoted to various plant motifs, and the desert plant in this print features multiple times. Seemingly symmetrical, it already appears in drawings from the early 1960s. It goes back to a significant development in Asawa’s sculptural work – rather than looping the wire, she began bundling and branching the strands. Examples of these sculptures, such as *Untitled (S.557, Wall-Mounted Tied-Wire, Closed-Center, Twelve-Petaled Form Based on Nature)*, are displayed in Room 8.

## Room 6

**9 Umakichi (TAM.1476-IV), 1965**
Lithograph
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, gift of Kleiner, Bell & Co., 1967

This print features a frontal portrait of Ruth Asawa's father Umakichi, wearing a half-open kimono, his head framed by flowers, beneath a narrow strip that can be read as a landscape. His dark face, detailed with minimal light elements, is reminiscent of a photographic negative.
Unlike woodcut or etching, the technique of lithography is very direct. Drawing onto a stone plate with a greasy pencil or ink allows for the same freedom as working on paper. The printing process has an almost magical appeal: following various chemical interventions, the stone selectively absorbs pigment on the areas drawn by the artist and transfers it onto the paper.
During her residency at Tamarind, Asawa visited her parents several times. After a stroke, her 85-year-old father was being cared for by her mother. Asawa invited her friend, the photographer Imogen Cunningham, to make portraits of her parents, and used them as starting points for her lithographs.

## Room 7

**10 Doors (S.528, Carved Redwood Doors for Ruth Asawa's Home), 1961**
Redwood
Private collection

Ruth Asawa designed these massive doors for her family home in Noe Valley, a neighbourhood in San Francisco. Before gracing the entrance to the family's house, the doors drew much attention as part of two exhibitions held in Los Angeles and in Stanford.
The doors' carved decorative scheme attests to Asawa's enduring fascination with entwined motifs and rhythmical patterns, already on display in the early drawings and paintings produced at Black Mountain College. Her eldest children assisted her in carving, blow-torching and wire-brushing the relief work – for Asawa, art and everyday life merged as a matter of course. She often shared her sketchbooks with her children. When friends came to visit, she spontaneously made casts of their faces, which she named "life masks". These also became part of Asawa's living environment, hanging outside on the façade – they are displayed here next to the doors.

## Room 7

**11 Untitled (S.203, Open-Window Form Mounted on Base), 1959, bronze cast 1972**
Patinated bronze
Private collection

With this work, Ruth Asawa further probed the creative possibilities of her wire sculptures. In 1972, she coated a wire sculpture made in 1959 in wax and had it cast in bronze. Traces of its open-meshed, basket-like texture remain visible. Yet the weave's consolidation into solid surfaces, the bronze's substantial materiality and the standing installation imbue the form with significantly heightened physical presence. The sculpture is also reminiscent of an abstracted botanical shape, for example that of an iris. Here, as in several of her suspended looped-wire sculptures, Asawa experimented with open forms, recalibrating the relationship between object, space and viewer. Wave-like, what was inside is turned out, what originally faced outward is now overlaid by what was facing inward. In the manner of a Möbius strip, we are given the unsettling impression of a boundless surface.

## Room 8

**12 Untitled (S.184, Hanging Tied-Wire, Single-Stem, Multi-Branched Form Based on Nature), ca. 1962**
Galvanised steel wire
Collection of Diana Nelson and John Atwater

This sculpture has its origin in a gift brought by friends, Virginia and Paul Hassel, the latter of whom was the author of many photographs of Ruth Asawa's sculptures. On an outing into the desert, they had found a dried-up plant and immediately thought of Asawa. The artist failed in her attempt to draw the plant's complex, tangled configuration onto flat paper. She thus began replicating the plant in three dimensions, starting with a tied bundle of wires, which she then divided and branched off into ever thinner strands. The three-dimensional study of nature achieved stunning resemblance to the original. This new approach proved deeply influential for Asawa's subsequent, more abstract sculptures, in which she explored the general growth principles of plant life.

## Room 8

**13 Untitled (S.268, Wall-Mounted Tied-Wire, Two-Tiered, Center-Tied, Five-Petaled Form Based on Nature), ca. 1968/69**
Bronze wire
Private collection

The wires tied together at the centre of this large, protruding wall sculpture branch out until the outermost ramifications consist of mere single strands. Arranged according to a fixed principle, together the wires create a form that appears more strongly abstracted than the sculpture *Untitled (S.184, Hanging Tied-Wire, Single-Stem, Multi-Branched Form Based on Nature)* discussed previously (> text no. 12).
Looking at the sculpture from the side, however, we can see that its structure closely matches that of a real plant, featuring roots, a stem and branches. With the roots, Ruth Asawa makes visible a significant element of plant morphology that normally remains hidden to the human eye.
This work belongs to the series of wire sculptures with which, from 1962 onward, Asawa explored what she called the “growth patterns” of plants.

## Room 8

**14 Untitled (S.132, Freestanding Electroplated Tied-Wire, Organic Form Based on Nature), ca. 1963**
Electroplated copper wire
Private collection

The small sculpture in this display case is delightfully simple and features a distinct surface texture, gritty and organic at the same time. Its shape is reminiscent of a blossom or an ocean creature – an underwater plant, a sea anemone or a coral.
This sculpture attests to Ruth Asawa’s exceptional spirit of experimentation and her tireless quest for new forms of artistic expression. Its patina is the result of a special process based on electrochemical plating, in which an electric current is used to deposit metal particles onto the surface of a metallic object immersed in a chemical bath. With the help of a plating company, Asawa adapted the technique to achieve rough surface textures rather than the glossy finish typical of industrial uses. She worked in her studio with her own plating tank, until she noticed that electroplating made the sculptures brittle and fragile, and abandoned the process.

## Room 8

**15 Untitled (PF.151, Ginkgo Leaves on Three Branches), ca. 1995**
Ink on graph paper
Private collection

This drawing features three branches of a ginkgo tree, an ancient plant species native to Asia. The fan-shaped ginkgo leaves are meticulously rendered in black ink on graph paper.
This depiction, pared down to essential elements only, shows Ruth Asawa's deep fascination with the symmetry found in plant life. The ginkgo leaves' two-lobed structure is created by their characteristic central indentation. With the variously shaped silhouettes of the leaves, which are shown growing in all directions, the artist illustrates the botanical principle of variation.
The motif does not fill the paper – it is drawn as though cropped on three sides, giving it the appearance of a detail taken from a larger whole that could extend far beyond the edges of the drawing.
Asawa also included ginkgo leaves in the logo of her "Ruth Asawa Fund", which she established in 1995 in order to support children's art education in San Francisco's schools.

## Room 9

**16 Untitled (WC.003, Cherries in a Bowl), mid-1980s to early 1990s**
Watercolour on paper
Private collection

This small watercolour features a glass bowl filled with cherries. Looking more closely, however, it becomes apparent that the bowl itself is not actually depicted. We are merely mentally filling it in when looking at the tightly overlapping arrangement of cherries.
This depiction of a wholly ordinary, everyday motif illustrates Ruth Asawa's distinctive gaze onto the world, which was the expression of a sculptor's way of thinking about space. The bowl forms the individual cherries into a larger yet temporary entity. Asawa was not interested in the shine of its likely glassy surface or in the shadow it would have cast onto the table. She looked straight through it onto the small volumes of the cherries, which together make visible the bowl's essence, its otherwise invisible hollow.

## Room 9

**17 Untitled (PF.229, Gladiolus and Lilies), 1993**
Ink on paper
Private collection

This pared down pen drawing features a gladiolus and lilies in a vase. The vase is merely suggested by the placement of the stems and by the refraction of light at the water surface. The flow of lines is highly confident, a sense of space created merely by deliberate, selective thickenings.
Back as a student at Black Mountain College, Ruth Asawa had told her teacher Josef Albers that she would like to paint flowers. Albers, a pioneer of abstract art, answered her with the words: “Good. Be sure they are Asawa flowers.”
Throughout her life, these “Asawa flowers” were created in many formats and materials. Asawa often modelled them on the flowers she and her husband Albert Lanier grew in the family garden or were gifted by friends. She often drew variations of the same motif from different angles – as seen in another drawing of the same flower arrangement on this wall. As Asawa advanced in age, the plants in her garden became an ever more important source of inspiration.


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## Information

**Exhibition**

"Ruth Asawa: Retrospective" is co-organised by Janet Bishop, Thomas Weisel Family Chief Curator, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and Cara Manes, Associate Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The exhibition at Fondation Beyeler is curated in collaboration with Chief Curator Theodora Vischer.

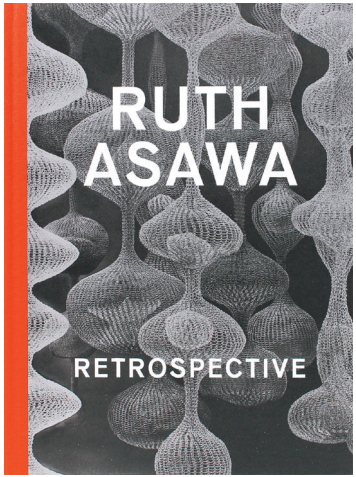
Assistant Curator: Laura Wilde

**Exhibition guide**

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We look forward to receiving your feedback on the exhibition guide at:
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Further publications on Ruth Asawa are available from our Art Shop: shop.fondationbeyeler.ch

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