

WHITNEY

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PRESS RELEASE

WHITNEY MUSEUM EXPLORES RUTH ASAWA'S LIFELONG DRAWING PRACTICE IN NEW EXHIBITION



Opening September 16, Ruth Asawa Through Line highlights the significant role drawing played in the artist's creative practice and daily life.

New York, NY, July 10, 2023 — *Ruth Asawa Through Line*, opening at the Whitney Museum of American Art on September 16, 2023, spotlights the work of groundbreaking artist Ruth Asawa (1926–2013). Known broadly for her rhythmic looped-wire sculptures, Asawa dedicated herself to daily drawing exercises, which served as the connective tissue—or through line—of her creative process and fueled her commitment to art. Through drawing, Asawa explored her surroundings and turned everyday encounters into moments of profound beauty, endowing ordinary objects with new aesthetic possibilities.

Co-organized with the Menil Collection in Houston, where the exhibition will travel in March 2024, *Ruth Asawa Through Line* highlights the artist's lifelong drawing practice with over one hundred works on paper, many of which have not been previously exhibited. Featuring work from several public and private collections, including the Whitney Museum's permanent

collection, the exhibition showcases drawings, collages, and watercolors alongside stamped prints, copper foil works, and sketchbooks that expose the breadth of Asawa's innovative practice.

"Ruth Asawa's association with the Whitney began in the 1950s when she exhibited in two Whitney Annuals, the forerunner to today's Biennials, and her work helped inaugurate our downtown home," remarks Scott Rothkopf, Senior Deputy Director and Nancy and Steve Crown Family Chief Curator. "Although Asawa's drawings may be less known than her sculptures, they are no less an achievement, and I am delighted that we can shine a spotlight on this important and moving body of work."

Organized thematically, the exhibition begins with the foundational lessons Asawa absorbed and built upon at Black Mountain College in the late 1940s. Subsequent galleries examine the function of repetition and the development of specific motifs and techniques—from the Greek meander to paper folding—and how they recur throughout the artist's work. The presentation highlights how drawing emerged as a cornerstone of Asawa's practice in San Francisco and later became a key component of her role as an educator and community leader in the Bay Area. Surveying the artist's expansive range, *Ruth Asawa Through Line* offers an unparalleled window into her exploratory and resourceful approach to materials, line, surface, and space.

"Asawa's playful curiosity and generous ethos inspired many of her drawings, and these works in turn remind us to seek moments of wonder in our daily lives," says Kim Conaty, Steven and Ann Ames Curator of Drawings and Prints at the Whitney Museum of American Art. "The curly leaves of an endive, the pattern of a quilt wrapped around a young child, or the abstract movements of a dancer—all of these subjects, in Asawa's expert hand, are rendered extraordinary."

Ruth Asawa Through Line is organized by Kim Conaty, the Steven and Ann Ames Curator of Drawings and Prints at the Whitney Museum of American Art, and Edouard Kopp, John R. Eckel, Jr. Foundation Chief Curator of the Menil Drawing Institute, with Scout Hutchinson, Curatorial Fellow at the Whitney Museum, and Kirsten Marples, Curatorial Associate at the Menil Drawing Institute.

Exhibition Overview – Ruth Asawa Through Line

Ruth Asawa Through Line explores the artist's lifelong practice of drawing, a daily exercise that influenced the way Asawa observed and engaged with the world around her. The exhibition is divided into eight thematic sections that illuminate the techniques and motifs that Asawa returned to throughout her career, interweaving and transforming them through a range of materials and at different moments in her life.

Learning to See

Asawa's time at Black Mountain College was an incredibly influential period that impacted the way she understood her surrounding environments. From the summer of 1946 through the spring of 1949, Asawa studied under groundbreaking artists and thinkers like Josef Albers and

Buckminster Fuller, who encouraged her to push material boundaries. Asawa credited Albers's lessons in drawing, color, and design with teaching her not only how to draw but "how to see." Contour line drawings of her hands are studies in how forms twist and bend in space, while cut-paper collages show the artist testing out color relationships and the play of positive and negative space. Throughout her time at the experimental liberal arts school, Asawa repeatedly returned to certain subjects and technical challenges, and their lessons reverberated across later bodies of work.

Found and Transformed

Asawa's penchant for scavenging and perennial resourcefulness prompted her to recognize the aesthetic potential in found objects, which she often used to explore interactions of color and texture. The earliest examples in this section were born from her 1948 summer job working in the laundry room at Black Mountain, where she borrowed the rubber stamps used to mark linens to create evocative abstractions for Albers's class. When Asawa moved to San Francisco, wine corks, bike pedals, and potatoes offered unexpected methods of mark-making. In the resulting stamped drawings, Asawa transformed recognizable symbols into abstract compositions. In later works, she created a simple index of a single object, often a gift from her children: fish caught by her son Adam or leaves gathered by her daughter Aiko. Asawa chose to make a record of these gifts by carefully transferring an impression of fish scales and leaf veins onto a blank sheet of paper, then peeling it away to reveal the object's mirror image.

Forms within Forms

Asawa often described her form-within-a-form looped-wire sculptures as three-dimensional drawings in space, explaining that for her, "sculpture was just an extension of drawing, which was really what I'm primarily interested in." Perhaps her best-known body of work, these rhythmic wire sculptures stem from her drawing practice, particularly her early graphic experiments with nested biomorphic forms, based in part on the figure of a dancer she observed at Black Mountain. This section brings together line drawings and watercolors alongside incised copper sheets and collaged screentone works that show Asawa exploring transparency, layering, and compositional balance in two dimensions. Shown alongside one of her looped-wire sculptures, the works demonstrate the artist's profound fluidity between two and three dimensions.

In and Out

Asawa learned to make origami as a child, later encountering the art form at Black Mountain, where Albers and Fuller encouraged her to test the structural and visual possibilities of paper. Rendering the paper pliant with repetitive pleats and folds, Asawa learned that she could "redefine what paper does" while respecting its inherent properties. Her "In and Out" drawings—two-dimensional oil-on-paper studies of the three-dimensional paperfolds—feature rows of parallelograms in varying color combinations; their chevron patterns give the illusion of projecting out from or receding into the picture plane. This section includes related exercises in oscillating figure-ground relationships that emphasize a connection between art, nature, and geometry: Asawa's triangle studies—inspired by thorns she gathered from around campus and pinned together—and the logarithmic spiral, a growth pattern commonly found in nature. In

addition to drawings and paper constructions, “In and Out” includes archival photography and footage of Asawa experimenting with paper folding over the years, from designs for public commissions to costumes used in student dance performances.

Rhythms and Waves

At Black Mountain, Asawa encountered the Greek meander, a geometric pattern composed of a line that curls in on itself and uncoils again, repeating as it travels across the page. Requiring skilled hand-eye coordination to ensure negative and positive spaces are treated equally, the meander held a lasting appeal for Asawa. Its rhythmic structure and repetitive nature informed later bodies of work, including watercolor designs for commercial home decor and a series of marker drawings. In these latter works, the artist cut grooves and notches into the felt tips of markers, leaving strokes of parallel lines when put to paper. With these modified implements, Asawa made staccato or undulating marks that echo patterns she observed around her, including ocean waves, woven blankets, and San Francisco’s row houses.

Growth Patterns

Intrigued by the growth patterns she observed in nature, Asawa created layered and spiral compositions inspired by tree rings, lettuces from her garden, and glowing light. One particularly generative drawing challenge Asawa grappled with was accurately depicting a dried desert plant’s branching forms and delicate contours. Her struggle to render the plant in two dimensions motivated Asawa to turn to sculpture to understand its structural intricacies better. Beginning with a bundle of wire at the center and dividing it as she worked outwards, she haptically untangled the plant’s complexities in her tied-wire sculptures, one of which is presented in this section. She then turned back to the page, creating a series of related drawings demonstrating her concern for connectedness and consequence—how starting from a particular center has radiating implications.

Curiosity and Control

Asawa’s luminous ink paintings testify to the artist’s nimble balance of chance and control, executing meticulous brushwork while embracing effects like blooms, tide lines, and cockling paper. At a young age, Asawa attended calligraphy classes, which she credited with developing her interest in watercolor. She would rely on this early training while learning about transparency, economy of means, and color theory in courses at Black Mountain. In San Francisco, she looked for forms that resonated with her material explorations of painting on coated paper, a support that encouraged ink to run and gather in pools. The mesmerizing effect of the fluid medium stilled in its tracks inspired paintings of rippling water and gnarled trees and reappears in Asawa’s cast looped-wire sculptures, an example of which is included in this section. Wax dripping from the ends of the wire became permanently suspended when cast in bronze, appealing to Asawa for its spontaneous appearance.

Life Lines

As a young parent and an increasingly active arts educator in San Francisco, Asawa drew as she raised her children, attended meetings, and worked in her garden. In this section, a selection of Asawa’s sketchbooks are displayed alongside her brushed-ink and contour line

drawings of family, friends, and colleagues. Employing her keen observational skills, Asawa captured the character of her subjects, varying her drawing implement to convey the distinctive quality of a suit jacket's folds or an infant's downy hair. This section also features drawings of the flowers and vegetables she and her husband, Albert Lanier, tended in their backyard garden, while others record bouquets gifted to Asawa, which in turn operated as portraits of the giver. Considered as a whole, these drawings illustrate the value Asawa placed in creative labor, the natural world, and her extensive Bay Area community.

About the Artist

American artist, educator, and arts advocate Ruth Asawa (1926–2013) grew up on a working farm in rural southern California with her parents and six siblings. She took art classes throughout elementary school in Norwalk and attended weekly Japanese language and calligraphy classes as a child. In 1942, when she was in high school, Asawa's family and other Japanese Americans were forcibly detained at Santa Anita Racetrack, California, and later sent to an incarceration camp in Rohwer, Arkansas, as part of the U.S. government's isolation policies during World War II. She continued to pursue art while incarcerated, learning from accomplished Walt Disney Studio animators also detained at Santa Anita, and from art instructors at Rohwer High School. After studying at Milwaukee State Teachers College, Asawa enrolled at Black Mountain College, an experimental liberal arts school outside of Asheville, North Carolina. There she took courses with avant-garde artists and thinkers, including Josef Albers, Buckminster Fuller, Merce Cunningham, and Max Dehn. She remained at the school from 1946 through 1949 when she moved to San Francisco and married her husband, Albert Lanier. The Bay Area would remain the nexus of her career, community, and family for over sixty years. Alongside her work in sculpture, drawing, printmaking, and public commissions, Asawa was invested in local arts education, leading workshops for students and co-founding the Alvarado School Arts Workshop in 1968. She was also an active member of organizations like the California Arts Council and the San Francisco Arts Commission, and she served on education task forces at the National Endowment for the Arts.

The artist's work is represented in museum collections across the United States, including Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas; de Young Museum, San Francisco; Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, Massachusetts; Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; San Jose Museum of Art; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Her public commissions can be found throughout the Bay Area, and a Public Art Tour is available on the artist's [website](#). During her lifetime, Asawa received grants and awards from the American Institute of Architects, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Asian Heritage Council, and the Women's Caucus for the Arts, among others. Asawa was posthumously inducted into the California Hall of Fame in 2021 for her transformative service as an arts educator and advocate in California.

Ruth Asawa Through Line is organized in close collaboration with the Estate of Ruth Asawa, which is represented by David Zwirner.

Catalogue

An accompanying exhibition catalogue, *Ruth Asawa Through Line*, published by the Whitney and the Menil Collection and distributed by Yale University Press, is the first to consider the significance of drawing in Asawa's oeuvre throughout her career. Featuring contributions by Kim Conaty, Edouard Kopp, Aleesa Pitchamarn Alexander, Jordan Troeller, Scout Hutchinson, Kirsten Marples, and Isabel Bird, the catalogue examines the range of Asawa's aesthetic maneuvers across materials and techniques, how her drawing intertwined with the Bay Area arts community, and the influence of Josef Albers's pedagogy on her work. This comprehensive overview of the artist's drawing practice includes reproductions of more than one hundred works—many of which have never been published—organized into eight thematic sections that span her career, revealing an approach to art more cyclical than linear. Copies are available for purchase online and in the Whitney Shop (\$50.00).

Free Public Programs

A series of free virtual and in-person programs are offered in conjunction with *Ruth Asawa Through Line*. More information about these programs and how to register will be available on the Museum's [website](#) as details are confirmed.

Exhibition Tickets

Starting August 8, visitors can purchase timed tickets for *Ruth Asawa Through Line*, opening September 16, 2023. More [ticketing information](#) will be available on the Museum's website.

Press Preview

The Whitney Museum will host a press preview on Wednesday, September 13, 10 am–1 pm. RSVP to the press preview by filling out this [form](#). A photography and broadcast hour will start at 9 am and requires registration. Please reach out to pressoffice@whitney.org for any questions about the photography and broadcast hour. Remarks by Adam D. Weinberg, the Alice Pratt Brown Director; Scott Rothkopf, Senior Deputy Director and Nancy and Steve Crown Family Chief Curator; and Kim Conaty, Steven and Ann Ames Curator of Drawings and Prints, will begin at 10:30 am.

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EXHIBITION SUPPORT

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ABOUT THE WHITNEY

The Whitney Museum of American Art, founded in 1930 by the artist and philanthropist Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney (1875–1942), houses the foremost collection of American art from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Mrs. Whitney, an early and ardent supporter of modern American art, nurtured groundbreaking artists when audiences were still largely preoccupied with the Old Masters. From her vision arose the Whitney Museum of American Art, which has been championing the most innovative art of the United States for ninety years. The core of the Whitney's mission is to collect, preserve, interpret, and exhibit American art of our time and serve a wide variety of audiences in celebration of the complexity and diversity of art and culture

in the United States. Through this mission and a steadfast commitment to artists, the Whitney has long been a powerful force in support of modern and contemporary art and continues to help define what is innovative and influential in American art today.

Whitney Museum Land Acknowledgment

The Whitney is located in Lenapehoking, the ancestral homeland of the Lenape. The name Manhattan comes from their word Mannahatta, meaning “island of many hills.” The Museum’s current site is close to land that was a Lenape fishing and planting site called Sapponckanikan (“tobacco field”). The Whitney acknowledges the displacement of this region’s original inhabitants and the Lenape diaspora that exists today.

As a museum of American art in a city with vital and diverse communities of Indigenous people, the Whitney recognizes the historical exclusion of Indigenous artists from its collection and program. The Museum is committed to addressing these erasures and honoring the perspectives of Indigenous artists and communities as we work for a more equitable future. To read more about the Museum’s Land Acknowledgment, [visit the Museum’s website](#).

VISITOR INFORMATION

The Whitney Museum of American Art is located at 99 Gansevoort Street between Washington and West Streets, New York City. Public hours are: Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday, 10:30 am–6 pm; Friday, 10:30 am–10 pm; and Saturday and Sunday, 10:30 am–6 pm. Closed Tuesday. Visitors eighteen years and under and Whitney members: FREE. Admission is pay-what-you-wish on Fridays, 7–10 pm. COVID-19 vaccination and face coverings are not required but strongly recommended. We encourage all visitors to wear face coverings that cover the nose and mouth throughout their visit.

Image caption:

Ruth Asawa, *Untitled* (BMC.59, Meander - Straight Lines), c. 1948. Ink on paper, 7 7/8 × 13 1/2 in. (20 × 34.3 cm). Private collection. Artwork © 2023 Ruth Asawa Lanier, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy David Zwirner

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