

LEARNING TO SEE

In the summer of 1946, Asawa enrolled at Black Mountain College, an experimental liberal arts school in rural North Carolina. There she studied with avant-garde artists, choreographers, and thinkers, including Josef Albers, Merce Cunningham, and Buckminster Fuller, and felt as though “another world opened up.” Through drawing exercises, she explored economy of line and honed her hand-eye coordination, while careful observation of ordinary objects around her—from leaves and thorns to Jell-O molds and Wonder Bread packaging—offered studies in color relationships and the play of positive and negative space.

Albers’s coursework in color, painting, and design proved particularly influential, and Asawa credited the Bauhaus artist and educator not only with teaching her how to draw but “how to see.” She took his classes multiple times, returning to certain exercises and forms. Repetition determined the cyclical rhythm of her lifelong art practice, and many of the techniques and motifs seen here reappear throughout the following galleries.

FOUND AND TRANSFORMED

Stemming from Asawa's material resourcefulness and penchant for scavenging, these stamped drawings show the artist testing found materials as implements for expanded mark making. The earliest examples on view here were born from her 1948 summer job working in Black Mountain College's laundry room, where she borrowed the rubber stamps used to identify linens to create evocative abstractions.

After Asawa moved to San Francisco in 1949 to marry her Black Mountain schoolmate and architect Albert Lanier, she began to make stamps from everyday objects: bike pedals, wine corks, and apples and potatoes carved with her own designs. Later works show her creating a simple record of an object, often a gift from one of her six children. Starting, for example, with fish caught by her son Adam or leaves gathered by her daughter Aiko, Asawa carefully transferred the impression of scales or branching veins to a blank sheet of paper, then peeled it away to reveal the object's mirror image.

FORMS WITHIN FORMS

In a 1952 letter to Asawa, her friend and fellow artist Ray Johnson describes the composition of some of her looped-wire works as “forms within forms within forms.” Asawa began experimenting with wire in 1947, and by the early 1950s she was creating the ambitious sculptures composed of nested, biomorphic shapes that inspired Johnson’s letter. While making these works, such as the one on view here, Asawa found that “sculpture was just an extension of drawing.”

These sculptures relate to her earlier drawings, including the curvilinear designs she had developed by observing dancers’ movements at Black Mountain College and studying cellular structures in science courses there. These graphic explorations provided a generative motif Asawa could use to investigate positive and negative space, transparency, and figure-ground relationships. Over the years, she rendered “forms within forms” in washes of watercolor, stippled ink dots, screentone collages, and relief drawings on copper sheets.

RHYTHMS AND WAVES

Asawa filled sheets of paper and notebooks with the Greek meander, a line that turns in on itself and uncoils again, repeating as it travels across the page. Drawing the meander requires careful calculation in order to ensure negative and positive spaces are treated equally, and Josef Albers assigned it as a lesson in “making the eye move ahead of the pencil.” The mental, visual, and manual challenges presented by the meander held lasting appeal for Asawa.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Asawa’s attention to pattern dovetailed with her material experimentation in her marker drawings. She made small incisions into felt-tipped pens so that, when put to paper, the grooved implements yielded groups of parallel lines with each stroke. Asawa used these modified tools to render rolling waves, San Francisco row houses, or quilted blankets that fill the page in a whorl of tessellated ink marks. Her interest in rhythmic pattern and all-over composition informed her commercial designs for home decor, one of which has been produced here as wallpaper for the first time.

GROWTH PATTERNS

Asawa's method of working outward from a central point, whether in concentric rings or diverging branches, began to take shape in the early 1960s. "I'm just interested in the way nature grows and structures," she explained, referring to the spiral or rippling patterns that inspired her. The works shown here, including drawings of tree rings, lettuces from her garden, and car headlights, demonstrate Asawa's concern for connectedness and consequence—how starting from a particular point has radiating implications.

Central to this approach are Asawa's tied-wire works, a project she began in 1962 when friends returned from a trip to Death Valley with a gift for the artist: a dried plant for her to draw. Challenged by rendering its entanglements in two dimensions, Asawa instead reached for wire to better grasp the plant's structural intricacies. Bundled at the center and dividing outward, her series of tied-wire sculptures emerged, including the early example on view here. Asawa then returned to paper in order to translate into line what she had learned through wire.

IN AND OUT

Asawa learned to make origami as a child and later encountered the art at Black Mountain College, where students were encouraged to test paper's structural and visual possibilities by folding it. Repetitive pleats rendered the paper pliant and sculptural, and the resulting paperfolds often became prompts for drawing exercises. Working in oil on paper or board, Asawa made rows of parallelograms that suggest the paperfold's rippling topography and sought out color combinations that would make them appear to project out from, or recede into, the picture plane.

Related exercises in oscillating figure-ground relationships include her triangle studies—inspired by thorns she gathered from around Black Mountain's campus and pinned together into a chain—and her logarithmic spiral prints. A growth pattern commonly found in nature, the spiral appeared in Josef Albers's drawing classes and in her geometry lessons with the philosopher and mathematician Max Dehn. Black Mountain's curricular emphasis on the relationship between art, nature, and mathematics would become an undercurrent of Asawa's teaching philosophy in later paper-folding workshops.

CURIOSITY AND CONTROL

Asawa's luminous ink paintings are a testament to the artist's nimble balance of chance and intentionality, displaying controlled brush work alongside effects like blooms, tidelines, and cockling paper. Asawa first held a brush during childhood calligraphy classes, which she credits with stimulating her interest in watercolor. Decades later, she would often use a calligraphy brush when making semi-abstract renderings of the plane trees in Golden Gate Park. Asawa recreated their knotted forms by painting on coated paper, a support that encouraged ink to run and gather in pools. She experimented with similar spontaneous effects in her cast looped-wire sculptures, such as the one on view here, in which dripping wax stilled in its tracks as it cooled. Of her desire to allow the intrinsic qualities of ink and papers to determine her compositions, Asawa explained, "I try to explore the total capacity of materials and techniques and often that takes me where I would not otherwise go."

LIFE LINES

As a young mother, Asawa recalled how her close friend, the photographer Imogen Cunningham (whose portrait is displayed here), advised her that an “artist can still create by observing what is around them, children, plants, and making images that can be savored when we are old.” Asawa took these words to heart, drawing her six children and the community she built as an increasingly active educator and arts advocate in San Francisco. In sketchbooks she carried with her to meetings and reached for at home, Asawa employed line to capture not just the form but also the character of her subject matter, from the folds of a suit jacket to the soft down of an infant’s hair.

Her drawings of plant life range from meticulous depictions of the flowers and vegetables she and her husband, Albert, tended in their garden, to graphic records of bouquets Asawa received, which in turn operated as portraits of the giver. Considered alongside her figure studies, these drawings embody what was, for her, “the most important thing, which is in the doing—integrating your life and your work and everything together.”