Ruth Asawa’s ‘Radically Broad and Diverse’ Practice Shines at MoMA

The show is hot off a blockbuster run in the Japanese American artist's hometown of San Francisco.

Installation view of "Ruth Asawa: A Retrospective" on view at the Museum of Modern Art. Artwork ©2025 Ruth Asawa Lanier, Inc., courtesy of David Zwirner. Photo: by Jonathan Dorado, courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. ©2025 MoMA.

by Sarah CasconeOctober 27, 2025

The delicate, woven wire sculptures of Japanese American artist Ruth Asawa (1926–2013) are having a major moment at New York’s Museum

of Modern Art, where the late Bay Area artist's first posthumous retrospective just touched down after a wildly popular run at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

"What I registered in my numerous visits to the exhibition was just this extraordinary outpouring of love and respect," Cara Manes, MoMA's associate curator of painting and sculpture, told me at the exhibition press preview. She co-curated the show with SFMOMA chief curator and curator of painting and sculpture, Janet Bishop.

San Francisco, of course, was Asawa's home for many decades, from 1949 until her death in 2013. The artist's profile—and the market for her work—has risen considerably since her passing, but the Bay Area has always had a great appreciation for her work, in no small part due to her many public sculptures in the region. Those works meant the SFMOMA exhibition—which welcomed 285,000 visitors and saw August attendance to the museum rise to pre-2020 numbers for the first time—effectively extended beyond the galleries and into the streets of San Francisco.

Here in New York, where we aren't lucky enough to have a cityscape populated with the likes of Asawa's beloved Ghirardelli Square and Embarcadero fountains, the MoMA exhibition stands poised to introduce her wide-ranging practice to a whole new audience. Altogether, there are 398 objects on view, making the exhibition the museum's largest ever to be dedicated to a woman artist. (The show's MoMA iteration also adds additional archival material about Asawa's public commissions to better set the scene.)

Ruth Asawa with *hanging wire sculpture* (1951). Photo: ©Imogen Cunningham Trust Artwork, ©2025 Ruth Asawa Lanier, Inc., courtesy of David Zwirner.

Staying in the Loop

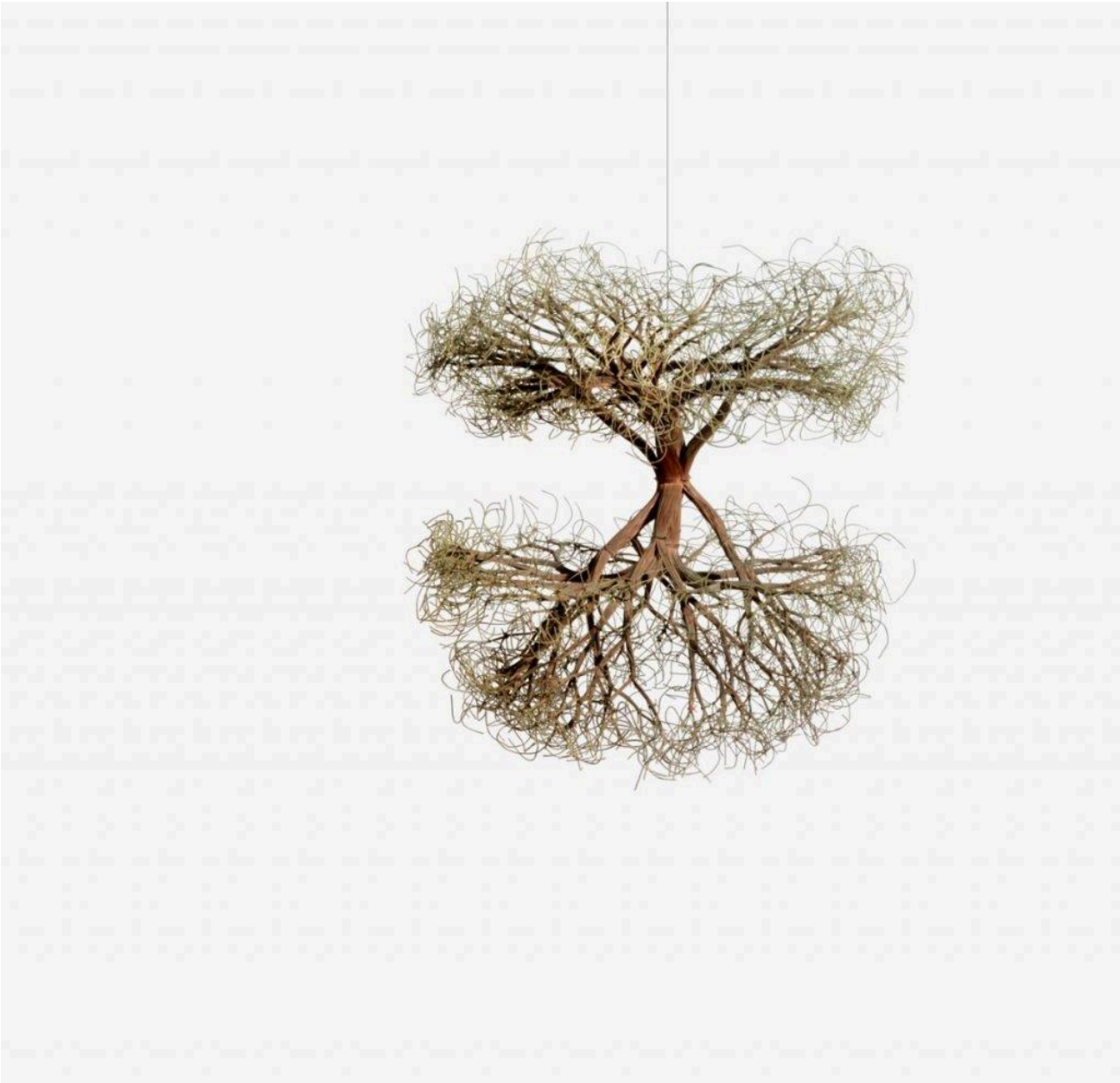
The artist’s signature is her airy, looped-wire sculptures, intricately interlaced into ornate lobes and cones designed to hang from the ceiling. Suggesting organic forms such as cocoons, plants, or even the womb, the hollow constructions cast lacy shadows on their surroundings, adding an extra layer of beauty to the display. Asawa developed this practice following a 1947 trip to Toluca, Mexico, where she learned looped-wire basketry.

She described her sculptures as “a continuous form within a form” and “a shape that was inside and outside at the same time,” where “everything is connected, continuous.”

Installation view of “Ruth Asawa: A Retrospective” on view at the Museum of Modern Art. Artwork ©2025 Ruth Asawa Lanier, Inc., courtesy of David Zwirner. Photo: by Jonathan Dorado, courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. ©2025 MoMA.

MoMA gives these incredible works space to breathe, with 16,000 square feet of exhibition space on the museum’s sixth floor. It also showcases Asawa’s incredible artistic range, with work in many other mediums.

Asawa sculpted in wood, clay, bronze, and even folded paper, creased to stunningly architectural effect. She also experimented with electroplating, a process that involves electric currents and acid baths. And then there are her tied wire sculptures, which Asawa began making in the 1960s. They use the same thin wire as her famous looping works, but with as many as 1,000 individual pieces radiating out from a central stem, creating tree-like shapes that branch out like dendrites.



Ruth Asawa, *Untitled (S.390, Hanging Tied-Wire, Double-Sided, Center-Tied, Multi-Branched Form with Curly Ends)* (1963). Collection of the Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center, gift of Rita Newman. Photo: ©2025 Ruth Asawa Lanier, Inc., courtesy of David Zwirner.

“The thing that is maybe most surprising is just how radically broad and diverse but also how interconnected her entire practice was,” Manes said.

Asawa's drawings, in recent years the subject of an excellent show at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art and Houston's Menil Collection, are a particularly striking example of how the artist translated her mastery of line and form from sculpture to the page. Many of these works are incredibly, surprisingly vibrant, like watercolors of bright blue and purple hydrangeas, and an ink drawing of ripe green watermelons that seem to pop off the page.

Ruth Asawa, *Untitled (WC.187, Two Watermelons)*, (ca. 1960s). Collection of the Glenstone Museum, Potomac, Maryland. Artwork ©2025 Ruth Asawa Lanier, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, courtesy of David Zwirner. Photo: by James Paonessa

"Across the board, she's such a colorist, even in the wire sculptures," Manes said, adding that on clear days, when the skylight is open, the hanging works shimmer in the sunlight, accentuating Asawa's subtle

color palette with shades of green and warm browns and golds. “The palette of those works—it’s a rainbow actually!”

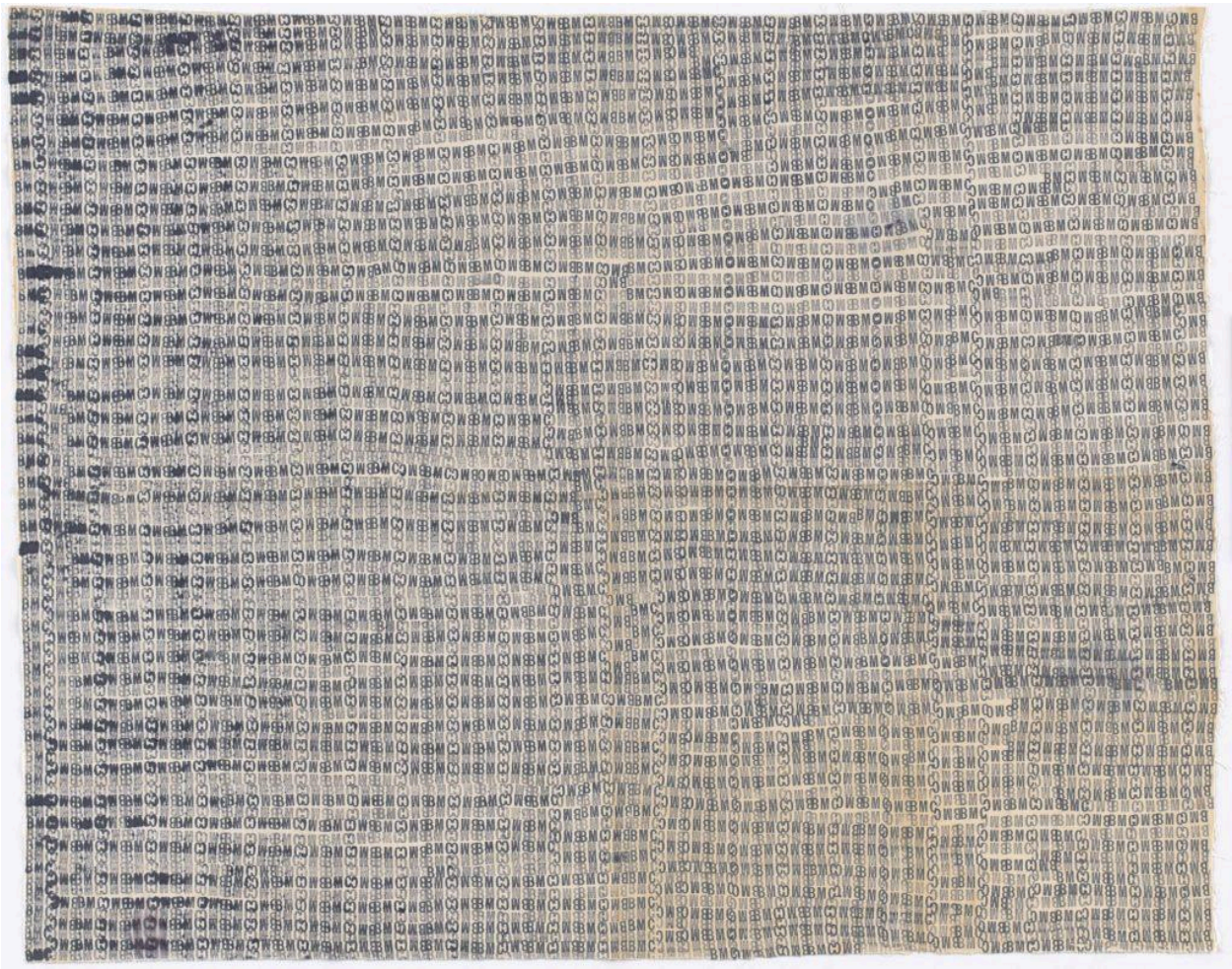
An especially revelatory (and colorful) room of the show is dedicated to the single year Asawa spent working in lithography, quickly mastering the new-to-her technique during an eight-week residency at the Tamarind Lithography Workshop in Los Angeles in 1965.

Ruth Asawa, *Poppy* (1965). Publisher and printer: Tamarind Lithography Workshop, Los Angeles. Edition: proof outside the edition of 20. Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, gift of Kleiner, Bell & Co., 1967. Artwork ©2025 Ruth Asawa Lanier, Inc., courtesy of David Zwirner.

A Woman Who Did It All

Taken in its entirety, the show presents a stunning amount of work, reflective of Asawa's seemingly preternatural productivity—she was said to sleep just four hours a night. This dedication to her craft is all the more remarkable considering the details of Asawa's biography. Born on a farm in Norwalk, California (then outside Los Angeles), Asawa was a teenager when World War II broke out, and her family was forced to relocate to an internment camp.

The artist was able to leave the camps to study at Milwaukee State Teachers College. But anti-Japanese sentiment continued to impact Asawa's life. Ostensibly out of concern for her safety, the school refused to give her a field placement to complete her degree. Instead, Asawa enrolled at Black Mountain College in Asheville, North Carolina, studying under Josef Albers (1888–1976) and Buckminster Fuller (1895–1983).



Ruth Asawa, *Untitled (BMC.145, BMC Laundry Stamp)*, ca. 1948–49. Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, acquired through the generosity of Joshua and Filipa Fink, 2018. Artwork ©2025 Ruth Asawa Lanier, Inc., courtesy of David Zwirner.

It proved a pivotal moment in Asawa's life, both personally and professionally. In addition to setting her on the creative path that would guide all her future endeavors—there are early student works in the exhibition, including clever prints made from repeated imprints of the stamp from the school laundry room, spiraling or in rows—she also met her husband, architect Albert Lanier (1927–2008), at the school.

California legalized interracial marriage in 1948, and the young couple moved back to Asawa's home state the following year. They had six

children, two of whom were adopted, and built a loving household centered around creativity. (The show includes an orange glazed ceramic plate made by the couple, and beaded clay necklaces sculpted by Asawa and fired by their son Paul Lanier, a ceramicist, in a beachside fire pit.)

The living room of Ruth Asawa's home in the Noe Valley neighborhood of San Francisco in 1969. Photo: ©Rondal Partridge Archive/RondalPartridge.com.

Learning about Asawa's life, it seems as though everything she touched turned to art. A tireless advocate for arts education, she helped open an art school in San Francisco that has been named in her honor, and she even engaged children to help her make some of her public

monuments. Asawa taught them to craft relief sculptures from a simple baker's clay made of flour, water, and salt. Cast in bronze, some of these collaborative works became monuments like the *San Francisco Fountain* at the city's Hyatt Hotel and the *Japanese American Internment Memorial* down in San Jose.

The SFMOMA presentation included a restaging of Asawa's home, with comfy brown leather beanbag chairs sitting before a large-scale black and white photograph of her living room. The art was everywhere, with finished wire works suspended from the ceiling and a table full of children's sculptures.

Ruth Asawa's masks and one of her looped wire sculptures on display on the façade of her Noe Valley, San Francisco, home. Photo: by Laurence Cuneo, ©Ruth Asawa Lanier, Inc/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; courtesy of David Zwirner.

The cedar-shingled exterior of the home was decorated in clay sculptures made from plaster casts of the faces of the family and their visitors. A selection of these unique ceramics, of which the artist made hundreds, hangs in the exhibition next to the home's former redwood doors, hand-carved by Asawa. (Much of the series belongs to the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford. where 233 of them are on longterm view.)

Another fascinating slice of Asawa's personal life comes in the form of her wedding ring, a striking design by Fuller with a large, smooth, round, black river rock. The sterling silver setting forms a trio of interlocking A's, for the vowels in her last name.

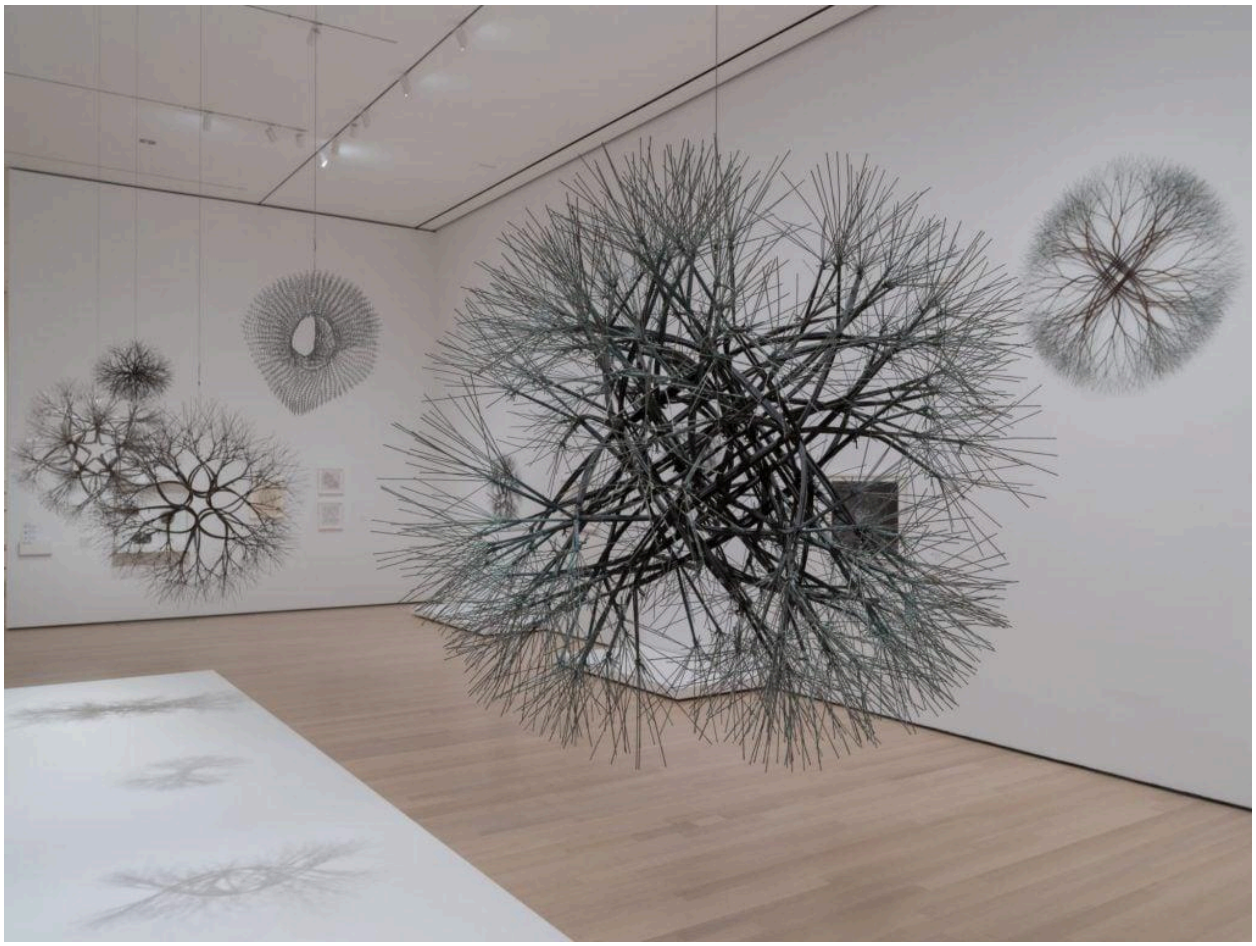
Ruth Asawa's wedding ring designed by Buckminster Fuller, fabricated by Mary Jo Slick (Godfrey) (1949). Photo: © Laurence Cuneo

An Artist Long Overdue for Widespread Success

During her lifetime, Asawa did find some recognition, with a trio of solo shows during the 1950s at Louis Pollack's Peridot Gallery in New York and an SFMOMA mid-career survey in 1973. One of her sculptures even made the pages of *Vogue* in 1952. But with so many small

children at home, the artist chose not to continue working with Pollack, essentially hitting the pause button on her career as a commercial artist.

Four of Asawa's five surviving children made the trip to New York for the opening. "Many of the grandchildren and some of the great grandchildren are here, including the newest one, who is only two months old," said Vivian Tong, the arts manager and archivist of the artist's estate, Ruth Asawa Lanier, Inc. "At the San Francisco presentation of the retrospective, when they walked in, they started tearing up, and it was very sweet."



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The retrospective is an emotional experience for the family, seeing the full body of Asawa’s work finally given the scholarly reappraisal it has long deserved. For too long, her art was dismissed as domestic, a form of craft that didn’t rise to the level of fine art—“They are beautiful if primarily only decorative objects in space,” wrote the *New York Times* of her “chain mail” technique in 1956. The Guggenheim Fellowship rejected the artist’s application no fewer than four times.

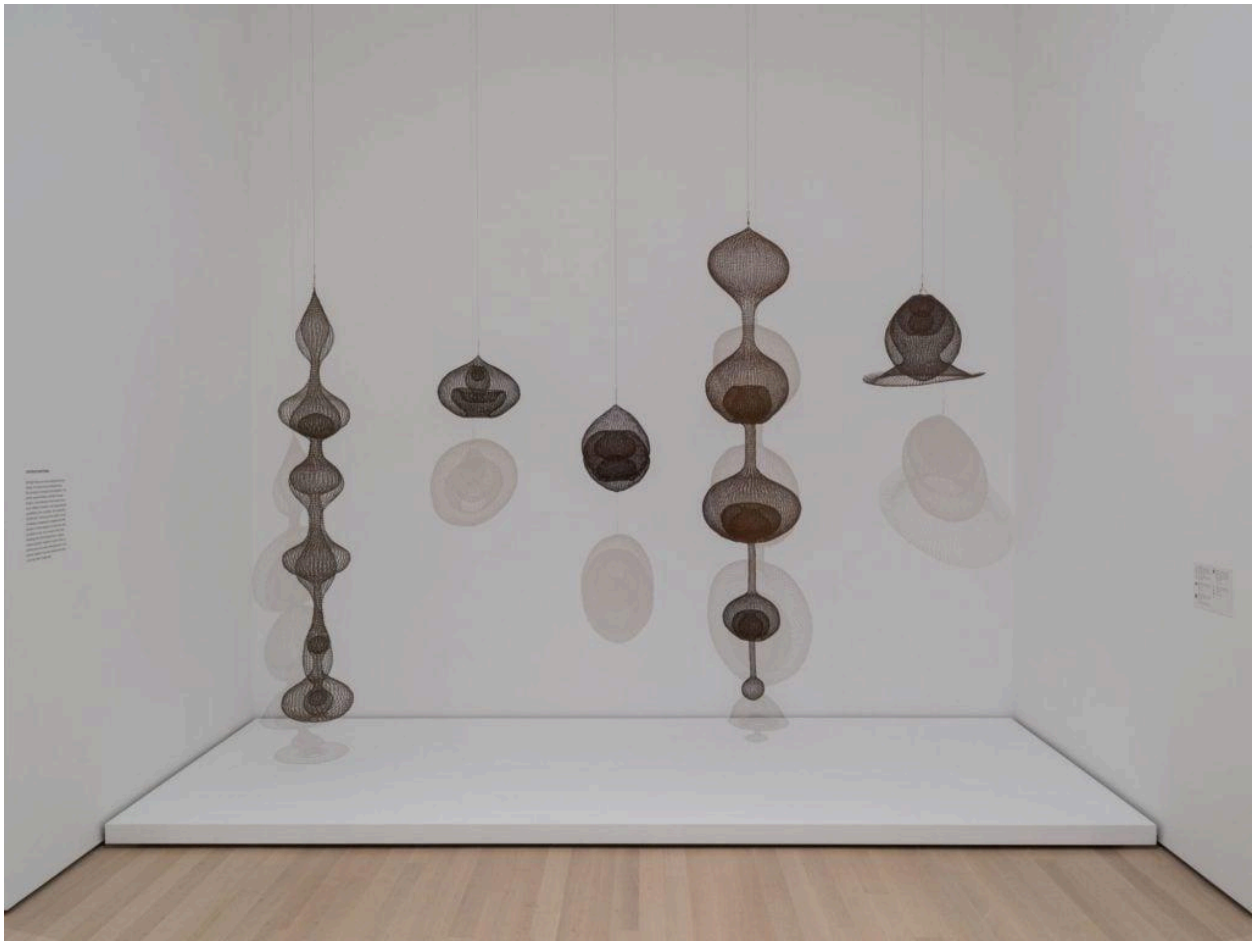
The tide only began to turn in the last five years of Asawa’s life, when the family called Christie’s specialist Jonathan Laib. They wanted to sell an Albers painting to help pay for 24-hour health care for Asawa, who was suffering from lupus.

Ruth Asawa at Ruth Asawa: A Retrospective View, San Francisco Museum of Art, 1973. Photograph by Laurence Cuneo. ©2024 Ruth Asawa Lanier, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: courtesy of David Zwirner.

Laib ended up flying out to San Francisco to see Asawa's sculptures, and put a looped wire piece in a 2010 sale. It went for $578,500, smashing her existing auction record of just $98,500 and opening up the doors for market success that continues to this day. Just months

before her death, Laib curated Asawa's first New York solo show in over 50 years, at the auction house.

Then, leading dealer David Zwirner began representing Asawa in 2017 (and Laib came on board as a gallery director). The artist's current auction record stands at $5.3 million, set at Christie's New York in 2020, according to the Artnet Price Database.



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In 2019, Asawa was the subject of a Google Doodle. In 2020, the U.S. Postal Service issued a set of Asawa stamps. In 2022, she made her Venice Biennale debut in Cecilia Alemani's exhibition "The Milk of Dreams." And in 2024, President Joe Biden posthumously awarded her the National Medal of Arts, the nation's highest honor. (She also got a crater named after her on Mercury)

The retrospective builds on this incredible momentum, presenting the full arc of her career and its many facets. And Asawa's moment looks to continue as the exhibition tours internationally, to the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao and Fondation Beyeler in Riehen, Switzerland. Don't miss it.

"Ruth Asawa: A Retrospective" was on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 Third Street, San Francisco, California, April 4–September 2, 2025. It will be on view at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street, New York, New York, October 19, 2025–February 7, 2026; Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, Abandoibarra Etorb., 2, Abando, 48009 Bilbo, Bizkaia, Spain, March 20–September 13, 2026; and Fondation Beyeler, Baselstrasse 101, 4125 Riehen/Basel, Switzerland, October 18, 2026–January 24, 2027.

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