

ICONS

High-Wire Artist Ruth Asawa Edges Into the Mainstream

The sculptor spent her life at the margins of the American art world, but now her work is winning new acclaim.



Ruth Asawa at work on a hanging wire sculpture in 1957.

PHOTO: IMOGEN CUNNINGHAM; THE IMOGEN CUNNINGHAM TRUST

By Marilyn Chase

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Seven years after her death, the artist Ruth Asawa is more popular than ever. In 2021, her wire sculptures will be featured in exhibitions in the U.S., U.K., France, Spain and Norway. And her reputation has spread beyond the art world: Over the summer, the U.S. Postal Service issued a new series of 10 stamps featuring her signature abstract wire sculptures. In May 2019, a Google Doodle depicted Asawa assembling one of her hanging sculptures, leading to a flood of searches that crashed the artist's website.

Asawa's posthumous elevation to the modern art pantheon is the latest twist in a story full of them. Born in California in 1926 to Japanese immigrant parents, she was among the 120,000 Japanese Americans interned during World War II. Released in 1943, she went on to enroll at Black Mountain College, an experimental school in North Carolina that drew many stars of midcentury modern art, including her teacher Josef Albers, a Bauhaus pioneer.



In July, Asawa's 1954-54 sculpture 'Untitled (S.401)' sold at Christie's for \$5.4 million.

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On a visit to Mexico in 1947, Asawa learned the technique of hand-looping wire to make baskets, which she adapted to create abstract hanging sculptures. Using materials that evoked the barbed wire surrounding her internment camp, she created forms that are abstract but still evoke nature: a snail shell, a spiderweb or a dragonfly wing.

Her signature technique, which she called “continuous form within a form,” involved overlapping layers of wire that undulate from inside to outside and back again. Asawa also made tied-wire sculptures, inspired by a spiky desert plant, in the forms of trees and stars.

Her first New York gallery show, in 1954, drew important collectors, including architect Philip Johnson. But critics often wrote about her in sexist and exoticizing terms. In 1955, a Time magazine profile of Asawa and sculptor Isamu Noguchi, headlined “Eastern Yeast,” referred to both U.S.-born sculptors as “Oriental,” describing Asawa as a “housewife and mother.” At a time when male modernist sculptors such as David Smith and Henry Moore were using steel or stone anchored to the ground, critics had trouble making sense of Asawa’s sinuous, handspun spheres and teardrops hanging in the air.

After 1960, Asawa withdrew from the New York gallery world to focus creatively on her home studio and growing family in San Francisco. She lived frugally, worked nonstop and ignored her market valuation. “The artist always pays for the privilege of doing the work,” she told her children. But Asawa’s absence from New York contributed to the eclipse of her work by movements like Pop Art and Minimalism, said Thomas P. Campbell, director of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco (FAMSF).

Asawa shrugged off identity politics, calling herself “a minority of one.” But in 2020, the factors that once pushed her to the margins—ethnicity, gender and geography—now make her work more desirable to collectors, according to San Francisco gallerist Trish Bransten. “Asawa’s time is now,” said New York poet and critic John Yau, “because we realize we have such a narrow aesthetic that left too many people out.”

The rediscovery of her work began in 2009, when the artist’s family called Christie’s about selling a painting that Josef Albers had inscribed to Asawa decades before, to pay for her nursing care. Jonathan Laib, a Christie’s curator, made contact with the artist and devoted himself to relaunching her work with gallery shows and auctions. According to Harry S. Parker III, former director of FAMSF, Mr. Laib, now senior director of the David Zwirner Gallery, has done “a remarkable job of attracting interest in Asawa’s unique art and, along the way, stimulated a dramatic market reappraisal.”

Nowhere is this clearer than with Asawa's sculpture "Untitled, S. 401" (1953-54), an early exploration of continuous interlocking forms, featuring 6½ feet of enameled copper wire shaped into lobes that enfold brass spheres. In 1994, the piece sold for \$2,300; in July, it fetched nearly \$5.4 million at Christie's, a record for the artist.

For Jordan Troeller, an American art historian teaching at the University of Graz, the Asawa renaissance isn't simply driven by collectors and museums. "The pointed celebration of Asawa at this time is not coincidental," she said, but a sign of "a public that thinks differently, a public that supports cultural difference and recognizes its vitality."

—*Ms. Chase is the author of "Everything She Touched: The Life of Ruth Asawa" (Chronicle).*

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