



Ruth Asawa

HIDDEN HERO OF HISTORY

Listen to the story: <https://jonincharacter.com/ruth-asawa/>

Ruth Asawa is one of California's most beloved **sculptors** and was an influential advocate for arts education.

Ms. Asawa created works in many different mediums, but one of her most popular materials was wire - her wire sculptures were like three-dimensional drawings, changing with the viewer's perspective.

She was born in 1926 in California, after her parents immigrated to the United States from Japan. **Immigration** is when individuals move from the country in which they were born to establish lives in a new country.

Ms. Asawa had a passion for art from early on. As a child, she was encouraged by her third-grade teacher to create her own artwork. She even received first prize in a school arts competition in 1939 for her piece on what makes someone American.

World War II and Japanese Internment Camps

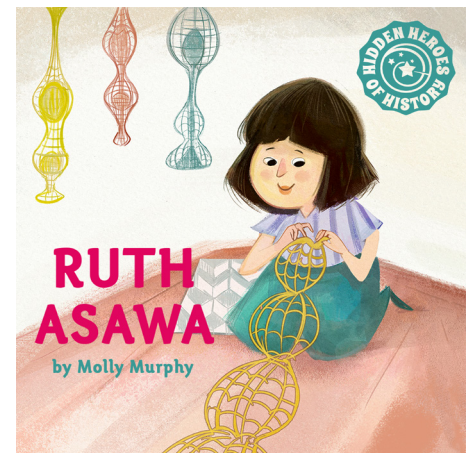
During World War II, the United States government forced over 100,000 Japanese Americans to live in internment camps. Internment camps were places where individuals' rights were restricted, families were separated, and no one was allowed to leave and return home.

These actions were brought about by an event that took place on December 7, 1941 when the government of Japan declared war on the United States by attacking Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. Americans and the American government unfairly and unjustly blamed all Japanese and Japanese American individuals for the attack, contributing to rampant **prejudice** against innocent individuals.

Lies were spread on radio programs, and people were refused service at various businesses. There were even false rumors that Japanese Americans knew about Pearl Harbor ahead of time, and that they might be involved in planning future attacks.

This prejudice is what led to the unjust internment of thousands of people, including Ruth Asawa and her family who were put into an internment camp in 1942. Most of her family stayed together, however, Ms. Asawa did not see her father for almost two years.

She spent eighteen months in the internment camps, where she attended and graduated from high school. She also continued to learn about drawing and painting from other artists who were living alongside her—including animators from Walt Disney Studios.





An organization called the **Japanese American Student Relocation Council** gave Ms. Asawa a scholarship to attend college. In 1943, she was issued an identification card by the **War Relocation Authority** that permitted her to leave the internment camp and travel to Milwaukee. There, she attended Milwaukee State Teachers College, but because of the ongoing war and prejudice against Japanese Americans, she was prevented from getting her degree.

Black Mountain College Interdisciplinary Study

Ms. Asawa did find another school in North Carolina called Black Mountain College, where she began a deeper exploration of art making. She took courses across a variety of different forms, studying drawing, photography, composing, choreography, and sculpture with very prominent artists.

Her time at the college and her **interdisciplinary study** were extremely formative and also freeing. For example, Ms. Asawa took a trip to Mexico during this time where she learned about basket weaving techniques. This informed some of her most iconic wire sculptures.

Museum Collections and Public Art Works

Throughout her adult life, Ms. Asawa created a large body of work. Today, her art resides in very famous museums like the Guggenheim and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. Some of her wire sculptures are on permanent display in San Francisco's de Young Museum in Golden Gate Park.

Later in her career, Ms. Asawa was commissioned to make many public works, including multiple fountains. She also designed a Japanese American Internment memorial in San Jose, California. **Public Art** is so important, because it brings culture to cities and helps us to never forget our past.

Two of her most famous fountains are in San Francisco. The first is called Andrea's Fountain and is located in the ever-so-popular Ghirardelli Square. The second is near Union Square where she created a fountain with the help of 200 school children. She had them mold hundreds of images of the city of San Francisco using baker's clay, which is a cheap, easy-to-make, and extra safe material. The children's shapes were then cast in iron to make the fountain.

Arts Education Advocacy

Ms. Asawa turned her early interest in teaching into becoming a dedicated advocate for arts education. She believed teaching the arts in school was a vital part of empowering young people, and felt hands-on learning was an invaluable experience. She championed these principles throughout her entire career.

Her first major project was building a program called the Alvarado School Arts Workshop. It began with no money and only household materials for art-making—like milk cartons, egg cartons, and scraps of yarn. The program eventually grew to be in over 50 public schools in San Francisco, and included teaching musicians, gardeners, parents, and all sorts of professional visual artists.

Throughout her life, Ms. Asawa spoke to politicians and organizations about supporting arts programs in San Francisco. As part of this work, she contributed to the creation of a public arts high school that was eventually named the Ruth Asawa San Francisco School of the Arts in her honor.

Discover more about Ruth Asawa's life and art: <https://ruthasawa.com/>

Glossary

Sculptors – Artists that make objects that have depth, can usually stand on their own, and sometimes, they even look like the subjects they are trying to portray. Sculptors can use a lot of different materials for their work—like clay, wax, stone, fabric, glass, wood, plaster, and random “found” objects.

Immigration – the process of moving to a new country, with plans to live there permanently. People who move to a new country are called immigrants.

Prejudice – hatred or unfair treatment toward a person or group without cause or reason.

Japanese American Student Relocation Council – worked during World War II to help Japanese American students from the government's internment camps go to colleges in the Midwest and the East Coast.

War Relocation Authority – Federal agency created by executive order by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1942 to “take all people of Japanese descent into custody, surround them with troops, prevent them from buying land, and return them to their former homes at the close of the war.”

Interdisciplinary study – a college student combines their love for many areas of study into one educational path.

Public Art – Art that is in the public realm contributes to a community's identity, fosters community pride and a sense of belonging, and enhances the quality of life for its residents and visitors.

Give it Some Thought

“I hold no hostilities.”

Ruth Asawa and her family lost their right to freedom, privacy, and family life when they had to live in Japanese internment camps. Ruth Asawa believed that internment was the first step on her journey to a world of art that changed who she was and what she thought was possible in life. When she was asked about it, here's what she said:

“I hold no hostilities for what happened; I blame no one. Sometimes good comes through adversity. I would not be who I am today had it not been for the Internment, and I like who I am.”

- How would you describe Ruth Asawa's character to be able to experience the internment camps and grow up to become a renowned artist and voice for arts education?

Ruth Asawa is just one of over 100,000 Japanese Americans who were forced into World War II Internment Camps. Here are some stories from other individuals:

Write to Me:

Letters from Japanese American Children to the Librarian They Left Behind

By Cynthia Grady

Fish for Jimmy

By Katie Yamasaki

They Called Us Enemy (Graphic Novel)

By George Takei, Justin Eisinger and Steven Scott

“Art is for everybody.”

“A child can learn something about color, about design, and about observing objects in nature. If you do that, you grow into a greater awareness of things around you. Art will make people better, more highly skilled in thinking and improving whatever business one goes into, or whatever occupation. It makes a person broader.”

- What do you take away from Ruth's statement about the importance of art education?
- Have you studied or spent time making art? How does it make you feel?

Use Your Imagination

This activity is inspired by:

- Ruth Asawa's first major arts education project called the Alvarado School Arts Workshop, and
- Her public works project where she created a fountain with the help of 200 school children who molded images of the city of San Francisco using baker's clay. (see image below)

Experiment with new materials to create an image that represents something you love about the place where you live. Use ordinary materials you find around the house or classroom—scraps of yarn, rubber bands, pages from old magazines, leaves—to create your artwork on the “Look What I Found” worksheet. Have fun!

