

Defining Air

Sculpture Inspired by Ruth Asawa

A Young at Art Lesson Plan • Grades K–8



"I am able to take a wire and go into the air and define the air without stealing it from anyone." - Ruth Asawa

Using pre-formed wire mesh, students sculpt their own hanging form inspired by Asawa's wire sculptures, exploring shape, volume, and the idea that art can be made from a single, simple material.

Student Objectives

- Students will learn about Ruth Asawa: her Japanese American heritage, her internment during World War II, her studies at Black Mountain College, and how she became one of the most original sculptors of the 20th century.
- Students will understand Asawa's core creative philosophy: that a single continuous material, shaped by patient hands, can define space, volume, and form.
- Students will connect Asawa's inspiration (natural forms such as seed pods, coral, cells) to their own sculptural choices.
- Students will create an original hanging wire mesh sculpture mounted on a stand, taking it home as a finished artwork.
- Students will practice 3-dimensional thinking: how does a form look from all sides? How does it change in different light?

Ruth Asawa: An American Original

Ruth Asawa was born in 1926 in Norwalk, California, the daughter of Japanese immigrants who farmed strawberries. She grew up working the land, watching things grow... and that early experience of observing nature would shape her art for the rest of her life.

In 1942, everything changed. After Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, the United States government ordered that all Japanese Americans be removed from the West Coast. Ruth's father was arrested by the FBI and taken away. Ruth, her mother, and her siblings were sent first to a racetrack, the Santa Anita Assembly Center, where they lived in horse stalls. Then they were sent to the Rohwer War Relocation Center in Arkansas. Ruth was 16 years old.



During the internment, something unexpected happened: Ruth found art. Three Japanese American artists who were also imprisoned at the camp began teaching the young people around them. Ruth threw herself into drawing. Art became the way she made sense of a world that had suddenly become very unfair.

After the war, Ruth earned a scholarship to study at one of the most remarkable art schools that ever existed: Black Mountain College in North Carolina. This was a place where painters, architects, composers, poets, and dancers all lived and worked together. Ruth studied under Josef Albers, a master of color and form who had fled Nazi Germany, and Buckminster Fuller, the visionary architect. The lesson they taught her was simple and radical: don't impose your ideas onto the material. Ask the material what it wants to become.

In 1947, Ruth took a trip to Mexico. In the village of Toluca, she met basket weavers who made their baskets out of wire, looping strand after strand with their bare hands. Ruth watched closely. She saw something nobody else had seen: that this humble technique could become sculpture.

Back in San Francisco, now married to architect Albert Lanier and raising six children, Ruth began her life's work. Every day, while her children played around her, she sat and looped wire, one continuous strand, looped thousands of times, building outward from a single starting point. The sculptures that emerged looked like nothing else in the world: hanging, glowing, gourd-like forms within forms, casting lacy shadows on the walls.

Ruth believed that art and life were not separate. Her studio was her kitchen table. Her children were her collaborators. She believed that every person, not just trained artists, had the right to make art. She became a fierce advocate for arts education in San

Francisco public schools and helped found what is now the Ruth Asawa San Francisco School of the Arts.



Ruth Asawa died in 2013, at age 87, having made art every single day of her adult life. In 2020, the U.S. Postal Service honored her with a set of stamps. In 2025–2026, the Museum of Modern Art in New York mounted the largest retrospective of her work ever assembled. This was the biggest show MoMA has ever given to a woman artist.

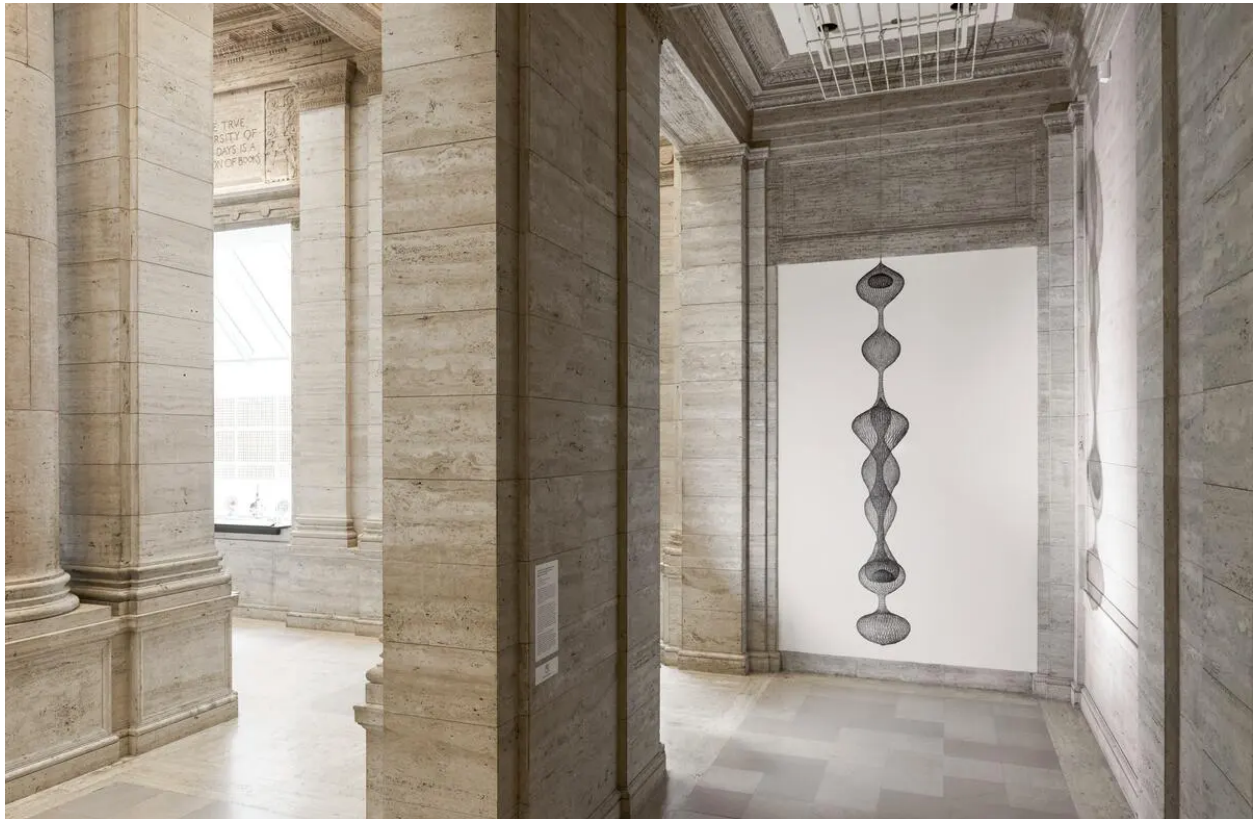
She once said: *"I am able to take a wire and go into the air and define the air without stealing it from anyone."* That is what we will try to do today.

Art Context: Post-War American Sculpture

Asawa began making sculpture in the late 1940s and early 1950s, a moment when American art was exploding with new ideas. In New York, painters like Jackson Pollock were dripping paint on enormous canvases, declaring that the gesture of making art was as important as the finished product. Sculptors were asking: does a sculpture have to be solid? Does it have to sit on a pedestal? Can it hang? Can it be transparent?

Ruth Asawa answered all of these questions in her own quiet way. She worked from her kitchen in San Francisco, far from the New York art world that mostly ignored her at the time. Her wire sculptures were unlike anything being made: they were light instead of heavy, transparent instead of solid, made by hand instead of by machine. Critics sometimes dismissed her work as "craft" (a word that was used to belittle the work of women and non-Western artists). Ruth didn't argue. She just kept working.

Today she is recognized as a pioneer: an artist who understood, decades before most, that space itself could be a sculptural material. Her work influenced generations of artists who came after her.



Asawa's Creative Process

Understanding how Ruth worked is the key to this project. A few things to share with students:

One continuous wire

Every sculpture started with a single piece of wire. She looped it around and around, sometimes thousands of loops in a single piece, never cutting, never stopping. The entire form grew from one unbroken line.

Starting from the inside and working out

Her children described watching her work: she would begin at the center of a form and spiral outward, the sculpture growing like a plant, like a cell dividing, like a seed becoming a pod.

Nature as the source

Ruth kept her eyes on the natural world: the shapes of seed pods, the branching of coral, the way a cell looks under a microscope. She didn't copy these forms literally, but rather she absorbed them, and they came out through her hands.

The process was the thinking

Ruth didn't make detailed plans or drawings before she sculpted. She thought through her hands. The looping itself was how she figured out what the sculpture wanted to be.

Shadows as a second sculpture

One of the magical qualities of her work: because the mesh is transparent, it casts shadows that are almost as beautiful as the sculpture itself. Ruth was very aware of this. Light was part of her material.

Art Vocabulary

Sculpture: A three-dimensional work of art. One that has height, width, and depth. Unlike a painting, you can walk around a sculpture and see it from many angles.

Form: The three-dimensional shape of an object. What gives it volume, or the sense of taking up space.

Armature: An internal structure or skeleton that holds a sculpture's shape. Like the frame inside a building.

Transparency: The quality of being see-through. Asawa's wire sculptures were transparent. You could see through them and into them at the same time.

Organic Form: A shape inspired by nature. Flowing, irregular, alive-feeling. The opposite of a geometric form like a cube or a cylinder.

Negative Space: The empty space around and inside a sculpture that becomes part of the artwork. With Asawa's work, the air inside the mesh is just as important as the wire itself.

Continuous Line: A line (or wire) that never stops or is cut. It keeps going to build the entire form. Asawa's sculptures were made from one continuous wire.

Supplies

Docent Prep (Before Class)

- Cut wire mesh tube into lengths of 12–16 inches per student (scissors or wire cutters). One roll of 5" x 32ft mesh yields approximately 24 pieces at 16".
- Pre-bend wire stems into ornament-hook shape: small hook at top, curved stem, small coil or loop at base. Prepare one per student. (14-gauge aluminum wire works well, stiff enough to hold shape, soft enough to bend by hand.)
- Portion out small amounts of air dry clay: approximately golf-ball size per student into zip-lock bags.

Supplies Per Student

- 1 pre-cut length of tubular wire mesh (12-16 inches)
- 1 pre-bent wire stem
- 1 portion of air-dry clay (golf ball size)
- 1 small zip-lock bag (for transporting wet clay base home)

Estimated Cost Per Student

- Wire mesh: ~\$0.13
- Wire stem: ~\$0.03
- Air dry clay: ~\$0.10–0.15
- Total: approximately \$0.25–0.30 per student

Timing Overview (50 Minutes)

- **0-5 min Introduction:** show Asawa video clip (SFMOMA, 1978 — link below). Ask: what do you notice about how she works?
- **5-10 min Make clay base first:** students press clay into a flat disc (~3" wide, 1" thick), insert pre-bent wire stem firmly into center. Set aside to firm up.
- **10-20 min Tell Ruth's story:** Use the narrative above. Pause for questions. Show images of her sculptures.
- **20-25 min Continuous line drawing exercise** with nature reference sheet.
- **25-45 min Sculpting:** students shape their wire mesh piece and hang on stem hook.
- **45-50 min Share out:** students hold up their sculpture, describe one choice they made. Brief class discussion.

Procedure

Step 1: Make the Base (Minutes 5-10)

1. Give each student their clay portion and pre-bent wire stem.
2. Students roll clay into a ball, then press it flat into a disc (about 3 inches wide and 1 inch thick.) It doesn't need to be perfect.
3. Insert the straight end of the wire stem firmly into the center of the clay disc. Press clay around the base of the wire to secure it.
4. Set base aside. By the time students are ready to hang their sculpture (~40 minutes later), the clay will be firm enough to hold the form upright.

Step 2: Tell Ruth's Story (Minutes 10-20)

5. Use the artist biography above. Tell it as a story: the strawberry farm, the arrest of her father, the horse stalls, the artists in the internment camp, Mexico, the wire baskets, the kitchen table, the six children.

6. Show images of her work. Ask students: what does this look like to you? What does it remind you of in nature?
7. Key message for students: Ruth didn't plan every sculpture. She thought through her hands. Today we're going to do the same.

Step 3: Continuous Line Drawing Exercise (Minutes 20-25)

Distribute the Nature Inspiration Sheet and a pencil to each student. Briefly explain before starting: Ruth Asawa drew every single day. Drawing was how she trained her eyes to see form before her hands built it in wire. We're going to do the same, but in a very specific way.



8. Ask students to choose one image on the sheet that interests them most.
9. Explain the rule: place your pencil on the drawing box and do not lift it until the timer ends. Let your eye travel slowly around the shapes in the image and then let your hand follow. It won't look perfect. That is the point. This is how Ruth thought.
10. Set a 3-minute timer. Play quiet background music if available. Circulate and encourage, remind students not to lift their pencil.
11. When timer ends: ask students to look at their drawing and circle one shape they want to try to make in their wire mesh. That shape is their intention going into the sculpting step.

Step 4: Sculpt (Minutes 25-45)

12. Give each student their pre-cut mesh tube.
13. Invite them to simply hold it and explore: pinch it, squeeze it, expand it, bend it. What happens?
14. Prompt: "Think of something from nature like a seed pod, a piece of coral, a pebble, a cloud. Can you push the mesh toward that shape?"
15. Encourage pinching sections to create lobes (Asawa's signature gourd shapes). Press inward to create narrowed waists. Expand sections outward to create wider areas.
16. **For grades 3-8:** encourage students to consider how the sculpture looks from all sides, not just the front. Rotate it. Look at the shadow it casts.
17. When satisfied, hang the mesh sculpture on the hook of the wire stem.

Step 5: Share Out (Minutes 45-50)

18. Ask 3 to 4 students to hold up their sculpture and describe one decision they made.
19. Ask the group: what does your sculpture remind you of? What surprised you?
20. Reinforce the connection to Asawa: she worked exactly this way: hands first, thinking through the material.
21. Students place clay base (with sculpture) into their zip-lock bag to take home. Include a small note: "Let the clay base dry for 24 hours before displaying."

Grade-Level Differentiation

K–2: Explore Freely

No constraints. Simply explore what the mesh can do. Encourage squeezing, pinching, and bending. Celebrate every result. Focus the story on the simpler elements: Ruth loved nature, she used wire like we're using wire today, she made art at her kitchen table with her kids around her.

Grades 3–5: Form with Intention

Ask students to try to create a form that has at least one wide section and one narrow section, mirroring Asawa's lobed, gourd-like shapes. Before they begin, ask them to name one thing in nature their sculpture might be inspired by.

Grades 6–8: Observation to Form

Show students several close-up images of natural forms (seed pods, coral, sea urchins) before they begin. Ask them to choose one as their inspiration and try to move the mesh toward that shape. Encourage them to also think about the shadow. Hold the sculpture up to the light and see what the shadow does. Is the shadow part of the art?

Discussion Questions

- Ruth Asawa said she could "define the air" with her wire. What do you think she meant by that?
- Ruth made art every single day, even while raising six children. What does that tell us about how she thought about art?
- Her family was forced into an internment camp during World War II. Art became a way for Ruth to survive that experience. Can you think of a time when making something helped you feel better?
- Look at the shadow your sculpture casts. Is the shadow part of the artwork? Why or why not?
- Ruth learned her wire technique from basket weavers in Mexico. What does it mean when artists learn from each other across cultures?

Resources

- Video (Recommended. Show in Class)
 - Ruth Asawa on Her Forms and Materials (1978 film footage, SFMOMA)
 - [sfmoma.org/watch/ruth-asawa-on-her-forms-and-materials](https://www.sfmoma.org/watch/ruth-asawa-on-her-forms-and-materials)
 - Asawa creates a looped-wire sculpture in her home studio and discusses her process. Approximately 5 minutes, ideal for classroom use.
- Official Website: <https://ruthasawa.com/>
- Exhibition: <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/5768>
 - Ruth Asawa: A Retrospective: Museum of Modern Art, New York (2025-2026). The largest exhibition ever devoted to Asawa's six decades of work.

Nature Inspiration Hand-Out

