

EDUCATOR GUIDE

Story Theme: The Family Business
Subject: Ruth Asawa
Discipline: Visual Art

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Ruth Asawa and son Paul Lanier at work in Asawa’s garden. Still image from SPARK story, February 2005.

SECTION I – CONTENT

RUTH ASAWA

“We’ve done many projects together. There’s really no typical work with my mom. Everything’s unique...” – *Paul Lanier, son of Ruth Asawa*

For more than five decades, sculptor Ruth Asawa has been associated with some of the most notable figures in American 20th century art. As a young woman she studied at the legendary Black Mountain College under Josef Albers and Buckminster Fuller, alongside John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Robert Rauschenberg, and Jasper Johns. In addition to producing an impressive body of work, Asawa has been a vocal advocate for arts education.

Asawa’s elegant cast bronze and steel sculptures have graced the Bay Area since the late 1960s. As public works of art, their weight and permanence belie the importance of process to the artist, who obsessively manipulates materials to find forms translatable into large-scale works. For Asawa, the path that leads to the production of a finished piece is as important as the work itself. Many of Asawa’s large cast sculptures and fountains began as folded paper, while the large latticed pieces derived from a looping technique which Ruth learned while visiting Mexico City in the 1940s.

Spark visits Asawa as she and her family assemble an expansive retrospective for the re-opening of Golden Gate Park’s deYoung Museum in October 2005. In preparation for this exhibition, Asawa’s daughter Aiko Cuneo, has been busily collecting her mother’s work as well as selecting a variety of drawings and preparatory works. It is a labor of love for Cuneo, whose memories of childhood are interwoven with her mother’s constant art-making.

As a strong supporter of public arts education, Asawa has helped in the founding of San Francisco’s School of the Arts and spearheaded the Alvarado

Arts Program, which brings working artists into San Francisco’s public schools. Asawa has fought hard to enhance the level of arts teaching and curriculum in San Francisco’s public schools. Activism in favor of arts education has become a tradition in Asawa’s family, as her son, ceramist Paul Lanier, was formerly an artist-in-residence at Alvarado Elementary School. Lanier attended the school as a child and it was there that the Alvarado Arts Program originated.

Ruth Asawa attended the renowned Black Mountain College from 1945 to 1948. Her work has been exhibited internationally, and can be found in major collections including, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. She has received numerous awards including the Fine Arts Gold Medal from the American Institute of Architects and the Award for Outstanding Achievement in the Visual Arts from the Women’s Caucus for Art. In 1982, February 12th was declared Ruth Asawa Day in San Francisco.

Ruth Asawa’s Web site

<http://www.ruthasawa.com>

The deYoung Museum

<http://www.thinker.org/deyoung/index.asp>

SECTION II – CONTEXT

The Big Picture

Ruth Aiko Asawa was born in 1926 into a farming community in Southern California. The fourth of seven children, her parents were Japanese immigrants and worked hard to make a living as farmers. In 1941 after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Americans became fearful of Japanese attacks on their cities. Leaders in States along the Pacific Coast of the U.S demanded that Japanese and Japanese-Americans be detained. Alongside 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry on the West coast, Ruth Asawa, her mother and her siblings were interned and her father was taken to a labor camp.

Ruth graduated from high school at a camp in Rohwer, Arkansas. After receiving a scholarship, she studied to become an art teacher at Milwaukee State Teachers' College in Wisconsin. However, since prejudice against the Japanese persisted, she was unable to find a teaching position to allow her to meet the practice requirement of the credential. In 1946 she decided to study art at Black Mountain College, a decision that had a profound influence on her life and development as an artist.

Black Mountain College, founded in 1933 in North Carolina, became an innovative and progressive College that promoted experimental and interdisciplinary approaches to learning. It was here that Asawa met artist and teacher, Josef Albers, with whom she studied drawing and painting, design and color. Josef and his wife, Anni Albers were founding members and professors at the College having fled Nazi Germany after the closing of the Bauhaus, the art school that was influential in modern design, art and architecture in Germany from 1919 to 1933. Albers and Black Mountain College became pivotal in the development of American artists during that period, attracting some of the greatest minds and artists of

the time. It was also transformative for Ruth Asawa, offering her both interaction with working artists and engagement with progressive ideas and pedagogical practices.

Artists who were contemporaneous with Ruth Asawa include Walter Gropius, Jacob Lawrence, Jean Varda, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, John Cage, Alfred Kazin, Merce Cunningham, Buckminster Fuller, Robert Rauschenberg, and Albert Lanier, who became her husband.

In 1948, in the spirit of experimentation encouraged at the College, Asawa decided to try sculpture. She proposed a project that involved making sculptural pieces out of wire using the basic technique she had learned from villagers in Mexico. The loop became the technique she used to fashion all her sculptural pieces, looping copper or brass wire into imaginative forms and shapes. From this point on, sculpture became her primary expression, although drawing always remained important.

Asawa describes the character of the looped wire sculptures that particularly excited her. She talks of the interplay or dynamic between the interior and exterior of the metal forms:

“What I was excited by was I could make a shape that was inside and outside at the same time”...“You could create something that continuously reverses itself”.

It was this movement and transformation from one state to another, as well as the transparency of the finished pieces that enthralled her. Talking about transparency, she remarks:

“It was Albers' word. I liked the idea....You can see through it, the piece does not hide anything. You can show inside and outside, and inside and outside are connected. Everything is connected, continuous.”

Also drawing upon Albers approach to design, Asawa worked with materials so that each element had its own unique character which, in combination with another material, created a completely different form or quality.

The intricate structures she fashioned belie the complexity of the process of fashioning industrial wire. Appearing simple and fragile, they also belie the materiality of copper or brass wire, as they became animated into organic, plant-like forms or living creatures from the natural world.

In addition to the materials and technique, light contributed a further compositional element to her work. In heightening the transparent quality of the installations, light added definition and dimension to the work, and through the use of shadow cast a spirituality and otherworldliness over her multi-layered forms. It is these dark and evocative shadows that make Ruth Asawa's work unique, lending a certain mystery and stillness to the suspended forms.



Photo by Laurence Cuneo
<http://www.ruthasawa.com/>
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Emily K. Doman-Jennings has written about the early reception of Ruth Asawa's sculptures in the 1950s, and her essay¹ offers insight into the positioning of Asawa's work in art discourse in that period (Critiquing the Critique: Ruth Asawa's Early Reception). Doman-Jennings cites the 1956 *Artnews* review of Asawa's New York exhibition:

"These are domestic sculptures in a feminine, handiwork mode - small, and light and unobtrusive

¹Cornell, Daniel (Editor). *The Sculpture of Ruth Asawa, Contours in the Air* (California: UC Press, 2006)

for home decoration, not meant as is much contemporary sculpture to be hoisted by cranes, carted by vans and installed on mountainsides".

The *New York Times* review in the same year acclaimed them as "beautiful if primarily only decorative objects in space."

In these reviews, Asawa's work is placed firmly within the domestic, feminine sphere and as Jennings points out, contrasts with Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's writings. Having worked at the Bauhaus with Albers, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy contextualized the work in contemporary art discourse by focusing on the use of material, technique and space.

In the 1950's Asawa's work was also critiqued in relation to her gender and cultural identity, and throughout her career Asawa's Japanese-American identity has been invoked as a way to understand her artistic sensibility. There is no doubt that her Japanese-American background constrained her during the war and in the aftermath when hostility to the Japanese and Japanese-Americans persisted. However, this drive to categorize Asawa's work as Asian and a product of a Japanese cultural heritage overlooked the fact that she was born in America and at that stage had never visited Japan.

Viewing Asawa's work through the lens of her gender has identified the sculptures with the handicraft tradition of female decorative arts. It presented difficulties when trying to position her work alongside the major modern art movements of the postwar period, such as Abstract Expressionism in America and modernism in Europe. Her aesthetic and materials distance her from these traditions, and may have presented critics with difficulties in analyzing her work.

In the post-war period through the 1960's, the Abstract Expressionist School predominated throughout the United States. The major centers of this style were New York City and California, especially the San Francisco Bay Area. Stylistically, this expressive method of painting was large scale and gestural, and expressive of emotion and feeling through the application of paint with large brushes, sometimes dripping or even throwing it onto canvas as if the work had been produced by accident or chance.

Asawa's work was very different in scale and aesthetic drawing on the principles of design promulgated at the Bauhaus, and expounded by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Josef Albers.

"Albers taught us to see things in context, that the space under a table is as important as the table."

Ruth Asawa invented her own sculptural vocabulary drawing on these principles; the play between negative and positive space, the context or setting, and the relationships generated by site-specific sculptural installations. These factors determined the overall effect of an installation, and shaped the context and experience of the spectator.

SECTION III – RESOURCES

RESOURCES – TEXTS

Cornell, Daniell (Editor). *The Sculpture of Ruth Asawa, Contours in the Air*, California: UC Press, 2006

Woodbridge, Sally Byrne. *Ruth Asawa's San Francisco Fountain* (Unknown Binding). San Francisco Museum of Art, 1973

RESOURCES – WEBSITES

<http://metroactive.com/metro/12.27.06/ruth-asawa-0652.html> Wired - *Ruth Asawa's sculptures create volumes of meaning from lines in space* by Michael S. Gant

FIELD TRIPS

Ruth Asawa
Public Commissions, San Francisco



Andrea
Ghirardelli Square, San Francisco
<http://www.ruthasawa.com/visit.html>

Copper tied wire fountain, 1966
Fox Plaza lobby
1390 Market Street
San Francisco, CA

Andrea, 1966-68
Cast bronze fountain
Ghirardelli Square
900 North Point
San Francisco, CA

Glass mosaic mural, 1969
Bethany Center Senior Housing Inc.
580 Capp Street
San Francisco, CA

Cast bronze fountain, 1970-73
The Hyatt Corporation of America
Grand Hyatt Hotel on Union Square
San Francisco, CA

Bronze plaque honoring Makoto Hagiwara, 1974
Japanese Tea Garden
100 Hagiwara Tea Garden Drive
Golden Gate Park
San Francisco, CA

Two fountains & concrete bas-relief benches, 1976
San Francisco Redevelopment Agency
Nihonmachi Mall, Buchanan Street
San Francisco, CA

Glass-fiber reinforced concrete bas-relief wall, 1984
San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department
Father Boeddeker Park
Ellis Street (between Jones and Taylor)
San Francisco, CA

San Francisco Yesterday and Today, 1984
Glass-fiber reinforced concrete bas-relief wall
Renaissance Parc 55 Hotel
55 Cyril Magnin Street, Union Square
San Francisco, CA

Aurora, 1986
Stainless steel fountain
Hampshire Properties, Bayside Plaza
188 Embarcadero
San Francisco, CA

Garden of Remembrance, 2002
San Francisco State University
1600 Holloway Avenue
Courtyard between Burke Hall and Fine Arts Building
San Francisco, CA

Public Commissions, Greater Bay Area

Glass-fiber reinforced concrete sculpture, 1987
Santa Rosa Redevelopment and Housing Agency
25 Old Courthouse Square (between 3rd and 4th Streets)
Santa Rosa, California

Cast bronze fountain, 1988
Beringer Winery
2000 Main Street
St. Helena, California

Japanese American Internment Memorial, 1994
Cast bronze relief sculpture
City of San Jose, County of Santa Clara, and the local
Japanese-American Community
Robert Peckham Federal Building
East Plaza (South 2nd and San Carlos Streets) or
280 S. First Street
San Jose, California

Collections for Public View

<http://www.ruthasawa.com/visit.html>

Bay Area institutions that include Ruth Asawa's work in
their permanent collections:

M.H. de Young Memorial Museum
Sculpture and works on paper
50 Hagiwara Tea Garden Drive
Golden Gate Park
San Francisco, California

Oakland Museum of California
Sculpture and works on paper
1000 Oak Street
Oakland, California

San Jose Museum of Art
Sculpture
110 South Market Street
San Jose, California

SECTION III – VOCABULARY

DISCIPLINE-BASED VOCABULARY AND CONCEPTS IN THE SPARK STORY

Bauhaus

Famous art and architecture school in Germany (1919 to 1933), the Bauhaus became influential in art and design and key in the development of modernism as an architectural movement and aesthetic. The Bauhaus operated from four different centres, three in Germany until the move to Chicago in 1937. It was also under the leadership of different architect-directors, Walter Gropius, Hannes Meyer, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and László Moholy-Nagy from 1937-1938, each of whom took the school in a different direction.

Black Mountain College

Founded in 1933, in a small town in North Carolina Black Mountain College became a unique, inter-disciplinary liberal arts college, imbuing in students a love of learning that involved the whole person – both their physical and intellectual being. It became recognized also as a pioneering art colony. Josef and Anni Albers, founding members and professors at the College were artists who had fled Nazi Germany after the closing of the Bauhaus. Promoting community and experimental approaches to education, through the forties and early fifties Black Mountain attracted some of the greatest minds and artists of the time, including Walter Gropius, Jacob Lawrence, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, John Cage, Alfred Kazin, Merce Cunningham, Buckminster Fuller Robert Rauschenberg, Ruth Asawa and Albert Lanier. By 1953 the school began to wane as

many of the students and faculty left for San Francisco and New York

Cityscape

The representation of a city as in a photograph or work of art, or the view of a city or a section of a city from a particular perspective

Icon

Image, symbol or representation A genre of sacred painting

Installation

Artwork that is created for a specific site or location, often using materials that reference the site or physical environment Materials used in contemporary installations can include natural materials from the environment or new media e.g. sound, performance, digital art etc.

Japanese Internment

The policy in America during World War II to detain Japanese and Japanese Americans in "War Relocation Camps" Approximately 120,000 Japanese and Japanese Americans from the West Coast of the United States were removed from their homes. 110,000 were detained, while others relocated to different states in the USA.

Josef Albers (1888 – 1976)

German artist and educator born in Bottrop, Westphalia, Albers was important in progressive and experimental art education programs in the 20th century. In the 1920's

he was a student, teacher, and later professor at the famous Bauhaus art and architecture school in Germany (1919 to 1933). He escaped to America when the Nazis forced the school to close in 1933. As a founding member of Black Mountain College, he taught drawing and painting, design and color until 1949.

Well-known and respected as an abstract painter, Albers was also a designer, photographer, printmaker and poet. His controlled creative process is illustrated in the famous series of paintings and prints "Homage to the Square" began in 1949.



Joseph Albers
Homage to the Square, Edition Keller 1h, 1970
<http://www.barbarakrakowgallery.com/>

László Moholy-Nagy

László Moholy-Nagy was a painter and photographer who became a professor at the Bauhaus and later director for the school from 1937-1938. He was a strong proponent of the integration of technology and industry into the arts.

Motif

Design, pattern, decoration or ornamentation. A repeated pattern.

Origami

The art of paper folding. Origami generally references Japanese paper folding, using a range of specialized folds to create a design or shape.

Platter

Plate or serving dish

Positive and Negative space

Negative space is the space around an object, painted figure or shape that gives the form definition. The object, delineated figure or shape is the positive space.

Retrospective

In visual arts, this refers to an exhibition of an artist's work usually spanning their lifetime

Sphere

Globe, orb circular shape

SECTION IV – ENGAGING WITH SPARK

STANDARDS-BASED ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION POINTS

Looking at Ruth Asawa’s Sculptural Forms

Play the SPARK story on Ruth Asawa, freezing the frame on her sculpture pieces. Alternatively, display examples of Asawa’s work via her Web site:

<http://www.ruthasawa.com/art.html>



Tied Wire Sculpture, 1995

Photo by Laurence Cuneo

<http://www.ruthasawa.com/art.html>

Invite students to respond to Asawa’s artwork by guiding them toward a sculptural language - a spatial vocabulary that references the relationship between material, form and light. Emphasize the language of design to describe the formal design elements, including: line, shape, color, texture, positive and negative space, and dark and light.

Initiate a discussion of the “feeling of balance” including: proportion, rhythm, and emphasis in each composition. How is each piece put together?

Ask students to work in small groups to respond to the following questions.

- What constitutes a sculpture? *Ensure that students identify the fact that a sculptural form is 3-dimensional and has width, height, mass, and volume.*
- How does Asawa create positive and negative space in her work? For example, the work does not exist in isolation but resonates with its surroundings. In what ways?

- Can shape and space communicate powerfully in the way that representational artwork does? How does this visual language differ?

Encourage the small groups to look carefully at Asawa’s complex wire forms and intricate weaving to think about the following questions:

- How are her pieces made?
- What material is Asawa using?
- Does the form appear heavy or light?
- How does shadow add to the form: does it extend definition or add dimension to the work?
- How does the work animate the space surrounding the form?

Take a few minutes to ask students to “free associate” and write any words or feelings that come to mind as they observe the looped art pieces.

To collectively summarize the small group study of Asawa’s work, invite all students to share their individual responses to the questions. Encourage them to speak to the words they noted and share their thoughts and reflections.

Finally, introduce the idea of the *organic* nature of Asawa’s work if the term has not already been discussed. Often resembling plant-like forms, the human body, or living creatures from the natural world, the term “organic” is frequently used to describe Asawa’s work.

Initiate a discussion by asking students if this is an accurate way of describing her work.

RELATED STANDARDS – Visual Arts

Grade 7

2.0 CREATIVE EXPRESSION

2.1 Develop increasing skill in the use of at least three different media.

2.3 Develop skill in using mixed media while guided by a selected principle of design.

Grade 8

3.0 HISTORICAL & CULTURAL CONTEXT

3.3 Identify major works of art created by women and describe the impact of those works on society at that time.

SPARKLER:

* Encourage students to visit examples of Ruth Asawa’s work in San Francisco or the Bay Area. Similarly, students can visit works in permanent collections, but are advised to check with the gallery before they go. Locations are listed above and at <http://www.ruthasawa.com/visit.html>

In The Spirit of Ruth Asawa

The following activities were developed by San Francisco artist, Jane Willson.

Observing sculpture: Anatomy of a cast shadow

To set the stage for students to discover the myriad of ways in which light can touch an object to create shadow—a key element in Asawa’s approach to sculpture – gather a selection of shaped and textured twigs and/or dramatic branches from trees or bushes. Ideally, this gathering could be a class activity in itself.

In this exercise, students will explore the many ways that light, striking an object from nature, can create shadow and dimension and provoke profound feeling.

Create a simple, dramatic assemblage of branches and/or twigs in a container, or heavy vase, so they rise up high into the room. Elevate the branches on a table or desk surface and, if possible, set all in the center of the classroom. Now ask students to sit in a circle around the assemblage. The teacher should also sit in the circle and participate.

Turn the lights off and a flashlight (or spotlight) on. Ask everyone to silently study the play of light in the branches, the walls, the ceiling (etc.) for a few quiet minutes - observing pure light and shadow, pure

positive and negative space. Now, pass the darkened flashlight to a student, and ask him/her to turn it on and shine light on a part of the branch assemblage that seems interesting, then describe what he/she sees, what feelings the light and shadow(s) evoke, etc. Ask the student to pass the flashlight to the next person in the circle to repeat the activity. The flashlight is thus passed around until all students have had a turn. When the lights are back on, have students briefly summarize 3 – 5 key observations they made in this study of light and shadow.

Weaving from nature

This activity is intended to provide a hands-on learning experience for students to learn the basic steps in creating a woven object.

In these exercises, students explore simple ways of weaving with nature to study first-hand how physical lines of matter can be woven to form mass and shape, hence sculpture. This project is best paced over several class art sessions.

Gather a small selection (roughly 7' X 5'-ish pieces) of flat-topped driftwood from a shoreline—one piece for each student. Alternatively, pieces of cut lumber will do, but will not be as pleasing in the finished art piece. Provide the following materials:

- A bag of small nails.
- Several light hammers
- Sand paper—assorted medium and fine grades.
- String (for the loom)
- A large assortment of earthy yarns, twine, thin cloth strips, pliable twigs, and pliable pieces of nature (long leaves, dried moss, cat tail leaves, etc) that lend themselves to weaving.

Project 1: Weaving on Driftwood

Ask students to select a piece of driftwood that appeals to them. Demonstrate how to sand wood to smooth its surface (using medium, then a fine grain paper). Next, distribute sand paper and ask students to proceed with sanding. Inspect each student’s piece to ensure it is nicely sanded before going onto the next step. Students can rub some furniture wax/polish onto the finished wood to protect it and give it a soft finished sheen.

Make a rustic frame for the loom atop the prepared wood. Since driftwood varies in size and shape, each

loom will be unique—and no loom will be “perfect.” This is part of the beauty of creating art with nature. Start by demonstrating safe hammering techniques with one nail. Hammer it in just far enough to have it sit firmly in the wood, but leaving an inch or so of nail exposed. Continue making the loom frame by pounding six nails, directly opposite each other at either end of the driftwood. It may be useful to set up a “pounding area” on the floor, with flat rectangles of larger wood or Masonite. Students can work together and use the flat surface to hammer the 12 nails, as discussed, to form the loom frame. (Carefully monitor this activity for safety!)

Once all nails are in place, have students cut a long piece of yarn, string or twine—long enough to wrap zigzag style between all six nails, from one side to the other to form the “warp” of the loom. At this point demonstrate making the warp by securely tying the end of the yarn or string to the top of the left nail, then pulling it taut to the top of the lower left nail, wrapping it around, then zigzagging back up to the next nail at the top, and so forth, until the final nail is reached. Tie the yarn or string securely to the last nail on the far right side. Now the loom is ready.

Moving on to the weaving stage, students can select their weaving materials from the pre-collected weaving items. Push a piece of yarn or thread from the weaving items, over, then under, then over, then under the loom’s warp. With this simple open-ended instruction, let students weave, inventing their own small woven piece in the loom, integrating various natural materials, yarn, string—or just a few colors of yarns. There are no right or wrong answers to weaving this way— this art exercise is as much about the experience as it is about the beautiful end products students will create.

When complete, create a special area for classroom display, or consider utilizing school display cases to exhibit students’ work in a public place.

Project 2: As an alternative method, squares of heavily textured, loosely woven material, such as small cut pieces of red net potato sacks can work nicely as a pre-made loom. Once again, students choose their weaving materials from a pre-assembled collection, then weave the threads over and under the “warp” of the potato sack’s netting to design their own woven hanging art piece. Challenge the

creativity of students by using more colors, textures, or adding pieces of natural material. When students are finished, hang their work individually or assemble it into an eclectic class display. The class should collectively curate the display. Invite the neighboring class in to view the artwork.

Project 3: For very young students, use strips of different cut widths of colored and textured or patterned paper to weave an easy under-over design. Elements of nature can also be woven in. The final pieces can be glued to paper for hanging on the classroom wall for display.

RELATED STANDARDS – Visual Arts

Grade 1

2.0 CREATIVE EXPRESSION

2.1 Use texture in two-dimensional and three-dimensional works of art.

2.3 Demonstrate beginning skill in the manipulation and use of sculptural materials (clay, paper, and paper maché) to create form and texture in works of art.

Grade 3

4.0 AESTHETIC VALUING

4.1 Compare and contrast selected works of art and describe them, using appropriate vocabulary of art.

Positive and Negative Space

Adapted from a lesson by Gloria Rabinowitz at <http://www.princetonol.com/groups/iad/lessons/high/Gloria-collage.htm>

Initiate a discussion of the meaning of “positive” and “negative” space in a work of art. Refer to Ruth Asawa’s work to illustrate this concept.

Suggest that students create a collage from pieces of black and white paper utilizing positive and negative space. They will need to cut out large and small shapes of black and white paper and glue these shapes to a backing surface. Encourage them to balance white and black, positive and negative space.

Invite students to evaluate their work by assessing whether they can discriminate between the foreground and background. Can they determine whether the positive and negative shapes are balanced?

SPARKLERS:

- For students who are interested, suggest that they visit <http://www.folds.net/tutorial/index.html> for Origami Diagrams and to learn how to fold paper, or select exercises from this site to introduce to the class. Encourage students interested in origami to learn some of the folding techniques, then share their knowledge with the rest of the class by teaching a folding lesson.

Art or Craft?

Initiate a discussion on art vs. craft. How do students differentiate between them?

- What defines an art and what defines a craft?
- Do they overlap? Is this a cultural distinction?
- Is there a difference in the perception of art and craft by the art world, especially art critics and public opinion?
- Is this changing in the contemporary world and why might that be?

Encourage students to use examples wherever possible to support their arguments and observations.

Now explore this debate in relation to the work of Ruth Asawa. In her essay about the reception of Asawa's work in the 1950s, *Critiquing the Critique, Ruth Asawa's Early Reception*², Emily K. Doman Jennings writes: "while almost all of the reviews of Asawa's work express a sense of awe in regard to her aesthetic vision, the classification of her sculptures in relation to traditional craft techniques significantly undermines her position within the dominant American art discourse of the period."

Challenge students to consider the following points:

- Is Asawa's work aligned with a domestic handicraft especially since weaving is a traditional craft technique?
- Is this view compounded by the fact that Asawa is a woman and her work denigrated because of the association with "woman's work" and a feminine decorative craft?

Researching Ruth Asawa

As a young woman, Asawa studied at Black Mountain College under Josef Albers and

² Cornell, Daniel (Editor). *The Sculpture of Ruth Asawa, Contours in the Air* (California: UC Press, 2006)

Buckminster Fuller, alongside John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. Black Mountain College created an environment conducive to interdisciplinary and experimental work and was seen as progressive, even revolutionary, in its approach to the arts and sciences.

Organize the class so that students work in pairs to research the legacy of Black Mountain College. Ask them to explore:

- The principles underpinning the educational philosophy of the College
- Artists who studied with Asawa – allocate a different artist to each student pair to research e.g. Merce Cunningham
- The influence of contemporary artists on her work.

Bring the whole group together to share findings allowing each pair at least 20 minutes to feed back information gleaned. Ask students to conclude this activity by writing a short essay on the influence of Black Mountain College on American artists. More information about the school can be found here:

<http://www.bmcproject.org/outline.htm>

Josef Alber's Design Class Lettering and Numbering

This activity draws on the beginning exercise in the design class at Black Mountain College.

Begin by asking students to write their name in the usual way and then to try to write it as a mirror image – they could use a mirror to help with this challenge. They should then write their name backwards and upside down to develop and refine visualization skills. This approach to viewing an image from multiple perspectives was important in Ruth Asawa's work.

Inkblots

Invite students to explore working on paper with inkblots. By blotting ink and water on paper and then folding and unfolding the paper, symmetrical and magical forms and landscapes appear that inspire multiple readings.

The simplest inkblot activity involves asking students to drop ink and water onto paper and then fold the paper in half, so that a symmetrical image appears

with similar halves. More dramatic and elaborate inkblots can be produced by using more ink and folding the paper more than once along the same crease.

For multiple fold inkblots, a lighter weight paper should be used and a couple of drops of ink and water applied onto paper. The paper should then be folded and unfolded along the same axis and then more ink added. By repeating the process, (this time folding the paper along a different axis) more elaborate images appear.

Invite students to describe what they see – a landscape, an insect, a figure? Invite them to share their ideas.

For more information about SPARK and its educational content, including the Visual & Performing Arts Standards, visit the Web site at <http://www.kqed.org/spark/education>.



For more information about the California Visual & Performing Arts Standards, visit the CA Dept. of Education at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/>

**RELATED STANDARDS – Visual Arts
Grades 9 -12, Proficient**

1.0 ARTISTIC PERCEPTION

Develop Perceptual Skills and Visual Arts Vocabulary

- 1.1 Identify and use the principles of design to discuss, analyze, and write about visual aspects in the environment and in works of art, including their own.
- 1.2 Describe the principles of design as used in works of art, focusing on dominance and subordination.

Analyze Art Elements and Principles of Design

- 1.3 Research and analyze the work of an artist and write about the artist's distinctive style and its contribution to the meaning of the work.
- 1.4 Analyze and describe how the composition of a work of art is affected by the use of a particular principle of design.

Impact of Media Choice

- 1.5 Analyze the material used by a given artist and describe how its use influences the meaning of the work.