

History of Wine, Beringer, St. Helena, 1987 - 1988

NARRATOR: Stories are at the heart of many of Ruth Asawa's public commissions. She would delight in delving into the history of each commission's location. And ask herself how her design could capture its character. Her son Paul worked with her on this piece. It's shaped like a Greek amphora, or wine jar:

PAUL LANIER: *With the fountain at the winery, she wanted to depict the history of the St. Helena area.*

NARRATOR: Let's take a closer look – starting with our backs to the Beringer Mansion.

See the medieval knights on either side of the oval crest with two Bs inside? They were inspired by figures from a stained-glass window inside the mansion. Their faces represent German brothers Jacob and Frederick Beringer, who established this winery in 1876. Around to the left, and down a little, Marvin Gaye lounges amid the leaves, with a musical note above his hat. No doubt he's singing "I Heard it Through the Grapevine"!

Now move your gaze up and to the left, and you'll see the Beringer Mansion itself. Sheltering its left side is a magnificent oak tree. According to winery legend, its roots tapped into a wine barrel in the cellars, causing it to grow to a huge size and also lean slightly tipsily to one side! Beneath the tree, you'll see a tiny couple on a bench - Ruth and her husband Albert.

Further around to the left is a gentleman in Victorian clothing, gesturing toward a big, drooping, tree-like vine. That's George Yount, who planted Napa Valley's first grapevines in the 1830s. He gave his name to nearby Yountville.

Next to the left is a building with a triangular gable flanked by palm trees and pines. Below, you'll find a truck with figures gathered around a big paper plan. One is Ruth herself – and another is Piero Mussi. This was one of several bronze-casting projects Piero worked on with Ruth at his foundry in Berkeley. Ruth was so enthusiastic to discuss the Beringer project with Piero that she started explaining it to him in his parking lot!

PIERO MUSSI: *And she came over with the drawing. And I remember I was outside, just got back with my truck and Ruth said, "Oh, I got a job for you now. Let's look at it", and didn't even give me the time to go into the office. She start to show me the drawing. So I opened the tail of the truck and we all sat there and we spend an hour and a half looking at the drawing.*

NARRATOR: Ruth's son Hudson:

HUDSON LANIER: *She really did get things done and she wouldn't be shy about asking people for favors. And how could you turn her down? You couldn't turn her*

down. So, you know, gardeners, photographers, foundrymen, all different people would do all these things for her.

PIERO MUSSI: She was so special, let's put it this way. Every artist has got his own character, own personality, and Ruth was the one that makes your work so easy. You know, you can actually relax and talk to her, discuss with her. Her hands was just always creating. The best artists, that's how they are. They just create something spontaneously, real quick.

NARRATOR: Ruth had a great sense of fun and loved to put little surprises into her work. See the cherub faces up at the top? One is her granddaughter Aiko Sofia – then barely a year old. And frogs appear in the fountain basin, and around the fountain itself. They often appear in other works, too.

At the dedication, the winery gave Ruth a double magnum of one of their finest wines. She served it at one of her community meetings at her home.

PIERO MUSSI: When Ruth comes, it was a fun time!