

Introduction to Ruth

PETER COYOTE: Hello – I’m Peter Coyote. I’m honored to talk to you about Ruth Asawa. We served together as members of the California Arts Council, and were friends for many years.

On this audio tour, we’re excited to take you to see Ruth Asawa’s public art and commissions in the Bay Area. Whether you’re visiting the art in person or listening at home, there’s a lot to see and learn. We’ll start by giving you some of the background to understand who this remarkable woman was as an artist - and as a person. And as we explore Ruth’s work, we’ll be meeting some of those closest to her – including her daughters Aiko and Addie:

AIKO CUNEO: There would be one sculpture started maybe over here and then another one in this room here. She would be working on that, and then she would go in the kitchen and cook dinner. And, I think a lot of her work was done when we were asleep.

ADDIE LANIER: I know her more as an artist activist, parent, PTA mom.

PETER COYOTE: Born in 1926, Ruth had a hardworking childhood on a farm in Southern California. During World War Two, her family was held in internment camps, alongside other Japanese Americans. Teacher college in Milwaukee came next. After three years’ study, she was denied her final year’s teaching practice and therefore her degree - because she was Japanese American.

But later in 1946, a new world opened up to Ruth, at Black Mountain College.

ADDIE LANIER: It was the first time people asked her to think.

PETER COYOTE: There, Ruth’s life was filled with art, dance, music, new ways of thinking. She also met her future husband, architect Albert Lanier.

Ruth and Albert raised their six children in San Francisco. And here, she developed her artistic career, making her iconic looped wire and tied wire sculptures, as well as her public artworks and commissions. She often said the commissions were important for two reasons. She got to experiment with new materials and techniques she could never have afforded on her own. And, she got to work with other artists and involve her family and friends. Because the commissions were designed for specific places, she worked with architects, developers, fabricators and the community to bring them to life. During this 30-year period, she also became deeply involved in arts education. She founded art programs, fundraised for art programs, and eventually helped to found the public high school for the arts which carries her name.

ADDIE LANIER: She always knew how to put on a meal for ten on absolutely nothing. And she knew how to do the art project with three hundred school children in two days - she just knew how to stretch the resources available. To do what you want to do

without thinking of the limitations that have been imposed upon you, that ... would be Asawa. That's a good verb! I mean, it's..

AIKO CUNEO: ... an Asawa?

ADDIE LANIER: To Asawa! It's what you do. You go and you try and optimize what's in front of you. Go forward.