

San Francisco Fountain, Union Square, 1970 - 1973

PETER COYOTE: Ruth Asawa's San Francisco Fountain was dedicated on February 14th, 1973. It was her valentine to the city, full of all its landmarks - along with a few surprises. Feel free to pause the audio whenever you like, to find details we're pointing out – or others you happen across.

Let's begin exploring up the steps, at the very top of the fountain – you'll see a couple sunbathing naked, up on the fountain's rim. Here, we're out west, at Golden Gate Park.

Moving down the steps to the right, you'll see the domed Conservatory of Flowers, with majestic palm trees either side. Down a little further, there's a *huge* American eagle, with a Peace march above it. There are some great signs here!

To the right of the eagle is Alvarado Elementary School. Ruth established a beloved arts program there, and the little figures were actually made by Alvarado students. Beneath Alvarado is the pillared facade of Mission Dolores church – San Francisco's oldest building.

Now look to the right of Alvarado School, and you'll see a spreading tree, below a tunnel with buses going in and out. Beneath the tree are the double gates of Ruth's home – and guests from her daughter Aiko's wedding.

AIKO CUNEO: *Well, I came home to get married, so of course the wedding went in and there's the wedding cake.*

PETER COYOTE: Actually, Aiko made the dome of City Hall that crowns the front of the fountain. To its left is the Opera House, with looped curtains and the ballet and symphony onstage. Below those performers, there's a fabulous Victorian building with bay windows. Ruth's daughters Addie and Aiko can let you in on a secret here:

ADDIE LANIER: *and if you look inside the window, you see a naked couple. That was one of Ruth's favorite little jokes –*

AIKO CUNEO: *And she was asked and she said, well, they're doing what most people usually do when they're in bed – you know, sleeping!*

PETER COYOTE: You might need a smartphone flashlight to see inside that window!

ADDIE LANIER: *And it's really cool because it is the outrageousness of San Francisco after the Summer of Love with the Peace March, and the hippies, and the protests, and just the kind of craziness that was San Francisco at the time.*

PETER COYOTE: Down below at the front of the fountain is the Ferry Building, a helicopter hovering by its tower. To the right, an enormous seagull leads our eye upward, past the lion gates of Chinatown, to a wonderful Chinese New Year dragon parade. And way up above are the snaky curves of Lombard Street. Moving on to the

right again, past the church spires of North Beach, there's Coit Tower, with a Halloween festival swirling around it. All the way down below is the clock tower of Ghirardelli Square, with Ruth's famous mermaid fountain. Up to the right again is the Golden Gate Bridge. Then the many columns of the Legion of Honor Museum – and back to Golden Gate Park at the top. And ... as you've seen, we've only scratched the surface!

For Ruth, as with so many of her projects, this was an opportunity to engage her whole community, and beyond. As well as the Alvarado kids, many of her family and friends worked on the fountain with her, including Aiko, and her friends Mae Lee and Sally Woodbridge.

ADDIE LANIER: That was a crew that worked on that project – it was very big. And then of course my grandmother Haru - she was a bird maker, a leaf maker, those small little bits that had to be made.

PETER COYOTE: To model the scenes, Ruth and her team made giant batches of Baker's clay from flour, salt and water.

AIKO CUNEO: And so it was 1400 pounds of flour and the panels were worked on simultaneously - sometimes they'd get a little soggy because of the fog in San Francisco, so that was a real challenge. And boy, the mice came for that flour and salt, so they had to put them up high so that they wouldn't get eaten.

PETER COYOTE: The panels took over her home and studio. They eventually moved to the backyard once they returned from the foundry. At that point they had been cast in bronze, but retained the wonderful quiriness of the baker's clay they'd been modeled in.

ADDIE LANIER: She wanted it to look like the softness and goofiness of dough. Everybody can relate to bread dough – it's a universal thing. Part of the genius of my mother is that she really understood how to design work that could speak to everyday people.

PETER COYOTE: The architect had asked Ruth to make something that could be “loved and touched.” Ruth's granddaughter Lilli never gets tired of looking at the fountain ...

LILLI LANIER: I love the whole thing – I love the completeness of it, that you could think of something “San Francisco” and look for it, and you can find it. And every time I go – I've been there so many times – I still find new things that I've never noticed before.