



Today's Masterpiece: Ruth Asawa, [*Plane Trees II*](#) (TAM.1472), 1965. Lithograph. Museum purchase with funds provided by Gordon J. Brodfuehrer in Honor of Dr. James Lasry, 2007.93. © 2023 Ruth Asawa Lanier, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy David Zwirner.



Welcome back to **Masterpiece Minute on Virtual SDMA**. I'm your host, **Rachel Jans**, Associate Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at The San Diego Museum of Art. Drop by on the first Friday of each month at 10:00 a.m. to pick up a new mini talk led by SDMA curators and special guests spotlighting works of art from the Museum's collection.

In 1965 the artist Ruth Asawa traveled from her home in San Francisco to Los Angeles. She spent two intensive months working in lithography, a medium that originated in the late 18th century, but was a new and exciting way for her to work. Asawa was invited by June Wayne, who founded the Tamarind Lithography Workshop in Los Angeles five years earlier and revitalized the printmaking medium with hands-on training for a new generation of artists.

Created in 1965, *Plane Trees II*, is one of the fifty-four prints Asawa created with a team of master printers during her residency in Los Angeles. Asawa often drew inspiration from nature, and the plane trees featured in this print lined the streets of her San Francisco neighborhood and filled the nearby Golden Gate Park Concourse near the de Young Museum. In fluid and brushy black ink on white paper, the work features a series of trees receding into the distance. The almost liquid state of the lithography accentuates the distinctive knobby forms of the branches and trunks, lending an exceptional feeling of texture and immediacy.

The elegance of black ink on paper is a reoccurring element in Asawa's art, which we can trace all the way to her childhood. The artist was born in the southern California town of Norwalk in 1926; it was a farming community at the time. Her Japanese-born father supported his large family as a truck farmer, and sent his children to a local Japanese language school, where Asawa spent her Saturdays and first took calligraphy lessons. Recalling the significance of these early lessons, she later noted, "We were taught to look at the space that we don't touch. The form in calligraphy, the form is the space around the letter—that we leave white—as much as the character." Later in San Francisco, where she moved in 1949, Asawa studied calligraphy with the Zen Master Hodo Tobase.

The idea that the white expanse of paper is just as important as the subject depicted is a simple yet radical notion, one that finds an eloquent expression in this print. Not only is the void or the negative space integral to the composition, but sum is more than the parts. As Asawa once noted, "When I put one shape next to another, I look at the new shape created in space." We can see then, Asawa's interest in the way elements interact with one another. Interestingly, the grouping of trees in her composition reflects her ideal way of displaying the sinuous looped-wire sculptures for which she is best known—in groups and clusters.

Asawa was again exposed to Zen teachings while a student at Black Mountain College, where she studied from 1946–1949. Her professors Max Dehn and Josef Albers emphasized yin and yang, negative and positive, hot and cold, all concepts that resonate with the opposing elements that give life to her work. Based on the principle that oil and water do not mix, lithography exemplifies such binaries, which is perhaps one reason Asawa excelled in her experiments with the medium.

As this print—and Asawa’s incredible body of work attests—magic can emerge from the most elemental materials and palette. June Wayne later marveled, “Anything she touches” becomes art. “She could make art of a mud puddle if she wished to.”



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