

An Activity Guide to 

Masters of Modern Design

The Art of the
Japanese American Experience

Ruth Asawa

Gyo Obata

Isamu Noguchi

George Nakashima

S. Neil Fujita

Kay Sekimachi

janm  JAPANESE AMERICAN
NATIONAL MUSEUM

Masters of Modern Design

Activity Guide

Artists have always helped us understand the world around us; they shape how we see the world and excite us with inspiration. The artists featured in the *Artbound* documentary *Masters of Modern Design: The Art of the Japanese American Experience*, are no exception.

Co-produced by KCET and JANM's Watase Media Arts Center, and available to stream for free on the PBS website, this hour-long film features five Japanese American artists who found beauty and optimism during difficult times. Each was influenced by their unjust incarceration during World War II and each found ways to make art despite this hardship. The activities in this book are inspired by these artists and their spirit of creativity. We suggest working through this book during or after watching *Masters of Modern Design*. All included activities are designed to use materials you might already have at home. See activity examples and share your creations using the hashtag **#JANMinspired** on social media!

Designed for ages 6 and up!

BEGINNER: 

INTERMEDIATE:  

MASTER:   

Ruth Asawa

3

Gyo Obata

5

Isamu Noguchi

6

George Nakashima

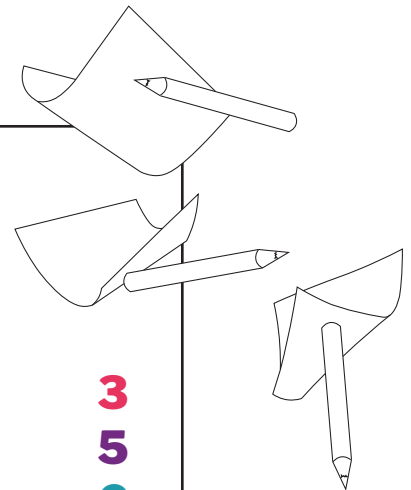
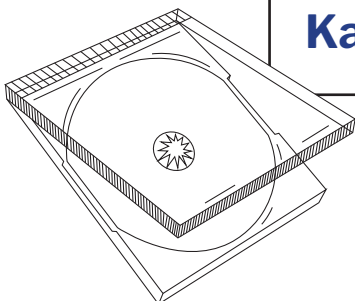
8

S. Neil Fujita

10

Kay Sekimachi

12





RUTH ASAWA

1926–2013

Ruth Asawa was born in Norwalk, CA, and is an artist most widely known for her work creating wire forms. During World War II, she was incarcerated in Rohwer, Arkansas.

ACTIVITY 1:

Materials needed: pencil and paper.

In the film, Ruth Asawa's sculptures are described as "baskets that are closed." Look closely at the lines, shapes, and edges of her sculptures.

What words would you use to describe her work?

Try drawing one of her pieces of artwork. (You can pause the film to get a good look. One of our favorite spots is at the 43:19 mark!) Imagine your line is one long piece of wire. That means you will have to make your drawing without lifting your pencil!

"Sometimes the most interesting artists aren't the heroic, male, abstract expressionists painters, but someone like Ruth Asawa, who does her work at home, surrounded by her children, with the simplest materials and still was able to make something amazing." —Alexandra Lange, design historian



ACTIVITY 2:

Materials needed: Wire ties, string, or yarn.

Ruth Asawa is known for using wire to make her art. If you have any wire in your house, such as little twist ties or the longer twist ties that are sometimes used around produce, try making something out of them. You can bend them, twist them, and tie them into knots.

Notice how the wire stays in the shapes you make. If you can't find any wire, maybe you can find some yarn or string and do some finger weaving. All you need are your hands! An instructional video for how to do this can be found on JANM's YouTube channel [here](#).

After you've finished your creation, hold it up to the light.

Does it cast an interesting shadow?

Did Ruth Asawa's sculptures cast shadows?

Why do you think that is? How do the shadows compare to yours?

Take your sculpture outside into the sun.

How does that change the shadows you see?

What happens if you leave it for an hour and then reexamine the shadows?

*"Ruth was inclined to find the good in the grimmest situations."
—Marilyn Chase, journalist and Asawa biographer*





GYO OBATA

1923–

Gyo Obata was born in San Francisco, CA, and is the architect of many buildings, including the Japanese American National Museum. During World War II, he enrolled in Washington University in St. Louis while his family was incarcerated in Topaz, Utah.

ACTIVITY 1:

Materials needed: Anything you can find! Some ideas of materials you can use: cardboard rolls, paper or plastic cups, CD cases, index cards, paper, even junk mail can be useful! Sometimes envelopes have neat little windows that you can cut out and use. Depending on the materials you are using, scissors, glue, or tape might be useful too.

Gyo Obata was an architect who designed very unique buildings. In the film, his buildings are described as “day-lit spectacular spaces” because of the way light goes through them.

Try creating a miniature building using materials found in your home. Think about open and closed spaces and use materials that light can pass through and other materials that block light. We suggest doing this activity outside so you can see the sunlight go through your building and as an added bonus, you can use natural materials that you find outside!

If you’re building indoors, use a flashlight and shine it on your creation from all directions. Whether indoors or out, see how light travels through your structure.

What kinds of shadows does it create?

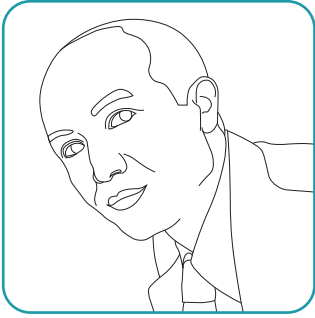
Imagine you are very tiny and can walk into your creation.

What would you see if you looked up?

What would you see if you looked to the sides?

“His mother told him that as an artist, painting was one thing but if you’re an architect, you’re building art.”
—Kiku Obata, Gyo Obata’s daughter





ISAMU NOGUCHI

1904–1988

Isamu Noguchi was born in Los Angeles, CA, and is most prominently known for his work in sculpture and landscape architecture. During World War II, he was living on the East Coast and therefore West Coast exclusion orders did not apply to him; however, he opposed the injustice of incarceration and in an act of solidarity he voluntarily entered the prison camp in Poston, Arizona.

ACTIVITY 1:

Materials needed: Paper and drawing materials.

Start by going for a walk outside. As you walk, look around and think about how spaces are used.

Why are there buildings in some areas and none in others?

Do you see natural things like grass, trees, or flowers?

Is there anything you see that you wish was different? More buildings? More open spaces? More nature?

Isamu Noguchi liked to design parks, gardens, miniature golf courses, and other spaces that could lift our spirits. In the film, it is mentioned that Noguchi believed that good design could fix anything.

Do you agree with this?

What sort of outdoor spaces make you happiest?

After taking a moment to think, draw the coolest outdoor space you can imagine. It could be a garden, a park, a place for sports, or all of those things and more! Imagine going there with a friend. Include as many details as you can.

What will make it fun?

What will make people want to visit your space?

What will make them feel happy?

*"He always had a sense of civic purpose. He was interested in sculpture because he was a civilization builder."
—Dakin Hart, Senior Curator at The Noguchi Museum*



ACTIVITY 2:

Materials needed: Cardboard and scissors.

In the film, we learn about Isamu Noguchi's interlocking sculptures. These were made of flat materials that could be collapsed and easily carried.

Using any cardboard you can find (cereal boxes, paper plates, or postcards would work great!), cut out fun shapes. Make some with straight edges and others with curvy edges. Make some shapes with both! Cut little slits into the shapes, but don't cut all the way through. Connect the pieces together by interlocking the slits.

"He took everything that should've been a handicap and made it into the core of what made him the powerful, successful person that he was." —Dakin Hart, Senior Curator at The Noguchi Museum





GEORGE NAKASHIMA

1905–1990

George Nakashima was born in Spokane, WA. He trained as an architect but is known as a woodworker who designed distinctive furniture. During World War II, he was incarcerated in Minidoka, ID.

ACTIVITY 1:

Materials needed: Paper, drawing materials, partner(s).

George Nakashima used the natural shapes, knots, and holes in wood to his advantage. He used whatever wood was available to him. There were many existing designs and shapes in wood that he didn't have any control over.

Find someone to do this activity with you. Each of you should draw a random line or shape on a piece of paper and then trade papers. Now, using that line or shape that was drawn by someone else, turn it into a drawing of some type of furniture. Maybe you'll invent an unusual desk or table or a one-of-a-kind chair or bench! This activity can be done with more than two people. You can also pass the drawings around more than once so multiple people contribute to the furniture creations.

"When he first opened his workshop, I don't think he could afford to buy really good lumber. Rather than bemoaning the fact that he couldn't afford the really good lumber, he improvised with it."
 —Mira Nakashima, George Nakashima's daughter



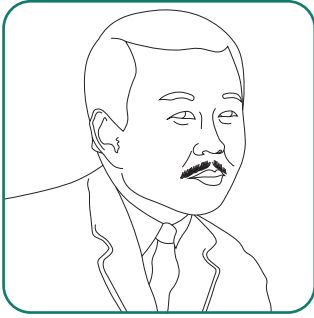
ACTIVITY 2:

Materials needed: Anything you can find, glue.

George Nakashima liked to make things with found objects. He liked to collect wood but also used found objects that were man-made, even broken pieces of things. See what is around your home or be like Nakashima and go outside to see what natural materials you can find. Maybe some sticks or leaves that are an interesting shape.

Create a sculpture using the objects you find. Remember, the most interesting shapes aren't always the most perfect ones! Find things that are flawed or a funny shape. These are often the best kind of materials to work with.





S. NEIL FUJITA

1921–2010

S. Neil Fujita was born in Waimea, HI. He designed album and book covers. During World War II, he was incarcerated in Heart Mountain, WY, before enlisting in the army and serving in the 442nd Regimental Combat Team.

ACTIVITY 1:

Materials needed: Access to music, paper, and colorful drawing materials.

S. Neil Fujita was a graphic designer. He drew the artwork for the covers of jazz records. His designs were usually abstract, meaning he didn't try to represent something real but instead used shapes, colors, and forms. Listen to a favorite song or album and draw an abstract design that could be the artwork for the album cover.

If you're feeling stuck, try to find a song or album that Fujita designed artwork for, such as Miles Davis' *Round About Midnight*, Don Byrd and Gigi Gryce's *Modern Jazz Perspective*, and the Dave Brubeck Quartet album *Time Out*. While you are listening, think about how you would "illustrate" the music.

What colors seem most fitting?

What shapes?

What textures?

If you picked an album that Fujita did artwork for, how does your art compare to his?

"I think jazz was something that represented freedom for him."
—Kenji Fujita, S. Neil Fujita's son



ACTIVITY 2:

Materials needed: Photo for inspiration, paper, pencil, recording device (optional).

Fujita often drew inspiration from his travels throughout Europe during WWII as part of the all Japanese American 442nd Regimental Combat Team—reminding us that our own life experiences and happy memories are often the best inspiration!

Ask someone to send you a favorite picture of a place they've visited. Look carefully at the image and think about how it makes you feel. Now imagine that the photo is a piece of music.

What type of music would it be?

Would it be fast and loud?

Soft and slow?

Write a short song that represents the image. If available, record yourself humming the tune for the song. Then, write some lyrics for your song and put it all together! Record or perform your song for the person whose photo inspired it.





KAY SEKIMACHI

1926–

Kay Sekimachi was born in San Francisco, CA, and is considered a master weaver and fiber artist. During World War II, she was incarcerated in Topaz, UT.

Now that your creative juices are flowing, check out the [additional short film](#) made in conjunction with Masters of Modern Design on pioneer weaver Kay Sekimachi. We were inspired by her life story, her spirit, and her groundbreaking work with textiles to create these activities.

ACTIVITY 1: —

Materials needed: Printer, paper, scissors, drawing materials.

Throughout her adolescence, Kay Sekimachi passed her time playing with paper dolls. (You can get a good look at these at the 0:53 and 1:45 marks in the film.) She drew fabulous costumes to imagine a lifestyle of glamour even when her family was experiencing extreme hardship. During World War II, when Sekimachi and her family were incarcerated, they were able to leave some of their belongings with friends who kept and returned their things to them after the war. Her paper doll collection was one of the treasures she left for safekeeping.

Start your own paper doll collection. Print the page labeled “Sekimachi Activity 1” and cut out the paper figure. Design some stylish clothes to go along with it. You can start by designing patterns for the clothes provided or you can design and cut your own shapes and pieces.

“It was craft when she began working in weaving, it was not considered art yet and yet because of the things she did with it, she helped elevate weaving to art.”
—Michele Ellis Pracy, Chief Curator at Fresno Art Museum



ACTIVITY 2:

Materials needed: Printer, paper, scissors, tape.

Known as the “weaver’s weaver,” Kay Sekimachi was captivated by the loom very early on in her career. Some of her earliest pieces were placemats. These were not only beautiful but they were also useful! You can weave placemats with your family to make your next meal more fun.

Print out the two pages labeled “Sekimachi Activity 2.” For extra interesting patterns, use colored paper or scratch paper that has designs, pictures, or words on them.

- For the first page, cut on the dashed lines so you end up with 1-inch strips
- For the second page, fold on the dotted line and cut on the dashed lines. Unfold this sheet so you have a paper with slits in the middle.
- Take a strip and weave it into the second page in an over/under action.
- Repeat with another strip alternating the over/under action
- Continue repeating until you have a completed placemat. (Don’t worry, you’ll end up with some extra strips and that’s okay!)

Now you know how to weave! For an extra challenge, try cutting your strips and slits thicker or thinner. Challenge yourself to be creative, you can decorate the paper as extravagantly or as simply as you like. Try using magazine pages or try making smaller items like coasters! When you finish weaving, add tape on one side for reinforcement.

*“Her grandmother said if you want to be a weaver you have to feel like a thread.”
—Michele Ellis Pracy, Chief Curator at Fresno Art Museum*



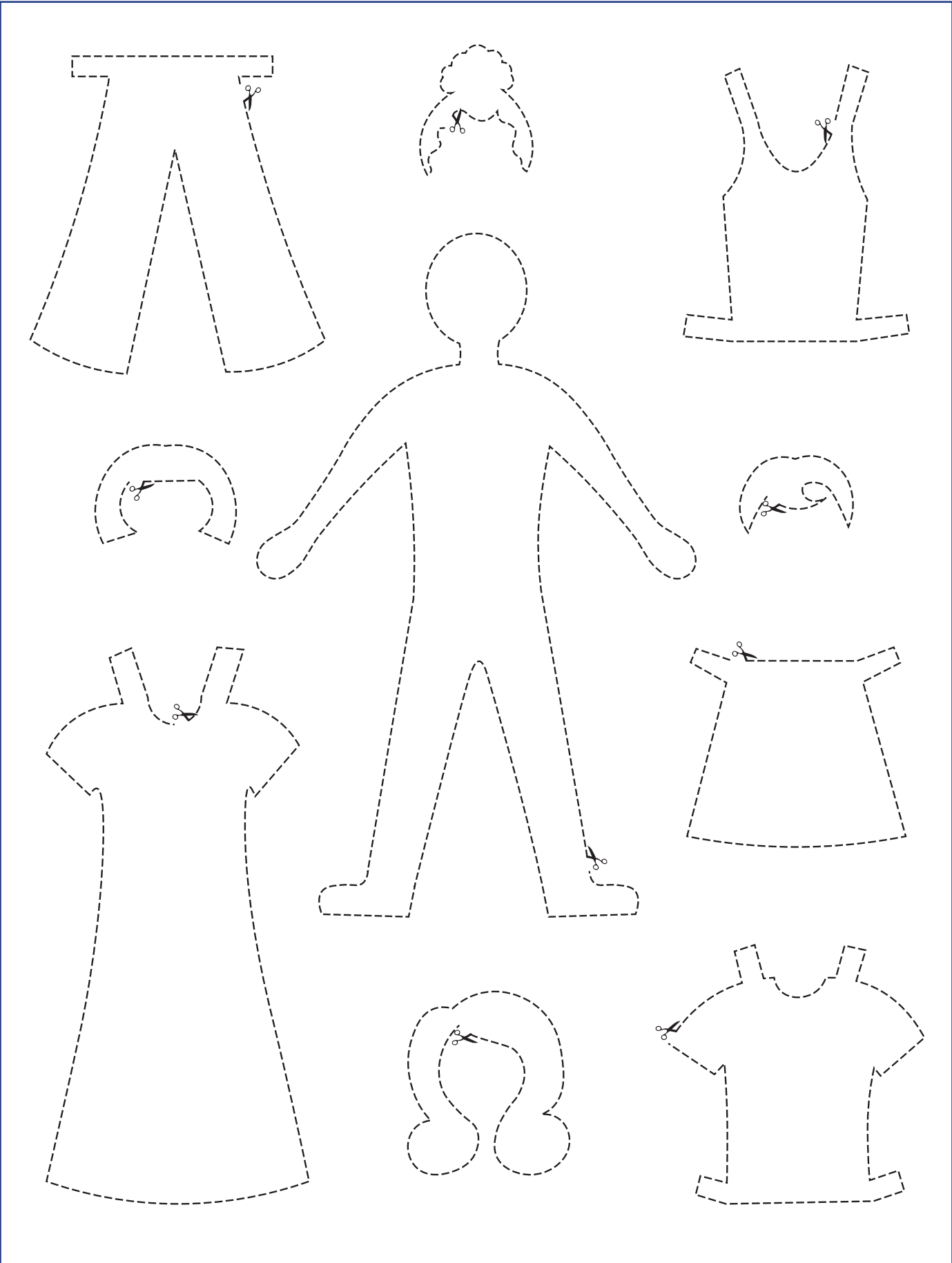
ACTIVITY 3: 

Materials needed: Paper and drawing materials.

S. Neil Fujita also designed book covers. Think of your favorite book and re-design a cover for it. Try to write the words in the title in a creative way. Is there a symbol or color that could represent the story? Challenge yourself to keep it as simple as possible with as little information as possible, while still communicating what the book is about.



(Sekimachi Activity 1)



(Sekimachi Activity 2)

A series of horizontal dashed lines for writing.

(Sekimachi Activity 2)

A grid consisting of seven vertical dashed lines, evenly spaced across the page, intended for writing or drawing. The lines extend from the top of the page down to a horizontal solid line that spans the width of the page.