Transcript
Dead Ladies Show Podcast Episode 58
Ruth Asawa

(Dead Ladies Show Music — 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon

SUSAN STONE: Welcome to the Dead Ladies Show Podcast! I'm Susan Stone.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: I'm Katy Derbyshire

FLORIAN DUISJENS: And I'm Florian Duisjens.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: The Dead Ladies Show celebrates women — both overlooked and iconic — who achieved amazing things against all odds while they were alive.

FLORIAN DUISJENS: And we do it through women's history storytelling on stage, here in Berlin and beyond. Then we bring you the very best of those stories here on the podcast.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: It's holiday time, and we're continuing our Dead Ladies Show tradition — getting together to toast the end of another year — with our favorite German fizz, Rotkäppchen! [LAUGHTER, OOHS, THE SOUND OF A POPPING CORK AND CLINKING GLASSES]

FLORIAN DUISJENS: So classy! And at the end of the show we'll be talking about some of our favorite Dead Lady moments from this year. But first, we're going to hear about a fabulous Dead Lady, artist Ruth Asawa. There are a lot of gorgeous visuals that you might want to refer to while you listen, or later, and you'll find them in our episode notes page at deadladiesshow.com/podcast.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: The story comes courtesy of our own beloved producer Susan Stone, who you know well, obviously. She's a journalist and podcaster, and aside from working on our show, she is currently senior editor on another podcast about a dead lady, the geographer Doreen Massey — that one's called *Spatial Delight*, and we'll drop a link for you in the show notes.

But first, here's Susan from the stage in Berlin's ACUD, to tell us about the wonderful Ruth Asawa.

SUSAN STONE: Ruth Asawa wove art from adversity. What fenced her in, eventually set her free. The world tried to tell her what she was. She told it — "I am an artist."

Ruth Aiko Asawa was born January 24th 1926 on a farm in Southern California. [SHOWS SLIDE] Her parents Umakichi and Haru were immigrants from Japan, growing seasonal crops, like strawberries, green beans, and tomatoes. Umakichi had lived on the West Coast of the US since the early 1900s, having started in Hawaii, then Utah, and finding his livelihood farming in California.

In search of a wife, in 1919, he began correspondence with Haru, who joined him from Japan as what's called a picture bride. [SHOWS SLIDE] That's sort of like online dating before online dating -- couples would send portraits back and forth, and much like the present day, then men often posted — literally in the post, the mail — images of themselves from several years previous [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER] so often the incoming brides got a bit of a shock at who picked them up at the harbor.

But despite a more than 10-year age gap, the two made things work, and Ruth was born as the fourth of seven children. Farms can use all the hands they can get. Although the family worked hard, as Japanese immigrants, or *Issei,* Umakichi and Haru could not own the land they toiled, or apply for American citizenship. [SHOWS SLIDE]

But Ruth and her siblings, who were *Nisei* — second generation — grew up as Japanese Americans. Lois, George, Chiyo, Ruth, Bill, Kimiko, and Janet all worked on the farm, attending school six days a week. Saturdays were spent at Japanese language and culture school. There they learn calligraphy, origami, and practice Kendo, a kind of Japanese fencing.

Ruth's early life was spent in the fields. By the time she is six, she has regular jobs, including starting and maintaining the wood fire for the family's evening bathwater. She was kind of argumentative as a child, so she often got assigned to work alone. Each year she strung up the string beans so that they would grow straight and tall, running a line across the bottom, middle and top across five acres. Ruth was said to have relentless energy — when she weeded crops, it was with two hands at a time — and she needed it for this hardscrabble life.

In free moments, she sketches abstract forms, curving and looping in the dirt. From an early age, Ruth loved drawing. She drew cartoon characters like Blondie and Little Orphan Annie, or portraits of child star Shirley Temple. By the age of 10 she declares that she wants to be an artist.

The family is frugal, and there are few craft supplies. Ruth begins to save fine wire scraps used to bind vegetables together, and she weaves them into bracelets and rings. She loves to collect and work with found objects, a habit that stays with her throughout her life.

The Asawa children were sent in turn to Japan to study with relatives. But when it was Ruth's turn, her uncle was ill, so she didn't go. When the next chance comes, she had already outgrown the kimonos sewn for the trip and she was excited about high school, so her younger sister Kimiko goes in her place, chaperoned by older sister Lois. The year is 1941. Ruth is 15 years old. One day, everything changes.

[CLIP PLAYS]

PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT: *Mr Vice President. Mr. Speaker, members of the Senate of the House of Representatives. Yesterday, December 7 1941, a date which will live in infamy. The United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by the naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan.*

SUSAN STONE: That's US President Franklin D. Roosevelt announcing war with Japan in retaliation for the surprise military strikes on the US Naval Base at Pearl Harbor in Honolulu, Hawaii. Before this event, the US was a neutral party in World War II. Now, it is at war. At home, and abroad.

Ruth remembered: "Terror struck all of us. We wondered how our classmates would react. On Monday the 8th, our high school principal called an emergency assembly to make the announcement that the United States and Japan were at war, but assured the student body the Japanese students at Excelsior Union High School were not responsible for it."

But plans were already in place. A memo sent to President Roosevelt in 1940 listed the bullet points to get ready for war with Japan. Number 12 was: "prepare plans for concentration camps to avoid sabotage from the so-called fifth column, the enemy within they believed could be found amongst the many citizens and residents of Japanese heritage." We know these now primarily as internment camps, and back then the term concentration camps didn't have the, *well* historical connotation it does today. It is still frankly chilling.

"To prevent any fifth column activity… All Japanese, whether citizens or not , must be placed in concentration camps," said Representative Leland Ford, Republican of California in January 1942, just weeks after Pearl Harbor. He urged people to enter the camps voluntarily, in the name of military security. [SHOWS SLIDE]

Public reaction was swift and unpleasant too. The San Francisco Examiner blared headlines like "OUSTER OF ALL JAPS IN CALIFORNIA NEAR!" An at the time little-known cartoonist called Dr. Seuss — yes him — published a rude editorial cartoon [SHOWS SLIDE] picturing a line of Japanese west-coast residents picking up explosives and quote "waiting for the signal from home" unquote. Very Grinchy, Dr Seuss. Boo.

Ruth's father Umakichi burns all the family's Japanese heirlooms and souvenirs. But it's to no avail. In February 1942, Umakichi, who is now 60 years old, is arrested by FBI agents. They are suspicious about those bamboo swords the kids have been practicing Kendo with — "why are you arming your children, Mr. Asawa?" They take him to an internment camp in New Mexico for the duration of the war.

Families like Ruth's must sell or abandon their possessions, losing almost everything — from horses to houses. [SHOWS SLIDE] Speaking of horses… Haru and six of the Asawa children turned themselves into a temporary detention center at the Santa Anita racetrack. Kimiko was stuck in Japan under observation for the duration of the war, and Lois had just made it home just in time to join the family for the move. They were given living space in converted horse stables, leaky, smelly, and lacking in privacy. At its peak, the racetrack center held 18,719 Japanese Americans. The children went to school up in the stadium seats.

Still, It was here that Ruth first encountered professional artists. One day, three Japanese American artists appeared as internees. They worked for Disney's animation studios, where they had contributed to films like *Snow White*, *Dumbo*, and *Pinocchio*. Tom Okamoto, Chris Ishii

and James Tanaka offered to teach the Santa Anita children drawing and perspective. Ruth loved being taught by them. But after six months, the family was told they would be moved to an inland internment camp with other Japanese Americans. There were several so-called relocation centers in the West, mid-West, and South. After boarding a train, and being forbidden to raise the blinds or look out the windows, they journey to the end of the line: Rohwer, Arkansas. [REFERS TO SLIDE] So that's California there, and Arkansas is over here with only three Japanese people [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER]. So at the time, Japanese people living in the US were concentrated on the West Coast, partly due to its relative proximity to Japan. Now, they were to be moved to the interior of the country away from the coasts — presumably they would do less damage there?

All in all, 120,000 ethnic Japanese US citizens were interned during World War II. The American Civil Liberties Union called it "the worst single wholesale violation of civil rights of American citizens in our history." And that's saying something. I'm going to add here that actually no sabotage ever happened by the way. [SHOWS SLIDE]

Rowher had guard towers and fences, but it also had a lot of young people. Here's Ruth with some of her friends. [SHOWS SLIDE] She excelled in classes, especially Art and English. Her art teacher Miss Jamison took the classes on field trips to sketch landscapes outside the camp. There's Ruth! [REFERS TO SLIDE] I've conveniently marked Ruth with "Ruth" for you! [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER] Yes, and Mrs Beasley. So this image shows Ruth with her adored English teacher Mrs. Beasley — photo taken by her art teacher Miss Jamison. Ruth drew and painted. She served as art editor of the camp yearbook and illustrated it with caricatures of her fellow students. [SHOWS SLIDE] Now why did she do that? Well, they couldn't have photos in their yearbook like most other American students, the internment camp residents weren't allowed cameras for "national security reasons," so any photos from that time seem to be taken by her teachers. But Ruth always made the best of things. "Art saved us," she said of her time in internment.

And as she remembered ironically, the internment camps had a sort of upside for the Asawas: free time. No more early mornings and late nights planting, harvesting and packing vegetables from the family farm. Ruth had time to draw and to dream. Her mother Haru took craft and sewing classes, and visited the camp's beauty salon to get her first permanent wave in her hair. Ruth later said sardonically that the camp was "the first vacation [the family] had ever really taken."

Of course that didn't lessen the constant worrying about missing husband and father Umakichi. Though Ruth dreamed of life as an artist, she was advised to become a teacher, to "do something sensible," secure a safe career for the future. She got a scholarship from a Quaker organization called the Japanese American Student Relocation Council to attend college in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Anyone leaving the internment camp was required to stay in the middle of the country, so she could not yet return to California. After leaving Rowher at 17 to attend college, Ruth never returned to visit her family there, and they weren't released until November 1945. She did not actually see her parents at all again until 1948, when she was 22.

She was issued a special ID card that allowed her to travel from Arkansas to Milwaukee. Her English teacher, Mrs. Beasley — Mrs Beasley again — drove her to the train station. As a farewell, Mrs. Beasley said to Ruth: “This is a terrible thing my government has done to your people. Don’t look back on your life here. You must go on.” I mean really, it was Ruth’s government too right? [SHOWS SLIDE]

So she could leave the camp with this ID, which by the way is now in the collection of the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery, a US government museum in Washington DC. Ruth’s time in the internment camps was ‘only’ 18 months, but it changed her life forever.

Later in life she said: “I hold no hostilities for what happened. I blame no one. Sometimes good comes through adversity. I would not be who I am today had it not been for the Internment, and I like who I am.” So, Ruth goes to Milwaukee, to learn to be an art teacher. [SHOWS SLIDE]

It’s a mixed experience. She must work as a housekeeper for room and board while studying. But she loves her coursework in the arts, and makes friends with other young teachers-to-be. Near the end of her teacher training though, there is another frustration. New teachers must complete placement in a classroom to finish their degree. But the programme refuses to put her in a school “for her own safety” they say students are ‘not ready’ for Asian instructors. Ruth is discouraged from teaching altogether — so much for that sensible career. She must leave without a degree, and without a way to support herself. But some of her friends from college have an idea. They are headed to Black Mountain College in North Carolina, and they help convince the liberal arts school to take Ruth for the summer program. [REFERS TO SLIDE] Looks like more fun doesn’t it! [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER]

So she lands at Black Mountain College, which turns out to be one of the most progressive art schools of its time, and she stays there from 1946-1949. It’s a work study program, so students and faculty eat together and share kitchen duties. No stranger to hard work, Ruth churns butter, and offers haircuts, becoming the school barber. [SHOWS SLIDE] What the school is lacking in funds, it makes up for in talent. Her classmates include future modern art icons Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Elaine de Kooning. [SHOWS SLIDE]

Faculty includes German Bauhaus luminaries Josef and Anni Albers, choreographer Merce Cunningham, experimental composer John Cage, and futurist architect and inventor Buckminster Fuller (best known for his geodesic dome), which explains why he is pictured like that on the cover of *TIME* magazine, like a big domed head!

Ruth is particularly close to Josef Albers who encourages pushing the boundaries of experimentation, and Bucky Fuller, an enthusiastic problem solver. Her world is open and full of opportunities. She travels to Mexico in 1947, and sees people looping baskets out of wire to hold eggs and produce, which fascinates her, so she learns how from a local craftsman. [SHOWS SLIDE] Here’s an image of an early basket work, along with examples of her drawing and printmaking. She excelled pretty much in all mediums, even modern dance. Her daughter later remembered: “it was almost a religious experience for her.”

A fellow student recalled: “Ruth was a beautiful and quiet person. The rest of us were students, but she was an artist.” There were no more barriers — Ruth could be free to find her creative bliss. [SHOWS SLIDE] She also finds love in the form of Albert Lanier, who is studying Architecture. That’s him shirtless over there. He looks very young! [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER] He was a little younger than she was, but not as young [as] Angela Carter and you know… Not like that! They hike and collect wildflowers, he helps her with math homework, she gives him advice on his architecture projects.

Ruth is in her 6th year of college, and is ready to go. In 1949, she and Albert decide to start their life together in San Francisco, where they can marry. Aren’t they cute! [SHOWS SLIDE] Their families aren’t overjoyed though. Though while Ruth’s parents are kind of sad about the match, Albert’s are shocked, and reeling. At the time, marriage between people of two different races is very uncommon, and in many places, illegal. But they all come around to this union of two loving artists. As it happens, only nine months earlier, in 1948, the anti-miscegenation laws prohibiting the marriage of people from different races were overturned, only in California though, where they’d had been banned since 1850.

You may have heard of the famous case *Loving v Virginia*, when the US Supreme Court ended all anti-miscegenation laws in the country? That wasn’t until 1967. [SHOCKED GASPS] Bucky Fuller designed her wedding ring, it’s a smooth black river stone with a silver band made up of interlocked letter A’s. Very sweet. Now as the saying goes first comes love, then comes marriage…[SHOWS SLIDE] Ruth always wanted a big family, and she got one. Between 1950 and 1959, Ruth and Albert added six children to their family, both biological and adopted. I heard that! It’s a lot! One less than seven though, right in her family! So it’s Xavier, Aiko, Hudson, Adam, Addie, and Paul. [SHOWS SLIDE] Here’s a photo of the family a few years later, in 1962, so with all of them present. [AWWS FROM AUDIENCE].

Ruth’s work was also growing during this fruitful period. In the early ‘50s, she started attracting notice for her sculptures. Her woven baskets now went further than the functional, morphing into transparent moving forms that must be suspended and considered. They cast shadows, and inspire interpretation - are they botanic forms? Sea creatures? Somehow womb-like? [REFERS TO SLIDE] You can see the kids there in the midst.

She hung work from the ceiling and worked upwards, but sometimes she had to hang from the ceiling herself and work downward to twist and loop the gossamer wire mesh into rounded forms. It was very physical labor, repetitive motion. Sometimes she had to put masking tape on her hands to cover the tears from the wire so she could keep working. And if the kids wanted to talk to her, they had to join in and help out by coiling wire onto wooden dowels. So her untitled works, mostly they are untitled, are generally crocheted from one continuous piece of wire. “It was like drawing in space” Ruth said of her work.

In 1953, her work is used as a backdrop to a fashion shoot in *Vogue*. In 1955, Ruth has her first solo art show at a gallery in New York, which is positively reviewed by *The New York Times* and *TIME* magazine, though *TIME* refers to her as “housewife and mother Ruth Asawa,” which while technically accurate feels suspect. [KNOWING LAUGH FROM AUDIENCE]

In 1960, she has her first solo exhibition in a museum, San Francisco's de Young. I love this picture, because this could be out of *Vogue* itself with this lady in a two piece suit there amongst the sculptures. People assume her art is very Asian, but she views it as more multicultural. I mean she's using a Mexican basket weaving technique, with design principles she learned from a German, after all. Anyway, her identity is simply "artist".

And her work is always evolving. After a friend brings her a twisted plant from the Death Valley desert to draw, she finds that it's too tangled to put down on paper, and re-constructs it from wire first taking her in a new direction of tied wire sculpture. [SHOWS SLIDE] Here's some various examples of that [ADMIRING SOUNDS FROM AUDIENCE]. Yeah, it's a little bit like tumbleweeds, and stars and explosions. It's quite fabulous.

By the way, you may have noticed that there are a lot of amazing photographs of Ruth. Most were taken by Imogen Cunningham, who would also be a great subject for the Dead Ladies Show. Imogen had one of the longest photographic careers in history. She bought her first camera in 1901 and took [SHOWS SLIDE] pictures up until her death at 93 in 1976. She and Ruth met in 1950, when Ruth was 24 and Imogen 67, and though they were 43 years apart in age, they became fast friends. They both refused to choose between family and creativity, and were often hit with a question that often plagues women artists at the time and probably still, that their work is more craft than art. Said Imogen of Ruth: "To me, she is what I call an unfailingly creative person and there are very few of them."

Ruth receives her first public art commission in 1966, for a fountain in San Francisco's Ghirardelli Square. Her design is whimsical and magical, and far from the minimalist abstractions she's known for. [SHOWS SLIDE] Working with clay she casts the form of her pregnant friend Andrea Jepsen, and turns her into a mermaid nursing a baby; she also names the fountain Andrea. There are frogs that might be mating, turtles, and giant water lilies. The square's principal architect hates it [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER] and even writes what becomes known as the "Mermaid Manifesto" against it! Others are scandalized by the breastfeeding scene. It's the 60s, yeah! But Ruth and Andrea (the fountain) prevail, and the work is completed in 1968. [SHOWS SLIDE]

She makes several more fountains in the region over the years, both modernist and realist, causing her to be dubbed the 'Fountain Lady'. The Aurora fountain from 1986 was first designed in paper, as an origami piece, then made in stainless steel. [REFERS TO SLIDE] It's down there, with the Golden Gate Bridge poking through, which is lovely. And the Ghirardelli and Hyatt fountains, which you can see…. Well, we saw the Ghiradelli and that's the Hyatt fountain in San Francisco in Union Square, that actually shows the history of San Francisco in the relief. So those two fountains were cast in bronze from sculpted baking clay, a technique she credited to having her studio at home and experimenting with materials that were safe for her kids to use. [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER]

Ruth was also tasked with designing meaningful memorials around California as years went on. From 1990-1994, she worked on San Jose's Japanese American Internment Memorial. The sculpted relief panels retell the experience, with scenes from her own life, including her father

burning their Japanese heirlooms and being arrested, and the family arriving at the internment camp in Arkansas. Her Garden of Remembrance at San Francisco State University, built between 2000-2002, utilizes boulders taken from each of the ten former internment camps where Japanese Americans were held during World War II. And that one's actually her last commission.

And she made her mark on the San Francisco area in other ways. Though thwarted from becoming a teacher back in Milwaukee, Ruth became an advocate for arts education in public schools. She co-founded the Alvarado School Arts Workshop in 1968, which brings working artists into the schools for regular visits, and she served on many important councils and boards. I couldn't list them all, it's a lot. She also went hands on — here she is on the left with Bucky Fuller making, I don't know, maybe a geodesic dome, in a classroom, and there she is on the right folding giant pieces of paper with kids and teachers.

By the way, that teaching college in Milwaukee is now part of the University of Wisconsin. You know, they wanted to name her a distinguished alumnus, and they offered her an honorary doctorate. She said, "Well, what about that bachelor's degree you never gave me?" [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER] So she finally received it in 1998 at the age of 72, [IMPRESSED NOISES FROM AUDIENCE] 52 years after she'd been denied. The woman was persistent! [SHOWS SLIDE] Ruth also helped found San Francisco's School of the Arts, which was an arts high school. And it was later renamed the Ruth Asawa San Francisco School of the Arts in her honor in 2010. [SHOWS SLIDE]

Ruth's legacy is ensured, but her health is failing. Her work exposed her to toxic compounds like resin and acetone for many years. She suffers from lupus — where her immune system attacks her body's organs — for three decades. And, after more than 60 years together, her beloved partner Albert dies of emphysema in 2008. [SHOWS SLIDE] But Ruth keeps going. In her 80s she is frail, but she still makes art every day. Not twisting wire, but she draws, and makes ceramics with her son Paul, who is an artist like most of the family. She is honored with a major retrospective of her work at the de Young Museum, and 15 of her works become part of its permanent display. In May 2013, one of her mesh sculptures is auctioned for $1.4 million. Her popularity surges. Prices have since reached over five million. But a few months later, Ruth dies in her sleep on August 6th 2013, at the age of 87. [SHOWS SLIDE]

In 2020, she was honored by the US Post Office with a beautiful set of stamps of her work, which you can find on Etsy if you want some. [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER] The dedication event features actor George Takei, best known as *Star Trek*'s Mr Sulu, who was actually interned in the Rowher camp at the same time as Ruth. To learn more about Ruth, the book *Everything She Touched — The Life of Ruth Asawa* by Marilyn Chase is really essential. It draws from Ruth's great archive of papers and letters and documents. I mean, even though she moved around so much, she kind of kept everything, which is great. I can also recommend the wonderful website at ruthasawa.com run by her children and grandchildren.

Though her famous work can be seen throughout the city she lived in, no public memorial marks Ruth's grave. In accordance with her wishes, Ruth and her husband Albert's ashes were

combined with those of their son Adam (who died in 2003) and with clay, which is formed into ceramic pieces by their son Paul, with one made for each sibling. As Marilyn Chase writes in her book: “Ruth made sure her earthly matter was not destroyed, but transformed, until the end, Ruth Asawa herself became a work of art.”

Thank you.

[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]

FLORIAN DUISJENS: Susan Stone on Ruth Asawa. Thanks to our sound tech/bartender Thomas Beckman and Johannes Braun of ACUD for their kind assistance.

SUSAN STONE: Now Florian, you had the chance to see some of Ruth Asawa’s work at the Venice Biennale, didn't you?

FLORIAN DUISJENS: I did. I did. it was a glorious Biennale edition actually, it was named after a work of one of our other previously-featured-on-the-podcast Dead Ladies, Leonora Carrington. The whole show is called “The Milk of Dreams,” and it was beautiful to wander through these long long halls of the Arsenale, I think it was, and to see these beautiful sort-of wire sculptures towering up, and it was really really fun to see my young niece and nephew look at them very closely, thinking like “can I do that? Maybe I could do that? I'd love to try doing that.” They just loved it, and I loved it too and it was great to see them in the flesh, so to speak.

SUSAN STONE: So that sounds like a highlight of the year for Dead Ladies, but we have a few more that we wanted to tell you about. Florian, why don't you get us started?

FLORIAN DUISJENS: I was very very pleased to start reading the ‘Best of the Year’ film lists. I love a ‘Best of’ list, basically, any list, best song, best graphic novel, best vegetable. I love it. I would have a hard time telling you what the vegetable of 2022 is…

SUSAN STONE: Parsnips! It’s got to be parsnips! [LAUGHTER]

FLORIAN DUISJENS: But it’s great to see the face of Vicky Krieps, that wonderful actress from Luxembourg (I want to say?) high up on those lists for both her performance in the movie *Corsage* and *Corsage* itself, which was directed by the Austrian director, Marie Kreutzer. It's a movie about Empress Elisabeth of Austria, who I, you know, I just have an unhealthy, parasocial relationship with historically. As does anybody of even partially Austrian descent. And what this movie does is it tells her story in a way that hasn't been told before. So we have Romy Schneider's *Sissi* movies from the 1950s. We have the RTL show, we have the Netflix show from this year, all about this one woman's life. But this is, I think, the first one that tackles her early 40s about which not a lot was known, and it does so in a way that is not cheesy. Like, we're all well familiar with, for instance, Princess Diana's sort of saintly visage in *The Crown* and in the movie from last year, *Spencer.* But what this movie does is it allows her to be fairly monstrous, like she's rude to her staff. I mean, really awful to her staff, not the greatest mom, and she's not a victim. It's clear where she's victimized. The movie is called *Corsage*, which is Austrian for corset. It's filled with all kinds of delightful anachronisms, much like Sofia Coppola’s

Marie Antoinette. She flips the bird, there's phones in the background, she does a lot of smoking. A lot of these palaces are empty, as though in the last days of the Habsburg Empire they were already selling off the furniture. And I think it's beautiful. I just loved it.

SUSAN STONE: You mentioned Romy Schneider. That's a little bit of a preview for later in the season. Because we're going to be hearing you talk about that actress and her portrayal of Sissi and how that kind of haunted her. And one thing I learned from your talk a couple months ago was that that movie is shown in several places during the holidays.

FLORIAN DUISJENS: Yes, every single Christmas. Every single Christmas in Germany, in Austria, in Holland, in China… [LAUGHTER] Oh, for more on that, listen later on in the season. I don't know. During the holidays, people felt it was legitimate to be nostalgic about a monarchy/ large empire.

SUSAN STONE: Very festive! Well Katy, what do you have for us?

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Well, speaking of previews of upcoming episodes, I have some good news on the Delia Derbyshire front. So I've talked very recently live about Delia Derbyshire, who may or may not be a relation of mine. [LAUGHTER] Who can say until they hear the podcast! But so she came from Coventry originally, and she has become very famous as a pioneering electronic music maker. And, bizarrely enough, Coventry University, which is right into the center of the town, has named, or will be naming, their new Arts and Humanities building after her, the Delia Derbyshire building. And I say bizarrely enough, because actually, in the UK, Arts and Humanities are not particularly popular with the people who fund universities. So it's quite impressive that they're building this whole new, massive space, they're going to have a gallery and an event space, and so they'll bring together the teaching of Architecture, Art, Design, Music, Languages, English, Philosophy, probably Sociology, in this one building. Although actually Delia studied Mathematics, mostly, and Music on the side, at Cambridge University. But yeah, it's great news. I love it when they name really big things after women. And a really big, chunky building, you can see artist's impressions online, various places. It looks sort of, you know, modern and spacious. It looks like it's going to be empty of students, but presumably there will be students in there using the film and photography production facilities, and games suites and you know, all the fancy modern techy stuff that kind of seems to go with electronic music, I guess.

SUSAN STONE: That's great. I like the idea of generations of students that come saying, meet me at the Derbyshire building. Meet me at Delia's place.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Yeah, I mean, I'm wondering what they're gonna call the cafe, they could call it the TARDIS Cafe!

SUSAN STONE: Infinite Loops!

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Yes! She famously made, let's say, the music for *Doctor Who*.

SUSAN STONE: So that is good news. Now I have a little bit, something a little bit different. This is about Joan Didion who actually died in 2021 at 87, the writer, American writer. But she was the subject of a rather fantastic estate sale last month. There were 224 items for sale from her home. From the mundane — there were trash bins, very stylish trash bins, they were leather and some paperweights – and there were exalted items like her wooden office desk, or typewriter and photographs and paintings of her. I mean, who would not want to type at Joan Didion's typewriter sitting at Joan Didion's desk?

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Did they have Joan Didion's empty coke bottles and ashtray? From breakfast time?

SUSAN STONE: No, they did have her shell collection.

FLORIAN DUISJENS: And a lot of empty notebooks.

SUSAN STONE: Yes, I'm coming to that. They also had her Le Creuset cooking ware, which they said was notable because it still had bits of dried food on it. [LAUGHTER] I mean, I don't know. That's what the estate sale catalog said! So, some of the high-selling items included a pair of sunglasses that sold for $27,000. Those were from the design house Celine, and Didion wore a similar pair in an ad for the brand in 2015. She was actually 80 when that ad was made. That was not her first ad, I was surprised to find out she was actually in a Gap ad in 1989. So, you know, ahead of her time! And there were, as Florian you mentioned, piles of blank notebooks. They sold for between $9000 and $11,000. [NOISES OF SURPRISE] That's some pricey stationery! And they had actually been estimated to sell for only between $100 to $200. The small collection of pebbles and shells that she'd collected went for $7,000 and her painted portrait went for $110,000.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Do you know where the money will go?

SUSAN STONE: Well, we will be getting to that! That's a very good question, Katy! So all in all, the estate sale generated more than $1.9 million. And the proceeds will go to charities that were important to Joan Didion, including the Sacramento City College's scholarship for women writers. She was born in Sacramento, and she's well known for her writing about California, so that really makes sense. And the money will also go to Parkinson's research and patient care at Columbia University. She had lived in New York for many years, and died from complications from Parkinson's disease. So, both very good causes and they will honor her legacy. For any of our West Coast listeners – West Coast US that is — there's also currently a show on at the Hammer Museum in LA called 'Joan Didion: What She Means'. And it's kind of a collage of art and artifacts, and it's described as an "exhibition as a portrait." And that's open now until February 19th. So Florian, if you're going to be on the West Coast any time soon! You're the traveler of the three of us.

And we're going to keep the conversation going over on our Patreon, that's at patreon.com/deadladiesshowpodcast where we're all going to tell you about some of the

recently departed Dead Ladies, and have some fun and some music and some discussion. So join us over there, won't you!

KATY DERBYSHIRE: What's your favorite Dead Lady news of the year? Do let us know on Twitter or Instagram at @deadladiesshow, all one word, or drop us an email to info@deadladiesshow.com.

SUSAN STONE: The Dead Ladies Show was founded by Florian Duijsens, and Katy Derbyshire. The podcast is created, produced, and edited by me, Susan Stone. Our theme song is Little Lily Swing by Tri-Tachyon. Thank you Katy and Florian.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Thank you, Susan.

FLORIAN DUISJENS: Thank you, Susan!

And thanks to everybody out there listening. We'll be back again soon with another fabulous Dead Lady.

(Dead Ladies Show Music — 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)