

NIKI DE SAINT PHALLE'S *QUEEN CALIFIA'S MAGICAL CIRCLE*

Project Description

The only American sculpture garden and the last major international project created by Niki de Saint Phalle (born France, 1930-2002). Inspired by California's mythic, historic and cultural roots, the garden consists of nine large-scale sculptures, a circular "snake" wall and maze entryway, sculpturally integrated bench seating, an egg shaped fountain and native shrubs and trees planted within the interior plaza and along the outer perimeter. The garden opened to the public on October 26, 2003.

The garden, like the state itself, takes its name from the legendary black Amazon queen, Califia, who was believed to rule a terrestrial island paradise of gold and riches. The legend was first popularized in the early 16th century romance novel, *Las Sergas de Esplandian* (The Exploits of Esplandian) that received wide circulation in Spain. Geologist John McPhee recounts the tale in his book *Assembling California* (1994), which Saint Phalle read and drew upon as a source for her initial ideas. *Queen Califia's Magical Circle* bears the brilliant, unique mosaic ornamentation that is an unmistakable part of Saint Phalle's later work. The garden uses a greater diversity of mosaic materials than any other of her large-scale projects. She personally selected dozens of varieties of glass of different shapes, color, hue, translucency and degrees of reflection. For the first time, she also used a wide assortment of polished and tumbled stones such as travertine, agates, quartzes and veined turquoise. The results are magical and ever changing, as the movement of light, wind, color and reflections continually transform the garden.

Location

Situated within a 12-acre natural habitat, in the Iris Sankey Arboretum in Kit Carson Park, on a parcel of land donated by the City of Escondido. The park's entrance is located five minutes from I-15 (Via Rancho Parkway Exit) at the corner of Bear Valley Parkway and Mary Lane.

Completion

October 2003

Artist

Niki de Saint Phalle

Leadership

Niki Charitable Art Foundation Trustees:

Bloum Cardenas, Dave Stevenson and Marcelo Zitelli

City of Escondido, California:

The Honorable Lori Holt Pfeiler, Mayor of Escondido

Don Anderson, Director of Community Services

Susan Pollack, Consultant, Public Art Program

Ted Kilman, Chair, Public Art Commission

Cost

The garden was entirely financed by Niki de Saint Phalle, with land acquisition, site grading, landscaping, maintenance and operations donated by the City of Escondido.

Total Square Feet

120 feet in diameter

Key Architectural Features

Snake Wall and Maze:

An undulating circular wall measuring 400 feet in length (with varying heights from 4 to 9 feet) surrounds the garden. Monumental sculpted, playful serpents, decorated in colorfully patterned mosaics, slither along the top of the wall. Their curved bodies form a pattern of solids and voids that allows visitors to see landscape vistas beyond the garden. The snake wall has one entrance into the garden. It opens into a maze whose walls and floors are covered with bold patterns of black, white and mirrored tiles. This gate announces that you are crossing a threshold into a magical world the world of your past, your roots, your land, your unconscious dreams, observed Marcelo Zitelli, the artist's curator and longtime assistant. Once through the maze, visitors enter into the central courtyard.

Surface Materials: The wall is largely faced in natural-colored Mexican pebble stones while the snakes (as well as the other sculptures) feature tens of thousands of individually hand-cut glass, ceramic and stone mosaics. Several sections of the wall are also decorated with high-fired ceramic plaques, each incised with Native American rock art symbols, planetary forms and hearts, as well as the hand imprints and signatures of the artist's team and family members.

Construction: Built from polystyrene encased in urethane skin with applied fiberglass coating over a steel armature. Designed from artist's original maquettes with computer-assisted modeling and prototyping.

Fabrication: La Paloma, Sun Valley, CA; Ron McPherson, owner

Mosaic Installation: Art Mosaic Inc., El Cajon, CA; Lech Juretko, owner

Bench Seating:

Three benches faced in travertine marble and river rocks are situated along the eastern, northern and southern sections of the snake wall. Each measures approximately 13 to 20 feet in length (with varying heights).

Designer: Pierre Marie LeJeune, an artist and designer based in Les Andelys, France

Fabrication: Art Mosaic Inc., El Cajon, CA, Lech Juretko, owner

Mosaic Installation: Art Mosaic Inc., El Cajon, CA, Lech Juretko, owner

Major Sculptural Features

There are ten freestanding sculptures in the garden, with symbols and forms freely drawn from Native American, pre-Columbian and Mexican art as well as the artist's own fantastic imagery.

Queen Califia, Egg Fountain and Eagle Throne:

The imposing mosaic sculpture of Califia herself (11 feet tall), an archetype of feminine power and strength, commands the center of the garden. Clad in gold glass armour, she holds a small bird aloft while striding astride a monumental eagle (13 feet tall). Openings between the bird's massive legs lead visitors into a small domed "temple" decorated with cosmic symbols as well as painted ceramic plaques from the *Tarot Garden*. A gold egg-shaped fountain occupies the middle of the space – a reference to Queen Califia's magical reign over the oceans, as well as to the cycle of birth, death, and transformation, a theme which recurs throughout Saint Phalle's considerable work.

Dimensions: 24 feet x 22 feet x 20 feet

Construction: Built of polystyrene encased in urethane skin with applied fiberglass over a steel armature. Designed from artist's original maquettes with computer-assisted modeling.

Surface Materials: The surface of Queen Califia is covered in hand-cut mirrored and iridized glass. The Eagle Throne is faced with individually cut colored and mirrored glass, tumbled stones and ceramic mosaics as well as hand painted ceramic plaques from the artist's *Tarot Garden* project in Tuscany, Italy. The Egg Fountain is faced with handmade gold leaf sandwich glass. A solar run pump controls the fountain.

Fabrication: La Paloma, Sun Valley, CA

Mosaic Installation: Art Mosaic Inc., El Cajon, CA

Totem Figures:

Eight large totemic sculptures surround Queen Califia. They are adorned with stylized monsters, protective deities, geometric symbols, crests, skulls, humans and various animals that once played vital roles in the lives of the people and are still endowed with sacredness and special powers. Of particular importance is the eagle, distinguished by his extraordinary high flight which brings him nearest to the sun and in closer proximity to the gods than any other creature. Figuring in both pre-Conquest Mexican legend and Native American imagery, it is a frequent image in Saint Phalle's work.

Cathead Totem, 11.6 ft. x 6 ft. x 4 ft.

Birdhead Totem, 13.4 ft. x 7 ft. x 2.9 ft.

Yelling Man Totem, 16 ft. x 5 ft. x 2.8 ft.

Bullhead Totem, 17 ft. x 6 ft. x 3 ft.

Untitled Totem [Bird on a Square], 21 ft. x 6 ft. x 4 ft.

Kingfisher Totem, 14 ft. x 5 ft. x 4 ft.

Step Totem, 13 ft. x 3 ft. x 8.6 ft.

Snake Totem, 16 ft. x 4 ft.

Construction: Working from original clay maquettes, totems are made of polystyrene encased in urethane skin with applied fiberglass coating over a steel armature.

Surface Materials: The totems are individually covered in hundreds of thousand of individually hand-cut mirrored and colored glass, ceramic, a wide range of tumbled stone, natural shells, and specialized glass mosaics. The materials were collected from all over the world.

Fabrication: Art Mosaic Inc., El Cajon, CA

Mosaic Installation: Art Mosaic Inc., El Cajon, CA

Landscape Design

Native trees and plantings are sited along the garden's perimeter and behind each of the three benches in the interior. Plant materials include:

Trees – Coastal Live Oak, Valley Oak, Canyon Oak

Shrubs – California Sagebrush, Brush Poppy, White Sage

Cactus and Aloes – Prickly Pear, San Pedro Cactus

Ground Cover– Dwarf Coyote Bush, Natural California Lilac

Landscape Architects: Deneen Powell Atelier, San Diego, CA; Jeri Deneen and Jon Powell, principals, with Jon Powell, lead architect for the project.

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