

The Fanciful World of Niki de Saint Phalle

Her Mosaic Works of Art Dot San Diego County

Louise Julig

Tucked away in the corner of a sprawling city park in Escondido, a shiny blue eagle with a golden head sits atop a tall, red-tiled perch. Nearby, a silver bull's head tops a totem pole of spider, frog and bird heads. A face from another totem pole looks on, its mouth stretched open in perpetual surprise.

These and several more totems look toward a giant, multicolored eagle guarding a huge egg between its legs. A proud woman in shining gold stands high atop the eagle, holding a small blue bird in her hand.

Surrounding all this is a maze of black-and-white and mirrored tiles, and a ring of friendly looking multicolored snakes.

Is this some kind of "Alice Through the Looking Glass" experience? No, it is "Queen Califia's Magical Circle," the only American sculpture garden by acclaimed La Jolla-based artist Niki de Saint Phalle, and her last major project before her death in 2002.

De Saint Phalle's works are created in fantastical forms, bright colors and inviting mosaic textures that draw in children and visitors of all ages to explore, touch and experience them up close. In short, they are approachable art.

We in San Diego are fortunate to have many of de Saint Phalle's sculptures publicly available throughout the county, as San Diego has the largest collection of her work of any American city. Visit some of them with your kids – it's an excellent way to introduce them to art while they're having fun. Even if you have no art background, there are simple things you can keep in mind to help open up the world of art to your child.

Start by examining the textures. Many of the pieces are mosaics of tile, stone, mirror and glass. Notice how the different surfaces contribute to the overall look and feel of the sculptures.

Then begin noticing the colors and patterns she uses. Shirel Zamir, a docent of the Mingei Museum North County Satellite, says, "Many of her pieces are very colorful



This Lion and "Nikigator" can be found at the California Center for the Arts outside the Children's Museum in Escondido.

and whimsical. She uses a lot of primary colors and black and white, and lots of lines and shapes.

“Hearts, flowers and question marks are often used as decorations, and spiders, snakes and birds are frequent themes... Some of her art came out of doodles and diaries that she expanded.”

Look for repeated themes and see how many you can find. Does your child doodle and draw? Imagine what some of his drawings would look like as life-size sculptures.

Next, notice the sculpture forms. De Saint Phalle is known for very rotund, ample figures in her animal and human sculptures. Her female figures are known as “Nanas,” and can be seen as symbols of supreme femininity.

She also incorporates tunnels, holes and benches that draw visitors in close. Look for similar features in the different pieces. De Saint Phalle was never formally trained in art, but incorporated lots of different styles and cultures into her work. “She loved *National Geographic* as a child, and felt a part of all cultures,” Zamir says.

Think about the different cultures that might have inspired her: Mexican, Indian, African, Native American?

These are just a few jumping-off points to spark your imagination as you explore this wonderful art resource in our backyard. Below is a family-friendly guide to places you can find de Saint Phalle sculptures, along with suggested activities. All are publicly accessible and many are free.

Kit Carson Park, Escondido

Home to “Queen Califia’s Magical Circle” sculpture garden. By far the largest installation in the county, it’s worth a trip on its own, or could be a side trip on the way to the Wild Animal Park.

Consisting of a large outer “snake wall” ringing the garden, a maze entryway and 10 freestanding sculptures in the interior including the massive, central “Eagle Throne,” there is much to discover and enjoy here. De Saint Phalle drew her inspiration for this installation from the legend of an Amazon queen believed to have ruled an island paradise. Bring your camera for some unique picture-taking opportunities.

Iris Sankey Arboretum at Kit Carson Park, 3333 Bear Valley Parkway, Escondido

California Center for the Arts, Escondido

Many statues are scattered throughout the grounds of the center for you to discover. Find them all and then have a picnic at Grape Day Park, or combine with a trip to the Escondido Children's Museum, also at the center.



Close to the theater ticket office are a large circular cat and “#19 Baseball Player,” created in honor of Tony Gwynn, wielding a golden bat and ready to swing. Outside the museum entrance stand two jazz trumpeters – Miles Davis and Louis Armstrong – decked out in multicolored coats.

Around back, facing into Grape Day Park and just outside the entrance to the Children's Museum, are five more treasures for you to explore. A pair of mirror-image reposing lions sit in full-maned glory. Nearby, two seals and a friendly looking “Nikigator” invite children to play under, around and through them.

Take note of the colors used in the lions compared to the other sculptures. Veering away from her usual brights and primaries, De Saint Phalle used more subdued browns, yellows and oranges to create a mellower effect for these two. Imagine how much different they would look in bright green, blue, red and orange.

One last sculpture, a totem topped by a giant golden face and a mother and child below, looks out onto the north

parking lot. With a built-in seat, this is a nice spot for a family photo.

340 North Escondido Blvd., Escondido

Mingei International Museum North County Satellite, Escondido

The Mingei Museum Satellite, a short walk from the Center for the Arts, has several of de Saint Phalle's works as part of its permanent collection. A bull's-head totem, identical to one at Kit Carson Park, is installed in front of the entrance.

Inside the museum, the huge, blue “Angel of Temperance” sculpture is suspended from the ceiling, hovering over the first-floor exhibits. Other interesting pieces are several owl and snake chairs of carved wood, decorated with her trademark mosaics, and a Hindu “Ganesh” elephant in a window display facing the Maple Street entrance.

The museum plans to add a reading/meditation garden incorporating the sculpture “La Cabeza,” in the shape of a giant skull, in coming months. In addition, the gift shop stocks books, T-shirts, pendants and fanciful inflatables with de Saint Phalle images.

155 West Grand Avenue, Escondido

Solana Beach Train Station

A garden at the northwest corner of Cedros Ave. and Lomas Santa Fe Blvd. is host to “Star,” one of de Saint Phalle's distinctive “Nana” sculptures. This blue-



tilled woman is captured in mid-stride, running joyfully through the garden. Though the location isn't conducive to up-close exploration, "Star" is certainly worth visiting if you're going to be at the station for a few extra minutes.

105 Cedros Ave., Solana Beach

UCSD

The UCSD campus is where the "Sun God" statue resides. Possibly the most recognized of de Saint Phalle's works, the 14-foot-tall, multicolored bird sits atop a huge concrete arch between the Faculty Club and Mandeville Auditorium.



It has become somewhat of an informal mascot of the school. "Sun God" was the first piece commissioned for the Stuart Collection on the campus in 1983 and was de Saint Phalle's first American installation. See "Sun God" along with other pieces from the Stuart Collection such as "Snake Path," "Red Shoe" and the newly installed "Bear" on a stroll through the campus. At the parking and information kiosk, get a brochure with a map of all the pieces. Also available at <http://stuartcollection.ucsd.edu/>.

9500 Gilman Dr., San Diego

Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego - La Jolla

"Big Ganesh," a much larger version of the "Ganesh" at the Mingei Satellite, resides in the sculpture garden at the Museum of Contemporary Art in La Jolla. At 11 feet high, he's an impressive sight. Visit "Ganesh" along with the other pieces in the sculpture garden on free day at the museum, the third Tuesday of the month, or come for the family programs held on the first Sunday of the month from 2 to 5 p.m.

700 Prospect St., La Jolla

Balboa Park

The Mingei Museum in Balboa Park has "The Poet and His Muse," and a "Nikigator" alligator like the one at the Escondido Center for the Arts outside its front walkway. The lawn in front of the Hall of Champions is where "#23 Basketball Player," a tribute to Michael Jordan, soars over the head of his mirrored opponent.

*Mingei Museum, 1439 El Prado, corner of El Prado and the Plaza de Panama
Hall of Champions, 2131 Pan American Plaza*

Convention Center

At Eighth Ave. and Harbor Dr. is the ceramic-and-mirror mosaic "Coming Together." It's a 38-foot face made of two halves – one colorful, the other mirrored. The artist's comments on the Port of San Diego Web site describes it as "the image of one person in all his or her magnificence and joy...the integration of the self."

111 West Harbor Drive, San Diego ♦

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