

## ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

Celebrating the work of a singular and innovative artist, this exhibition represents the United States' first full retrospective of French-American artist Niki de Saint Phalle (1930 – 2002).

The exhibition traces the course of Saint Phalle's career, from her beginnings as a self-taught artist bursting onto the world stage in the 1960s to her iconic "Nanas" sculptures and immersive public installations. Nearly 100 prints, sculptures, and paintings—many of which have never been shown in the U.S. before—illustrate the expansive imagination and exuberant style of this pioneering artist. The objects in *Niki de Saint Phalle: Rebellion and Joy* are drawn from the Musée d'Art Moderne et d'Art Contemporain (MAMAC) in Nice, France, which houses one of the largest collections of Saint Phalle's work, as well as the Niki Charitable Art Foundation.



View of the exhibition galleries

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Through the activities outlined in this guide:

- Students will examine the diverse media, themes, and meanings found in the art of Niki de Saint Phalle.
- Students will consider how Niki de Saint Phalle uses the elements of art.
- Students will use the art of Niki de Saint Phalle as inspiration for their own original works of creative expression.

## USING THIS GUIDE

This guide can be used to support a class visit to *Niki de Saint Phalle: Rebellion and Joy* at the Nelson-Atkins or to facilitate classroom study of the exhibition for those who cannot visit in person. Images of select works in the exhibition can be found by searching Saint Phalle's name in the online collection of the Musée d'Art Moderne et d'Art Contemporain ([navigart.fr/mamac/artworks](http://navigart.fr/mamac/artworks)).

In the **Before Your Visit** section of the guide, you will find activities and discussion questions to use when preparing students for the exhibition. The **In the Exhibition** section can facilitate exploration within the museum or while viewing works online, and the **Extend Your Learning** section provides post-visit suggestions that build on what students have seen. For specific works of art referenced in the guide, links to images are provided.

This guide provides suggested activities for both younger and older students and can be adapted to a range of grade levels and subject areas.

To schedule a free teacher-led student tour of the exhibition, visit [nelson-atkins.org/educators/school-tours](http://nelson-atkins.org/educators/school-tours).

## ABOUT THE ARTIST



Niki de Saint Phalle in 1967

Niki de Saint Phalle was born in 1930 to well-to-do French and American parents. She spent an unhappy childhood in New York before marrying at the age of 18, giving birth to two children, and returning to France with her young family in the 1950s. Feeling constrained by a difficult marriage and the social expectations of being a wife and mother, Saint Phalle turned to art as a source of freedom and self-expression.

In her early works of the late 1950s and early 1960s, she experimented with painting, assemblage, and performance, shocking the art world with her “Shooting” paintings, which involved firing a gun at canvases covered in plastered-over pockets of wet paint. In the 1960s and 1970s she created sculptures of female figures that celebrated liberated womanhood (her “Nanas,” from the French slang term for “chicks”) and critiqued gender expectations (her “Devouring Mothers” series). Later in her career, she made art that brought attention to social issues and embarked on ambitious outdoor sculpture installations built around such themes as the tarot and Queen Califia, a mythical figure who inspired the name of California.

Niki de Saint Phalle died in 2002 from emphysema, possibly triggered by exposure to the synthetic materials she used in her sculptures.

## BEFORE YOUR VISIT

- Discuss the title of the exhibition. What do *rebellion* and *joy* mean? What other words or ideas come to mind when students hear those terms? What do they expect the art in this exhibition to look like, given its title?
- While Niki de Saint Phalle’s art reflects her personal vision, much of it deals with themes and experiences that are universal. Invite students to reflect on a time when they felt one of the following:
  - Anger at how someone treated you
  - Joy and triumph
  - A desire for freedom
  - Concern about something happening in the world

Students can look for connections to these themes in Saint Phalle’s works when they view the exhibition.

- Preview some of Saint Phalle’s works by visiting the sites listed in the “Suggested Resources” section of this guide. Ask students to create a running list of words they would use to describe her art.

## IN THE EXHIBITION

### For younger students:

- Challenge each student to find one work of art in the exhibition that interests them. For their chosen piece, students should use adjectives to describe how the elements of art are used in the work:
  - Line
  - Color
  - Form
  - Shape
  - Texture
  - Space

- See how many of the following symbols students can spot in the art shown in the exhibition. For each one, students can draw the symbol they see and write or discuss the meaning that symbol suggests to them.
  - Sun
  - Snake
  - Cat
  - Heart
  - Flower
  - Skull
  - Spider

Suggested work if viewing online: *Trilogie des obélisques*, 1987 ([bit.ly/49PSoap](https://bit.ly/49PSoap))

- Ask students to imagine themselves as one of the figures shown in Saint Phalle’s art. Invite them to write a short story or poem from that character’s viewpoint, using details from the artwork as inspiration.

### For older students:

- Have students compare one of Niki de Saint Phalle’s early “Nanas”—her sculptures of empowered female figures—with a later version of the same subject:
  - *Erica*, 1965 ([bit.ly/3JDg86K](https://bit.ly/3JDg86K))
  - *Dawn (Yellow)*, 1995 ([bit.ly/3xW64TZ](https://bit.ly/3xW64TZ))

What similarities and differences do they notice between the two works in terms of materials used, formal qualities, and the overall mood or impression of each piece?

- Invite students to analyze the symbolism Saint Phalle uses in her design for *Strength Card No. 11*, (1998), one of the sculptures included in *Tarot Garden*, a 14-acre installation in Italy inspired by tarot cards. (Viewable online at [bit.ly/3JWAV5H](https://bit.ly/3JWAV5H).)
  - What imagery does Saint Phalle use to illustrate the concept of strength?
  - Who or what appears strong to you in this image?
  - What kind of strength might be represented here? What do you see that makes you say that?
  - What imagery would you use to illustrate strength? Sketch your idea.
- Ask students to consider this quote from Niki de Saint Phalle: “I used to think there was a need to provoke... And then I understood that there is nothing more shocking than joy.” Discuss:
  - Which works of art in this exhibition provoke you (incite a strong reaction)?
  - Which works of art express joy?
  - Do you agree with Saint Phalle’s statement? Why or why not?

## EXTEND YOUR LEARNING

- Challenge students to create an original work of two-dimensional or three-dimensional art that uses the elements of art and visual symbols to express their idea of joy.
- Have students work in groups to design an immersive sculpture installation that is built around a unifying theme, inspired by Niki de Saint Phalle’s *Tarot Garden* or *Queen Calafia’s Magical Circle*.

## SUGGESTED RESOURCES

### Books

*What is Now Known was Once Only Imagined: An (Auto)biography of Niki de Saint Phalle*, by Nicole Rudik, 2022. Available in the ERC.

The story of Saint Phalle's art and life compiled from her own paintings, drawings, sketches, and writings.

*Niki de Saint Phalle: The Story of Her Life*, by Monica Foggia and Valeria Quattrocchi, 2023. Available in the ERC.

An informative biography of the artist in graphic novel form.

### Web

*Niki Charitable Art Foundation* / [nikidesaintphalle.org](http://nikidesaintphalle.org)

Foundation dedicated to the art of Niki de Saint Phalle.

*Musée d'Art Moderne et d'Art Contemporain* / [mamac.org](http://mamac.org)

Museum with large holdings of Saint Phalle's art and a searchable online collection.

"Tuscany's Tarot Garden" from *Great Big Story* / [youtube.com/watch?v=0niI7Jospuo](https://youtube.com/watch?v=0niI7Jospuo)

Short video tour of *Tarot Garden*, the Italian sculpture park Saint Phalle designed.

"Queen Califia's Magical Circle" from *Atlas Obscura* / [atlasobscura.com/places/queen-califia-s-magical-circle](https://atlasobscura.com/places/queen-califia-s-magical-circle)

Photos and descriptions of Saint Phalle's immersive sculpture project in Escondido, California.

## EDUCATOR RESOURCE CENTER

This guide was produced by the Educator Resource Center at the Nelson-Atkins. The ERC is available to support educators with a variety of programs and resources. If you are interested in learning more about ways to link museum works with classroom learning, we invite you to connect with the ERC to access:

- Curriculum consultations
- Circulating resources
- Professional development workshops

Visit [nelson-atkins.org/educators/resources](https://nelson-atkins.org/educators/resources) for more information.

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