

**TRACES:
Autobiography,
Volume I
(1930-1949)**

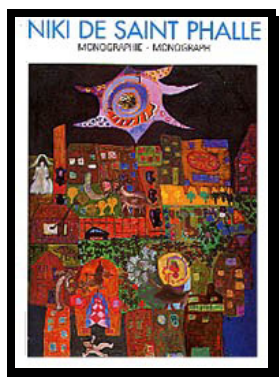
Niki de Saint Phalle

**Reviewed
by
Jan Lisa Huttner**

Personal Introduction: *Last year I had the great good fortune to vacation in Nice, where I joined a tour group dedicated to surveying "The Artistic Legacies of the Riviera." On our first day, we dutifully headed to the Matisse Museum in the morning and to the Marc Chagall National Biblical Message Museum in the afternoon. A welcome dinner was planned for that first evening at the fabulous Negresco Hotel, the grand dowager of the Promenade des Anglais which runs parallel to the Mediterranean.*

When I arrived at the Negresco, I headed to the interior lobby to find my group. But all I could see was the enormous vibrant sculpture in the center of the room. I was struck dumb. The figure, so incongruous in such a refined setting, dominated the space. One of our faculty members saw me and came over to personally introduce me to the Negresco's prize possession: "Dancing Yellow NANA" (1995). Two days later, at the Musée d'Art moderne et d'Art contemporain (MAMAC), I found two more Saint Phalle sculptures in the courtyard, a pair of bathers and a mirrored dragon.

I returned home to Chicago eager to learn more about this wonderful French artist and ordered TRACES: Autobiography, Volume I (1930-1949) that very day from Amazon.com.



Niki de Saint Phalle is famous for her huge, buoyant NANA sculptures. These voluptuous "earth goddesses" are on display in numerous cities in France, Germany, Israel, Italy, and Japan, but are not especially well known in the United States. With the publication of this book, however, the artist is making herself known as an American, to American audiences. The narrative, like the author's life work, reflects a gregarious, optimistic American spirit.

Saint Phalle's father moved to New York in the mid-20s, married, and had his first child. Then, with the stock market crash that ushered in the Great Depression, he returned to France. Niki was born in France and remained there with her grandparents for three years, at which point her parents, having re-established themselves in New York, reclaimed her. In 1946, she went to France for an extended visit: "Until that summer, I had always felt that I was Franco-American. When I met my cousins and their friends of the same age, I had the impression that I was American only." (141)



How could it be otherwise? While the French members of her family were suffering through World War II, Niki was cavorting with school friends, eating Tootsie Rolls, and reading comic books. I stress this because most textbooks refer to Saint Phalle as a "French artist," but a full page right in the middle of TRACES is devoted to a brightly colored picture of Wonder Woman, and underneath the picture Saint Phalle writes: "At BREARLEY [her private school] I became a feminist. We were indoctrinated with the idea that women could and should ACHIEVE." (71) The genesis of the NANAs is now clear.

But TRACES is no mere chronology of events, impressions, and influences. It is a complex work, both thematically and structurally. Although most of the text is typeset, there are many passages that are hand-written, and there are also proof-reading corrections hand-printed within the textual passages. The combination of printing and writing, along with photographs, pictures, and drawings disorients the reader – is this a diary? a scrapbook? a letter to her brother? Yes.

Many passages are addressed to her brother John (born in 1928). Although there are three younger siblings in the family, the age gap is significant. John was in New York when the infant Niki was in France, and the third child Claire was born several years after the family was finally reunited. Niki begins her autobiography by telling us: "When I was quite young, I saw a film called RASHOMON... It made a lasting impression on me. It taught me that each reality is unique and the only one who can see all the pieces of the puzzle is GOD, not me!" (2-3). So she tells us what she can (combining words and images), all the while alluding to subjects John would describe differently.

Volume I ends with her marriage to her high school boyfriend in 1949. She is young, beautiful, and passionate. We must wait for Volume II to learn how this lively American girl matured into a "French artist."

Wish List: If I ruled the world, my next newsletter from the Lyric Opera of Chicago would tell me that a new production of Wagner's RING CYCLE was in the works. The entire cast would be costumed like characters from THE TAROT GARDEN; Fafner would be modeled on the ferocious dragon in "The Strength Card," Brunhilde & Grane would mount Siegfried's pyre clothed like "The Death Card," and all of the Valkyries would, of course, look like NANAs.

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References:

- 1) Art of the 20th Century edited by Ingo Walther; Taschen; 2000
- 2) Art Since 1960 by Michael Archer; Thames and Hudson, Ltd.; 1997
- 3) The Artist's Body by Tracey Warr & Amelia Jones; Phaidon; 2000
- 4) The Prestel Dictionary of Art & Artists in the 20th Century; Prestel Verlag; 2000
- 5) The Tarot Garden by Niki de Saint Phalle & Giulio Pietromarchi; Acatos; 1999
- 6) TRACES: Autobiography, Volume I (1930-1949) by Niki de Saint Phalle; Acatos; 1999

Dedication:

This review is dedicated to the members of my tour group, with special mention of two – Professor Michel Remy of the University of Nice and classmate Margery Fulham.

2007 UPDATE:

This article was originally posted on the PICKLEBIRD website in December, 2001:

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Niki de Saint Phalle's TRACES

Jan Lisa Huttner December 12, 2001
 TRACES: Autobiography, Volume I (1930-1949)
 by Niki de Saint Phalle
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