

# THE LEGEND OF CALIFORNIA: WHO WAS QUEEN CALIFIA?

## Background:

When Niki de Saint Phalle moved to California, she read many books about its history, among them was “Assembling California” by the geologist John McPhee. McPhee references Queen Califia, a fictional queen who was a powerful amazon, clad in golden armor, ruling over the island of California without men. It is probable Califia comes from the Arabic word Khalifa (religious state leader), as she was a Moorish Queen. In 1524, when Hernan Cortes landed with his crew in Baja, CA, it is said that he announced to his men that they had arrived in Califia’s Island. By 1770, when the entire Pacific Coast was controlled by Spain, it was given the name California. Although fictional, as California was found to neither be an island nor only female populated, the Queen is symbolically representing a legend of California. In this way, Niki pays homage to the history of the land, gifting a forgotten, magical tale back to the region. As with this garden, all of Niki’s work have a timeless quality to them, reminiscing ancient civilizations and her imaginative subconscious mind.

## Vocab:

**Naïve Art:** art made by people with no formal art training. Niki did not attend art school and learned how to create through her own experiences. She traveled the world, made friends with artists, understood what was going on in the art world, and built-up skills as an artist as she developed in her career.

**Sculpture:** an artistic form in which hard or plastic materials are worked into 3D art objects. Dating back to prehistoric times, sculptures are one of the oldest art forms, used to artistically express cultural norms and traditions.

**Site-specific art:** any work made for a specific place, which cannot be separated or exhibited apart from its intended environment. This sculptural garden is a site-specific art as its physical location and surroundings are inseparable from its identity.

## Guided Practice:

- What is the significance of showcasing the queen in the form of a sculpture? How are the elements working together to bring your attention to the Queen? Pay attention to Niki’s use of color, materials, organization, size, and other elements.
- Placed under the Queen Califia structure is a golden egg. What do you think it symbolizes? How would the space differ with its absence? Alternatively, would the egg lose some of its meaning if it was located somewhere else in the space?
- How does Niki’s background as a naive art contribute to her abilities as an artist? Do you think her lack of artistic training allowed her to be more creative? Why or why not?