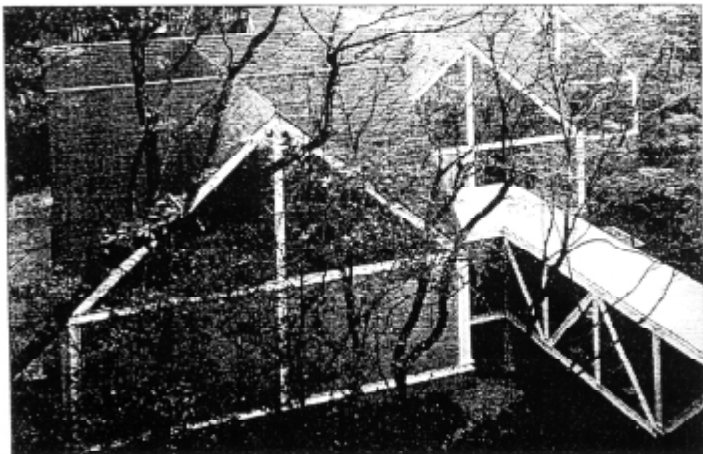


Nasu's French Twist

A Japanese museum surveys Niki de Saint Phalle's dramatic sculpture



The Niki Museum

By PHYLLIS BRAFF

TUCKED away in the rich vegetation of central Japan and within sight of Mount Chausu's dramatic peak, Tochigi Prefecture's newest museum — opened in 1994 — surveys, to the surprise of many, the career of a contemporary French sculptor, Niki de Saint Phalle.

The Niki Museum houses the collection of its founder and director, Yoko Shizue Masuda, an enthusiastic admirer of Ms. Saint Phalle's exuberant, brightly colored figurative pieces. Mrs. Masuda discovered one of the artist's prints in a Tokyo gallery in 1980. Her collection now numbers more than 200 examples. Tsaji Masuda, the director's husband and former chairman of the Parco Company, a department store and real estate conglomerate, assisted with the concept and design.

The museum is in the small town of Nasu, famous for its hot springs, pristine scenic beauty and royal summer residences. An 80-minute train ride from Tokyo, Nasu can be a pleasant one-day trip. Many combine a museum visit with a stay at one of the popular thermal resorts. The recently completed Princess roadway, linking the train depot to older roads running into velvety green hills

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dotted with small white cloud puffs, seems almost incongruously modern in an area that protects its natural heritage with strict conservation laws and rigid design codes.

Respect for the natural surroundings is also a striking characteristic of the museum's two-acre property. Its handsome one-story zigzag building, which celebrated its second anniversary this fall, wraps around tangled forest interrupted only by a footbridge over a modest brook. Glass walls bring this view indoors, providing different blossom, foliage or ground cover effects in each of the four seasons. Sequences of glass gables allow still more light to pour into the galleries and over the sculpture.

Visitors encounter Ms. Saint Phalle's work in a way that could hardly be more dramatic. A lengthy glass-enclosed walkway through the landscape terminates before a shrinelike installation of the artist's lively, gleaming interpretation of the dog-headed god Anubis. At this point the primary illumination comes from the creature's flaming light-bulb horns and the cascade of brightly toned bulbs trailing down her head-dress.

This work from a 1990 series based on ancient female deities might seem an odd introductory choice for an artist best known for her playful, generously proportioned "Nana" figures, yet Anubis reinforces the spiritual ingredient in Ms. Saint Phalle's work, which is an aspect several visitors said made the deepest impression.

There is a quick change of mood in the

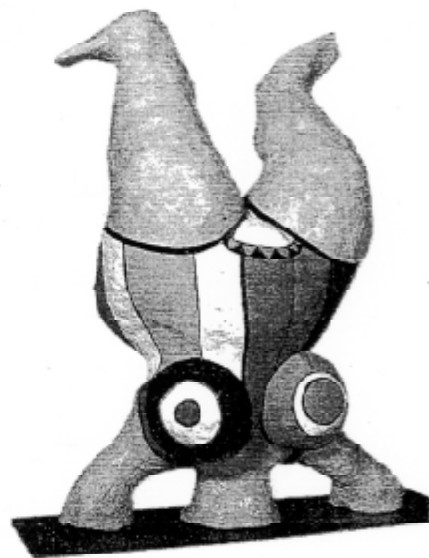
adjacent gallery that displays orientation materials. Here photo enlargements give a sense of the artist's large outdoor projects, including the multiunit Stravinsky Fountain in front of the Pompidou Center in Paris, the extensive Tarot Garden in Tuscany, which is open to the public on a limited basis, and "Hon," a temporary massive structure in the form of a reclining Nana. Housing a planetarium, milk bar, movie theater and gallery, the interior was visited by thousands during the artist's 1986 exhibition at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm. In conception, "Hon" and several walk-in figurative structures at the Tarot Garden relate to a museum design by Ms. Saint Phalle that the Masudas originally wanted to construct in Nasu before local authorities vetoed the unorthodox fairy-tale project design.

Documentary materials in the orientation area review Ms. Saint Phalle's career and provide context for themes carried out in the galleries. This is especially helpful with the artist's protest works from the early

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LEFT The Niki Museum is in Nasu, which is noted for its scenic beauty and hot springs. Among the works on view are "Upside Down Nana," 1967, right, and "Hand," 1982, below.



Absorbing art and soaking yourself

The Niki Museum, 203 Yumoto Nasu-machi, Tochigi, Japan, is open daily, excluding most Wednesdays, from 9:30 A.M. to 4 P.M. in winter. Admission is \$9 (1,000 yen); reduced rates are available for students. Telephone (81) 287-76-2322, fax (81) 287-76-4622. The museum's pleasant small cafe is situated to take maximum advantage of the view of the grounds. A museum shop sells gift items along with books in English and Japanese.

There is frequent rapid train service from Tokyo and Ueno stations on the Tohoku Shinkansen (Japan Railways) line to Nasu-shiobara, or the Tohoku Hensen (Japan Railways) line to Kuroiso. The trip takes 80 minutes from Tokyo. The local bus for Nasu-yumoto from either train stop will take passengers to Shin-Nasu, a five-minute walk from the museum. Alternatively, the bus for Nasu-highland from Kurico stops at Kin-kotsuonae, a two-minute walk to the museum. A round-trip, four-day "Q-ticket" on the Tohoku-Shinkansen line is \$86.

Where to Eat

Prices noted are the average cost of a meal for one.

Kamikawa no Sato, 2562-3 Terako-Otsu, Nasu, Tochigi; 287-72-0755. A Japanese noodle shop. \$18. Closed Wednesday.

Furusato, 2733 Takaku-otsu, Nasu, Tochigi; 287-78-0529. A tempura and soba noodle shop. \$13. Closed Tuesday.

Gioia Mia, 493-3 Tsumujigadaira, Yumoto Nasu, Tochigi; 287-76-4478. Italian cuisine with attentive service in pleasant surroundings. \$27. Closed Thursday.

Where to Stay

Most hotels accept cash only. All of these are a short drive, or a pleasant walk, to the museum. The rates are for one person.

Hotel Laforet Nasu, 206-659 Yumoto Nasu, Tochigi; 287-76-1811, fax 287-76-1804; Tokyo reservation office: 3-5562-5489. A highly regarded European-style hotel with Japanese and French dining facilities. \$157.50 to \$236, including breakfast and dinner.

San Raku, 206 Yumoto Nasu, Tochigi; 287-76-3010, fax 287-76-4638. Nasu's top-rated Japanese-style hotel. \$277 to \$473, including breakfast; and a traditional kaiseki dinner.

Higashiyama, 204 Yumoto Nasu, Tochigi; 287-76-1600, fax 287-76-3148. A good value at \$134 to \$313, including breakfast and a traditional kaiseki dinner.

Hotel Sun Valley Nasu, 203 Yumoto, Nasu, Tochigi; 287-76-3800, fax 287-73-4455; Tokyo reservation office: 3-3588-3800. Thirty-eight different hot spring baths make this a popular choice for Japanese families. European style, with some Japanese-style rooms. \$125 to \$268, including breakfast and dinner.

Hotel Epinard Nasu, 1 Takaku-hei, Nasu, Tochigi; 287-78-6000, fax 287-78-6666; Tokyo reservation office: 3-3535-8484. Opened in mid-1995. Hot spring indoor pool and several types of hot spring baths. European and Japanese-style rooms starting at \$138.

Daikokuya, 836 Itamuro, Kuroiso, Tochigi; 287-69-0226, fax 287-69-0497. Features include Japanese-style rooms, a Japanese garden and modern art works from the owner's collection. \$125 to \$170, including breakfast and dinner.

P. B.