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IN THE TAROT GARDEN, A CREATION BY NIKI DE SAINT PHALLE

The Giardino dei Tarocchi (Tarot Garden) lies on the southern slope of the Garavicchio hill, approximately 8 km from Capalbio, province of Grosseto; the French-American sculptor Niki de Saint Phalle (born Catherine Marie-Agnès Fal de Saint Phalle) began to build it in 1979, after personally visiting Antoni Gaudí's Parco Güell in Barcelona and the Parco dei Mostri (Park of the Monsters) in Bomarzo, province of Viterbo.

It looks like a town out of time, a triumph of colours, mirrors, glasses, ceramics and Venetian murrine in the heart of [Southern Tuscany](#)'s Maremma countryside; the 22 monumental sculptures

representing **the greater Mysteries of the tarot** seem to rule over the cobblestone paths, the oaks and the olive trees, over the cobalt blue sea extending to the horizon. To make this magical and spiritual dream come true, **Niki** spent about seventeen years working and living in the Garden, assisted by her husband **Jean Tinguely**, a team of renowned contemporary artists and a group of specialized workers; the Swiss architect **Mario Botta** constructed a wall and entrance for it: a thick wall with one large circular opening, which clearly separates the Garden from the outside world.

During construction works, Niki moved into **The Empress-Sphinx** and patiently waited for her sculptures to take shape (or maybe to come to life?)... She died four years after the opening of her spellbinding Creation, which is now maintained by the **Fondazione Il Giardino dei Tarocchi**.

Beyond the wall, the dusty gravel path goes up to a large square occupied by the **Magician** and the **High Priestess**, the first two Major Arcana: *the masculine power of creation and the feminine inner intuition* form a single, massive statue, which supplies water to the **Wheel of Fortune**'s fountain. The path continues under a huge bird-**Sun** – *the divinity that illuminates our spirits* – and divides into several branches that you can choose according to your feelings: Niki wanted everybody to have the opportunity to bump into the Arcana by following their own instincts, avoiding the kind of mechanicalness that characterizes the guided visit, definitely an enemy of the interpretation. However that may be, **Justice** will keep an eye on you and sooner or later you will find yourself wandering in the **Emperor**'s castle, admiring the green hills running gradually down to the sea, the broken **Tower**'s silvery mirrors and the black face of the **Empress**, symbolizing the Great Mother archetype, *the imperturbable Queen of Heaven*.

Temperance comes in the form of a small chapel that invites you to meditate and pray, the **Moon** rises close by, oddly far from its **Star** (held in the Empress' womb together with the **Chariot** and **Judgement**)... On the opposite side of the park are **Strength** (taming a green dragon with mirrored decorations), **Death** (on horseback, with its inseparable scythe), the **Devil**, the **World**, the **Fool** and the **Hierophant**. The **Lovers** – eye to eye – enjoy a picnic in the shade of the trees, the **Hermit** meanders around the clearing like a ghost, the **Hanged Man** observes the world upside down, from the belly of the tree of life...

Carefully engineered down to the most minute details, the **Tarot Garden** demanded enormous effort; here are some comments by the artist herself: “As soon as I started working on the Tarot Garden, I realized that the path would be difficult and strewn with hurdles. For a long time, a rheumatoid arthritis attack prevented me from being able to use my hands and walk. However, that didn't stop me from going ahead anyway. Nothing could stop me. It was like being under a spell. Despite everything, I felt that my destiny was to create this Garden”... “I put a great deal of effort into this Garden, I put love, deranged enthusiasm, obsession and mostly faith. Nothing and nobody could have stopped me from carrying on with it. As in all fairy tales, along the path to the treasure chest, I came across dragons, witches, wizards and the Angel of Temperance”. What Niki didn't say – but anyone who's familiar with tarot cards is probably already thinking – is that another card, the **World**, no. XXI, must have accompanied her in her journey: when an extraordinary project springs from a great dream - intended as any kind of authentic expression of one's deepest self – *the whole Universe cooperates to make it come true*

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