

# Nina Winkel

*A Guide to the Winkel Sculpture Court*

**Plattsburgh State Art Museum**  
SUNY Plattsburgh • Plattsburgh, NY

Cover: Winkel Sculpture Court. Digital Photograph. Courtesy of the Office of Institutional Advancement.

# Nina Winkel

*A Guide to the Winkel Sculpture Court*

**Plattsburgh State Art Museum - SUNY Plattsburgh - Plattsburgh, NY**

## Nina Winkel



Nina Winkel with *Mystic Birth*

Nina Koch Winkel was born on May 21, 1905 in Borken, Westphalia, Germany, a little town close to the Dutch border. She had an older sister, Elisabeth. She was told that she entered the world as an “early bird” and said she lived her life in the same way.

Nina was not a healthy child. Just after starting school, it was discovered that she was suffering from a rare bone disease, a type of Tuberculosis that kept her in bed for just over two years. She claims this terrible disease was cured by a miracle with the aid of a concoction of soap and herbs. Two things that remained with her throughout her life were enkindled in her during this healing process— her strong faith in God and her love of the arts. Since she was confined to her bed for a long period of time, books, papers, pencils, and music became her dearest treasures.

Her parents provided her with an exposure to the cultural world. Her father, Ernst, taught Greek, Latin, and History at a Rectorate school in Borken and spent many hours a day at his piano, so Nina grew up with the music of Bach, Handel and Beethoven. Her mother wanted to be a teacher but since circumstances would not allow that, she used her “great intelligence at home, teaching and doing complicated calculations in her head, and writing poems and articles for the local clubs.”

When Nina was sixteen or seventeen (1921-22), she received permission from her parents to enroll in the Kunstakademie in Dusseldorf where she learned to paint. This lasted only a short time, as the French Occupation Forces closed the school. They wanted to pressure the German Reich to pay for the repairs as they had agreed to do at the Treaty of Versailles (1919).

Upon her return to Germany, she took a job at Municipal Theater in Bochum where she performed for four years. She loved being in a “society of art-minded friends and helpful comrades” until one day she found a large amount of plasticine and made a statue.

As Nina recalled, “this creating process made me so happy that I knew at once in which direction my real vocation was calling me” — perhaps a call from her ancestors. Her grandmother’s family, the Steinhaures, were stone masons and sculptors. With the help of her sister and friends, she moved to Frankfurt and studied sculpture at the Stadel Museum’s Art School for three years under Professors Hartwig and Scheibe.

## Her Sculpture

Winkel's sculpture is known throughout the country and indeed throughout the world. She won five gold medals for various pieces, including the E. Watrous Gold Medal (which she won three times) and the Samuel F.B. Morse Medal. An Academician of the National Academy of Design, she was a Fellow of the National Sculpture Society and a winner of that organization's Louis Bennett Prize.

In the early 1980's, she began an association with SUNY Plattsburgh which resulted, in 1983, with the Winkels selecting the college as the repository for many of her works. The Winkel Sculpture Court, dedicated in 1987, houses an extensive collection of her work and is one of the largest gallery space in this country devoted to the work of one woman.

In addition to the Winkel Sculpture Court, her work is included in numerous public and private collections throughout North and South America and in Europe. Her art has been exhibited in countless museums and galleries, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

A strong personal view of life animates her sculpture, while its stylistic and philosophical roots are found in the history of western art and belief. Themes from the Old and New Testament, ancient mythology, and the twentieth century experience co-exist in a non-parochial balance creating a system of humanistic wisdom. References to the past include Egyptian, Romanesque and early Gothic styles while twentieth century German Expressionism and Deco formality are the basis of her modernism.

Nina Winkel enriched the life of the college and its students, not only through her work, but through the various workshops and seminars she conducted on campus, sharing her insights on life with so many members of the college community.

The Winkel Endowment to the Plattsburgh College Foundation was established by George and Nina Winkel in 1994. It's revenue allowed for the creation of the Winkel Sculpture Court and the Nina Winkel Sculpture Collection and Archives. The Winkel Endowment generates funds for the Plattsburgh State Art Museum and special funds in the Visual Arts and Humanities, fostering student scholarships and faculty development.

Nina received an honorary Doctor of Fine Arts degree from the State University of New York in 1984. In 1987, SUNY Plattsburgh bestowed the Distinguished Service Award upon both George and Nina Winkel.



Nina Winkel with *Cotton Picker*

## Arch of Triumph



*Arch of Triumph*, 1945, Plaster for bronze,  
40 x 16 x 19", X1983.7.7,  
Gift of George and Nina Winkel

Completed soon after Nina Winkel fled Paris, this piece was inspired by a newspaper article detailing the shooting of fifty hostages by the Germans.

The piece's title distorts the meaning by introducing a seemingly contradictory reference. Triumphal arches are typically monumental structures that were erected in order to commemorate a significant public event, such as a military victory or a death in the imperial family. This expression of suffering and death uses the arched backs of the twisted figures to mimic the multi-arched structures while shifting the intended message from celebration to mourning.

Two figures suffer excruciating agony as they hang, painfully elongated from a crooked, twisted tree. One figure appears to be resisting, struggling to stay strong in the face of adversity. The other has given up, drawing nearer to death with each remaining breath. It represents the idea that "martyrs always come out victorious in the end because you can kill the body, but you cannot kill the idea for which they suffer and die." – A fitting tribute in honor of the victims who lost their lives.

*"I did this in 1945. This is naturally a piece strongly influenced by the war, which at that time was almost over, and it is in remembrance and to honor the first fifty hostages that the Germans shot in Paris. When I had heard that here, I was in this country already at the time. When I heard that I was greatly shaken and I thought that someday I would want to do a piece to commemorate those poor victims and brave people and this is what came out of it. It's done in plaster. It was cast in bronze in '55 in Florence while I was in Florence doing a large marble monument. That has been sold, so the plaster original is now here in the sculpture court, and we hope that someday there will be enough money to cast it again in bronze. If not, well, it's pretty permanent. This is one of the most, what should I say, one of the most popular pieces. I had a lecture to give the other day for some Freshman and they had to write papers and pick one or other of my pieces and write something about it; and most of them talked about this piece. It naturally is something that every youngster even would grasp immediately what it is and the tragic content and the expression of suffering and death. And I told them at the time not to be afraid of suffering in life because that is the time when you do most of your growing and become a strong and worthwhile personality. And also, you can overcome certain difficulties in life sometimes only through suffering and even in dying for an ideal. The martyrs always come out victorious in the end because you can kill the body, but you cannot kill the idea for which the suffering die."*

*-Nina Winkel (October 9, 1988)*

## Shelter

The intensity of fear is palpable in this statue. The mother's wide eyes and strained face capture her panic. Terrified, she clutches her child, protecting her offspring from the impending danger. The child, completely enveloped by its mother's extremities looks up in hope of motherly reassurance.

These expressions of fear and the manifestation of motherly protection unite to provide the viewer a unique look at the emotions experienced during World War II.

*"This work called **Shelter** has been done in 1946. So at that time the war was over and it definitely belongs into the series of works influenced by the war. This is also one of my favorite pieces and I think, one of the strongest of the war series. It shows us the undercover seen by our own eyes, a mother with a child, either in a shelter or her serving as a shelter for the child, and I have expressed an almost animal-like intensity of fear, especially in the case of the mother and therefore I have given her features that would belong almost more to the original, early mankind than the shape of faces as we know them now, but also the child is a little bit of a young apelike being, and the whole thing is just an intense expression of fear as well as motherly protection."*

*-Nina Winkel (October 9, 1988)*



*Shelter*, 1946, Terra-cotta, 20.5" x 17" x 16", X1983.7.34, Gift of George and Nina Winkel

## Hodegetria

*Hodegetria*, the Greek word for “she who shows the way,” refers to an iconographic depiction of the Madonna located in the Church of the Hogdegoo in Constantinople (present day Istanbul). The original depicts the Virgin Mary holding the baby Jesus while identifying Him as the Salvation of all mankind. In the western church, *Hodegetria* icons are also sometimes called “Our Lady of the Way”.

Nina Winkel’s *Hodegetria* shows the child nestled in the Virgin’s left arm with her right arm wrapped about him. The strong lines of the mother’s head and facial expression add to the impression of a “protective embrace.”

This work was accepted to and used as the cover illustration for the American Sculpture exhibition at that Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1952.

*“Hodegetria 1950 is a material with which I did experiment as a child. The material is called lava compound. It is a powder which comes together with liquid, with which one has to mix it, and it’s really mainly used in industry for dye making because it gets as hard as stone. It has not too pleasant a color therefore I have tried to mix some color and especially some mica flakes. I don’t know how well they show up in this work. It was an experiment. It was also an experiment in a way with the shape itself. I think it is one of the most stylized and most abstracted works that I have done where I have really used the human figure exactly as muscles and forms to a great extent disregarding the actual shape of the human body. I think the result is rather interesting. It goes in style a little bit with the Stargazer of which we spoke a little while ago on this tape. The title should need an explanation. The title is **Hodegetria**, which means the Guide of the Wayfarers. It was the title of a miraculous image in Constantinople during the Byzantine time and it was near the north door of the city and it was more or less the only exit of the city that did not exit on the water and everybody who wanted to travel west or north or in any way on firm land had to use that exit to leave the city. There was a church near that gate and that was the church of the Hodegetria and the Byzantine travelers, at a period (when) all Byzantines were very, very religious, stopped at this church and offered his prayers up to Our Lady as Protector of the Wayfarer. This work has been shown in an exhibition of American Sculpture, I cannot recall the date, I think it was somewhere in the 60s which was held at the time at the Metropolitan Museum and to my great pleasure it was not only accepted in this show, for which many sculptors tried and not too many could be accepted. I was accepted and not only that, but a picture of this work has been shown in the catalog of that exhibition.”*

*-Nina Winkel (October 9, 1988)*

Right: *Hodegetria*, 1950, lava compound with mica, 24 x 13 x 15”,  
X1983.7.17, Gift of George and Nina Winkel



## The Astronomer

With eyes trained sky-ward, this Babylonian astronomer studies the heavens with an expression of awe. The very stars he studies are the ones inscribed on the tablet he holds closely to his chest.

*“That is done in terra cotta. Here I was thinking more or less of one of the Babylonian astronomers of the past and therefore I gave him here a sort of tablet like thing in his hand on which I indicated a few stars and the man is carrying this heavy thing and looking up to heaven. I like this piece very much; it’s a powerful piece. It’s interesting from all sides and may be what some other works of mine... I’ll travel around and show it from here, too. I have always tried to make a piece in the round interesting from all angles. It should have a front view, a main view, otherwise you feel you have to run around all the time without ever stopping.”*

*-Nina Winkel (October 9, 1988)*



*The Astronomer*, 1955, terra-cotta, 27” tall,  
X1983.7.39, Gift of George and Nina Winkel

## Rain is Raining All Around II



*Rain is Raining All Around II*, 1959-85, Copper and brass, 16.5" x 15" x 11",  
X1983.7.35, Gift of George and Nina Winkel

Inspired by a famous poem\* that school children used to learn (see below), this piece belongs to a fourteen-part series called *Rain and Wind*. The bronze sculpture features five faceless figures huddled together under their umbrellas, trying to escape the rain.

The rain is falling all around,  
It falls on field and tree  
It rains on the umbrellas here,  
And on the ships at sea.

-Robert Louis Stevenson

\*Please note that there is some debate concerning the reference. Museum files cite both a poem and a song. Robert Louis Stevenson's poem "Rain" from the *Child's Garden of Verses* is the most likely candidate and has therefore been reprinted in this publication.

*"The **Rain is Raining All Around** is from the very famous little poem that school children learn and it belonged to a series of rain and wind. That series I started out with when I did copper work. Our friend, Bob Summer, who is right now taking this video tape showed me at the time how to work copper with silver soldering because the actual bronze and steel welding was physically too hard for me. My husband wouldn't allow me to do that. And so, I thought after I had started the simple shapes which at the time I could handle already, would lend themselves to a series of Rain and Wind. And I did about fourteen of those. This is the one with the most figures in it. I have other ones that is [sic] just one figure or two figures partly running in the rain trying to escape the rain and the wind and quite a great variety. This now, is here as the only piece that is left from that series because they were all sold in no time. They were very popular at the time."*

-Nina Winkel (October 9, 1988)

## Constellation Virgo

Astronomy interested Winkel from an early age, and she often related her work to cosmic space. *Constellation Virgo* derived from the artist's early observations of the sky. Winkel would sit outside on clear fall nights to make drawings of what she had seen.

This copper and brass sculpture depicts a seated goddess, evoking the cosmos through its prominent use of negative space.

*"Constellation Virgo is also a favorite of mine. I have always been interested in stars. Already when I was a child and in clear fall nights, when the stars came out early enough not conflicting with my bedtime, I went out and observed the stars and made even little drawings of what I thought I had seen. So, one day I decided to do this and got it done really rather fast. It is one of the pieces that I have done the fastest of all. I think it didn't take me more than three weeks, which for a piece like this is very, very fast. But I had it so clear in my mind that it just flowed out of me. I had a very nice experience with it one day: we had a man coming on some business and he brought his four year old little daughter along with him and I had it at home at the time, she was standing in front of it and looking at it, so we said, "Sarah, what do you think that is?" She gave it another look and then she said, "It's a star." We were absolutely flabbergasted, all of us! And the father said, "Well, I would never have thought of that." And I said, 'Well, this is really the closest a four years old child can come to the conception of the constellation.' And it gave me such joy that she realized that is a star configuration that she could see it in it, that I had really gotten it. So that is a remembrance I like to talk about and it gives me, to this day, great pleasure."*

*-Nina Winkel (October 9, 1988)*



*Constellation Virgo*, 1968, copper and brass, 40 x 18 x 18", X1983.7.22, Gift of George and Nina Winkel

## The Great Fish

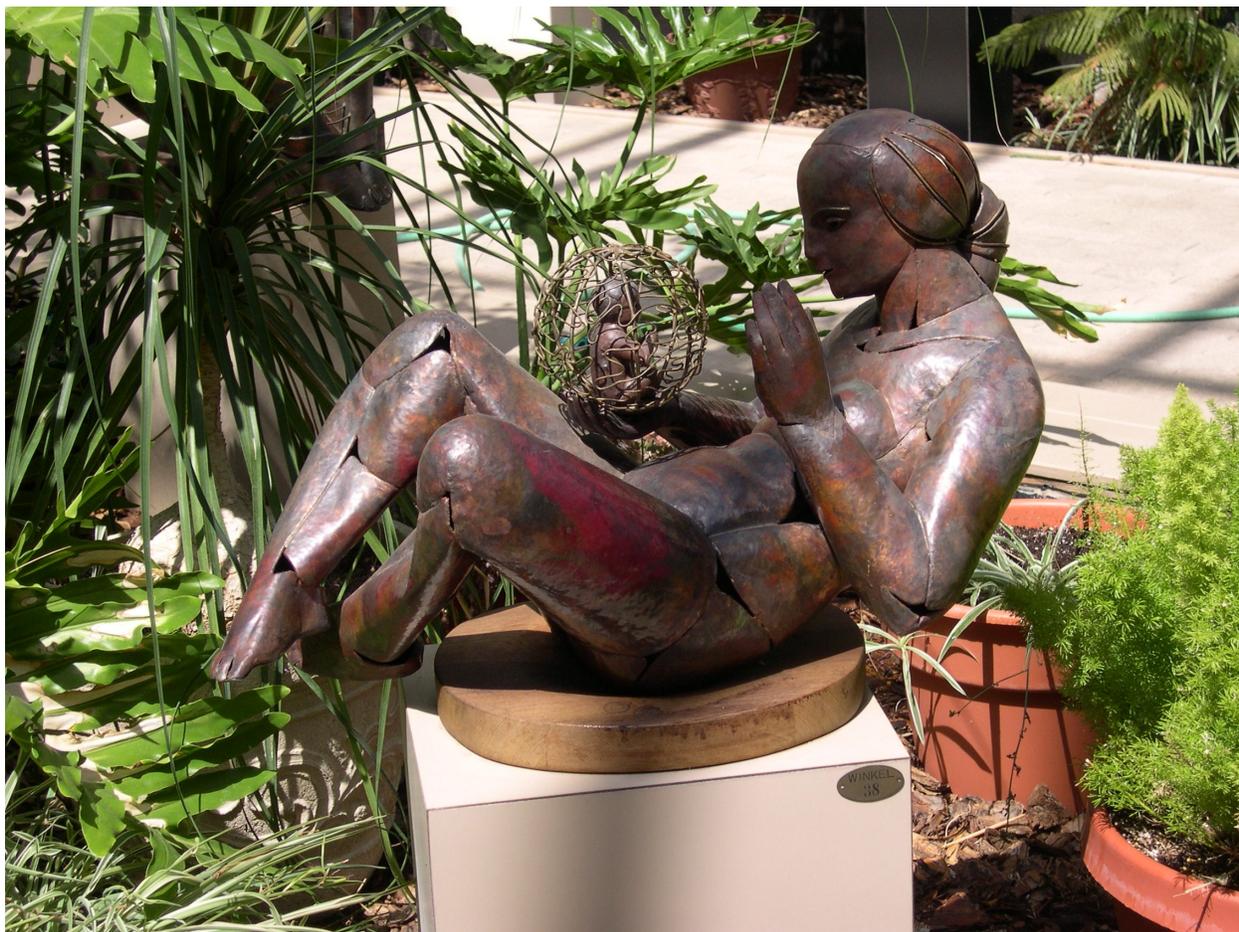
Based on the biblical story of Jonah, this cooper and brass sculpture captures the moment before Jonah is swallowed by the whale. A whale, with its mouth open wide, is swimming downwards toward Jonah, who is struggling to stay afloat amongst the crashing waves and churning seas. The scripture reading from Jonah 2:5 encapsulates the moment in question: “water compassed me about, even to the soul: the depth closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head”.

Jonah was a prophet from Gailee about 780 B.C. The Lord told Jonah to go to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, to warn the Ninevites to repent or suffer the consequences of their wickedness. Jonah refused. Instead of going to Nineveh he boarded a boat headed for Tarshish, Spain, in an attempt to hide from God. At night a huge storm came upon the travelers, wildly tossing the boat. Jonah confesses that he is the cause of the storm and the sailors throw him overboard in an effort to spare their lives. As Jonah is sinking, a big fish swallows him. He sat in the whale’s belly for three days and nights praying all the while. Then God commands the whale to spit Jonah out onto the land. God tells Jonah to go to Ninevah and preach repentance. This time he follows God’s orders.



*The Great Fish*, 1975, copper and brass, 48 x 24 x 6", X1983.7.26, Gift of George and Nina Winkel

## Mystic Birth



*Mystic Birth*, 1981, copper and brass, 18 x 28 x 16", X1983.7.32, Gift of George and Nina Winkel

Winkel repeatedly visited the themes of motherhood and childbirth during her lengthy career. *Mystic Birth*, done later in her life, revisits the theme in a more transcendental fashion. Here a woman rests on her back, exposing her stomach. The tangled globe contains a small child and seemingly floats above her womb. The symbolism is endless.

Winkel left the exact interpretation up to the viewer but stressed its universal, mystical undertones with the title. She could be Mother Earth, the cosmos, or a myriad of other mystical representations.

*"This statue is called **Mystic Birth**. It is a theme that I have done already at the beginning of my career. I have done two pieces representing the woman giving birth, but in a more realistic way, and so it was strange to me that toward the end of my life, I had an idea to do it in a more transcendental way. And it could be not just a regular mother, it could be mother earth, it could be the cosmos as such and the child is enclosed in sort of a globe and it has a much deeper meaning I think than the things I did when I was in my youth. And therefore, the name not just birth, but Mystic Birth. You can give it all kinds of interpretations and I think people do. I like it very much and I think it is a good piece."*

*-Nina Winkel (October 9, 1988)*

## Orpheus

The multi-piece sculpture relief is based on the mythological story of Orpheus. Orpheus, the son of Apollo, played the lyre so beautifully that no one could withstand the charm of his music. Men, wild animals, even the rocks and trees were charmed.

Orpheus is in the center, strumming the lyre for which he is so famous. The animals and fish face him, intently listening to the music. Even the trees seem to be swaying to his song.

*“Orpheus and the Animals is the last work I have done. I started it in the summer of 1987. I was able to get the center part, Orpheus, the two trees and the center of the fish frieze. I got it ready in time for the opening of October 24<sup>th</sup>, but then I continued and did the wolf and the deer to the right and left, and the water motifs over the doors with the two cranes. We mounted that on March 20<sup>th</sup> and from that time on I couldn’t work anymore. I had to close my workshop. However, I am grateful and satisfied because I was able to finish this piece. But now I’m past eighty-five and I think I ought to be thankful that I have been able to work that long and work well and I really haven’t anything coming to me anymore. And whether I do now another couple or so of piece is really not that important, so, I give thanks that I was able to finish it because it makes quite a difference whether I would have the animals to the right and left or not. I like the piece very much and it seems that many other people do too.*

*–Nina Winkel (October 8, 1988)*



*Orpheus (Figures in Relief), 1987-1988, copper and brass, X1989.7.3, Gift of George and Nina Winkel*

## Magnificat

The Virgin Mary stands upright with hands and eyes raised to heaven. Elizabeth is on her knees, reaching out towards Mary's unborn child, Jesus, striving to touch the divine.

This sculpture is based on the Gospel of Luke 1:46-55, which tells the story of the Virgin Mary and her cousin Elizabeth. Mary, who is three months pregnant, hears that her cousin Elizabeth is also expecting. Elizabeth was past the age of childbearing and considered barren. Upon hearing the news, Mary traveled to the city of Judah to help Elizabeth with household chores.

The title refers to Mary. The Magnificat is a Marian hymn frequently recited in Christian church services. It reads:

“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord;  
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.  
For he has looked upon his handmaid's lowliness;  
behold, from now on will all ages call me blessed.  
The Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.  
His mercy is from age to age to those who fear him.  
He has shown might with his arm, dispersed the arrogant of mind and heart.  
He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones but lifted up the lowly.  
The hungry he has filled with good things; the rich he has sent away empty.  
He has helped Israel his servant, remembering his mercy,  
according to his promise to our fathers, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”\*

\*Translation from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. <http://www.usccb.org/bible/luke/1/>

*“Conceived like a piece of architecture. It's the buttress with the flying arch, which is familiar to anybody who knows the architecture of the Gothic cathedrals and this has always interested me very much. It's a beautiful architectural motif and also it expresses the idea behind the work. Mary, the Virgin, standing upright in the power of the Lord which she has been carrying in her own body and Elizabeth, as the flying arch, reaching out desiring to reach and touch the divine. This work has been for quite a while, for several years, at to George Mercer Jr. School of Theology on Long Island. It's an Episcopalian institution. And they have given it back so that the base which we have here, which had been the original base had been lost and I needed to have another base made. I also needed pictures of it and further more we were very desirous to have this important piece of mine here included in the sculpture court. At the Mercer Libraries they could never have given it the display that it has there and I have given them in return another work of mine, a work in copper, brass and silver, a bust of Christ as the Man of Sorrows.”*

*-Nina Winkel (October 9, 1988)*



*Magnificat, c.1960, terra-cotta, X1989.7.1,  
Gift of George and Nina Winkel*

## Proud Spirits



*Proud Spirits*, 1972, copper and silver, 32.5 x 25 x 11", X1983.7.25, Gift of George and Nina Winkel

*Proud Spirits* is aptly named. Head held high, eyes wide, left front foot raised; the horse seems poised for a grand gallop across an open meadow.

A closer look at the sculpture makes the viewer aware of the piecemeal construction method. The smooth muscles, prominent structure, and flowing mane were crafted by welding together many small pieces of copper and silver.

*This piece called **Proud Spirits** show [sic] the powerful horse. Just then I was interested as a child in horses as in stars. I also have liked horses very much and I have done repeatedly things with horses, or a single horse and this is sort of a humorous horse, kicking horse. It is very popular, especially with the children, I'm told by the docents who take care of visiting children.*

*-Nina Winkel (October 9, 1988)*

