Art and Culture of Nice

Art and Culture in Nice

Nice stands among the great art cities of Europe. With the second highest concentration of museums in France after Paris, a Mediterranean light that has enchanted painters for two centuries, and one of the most radical and original avant-garde movements of the twentieth century, the city has shaped, and been shaped by, an extraordinary artistic life. From prehistoric cave paintings to the provocations of the École de Nice, from Baroque palaces to the world's oldest carnival, Nice is a city in constant creative conversation with itself and with the world.



Nice's historic centre, together with the Promenade des Anglais and the surrounding Belle Époque neighborhoods, was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2021, recognizing the city's exceptional fusion of cultural influences and architectural heritage.

I. The Light of Nice: Why Artists Came

The quality of light on the Côte d'Azur has long been identified as a distinct artistic force. Art historians speak of the ***lumière niçoise*** — a luminosity that dissolves shadows, saturates colours, and renders the everyday extraordinary. This light drew Henri Matisse to Nice in 1917; it seduced Auguste Renoir, who spent his final years in nearby Cagnes-sur-Mer; it attracted Marc Chagall, Raoul Dufy, and countless others. The city was not merely a backdrop for these artists — it became the substance of their work. Matisse painted the light through shuttered windows; Dufy painted the sweep of the Promenade des Anglais as pure chromatic joy; the artists of the École de Nice made the Mediterranean sky itself the subject of their art.

This unique luminosity is inseparable from Nice's geography: sheltered by the Alps to the north, open to the sea to the south, bathed in over 300 days of sunshine per year. For artists seeking colour, clarity, and warmth, there was no better laboratory.

II. The École de Nice: An Avant-Garde in the Sun

Origins

The **École de Nice** (School of Nice) is one of the most remarkable artistic phenomena of twentieth-century Europe: a radical, internationally significant avant-garde that emerged not from Paris or New York, but from a sunny Mediterranean resort town. Its origins lie in a legendary moment on a Nice beach in **1947**, when three young friends — **Yves Klein**, the poet Claude Pascal, and **Arman** (Armand Fernandez) — divided the world between them in a gesture of playful omnipotence: Klein

claimed the infinite blue of the sky; Pascal claimed the air; Arman claimed the earth and its riches.[1] This founding myth presaged their artistic careers with uncanny accuracy.

The term “École de Nice” was first used in print by critic Claude Rivière in the newspaper *Combat* in **1960**.[2] It is not a school in the academic sense, nor a single movement, but rather a succession of generations of artists united by geography, mutual provocation, and a shared rejection of artistic academicism — what the MAMAC describes as “a revolution of forms, an insolence of attitudes.”

The Key Figures

Yves Klein (1928–1962), born in Nice to two painter parents, is the central figure of the movement. Self-taught, trained in judo, and infused with a quasi-mystical sense of the absolute, Klein developed the concept of the **Void** and the iconic **International Klein Blue (IKB)** — a deep, luminous ultramarine registered as a proprietary colour in 1960. His *Anthropométries* (1960), in which nude models covered in IKB paint were dragged across canvases while an orchestra played his *Monotone Symphony*, transformed the making of art into performance. He signed the sky of Nice as his first artwork. He died of a heart attack in Paris in 1962, aged only 34, but his influence was already global: Yves Klein had announced “a new art axis: Nice–Los Angeles–Tokyo.”[3]

Arman (1928–2005), born Armand Fernandez in Nice, studied at the École Nationale des Arts Décoratifs in Nice before moving to Paris and then New York. His practice of ***Accumulations*** — transparent containers filled with objects such as razors, watches, toy soldiers, and violin fragments — offered a counterpoint to Klein's Void: where Klein offered emptiness, Arman offered an overwhelming fullness. His *Poubelles* (rubbish bins filled with refuse presented as sculpture) were a provocation to the consumer society of the 1960s.

Martial Raysse (born 1936, Golfe-Juan), who lived and worked in Nice, developed a uniquely French form of pop art, exuberant and ironic. He transformed the visual codes of the Côte d'Azur — beach pin-ups, sunbathers, neon light, the kitsch of the summer resort — into large-scale installations and paintings vibrating with saturated colour. His 1962 installation *Raysse Beach* brought an entire seaside scene, complete with sand, inflatable toys, and a jukebox, into the exhibition space.

Ben (Benjamin Vautier, born 1935) remains the movement's most tireless provocateur and its longest-lived public presence. His text paintings — canvases covered in handwritten declarations such as “Everything is Art,” “God Does Not Exist,” or “Sign Everything” — connect Fluxus to conceptual art, philosophy to stand-up comedy. He took art into the streets of Nice, standing on the Promenade des Anglais with a sign reading *Look at me, that's enough* (1962) or lunching in the middle of traffic. He created the **Festival Fluxus Mondial et Art Total** in Nice in **1963**, making the city briefly the world capital of Fluxus performance.

Other major artists of the École de Nice include **Marcel Alocco**, **Bernar Venet**, **Sacha Sosno**, **Claude Gilli**, **Noël Dolla**, **Ernest Pignon-Ernest**, and **Niki de Saint Phalle**, whose large-scale colourful sculptures — vivid figures of women, serpents, and fantastic creatures — became some of the most beloved images of the French avant-garde.

The Movements

The École de Nice encompassed several successive and overlapping movements:

- **Nouveau Réalisme** (New Realism) — Founded with a manifesto signed in October 1960 at Klein's Paris apartment by Arman, Klein, Raysse, Tinguely, Niki de Saint Phalle, César, Christo, and others. The movement proclaimed a new awareness of "modern nature" — the factory, the city, advertising, and mass media — and made the object the primary material of art.
- **Fluxus** — The global neo-Dadaist movement found a particularly fertile home in Nice thanks to Ben, whose shop (**Laboratoire 32**, from 1958) was a meeting point for artists, poets, and musicians. Ben hosted George Brecht and Robert Filliou, who set up their "non-shop" in Villefranche-sur-Mer.
- **Supports/Surfaces** — In the late 1960s, a younger generation of artists trained at the Nice School of Decorative Arts turned to an analytical exploration of painting itself: canvas, stretcher, pigment, support. Artists including Claude Viallat, Noël Dolla, Max Charvolen, and Patrick Saytour stripped painting of imagery and subject to examine its physical and material conditions.
- **Groupe 70** — A collective of Nice-based artists active from 1971 to 1973, which mounted its first exhibition in a house in Vieux-Nice in January 1971.



In **1977**, the Centre Pompidou in Paris celebrated the movement with a major exhibition titled *À propos de Nice* (About Nice), orchestrated by Ben — the first major national recognition of a movement that had operated for decades in productive distance from the Parisian art establishment.

III. The Great Artists of Nice

Henri Matisse (1869–1954)

Henri Matisse arrived in Nice in December 1917, aged 48, initially to treat a bronchial condition. He booked a month at the Hôtel Beau Rivage on the Quai des États-Unis. It rained every day — until the last, when the morning light appeared and, as he wrote, *when I understood that I would see that light again every morning, I could not believe my happiness.* He never truly left.

Matisse lived in Nice for nearly **37 years**, until his death on 3 November 1954. He settled on the Cours Saleya, then later at the Hôtel Régina in Cimiez, a vast Belle Époque palace where he occupied a large apartment overlooking the city and the sea. The light, the colours, the open windows onto the Mediterranean — all of these became constant subjects and conditions of his painting. His great Nice-period works include his *Odalisques* of the 1920s, the decorative panels of the 1930s, and the extraordinary paper cut-outs (*gouaches découpées*) of his final years, created when his hands were too arthritic to paint.

In 1941, Matisse underwent a major abdominal operation in Lyon and, considering himself a survivor, began what he called "a second life." He moved to Vence in 1943 for safety during the Allied landings, and there, in collaboration with Sister Jacques-Marie (his former nurse turned Dominican nun), designed and decorated the **Chapelle du Rosaire de Vence** — stained glass, ceramic murals, liturgical vestments — completed in 1951 and considered one of the finest works of religious art of the twentieth century.

Matisse is buried in the **Monastère Notre-Dame de Cimiez**, a short walk from the museum that bears his name.

Marc Chagall (1887–1985)

Marc Chagall, the great Russian-French painter of poetic, dream-like imagery rooted in Jewish folklore and the Old Testament, moved to the French Riviera in **1950**, settling in nearby Vence. Enchanted by the light and by the warmth of the region, he made it his permanent home. On the initiative of André Malraux, Minister of Culture, the French state created the **Musée National Marc Chagall** in Nice's Cimiez district — inaugurated on **7 July 1973**, on Chagall's 86th birthday, in his presence. It was the only national museum in France created for a living artist.

Chagall wished the museum to be a place not of display but of **spirituality and peace** — a sanctuary for his great *Biblical Message* cycle: seventeen large paintings on Old Testament themes, from the creation and paradise to Moses and the prophets, painted in Vence between 1954 and 1967. He also contributed stained glass windows, mosaics, and sculptures to the building. He is buried in the village cemetery of Saint-Paul-de-Vence.

Raoul Dufy (1877–1953)

Raoul Dufy, master of vivid colour and joyful line, was captivated by the Côte d'Azur throughout his career. His paintings of Nice — the Promenade des Anglais, the Baie des Anges, the regattas — capture the city's hedonism and light with an elegance entirely his own. He is buried in the **Monastère de Cimiez** cemetery, alongside Matisse.

Gustav-Adolf Mossa (1883–1971)

Gustav-Adolf Mossa was a Niçois painter of the Symbolist movement and, together with his father Alexis Mossa, a key figure in the organisation and iconography of the Nice Carnival. His paintings, steeped in fin-de-siècle decadence, melancholy, and erotic fantasy, are major works of European Symbolism. A significant collection is held at the **Musée des Beaux-Arts Jules Chéret**.

Jules Chéret (1836–1932)

Jules Chéret, the Parisian-born master of the lithographic poster, spent his final years in Nice, dying there in 1932 at the age of 96. Considered the father of the modern poster, Chéret elevated commercial advertising into a recognised art form through his luminous, joyful images of Parisian life. He left a significant collection to Nice, inspiring the creation of the **Musée des Beaux-Arts**, which bears his name.

IV. The Museums of Nice

Nice has an exceptional density of museums — **the second highest in France after Paris**. Most municipal museums offer free entry to residents of the Nice Côte d'Azur metropolitan area, and a multi-day museum pass is available for visitors.

MAMAC — Musée d'Art Moderne et d'Art Contemporain

The **MAMAC** (Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art) is the city's flagship museum of contemporary art. Its collection of over 1,300 works by some 300 artists traces the adventure of art from the 1950s to the present, with particular strength in:

- The **École de Nice** — Klein, Arman, Raysse, Ben, Niki de Saint Phalle, Alocco, Sosno, Venet, and many others
- **Nouveau Réalisme** — including César's compressed automobiles and Niki de Saint Phalle's *Nanas*
- **American Pop Art** — Warhol, Lichtenstein, Wesselmann, Rosenquist
- **Fluxus** and **Supports/Surfaces**

The building, designed in a bold contemporary style, includes a **rooftop terrace** offering panoramic views over the city.



The MAMAC closed in January 2024 for major renovation works as part of the **Promenade du Paillon 2** urban project. During renovation, the collection is accessible through partnership exhibitions in other Nice museums and on tour nationally and internationally. Check the MAMAC website for current programming: mamac-nice.org

Musée Matisse

Housed in a **red-ochre seventeenth-century Genoese villa** set in an ancient olive grove in the Cimiez neighbourhood, the **Musée Matisse** opened in 1963 and was extended by architect Jean-François Bodin in 1993. It holds one of the world's most complete collections of Matisse's work: 68 paintings and gouaches, 236 drawings, 218 prints, 57 sculptures, 14 illustrated books, and 187 personal objects that once belonged to the painter, giving an intimacy of access to his creative world.[4)]

The villa stands within the **Parc des Arènes de Cimiez**, adjacent to the ruins of the Roman city of Cemenelum and across the park from the **Monastère Notre-Dame de Cimiez**, where Matisse is buried.

- **Address:** 164, avenue des Arènes de Cimiez
- **Website:** musee-matisse-nice.org

Musée National Marc Chagall

The **Musée National Marc Chagall** is the largest museum in the world dedicated to a single artist's spiritual vision. It was designed around Chagall's donation of his ***Message Biblique*** cycle (twelve large paintings on Genesis and Exodus, plus five paintings on the Song of Songs) and holds the most important public collection of his work. Beyond the *Message Biblique* paintings, the museum contains stained glass windows, mosaics, sculptures, and an auditorium lit by Chagall's extraordinary blue stained glass.

The museum sits in a garden on the edge of Cimiez. Chagall participated in its design and considered it a place of meditation, not merely display.

- **Address:** Avenue Docteur Ménard, Cimiez
- **Website:** musees-nationaux-alpesmaritimes.fr/chagall

Musée des Beaux-Arts Jules Chéret

Housed in a sumptuous **Neo-Renaissance villa** built in 1878 for the Ukrainian Princess Elizaveta Kochubey, the **Musée des Beaux-Arts** opened as a public museum in 1928. Its collection spans four centuries, with notable strengths in:

- The work of **Jules Chéret** — the master poster artist who lived in Nice
- **Alexis Mossa** and **Gustav-Adolf Mossa** — the great Niçois Symbolist painters, and long-time curators of the museum
- Impressionist and Post-Impressionist masters: Monet, Sisley, Renoir, Degas, Dufy
- Sculptures by Rodin, Carpeaux, and Rude
- Ceramic works by Picasso

The villa is set in an English garden and approached by a steep climb from the city centre.

- **Address:** 33, avenue des Baumettes

Palais Lascaris

One of the finest examples of **Niçois civil Baroque architecture**, the Palais Lascaris was built in 1648 for the noble Lascaris-Vintimille family and occupied their residence until the Revolution. Purchased by the City of Nice in 1942, it was restored and opened as a museum in 1970. Its **monumental staircase** adorned with frescoes, its richly decorated Baroque salons hung with Flemish tapestries, and its remarkable collection of paintings and sculptures from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries make it an experience in itself.

Its most astonishing treasure, however, is its **collection of over 500 ancient musical instruments** — the second largest such collection in France after the Musée de la Musique in Paris, and one of the finest in Europe. The collection was largely built from the bequest of Antoine Gautier, a Niçois virtuoso and collector who bequeathed his instruments to the city in 1904. Highlights include rare Baroque guitars dating to the early seventeenth century, a bass violin from Milan (1696), violas da gamba, harps, and keyboard instruments.

- **Address:** 15, rue Droite, Vieux-Nice
- **Listed historic monument:** 1946

Musée Masséna

The **Villa Masséna**, a grand Belle Époque palace built in 1898 for Prince Victor d'Essling on the Promenade des Anglais, has been a public museum since **1921**. It narrates the history of Nice from the late eighteenth century through the Belle Époque — the arrival of English tourists, the annexation of Nice by France in 1860, the development of the Promenade des Anglais, the flowering of the great hotels, the Carnival, and the artistic life of the Riviera. Its ground-floor rooms preserve their original décor: frescoes, inlaid woodwork, chandeliers, and sculpture, a testament to nineteenth-century taste.

- **Address:** 65, rue de France / 35, Promenade des Anglais

Musée d'Art Naïf Anatole Jakovsky

Housed in the elegant **Château Sainte-Hélène** — a nineteenth-century villa that once belonged to the perfumer François Coty — the **Museum of Naïve Art** holds an international collection assembled by the art critic and advocate Anatole Jakovsky, who donated it to Nice. Naïve art — created by self-taught painters, marked by vivid colour, simplified form, and unselfconscious joy — finds a fitting home in this charming villa.

Musée des Arts Asiatiques

Designed by the Japanese architect **Kenzo Tange** and set in the **Parc Phoenix**, the **Museum of Asian Arts** presents an exceptional collection of art from India, South-East Asia, Japan, and China across the ages. The building, with its four elegant marble pavilions on a lake, is itself a work of art. Regular events include tea ceremonies and lunar new year celebrations.

Villa Arson

Villa Arson is Nice's national centre for contemporary art — a uniquely ambitious institution combining an exhibition space, one of France's foremost art schools (the École Nationale Supérieure d'Art), a media library, and a research centre. Its white terraced buildings cascade down a hillside north of the city centre, surrounded by gardens. The exhibition programme presents major contemporary artists alongside the work of students and emerging creators.

- **Address:** 20, avenue Stephen Liégeard

Musée de Préhistoire — Terra Amata

On the slopes of Mont Boron, the **Terra Amata Museum** is installed on an archaeological site that has yielded some of the **oldest evidence of human habitation in Europe**, dating back approximately **400,000 years**. Among the discoveries are traces of some of the earliest

domestication of fire in the history of humankind. The museum presents the lives and material culture of the first inhabitants of Nice, who set up their seasonal hunting camps on a prehistoric beach at this spot.

V. The Carnival of Nice

The **Carnaval de Nice** is one of the great carnival celebrations in the world, alongside Venice, Rio de Janeiro, and Mardi Gras in New Orleans. It is also the **oldest carnival in the world for which documentation survives**: the first written record dates to **1294**, when Charles of Anjou, Count of Provence, wrote that he had passed *the joyous days of carnival* in Nice.[5)]

The Carnival runs for two weeks each February and attracts over a million visitors. Its key elements are:

- **The Carnival Parade (*Corso Carnavalesque*)** — A procession of enormous satirical floats, up to 20 metres high, built from traditional papier-mâché by craftsmen working year-round. Each year's parade is presided over by **His Majesty the King** — a gigantic papier-mâché figure whose effigy is ceremonially burned at sea on the final night.
- **The Battle of Flowers (*Bataille des Fleurs*)** — First held in **1876**, initiated by the writer Alphonse Karr, the Flower Battle is a procession of floats covered entirely in fresh flowers along the Promenade des Anglais. Costumed performers shower the crowd with mimosas, gerberas, roses, and carnations; around 90% of the flowers come from local growers. It is an event of delicate Mediterranean elegance entirely unlike the rough-and-tumble of the main carnival.

The modern form of the carnival dates from **1873**, when a committee headed by the painter **Alexis Mossa** reorganised it as a formal parade with masquerades, satirical floats, and tribunes.



The paths of the **Jardins des Arènes de Cimiez** are named after jazz musicians — a reminder that this ancient olive grove was the site of the **Nice Jazz Festival** for more than three decades, from 1974 to 2010. See the companion page Music and Composers of Nice for the full history of music in the city.

VI. Baroque Nice: Churches and Palaces

Before the Belle Époque and long before the École de Nice, Nice developed a richly distinctive **Baroque culture** under Savoyard rule, deeply influenced by the Italian tradition yet with its own local character. Vieux-Nice is one of the finest ensembles of Baroque urban architecture in France.

- **Cathédrale Sainte-Réparate** (Place Rossetti) — Built from 1650 to 1680, dedicated to the patron saint of Nice. Its polychrome tile dome is one of the iconic silhouettes of the old town. The interior is a sumptuous display of Niçois Baroque: frescoed ceilings, marble altars, gilded chapels.

- **Chapelle de la Miséricorde** (Cours Saleya) — Considered the jewel of Niçois Baroque, built 1736–1740. The interior is a theatrical composition of coloured marble, gilded stucco, and painted vaults.
- **Palais Lascaris** (Rue Droite) — The finest example of Baroque civil architecture in Nice (see Museums section above).
- **Église Saint-Jacques-le-Majeur** (*known as* the Gesù) — A seventeenth-century Jesuit church with an elaborately decorated interior, reflecting the strongly Italian character of early-modern Nice.

VII. Nice and the Belle Époque

The annexation of Nice by France in **1860** unleashed a cultural and architectural transformation of extraordinary scale. The city became one of the most fashionable winter resorts in Europe, attracting royalty, aristocracy, artists, and wealthy tourists from across the continent. This era of prosperity produced the grand hotels, villas, and public buildings that define the city's historic skyline:

- The **Hôtel Negresco** (1913, architect Édouard Niermans) — A national monument and living emblem of Belle Époque splendour on the Promenade des Anglais.
- The **Casino Municipal** (now demolished, but replaced by the Palais de la Méditerranée)
- The **Musée des Beaux-Arts** (1878), the **Villa Masséna** (1898), and the series of grand winter palaces in Cimiez, including the **Hôtel Régina** — where Matisse lived and worked — and the **Grand Hôtel** (now the Hôtel Splendid).
- The **Promenade des Anglais** itself — originated in 1822, widened and transformed throughout the century, and still the great cultural and social artery of the city.

The Belle Époque also saw a rich literary and intellectual life: Friedrich Nietzsche, who stayed in Nice repeatedly between 1883 and 1888, wrote much of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* on the hills above the city. F. Scott Fitzgerald, Somerset Maugham, and many others wrote in and about Nice and its surroundings.

VIII. Contemporary Cultural Life

Nice's cultural life today is as rich as it is diverse:

- **Nice Jazz Festival** — Founded in 1948, one of the world's oldest jazz festivals, held each July in the Jardin Albert-I^er and Théâtre de Verdure. See Music and Composers of Nice.
- **Opéra Nice Côte d'Azur** — The historic opera house, listed since 1992, presents a full season of opera, symphony concerts, and ballet with the Orchestre Philharmonique de Nice.
- **Galerie des Ponchettes** — A gallery on the Quai des États-Unis with views over the sea, regularly presenting temporary exhibitions of contemporary art.
- **Galerie Lympia** — Opened in 2017 in a restored former galley-slaves' prison near the port, presenting free exhibitions by prominent Niçois and international artists.
- **Musée de la Photographie Charles Nègre** — Dedicated to photography, housed in a former factory on the Cours Saleya.
- **Festival MANCA** (Musique Actuelle Nice – Côte d'Azur) — An annual contemporary music

festival championing new composition and experimental music.
- **Théâtre National de Nice (TNN)** — The city's principal theatre, presenting a full programme of drama, dance, and performance art.
- **Villa Arson** — National centre for contemporary art and one of France's foremost art schools (see Museums section).

IX. Key Cultural Personalities of Nice

Name	Field	Dates	Connection to Nice
Yves Klein	Visual art (Nouveau Réalisme)	1928–1962	Born in Nice; founding figure of the École de Nice
Arman (Armand Fernandez)	Visual art (Nouveau Réalisme)	1928–2005	Born in Nice; studied at the ENBA Nice
Martial Raysse	Visual art (Pop art, Nouveau Réalisme)	born 1936	Lived and worked in Nice
Ben (Benjamin Vautier)	Visual art, Fluxus	born 1935	Lives and works in Nice
Niki de Saint Phalle	Sculpture, Nouveau Réalisme	1930–2002	Closely associated with the École de Nice
Ernest Pignon-Ernest	Street art, visual art	born 1942	Born in Nice
Sacha Sosno	Sculpture	1937–2013	Key figure of the École de Nice; the “Square Head” at the Louis Nucera Library
Gustav-Adolf Mossa	Symbolist painting	1883–1971	Born in Nice; curator of the Musée des Beaux-Arts
Jules Chéret	Poster art	1836–1932	Died in Nice; left collection to the city
Henri Matisse	Painting	1869–1954	Lived in Nice 1917–1954; buried in Cimiez
Marc Chagall	Painting	1887–1985	Lived in Vence; his museum is in Nice
Raoul Dufy	Painting	1877–1953	Painted Nice; buried in Cimiez
Yves Klein	Contemporary art	1928–1962	Born in Nice
Jean-Honoré Fragonard	Painting (18th c.)	1732–1806	Born in Grasse (nearby); works held in Nice

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X. Practical Information

Museum	Address	Notes
MAMAC	Place Yves Klein, Nice	Closed for renovation 2024–; check website
Musée Matisse	164, av. des Arènes de Cimiez	Tues closed; Bus 15 from centre
Musée National Marc Chagall	Av. Docteur Ménard, Cimiez	Open daily except Tues
Musée des Beaux-Arts Jules Chéret	33, av. des Baumettes	Mon closed

Museum	Address	Notes
Palais Lascaris	15, rue Droite, Vieux-Nice	Mon closed; free with museum pass
Musée Masséna	35, Promenade des Anglais	Tues closed
Musée d'Art Naïf Anatole Jakovsky	Av. de Fabron	Tues closed
Musée des Arts Asiatiques	405, Promenade des Anglais (Parc Phoenix)	Tues closed
Villa Arson	20, av. Stephen Liégeard	Check programme
Terra Amata	25, bd Carnot	Tues closed

A **Nice Museum Pass** (multi-day) gives access to all municipal museums and galleries. The **French Riviera Pass** also includes major cultural attractions and activities.

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[1)]

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2)

MAMAC Nice, *Made in Nice — Mediation Form*.

3)

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4)

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5)

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