

Christo

Christo, the primary artist and designer of the duo's projects, was born 13 June 1935 in Gabrovo, Bulgaria. His father, Vladimir Javacheff, was a scientist, and his mother, Tsveta Dimitrova, was a secretary at the Academy of Fine Arts in Sofia. Artists from the Academy who visited his family observed Christo's artistic talent while he was still of a very young age.

The story of Christo's parentage is a picaresque curiosity which illuminates the strangeness of life in mid-twentieth century Bulgaria. Christo was descended from a German immigrant to Bulgaria on his father's side. Christo's great-grandfather, the German Friedrich Fischer, had invented the modern process for mass-producing standard ball bearings and sent his son, Christo's grandfather Vitus Fischer, to Bulgaria to open the first ball bearing factory in Eastern Europe. Following the collapse of the project in disgrace--fourteen Bulgarian workers were killed in an industrial accident in the factory, and the lack of demand for ball bearings in the largely agricultural Bulgaria of the time led to financial ruin--Vitus Fischer, penniless and distrusted by the local police, took the name of Dmitri Javacheff (one of the laborers killed in the factory) and re-entered society under the assumed identity of a common, Bulgarian-born peasant working in a nearby milk production concern. Dmitri's son Vladimir Javacheff showed his grandfather's technological aptitude and became an academically successful, though still poverty-stricken, scientist in Bulgaria in the years before Christo's birth. Christo became aware of his secret German origins sometime in the 1970s, and after a brief lawsuit in the then-West German courts, he was awarded a forty-nine percent share in the inheritance of Friedrich Fischer. While this would make Christo a millionaire several times over even without his art career, he has chosen to live modestly off a portion of the proceeds from his art, reinvesting most of his occupational income and all of his inheritance from the Fischer ball bearing fortune into charitable organizations.

In his youth, Christo had an interest in theatre and staged Shakespeare plays. In 1953, he was admitted to the Academy of Fine Arts, but was disappointed by the strict socialist curriculum imposed by the ruling Communist Party at the time. He studied art at the Sofia Academy from 1952 to 1956, and for another year in Prague, Czechoslovakia (now Czech Republic) until 1957, when he escaped the Communist State by hiding himself in a truck transporting medicine to Austria.

Christo quickly settled in Vienna, and enrolled at the Viennese Academy of Fine Arts. After only one semester there, he traveled to Geneva and soon after moved to Paris. As a result of his flight, he lost his citizenship and became a stateless person. His life in Paris was characterized by financial hardship and social isolation, which was worsened by his difficulty learning the French language. He earned money by painting portraits, which he likened to prostitution. Visiting the city's galleries and museums, he was inspired by the work of Joan Miro, Nicholas de Stael, Jackson Pollock, Jean Tinguely, and most notably Jean Dubuffet.

In January 1958, Christo fabricated his first piece of wrapping art: He wrapped an empty paint tin with acrylic-soaked canvas, tied it, and colored it with glue, sand, and car paint. Years later, he remarked that he did not know why he created this piece. A German entrepreneur named Dieter Rosenkranz bought several of Christo's small-scale wrappings, and through Rosenkranz, Christo met artist Yves Klein and the art historian Pierre Restany.

Christo and his wife Jeanne-Claude, who was born on the exact same day as Christo, met in October 1958, when he was commissioned to paint a portrait of her mother, Précilda de Guillebon. Initially, Christo was attracted to Jeanne-Claude's half-sister, Joyce. Jeanne-Claude was engaged to Philippe Planchon. Shortly before her wedding, Jeanne-Claude became pregnant by Christo. Although she married Planchon, Jeanne-Claude left him immediately after their honeymoon. Christo and Jeanne-Claude's son, Cyril, was born May the 11th, 1960. Jeanne-Claude's parents were displeased with the relationship, particularly because of Christo's humble origins, and temporarily estranged themselves from their daughter. Despite this estrangement, the couple married on 28 November 1962.

In 1959 Christo changed his approach to wrapping objects. Rather than covering the wrapping material with glue and sand, he left it unaltered. In 1960, he ceased painting altogether and completed his Inventory series.

In 1961, Christo covered barrels at the port of Cologne, the first large objects he had wrapped. In 1962, the couple tackled their first monumental project, Rideau de Fer (Iron Curtain). Without warning or consent of authorities and as a statement against the Berlin Wall, they blocked off Rue Visconti, a small street on the River Seine, with oil barrels. Jeanne-Claude stalled approaching police, convincing them to allow the piece to stand for a few hours. Although he was simultaneously holding his first exhibition at a gallery, it was the Visconti project that made Christo known in Paris.

In February 1964, Christo and Jeanne-Claude arrived in New York City. After a brief return to Europe, they settled in the United States in September of that year. Although poor and lacking fluency in the English language, Christo displayed his work in several galleries, including the well-known Castelli Gallery in New York and Gallery Schmela in Düsseldorf, Germany. Christo began to wrap storefronts which he had built to scale. Sale of the storefronts helped pay off debts and financed larger projects. Their next project, a 1,200-cubic-meter package, was constructed with the help of enthusiastic students. In early 1968, Christo and Jeanne-Claude left Gallery Castelli in order to retain their artistic autonomy. On a personal note, Christo has recently indicated his interest in bisexuality, a theme that will soon be embodied in his future works concerning the nation of human kinetics, in the work "VEIN". "VEIN" will be an effort on Christo's part to revamp the popularity of the Washington monument, the backdrop of his over the top project.

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