

Christo's muse

Two artists were born on the same day in 1935 in different parts of the world; one in Morocco and the other in Bulgaria. And though that 13th of June marked the day of their births, it would be more than 20 years before they found each other. **By Candice Elizabeth Ashby**

The circumstances are not difficult to imagine. Jeanne-Claude walks into the boudoir of her mother's home, the room thick with the smell of paint. Drawn in by the odour, Jeanne-Claude gets a better look at the man her mother has commissioned to paint her. A longhaired, intelligent looking man wielding his paintbrush like a maestro conducting an orchestra. She is immediately smitten.

Their actual meeting may have been a more practical encounter. Though Christo had been painting a portrait of Précilda de Guillebon, the circumstances that led to him marrying her daughter are unknown. Still, the very nature of the work created by Christo and Jeanne-Claude over fifty years inspires art enthusiasts to mentally envision a dreamy and hopeful scenario.

Sadly, this love story has a mournful twist. Jeanne-Claude de Guillebon died of an aneurysm on November 18, 2009, much to the dismay of her friends, her fans and her beloved Christo.

Curiously, for many years, Jeanne-Claude allowed her husband to take all of the credit for their art installations.



This was a deliberate move on her part, allowing her to focus her energies on getting projects approved by various governments.

Through sheer strength of will, Christo and Jeanne-Claude achieved together what others thought impossible. Although it took them 23 years, they finally received approval in 1995 to wrap the Reichstag building in Berlin, Germany. They chose the project because they felt that a Parliament building was not just a building occupied by officials, but one 'owned by a whole nation'.

Before they wrapped the Reichstag, Christo described it to the *Journal of Contemporary Art* as "a solitary monolith...a sleeping beauty that was sitting there, standing near the Tiergarten like a mausoleum."

The artistic duo certainly brought the Reichstag back to life again. During the 1995 exhibition, there were an estimated five million visitors according to the BBC.

Their exhibition in New York City was equally thought provoking. British photographer Matt Taylor was fortunate to have visited New York in February of 2005 just after *The Gates* was displayed in Central Park. To Taylor, who had never seen Central Park any other way, it was the perfect opportunity to take pictures.

"It was cold, bright and very frosty out. It was breathless, and the only noise I could hear was the fabric flapping in the wind," he said.

NY-based musician Curtis Eller described how *The Gates* enhanced the beauty of the park's landscapes.

"I loved it and had a really weird feeling about it. It blew me away," he remarked. "You could see the fabric hanging over the pathways. All from the same height, as you looked below and above, you became aware

of the three dimensional aspects of Central Park."

The works of Christo and Jeanne-Claude have not only made an impact on the art world, but undeniably

on the world at large. With the buildings, landscapes and other incredible venues around the world that they have transformed into their own creative visions, they have also managed to break down the walls of galleries and expose art to people of different levels of cultural awareness.

Christo alone will continue to bring these visions to the public by finishing the projects that had not yet been completed at the time of Jeanne-Claude's death. For he and his wife had promised each other that as long as one of them was alive, the work of Christo and Jeanne-Claude must continue.

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Photographs: Matt Taylor

