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Christo and Jeanne-Claude : Works from the Weston Collection

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[See table of contents](#)

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Christo and Jeanne-Claude Works from the Weston Collection

GIL McELROY

Christo Vladimirov Javacheff began his artistic career in the realm of propaganda when, as an art student in his native Bulgaria, he and his classmates were sent by the government to rework the landscape, arranging the placement of haystacks and farm machinery along the route traveled by the Orient Express so as to meet the aesthetic expectations of those aboard the train and ensure that nothing untoward or unexpected jarred them from their aesthetic complacency and so lead to politically undesired questions about the real state of the communist country.

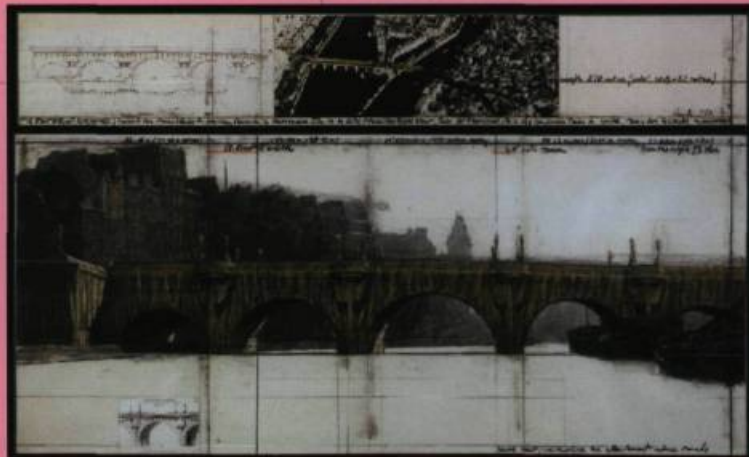
Years later, having left the eastern bloc, he met and married the Moroccan born Jeanne-Claude Denat de Guillebon. Collaboratively working as Christo and Jeanne-Claude, they went on to create the most recognized public and site-specific art in the world, dating back to *Dockside Packages, Cologne Harbour* (1961), their first formal collaboration and the first work in which the wrapping of objects (in this case, a stack of oil barrels and large rolls of industrial paper) occurred.

This past winter, their latest project, *The Gates, Project for Central Park, New York City 1979-2005* — a work in which the paths of the famous park were lined with 7, 503 large vinyl frameworks (the titular gates) from which were suspended saffron-coloured fabric panels free to move in the wind — closed after a successful 16-day run and a 27-year inception period.

Concomitant with that exhibition, the Art Gallery of Ontario mounted *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Works from the Weston Collection*, an exhibition of a collection of the duo's preparatory drawings, collages, and even one small maquette all owned by W. Galen Weston, who began collecting their work in 1980. It's the sale of such work that underwrites the cost of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's public art works.

Though they are much more widely known for their site-specific installations in natural or quasi-natural settings, like *Valley Curtain* (1972), *Running Fence* (1976), or *Surrounded Islands* (1983), it was objects that initially occupied Christo and Jeanne-Claude's aesthetic focus. So the earliest of their preparatory work included in the exhibition was *Package on a Table, Project* (1961-1988), a piece on brown cardboard which incorporates a fabric and string wrapping of an otherwise indeterminate object atop a perspective drawing of a small wooden table.

Their interest in objects inevitably led to working with things of an architectural persuasion. The earliest such piece in the Weston collection is *Double Store Front Project, Orange and Yellow* (1964-65), a wall-mounted construction that details the interior wrapping of two storefront windows. But there are others of larger scale and ambition, like *Ponte Sant'Angelo Wrapped, Project for Ponte Sante'Angelo, Roma* (1969), a collage



CHRISTO, *The Pont Neuf Wrapped, Project for Paris*. Drawing in two parts, 1983. Collection of George Weston Limited. © Christo 1983, 2005.

proposal (which, like earlier preparatory pieces, incorporated actual fabric wrapping) that clearly speaks of the later *The Pont Neuf Wrapped, Project for Paris* (1983), a work finally carried out in 1985 after (only) ten years of planning. And *Wrapped Building, Project for Number One Times Square, Allied Chemical Tower* (1985), a collage for an as-yet uncompleted work for a downtown New York City location leads to a pair of related works — one a collage, the other a drawing (both in two parts) — entitled *Wrapped Reichstag, Project for Berlin* (1982 and 1984, respectively), a work that finally came to fruition in 1995 after 24 years of planning. Clearly Christo and Jeanne-Claude think in the long-term.

While early pieces like *Package on a Table, Project* had comprised little more than a drawing/collage with perhaps the work's title written across the top, a general formula for the production of such preliminary work was established early on. Typically, each such work involves two elements: a large drawn/collaged component proffering a perspectival view of the planned work shown as it would look in situ; and, along the top, bottom, or side of that primary element, a smaller, separate piece incorporating a topographical map of the site denoting the work's proposed location within it.

Interestingly, while their primary work involves architecture and the landscape, Christo and Jeanne-Claude have worked recursively, turning their sights self-referentially upon objects of pre-existing aesthetic purposes. With *Wrapped Monument to Cristóbal Colón, Project for Barcelona* (1984) and *Wrapped Statues, Sleeping Faun "Barberinische Faun," Project for der Glyptotek-München* (1984), the couple

CHRISTO, *Wrapped Reichstag, Project for Berlin*. Drawing in two parts, 1982. Collection of George Weston Limited. © Christo 1982, 2005.



CHRISTO, *Surrounded Islands*, Project for Biscayne Bay, Miami. Drawing in two parts, 1982. Collection of George Weston Limited. © Christo 1982, 2005.



sought to address sculpture directly, subjecting classical sculpture — of both gallery and public varieties — to their trademark wrapping.

The sole maquette of the exhibition testified to their abiding interest in oil drums. While their earliest site-specific collaboration was a wrapped dockside stack of such things, they made their first real headlines with *Iron Curtain-Wall of Oil Barrels, Rue Visconti, Paris* (1961-62), in which they completely blocked a city street with 240 barrels for a period of eight hours in a work echoing the revolutionary days of the Paris Commune. Most recently, they mounted the much longer *The Wall, 13,000 Oil Barrels, Gasometer, Oberhausen, Germany* (1999), an indoor installation. Wedged between those two exhibitions is a proposed site-specific work for the United Arab Emirates (to date, 28 years in the planning, though the preparatory drawing in the show dates back only 25 years), and the scale model exhibited here, *Oil Barrels Mastaba, Project for ICA, Philadelphia* (1968), an enormous flattened pyramid comprised of a sculptural stack of oil drums.

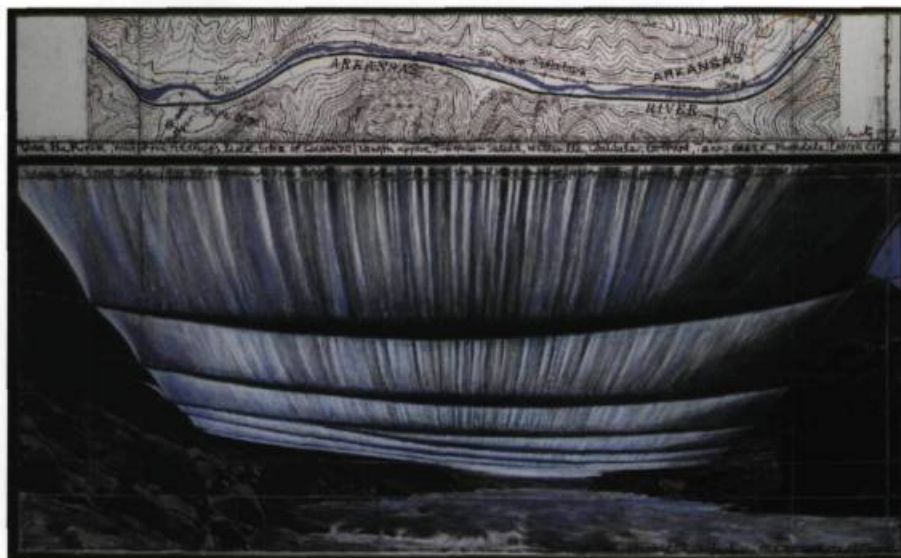
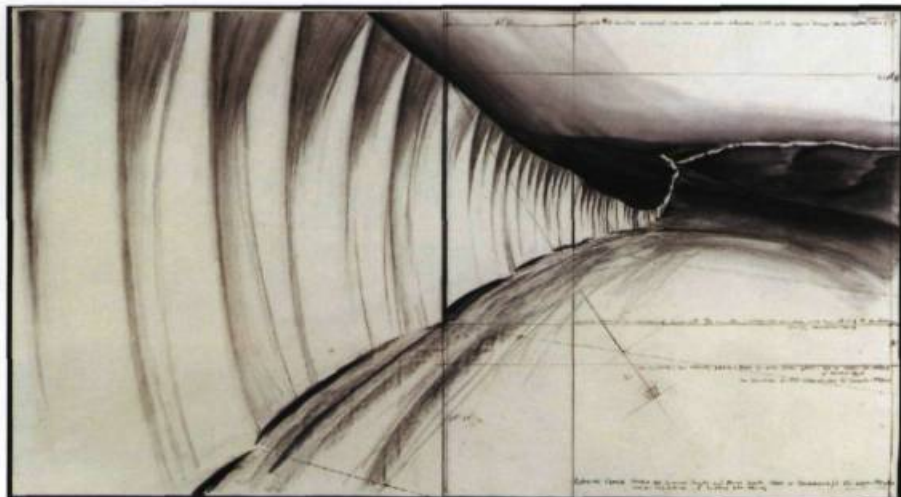
Not all of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's work is under wraps. ←

*Christo and Jeanne-Claude:
Works from the Weston Collection*
Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Ontario
January 22–May 15, 2005



CHRISTO, *The Gates*, Project for Central Park, New York City. Drawing in two parts, 1985. Collection of George Weston Limited. © Christo 1985, 2005.

CHRISTO, *Running Fence*, Project for Sonoma County and Marin County, State of California. Drawing, 1975. Collection of George Weston Limited. © Christo 1975, 2005.



CHRISTO, *Over the River*, Project for the Arkansas River, State of Colorado. Drawing in two parts, 1993. Collection of George Weston Limited. © Christo 1993, 2005.