

Christo and Jeanne-Claude
The Early Years

An Interview by Matthias Koddenberg

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The following text is a compilation of interviews conducted in August 2007, June 2011, and October 2019 as well as numerous conversations held over the same period. They were edited and approved by Christo for this publication.

***Christo, I would like to follow your path
from your growing up in Bulgaria up until
you emigrated from Paris in 1964...***

My years in Bulgaria are a period of my life that I don't like to talk about. There must be a reason if I escaped and I never went back.

***You spent your whole youth in Bulgaria.
That's where your roots are.***

I did. I wanted to become an artist from the very beginning. I was five or six years old when my mother saw that I was drawing all the time. She decided I should have private lessons. So, after school, I was taking private lessons directly in the studios of painters, sculptors, and architects, all friends of my parents. At that time, art academies in Bulgaria were organized like German nineteenth-century academies. During the first four years you would study architecture, painting, sculpture, and decorative arts. You had to learn everything. We even had anatomy classes with dissections of human bodies. After the fourth year, you would decide what your specialization would be. I was in my fourth year when I escaped from Bulgaria; that's why I always say that I still haven't decided what I am yet.

But your family still lives in Bulgaria?

Yes, my two brothers, Stefan and Anani. Anani comes to New York regularly to see me. We talk only in French. I'm only a quarter Bulgarian. I'm half Macedonian and a quarter Czech. My grandmother escaped with her two children from Salonika just before World War I. My grandfather was a Macedonian freedom fighter and was executed by the Turks during the Balkan Wars. When I was still an art student in Sofia, I desperately desired to go to Prague: the most "Western" of the Communist states. Finally, in the fall of 1956, I was allowed to visit some of my relatives who lived there. But things became very violent. With the Soviet tanks invading Budapest everybody thought that World War III was imminent. That's why, in January 1957, I decided I would not return to Bulgaria. I bribed a railway employee and escaped to Vienna in a sealed freight car. I was not the only one. I was scared to death of being stopped at the border, but luckily, we made it.

So you were a group of refugees...

Yes. I was with a group of doctors. As I recall, we didn't say a word. It was frightening. At the border, we heard the officers with their dogs, but they didn't find us. When we arrived, we banged on the train door and somebody opened it from the outside.

What happened then?

When you were a refugee, the moment you arrived, you went your separate ways. Everybody took care of himself or herself. That's how it worked. I handed over my Bulgarian passport and became a stateless political refugee. Because of the high number of refugees that were fleeing from the Communist block to Vienna, the United Nations became responsible for processing the situation and creating



Gabrovo, 1949: Christo at age fourteen, on the far left, during a drawing lesson. Photo: Archive

refugee camps. You never knew where you would end up. But refugees who were registered as students in the country where they were trying to find asylum were not supposed to be sent to any of those camps. That's why, since I still had my student card from the academy in Sofia, I registered as a student at the academy in Vienna, upon the suggestion of the wife of the friend of my father who hosted and helped me when I arrived. She was a lawyer.

Why did you decide to go to Vienna in the first place?

Well, I wasn't the only one. There were thousands of refugees crossing the border. The same as today. Of course, my idea was to go to Paris. In Vienna, I only studied for one semester, from January to October 1957.

So, you arrived in Vienna as a total stranger.

Yes, I didn't speak any language other than Bulgarian and Russian. When I arrived in Vienna, I only had a piece of paper with the address of an old friend of my father's who studied in Vienna in the 1920s. Without even knowing whether he was still living there, I rang the bell, and when he opened the door, he miraculously understood immediately who I was and welcomed me into his home.

How did you survive?

I did all kinds of jobs, from washing cars and dishes to unloading crates from trucks at the market in the early morning; but at the same time I was doing portraits, which I signed "Javacheff." All my first connections in Vienna arose through a Canadian United Nations officer, after I did a portrait of his wife. She introduced me to her hairdresser, Mr. Rochart, and I did portraits of all his clients. When I moved to Geneva, I met another

United Nations officer, Mr. Cabarrus, and I painted a portrait of his wife. His father or grandfather had an apartment in Paris, on rue Ouentin-Bauchart, number 8. It's a small street near the Champs-Élysées. When I went to Paris, I was able to rent a maid's room there.

Let's stay in Vienna for a while. What kind of works did you do there?

Any kind. I mostly did portraits, city landscapes, still lifes. It was in Vienna that I got to know Mr. Zagoroff, a university professor. I remember I painted two city landscapes for his office. His son, Mitko, later became the engineer of all our first projects till *Surrounded Islands*.

Do you remember seeing any exhibitions or collections in Vienna?

I remember going regularly to Galerie nächst St. Stephan. They had a lot of late 1930s art. It was a very small space with incredible exhibitions. I saw works by Jean Arp and Sophie Taeuber-Arp there.

Did you do any sculptures in Vienna, or later in Geneva, before you went to Paris? Because at the academy in Sofia you said you were trained as a sculptor.

Yes, in Sofia at the academy, I did everything. Drawing, painting, sculpting, scale models too. But not after I escaped, because I had nothing. I only started doing sculptures again in Paris, right after I arrived. But in Vienna, I did practice sculpture in Wotruba's class.

You mean Fritz Wotruba? The famous Austrian sculptor?

I remember I was in Mr. Andersen's painting class. He was the professor who flunked Hitler twice when he was a student at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. Andersen later became the dean of the academy. But, yes, I took courses with Fritz Wotruba as well. I have very vivid memories of his classes.

So, what kind of works did you do there?

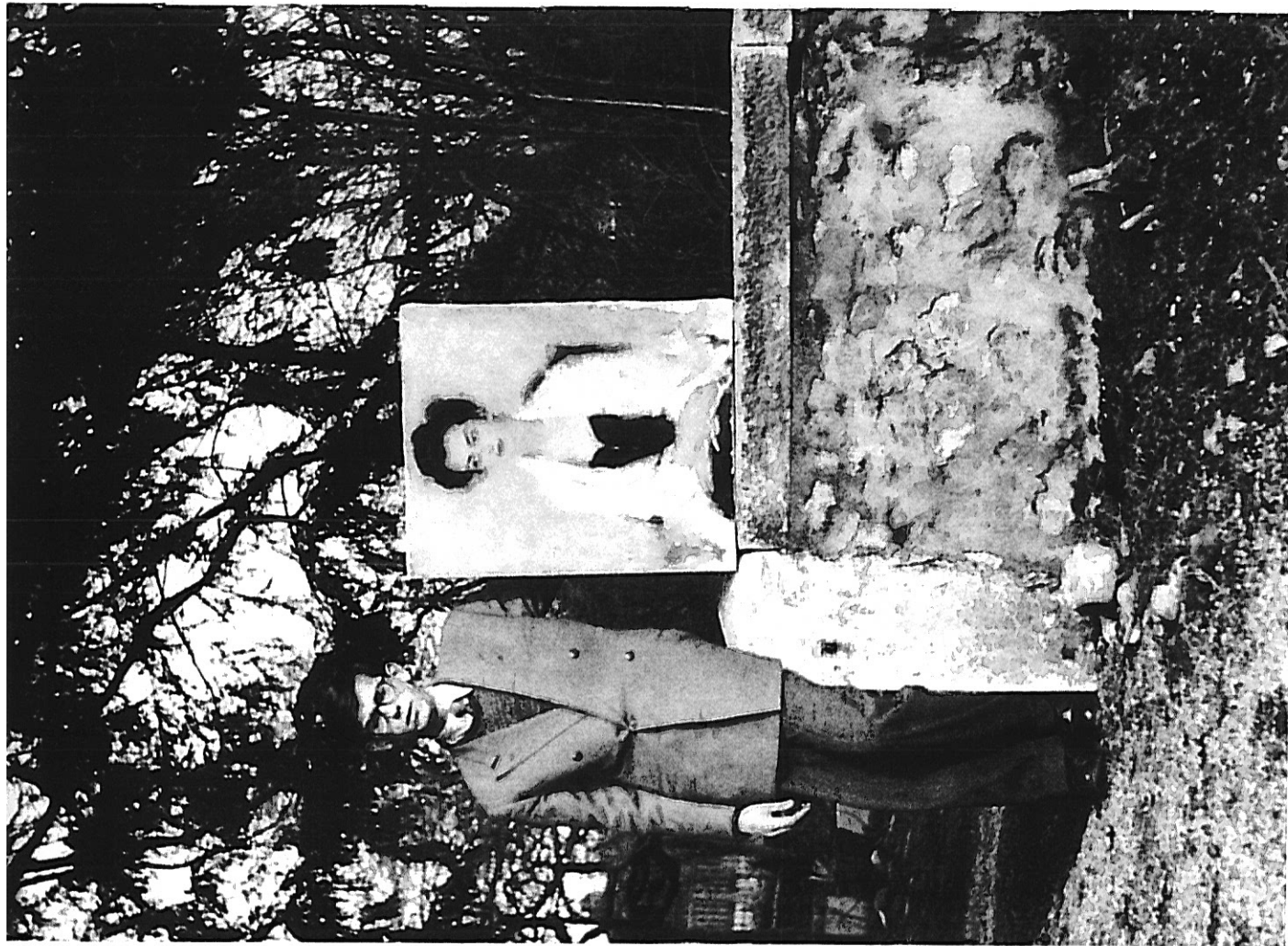
Many different things, but all very abstract works, mostly made from plaster. But I literally left everything in the classroom when I left for Geneva. Since I took the train, I couldn't take anything with me; but I really didn't care. There is probably nothing left from that period. All I have are two small paintings, and only because a fellow student of mine kept them and gave them back to me many years later. The same thing happened in Bulgaria. I left so many things in the corner of the classroom at the academy. A pile of things. Now, people in Bulgaria claim that they have "a Christo" in their homes. The academy probably sold everything, or people just took the works.

Anani still has some works from that period. You may remember that I went to see him in Sofia a few years ago.

What does he have?

Many drawings and paintings from your time in Bulgaria. But he also has some flower still lifes you did in Vienna or Geneva.

Yes, probably, because I sent him something.



Geneva, 1957: Christo with one of his oil-on-canvas portraits, which he signed with his family name, "Javacheff."
Photo: Archive

So, why did you go to Geneva?

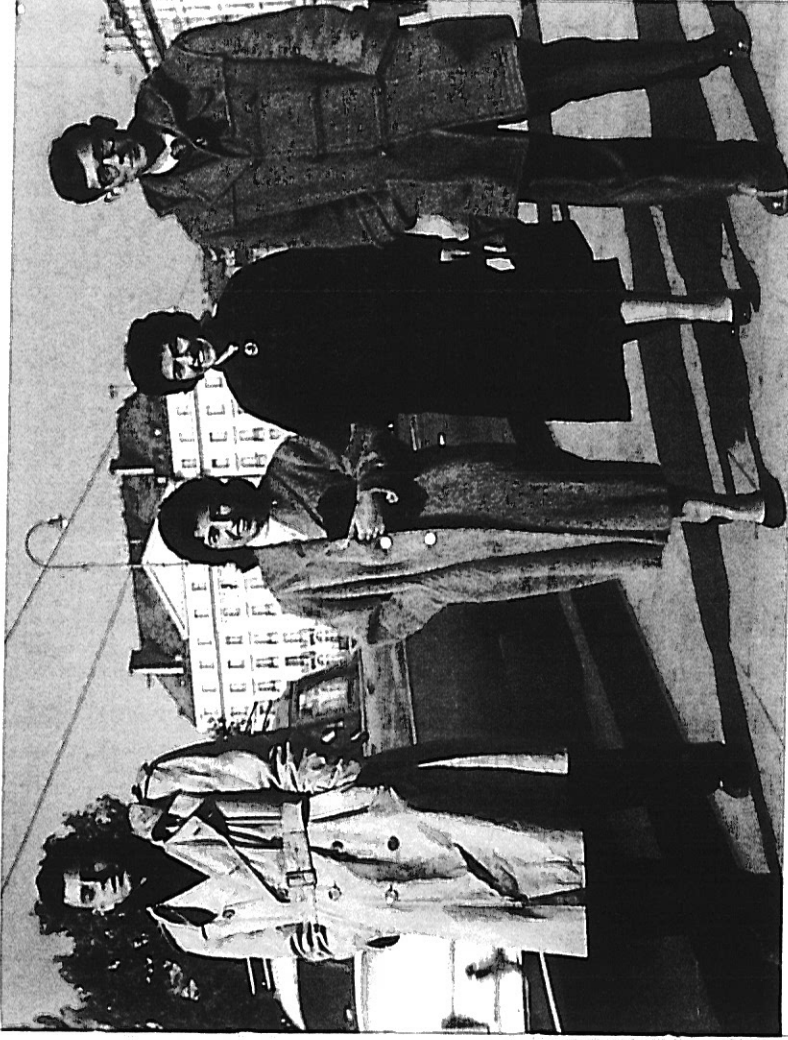
I went to Geneva because I had a friend, Bulgarian born, who was studying medicine there. Now he's a doctor in Alabama. His name is Alexandre Todorov, and we called him Sacho. We were already friends in Bulgaria. I probably met him a year before I left. It was not at the academy, but somewhere else, I don't remember exactly. I hardly had any friends in Bulgaria. However, Sacho and I became very close. His parents were divorced and his father was already in the United States. He made his son study in Budapest, in another Communist country. He left at the same time I went to Prague, when the Hungarian Revolution started. From there he escaped to the West and went to Geneva to study medicine.

And you joined him there?

Yes, it was thanks to this connection that I finally made it to Geneva in October 1957. We shared a room in an old house, outside of Geneva, but at some point the landlord threw us out, because he found it very suspicious that two boys were sleeping in the same bed. Even Sacho's father never understood why his son was hanging out in Geneva with a strange Bulgarian artist.

I visited Sacho last week. He told me you were working like crazy. You had your easel in one corner of the room, and the whole floor was filled with drawings and paintings.

I was working all the time and trying to go to as many museums as possible. I did portraits, still lifes, flowers, landscapes, boats on the lake, in the style of Picasso, Chagall, everything. Also, Cubist paintings, abstract compositions with newspaper collages. I drew and painted non-stop. I have never learned how to drive, but Sacho had a little



Geneva, 1957: Sacho, Chokoufè, her sister Mery, and Christo.
Photo: Archive

Vespa and once I asked him to drive me to Basel to visit the Kunstmuseum. It was pouring rain. We were crazy, the road was so slippery. That was in November 1957.

Sacho told me the exact same story. He said, "I was driving, and Christo was sitting in the back dreaming about the world."

For me, seeing those works was the biggest revelation. That collection is one of the most fabulous in modern art. It was simply marvelous. I really discovered the West in Austria and Switzerland. I was desperate to visit museums, because I never saw anything like that before in Bulgaria. Communist censorship was just horrible. Coming to the West, especially in the late 1950s, was insane!

I also met with Chokouf .

Oh, Chokouf ! Yes, I met her through Sacho and we became very, very close in Geneva. She was also studying medicine. Very beautiful, with long black hair. She was an Iranian immigrant, from a wealthy Iranian family. I think they moved to Geneva when the Shah came to power.

She showed me some letters you wrote her from Paris, very lovely, extremely touching letters.

When I went to Paris, she stayed in Geneva, because she was studying there. But she came to visit me in Paris several times.

She also told me you never really spoke about your art, never tried to explain it.

I do actually speak a lot about my art. I lecture very often now. But there's nothing to explain, there are no hidden messages behind my art. Doing art is something extremely personal. I was educated as a Marxist and I use the capitalist system. I escaped Communism. I will not relinquish a millimeter of my freedom. I will never do art with messages. Messages can be political, religious, or commercial—but they are all propaganda. I'm an artist, I have the freedom to do things for no particular reason, with no particular purpose. You don't have to explain why you want to cover a white canvas with paint, why you use blue, or yellow, instead of any other color.

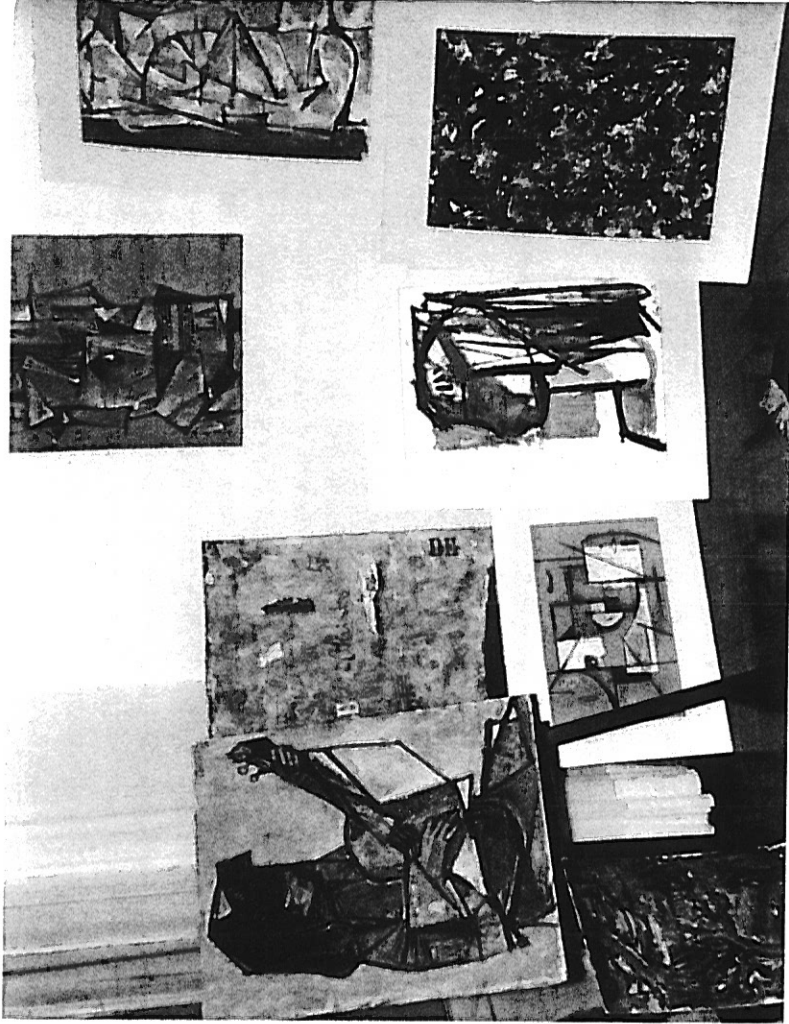
Chokouf  told me you even drew and painted on the walls and doors of her apartment. Like a maniac, she said.

Did she tell you that? At that time I was really very, very poor. Sometimes, I didn't even have enough money to buy new paint or paper. I constantly had to find money. That's why I did so many portraits. Even when we arrived in New York. But when you're young, you never think it's the end of the world. You're maybe irresponsible, but you don't really care.

She still has her portrait. Even Sacho has one.

I believe it, because when I went to Paris, I left everything with Sacho. I think I did several portraits of her, in different styles. All were signed "Christo," because they were not commissioned.

Chokouf  recalled that each portrait took several sessions each at least three hours long! How did you communicate? Did you already speak French at that time?



Geneva, 1957: Partial view of Chokouf 's living room with some of Christo's works, including, on the easel, an oil-on-canvas portrait of her. Photo: Archive

I never learned French at school. I started to learn it in Geneva, on the streets, trying to talk with people. Then I started to read in French, especially newspapers. That's why I can speak and read French, but I still can't write in French.

Do you remember whether you already started wrapping things in Geneva?

No, in Geneva I started working on the *Surfaces d'Empaquetage*. I took pieces of paper which I crumpled and painted with lacquer, and I put sand on it, and after that I washed the surface, so it looked worn. I used the same process for the *Wrapped Cans*, which I started to make only after I moved to Paris.

That's what both Chokouf  and Sacho remembered. They said there were fans all over the place to dry the paint of the paper collages. So, as you said, your idea was to go to Paris...

Absolutely, from the very beginning, but it wasn't easy. I had to save money and get a visa. Once, I think it was in January 1958, I even tried to go to France illegally, but they caught me. I had a Swiss refugee card, and since Geneva is very close to the French border, I took a bus to go to some suburb, which was already on French territory. I vividly remember that a police commissioner came to me to check my papers. He sent me back.

I never heard that story before. Did they put you in jail?

No, they just sent me back to Geneva. I remember I even bought a watch in Geneva just before that, because I had never had a watch before. I'm still wearing that same watch today!

You mean, right now?

Yes. It's the same watch I bought in Geneva in 1957.

After you were sent back, how did you finally make it to Paris?

That was thanks to a French diplomat, Mr. Bonavita. In the 1950s, Mr. Bonavita was the French consul in Sofia. I did portraits of his family when I was still at the academy there. I remember very well that Mr. Bonavita had a great collection of art books. He had those beautiful Skira books about all the classical modernist masters, which were forbidden in Bulgaria. That's when I saw Western art for the very first time: reproductions in his books. It's thanks to Mr. Bonavita that I finally managed to get a visa to France.

And when you arrived in Paris, you were a total stranger again?

Yes, I knew very few people there. But living in Paris in 1958, I went back to Geneva several times to make portraits. That's how I survived. This is a very funny story: at that time, all the young French women who needed to get an abortion used to go to Geneva. I remember that Jeanne-Claude was once asked "Where is Christo?" and she replied, "He's in Geneva." Everyone then made jokes, because one would go there only to have or arrange an abortion. I remember that through Rochart, the hairdresser, I also met a Romanian family and I did portraits of their little boys. I think you sent me photos of those works when you discovered them in Geneva.

You're talking about the Höhn family?

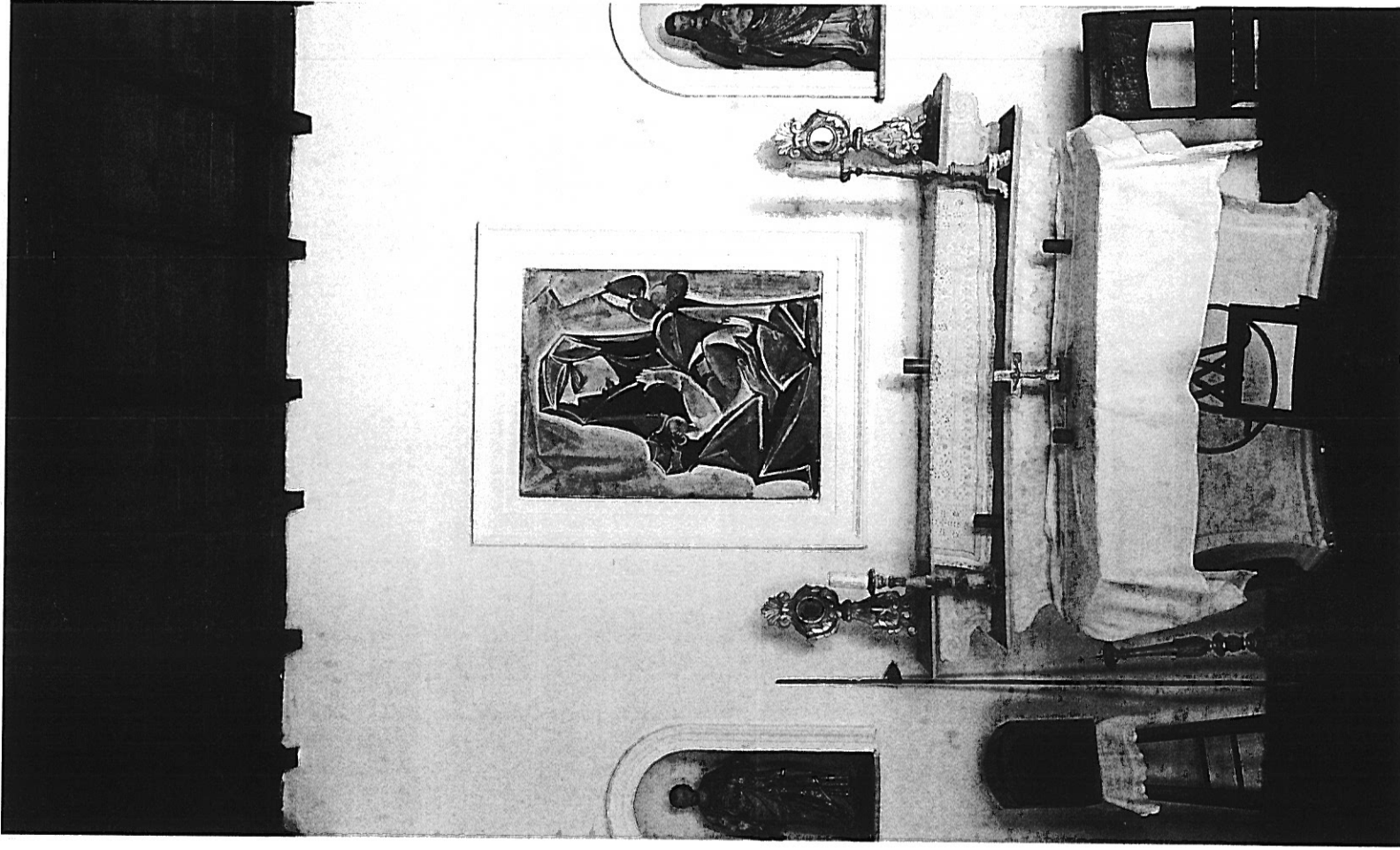
Yes, exactly.

But you also started doing portraits in Paris?

Yes, because Rochart recommended me to two famous hairdressers in Paris. One was Jacques Dessange, and the other was René Bourgeois, who was Jeanne-Claude's mother's hairdresser. My life in Paris was like a French movie of the 1950s, absolutely crazy. I worked like a maniac. Doing all these portraits for the French aristocracy, going to all these castles, and painting all those ladies and their children, like the Bretton family. They commissioned me to make the portraits of all of their thirteen children. They had a property in Corsica with a little chapel adjacent to the house. Then they asked me to go there to paint the chapel. I painted different religious subjects: the Virgin above the altar and *The Deposition* on one of the lateral walls in a very cubistic style. It's still there today, I actually went to visit it three years ago, after *The Floating Piers* project. You can still see the drops of paint on the floor!

Tell me more about how you met Jeanne-Claude.

We met in October 1958, when I was doing a portrait of her mother. Actually, I did the whole family. I also made portraits of her father, of her sister, Joyce, and of Jeanne-Claude herself, which I later wrapped. I even did a painting of their castle outside of Paris. Jeanne-Claude's stepfather was Jacques de Guillebon, a famous four-star French general. He was the director of the École Polytechnique at the time. I remember we were once invited to a lunch where I met Mr. Robert Oppenheimer, who was hired by Jeanne-Claude's father as a professor at the École Polytechnique. They even let me use a room in the attic of the École as a studio.



Corsica, 1959: The Bretton family chapel with Christó's paintings of the Virgin above the altar and The Deposition on one of the lateral walls. Photos: Wolfgang Volz



So, you became like the son of the family...

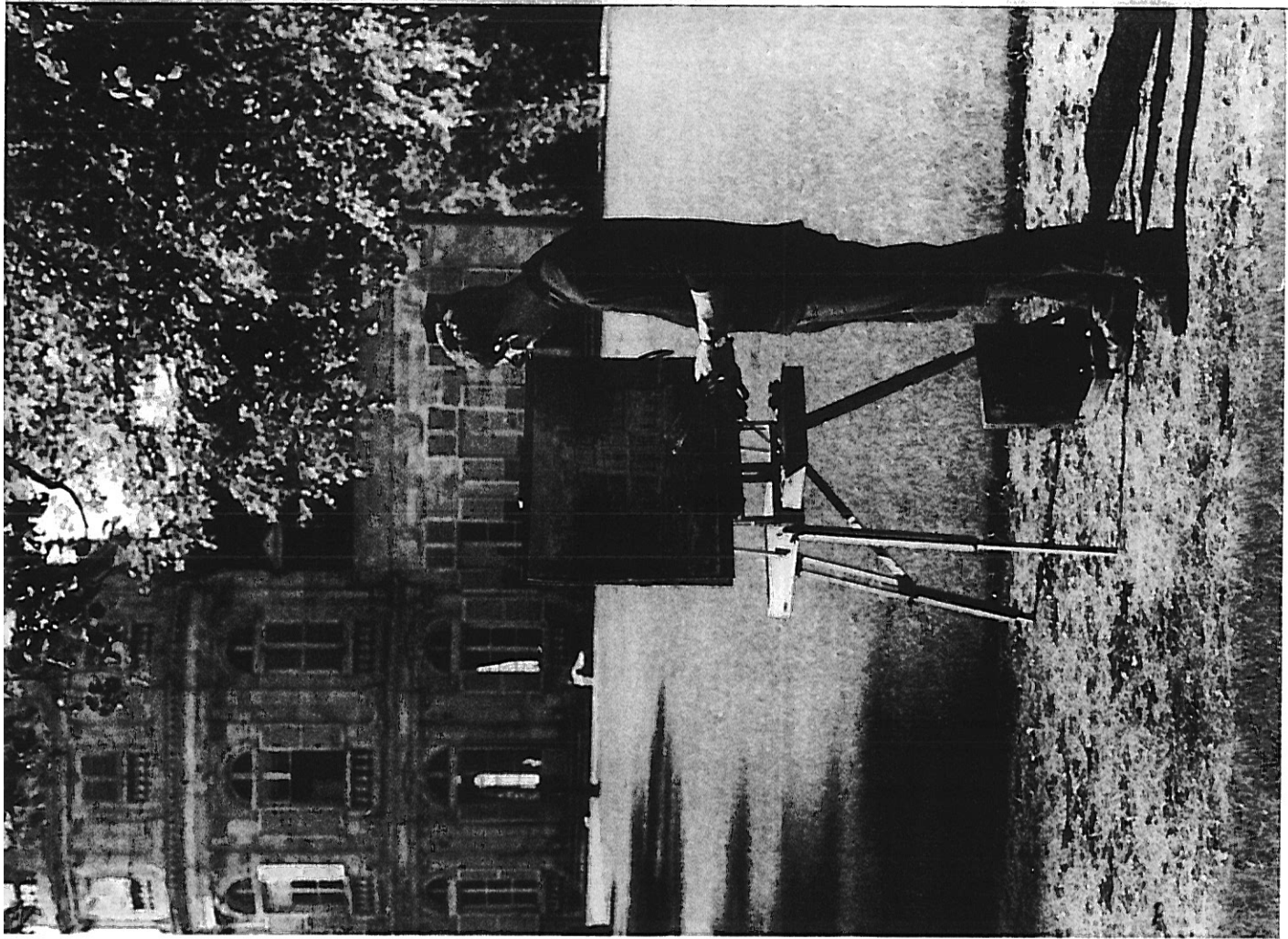
Yes, like the son. But of course, they didn't want me to be their son-in-law. Shortly after we met, Jeanne-Claude got engaged to another man, Philippe Planchon. However, we were already having an affair. Jeanne-Claude and Philippe got married in August 1959, but when they returned from their honeymoon, Jeanne-Claude started the divorce proceedings. When her parents found out that she had started seeing this strange penniless Bulgarian artist instead, they kicked her out, and she moved in with me.

Into the small maid's room?

I had moved to another place in the winter of 1958. I was living in one maid's room and working in another. The new place was a one-room bachelor's apartment at 24, rue Saint-Louis en l'Île, which belonged to the son of the Cointreau family. Jeanne-Claude and I lived in that apartment until the very end, before emigrating to New York in 1964.

Jacques Dessange even introduced you to Brigitte Bardot, right?

Yes. One day he called me and said, "For Christmas I'd like to donate a portrait to Brigitte Bardot. You will paint it." I did four portraits of her. One as a present from Dessange to her, one for Dessange himself, and two for myself, which I later wrapped. He asked me to do portraits of his most famous clients so he could hang them on the walls of his beauty salon. Dessange had a little maid's room that he rented to me. All the works I did in Paris were done in that maid's room, at rue de Saint-Sénoch. I kept that maid's room until the very end, until 1964.



Essertaux, 1960: Christo painting the castle of Jeanne-Claude's family. Photo: Wjera Fechheimer



Paris, 1959: Christo in his studio at the École Polytechnique.
Photos: Jeanne-Claude





Paris, 1959: A just-completed work from the Cratères series lying on the floor in Christo's studio at the École Polytechnique.
Photos: Jeanne-Claude

So, when you arrived in Paris, you started making sculptures right away? You said you already started to do the Surfaces d'Empaquetage in Geneva. What about the Cratères series? I think it illustrates very well how your interest shifted from the flat surface to the three-dimensional object. Do you remember what you did first, the Cratères or the Wrapped Cans?

No, I don't remember. I started working on the *Cratères*, the *Wrapped Cans*, the *Surfaces d'Empaquetage* around the same time, in 1958. In the beginning, the wrapping was not essential. It was not so much about making an object, but more about the texture of the object itself. I used fabric to wrap the cans, then I applied paint and lacquer to stiffen the fabric. This way they became like a still life. Some of the *Cratères* present very prominent reliefs, created by nailing simple empty cans to the surface. They are all very heavy because of all the plaster, and sand, and cans, and paint that I used.

In some of the Cratères you even sliced the surface to create a kind of inner space. That reminds me very much of works by Lucio Fontana.

I'd say also Dubuffet's, but other artists as well. It is like a flow of lava coming out from the inside. They all have this kind of gravity coming down. Basically, they are bas-reliefs. In this sense, there are a lot of elements of the early Dubuffet; especially his very textured landscapes from the late 1940s and early 1950s, which have a kind of tactile and tridimensional quality.

Do you remember where and when you saw Dubuffet's work for the first time?

I don't remember exactly. Probably in Switzerland in 1957, or in Paris at Galerie Daniel Cordier, rue de Miromesnil, in 1958. When I arrived in Paris in 1958, I made a portrait for a family who asked me one evening to stay for dinner, and Daniel Cordier was one of the guests. He was a well-known art dealer, very influential. He told me to go to his gallery. He held the first Rauschenberg show, he showed many Dada works, and even primitive art, which I liked very much. I went to see his exhibitions quite often. I was hoping to have an exhibition with him. He even came to see my studio, but nothing happened. It was in his gallery that I saw the early works by Dubuffet. It was in the spring or summer of 1958. Going beyond the painting, creating reliefs to make them look like real objects, is something I learned from Dubuffet. I am almost positive I also had the opportunity to see his work at Galerie René Drouin. René Drouin had a very good avant-garde gallery on rue Visconti, where he often showed Dubuffet: those works from the late 1940s and early 1950s, where you see that new thick paste that gives them a sculptural quality. It was Mr. Drouin who lent us the lights and electricity of his gallery to light the *Iron Curtain* in 1962.

But you never met Dubuffet?

No, I don't remember meeting Dubuffet. It was difficult to meet those important artists, also including Jean Bazaine, Alfred Manessier, and Pierre Soulages. The Paris art scene, the École de Paris, was an old tradition with powerful dealers, the art aristocracy. Meeting dealers was also very difficult. I met Mr. Cordier only because I made a portrait of a man who had some business with Cordier. Mr. Cordier was a well-known French resistance hero. He was also a powerful political figure, very active. Gallerists were so powerful that it was almost impossible for a young artist to approach them. But one day I had my chance: after I met with Tériade, he told me I should join him at a brunch

with Picasso. I remember that, a few days before the brunch, I went to see Picasso's landscapes exhibition and I didn't like it at all. So, I decided not to attend the brunch. And I didn't meet Picasso that day.

But didn't you once tell me you even bought a work by Picasso?

Yes, in Paris I bought a little Picasso lithograph from Mr. Berggruen.

Because you were doing a lot of Picasso-style works at the time. There are also many abstract works from that period. You once told me you saw the great Pollock exhibition in Paris in 1959.

It was not a Pollock solo show. In fact, there were works by all the greatest Abstract Expressionists: Pollock, de Kooning, Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still, Franz Kline... it was a very important exhibition. Before that, in the summer of 1958, I went to Brussels to see the famous World's Fair exhibition. The Belgian pavilion featured a reconstructed African village populated by real people shipped over from the Belgian Congo. On that occasion I could see the greatest primitive art exhibition ever. In fact, native Congolese art was actually rejected for display, and instead, European artists had been asked to create works in a purposefully primitive style. And there was a huge exhibition called *50 Years of Modern Art* with works by many artists, including Pollock.



Self-Portrait

Plovdiv, 1949

Charcoal on paper, 49.8 x 35 cm

Property of the artist