



# That's a WRAP!

As Christo and Jeanne-Claude's final artwork transforms the Arc de Triomphe, art historian **Mark Callaghan** reflects on what people will see when the iconic monument is hidden from view

**T**his September, for 16 days, a most recognised symbol of France will be covered in fabric, giving the impression that vital restoration work is about to commence. Yet the famous landmark will not be subjected to a repaint and polish, but will instead become an artwork entitled, *L'Arc de Triomphe, Wrapped*.

The Arc's sculptures, columns, arches and reliefs will be cloaked, while the monument's enormous shape and bulk will be accentuated, perhaps reminding visitors that this was, upon its unveiling in 1836, the largest arch created since classical antiquity. It will require intricate logistics, including construction workers and specially trained rock climbers.

From 18 September, Napoleon's triumphal arch will be draped in 25,000 square metres of silvery-blue recyclable polypropylene sheets, tied with 3,000 metres of red rope. This ironic creation of concealment will be the last artwork by Christo and Jeanne-Claude, who are most known for their *Wrapped Reichstag*, Berlin, of 1995, when they transformed



an immense, bombastic building into something delicate and seemingly light. This encapsulated their belief in 'revelation through concealment', creating elusive, temporary sculpture by way of wrapping significant structures.

As only the sleek architectural form of the imposing monument will remain, Christo and Jeanne-Claude seem to indicate that this is the Arc's very essence. What this essence might be and how it contrasts with what is already known of the Arc de Triomphe, will be tested this autumn as thousands of visitors ponder the spectacle of a new monument being conceived through the concealment of a most familiar French landmark.

### Take cover

The idea of wrapping the Arc de Triomphe actually dates to 1961 when 23-year-old Christo Vladimirov Javacheff contemplated the monument from his Paris apartment. He was an unknown artist, a Bulgarian refugee, having escaped the Communist regime of his native state. Christo had already cultivated a means for wrapping small objects (chairs, bottles, eventually a motorcycle), and now, gazing at Napoleon's triumphal arch he could only think of wrapping it, too.

Christo in his studio with a preparatory drawing for the project

PHOTO: PHOTO WOLFGANG VOLZ ©2019 CHRISTO AND JEANNE-CLAUDE

PHOTO: CHRISTO AND JEANNE-CLAUDE FOUNDATION



Christo and Jeanne-Claude's earlier Paris project, *The Pont Neuf Wrapped*, was completed in 1985

## It will require intricate logistics, including construction workers and specially trained rock climbers

His partnership with Jeanne-Claude is especially known for *Wrapped Reichstag*, which was seen by an estimated half a million visitors, and even during the Covid era, large numbers are also expected to see the wrapped Arc this autumn.

The project will cost around €12 to €14 million, and like all their work, *L'Arc de Triomphe, Wrapped* will be entirely financed through the sale of the scheme's architectural blueprints and models, without private or public funding or sponsorship. They even evolved a venture-capital entrepreneurial way of financing their staggeringly ambitious projects, creating their own company to do this: The CJC Corporation.

The artists themselves will not see their latest and final installation though, as the

project will be posthumous (Jeanne-Claude passed away in 2009, and Christo in 2020).

The ephemeral wrapping of the Arc de Triomphe will not be Christo and Jeanne-Claude's first Parisian venture. In 1985, they transformed Paris' oldest bridge, the Pont Neuf, to being, in effect, its newest, revived after being draped in a sandstone coloured silky fabric.

Pont Neuf was metamorphosed with a new sculptural dimension that maintained its principal shape and still allowed pedestrians to walk across (on the fabric) and without hindering river traffic below. Christo viewed the project as a new way of looking at the bridge. Whereas Turner, Pissarro and Renoir had represented the Pont Neuf, Christo wanted the bridge itself to be considered a new work of art.

### Monumental change

The artists liked to compare their creations to "rainbows: beautiful, yet elusive and volatile". Their vast projects are curiously gentle; they are in one sense sculptures, as they have finite form, though in another sense they are theatre and performance, prompting

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The Arc de Triomphe was unveiled in 1836



interaction. It is also, to some extent, misleading to think of the projects as being short-lived.

As the artists would agree, the scale of the event and its publicity means that permanence is not required, since, as Christo declared, “an experience can never be taken away.” The works cannot be bought, owned, and tickets have never been sold to see them. Like Pont Neuf, the Arc de Triomphe will be shimmering where it once was solid, refined where it once was heavy, and because the structures still look monumental, Christo and Jeanne-Claude show that monumentality is not exclusively made of firm, hard-edged forms. Monumentality is given new, unlikely, characteristics, while losing none of its power.

In fact, once wrapped, the Arc will be transformed into an enigmatic contradiction of what we thought we knew, captivating, seemingly unique, subjected to Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s iconoclasm and thus familiar yet de-familiarised. The wrapping will certainly cause viewers to perpetually draw back to what has been lost, or

PHOTO: CHRISTO 1962 CHRISTO AND JEAN-CLAUDE FOUNDATION



in this case, covered. Further observations are sure to include how the wrapping will capture the natural cycle of the day and night, through 24 hours, as the changing light is reflected by the sheets of fabric, reminiscent of Claude Monet’s ambition of documenting similar, cyclical transitions.

The wrapping will certainly create a new symbol for France, with original meanings for the monument – an icon with

a surprising history, a multi-dimensional emblem loaded with many facets of French national identity.

### Arc associations

It was commissioned after Napoleon’s victory at Austerlitz, and was designed by Jean Chalgrin who was inspired by the Arch of Titus in Rome. Napoleon, however, did not live to see the completion of the neoclassical monument, though a wooden mock-up was built for his wedding procession in 1810 and his funeral carriage passed beneath the finalised Arc in 1840.

The Arc has many further associations though, some of them eccentric, such as Charles Godefroy’s daring act of flying a small plane through the Arc in 1919. More grimly, it has witnessed the attempted assassinations of President De Gaulle and President Chirac, and two German marches of supremacy, most notoriously in 1940 during the Nazi occupation of Paris.

More recently, it was subjected to acts of vandalism by the ‘gilets jaunes’ movement, daubed with graffiti calling for

**Above:**  
Jeanne-Claude  
on the Pont  
de la Tournelle  
in Paris

A photomontage of the Arc de Triomphe wrapped, first created by Christo in 1962





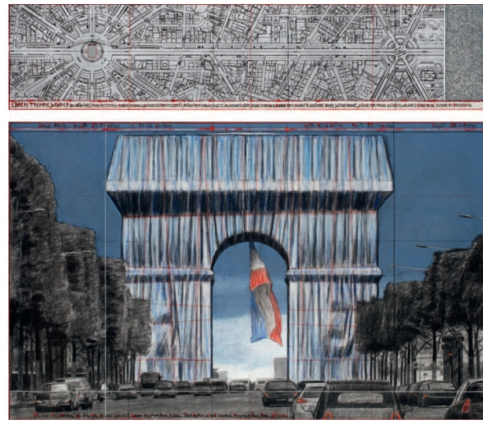
President Macron to resign. It is ostensibly, though, a military monument, further emphasised by the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier interred at its centre.

Either way, the afterlife of the Arc has certainly expanded its meaning, though its main point of reference continues to be the Napoleonic, post-Revolutionary period. Perhaps it is here that Christo and Jeanne-Claude's wrapping will best symbolise France's divided and often ambiguous attitude to its most famous ruler. While France is not shy of naming streets and even railway stations with reference to Napoleon's triumphs (Gare Austerlitz, Avenue de la Grande Armée), it is perhaps telling that there is no 'Place Napoleon' nor 'Boulevard Napoleon'.

### Status symbol

Just as the *Wrapped Reichstag* became symbolic of unified Germany, metaphorically hiding the past and creating a blank slate for modern German identity, the wrapping of the Arc de Triomphe will provoke many interpretations of what it represents. The balance of its symbolic message during the

PHOTO: ANDRÉ GROSSMANN  
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**Above:** The iconic landmark will be draped in silvery-blue sheets

last two centuries, oscillating between war and peace, will surely be challenged by Christo and Jeanne-Claude's project, thus engaging France and visitors alike in the question of what the Arc de Triomphe represents in the 21st century.

Interpretations are likely to range from the predictable to the profound, from translating the effect of the luminous wrapping to being symbolic of the City of Light; to the covered Arc's history and relevance being in some way censored and blanked out, a mixture of sorrow and triumph that needs to be screened before it can be truly seen.

Once covered, even the most recognised forms become

something else. *L'Arc de Triomphe, Wrapped* will reveal the spirit of the monument, as its purpose has been subject to change since its conception.

### Hidden in plain sight

While the wrapping will call attention to that which has been covered, wrapping and packaging also indicates honour and signifies status, while it may also identify or attract, or even disguise. Wrapping also changes our relationship to the concealed structure and opens our eyes to what is right in front of us. It prompts us to take a fresh look at things.

Many French people, certainly Parisians, who probably stopped paying attention to the Arc because it became so familiar, will see it anew, as a contemporary work that references the Arc de Triomphe.

Besides, who really saw the Arc before it was draped? While it continues to be a focal point for some, it has been unseen and, in effect, invisible to others. But from 18 September, indifference will be supplanted by the most captivating sight in Paris. We should certainly anticipate responses that are akin to the project acting like a social mirror, reflecting how France feels about its past and itself.

But not all who gaze at *L'Arc de Triomphe, Wrapped* will analyse and interpret; some will be overwhelmed by the sheer audacity and majesty of it all. The wrapping will prompt admiration for Christo and Jeanne-Claude's career, and France will argue with itself about what all of this could mean, ironically unifying the nation in discussion. And then, when the wrapping is removed, what will they see? ♥

*L'Arc de Triomphe, Wrapped* will be on view for 16 days from 18 September to 3 October. [christojeanneclaude.net](http://christojeanneclaude.net)

PHOTO: SHUNK KENDER 1962 CHRISTO AND JEAN-CLAUDE FOUNDATION

## Did you know?

The project has been achieved through a collaboration with France's Centre des Monuments Nationaux and the Centre Pompidou.

After leaving Bulgaria, Christo went to Prague and then Vienna before moving to Geneva. In 1958 he arrived in Paris where he met Jeanne-Claude Denat de Guillebon, who would become his wife and partner in the creation of

monumental environmental works of art.

The Eternal Flame, in front of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at the Arc de Triomphe, will continue to burn throughout the preparation and display of the artwork.

Christo died on 31 May, 2020 at his home in New York City, where he had lived for 56 years.