

# Portuguese Artist Joana Vasconcelos Exhibits At Art Geneve This Weekend

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*I write about luxury, art and culture.*

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Visitors to the 12<sup>th</sup> edition of [Art Genève](#) art fair held at Palexpo in Geneva until January 28, 2024, will be greeted by the multicolored, monumental textile sculpture “Valkyrie Mumbet”, suspended in the main entrance hall, one of a series of emblematic “Valkyries” paying tribute to the war goddesses of Norse mythology created by [Joana Vasconcelos](#) over the last two decades. At the same time, over in Lisbon, the Portuguese artist’s solo exhibition “Plug-In” running until April 8, 2024, at the [Museum of Art, Architecture and Technology](#) unites new creations, iconic pieces since 2000 and works from the EDP Foundation Art Collection, establishing a dialog between electricity heritage, technology and the visual arts.



Joana Vasconcelos, Valkyrie Mumbet, 2020, on display at Artgenève/Sur-Mesure  
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GOWEN, GENEVA

Vasconcelos has had several world firsts: in 2012, she was the youngest artist and the first woman to exhibit her work at the Palace of Versailles, while in 2018, she became the first Portuguese artist to have a solo show at the Guggenheim Bilbao. Frequently collaborating with Dior, she has shown seven times at the Venice Biennale, and her exhibition “Between Sky and Heart” has just come to a close at the Uffizi Galleries in Florence, in which her striking installations weaving myth, history and tradition through irony and irreverence rubbed shoulders with classical masterpieces by the likes of Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Botticelli and Caravaggio. She explains how her origins led her to art.

### **Tell me about your background.**

My parents were political refugees in Paris because of the Portuguese Colonial War. They were first in Brussels, then in Paris, and they were part of the movement of May '68. They

were working a lot with the Portuguese community, and I was born in '71 in that kind of “liberté, égalité, fraternité” spirit. And then in '74, when we had the Carnation Revolution in Portugal, they came back to Portugal right away because they were against the regime, so I grew up in Lisbon. My parents lived for a while in France, but as soon as they could, they came back to Portugal.

## **What did your parents do for a living?**

My father studied architecture and then became a photographer. My mother studied many different languages and took care of me and my sister, but she studied furniture restoration. My grandmother was a painter, my auntie is a poet and a writer, and my uncle stayed in politics because he started politics in Paris and he continued to be in politics.



Joana Vasconcelos, Wedding Cake, 2023, commissioned by Lord Rothschild for the grounds of Waddesdon ... [+]  
PHOTO COURTESY OF ATELIER JOANA VASCONCELOS AND WADDESDON MANOR

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### **You came from a very artistic family...**

Yes, it's true. And that allowed me to pursue my path with very important freedom, so when I started studying art, nobody tried to dissuade me, so I did pretty much what I wanted and I was very supported by my family. That was a big freedom and it was very important for me to do whatever techniques I wanted because I studied jewelry, drawing, design. I tried many things with their support and that's really valuable because a lot of people, their parents don't want them to study art. In my case, it was natural so I did not have much opposition on that.

### **With your parents having gone to Paris to escape from the Portuguese dictatorship, did you ever feel the presence of the dictatorship growing up?**

My parents were really into politics. They were very left wing, living on ideals and then they understood that they weren't the best. The truth is when they came to Portugal, they continued to follow those political ideals, but then they were part of the reconstruction of a country that was shut down in dictatorship for 47 years. So in a way, with their perspective, they helped to build a new identity for the country. My father became a journalist, a war photographer, and my uncle became a politician, and so they were very active in reconstructing a new country, a more contemporary country and a more updated

country. I think that throughout my childhood, that was very important because there was a lot of debate, political discussions and cultural discussions. My father was very good friends with many artists, my uncle with a lot of politicians and my auntie with a lot of intellectuals. I was thinking about what important teachers I had in my personal history, in my past, and I understood that in a way, in my house with my family, there was so much debate, so much discussion, it was very challenging because they were always talking about ideals and politics that I don't really remember my teachers, but I really remember my family debating things like literature, philosophy or politics. I think I learned more from my family than I ever learned from my teachers.





The 13-meter-high Tree of Life at the Sainte Chapelle in the Château de Vincennes in France, ... [+] PHOTO COURTESY OF ATELIER JOANA VASCONCELOS

**Does that come through in your work today? Is that why it's important to you to address social, environmental and political issues through your art?**

Yes, I think a lot of things stayed with me, ideals from Marxism, good things and many things that they debated. I was there, I was small, I couldn't understand everything, but later on in my life, I understood that some of those ideals were correct, some weren't, but it gave me a depth which is important and that I can address. I was brought up not in a traditional Catholic and conservative family. I was brought up into a very revolutionary, intellectual family that was really keen to make a difference for the country, and they did, so the truth is that was interesting.

Today, I can see that all the debates and all the discussions that I was part of helped to build who I am, and the freedoms that they allowed me to have to become an artist were very important, too, because I was never told you shouldn't do that or you shouldn't go there. They always supported me, so that freedom allow me to pursue my dreams and to go further, to travel and to go to museums.

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