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Rediscovering the Sun King's chief court painter

Louvre-Lens

by [Catherine Hickley](#) | 02 May 16



Charles Le Brun, *The Sacrifice of Polyxena*, 1647, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Dist. RMN-GP / image of the MMA

The suite inhabited by Coco Chanel for more than 30 years at the Ritz in Paris held an intriguing secret, which emerged when the hotel closed for renovation in 2012. A gloomy painting hanging over a desk for decades was identified as the work of Charles Le Brun (1619-90), the chief court painter to the Sun King, Louis XIV. The Metropolitan Museum bought *The Sacrifice of Polyxena* (1647), paying more than €1.4m (a record for the artist) at Christie's in 2013.

It is a similar spirit of rediscovery and reassessment that the curators Bénédicte Gady and Nicolas Milovanovic are asking visitors to bring to the first major exhibition of Le Brun's work in more than 50 years, at the Louvre-Lens museum in northern France. *The Sacrifice of Polyxena* is among more than 235 works on show, including some from private collections that have never before been exhibited.

The son of a humble stonemason, Le Brun rose to become Louis XIV's artist-in-chief for nearly 30 years, overseeing the sumptuous decor of the king's magnificent palaces, from tapestries and garden sculptures, to

furniture and chandeliers. Le Brun is the artist most immediately associated with Le Grand Siècle in the 17th century.

Yet, the curators argue, he is too often dismissed as a propagandistic guardian of the king's image; a kind of art dictator who forced his restrictive theories on the squads of young artists under his watch. He was indeed a manager who exerted his considerable authority to push through visions—an essential personality trait when realising such ambitious projects as the Hall of Mirrors at the Palace of Versailles and the Gallery of Apollo in the Louvre. (Both these and other halls whose decor he oversaw have recently been restored, offering further scope for a fresh appraisal of Le Brun's work.)

But the Louvre curators argue that he should be mentioned in the same breath as Rubens or Bernini. The exhibition seeks to emphasise his innovativeness and depth in a range of works encompassing vast tapestries and intimate sketches, including some fascinating portrayals of animals with very human expressions. Visitors will also have the opportunity to watch the restoration of one of Le Brun's major works, *Christ in the Garden at Gethsemane* (around 1660), through a glass-walled studio in the exhibition.

Sponsors include Groupe Sanef, a toll road operator, and Saint-Gobain, a maker of construction materials.

• *Charles Le Brun: Painter of the Sun King, Louvre-Lens, 18 May-29 August*