

## CHARLES LE BRUN

### The painter of the Sun King

Exhibition from 18 May to 29 August 2016

**The Louvre-Lens presents the first major retrospective in over 50 years, dedicated to the work of Charles Le Brun, the most important artist in the late 17th century in France.**

The son of a simple monumental stonemason, Le Brun was appointed First Painter to Louis XIV, and held the position for almost thirty years. One of his most famous works is the Hall of Mirrors at the Palace of Versailles. Le Brun was also the Director of the French Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture and of the Gobelins Royal Manufactory.

It was mainly through these official roles and his links with the country's institutions that the name of Le Brun has gone down in history. Today, his work is still frequently likened to academic art, even propaganda. However, an examination of his work demonstrates the constant renewal and greatness of his inspiration. For example, did you realise that his depictions of animals are among the most expressive in all art? His talents are expressed just as well on a very grand scale – for example in tapestries and major decoration projects – as in more intimate sketches, which highlight the accuracy and emotion of his hand. With regard to his style, Bernini spoke of “abundance without confusion”, to describe the generosity, myriad nature and perfectly readable organisation of his work. This exhibition in Lens brings together 235 works, some of which are from private collections and have never been shown in public. Others are recent revelations, such as the *Sacrifice of Polyxena*, discovered in Coco Chanel's suite at the Paris Ritz during renovations, and purchased by the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2013. The exhibition does justice to the infinitely varied talent of a prodigy who came to light at the age of 15, and, just like Delacroix for Romanticism or Monet for Impressionism, is the sole embodiment of the art of an era: the *Grand Siècle*.



Charles Le Brun, *Portrait of Pierre Séguier, Chancellor of France* (detail), oil on canvas, circa 1660, Paris, musée du Louvre © RMN-GP (musée du Louvre) / Franck Raux

At a time when courtly European artists are being reassessed, Le Brun should form one of their numbers in France. A multi-talented genius, Le Brun can be compared to Bernini in Italy or Rubens around Europe. In the last decade, much new light has been cast on a number of aspects of Le Brun's work. From the Pavilion of Aurore in Sceaux and the Apollo Gallery in the Louvre to the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, the majority of his major decoration projects have been restored, and have resulted in major studies that summarise the history of the sites as well as the technical aspects of the restorations. Le Brun's role as provider of sketches for the sculptors, weavers and goldsmiths to follow, each according to their own technique, has been the subject of specific exhibitions. However, there has never been a major retrospective of his work to provide an overview of his pathway.

This exhibition at the Louvre-Lens therefore intends to eschew the fragmented, over-specialised approach previously taken, to bring coherence to this exceptional figure, distinguished as he is by the multiplicity of his talents, the vivacity of his imagination and his talent for organisation. It was these qualities that justified the extent of the commissions awarded to him by Louis XIV and Colbert. If Le Brun were not the "dictator of the arts" under an absolute monarchy, he was undoubtedly their director.

The exhibition offers a pathway through 10 chronological and thematic rooms:

## 1. DAZZLING GLORY

No one embodied better than Le Brun the change in status for painters in the 17th century. In 1648, together with a few painters and sculptors, Le Brun founded an academy under the protection of the king that elevated painting and sculpture to the rank of the liberal arts.

In the early 1660s the king ennobled Le Brun, giving him the sun and the fleur-de-lis as arms, thereby associating him with his own glory. He named him First Painter, director of the Gobelins Manufactory and supervisor of decoration. *The King Visiting the Gobelins* illustrates this royal trust and artistic fecundity.

Le Brun, who had a beautiful mansion built for himself at Montmorency, where he hosted prominent figures and artists, received various accolades: the Accademia di San Luca in Rome elected him Principe; the Grand Duke of Tuscany commissioned him to paint his self-portrait; his effigy was preserved in marble, silver and bronze; books were devoted to him; and biographies praised his artistry.

## 2. THE SÉGUIER YEARS. TRAINING IN PARIS AND ROME (1630-1646)



Charles Le Brun, *Hercules and Diomedes*, oil on canvas, 1640-1641, Nottingham, Castle Museum & Art Gallery  
© Nottingham Castle Museum & Art Gallery

Charles Le Brun was the son of a modest sculptor, of whom, as an adolescent prodigy, he painted a flattering portrait. He trained under several painters, including François Perrier and Simon Vouet. His earliest known works are small monochrome paintings, often on panel, which were preparatory works for engravings. These modest, touching works are currently being rediscovered. Le Brun himself made a few attempts at etching.

He quickly came to the attention of Chancellor Séguier, becoming his 'creature', in the parlance of the times: Séguier protected him, housed him and gave him the opportunity to frequent scholars and people of letters, who all enriched his conception of art. In around 1640, at the age of barely 21, Le Brun had his first triumph when he painted a majestic *Hercules and Diomedes* for Cardinal Richelieu and *The Martyrdom of Saint John the Evangelist* for the chapel of the Corporation of Painters and Sculptors. This stunning start to his career was abruptly interrupted by his departure for Rome in 1642.

By order of Chancellor Séguier, he left Paris for Rome in 1642, accompanied by Nicolas Poussin. He made drawings of ancient Rome and copied works by old masters such as Raphael and Annibale Carracci for Séguier. His paintings of his own creation reveal that he was also open to the influence of Poussin and Guercino. Le Brun soon felt that he had seen enough and was keen to leave the Rome he depicted in his *Allegory of the Tiber*.



### 3. MAJOR COMMISSIONS IN PARIS (1646–1661)

On his return to Paris in 1646, Le Brun received numerous commissions. He painted both easel paintings, such as *Moses Striking the Rock* and *The Brazen Serpent*, which reveal the influence of Poussin, and large canvases for Paris churches. The latter include *The Martyrdom of Saint Andrew*, painted for Notre-Dame Cathedral, and *The Pentecost* for the altar of the Saint-Sulpice Seminary, beneath Le Brun's first large complete ceiling project (lost). Le Brun also worked on the decoration of civil interiors, from the Hôtel Lambert to the Palais du Louvre, many of which are now lost. He produced decorative paintings, now in the Musée Carnavalet in Paris, for the Abbé de La Rivière's hôtel particulier. *The Apotheosis of Psyche* demonstrates Le Brun's rejection of a single vanishing point in ceiling compositions. All these projects reveal Le Brun's sensitivity to space and the interaction of the arts, typified by the chapel of Mary Magdalene at the Carmelite convent of the Faubourg Saint-Jacques, which had a sculpture of Cardinal Bérulle praying in front of the Penitent Magdalene renouncing the Vanities of the World.



Charles Le Brun, *Sacrifice of Manoah*, oil on canvas, circa 1650-1655, Maincy, Château de Vaux-le-Vicomte  
© Guillaume Crochez / Vaux-le-Vicomte

### 4. THE FOUQUET EXPERIENCE. VAUX AND MAINCY (1657–1661)

In late 1657, Le Brun, who up until then had received only occasional commissions from the king for the Palais du Louvre, was entrusted by the Superintendent of Finances, Nicolas Fouquet, with a project commensurate with his ambitions. At the recently completed château of Vaux-le-Vicomte, designed by Louis Le Vau, Le Brun devised and supervised the interior decoration, involving numerous artists and combining all the arts. When Fouquet was abruptly arrested on the orders of the king, on 5 September 1661, the project was left unfinished, but Le Brun had done enough to demonstrate his talent and capabilities. At Vaux, Le Brun oversaw the decoration of the formal rooms on the ground floor, the centrepiece of which was supposed to be the ceiling of the large salon, which was never painted but is known from drawings and a print. He also created décors for the sumptuous festivities organised by Fouquet. He also designed tapestries for the Superintendent's factory at Maincy, next to the château, but contrary to legend he did not oversee their manufacture. Work at the factory continued even after Fouquet's fall, before being transferred to the Gobelins in spring 1662. There the same designs were woven, but with a different coat of arms.



## 5. COLBERT'S TRUST

Thanks to the unconditional support of Chancellor Séguier, and to the admiration and perspicacity of Jean-Baptiste Colbert, Le Brun was able to make the switch from serving Fouquet to serving Louis XIV relatively unscathed. Even before becoming the king's Superintendent of Buildings in 1664, and right up to his death in 1683, Colbert trusted him completely when it came to the decoration of the royal residences and the running of art institutions. He also commissioned him to decorate his own Château de Sceaux. In addition to the cupola of the Pavillon of Aurore, Le Brun designed the decoration of the château's chapel, dedicated to Saint John the Baptist. The various arts and light were combined to create a complete work. Today the only vestiges of this destroyed work are Jean-Pierre Tuby's sculpture and the cartoons that were used for the painting of the ceiling.

## 6. LE BRUN THE THEORIST: THE EXPRESSION OF THE PASSIONS AND PHYSIOGNOMY

Like Poussin and Rubens, Le Brun was a learned painter. His main contribution to artistic theory was a lecture on the expression of the passions, or the emotions, given at the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture in 1668. Drawing inspiration from various sources, including Descartes's treatise *Passions of the soul* (1649), Le Brun defined the way in which the various passions affect the facial features. The artist also wrote a study of physiognomy, or the way in which the face reveals temperament. This research was based on a comparison of human and animal physiognomies, which Le Brun illustrated with a set of marvellous drawings. Indeed, it was thought that a similarity in features corresponded to a similarity in characters, with the man-lion being brave and magnanimous, the man-pig, lecherous and lazy, and so on.

## 7. LE BRUN, DIRECTOR OF THE GOBELINS

Director of the Gobelins Royal Manufactory from 1663 to 1690, Le Brun had a profound influence on the decorative arts. He supervised the manufacture of the most famous tapestry hangings (*The Seasons*, *The Elements*, *The Royal Houses*, *The Story of the King*, among others), as well as a wide variety of exceptionally refined furniture, including tables and large cabinets often decorated with hardstone marquetry – decorative panels consisting of semi-precious stones in various colours. The artist also provided the designs for the famous 'silver furniture' consisting of monumental pieces in silver, including vases, mirrors, tables and torches. Le Brun sketched out the general shape of the furniture in very loose drawings. He also provided all the drawings from which the craftsmen worked, enabling him to ensure that the furniture and tapestries were all of a piece. He shared out the different tasks between artists and craftsmen and supervised the various stages of manufacture.



Table top, marble and hard stone mosaic, last quarter of the 17th century, Paris, musée du Louvre © RMN-GP (musée du Louvre) / Droits réservés

## 8. DIRECTOR OF THE ROYAL PROJECTS

As the First Painter to the king, Le Brun was in charge of all the royal decorative projects. At Versailles, he oversaw the large painted décors: the Grand Apartments (1671–1680); the Ambassadors Staircase (1674–1679, decoration lost), the royal chapel (1675–1679, not executed); the Hall of Mirrors (1678–1684); the War and Peace lounges (1685–1687). He was also in charge of the sculptors working on the decoration of the palace's façades and the statues scattered throughout the gardens. A knowledgeable painter, Le Brun also contributed to the conception of the iconographic programmes, that is to say he helped shape a political discourse dedicated to the glory of Louis XIV, codified in the numerous allegories and symbols that can be deciphered in the painted and sculpted decoration at Versailles.

## 9. LE BRUN AND PRINTS: BLACK-AND-WHITE VERSIONS OF THE LARGE DÉCORS

Like Raphael (1453–1520) and Rubens (1577–1640), Le Brun personally oversaw the dissemination of his work through engravings. Thanks to a privilege obtained in 1656, he had reproductions made of most of his large paintings and painted décors. He called on young engravers such as Girard Audran, who were able to transcribe in small format the large compositions that he created for tapestries or to adorn the ceilings and cupolas of royal residences. These engravings, which are often striking because they were made using several plates, added to the painter's fame. The publication of engravings of several of his decorative schemes, including the ceiling of the gallery of the Hôtel Lambert, the Ambassadors Staircase and the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, helped ensure Le Brun's continued influence to the the end of the period of the Enlightenment.

## 10. THE TWILIGHT YEARS OF A GENIUS

Charles Le Brun's last years were blighted by his rivalry with the painter Pierre Mignard and, above all, by the enmity of the powerful marquis de Louvois, who became Superintendent of Buildings after Colbert's death in September 1683. Although he retained his titles of First Painter and director of the Gobelins Royal Manufactory, Le Brun was excluded from involvement with the main decorative projects at both Gobelins and Versailles. He devoted his final years to a small number of easel paintings intended for a single viewer: Louis XIV. These touching, emotional works, carefully thought out and pondered, reveal the most intimate and personal aspect of his talent.



Charles Le Brun, *Adoration of the Shepherds*, oil on canvas, 1689, Paris, musée du Louvre © RMN-GP (musée du Louvre) / Franck Raux

## ON THE FRINGE OF THE EXHIBITION, VIEWABLE AND VISITABLE RESTORATIONS

Before its presentation in the exhibition, a Le Brun cartoon for a major decoration project is being restored in the viewable, visitable studio at the Louvre-Lens, until 18 March. On loan from the Department of Prints & Drawings at the Louvre, the work depicts *The Alliance of Germany and Spain with Holland*, 1672. This is a cartoon for a composition on the ceiling of the Hall of Mirrors at the Palace of Versailles.

During the exhibition, the public will be able to view the special restoration of Le Brun's painting of *Christ on the Mount of Olives*, with two further versions of the same work shown in the exhibition. This painting, bought by Louis XIV in 1695, is a major rediscovery, resulting from the research conducted while preparing the exhibition.



## CURATORS

- **Bénédicte Gady**, scientific advisor, department of Prints & Drawings, Louvre museum
- **Nicolas Milovanovic**, chief curator, department of Paintings, Louvre museum

Exhibition design by Atelier Maciej Fiszer

This exhibition has been made possible thanks to the exceptional support of the Château de Vaux-le-Vicomte and the Musée Carnavalet-Histoire de Paris.

The exhibition has benefited from special support from the Sanef group.

## VISITOR INFORMATION

Exhibition at the Louvre-Lens museum from 18 May to 29 August 2016.

Open every day (except Tuesday) from 10 AM to 6 PM.

Free for under 18's and job-seekers.

Admission to the exhibition : € 10 / € 5 for 18-25's.

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Charles Le Brun, *Study of raven and owl*, drawing, circa 1668-1678, Paris, musée du Louvre © RMN-GP (musée du Louvre) / Michèle Bellot