

# CHRISTIE'S

PRESS RELEASE | PARIS | JANUARY 2013  
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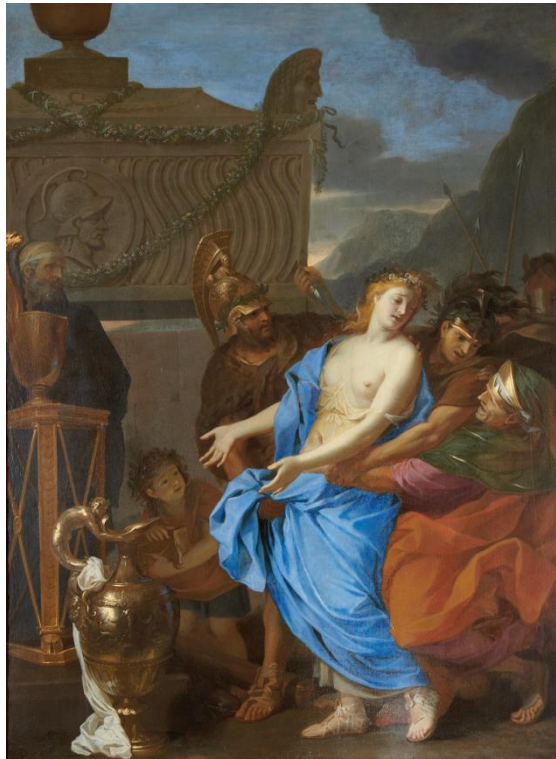
## MASTERPIECE BY CHARLES LE BRUN REDISCOVERED AT THE HÔTEL RITZ, PARIS

DISPLAYED FOR THE FIRST TIME EVER IN NEW YORK  
FROM 26 TO 29 JANUARY

OFFERED AT CHRISTIE'S PARIS ON 15 APRIL 2013  
OLD MASTERS AND 19<sup>th</sup> CENTURY ART AUCTION



Painting *in situ* at the Hôtel Ritz, Paris,  
Coco Chanel Suite  
Charles Le Brun (1619-1690)  
*The Sacrifice of Polyxena*, 1647, Oil on canvas



Charles Le Brun (1619-1690)  
*The Sacrifice of Polyxena*, 1647, Oil on canvas  
179 x 131 cm  
Estimate: €300,000-500,000

**Paris** - Christie's is delighted to announce the discovery of a previously unknown oil masterpiece *The Sacrifice of Polyxena* created in 1647 by Louis XIV's favoured artist Charles Le Brun, which will be on view in New York from 26 to 29 January ahead the sale of *Old Masters and 19<sup>th</sup> Century Paintings* at Christie's Paris on 15 April 2013 (estimate: €300,000 – 500,000). Synonymous with an artist whose name evokes the kingdom of Louis XIV and Versailles, this painting was discovered in one of the most prestigious and luxurious venues in Paris, the Hôtel Ritz.

Occasionally, the biggest surprises are hiding in plain sight: A major discovery by one of the most important painters in the history of French art, *The Sacrifice of Polyxena* by Charles Le Brun (1619-1690), was recognized only recently by the Ritz's art adviser Joseph Friedman and fellow consultant Wanda Tymowska, and its attribution has been unanimously supported by leading French museums. However, it was not found in a dusty attic, but on prominent display in the heart of Paris, in the most opulent and celebrated hotel in the world, the legendary Hôtel Ritz. The Ritz archives have not revealed how the painting came to the hotel or when it was first installed in the fabled 'Coco Chanel Suite', but it is possible that it was already in the townhouse (built 1705) when it was acquired by César Ritz in 1898.

Monogrammed by the artist and dated 1647, *The Sacrifice of Polyxena* represents a turning point in Le Brun's career. He had recently returned to Paris from a three-year sojourn in Rome, where he studied the paintings of Raphael and came under the influence of Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665), whose severe classicism marked a new chapter in European painting. *The Sacrifice of Polyxena* displays the profound impact of Poussin's art on Le Brun's style, as it shows the artist's fidelity in reproducing the antiquities of Imperial Rome, evident in the details of the bronze vase, tripod and marble sarcophagus that ornament the scene, and the incense casket, which is taken from a drawing made by Le Brun in Rome after an Antique prototype.

Powerfully composed and brightly coloured with an unerring decorative sense that serves to heighten, rather than undermine the pathos of Polyxena's tragedy, Le Brun's painting amply demonstrates the extraordinary gifts of the artist in whom all artistic authority in France would soon be concentrated: Chancellor for Life of the Académie Royale, First Painter to the King, and mastermind behind the creation of the royal palace of Versailles.

**AUCTION:**  
15 April 2013

**VIEWING:**  
New York, Rockefeller Center

Jan 26 - 10am-5pm  
Jan 27 - 1pm-5pm  
Jan 28 - 10am-5pm  
Jan 29 - 10am-2pm

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*\*Estimates do not include buyer's premium. Sales totals are hammer price plus buyer's premium and do not reflect costs, financing fees or application of buyer's or seller's credits.*

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## **EDITOR'S NOTES:**

The subject of the present painting, the sacrifice of Polyxena, is taken from Ovid's *Metamorphosis* and from Homer's depiction of the Trojan War. Charles Le Brun depicts - almost literally - Ovid's text with the killing of Polyxena, daughter of King Priam and Queen Hecuba (Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, XIII, 439-480):

*"Agamemnon had moored his fleet on a Thracian beach until the sea calmed, and the winds were kinder. Here, suddenly the ghost of Achilles appeared from a broad fissure in the earth, as large as he used to be in life. He appeared as on the day when, with threatening face, and sword in hand, he fiercely challenged Agamemnon's injustice. 'You depart, then, Achaeans, forgetting me, and gratitude for my courage is buried with me!' he cried, 'Do not let it be so! Let Polyxena be sacrificed, so that my tomb is not without its honours. Appease Achilles's shade!'*

*He spoke, and, his countrymen obeyed the pitiless ghost. Now, she was torn from her mother's arms, and the girl, almost Hecuba's only comfort, ill-fated, but with more than a woman's courage, was led to the burial mound and became a victim of the dread grave. She remembered who she was, set before the brutal altar, knowing the savage rite was readied for her, and when she saw Neoptolemus standing, gripping his sword, his eyes gazing at her face, she said: 'Now, shed noble blood, nothing prevents you: but sheathe your sword in my throat or in my breast,' and she uncovered both her throat and her breast. 'Polyxena, for certain, has no desire to be slave to any man! No god will be appeased by such a rite as this! I only wish my death could be unknown to my mother: my mother weakens and lessens my joy in death, though it is not my dying but her living that is terrible. Now, move away, you, so that if my request is lawful, I may not be hindered in going to the Stygian shades: and take the hands of man from virgin flesh! My free blood will be more acceptable to him, whoever he is, whom you are trying to appease with my murder. If my last words still move any of you (The daughter of Priam asks it, not a prisoner) return my body to my mother without ransom: let her pay for the sad privilege of burying me, not with gold, but with tears! When she could, then she paid in gold as well.'*

*She spoke, and the crowd could not restrain its tears, that she restrained. Then the priest, also weeping, and against his will, driving his sword home, pierced the breast she offered up. Her knees gave way, and she sank to the ground, keeping her look of fearless courage to the end. Even then, as she fell, she was careful to hide the parts that should be hidden, and to protect the honour of her chaste modesty."*

In *The Sacrifice of Polyxena*, Le Brun follows the poet's dramatic scene: the young virgin will soon be killed, her mother Hecuba dramatically trying to hold her, the priest and Neptolemus on the verge of plunging the dagger into Polyxena's breast. Interestingly, there is a part of the garment covering the virgin's breast showing the artist's hesitation when finishing that section as he was probably trying to follow the text faithfully which states that she was trying to "arrange her clothes" at the time of her death. Roman influences are very present. Nivelon relates that Le Brun copied "every vestige that he has under the eyes in Rome", hence the details of the vase, the tripod and the sarcophagus adorned with strigils, parapet and theatrical mask. The little case held by the young Camille, assistant to the priest, is taken from a drawing that Le Brun executed after the Antique in Rome. This case was destined to keep the incense for the sacrifice (this drawing as well as all the other Roman drawings has been published by Stéphane Loire in the Gazette des Beaux-Arts in 2000, n. 136).