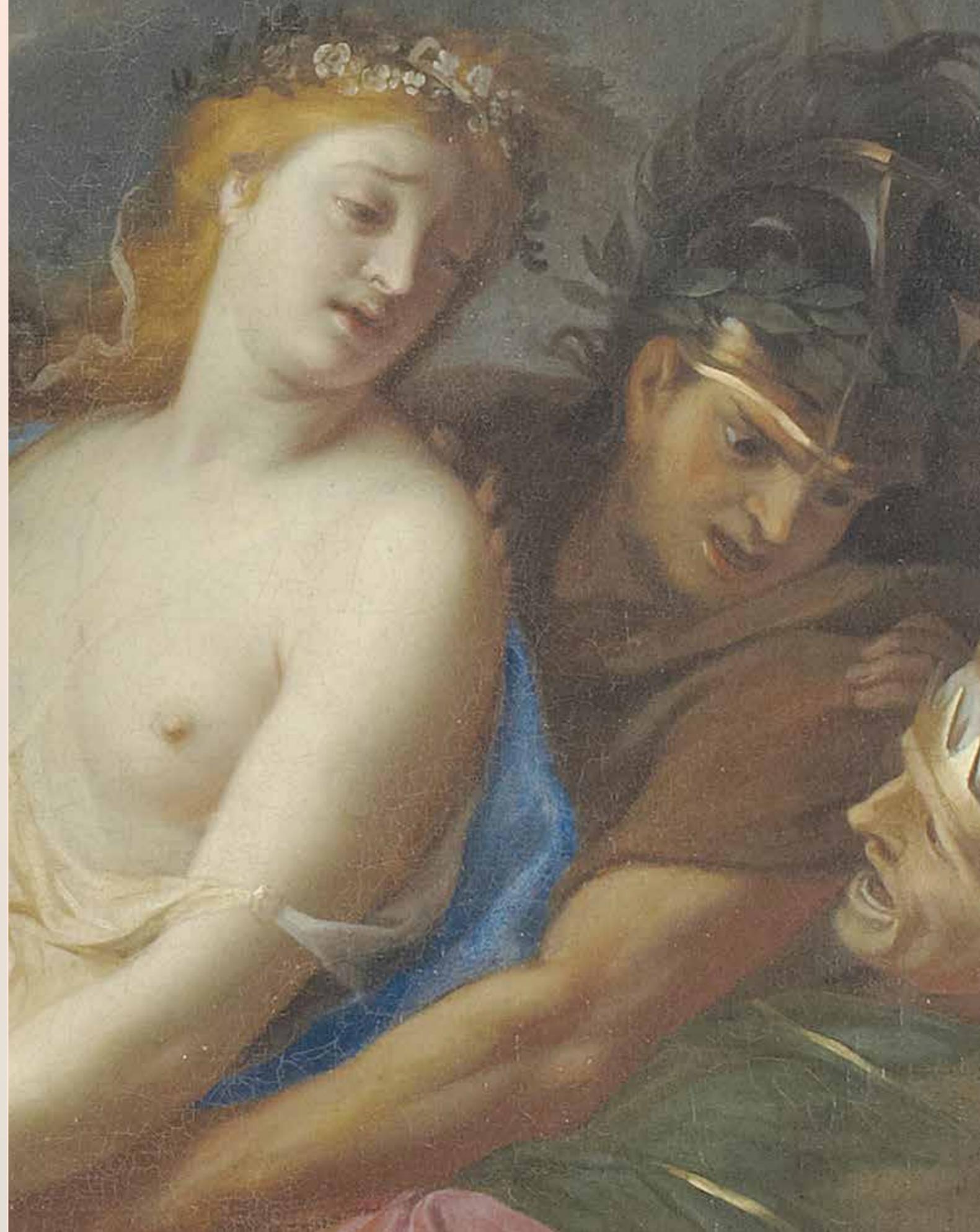


# HIDDEN IN PLAIN VIEW

THE SACRIFICE OF POLYXENA

FINE-ART ADVISER TO THE PARIS RITZ,  
JOSEPH FRIEDMAN RECOUNTS HIS SURPRISE  
DISCOVERY IN THE LEGENDARY HOTEL'S  
COCO CHANEL SUITE OF A UNRECORDED  
MASTERPIECE BY CHARLES LE BRUN, PAINTER  
TO THE SUN KING, LOUIS XIV



*Here the exceptional is always to be expected. But this was something of a different order, a masterpiece of the highest rank.*

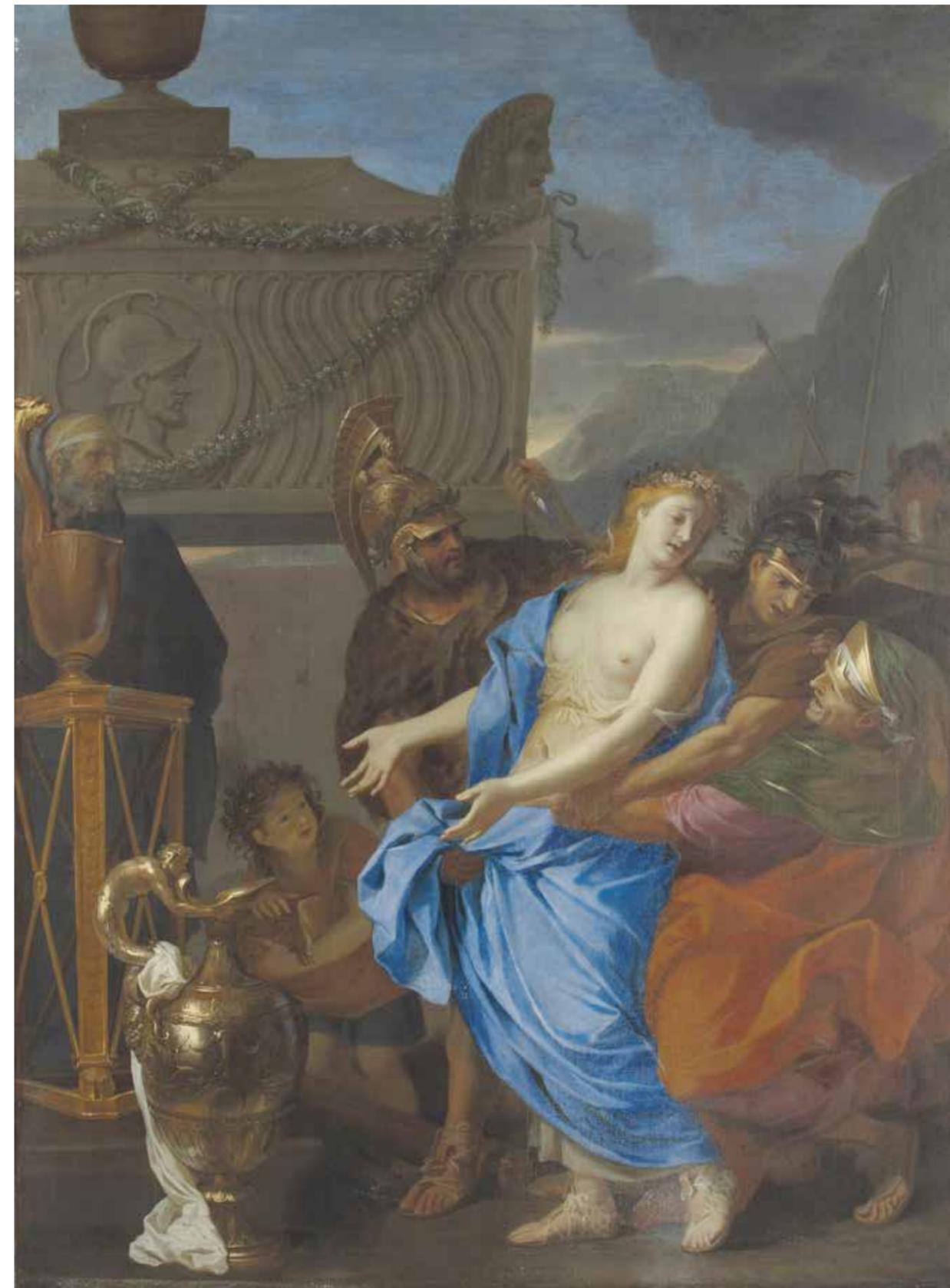
I literally took a step backwards when I first came face to face with the painting. It was not just the obvious quality: the brilliant handling of line and colour, of movement and composition. It was not just the drama and emotion of the scene: the tragic figure of a beautiful young woman, bowed yet serene, dragged to her execution by armed soldiers, one of whom prepares to plunge a dagger into her breast as an older woman struggles desperately to hold them back. Above all it was the surprise of finding such a painting in so improbable a setting. For the painting was not hanging in a museum or the town or country house of some great private collector, but in a hotel suite. Admittedly this was no ordinary hotel and no ordinary suite. It was the legendary Coco Chanel suite at the Paris Ritz, famed above all other Paris hotels for its magical setting, the heavenly Place Vendôme; for the beauty of its design, conceived by the great Beaux-Arts architect Charles Mewès; for its stellar cuisine and service, and its unparalleled historical associations, which quite apart from the suite's former occupant, the celebrated couturière Coco Chanel, include such luminaries as Marcel Proust and Ernest Hemingway, among a guest list that reads like a who's who of 19th, 20th, and now 21st century literature, art, politics, and high society. As anyone knows who has visited, the Ritz contains no shortage of art treasures. Here the exceptional is always to be expected. But this was something of a different order, a masterpiece of the highest rank.

The painting was clearly French, clearly 17th century, clearly the work of an artist steeped

in the values of Classical French painting, with a sure knowledge of Antiquity, and a profound debt to the greatest of all early 17th century French painters, Nicolas Poussin. But who might that be? It was my colleague Wanda Tymowska, formerly a specialist in the Old Master Paintings department at Christie's Paris, who first suggested Charles Le Brun, a disciple of Poussin who had first-hand experience of the ancient world, having travelled as a young man to Rome, and who from the time of his return to France immediately established himself as the foremost exponent of Classical painting of his generation, rising to become *premier peintre du roi*, official painter to the Sun King, Louis XIV, who considered him the greatest painter in all of French history. As we set about examining the picture, it was Wanda again who first discovered the tell-tale inscription in the lower left-hand corner 'C.L.B.F', which we instantly realised must surely stand for 'Charles Le Brun Fecit', a Latin form of signature denoting that the work was executed, literally 'made', by Charles Le Brun. Moreover, the inscription was accompanied by a date, 1647, which again supported a possible attribution to Le Brun. Indeed it potentially placed the painting among the artist's very earliest major works, completed when Le Brun was barely 27 years old and had only just returned from his journey to Rome.

A preliminary search of the literature on Le Brun yielded nothing, however. There was literally no mention of the painting in any of the standard sources. On the other hand this served only to increase my excitement, since it meant the painting

Charles Le Brun (1619–1690)  
The sacrifice of Polyxena  
oil on canvas  
179×131 cm.  
ESTIMATE ??????



could not be a copy or re-working of any known original by the artist. Instead it might itself be an original, all the more thrilling for the fact that it was previously unrecorded despite having hung at the Ritz for years, even decades.

At this point we turned to Christie's, with whom the hotel and its owner have long enjoyed a close working relationship. First on the scene was Olivier Lefeuvre, a senior specialist in the Old Master Paintings department in Paris. He immediately concurred with the view that the painting might well be a major early work by Le Brun, and in excellent condition. Cécile Bernard, head of the department, was similarly convinced. Working together, Olivier and Cécile soon identified the subject of the painting, revealing it to be the sacrifice of the Trojan princess Polyxena, daughter of King Priam, executed by the Greeks to avenge the spirit of Achilles, despite the protestations of her mother, Queen Hecube, the older female figure straining to intervene in the lower-right section of the painting.

Although Le Brun was not known to have treated this subject, the choice was typical of an artist whose genius lay in dramatising ancient history and mythology for a contemporary audience. Moreover, it was discovered that the painting followed almost exactly the account of Polyxena's sacrifice in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a frequent source for Le Brun, whose fidelity to Classical precedent was again a hallmark of his work. Nor was this all, for in searching through Le Brun's published drawings, Olivier came across a

study for a Classical casket virtually identical to that held by the child in the centre of the painting.

From this point a succession of specialists from the French museum world, including the leading experts on Le Brun, came to view the painting. Their verdict was unanimous. All pronounced it to be a fully autograph work of outstanding quality and a major discovery that constituted an important contribution to the study of Le Brun and of Classical French painting at the period in which he worked.

What the painting's origins and early history may be remains a mystery; although now squarely on the map, it is surely only a matter of time before the full facts finally emerge. How the painting came to be hanging in the Coco Chanel suite may also one day be revealed, although the archives of the Ritz are tantalisingly silent on this question. As to the future, the owner of the Ritz, Mohamed Al Fayed, has decided that it would be inappropriate for a painting of this importance to continue to hang at the hotel and that it should be auctioned instead, with the proceeds going to charity. The sale, to be held at Christie's Paris in April, will surely provide another fascinating chapter in the story of this remarkable and elusive masterpiece.

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Tableaux Anciens et du XIXe Siècle  
Paris, 15 April 2013

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