

Charles Le Brun

Charles le Brun was born in Paris on February 24, 1619. At the age of eleven, he attracted the notice of Chancellor Séguier, who placed him in the studio of Simon Vouet. He was also a pupil of François Perrier. At fifteen he received commissions from Cardinal Richelieu, in the execution of which he displayed an ability which obtained the generous commendations of Nicolas Poussin, in whose company Le Brun started for Rome in 1642.

In Rome he remained four years in the receipt of a pension due to the liberality of the chancellor. There he worked under Nicolas Poussin, adapting the latter's theories of art.

On his return to Paris in 1646, Le Brun found numerous patrons, of whom Superintendent Fouquet was the most important. Employed at Vaux-le-Vicomte, Le Brun ingratiated himself with Mazarin, then secretly pitting Colbert against Fouquet. Colbert also promptly recognized Le Brun's powers of organization, and attached him to his interests. Together they founded the Academy of Painting and Sculpture (Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture, 1648), and the Academy of France at Rome (1666), and gave a new development to the industrial arts.

In 1660 they established the Gobelins, which at first was a great school for the manufacture, not of tapestries only, but of every class of furniture required in the royal palaces. Commanding the industrial arts through the Gobelins - of which he was director - and the whole artist world through the Academy - in which he successively held every post - Le Brun imprinted his own character on all that was produced in France during his lifetime, and gave a direction to the national tendencies which endured after his death.

The nature of his emphatic and pompous talent was in harmony with the taste of the king, who, full of admiration at the decorations designed by Le Brun for his triumphal entry into Paris (1660), commissioned him to execute a series of subjects from the history of Alexander. The first of these, "Alexander and the Family of Darius," so delighted Louis XIV that he at once ennobled Le Brun (December, 1662), who was also created Premier Peintre du Roi (First Painter to His Majesty) with a pension of 12,000 livres, the same amount as he had yearly received in the service of the magnificent Fouquet.

From this date all that was done in the royal palaces was directed by Le Brun. In 1663, he became director of the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture, where he laid the basis of academicism and became the virtual dictator of the arts in France.

The works of the gallery of Apollo in the Louvre were interrupted in 1677 when he accompanied the king to Flanders (on his return from Lille he painted several compositions in the Chateau of St Germain), and finally - for they remained unfinished at his death - by the vast labours of Versailles, where he reserved for himself the Halls of War and Peace (Salons de la Guerre and de la Paix, 1686), the Ambassadors' Staircase, and the Great Gallery (Galerie des Glaces, 1679-1684), other artists being forced to accept the position of his assistants.

At the death of Colbert, François-Michel le Tellier, who succeeded him in the department of public works, showed no favour to Le Brun, and in spite of the king's continued support he felt a bitter change in his position. This contributed to the illness which on February 22, 1690 ended in his death in the Gobelins, in Paris.

Le Brun primarily worked for King Louis XIV, for whom he executed large altarpieces and battle pieces. His most important paintings are at Versailles. Besides his gigantic labours at Versailles and the Louvre, the number of his works for religious corporations and private patrons is enormous. Le Brun was also a fine portraitist and an excellent draughtsman. He modelled and engraved with much facility, and, in spite of the heaviness and poverty of drawing and colour, his extraordinary activity and the vigour of his conceptions justify his claim to fame. Nearly all his compositions have been reproduced by celebrated engravers.

In his posthumously published treatise, *Méthode pour apprendre à dessiner les passions* (1698) he promoted the expression of the emotions in painting. It had much influence on 18th-century art theory.

Many of his drawings are currently exposed in the Louvre.

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