Contributor: Joseph Hartman

**Lam, Wifredo**

Born: 1902 -- Sagua la Grande, Cuba; Died: 1982 – Paris, France,

The art of Cuban artist Wifredo Lam is internationally recognized for its blending of European Modernism, especially Cubism and Surrealism, with the visual culture of Africa and the Caribbean. Lam is most famous for his paintings of mask-like figures and animal-human hybrids arranged in geometrized tropical spaces. These figures often suggest the spirit of *orishas*, divine beingsassociated withSantería , a Cuban religion that fuses Catholic saint imagery with the sacred practices of Yoruban West Africa. Lam’s hybrid figures engaged and subverted the modernist technique of primitivism; a technique that entails the appropriation of non-Western visual forms regardless of cultural meaning, as in the African mask-like faces of Picasso’s famous painting *Les Demoiselles D’ Avignon* (1907). With an intimate knowledge of Afro-Cuban cosmologies, Lam asserted that his appropriations embodied a kind of ‘Trojan Horse’ - recombinant visual forms that challenged bourgeois tastes based on Western stereotypes. Lam’s most famous work comes from his time in Cuba, before he settled in Paris in the 1950s. *The Jungle*,made in 1943 and currently on display at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, is considered Lam’s masterpiece.

On a nearly eight foot square canvas, this gouache painting features inscrutable figures whose strange faces and exaggerated limbs twist in and around a cluster of tobacco leaves and sugarcane. Lam’s painting toys with viewer perceptions. The large buttocks and feet of his figures blend with a clustered, unorthodox landscape, which excludes typical elements of horizon, sky, or ground. Aside from such formal gestures, the iconographic details of Lam’s painting test the sensitivity of Western audiences. The inclusion of sugarcane, in particular, signified a disturbing colonial past and postcolonial present; sugarcane, first imported by Columbus, had become Cuba’s largest business by the 1940s. Rather than depict Cuba as a tropical playground for tourists, Lam’s sugarcane gestures at a long history of exploited labor, especially for Afro-Cuban populations. Inverting the notion of primitivism, Lam's *The Jungle* suggests a spiritual state in the Cuban agricultural landscape, inspired by Santería. The artist thus reveals how Afro-Cuban culture and traditions have been cheapened by industrial and tourist consumption. *The Jungle* instead creates a visual counterpoint focused on Afro-Cuban realities, a state of being that Lam sought to reveal throughout his career.

Lam’s upbringing as a mixed-race individual in Cuba played into the development of his signature style. Lam was born in Sagua la Grande, a small sugar farming province. Lam’s father was a Chinese immigrant. His mother was an Afro-Cuban, born of a Congolese slave and a free mulatto – that is, a mixed-race individual of African and European descent. Lam’s godmother was a renowned Afro-Cuban healer and priestess. As a child, she introduced Lam to the practices of Santería. Arguably, his early contact with Afro-Cuban rites and spiritual practices served as Lam’s greatest artistic influence. All the same, Afro-Cuban themes did not appear prominently in Lam’s work until after his return to Cuba in 1941.  
  
Prior to this date, Lam had studied and lived in Spain and France. After a short period of study at the University of Havana, Lam moved to Madrid in 1923 to study art with Fernando Álvarez, teacher of Salvador Dalí and curator of the Museo del Prado. Though Lam despised Madrid’s academic conservatism, in Spain he learned to adapt techniques from old masters like Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegel, as well as modern contemporaries, such as Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso. At the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, Lam joined the Republicans and ceased his studies.

After being injured in conflict, Lam moved to Paris in 1938. There he met and gained the respect of Picasso. In Paris, Lam painted still-lifes, landscapes, and simplified portraits, first with the flowing lines of Matisse and then the refracted geometry of Cubism. Working with gouache, Lam began producing an early form of the stylized figuration for which he would become famous. During this period, Lam imbued his work with a strong emotional resonance. His subject matter ranged from lovers to women in despair. Lam appropriated visual techniques from African traditions as well at this time. These African forms can be seen in his use of angular lines and the corporeal synthesis of his figures.

With World War II and the German invasion of Paris, Lam left for Marseille in 1940. There, he reconnected with members of the Surrealist group. Lam had become associated with the Surrealists through André Breton whom he met in Paris in 1939. In Marseille, the two collaborated on *Fata Morgana*, a book-length poem written by Breton and illustrated by Lam. The pen and ink drawings for *Fata Morgana* were important in the development of Lam's mature style. Lam’s dynamic line drawings mark a definite transition from his exploration of Cubism to his own creative mode, known for its challenge to Eurocentric views of non-Western cultures. At that moment, inspired by the strange dreamscapes of the Marseilles Surrealists, Lam began to invent *femme chevals* (horse-headed females), hybrid creatures with horns, and visual puns that emphasized the sexual organs of his figures. These would all become distinguishing features of his later paintings.

As the war intensified, Breton and Lam left for the Caribbean island of Martinique in 1941, accompanied by other important figures including anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss and Aimé Cesaire of the Negritude movement. After being unexpectedly imprisoned in Martinique for forty days, Lam was released and allowed to leave for Cuba. When Lam returned to the island, friend and anthropologist Lydia Cabrera reacquainted the artist with Afro-Cuban religious practices through her extensive fieldwork. With renewed interest, Lam began to employ modernist forms to reinterpret Afro-Cuban religious symbolism. In so doing, Lam situated his work in a larger effort to define Cuban national identity in the mid-twentieth century. Beginning in the 1920s, Afro-Cuban culture had become a privileged vehicle for defining *Cubanidad* (Cubbanness). Literary journals such as *Camagüey Gráfico, Lis*, and the *Revista de Avance* (published by the Vanguard group Grupo Minorista) emphasized the African origins of Cuban national culture at this time.



Wifredo Lam, *The Jungle*, 1942-43, gouache on paper mounted on canvas, 94-1/4 x 90-1/2   
inches, The Museum of Modern Art, Image Source: http://smarthistory.khanacademy.org/wilfredo-lams-the-jungle.html

**Further Reading:**

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**List of Works:**

Wifredo Lam*, Autel pour Elegua (Altar for Elegua)*, 1944, oil on paper mounted on canvas, 148 x 95 cm., Private Collection, Paris.  
  
Wifredo Lam*, Fata Morgana drawing (Figure with Spiked Armor Hands)*, 1940, pencil and ink on paper, 14 x 20.3 cm., Private Collection.  
Wifredo Lam*, Fata Morgana drawing (Angelic Woman)*, 1940, pencil and ink on paper, 14 x 20.3 cm., Private Collection.

Wifredo Lam*, La silla (La chaise/The Chair*, 1943, oil on canvas, 115 x 81 cm., Museo Nacional de Cuba, Havana