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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY
Department of Art History and Archaeology

WIFREDO LAM: NEGOTIATING TRANSCULTURAL MODERNISM AND
ARTISTIC IDENTITY IN EUROPE, THE CARIBBEAN, AND THE UNITED STATES

by

María Fernanda Fierro

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Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Washington University in
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I wanted with all my heart to paint the drama of my country.
In this way I could act as a Trojan horse that would spew forth
hallucinating figures with the power to surprise,
to disturb the dreams of the exploiters.
---Wifredo Lam

Introduction

The hybridity of Wifredo Lam's (1902-1982) work and persona has prompted diverse analyses and conclusions about the significance of his work. The first critical assessments about his work written in the 1940s, such as those by the French surrealist leader André Breton and the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier, emphasized their perception of the artist's intrinsic connection with "fantastic" elements of his native Cuban culture.¹ Moreover, during Lam's two-decade-long stay in Spain and France (1923-1941), Lam and his work were welcomed by members of the avant-garde who had strong interests in non-Western art and in Primitivism as an avant-garde strategy. More recently, contemporary critics writing from a post-colonial perspective, such as the Cuban Gerardo Mosquera and the art historian Charles Merewether, have considered Lam's work to perform a fundamental decentering of modernism that aimed to decolonize Third World culture.²

While I agree that Lam's work created a displacement of the authority of European modernist aesthetics and installed an alternative voice from a peripheral perspective that expanded modern art, this thesis will strive to rebalance our understanding of Lam's intentions. A more focused historical consideration both of his investment in a hybrid French and Afro-Caribbean persona, and his conscious participation in the global art market, will seek to reveal how his work and persona have

¹ See: André Breton, Surrealism and Painting, translated by Simon Watson Taylor (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2002), 169-71. For Carpentier see: Alejo Carpentier, "Reflexiones acerca de la pintura de Wifredo Lam," Gaceta del Caribe July 1944. See also: Alejo Carpentier, "On the Marvelous Real in America" in Magical realism: theory, history, community edited by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy Faris, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 85.

² See: Gerardo Mosquera, "Jineteando el modernismo. Los descentramientos de Wifredo Lam," Lápiz 16, no.138 (1997):24-29. See also: Charles Merewether, "At the Crossroads of Modernism: A Liminal Terrain," in Wifredo Lam: a Retrospective of Works on Paper (New York: Americas Societies, 1992).

been formed. Therefore, this thesis strives to open a new characterization of Lam as a cosmopolitan modernist who sought an international clientele and reputation rather than as a revolutionary figure or an agent of the “fantastic.”

Wifredo Lam was born in 1902 in Sagua la Grande, a small town in the sugar cane agricultural province of Villa Clara, Cuba. He was raised in a family of mixed-ethnicities, a common circumstance in Cuban syncretic culture. Lam’s father, Lam Yam, was a Chinese immigrant from Canton who continued the traditional practice of calligraphy by rendering the teachings of Confucius and Lao Tse in this technique, and remained faithful to ancient Chinese ancestral cults, such as offering rice and chicken to the dead.³ Wifredo Lam’s mother, Ana Serafina Lam, was a Cuban daughter of an enslaved Congolese woman who had been granted freedom by marrying a mulatto. In addition, Lam’s godmother, Mantonica Wilson, was an Afro-Cuban priestess of the Santería religion, and she introduced him to its rituals and beliefs in his early youth.⁴ This first insight into Afro-Cuban traditions remained dormant in Lam and would materialize only later in his personal expression of Cuba’s distinct culture, long after he had learned and appropriated the visual language of European artistic modernism.

After a hiatus of almost two decades, the artist returned to Cuba in 1942. During this absence he studied art in Spain (1923-1938), and subsequently moved to Paris (1938-1941) where he was greatly influenced by Picasso’s Cubism and Breton’s Surrealism.

Lam’s return to the Caribbean (1941-1952) was fundamental for the development of his

³ Lowery Stokes Sims, Wifredo Lam and the International Avant-Garde, 1923-1982 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 212.

⁴ Santería was born of the combination of traditional Yoruba religion and Spanish Catholicism. This religion is still a major part of Cuban culture and is practiced in other Latin American countries. It is known as Candomblé in Brazil, Shangó in Trinidad and Tobago, Grenada, and Barbados, and Kele in Saint Lucia.

work. He was confronted with the Cuban ethos, a strong element of his identity that had been missing from his life, and that generated a transformation in his work. Lam was not the only Cuban artist that had learned European modern art while living in Europe. In fact, many of his fellow artists had returned to the island before him and established a scene of avant-garde art they called *vanguardia*, based on an imported modernism rephrased within Cuban parameters.

Lam's initial differentiation from them included that he was profoundly impacted by the neocolonial political and socio-cultural situation that was currently affecting his native country. In Cuba, Lam forged a reaction that animated his intention to produce paintings with strong visual elements of combative ideology against the wounds of colonialism that were still harming this culture. Having to flee the war in Europe for fear of prosecution, the artist certainly carried a distressing emotional load and a malaise against power and injustice that may possibly have granted him a justified eagerness to fight back. Once in Cuba, his style and narrative became more focused in exploring Afro-Cuban religious and cultural elements that incorporated arcane symbolisms.

Lam developed an innovative language that reconciles local religious traditions and artistic practices with European avant-garde artistic values, and thus, expands the syncretic nature of Antillean culture. In addition, Lam's work of this period is complemented by the development of post-colonial currents of thought such as the already-established surrealist agenda in Paris that questioned the system of values of Europe and its colonialist dominance,⁵ the Negritude movement,⁶ Surrealism in the Caribbean,⁷ and the literary ideas of Latin America as the land of the "marvelous real."⁸

⁵ At this time the great moment of Surrealism had already taken place and the group needed a renewal. The renewal occurred when the group came in contact with the arts and myths of non-Western cultures during

Lam had the challenge of finding an artistic strategy that mediated the visual vocabulary of European modernism and traditional Afro-Cuban content, reintegrating form and content into his own expression. By implementing this practice, he set a model of transcultural art that was in dialogue with African, European, and Cuban cultures and their diverse artistic methods. Lam's multicultural ethnic background and his broad-based artistic education have proved to be resistant to one fix identity. I argue that this inscrutability lies in the failure to acknowledge Lam as an emergent transnational figure that represents Fernando Ortiz's theory of "transculturation."⁹

the 1940s. They believed these cultures were closer to a primitive state they considered authentic and pure, and by being closer to them they would increase their spiritual and intellectual consciousness and achieve an ideal awareness that would improve their existence. See: Catherine David, "The Invention of the New World: Drawings 1914-1942," in Wifredo Lam: a Retrospective of Works on Paper (New York: Americas Societies, 1992), 42.

⁶ Negritude started as a literary movement in the 1930s. It was created by the Martinican poet Aimé Césaire and the Senegalese poet-politician Léopold Sédar Senghor. They were educated in France and embraced the theoretical values of human dignity and rights promulgated by the West, but rejected its negligence in applying them in the colonial project. Through poetry, and using the language of the colonizers, the Negritude writers sought to recover the Black identity that colonialism had annihilated. In addition, Negritude used the Surrealist creative language against colonial oppression, and as a means to reach a different reality that could not be gained otherwise. See: Robert Linsley, "Wifredo Lam: Painter of Negritude," Art History 11, no. 4 (December 1988): 527-29.

⁷ Caribbean Surrealism adopts the main ideas defended by the surrealists and adapts them to the Caribbean reality, becoming an anti-colonial literary instrument. In 1941 René Menil and Aimé and Suzanne Césaire began the publication of the journal *Tropiques* in Martinique, in which they promoted Surrealism as a weapon of liberation. In addition, Surrealism helped the Caribbean to fight against assimilation and reinforced the importance that a local culture could become universal. See: Suzanne Césaire, "1943: Le Surréalisme et Nous," Tropiques nos 8-9 (October 1943): 14-18, in Tropiques 1941-1945: collection complete, unpaginated. Paris: Jean Michel Place, 1978.

⁸ Cuban author Alejo Carpentier began to use this term in 1943 to define Latin America's singularity, a culture where, according to Carpentier, the marvelous is present in everyday life. His intention was to recuperate Latin American identity from cultural colonialism and was opposed to Surrealism, a movement that he had joined in Europe and that, paradoxically, believed that Latin America was the land of the marvelous and the fantastic. See: María Clara Bernal Bermúdez, Más allá de lo real maravilloso: el surrealismo y el Caribe (Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes. Ediciones Uniandes, 2006), 16-7.

⁹ Transculturation is a concept coined by Fernando Ortiz, one of the most prominent Cuban ethnographers, anthropologists and essayists working in the 1940s. He posited transculturation in 1943 as a term that expresses "a process from which a new reality emerges, transformed and complex, a reality that is not a mechanical agglomeration of traits, nor even a mosaic, but a new phenomenon, original and independent. To describe this process the word *transculturation*, stemming from Latin roots, provides us with a term that

The artist's transnationality and the characteristics of his work involve a number of topics that will be addressed in this thesis. His resistance to categorization into one fixed identity raises questions that will be studied from the perspective of post-colonial theory. Key elements to be addressed are the notions of "hybridity"¹⁰ as related to Lam's iconography, his practice of "mimicry"¹¹ to enter into a Cuban dialogue with European Primitivism, and his close connection to the notion of "transculturation."

Although Lam's artistic career spanned more than six decades (1918-1982), this thesis will focus on Lam's post-European Cuban period. The paintings created after his return to Cuba define how the artist was striving to find a visual language that represented the syncretism of a culture that had struggled through uprooting, slavery, and colonialism. These works illustrate Afro-Cuban subjects in a unique and complex aesthetic and symbolic pictorial form. However, to understand Lam's work, it is important to study his relationship with both the Cuban art-scene and with the critical responses to his work in three locales: Paris, Cuba, and New York. Moreover, Lam's situation in the context of the international network of cultural institutions that exhibited and sold his work to international audiences may reveal multivalent intentions.

does not contain the implication of one certain culture toward which the other must tend, but an exchange between two cultures, both of them active, both contributing their share, and both co-operating to bring about a new reality of civilization." Bronislaw Malinowski, "Introducción," in Fernando Ortiz, Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar (Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra, 2002), 125-26.

¹⁰ The notion of *hybridity* as part of the postcolonial discourse is informed by Hommi K. Bhabha. In The Location of Culture, New York: Routledge, 1994, Bhabha asserts that "hybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other 'denied' knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority -its rule of recognition (114)." In this sense, Lam plays with the hybrid nature of Caribbean identity and with the intrinsic meaning of his artistic language.

¹¹ *Mimicry* is another essential term in postcolonial theory that has been developed by Bhabha as part of the ambivalence of colonial discourse. In the act of mimicry the colonized "revalues the normatives" and in turn "deauthorizes" the colonial power. See: Homi Bhabha, "Of mimicry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse," The Location of Culture (New York: Routledge, 2004), 130.

Chapter one will contextualize the European framework in which Lam worked early in his career, from 1923 to 1941. This chapter will review Lam's relationship with Picasso and with the surrealist generation, his introduction to African art and European Primitivism, and most importantly how his work related to these influences. Liberated from the academicisms learned in Spain, Lam adopted a visual language that was already in use by Picasso, based on the adoption of African stylistic and thematic elements. Lam thereby re-discovered some of what he regarded as his own ancestral forms, thus leading him to new forms of expression. Moreover, Lam confronted a warm reception by the Parisian avant-garde who were captivated by his Cuban origins, which became invested in a particular idea of his artistic persona as Caribbean. This race-based identity proved to be beneficial for Lam's immersion in the avant-garde context, and a perception associated with Cuban culture that Lam would later fight against in his work of the Cuban period.

Chapter two will contextualize the Caribbean scene. It will address the major questions of the place of Surrealism in the Caribbean, its aims and precursors, and the adoption of this language by Caribbean intellectuals as an anti-colonial liberating tool. Lam's ongoing relationship with Breton, his collaboration with Aimé Césaire and his appreciation of the Negritude movement introduced an additional influential element in his work that will be analyzed. In addition, Lam was immersed in the religious beliefs of this area, which differ from Catholicism and increased the conception of the Caribbean as the land of the "real marvelous" and the "fantastic." These concepts were developed in the writings of the Cuban intellectual Alejo Carpentier, who acknowledged Lam's work as an additional element as well as an expression of them. This chapter will also

contextualize the artist's five-month stay in Haiti with Breton, where they observed voodoo ceremonies, in addition to his relationship with anthropologists Fernando Ortiz and Lydia Cabrera who worked on the documentation of Afro-Cuban rituals and customs. The political situation in Cuba will be addressed, as well as the local artistic scene and Lam's hesitant position within these. This chapter will discuss hybridity and mimicry as critical tools of post-colonial theory that will help us understand Lam's aesthetic strategy of inverse Primitivism.

Chapter three will address Lam's position within the international art market, and will analyze the conditions in which his work was exhibited and sold, and its critical reception both in Cuba and the major artistic centers. A critical understanding of his ultimate intention as a strategist of modernism that considers the self-conscious crafting of his persona, his later work, his international network of clients, and exhibitions is missing from the literature. This chapter will inquire if Lam should be reduced to singular identities, or if we need a more fluid model to accommodate his complex history. What does the fact that he rejects the dominance of European avant-garde while not separating himself from this culture tell about him? Or, what can be understood by the fact that his work reconstructs the meaning of Primitivism by using a European avant-gardist language to critique itself? Can Lam reconcile what seems to be an ambiguous discourse? Is the purpose of his paintings to fight against oppression, to re-evaluate his origins, or to construct an affirmation of his hybrid position? What does his refusal of being established under the periods' primitivist discourses of avant-garde European modernism tell us about him and his work? Or, more generally, how does it highlight the profoundly Eurocentrist and exclusionary cultural biases of that moment of modernism?

Chapter I - Wifredo Lam in Europe: a Journey from and toward Cuba

Wifredo Lam's Cuban, African, and Chinese cultural inheritance played a decisive role in the reception of his work and persona in the artistic Parisian milieu in 1938. The modern European interest in "primitive" cultures and the exotic allure of Lam's profile provided the artist an eager welcome by the Parisian avant-garde. Striving to become a renowned artist, Lam's first reaction to the imposition of a constructed identity upon him was one of acceptance, and therefore I argue that it was strategic, albeit probably by then not strictly premeditated. For a neophyte within the avant-garde, he lacked the agency to manipulate his own career and had to profit from the fortuity of being so rapidly accepted by such an influential group of intellectuals.

Nevertheless, Lam's interest in modern European art and his adoption of it was the reason of his moving to Paris, and therefore the embracing of this artistic style should not be regarded as fate but as conscious pursuit. Lam's temporary mingling with the group of surrealists confined in Marseille between 1940-1941 established his interest in unconscious creative methods, which he will later associate to Antillean religious ceremonies that involve spiritual connections, evolving in forms that will appear in his future work.

After considering Lam's interaction with Picasso and other intellectuals living in Paris at the time, and the works he created during the late 1930s, it becomes evident that Lam's first engagement and experimentation with African and thus "primitive" imagery was symptomatic of the European interest in those forms. His works did not spring out of an inherent inspiration from his cultural heritage, but were the direct application of European Primitivism. Yet, it should be emphasized that once Lam returned to Cuba in

1942 after an interval of almost two decades, his work became grounded in Afro-Cuban imagery and was since then expressive of his personal understanding of his native region's ethos, albeit consistently using an acquired European modern artistic style.

Understanding the dynamics of Lam's particular cultural heritage is of foremost importance to grasp the evolution of his work. Cuban society was (and is) inherently hybrid in its ethnicity, religion, and cultural habits. Lam and his extended family lived in the Chinese area of the town of Sagua la Grande, located next to the quarter where most Afro-Cubans resided. From the first slave trades in the sixteenth century, Africans who were violently brought to Cuba adopted Catholicism in combination with their traditional religions. Therefore, the cult of worshipping *orishas*¹² and Western saints simultaneously is a major component of Afro-Cuban culture to this day.¹³ This complex cultural and ethnic background in which Lam was raised was (and is) a common trait of most of the Cuban population and, paradoxically, what granted Lam distinctiveness and the attribute of having an "exotic authenticity" in Europe. Lam himself acknowledged that identity was not a fixed element in his life: "From childhood I didn't know what was the basis of my ethics or my joy. I was not considered an African nor a Chinese nor a Spaniard nor a creole, because I was cross-bred with many races."¹⁴

¹² "Orisa/Orisha: Yoruba word for 'divinity'; literally, 'selected head,' that is a distinguished ancestor who became deified and is often associated with a natural phenomenon, such as a thunderstorm, mountain, river, or ocean." Glossary, in Santería Aesthetics in Contemporary Latin American Art, edited by Arturo Lindsay (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996).

¹³ Julia P. Herzberg, "Naissance d'un style et d'une vision du monde: Le séjour à La Havane," in Lam métis, with essays by Julia P. Herzberg, Jacques Dubanton, Jean-Louis Paudrat, Edouard Glissant, and Erwan Diantelli (Paris: Musée Dapper, 2001), 101.

¹⁴ Valerie Fletcher, "Wifredo Lam," in Crosscurrents of Modernism: four Latin American Pioneers: Diego Rivera, Joaquín Torres-García, Wifredo Lam, Matta, ed. Valerie Fletcher (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 169.

This chapter will contextualize the first steps of Lam's journey in Madrid (1923-1938) and his later brief but immensely significant experience in Paris close to Picasso (1938-1940), and later his stay in Marseille with the surrealist dissidents (1940-1941). This chapter seeks to emphasize the importance of Lam's reception as a figure that bore the qualities cherished by intellectuals interested in Primitivism and Surrealism and the artist's acceptance of it as a way of securing a place among them. This strategy proved to be beneficial years later into his career for the exhibition, recognition, and sale of his work.

A Life Path toward European Modernism

Following his will to become an artist, Lam moved to Havana in 1918 at age sixteen to study art at the Academia San Alejandro where the formal artistic training followed academic European models. His talent helped him obtain a scholarship from the municipality of his town after holding a personal exhibition in Havana.¹⁵ This grant allowed him to immigrate to Madrid in 1923 to continue his education under the academic painter Fernando Alvarez de Sotomayor at the Prado. Sotomayor was also Salvador Dalí's professor and Lam frequented the atelier of the surrealist artist during his sojourn in Madrid. This might have been his first examination of Surrealism, which by then was well established in Madrid. To supplement his training and to satisfy his interest for the contemporary artistic scene, Lam frequented modernist circles and took lessons at the Academia Libre. Usual accounts of Lam's biography emphasize his visits to the art museums in Madrid in which he became especially attentive to the works of Hieronymus

¹⁵ "Biographie," in *Lam métis*, 227.

Bosch and El Greco as a first encounter with European imagery evoking fantastic or unnatural creatures that the artist would develop throughout his career.¹⁶

The young painter supported himself by selling portraits he conceived in formalist styles, but the paintings he created for his personal interest denote his involvement in modernist aesthetics and his desire to liberate his work from the creative restrictions of academicism.¹⁷ Lam began to experiment with different subjects and representations that denote manifestations of the unconscious such as *Composición I* (Fig. 1), which is imbued with a dreamy mood. As asserted by Tronche “this singular work reveals a sharp sensitivity, drawing from imaginary encounters, something that could be close to the ‘magic dictate’ of the unconscious.”¹⁸ This experimentation with a looser style that deliberately moves away from academic rigidity of subject and method displays Lam’s motivation to adopt modernism into his work.

It was in 1929 that the young Cuban artist saw for the first time the work of Picasso and Juan Gris in the Madrid exhibition “*Pintores españoles en París*” (Spanish Painters in Paris). The cubist forms made a strong impression on the young artist.¹⁹ A second traveling exhibition of the work of Picasso reached Madrid in May 1936, one that was qualified by Lam as “not only a revelation but...a shock.”²⁰ According to Sims, Lam

¹⁶ Anne Tronche, “Une morphologie totemique de l’invisible,” in Wifredo Lam: Voyage entre Caraïbes et avant-gardes (Nantes: Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nantes, 2010), 20.

¹⁷ Jacques Leenhardt, “Introduction,” in Wifredo Lam and His Contemporaries: 1938-1952 edited by Maria R. Balderrama (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1992), 13.

¹⁸ Tronche, 20. My translation.

¹⁹ “Biographie,” in Lam métis, 227.

²⁰ Lam quoted in Max-Pol Fouchet, Wifredo Lam (Paris: Editions cercle d’art, 1989), 112, cited in Lowery Stokes Sims, “Wifredo Lam: From Spain Back to Cuba,” in Wifredo Lam and His Contemporaries: 1938-1952, 18.

felt captivated by Picasso's art as well as, implicitly, by his political affiliations. It was known that Picasso was engaged in the Republican cause and at the onset of the Civil War he was assigned the honorific post of director of the Prado.²¹

The hostility of the Spanish Civil War is portrayed in Lam's compositions produced between 1937 and 1938 that express the anguish and distress caused by this warlike period. The painter demonstrated a strong interest in the Spanish political situation and an alliance to the Republican cause after joining the party in 1932. He produced anti-franquist propaganda posters and was drafted when the Civil War began in 1936 to work in a munitions factory.²² Some of the figures in his paintings from this period seem to be awaking from nightmares; others are crying in anguish and screaming in despair (Figs. 2, 3). Most significantly, all these paintings are conceived in a cubist style, particularly adapting the geometric forms of analytic Cubism. Simple geometric shapes compose the bodies of the figures that, although they are almost abstracted from their humanity and their mask-like faces seem inanimate, the position, the size of the hands, and the closeness of the bodies are poignantly expressive. Lam's response to Cubism, a style that had long reached its maturity by then, is therefore one of appropriation of stylistic elements for his personal experimentation. In addition, the mask-like faces denote an appreciation of the incorporation of African art into modern European art, and the fact that Lam includes this Africanizing forms only in his work from the late 1930s, indicates his recent awareness of this foreign art.

²¹ Sims, 18.

²² "Biographie," in *Lam métis*, 227.

Although Lam had probably already seen African sculptures while in Madrid, and even more likely had been familiar with Afro-Cuban forms since childhood, the Africanizing forms that distinguish his work appear fully developed in the paintings he created in Paris after having met Picasso in person.²³ It is likely that the Spanish sculptor Manuel Martínez Hugué (known as Manolo), whom Lam met in 1937 when both artists were hospitalized due to war injuries in a clinic close to Barcelona, introduced Lam to the European interest for African art. A close acquaintance of Picasso and Braque, Manolo had witnessed their first acquisitions of “art nègre” during the first decade of the twentieth century and might have recounted these stories to the young Cuban artist.²⁴ At any rate, what is certain is that Picasso thoughtfully introduced Lam to an art tradition that he believed Lam would have some natural affinity for: African art.

Introducing the “primitive” into “Primitivism”

In May 1938, shortly after Manolo encouraged Lam to meet Picasso by writing a letter of introduction on his behalf, Lam moved to Paris with the hope of establishing himself as an artist. Lam narrated his first encounter with Picasso at his atelier on rue des Grands-Augustins in what could be considered a revelatory moment for both artists, and a meeting that evidences the Spanish artist’s clear fascination with the ethnic origins of the young Cuban artist. “After greeting me, Picasso took me to a room where he kept African sculptures. I was immediately attracted to one of them, a horse-head. It was placed on a chair. When I walked next to it Picasso moved the chair with cleverness and the sculpture

²³ Sims, 18-19.

²⁴ Jean-Louis Paudrat, “Afriques en confluence,” in *Lam métis*, 74.

swung as if it was alive.”²⁵ When showing his collection of African sculptures, the artist recounts Picasso saying: “You should be proud!..because this sculpture was made by an African and you have African blood.”²⁶ In turn, he instructed the French ethnographer and surrealist dissident Michel Leiris who happened to be at the atelier: “Apprends à Lam l’art nègre.”²⁷

Lam’s ethnic origins have been considered an essential element in the construction of his persona by his contemporaries. In their responses of admiration for the artist, members of the European avant-garde invested all their appreciation for “primitive” forms imposing an identity upon him.²⁸ Max-Pol Fouchet, one of his biographers, asserts that it would be an exaggeration to explain Lam’s work using his unusual heredity, just as it would be inadequate to overlook it. Fouchet quotes Michel Leiris, who forged a close relationship with Lam, who affirmed a similar perspective: “It is – or it should be – a well-known fact that a man hardly owes anything but his physical constitution to the race or races from which he has sprung.”²⁹ Along the same lines, the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortíz claimed that bestowing such determinism to race would be a groundless assertion, and that Lam’s aptitudes were learned culturally.³⁰ However, these affirmations do not correspond to how Lam was perceived by the European artists he encountered in the 1930s. Members of the Parisian avant-garde,

²⁵ Wifredo Lam, “Mon amitié avec Picasso, 1938,” 13, quoted in Paudrat, 74.

²⁶ Wifredo Lam, “Mon amitié avec Picasso, 1938,” quoted in Sims, 6.

²⁷ Wifredo Lam, “Mon amitié avec Picasso, 1938,” 14, quoted in Paudrat, 75.

²⁸ Michele Greet, “Inventing Wifredo Lam: The Parisian Avant-Garde’s Primitivist Fixation,” *Invisible Culture* 5 (2003): unpaginated.

²⁹ Fouchet, 12, quoting Michel Leiris, in *Lam* (Milan: Fratelli Fabbri, 1970), preface.

³⁰ Fernando Ortíz, *Wifredo Lam* (La Habana: Dirección de Cultura Cubana, 1950), 2.

Picasso and André Breton in particular, were captivated by how they envisioned the role of Lam's cultural heritage, especially his African heritage, in shaping his art.³¹ Lam's art dealer Pierre Loeb mythologized the connection between Lam's art and his racial affiliations and usually overstated his ethnicity, such as when he praised his "African face drawn by a refined and subtle Chinese."³²

Lam's multiple non-western identities (Chinese, Cuban, and especially African) and the stunning iconography he developed when he returned to Cuba in 1942 granted him epithets that evoked his identity as "exotic" or "authentic" such as "magician," "master of the fantastic," and "shaman."³³ From this perspective, Lam's presence among these modernists "precipitated the first crisis of modernism by introducing the 'primitive' into 'primitivism.'"³⁴ Although Lam had probably seen Afro-Cuban art while growing up in Cuba, Africanizing forms influenced his work for the first time while living in Europe. It was, reasonably, neither "intuitive" nor merging naturally from his "inherent connection to the tribal," but acquired.³⁵

At the time Lam arrived in Paris, the interest in Primitivism and black culture of the Parisian avant-garde had been in place for some time. From the mid-nineteenth century the appreciation for foreign cultures was motivated by the study of racial differences, placing the "primitive" at the lower levels of the hierarchy. As argued by

³¹ Greet, unpaginated.

³² Pierre Loeb, in Tropiques (Galerie Albert Loeb, 1974), quoted in Greet, unpaginated.

³³ Sims, Wifredo Lam and the International Avant-Garde, 1923-1982 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002) 3.

³⁴ Sims, 2.

³⁵ Greet, unpaginated.

Archer-Straw, identifying the “primitive” was an act of European “*self*-definition...created to be oppositional to or to complement the Western rational ‘I’.”³⁶ The avant-garde demonstrated an interest in cultures of Africa and the Americas that were considered “primitive” and close to the authenticity of primal humanity, in which Europeans found a way of escaping an oppressive bourgeois culture. This rationale was a direct consequence of colonialism in Africa and the “New World” that helped to reinforce racial differences, and allowed a Eurocentric scrutiny of the “other” that led to fix stereotypes.

The intellectuals in Paris questioned the “civilizing” drive concealed in the imperialism of a country that held colonies in Africa, South East Asia, and the Caribbean. However, their standing for French ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity, and their anti-colonial cry was underlined by a paradox. The use of African forms in the artworks of the avant-garde was “as much to satisfy its own need for the ‘exotic’ and the ‘real’ as it was economic exploitation...an assimilation that was remedial and therapeutic... ‘Blackness’ was a sign of their modernity.”³⁷

Thus, Picasso’s praise of Lam’s African heritage was instilled by an established interest in black culture. It might also have been accentuated by Picasso’s knowledge of his family bonds with Cuba.³⁸ Black musicians, dancers, and entertainers such as

³⁶ Petrine Archer-Straw, Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s, (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 11.

³⁷ Archer-Straw, 18-19.

³⁸ Picasso’s grandfather, Francisco Picasso, moved to Cuba in 1868 as custom’s officer, and died on the island. It is known that he had a liaison with a black woman with whom he had four children. In fact, most of the Cuban Picassos lived in Lam’s native town, Sagua la Grande, but it has not been confirmed that this was a known fact for both artists, and if it might have influenced their relationship. Rafael Inglada, Picasso Antes del Azul (1881-1901). I. Documentos familiares inéditos (Málaga: Ayuntamiento de Málaga, 1997), 198-201. See also <http://www.artnet.com/magazine/reviews/rosa/rosa9-6-00.asp>

Josephine Baker acting at *La Revue Nègre*, and Ada ‘Bricktop’ Smith were renowned black figures in Paris during the 1920s who enjoyed the freedom of social mobility they did not have in America. In this sense, foreign figures with a racial distinction began to redefine their identities vis-à-vis the Parisian context in which they found a position “by alternately concealing and exploiting their differences,”³⁹ and Lam was no exception. Although neither an entertainer nor precisely black, Lam was considered “exotic” within this context. The term *nègre* encompassed an array of significations during the 1920s; from jazz to voodoo, moving to Oceanic sculpture and back to pre-Columbian objects, describing a “knitted-together collective representation figuring a geographically and historically vague but symbolically sharp exotic world...a complete world of dreams and possibilities- passionate, rhythmic, concrete, mystical, unchained: an ‘Africa’.”⁴⁰

Lam moved to Paris attracted by the artistic scenery of this city that had historically welcomed and promoted artists, and where seemingly black foreign figures were now recognized for their racial distinction and considered “primitive” in an ostensibly positive sense. The young Cuban artist probably shared the expectation of an “exchange of (his) historical sense of displacement and dislocation for membership in the avant-garde’s postwar cosmopolitanism,”⁴¹ that could help him gain a place in the international artistic scene.

³⁹ Archer-Straw, 16.

⁴⁰ James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 136-37.

⁴¹ Archer-Straw, 20.

Picasso, Primitivism, and African Art: a “Pervasion of the Spirit”

It is notorious that Lam’s careful study of Picasso’s work had a major influence in his work of the 1930s, although his art is more inclined to the use of simplified geometric forms and is less asymmetrical than Picasso’s. Lam clearly took elements from the Spanish painter’s work, but he emphatically ruled out any imitation and stressed his mentorship:

“Everybody has felt this influence, for Picasso was the master of our age. Even Picasso was influenced by Picasso! But...I had done my own paintings in a synthetic style, in an attempt to simplify my forms, before discovering his. Our plastic interpretations simply coincided...Rather than an influence, we might call it a *pervasion of the spirit*. There was no question of imitation, but Picasso may easily have been present in my spirit, for nothing in him was alien or strange to me. On the other hand, I derived all my confidence in what I was doing from his approval.”⁴²

Woman in Violet (Fig. 4) and *Figure* (Fig. 5) are two examples of paintings by Lam that illustrate the parallelism with Picasso’s post-cubist portraits, albeit demonstrating their distinctiveness from the Spanish artist. Lam and Picasso’s paintings coincide in the flatness and spare details of the figures, but these two works by Lam show a more insistent use of basic geometric forms. In addition, both figures show Lam’s use of masks that have elements linked to artistic forms from specific African regions, such as the pointed oval shapes and the so-called “coffee bean” eye in sculptures from the area expanding from the Congo Basin to Nigeria.⁴³ In a revealing statement, Lam acknowledges his individual stance and his affinity with the evocation of African art,

⁴² Fouchet, 23.

⁴³ Fletcher, 169-71.

from which can be inferred his difference with Picasso toward African art: “I could have been a good painter from the School of Paris, but I felt like a snail out of its shell. What really broadens my painting is the presence of African poetry.”⁴⁴ His interest in collecting African art began only after his return to Cuba, and brought his first eight pieces from Paris in 1947 (Fig. 6).⁴⁵

Picasso’s endorsement of Lam’s career and the stylistic similarities between their works encouraged the art critics to aggrandize the existent influence into a sort of relationship master-apprentice. In example, the first exhibition of Lam’s work in New York took place at the Perls Gallery in 1939 in an exhibition dedicated to both artists. In a review of this exhibition published in *Art News* Lam was described as “a protégée of Picasso since the end of the Spanish war, (who) now lives with him.”⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the short article did not obscure Lam’s autonomy as an artist who although “hark(s) back faintly to Picasso’s cubist phase, . . . one feels in the young artist a definite freedom in experimenting with forms. . . (and) it is in his potentialities of growth that he seems most remarkable.”⁴⁷ In a similar mood, a later article in *Art Digest* from 1942 about an exhibition of Lam’s paintings at the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York was given the allusive title “Picassolamming” in reference to commentaries by *Times* critic Edward Alden Jewell.⁴⁸ This critic pointed to the symbols in Picasso’s *Guernica* that Lam “might have snatched. . . and set to the transforming music of Ravel,” an action the critic

⁴⁴ Fouchet, 206.

⁴⁵ Sims, *Wifredo Lam and the International Avant-Garde, 1923-1982*, 93.

⁴⁶ “Picasso Footnotes: His Drawing; Lam’s Painting,” *Art News* (November 18, 1939): 22.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ “Picassolamming,” *Art Digest* (December 1, 1942): 7.

denominated a “picassolamming reverence,” denoting Lam’s appropriation of Picasso’s imagery and subsequent rephrasing.⁴⁹ Moreover, the disjointed mention of Ravel’s music in addition to the inescapable description of Lam’s ethnic origins perpetuated the conception of the emerging artist as an exotic figure. *Art Digest* asserted that “much under the influence of Picasso, this young artist in whose veins runs both Chinese and Negro blood, gives the spectator something to figure out as well as view.”⁵⁰

In *Surrealism and Painting* Breton contended that Lam’s origins were crucial for Picasso’s interest in the Cuban painter and, most importantly, not only emphasized Lam’s inherent primitivism but also claimed the supremacy of European art as the highest converging point of both artists whose essences could not be more far apart:

“It seems probable that Picasso found in Lam the only confirmation acceptable to him, that of a man who, in relation to his own work, had traveled the same path in the opposite direction. Lam started off with a great fund of the marvelous and the primitive within him, and sought the highest point of consciousness by then assimilating the most skillful discipline of European art, this point of consciousness being also the meeting point with the artist – Picasso – who commenced his own journey with perfect mastery over his disciplines but has always insisted on the necessity of a constant return to basic principles in order to retain the power of rejoining the marvelous.”⁵¹

In relation to the “pervasion of the spirit” mentioned by Lam as an effect of Picasso in his work, the comparison between Picasso’s *Head of a Man*, 1907 (Fig. 7) and Lam’s *Self-Portrait*, 1938 (Fig. 8) pointed out by Michelle Greet, proves to be an

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ André Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, translated by Simon Watson Taylor (Paris: Editions Gallimard 1928, reprinted 1965; Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2002), 169-71.

eloquent visual self-consideration of Lam's identity. Both works reduce the modeling of the volumes and render the figure in simplified geometric forms. However, Lam's portrait is more frontal and emphatic in the decomposition of form than Picasso's. Both paintings represent portraits of figures apparently wearing African masks, with the significant difference that Lam is portraying himself. With this gesture he seems to be declaring his adoption of a modernist artistic language that celebrates African forms; at the same time, he accepts these as part of the identity imposed upon him in Paris. However, conceiving a self-portrait wearing a mask that conceals his face indicates that Lam is purposefully covering his true identity. By using the mask, an object that signifies an "erasure, a violent effacement whose function is to contain and neutralize a perceived threat,"⁵² the artist is deliberately portraying himself as irreducible. The mask might be directly referring to the personality that is hidden behind, or might be considered an element of obstruction of that interiority. Lam is containing his identity by the mechanism of concealment and at the same time he is exposing an individuality that is closer to the outsider's idea of himself. When describing the use of the mask in Picasso's *Portrait of Gertrude Stein*, Lubar notes that this method denotes anxiety and instability, and its use as a means was by then established in the modernist visual tradition.⁵³ Lam therefore counteracts the perception that his French colleagues had of him and presents himself as an elusive character, creating a tension and a dislocation between identity and perception.

⁵² Robert S. Lubar, "Unmasking Pablo's Gertrude: Queer Desire and the Subject of Portraiture," *Art Bulletin* 79, no. 1 (March 1997): 59.

⁵³ Lubar, 61.

As many of his contemporaries would have argued, Lam's use of Africanizing forms was not tied to his cultural heritage; it was an exercise in the visual language of European modernity. Instead of continuing with his academic training, he engaged in the avant-gardist tendency of employing a primitivist language.⁵⁴ Paudrat argues that during the fifteen years Lam spent in Spain he untied his bond with his native Cuban culture as a consequence of the uprooting he experienced.⁵⁵ Therefore, at this moment Lam did not look back to his roots to conceive referential works, but was immersed in the contemporaneity of his life in Europe and intended to incorporate that modernist style into his paintings. Lam's works from this period show a dedication to "essentializing Western forms by submitting them to African pictorial influences."⁵⁶ Considering the warm reception his work and persona experienced because of his identity, it is possible that Lam has self-consciously incurred in the use of African art both due to affinity and as a natural influence from which his work would profit in an interested market. It is important to mention that this exercise would allow Lam to prepare himself to establish his own personal expressive language, which would occur after his return to Cuba in 1942, which included local references.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Greet, unpaginated.

⁵⁵ Paudrat, 79.

⁵⁶ Charles Merewether, "At the Crossroads of Modernism: A Liminal Terrain," in Wifredo Lam: a Retrospective of Works on Paper (New York: Americas Societies, 1992), 18.

⁵⁷ Greet, unpaginated.

Lam and Surrealism: a Reciprocal Interest

In 1939 Picasso introduced Lam to André Breton. The poet and surrealist leader saw in Lam and in his work a source of creation that fitted the surrealist agenda and henceforth remained friends with the Cuban artist. At the time of their encounter the great moment of Surrealism had been left behind and the group needed a renewal, which emerged when it came in contact with the arts and myths of non-Western cultures during the 1940s.⁵⁸ During this period, the surrealists sought to increase their spiritual and intellectual consciousness and achieve an ideal awareness that would build a “better humanist existence.”⁵⁹ They believed that colonialism was detrimental for non-Western cultures, with which they had a special infatuation because they considered that these cultures were in closer contact with a primitive state that they valued as authentic and uncorrupted.⁶⁰ Breton was another decisive figure in Lam’s insertion in the local and international artistic scene, and his motivations were fueled by the interest of Surrealism toward the primitive, the intuitive, and the marvelous.

Lam’s relationship with Surrealism fluctuated throughout his career. Stylistically, he often used a “biomorphic abstraction” in his works, blending human with natural forms in which “personal desires and memory are linked through myth and the unconscious and the world in an intimate and organic spectacle,” a fundamental surrealist concept.⁶¹ However, despite Lam’s later friendship with Breton and his acquaintance and

⁵⁸ Catherine David, “The Invention of the New World: Drawings 1914-1942,” in Wifredo Lam: a Retrospective of Works on Paper (New York: Americas Societies, 1992), 42.

⁵⁹ Fletcher, 171.

⁶⁰ Sims, 6-7.

⁶¹ Merewether, 19.

further collaboration with members of the group, he was “resistant to all cliquishness” and stood apart from formally integrating the movement.

During the 1930s there was a sudden growth of ethnographic studies stimulated by the Mission Dakar-Djibouti.⁶² This French ethnographic expedition across sub-Saharan Africa, in which Michel Leiris participated, took place from 1931 to 1933 and provided the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro with three thousand objects and thousands of photographs and films. Given that the appreciation of non-Western cultures went hand in hand with a resistance to France’s imperialism and a questioning of cultural hierarchies, this expedition unleashed a critique of ethnocentrism supported by Surrealism adherents. The First World War had emotionally mobilized the Parisian intellectuals who lost their optimism in the progress of civilization and resorted to “primitive” societies as “serious human alternatives; (realizing that) modern cultural relativism became possible.”⁶³

As much as the surrealists were interested in the exotic per se, they engaged in a continuous play between it and the familiar, turning the latter into an exotic element. Everyday objects acquired in flea markets in addition to African sculptures and unusual artifacts constituted separate elements that, when reunited, they conformed surrealist creations. During the 1920s and 1930s France began to advance its ethnographic scholarship and institutions creating the Institut d’Ethnologie, reorganizing the Trocadéro museum that developed in 1938 into the creation of the Musée de l’Homme and the

⁶² David, 42.

⁶³ Clifford, 120.

Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires.⁶⁴ However, these institutions were not fully established, as ethnography was not a matured social science. An interest for classification, juxtaposition of elements, and for a rearrangement of culture would converge disparate elements such as archaeology, fine arts, and ethnography in the publication *Documents*, in which artists such as André Masson were studied ethnologically.⁶⁵ As Clifford explains, the use of juxtaposed and irreconcilable elements to create something original and singular, as in collage or as in Picasso's use of African masks in the creation of paradigmatic modern art, was as much a product of a globalized modern world as it was a practice of ethnography and ethnographic Surrealism:

“Ethnographic surrealism and surrealist ethnography are utopian constructs; they mock and remix institutional definitions of the arts and science. To think of surrealism as ethnography is to question the central role of the creative ‘artist,’ the shaman-genius discovering deeper realities in psychic realm of dreams, myths, hallucinations, automatic writing. (...)Surrealism coupled with ethnography recovers its early vocation as critical cultural politics, a vocation lost in later developments. (...)Ethnography cut with surrealism emerges as the theory and practice of juxtaposition. It studies, and is part of, the invention and interruption of meaningful wholes in works of cultural import-export.”⁶⁶

As argued by Greet, the surrealists' use of ethnography was conflicting because by placing themselves as the “privileged viewer of the modern and the primitive, they

⁶⁴ Ibid., 122-28.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 129-30.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 147.

perpetuated the ethnocentrism that they were trying to undermine.”⁶⁷ However, this reading of Surrealism does not take into account a historic perspective of the movement that permits to reconcile its paradoxical stance. Although in many instances locked within the contemporary world-view, Surrealism vocalized an anti-imperialistic and anti-colonial position from its beginnings, fusing politics with aesthetics and accommodating a notion of the “primitive” at the hands of the political changes in Europe.

During the 1940s the movement expanded its horizons globally and established international dialogues. These actions were “forms of global multi-vocality” that according to Tythacott must grant Surrealism a position between “the universalizing ascriptive qualities of modernism (...) and postmodernism, where art historical values are relativized and the aesthetic of primitivism politicized.”⁶⁸ Yet, despite its anti-hegemonic impulses and motivations to denounce racist and imperialistic practices, their strategies may be considered “as a form of *inverse* racism” and a perpetuation of cultural imperialism.⁶⁹ The “Surrealist Map of the World” (Fig. 9) created in 1929 conferred value to non-Western societies “within the hierarchies of a defined system of exotic desire,” performing what Tythacott denominates a “Surrealization” of foreign cultures, implying yet another expression of cultural imperialism.⁷⁰

Therefore, the paradox lies in the surrealist progressivism of rejecting imperialistic discourses while generating questionable discussions about the fantastic, the magical, and the marvelous found in the foreign and exotic lands they travelled to beginning in the

⁶⁷ Greet, unpaginated.

⁶⁸ Louise Tythacott, Surrealism and the Exotic (London: Routledge, 2003), 11-12.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

1940s. “The marvelous, an impassioned fusion of wish and reality, in a surreality where poetry and freedom are one,”⁷¹ was the paradigmatic state of non-Western cultures described by the surrealists in a naïve reproduction of the standard stereotypes of the “primitive,” perpetuating the “notions of an essentialist, magical and dreamlike primitive world.”⁷² The French writer Pierre Mabille, who became cultural attaché in Port-au-Prince and was connected with the surrealist group in Europe and the Caribbean, in his 1940 book *Le miroir du merveilleux* expressed the idea that the *merveilleux* and the supernatural as the ideal unification of external reality and desire could be achieved through Surrealism.⁷³

Lam in Marseille

Lam participated in surrealist gatherings in Marseille in 1940 with Max Ernst, Marc Chagall, Pierre Mabille, René Char, Victor Brauner, André Masson, Tristan Tzara, Benjamin Péret, Victor Serge and Breton. They were all staying at the Vila Bel-Air that functioned as the site of the “Association for the Defense of Intellectuals Menaced by Nazism” (or the Emergency Reserve Committee) organized by Varian Fry.⁷⁴ In the advent of the German invasion of Paris in 1940, Lam and this group of intellectuals and artists escaped to the unoccupied zone under the Vichy government. He left his studio on

⁷¹ André Breton, cited in René Passeron, Phaidon Encyclopedia of Surrealism (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978), 261, quoted in Lowery Stokes Sims, “Syncretism and Syntax in the Art of Wifredo Lam” in Crosscurrents of Modernism: four Latin American Pioneers: Diego Rivera, Joaquín Torres-García, Wifredo Lam, Matta, 215.

⁷² Tythacott, 197.

⁷³ David, 42.

⁷⁴ Fouchet, 25.

rue Armand Moisant in Montparnasse and left all his paintings to Picasso, who kept them until Lam could return to them in 1946.⁷⁵ In June Lam fled to Bordeaux (walking for most of the way) and then settled in Marseille. However, knowing that the government actively collaborated with Germany and was denouncing members of the *Résistance*, the group decided to leave the country, but had to wait for six months to be transported out of it.

Many of them were already acquaintances of Lam whom he had met through Picasso and Dora Maar. The group often played the game *Cadavre Exquis* (“exquisite corpse”),⁷⁶ a process of collaborative drawing that embodies the concept of “chance images of metamorphosis.”⁷⁷ Lam participated in other collaborative drawings and productions conceived with automatist techniques, such as the curious deck of playing cards called *Jeu de Marseille* for which Breton, Brauner, Ernst, Masson, Lamba, and Hérold each illustrated two cards. Lam was assigned by chance the figures of Alice and Lautréamont (Fig. 10). These games and creations, and especially their fundamental concept of creating through unconscious automatism, were influential for Lam’s work and the important transition it experienced in Marseille.⁷⁸

During this wait in the south of France, Lam also produced a series of ink drawings for André Breton’s poem *Fata Morgana*, which was subsequently seized and

⁷⁵ Sims, “Wifredo Lam: From Spain Back to Cuba,” 20.

⁷⁶ The game consists on one person who draws on a piece of folded paper and then passes it along to the next participant who performs the same action, and so forth. In the end, when unfolded, the result is a drawing made of unrelated images connected by chance.

⁷⁷ Juan A. Martínez, *Cuban Art and National Identity: The Vanguardia Painters, 1927-1950* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994), 141.

⁷⁸ Sims, “Wifredo Lam: From Spain Back to Cuba,” 24.

destroyed by the Vichy government.⁷⁹ The artist created hybrid figures composed of animal, plant, and human forms that insinuate “imaginary beings in a state of metamorphosis” (Figs. 11-14).⁸⁰ The simplified forms and the distorted figures may imply cubist influences, however, Lam’s drawings clearly reveal the impact of surrealist principles and in particular the methodology of the composition of the game *Cadavre Exquis*.

These drawings determined a starting point for the iconography that Lam would employ regularly in his future work. He grasped the surrealist connection between the unconscious, the automatist techniques, and the creation of symbols and forms via free associative movements of the mind and the hand.⁸¹ Thanks to the creative inspiration of the surrealists and their exercises, Lam developed hybrid figures with bulbous chins and flowing hair that incorporated an “intensified psychic energy” to his work. His so-called *femme cheval* (horse-woman) type appears for the first time in these drawings, which chronicle the anxiety and worry that the group was facing (Figs. 14-15). In Lam’s drawings the figures are portrayed interconnected “like pieces of puzzles as they grimace, howl, and clutch at themselves and each other.”⁸²

Probably due to the difficulty of producing paintings under these circumstances and the large amount of available time during his stay in Marseille Lam was producing up to five drawings a day. He completed several notebooks with drawings of human figures that were increasingly metamorphosed, and many would be used as the basis for

⁷⁹ David, 42. Five copies of the poem survived.

⁸⁰ Martínez, 141.

⁸¹ Fletcher, 173.

⁸² Sims, Wifredo Lam and the International Avant-Garde, 1923-1982, 29-31.

paintings he created during his stay in Cuba from 1942 to 1952.⁸³ The *Fata Morgana* drawings are a clear transition from Lam's examination of Africanizing forms to the style he would develop in Cuba, which is marked by the marriage of the formalist elements of Cubism, the creative drive of Surrealism, and Afro-Cuban forms, creating a language that confronts the European understanding of the "primitive." The movement's principles gave Lam the necessary impulse to evolve individually once he took his own artistic (and geographic) path.

On March 24, 1941, the wait was over. The *Paul-Lemerle* departed Marseille with more than three hundred passengers on board escaping the war, among whom were Wifredo Lam and his companion Helena Benítez, André Breton, Victor Serge, Benjamin Péret and the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss.⁸⁴ They arrived in Fort-de-France, Martinique, at the end of April.

⁸³ Sims, "Wifredo Lam: From Spain Back to Cuba," 24.

⁸⁴ Lévi-Strauss described the month-long journey in his 1955 publication *Tristes tropiques*.

Chapter II - Cuba, 1942-1952: Refusing to Paint the Cha-Cha-Cha

In 1941 Wifredo Lam fled the war in Europe and returned to his native Cuba in 1942 where he stayed for ten years. During the last five years of that decade, he traveled regularly between Europe, United States, and Cuba on occasion of personal exhibitions. Although brief, this period was of significant importance for the development of his work and his artistic persona. Lam witnessed the contemporary religious traditions of Cuban Santería and Haitian voodoo, which informed his work meaningfully. Reconciling local religious traditions and regional elements with European avant-garde artistic values, Lam developed a personal modern artistic language that subverted the centrality of European modernism. His work presented an unusual viewpoint from the periphery that could engage in a dialogue with European art because it spoke the same artistic language.

There is an essential context in which we should consider Lam's Cuban career: Caribbean postcolonial thought of the era that challenged European dominance. Within this framework, Lam's work was created close to the ideas generated by Surrealism in the Caribbean. In addition, his work has been interpreted through the lens of the idea of Latin America as the land of the "marvelous real." Each of these contexts has introduced different points of view from which Lam's work might be interpreted. For example, surrealist expatriates found in the Americas and the Caribbean a compelling environment in which they thought they could find new and fantastic elements, and a place where they aspired to project their notions of authenticity. When Surrealism reached the Caribbean, it evolved into a strategy implemented by local writers, poets, and artists as a way of evoking emancipation through autonomy of thought. For instance, the Negritude writer Aimé Césaire sought to accentuate the African origins of his identity by condemning

colonialism and through envisioning a Caribbean culture unchained from external impositions by way of Surrealism. Through his acquaintance with Césaire and the surrealists, Lam adapted their principles into his personal work. In contrast, the literary ideas of Latin America as the land of the “marvelous real,” advanced by Alejo Carpentier to designate this culture’s unique regionalisms, helped to fix an inaccurate image of the cultural products of the continent. Carpentier, an admirer of Lam’s work, categorized it as expressive of the “real marvelous” and therefore secured a stereotyped interpretation of Lam’s work and persona.

Throughout his youth and education, Lam’s development was confronted with the politics of representation concerning the Other and the implicit history of colonial violence in “contact zones.”⁸⁵ The European avant-garde had an undeniable influence on Lam’s work; his close relationship with Picasso stimulated his interest in Africanizing forms, and the surrealist methods played an important role in establishing his mature style and ideology. In addition, the surrealists’s fascination with Lam’s ethnic identity as part Afro-Cuban might have started to encourage his response to his experience when he returned to Cuba, where he found the contradictions of the legacy of Euro-American colonialism. The effort to rebuild Cuba’s national identity was already taking place in the country, and Lam contributed with his use of aesthetic modernism to challenge European Primitivism, and European concepts of race.

⁸⁵ “Contact zones” have been defined by Pratt as “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today (...) [T]he space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.” Mary Louise Pratt, Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation (London: Routledge, 2003), 4-6.

To intervene in the dialogue of European Primitivism and to subvert these established aesthetic norms, Lam employed a strategy of mimicry, which produces a distorted image of the model and therefore underlines its difference and announces its menacing disposition.⁸⁶ Ultimately, Lam's work has opened a way to express a Caribbean sensibility that reflects the processes of transculturation.

In this chapter I argue that Lam stood on the crossroads of political and cultural circumstances that ultimately shaped both him and his art in transcultural forms. Inspired by the context of Surrealism in the Caribbean and Negritude as means of both liberation from colonialism and elevation of a black Caribbean identity, Lam created artistic manifestations from a Third World that was reacting against socio-cultural domination.

Surrealism meets the Caribbean

The ship Lam boarded with hundreds of passengers fleeing the war in France departed from Marseilles at the end of March 1941 and arrived at Fort-de-France, Martinique, toward the end of April. The anti-colonialist intellectual struggle in the Francophone Caribbean had been in place for some years, and the subsequent encounter with the French surrealists in the 1940s proved to be fundamental for its development.

In fact, in 1931 a group of young Martinicans studying in Paris at the Sorbonne intended to form a Caribbean Surrealist Group and published one issue of the journal *Légitime défense*, named after a book by André Breton. This journal was informed by Surrealism and was the first attempt of colonized peoples to give voice to their protests,

⁸⁶ Homi Bhabha, "Of mimicry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse," *The Location of Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 2005), 121-131.

and as such was banned by the French government after its first issue.⁸⁷ Nevertheless, *Légitime défense* initiated an intellectual revolt against the spread of colonialism from the colonized peoples who were affected by it. That same year the infamous Colonial Exhibition took place in Paris, which displayed the splendors of the French Empire and provoked the surrealists to organize the counter-exhibition “The Truth About the Colonies.” Supported by the Communist Party, this latter exhibition criticized the imperial attitudes of their country from within and professed the Marxist motto: “A people which oppress others cannot be free.”⁸⁸

For the first time, the colonized Francophone community was faced with a white discourse that critiqued its own country’s cruel actions toward the colonies, with which they could relate and cooperate. Most importantly, they could springboard their own protests from it. This anti-colonial mood manifested in the protests by colonized Francophone students living at that time in Paris, who employed Surrealism as a starting point to criticize colonial society “for, in breaking with the ethics of European culture, it offered them a sort of Trojan Horse in which to enter the previously impregnable white citadel.”⁸⁹

The journal *L’Étudiant noir*, also short-lived with only one published issue, was founded in 1934 by three students from French colonies and studying at the Parisian École Normale Supérieure. The Senegalese Léopold Sédar Senghor, the Martinican Aimé Césaire, and the Guyanese Léon Damas criticized the pioneer *Légitime défense*’s

⁸⁷ Michael Richardson, introduction to Michael Richardson, editor, *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean* (London: Verso, 1996), 5.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

mimicry of the system by “appropriating a European standpoint and adopting Surrealism and Marxism in an imitative way.” Therefore, they sought to create their own anti-colonial journal, which paved the way for the birth of Negritude.⁹⁰

Negritude started as a literary movement before World War II and was developed more firmly in the post-war years. The movement was formulated by these African and Afro-Caribbean intellectuals educated in Europe, who embraced the theoretical values of human dignity and rights promulgated by the West, but rejected its negligence in applying them to the colonial project.

Negritude emerged from an emotional and intellectual reaction of the black elite in Paris who were on the one hand assimilated to French intellectual culture but who, at the same time, confronted discrimination and racial prejudices in the same society. As Irele puts it: “As cultural hybrids, the only way out of their form of alienation was to fall back on their ethnic loyalties.”⁹¹ The principles of Negritude were in direct dialogue with the surrealist ideas; therefore, the movement led by Césaire and Senghor used the surrealist creative language “against the oppressive persuasiveness” of the colonial culture.⁹²

Through journal publications, and using the language of the colonizers in poetry, the Negritude writers sought to recover the Black identity that colonialism had annihilated. Jean-Paul Sartre in his essay “Black Orpheus”⁹³ indicated “the paradox of the

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Abiola Irele, “Negritude or Black Cultural Nationalism,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 3, no. 3 (October 1965), 344.

⁹² Robert Linsley, “Wifredo Lam: Painter of Negritude,” *Art History* 11, no. 4 (December 1988): 527-9.

⁹³ This essay was written in 1948 as the introduction to an anthology of African poetry edited by Léopold Sédar Senghor.

Black poet” who has to communicate with his equals in the same language that represents what he fights against: “When the Negro declares in French that he rejects French culture, he takes in one hand that which he has pushed aside with the other... Since the oppressor is present even in the language they speak, they will speak this language to destroy it.”⁹⁴

Césaire returned to Martinique and published in 1939 the seminal long poem *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (Notebook of a Return to My Native Land) in the journal *Volontés*. It was in this poem that the term *négritude* appeared for the first time.⁹⁵ *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* “helped to define a specifically black Caribbean sensibility, but also announced a changed relation between black and white in the French colonies.”⁹⁶ In it, the author exposed these principles and attempted to come to terms with his own identity and that of his people, which his metropolitan education had trained him to look down on.⁹⁷

The Negritude group was dispersed with the war, but the spirit of their intellectual commitment continued in Martinique. Inspired by Surrealism and adapting it to be used as a system of cultural liberation that would defy a “cultural void” in Martinique, Aimé Césaire together with his wife Suzanne and René Ménénil began publishing in 1941 the journal *Tropiques*.⁹⁸ In it, the Negritude writers used Surrealism “out of necessity,” because they intended to reach an ideological realm and discuss a projected reality that

⁹⁴ Linsley, 528, quoting Jean-Paul Sartre, “Black Orpheus,” trans. S.W. Allen (Paris 1951), 23-6.

⁹⁵ Irele, 345.

⁹⁶ Richardson, 6.

⁹⁷ Linsley, 528-9.

⁹⁸ Richardson, 7.

could not be grasped otherwise. In this sense, Surrealism worked not as the movement it had been in France two decades before, but as a body of ideas that connected different cultures and established a communication between them.⁹⁹

When Surrealism reached the Caribbean, it activated an interrelation between both parties that would be better understood as a reciprocal interaction than as an impact of one over the other. Richardson explains this cooperation as one that neither defines Surrealism ‘in’ the Caribbean nor ‘Caribbean Surrealism’. He claims that "Surrealism certainly did not offer a closed template from which to draw inspiration, but provided a point of convergence and interaction, within which (Caribbean artists) could attain and extend their freedom of expression."¹⁰⁰

In “1943: Surrealism and Us,” Suzanne Césaire (Aimé’s wife) defined the importance of Surrealism in their struggle, and its agency in helping to transcend binaries to achieve liberty. She praised Breton for the validity of the movement he had started decades before, and that had spread globally:

...in 1943, when liberty itself is threatened throughout the world, Surrealism which has not ceased for a moment to remain in the service of the greatest emancipation of mankind, can be summed up with this single magic word: liberty (...)

Not for a moment during the hard years of Vichy domination did the image of freedom completely fade here, and it is to Surrealism that we owe it. We are glad to have maintained this image in front of those who believed they had erased it forever (...)

Our Surrealism will reveal itself from its profoundness. Finally those sordid contemporary antinomies of black/white, European/African, civilized/savage will be

⁹⁹ Dawn Ades, “Wifredo Lam and Surrealism,” in Wifredo Lam in North America, ed. Paula Schulze (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 2007), 38.

¹⁰⁰ Michael Richardson, “Surrealism Faced with Cultural Difference,” in Cosmopolitan Modernisms edited by Kobena Mercer (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 2005), 74-75.

transcended (...) Colonial stupidity will be purified in the blue welding flame. Our value as metal, our cutting edge steel, our amazing communions will be rediscovered. Surrealism – the tightrope of our hope.¹⁰¹

In the intellectually active 1941, Lam and Breton landed in Martinique and met the Césaires and René Ménénil. Their meeting forged the alliance between Surrealism and Caribbean anti-colonial consciousness, one that would ignite Lam’s ideological awareness and give him the basis for his work in Cuba. Their twin opposition against colonialism and oppression motivated them to begin an intellectual collaboration; Breton and Lam participated in further visits to Martinique for public lectures, Lam illustrated the bilingual edition of *Cahier...*, Breton wrote the preface to the next French edition entitled “*Un grand poète noir,*” and their works were the subject of different articles in *Tropiques*.

Motivated by related political and cultural circumstances, the works of Césaire and Lam began to operate in parallel channels: they created Caribbean critiques of the exploits of colonialism by appropriating modern European terms of visual and written language. Césaire’s poetry came first and the anxieties raised stimulated similar plastic expression in Lam’s works. Both men incorporated their European education in their art, yet rephrased it, adjusting it to fulfill their artistic purposes, thereby creating a Third-World response to an oppressive Western culture. Their works have been considered an essential point of departure for establishing a sensible construction of Caribbean identity that engages in dialogue with Europe. They are also celebrated as pioneers of a new form of modernism formulated in the Caribbean.

¹⁰¹ Suzanne Césaire, “1943: Le Surréalisme et Nous,” *Tropiques* nos 8-9 (October 1943): 14-18, in *Tropiques 1941-1945: collection complète* (Paris: Jean Michel Place, 1978), unpaginated. My translation.

Re-acknowledgment and Incorporation of Afro-Cuban Culture

After a stay of over a month in Martinique and a nineteen-year absence from his native country, Lam arrived in Cuba in 1942 and was startled by the situation he encountered:

“My first impression when I returned to Havana was one of terrible sadness... The whole colonial drama of my youth seemed to be reborn in me... Havana at that time was a land of pleasure, of sugary music... The Negroes were considered *picturesque*. They themselves aped the whites and regretted that they had not light skins.”¹⁰²

Cuba had achieved independence in 1902 and slavery had been abolished in 1886, but nonetheless, by 1942 the racist mentalities of the white elite who did not esteem Afro-Cuban culture endured. At the time Lam came back from Europe, vestiges of the United States’ occupation of the island in 1899-1902 were still visible, such as an established market of souvenirs targeted to American tourism that stereotyped, and thus vulgarized, characteristic elements of Cuban culture. Fulgencio Batista had been in power for six years, and the social conditions had not changed because of his regime’s increased practices of racism and prostitution. Endorsed by American support, Batista had “turned Havana into the equivalent of Las Vegas.”¹⁰³

In addition, at the time Lam returned to Cuba in 1942, Cuban ethnographers, anthropologists, and intellectuals were invested in recuperating Cuban national identity through the affirmation of their Afro-Cuban heritage. These intellectuals were

¹⁰² Lam quoted in Fouchet, 30. Emphasis from the original text.

¹⁰³ María Clara Bernal Bermúdez, Más allá de lo real maravilloso: el Surrealismo y el Caribe (Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes. Ediciones Uniandes, 2006), 195.

researching diverse themes from Afro-Cuban history, literature, music, dance, and folklore. Fernando Ortiz, the Cuban anthropologist who coined the term “transculturation,” pioneered the study of the African component in Cuban culture. He was a founding member of the *Sociedad de Estudios Afrocubanos* (Society of Afro-Cuban Studies), which published a scholarly journal from 1937 to 1940 that did not strictly treat Afro-Cuban issues, but extended its purview to include the relationship of other Caribbean and South American countries to African matters. In addition, Lam met the ethnographer Lydia Cabrera and the musicologist and writer Alejo Carpentier while the three were expatriated in Europe. In the early 1940s Cabrera worked on the documentation of Afro-Cuban folkloric beliefs and oral histories from generations of black practitioners, which she published in 1954 under the title *El Monte*.¹⁰⁴

In turn, through his friendship with Cabrera, Lam was reintroduced to the culture he had grown up in. They discussed Afro-Cuban culture at length and attended Santería ceremonies together, in which Lam rediscovered elements he had already witnessed as a child with his godmother Mantonica Wilson, the Santería priestess.¹⁰⁵ Lam also witnessed voodoo ceremonies of spiritual possession during a five-month-trip to Haiti from December 1945 to April 1946. The artist and Breton had been invited to Haiti by the new French cultural attaché to Haiti Pierre Mabilie. A solo exhibition of Lam’s work was organized at the Centre d’Art in Port-au-Prince, where Breton had previously encountered the work of the Haitian painter and voodoo priest Hector Hyppolite, a self-

¹⁰⁴ Julia P. Herzberg, “Rereading Lam,” in *Santería Aesthetics in Contemporary Latin American Art*, edited by Arturo Lindsay (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 164-65.

¹⁰⁵ Juan A. Martínez, *Cuban Art and National Identity: The Vanguardia Painters, 1927-1950* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994), 143.

trained artist whose “authenticity” captivated Breton.¹⁰⁶ Breton acquired five of this Haitian “intuitive” painter, artworks that he later included in his book *Surrealism and Painting*.¹⁰⁷ In that book, Breton praised Hyppolite’s work and seemed enthusiastic about his lack of formal education: “Although he is entirely ignorant of all the recipes for ‘composition’ which professional artists pass on to each other...it is remarkable how he achieves balance in his compositions in an entirely spontaneous and instinctive manner.”¹⁰⁸

Cabrera and Carpentier were Lam’s first compatriots to write critical texts about his work, celebrating and promoting it in a cultural scene to which he was majorly unknown. Published in 1943 in a leading Cuban newspaper and in an avant-garde magazine respectively, both writers underlined Lam’s surrealist influence and the Afro-Cuban content of his work.¹⁰⁹ Cabrera distinguished Lam’s painting from “exotic or vulgar” works sold in commercial art. She insisted on the originality of his work and his sources of inspiration: “The ancient ancestral black deities...appeared tangible to him in Cuba...where they are expressed...in each corner of the landscape, in each tree-divinity, in each fabulous leaf of his garden in Buen Retiro.”¹¹⁰ Carpentier praised the inherent expression of Caribbeanness in Lam’s work, highlighting its vernacular elements and stressing a separation from Western artistic ties. He stated that Lam was “animating a

¹⁰⁶ Dawn Ades, *Art in Latin America: the Modern Era, 1820-1980* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 228-30.

¹⁰⁷ Jacqueline Barnitz, *Twentieth-Century Art of Latin America* (University of Texas Press, 2001), 124–126.

¹⁰⁸ André Breton, *Surrealism and Painting* trans. Simon Watson Taylor (Paris: Editions Gallimard 1928, reprinted 1965; New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 312.

¹⁰⁹ Herzberg, 165.

¹¹⁰ Lydia Cabrera, “Wifredo Lam,” *Diario de la Marina* May 17, 1943, quoted in Herzberg, 165.

world of primitive myths with something that was ecumenically Antillean- myths that belonged not only to the soil of Cuba, but to the larger chain of islands.”¹¹¹ Concurrently, Breton wrote a short text entitled “At night in Haiti...,” in which he asserted that Lam created his artworks as if drawing his inspiration from a voodoo spiritual possession ceremony.¹¹² In response to this critical evaluation, Lam resisted the imposition of influences that would limit his work, and rather portrayed himself as an open-ended and sensible multicultural artist: “Some people say, quite wrongly, that my work took on its present form in Haiti. But my stay there merely broadened its range, as did my visits to Venezuela, to Colombia or to the Mato Grosso in Brazil.”¹¹³

Critical evaluations of Latin America and its culture inspired by presumptive images of spiritual possession and exuberant nature, have created inaccurate characterizations of Latin American culture as holder of fantastic and extraordinary qualities. For example, the surrealists designated the “marvelous” as an inherent characteristic of non-Western cultures that possessed a “mysterious, liberating,

¹¹¹ Alejo Carpentier, “Reflexiones acerca de la pintura de Wifredo Lam,” Gaceta del Caribe July 1944, repr. in Alcance a la Revista de la Biblioteca Nacional José Martí 3 (1989):99, quoted in Herzberg, 165.

¹¹² “At night in Haiti, the black fairies follow each other carrying, three inches above their eyes, canoes from the Zambezi, the hilltop’s synchronous fires, steeples crowned by fighting cocks, and dreams of Eden frolics shamelessly in the dust settling down from atomic disintegration. It is at their feet that Wifredo Lam sets his *vever*, that is to say the marvellous, ever-changing rays of light from the delicately worked stained-glass windows of tropical nature that fall upon a mind free from all influences and predestined to make the images of the gods rise up out of these gleams of light. In times like our own, we should not be surprised to see that the Loa Carrefour- Eleggua in Cuba- is everywhere in evidence, armed with horns here and breathing upon the door’s wings. A unique testimony, still trembling as though it had been weighed in the scales of the leaves, a flight of egrets skimming over the surface of the pool in which today’s myth is brewing, such is the art of Wifredo Lam as it streams out from that point where the vital force seeks out the tree of mystery which is the human race’s unvanquished soul, and sprinkles with stars the slowly growing shape of humanity’s well-being. Port-au-Prince, 9 January, 1946.” André Breton, Surrealism and Painting trans. Simon Watson Taylor (Paris: Editions Gallimard 1928, reprinted 1965; New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 172.

¹¹³ Max-Pol Fouchet, Wifredo Lam (Barcelona: Poligrafa, 1989), 210.

imaginative element.”¹¹⁴ Later, Carpentier’s idea that the “marvelous real” was characteristic of Latin America, a land of the “fantastic,” helped to establish a stereotype about this culture.¹¹⁵

In an effort to elaborate an independent Latin American expression, Carpentier came up in 1949 with the term “the American marvelous real” (*lo real maravilloso americano*), which first appeared in the preface to his novel about the eighteenth-century Haitian revolution, *The Kingdom of this World*. In it, Carpentier explains that the marvelous is present in the everyday reality of America, whose components are perceived with an outstanding clarity only by the senses of those who are born there. In fact, when describing André Masson’s intent of drawing Martinique’s jungle “the marvelous truth of the matter devoured the painter (...) It had to be an American painter- the Cuban, Wilfredo Lam (sic)- who taught us the magic of tropical vegetation, the unbridled creativity of our natural forms with all their metamorphoses and symbioses on monumental canvases in an expressive mode that is unique in contemporary art.”¹¹⁶ For Carpentier, the idea of the extraordinary represents the true character of these lands, which for him still held the potential of pure and original sources, untouched by Western society. The Cuban writer was confronted with this reality in Haiti, where he claimed to have “found (himself) in daily contact with something that could be defined as the marvelous real.”¹¹⁷ Breton, in his text about Lam in Haiti, and Pierre Mabilie in a 1944

¹¹⁴ Julia P. Herzberg, 150.

¹¹⁵ Bernal Bermúdez, 14.

¹¹⁶ Alejo Carpentier, “Marvellous Real in America” in Magical realism: theory, history, community edited by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy Faris, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 85.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

essay “*La Jungle*” published in *Tropiques* also highlighted the magic element as an intrinsic part of Lam’s work. Both surrealist poets shared exile in the Caribbean and were the first to write about the Cuban artist once they debarked in the area, setting the stage for historical reexaminations of Lam’s connection with the mystical.

However, I argue that Lam confronted the imposed identity of an Afro-Caribbean whose work bordered on what the European avant-garde regarded as the fantastic. From the moment he returned to Cuba in 1942, he strove to redefine his own position through an art that refused to give in to established definitions. Lam acknowledged the variety and multiplicity of elements that constituted his identity and culture- an identity that was influenced by contemporary international movements and remained flexible instead of bound to notions of fixed “authentic” traditions. Indeed, the conciliation of the diverse influences that were part of his transnational upbringing contributed to his persona as a transcultural artist.

Contemporary art historian Bernal Bermúdez reads Lam’s work through Ortiz’s concept of transculturation, and considers the artist “an agent of transculturation of the visual arts.”¹¹⁸ Ortiz came up with this neologism that describes more accurately the processes of cross-cultural contact between Europe and Latin America than the then-popular concept of “acculturation.” Acculturation implies the loss of the original culture, and its replacement by a new, dominant culture. In contrast, transculturation denotes a mutual exchange between cultures, instead of the unidirectional movement implied by acculturation. Ortiz speaks of a “counterpoint” between cultures, through which cultures exchange aspects of their nature and complement each other, creating a “third element”

¹¹⁸ Bernal Bermúdez, 179. My translation.

that contains components of both societies but in the end is different from them. The product is original and novel.¹¹⁹

According to Bernal Bermúdez, Lam's work denotes this interchange and the emergence of a new identity that is a product of transculturation experienced by the peoples of the Caribbean (and Latin America). Lam established a hybrid visual language that rejected the idea that in order to create Latin American art, European influences should be ignored and vernacular symbols and forms should be developed. Instead, Lam acknowledges the hybrid and syncretic nature of his culture, and exploits it for the benefit of a new visual language based on the synthesis of diverse elements, a language that is "anti-colonial in its refusal to be established under unifying parameters."¹²⁰

Interestingly, Afro-Cuban religions function through syncretist processes that date from the times of slavery. Beginning in the sixteenth century, Yoruba people from West Africa sold in the Caribbean as slaves, managed to preserve some of their cultural heritage through cultural resistance in syncretic forms that combined European and African elements. Similarities between Yoruba religion and Catholicism, such as the veneration of sacred characters and the use of devotional images, allowed slaves to identify their divinities and spiritual intercessors, the orishas, with attributes of the Catholic saints. In practice, slaves would conceal their sacred symbols on Catholic altars. By doing this, they could continue their spiritual practices while safeguarding their

¹¹⁹ Fernando Ortiz, Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar (Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra, 2002), 254-60. The first edition of this book was in 1940.

¹²⁰ Bernal Bermúdez, 221. My translation.

beliefs from their owners.¹²¹ This method entailed the creation of androgynous figures, as for example the male orisha Changó,¹²² who is associated with the Catholic saint St. Barbara. Throughout the centuries, these practices transformed Yoruba rituals into Santería, a religion that is still vibrant in Cuba and throughout the Caribbean in diverse forms.

Hybridity is usually referred to in post-colonial studies as “the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization.”¹²³ Colonial relationships generally reflected an imbalance of power, since inequalities generated by political power were inherent in all social and cultural exchanges. The colonial authority generally identified hybrid products created from those interactions as degenerate and inferior. However, the colonial power did not fully silence the subaltern, but rather elicited its reaction. Therefore, hybridity “allows the inscription of the agency of the subaltern, and even permits a restructuring and destabilizing of power.”¹²⁴ Therefore, colonial authority loses its dominance when a new discourse disrupts its univocality; the hybrid has the agency of subverting the power of the dominant by reversing its discourse.¹²⁵

¹²¹ Valerie Fletcher, “Wifredo Lam: Art of Pride and Anger,” in Wifredo Lam in North America (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 2007), 54.

¹²² Written Yoruba language has evolved into a variety of spellings and pronunciations for the same word. Changó exists also as Shangó and Sango, but I will use only Changó. It is the name of the god of fire, lightning and thunder, dance, music, and virility; it is a major orisha highly revered by all practitioners of Santería.

¹²³ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds., Post-Colonial Studies: the Key Concepts (New York: Routledge, 2007), 108.

¹²⁴ Anjali Prabhu, Hybridity: limits, transformations, prospects (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 1.

¹²⁵ Robert Young, Colonial desire: hybridity in theory, culture, and race (New York: Routledge, 1995), 21.

In relation, Lam employs hybrid figures in his paintings of the Cuban period, such as bearded females with bulbous chins that resemble testicles (Figs. 16, 17, 18), and females crossbred with horses (Figs. 16, 17, 19). The painter's inclusion of this type of figures reveals the syncretic nature of Cuban history and of its spiritual imagery. The destabilizing power of the hybrid to counteract colonial discourses of race is therefore an inherent element of Lam's imagery. These images comprise an anti-colonial strategy, one that is also revealed in his use of mimicry that will be discussed later in this chapter.

This spiritual world depicted by Lam did not derive from the unconscious as had his first artistic surrealist exercises, rather, this notion of spirituality was an inherent element of Afro-Cuban life, to which he was re-exposed at an adult age. At the same time, the painter captured the exuberant forms of nature he witnessed daily in Cuba, where fruits of peculiar shapes grow copiously, some of which informed the setting of many of his paintings. In example, most of the breasts of Lam's figures (as in fig. 18) correspond to the round fruit seen in a photograph taken in his garden of Marianao in Havana (Fig. 20). The suggestive forms of these fruits made an impact on Lam, who used to paint in his garden. Plantains, paw-paw trees, sugarcane, palm trees, and avocados; "a microcosm of the island's natural tropical splendor," all grew in his backyard.¹²⁶ Thus, the iconography found in Lam's Cuban period reveals the closeness of the animal, the human, and the natural, which are virtually knitted together in the Afro-Cuban worldview.

Cuban multiculturalism and syncretism are evidenced in *Annunciation* (Fig. 21), in which Lam merges a Christian narrative with Afro-Cuban motifs. The figure on the

¹²⁶ Herzberg, 161.

right represents the angel Gabriel; he has a multifaceted face and wears multiple crescent-shaped masks that refer to statuary used in Santería rituals.¹²⁷ He has long wings, horns, and is covered in leopard-skin in reference to the masculine orisha Changó.¹²⁸ The Virgin Mary is represented on the left with multiple feet, wings, and a mask-like face from which flames and small hands sprout. In addition, the configuration of space and figures recalls the Cubist use of fragmentation, in which multiple viewpoints are used simultaneously to depict one element of the composition. Anatomical parts and attributes are thus portrayed in different grounds and angles, impeding the viewer to recognize them without consciously assembling these together. In Lam's Cuban work, the visualization of orishas is a common feature. Two small round heads representing the impish creature known as Elegguá (one located at the top portion of the left figure and the other at the bottom of the right figure) complete the extraordinary qualities of the composition. Elegguá has a protective role, and is also a predictor and preventer of harmful events, and it is common to find his round votive head at the entrance of homes in Cuba (Fig. 22).

Femme (Fig. 16) and *Déesse avec feuillage* (Fig. 19), exemplify Lam's motif of the *femme-cheval* (horse-woman), another form of hybrid that belongs to Afro-Cuban religious practices. Both figures, in addition to having male and female attributes, display their equine features: muzzle, mane, and tail. Hybrid human-equine and bull-human imagery go back to the Greek mythological characters of the centaur and minotaur respectively. These forms have appeared throughout the history of art. Avant-garde artists

¹²⁷ Sims, "Syncretism and Syntax in the Art of Wifredo Lam," 219-21.

¹²⁸ Sims, "Lam's Femme Cheval: Avatar of Beauty," in *Wifredo Lam in North America* (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 2007), 31.

such as Max Ernst and Picasso used this imagery in their paintings. Ernst represented the centaur in a series of collages for Leonora Carrington's *The House of Fear*, and Picasso created several drawings and paintings that include the minotaur.¹²⁹ Composed of a human body with a bull's head, the minotaur lacks the human state of consciousness to act from reason, and therefore was emblematic of hybridity for the surrealists. However, Lam uses the motif of the centaur in direct reference to a specific Santería practice: the moment of spiritual possession during the *bembé* celebration when a devotee becomes empowered by the orisha. The orisha uses the devotee as a vehicle to communicate with his followers; it is said that the orisha "rides" a "horse" (embodied by the devotee) in a materialized life-force exchange.¹³⁰

In *Malembo* (Fig. 23) another horse-like figure dominates the composition, although the adjacent multiple creatures obscure its reading. The painting illustrates the human/animal/nature compound in which Afro-Cuban beliefs operate, literally showing a symbiosis of elements. Two hooves indicate the presence of a horse whose muzzle appears on the top center of the picture. In a discontinuous use of space, its long mane and tail seem to be on a different plane than its body. In fact, two large feet on both sides of the tail seem to belong to a second creature whose head and upper torso are placed on top of the horse's hooves, as if these figures' body parts had been interchanged. Ogún, the orisha of war and protector of the *monte* (both a physical and spiritual place where orishas were born, and to which prayers and offerings are directed), is commonly

¹²⁹ Sims, Wifredo Lam and the International Avant-Garde, 117.

¹³⁰ Martínez, 145-8.

associated with the hoof and might therefore be present in this painting.¹³¹ Within the area where these two figures stand multiple eyed creatures of different shapes and positions seem to be peeping into the scene, some more concealed than others. One of them is blurred into the background on the left side of the painting and two orange crescent-shaped hide behind the horse's hooves. The setting is undefined, probably representing the *monte*. Lam characterizes it with two sugar-cane stalks, a few leaves, and a homogenous mix of green, blue, yellow, black and white blemishes that taint and wrap together the whole scene. The spiritual figures are integrated into the background in a visual representation of the compound reality/fantasy that represents the stage in which Afro-Cuban religion takes place.

The effects of fusion between the physical and spiritual worlds of Afro-Cuban ideology are latent in other examples such as *Oque Irisi* (Fig. 24) and *Altar for Elegguá* (Fig. 25). Lam uses a very thin layer of paint so that the paper can be seen through it and the figures blend in with the background. The gathering of natural and fantastic elements that are knitted “into a visual and semiotic texture” indicates the system upon which every force (plant, animal, human, spirit, mineral) depends, and which acts upon all the others. This system of beliefs is not governed by the Judeo-Christian polarities of right and wrong, or good and evil, but by an integrated compound of all of these simultaneously.¹³² In example, Elegguá, in addition to guarding and possessing the key of destiny, is a “mischievous trickster who plays malicious pranks and wields great

¹³¹ Herzberg, 156.

¹³² Gerardo Mosquera, “Modernism from Afro-America: Wifredo Lam,” in *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America*, ed. Gerardo Mosquera (London: The Institute of International Visual Arts, 1995), 127.

power.”¹³³ In effect, in Lam’s paintings from the Cuban period the elements seem to be mutant, on the verge of turning into unpredicted forms. The recurring inclusion of Elegguá in his work indicates Lam’s interest in the relationship between the principle of uncertainty denoted by this character, the fantastic nature of Afro-Cuban beliefs, and the potentiality of creating a work that would trigger the curiosity of both the local and the foreign viewership.

The painting *Altar for Elegguá* (Fig. 25), as the title indicates, depicts an altar dedicated to this intercessor. Lam represents a common component of Cuban culture, the domestic altar to venerate an orisha or a saint, in the traditional Western genre of still-life painting, twisting its formalism by creating an elusive image that lacks the usual clarity and legibility of still-lives. By using a traditional European genre with local Cuban and Afro-Caribbean elements, Lam is extending the dialogue with Western artistic expressions and therefore twisting the formalisms of modernism.

Not all references to the spiritual world and the orishas in Lam’s paintings are direct representations of them, or follow iconographic conventions. Neither is the artist giving them new meaning. He explicitly states: “I do not usually employ a specific symbology, I have never created my pictures in terms of a symbolic tradition, but always on the basis of a poetic excitation.”¹³⁴ Although interested in Cuban ethnography and informed about it by his Cuban acquaintances who investigated those subjects, Lam used these references not in a documentary fashion, but as a way to legitimate his personal interpretation of Afro-Cuban culture. In fact, Lydia Cabrera gave Afro-Cuban titles to

¹³³ Martínez, 148.

¹³⁴ Lam quoted in Fouchet, 34.

many of Lam's painting (in example *Malembo*, Fig. 23) according to the studies of religious practices she was conducting at the time. Breton had had the same privilege in 1942, when Lam exhibited at the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York, although the titles he assigned to his friend's paintings are not related to Santería.¹³⁵ This would infer that Lam was seeking to create a fantastic environment that was part of the Cuban world, the same in which these masks operate, but without scientific precision. He portrays them as suggestions of puzzling forces and mystic powers that insist more on their distance from Western understanding than they do on a precise cultural referent. At this time Lam exhibited his work in New York, and the painter was aware that the American audiences would probably have no information about orishas.¹³⁶ Talking about reaching the general public Lam stated: "I knew I ran the risk of being misunderstood by the average man and by all the rest. But a real painting has the power of getting the imagination to work, even if it takes time."¹³⁷ Consequently, by including the orishas, he strove more to represent a mental state than to introduce specific cultural facts: "My painting was supposed to communicate a psychic state."¹³⁸

In the cases when the spiritual forces are openly identified, either by the title or iconography such as the head of Elegguá, Lam shows a preference for those orishas that are invoked when a devotee needs help with personal problems that require forceful actions to solve them. The artist includes aggressive forms and objects such as scissors,

¹³⁵ Bernal Bermúdez, 189.

¹³⁶ Fletcher, "Wifredo Lam: Art of Pride and Anger," 55.

¹³⁷ Lam quoted in Bernal Bermúdez, 197. My translation.

¹³⁸ Fletcher, "Wifredo Lam," 185.

knives, and pointed elements that can be seen in *The Eternal Present* (Fig. 26). This painting shows a change in the manner of Lam's rendering individual figures and elements: volumes have gained sculptural form and become separated from the background. Nonetheless, the composition is still chaotic in its abundance of intermeshed elements and the inclusion of vegetation to set the scene in a dense nature. The figure on the left side of the painting seems to be of the *femme-cheval* type. The hybrid is wearing high-heels and a hat decorated with flowers, essential components of Western fashion, and although it is difficult to recognize which limbs belongs to her, the figure seems to be holding a knife or machete close to the ground and a bird higher than its head. The figure on the right, also in profile, has prominent buttocks and fruit-shaped breasts and holds another knife. She stares directly at the viewer, as does the *femme-cheval*. In the middle of the painting a figure with hands and feet of different sizes holds an Elegguá head. The lance on the right symbolizes Ochosí, an orisha that guards the hunt and the mysteries of the forest.¹³⁹ The mood of the scene is one of vigilance and alertness; the figures are on guard, protecting their territory and ready to attack. Their attentive gazes turns the viewer into an element of threat and their stillness conjures potential energy soon to be released. The painting reads as a Third-World response to Western observers.

Cuban Social and Artistic Circumstances

The Eternal Present refers also to the social conditions in Cuba at the time of Lam's arrival, and displays its ambivalence. At the time Lam returned to Cuba in 1942, the country had commodified its folkloric music, dances, and rituals by selling them as

¹³⁹ Herzberg, 161.

souvenirs to the rising tourist industry, contributing to the international construction of racial and cultural stereotypes of Cuba.¹⁴⁰ “Spectacles of Primitivism” took place at the Havana clubs such as at the famous Tropicana, where European and North-American tourists attended shows of black dancers who were, as historian Charles Merewether claims, “in a state of nature, in which their exposure and nudity stood for their savagery.”¹⁴¹ Although Lam usually did not comment about his paintings, he described *The Eternal Present* as his reaction against those circumstances: “The figure on the left is a stupid whore. With her two mouths she feels ridiculous. In her heterogeneity she evokes cross-breeding, the degradation of the race. The figure on the right has a knife, but he makes no use of it, he does not fight. He suggests the indecision of the mulatto, who does not know where to go or what to do.”¹⁴² In this interpretation, the painting showcases Cuba’s passive social downside inherited from colonialism, which replaces the previous analysis of a powerful stillness on the verge of erupting. Indeed, the “indecision of the mulatto” reveals the ambivalence in this painting. Lam indicates the intrinsic power of Cuban society to react against foreign impositions and yet this society’s continuous submission to racist constructs.

Despite the sexist tone of Lam’s commentary, it should be considered as a reference to the degrading conditions of Cuban’s lower classes that he intended to denounce with this painting. In it, Lam portrays disturbing figures who are a product of the “old colonial drama” and he expresses his reaction to the modern realities of his

¹⁴⁰ Fletcher, “Wifredo Lam: Art of Pride and Anger,” 57.

¹⁴¹ Charles Merewether, “At the Crossroads of Modernism: A Liminal Terrain,” in *Wifredo Lam: A Retrospective of Works on Paper* (New York: Americas Society, 1992), 14.

¹⁴² Lam quoted in Fouchet, 34.

country. The prostitute indicates the conditions of exploitation in the commodified Cuban culture, which put on display Afro-Cuban women as “exotic” products. As a passive civilian who did not publicly manifest his opinion, he used his work as a means to respond to the condition of Cuba’s neo-colonial state, reflected in the country’s persistent economic dependency on foreign help and the degrading effects of tourism in Cuban culture.

Lam’s shocking work was conceived at a time when white Cuban society was disdainful of Afro-Cubanism and of, most surprisingly, modern art. As Alfred Barr explains in an article published on occasion of the 1944 exhibition “Modern Cuban Painters” at the Museum of Modern Art in New York: “The wealthy, who frequently in other countries feel a certain *noblesse oblige* toward their most talented living artists, seem in Cuba comparatively indifferent. Nor is official support much more active.”¹⁴³ Only thirteen of the most recognized Cuban artists were selected for the exhibition, among whom were Mario Carreño, Víctor Manuel, Amelia Peláez, and René Portocarrero. But Lam was not part of the group.¹⁴⁴ When he returned to Cuba the local avant-garde art scene had existed for two decades, and although it was not conceived as a formal group or entity, several painters had forged a name of their own. Lam’s fresh arrival, his disconnection from the country, and his European cultural background and connections with the most prominent artists marginalized him. Although he was recognized as a prominent artist, and he participated in collective exhibitions and collaborations between Cuban artists, rivalry and tensions existed between Lam and his

¹⁴³ Alfred H. Barr, Jr. “Modern Cuban Painters,” The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art 11, no. 5 (April 1, 1944): 7.

¹⁴⁴ The implications of Lam’s absence from this exhibition will be discussed in chapter 3.

contemporaries. Lam's long absence and cosmopolitan influential acquaintances inevitably turned him into the "odd man out" but, paradoxically, internationally he was rapidly recognized as the quintessential Cuban painter.¹⁴⁵

Local interest in Cuban modern artists resulted in a scarce number of exhibitions in Havana, and publications were targeted to a minority of readers and enthusiasts. The avant-garde magazine *Revista de Avance* (launched by Carpentier, among others), the Association of Painters and Sculptors, and the Lyceum formed the sites for exhibition and exchange of written and visual information, and the promotion of literature, art, and music. Most of the so-called *vanguardia* painters had grown tired of the San Alejandro Academy of Fine Arts and travelled to Europe in the late 1920s and 30s to learn from the example of French modernism. In 1927, a date now often used to mark the beginning of Cuban avant-garde, the first Exhibition of New Art took place in Havana (Fig. 27), the Declaration of the Grupo Minorista was drafted, and Víctor Manuel was the first Cuban artist to return from Europe. This new generation applied and adapted their knowledge of French modernism to "challenge academic painting, to develop personal styles, and to interpret their native land" symbolizing a national identity.¹⁴⁶ As Barr stated, the social sphere to which these exhibitions were targeted was not yet ready to accept such revolutionary ideas, and therefore some exhibitions were canceled or

¹⁴⁵ Giulio V. Blanc, "Cuban Modernism: The Search for a National Ethos," in Wifredo Lam and His Contemporaries 1938-1952 edited by Maria R. Balderrama (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1992), 67-8.

¹⁴⁶ Martínez, 4.

ignored for, as in example, Carlos Enríquez's for his "indecent nudes" or Amelia Peláez's "too radical cubist abstractions."¹⁴⁷

The Cuban avant-garde artists strove for the creation of an art that defied academicism and represented their national ethos in a contemporary artistic language. Having learned from French modernism in Paris, their artworks represented diverse subjects such as the Cuban rumba, landscapes featuring the Cuban mulatto population, Cuban peasants, and still-lives of the Cuban flora and fauna in expressionistic, abstract, cubist, and even some symbolist styles (Figs. 28, 29, 30).¹⁴⁸ The search for a synthesis of modernism and vernacular elements was therefore not Lam's exclusive artistic strategy. When Lam returned to Cuba in 1942 local artists had been experimenting with the issue for more than a decade. However, Lam's symbolic approach of Afro-Cuban culture differed from the more narrative and straightforward compositions of the *vanguardia* painters. He used elements of European modernism in innovative compositions that combine discernable Afro-Cuban elements with his conscious targeting of sociocultural predicaments of Cuban modernity.

Denouncing the Status Quo through Mimicry and Reverse Primitivism

Most importantly, something else drove Lam's work to stand out from his fellow Cuban artists and to elevate him to what art historians like Charles Merewether or Gerardo Mosquera have considered as Lam's major role as advocate for an ideological decolonization of the Third World. Lam's work performs a reverse Primitivism: he shifts Primitivism's paradigm by creating modern art from a culture that produces those

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 12.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 15-17.

“primitive” images, and with the authority of pertaining to that culture, laying the foundation for a new form of modernism. Primitivist aesthetics developed in Europe had experimented with non-Western “exotic” and “primal” forms, loading them with sexist and racist colonial values. Dominating European modernism, Lam pushed its limits by changing the origin and direction of the scrutiny. In his paintings, the Western and inquisitive gaze upon the “primitive” is reversed, turning the active role to the “exotic other.”

Contemporary art critic Mosquera claims that in Lam’s use of Afro-Cuban forms, the artist was launching a “Third-World offensive” against European aesthetics. In an effort to *épater les bourgeois* and to destabilize their rules, Lam included forms (in some cases distinctively aggressive) that were foreign to Western audiences but expressed in a familiar artistic language.¹⁴⁹ Indeed, Lam was able to establish a dialogue with Western audiences and be recognized by them because he dominated their language: “I was able to turn into a prosecutor and represent the Third World within European culture owing to the fact that I took possession of that culture. I could speak in a language that was clear.”¹⁵⁰ In example, his use of the *femme-cheval* as a subversive figure introduces a deconstruction of a Classical character, the centaur, generating simultaneous feelings of attraction and repugnance to the Western viewer through the painter’s manipulation of the body and the use of masks. The ambivalence of Lam’s figures shows the threat

¹⁴⁹ Gerardo Mosquera, “Modernism from Afro-America: Wifredo Lam,” in *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America*, edited by Gerardo Mosquera, (London: The Institute of International Visual Arts, 1995), 130.

¹⁵⁰ Wifredo Lam, “Mi pintura es un acto de descolonización-Entrevista con Wifredo Lam,” in Gerardo Mosquera, *Exploraciones en la plástica cubana* (La Habana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1983), 186-87. My translation.

represented by the Other in a strangeness that also enthralls and lures the observer.¹⁵¹

Later, in a 1977 interview with Mosquera, Lam acknowledged: “I was irritated by the fact that in Paris African masks and idols were sold as adornments. I decided to place the black objects in accordance with their scenery and the world to which they belong. My painting is an act of decolonization; not physical, but mental.”¹⁵²

Lam recognized that a constructed colonial idea of the Other was dangerous to Cuban and Caribbean identity and therefore he took advantage of its potential to disturb. Through the use of mimicry, he positioned his work as a vehicle to challenge European Primitivism’s colonialists ideologies of race and cultural hierarchies. His use of a European artistic style that combines seemingly surrealist topics, fragmented figures reminiscent of Cubism, and of European Primitivism, imitates, without replicating, European modernism as a strategy of subversion. Homi Bhabha’s theory of mimicry proposes that “the fetishized colonial culture is potentially and strategically an insurgent counter-appeal (...) Mimicry, like the fetish, is a part-object that radically revalues the normative knowledge of the priority of race, writing, history. For the fetish mimes the forms of authority at the point at which it deauthorizes them.”¹⁵³ Bhabha formulates this premise within a post-colonial discourse, which seeks to denounce colonial systems and these structure’s strategies of domination. Colonialism replicates the metropolis’ systems and institutions in a foreign land inhabited by populations considered inferior and subservient. The colonial “mimic man,” educated under those circumstances but with an

¹⁵¹ Merewether, 24.

¹⁵² Wifredo Lam, “Mi pintura es un acto de descolonización-Entrevista con Wifredo Lam,” 184. My translation.

¹⁵³ Homi Bhabha, “Of mimicry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse,” The Location of Culture, (New York: Routledge, 2005), 130.

inherently different cultural background, is thus not a product of mimesis but of mimicry; he “*repeats*, rather than *re-presents*.”¹⁵⁴ This process introduces the element of ambivalence in mimicry, which in repeating the dominant cultural term, produces difference and ultimately excess, thereby disrupting the authority of the same colonial discourse that created it.

Therefore, Lam plays with the power that Western modernism has in order to subvert its own assumptions in a neo-colonial context. His paintings draw upon a European artistic expression that has been absorbed by Cuban painters through imitation, but they are “not quite” since they are a product of mimicry executed by an Other. The figures represented, as well as Lam’s strategy, operate as “a process by which the look of surveillance returns as the displacing gaze of the disciplined, where the observer becomes the observed and ‘partial’ representation rearticulates the whole notion of *identity* and alienates it from essence.”¹⁵⁵ Who are these mischievous personages, and what do they intend? Their ambivalence imply a menace; the return of the repressed. The Western gaze transforms their features into uncontrolled “bestiality, genitalia, grotesquerie.”¹⁵⁶

This threat is a feeling conveyed throughout Lam’s paintings of the Cuban period. In a dialogue with his biographer Fouchet, Lam describes his reaction against the manipulation of Cuban culture by foreign interests, and positions himself as an agent of cultural liberation from harmful Western influences:

“ I decided that my painting would never be the equivalent of that pseudo-Cuban music for nightclubs. I refused to paint cha-cha-cha. I wanted with all my heart to

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 125.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 127.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 131.

paint the drama of my country. In this way I could act as a Trojan horse that would spew forth hallucinating figures with the power to surprise, to disturb the dreams of the exploiters.”¹⁵⁷

The image of the Trojan horse is especially powerful and defines Lam’s role very clearly. The Trojan horse is a creature that is not what it seems; it contains hidden elements and is an agent of change, a seemingly benign intruder in a foreign zone that arrives in an unassuming guise, but aims to subvert the status quo by attacking and vanquishing. Determined to create “hallucinating figures” to “disturb the dreams of the exploiters,” Lam combines their European modernist visual vocabulary with Afro-Cuban themes and iconography, creating an individual language that brings together multicultural elements in a unique transcultural work.

Lam’s use of Afro-Cuban symbols emphasizes their mutability and the enigmatic nature of the relationship between the physical and spiritual realms within Cuban culture. His use of the dense jungle as the landscape against which the figures are portrayed, acts as a limit and visual barrier to foreign eyes that cannot access the mysterious world behind it. His paintings represent images of resistance to being scrutinized, exercising control by refusing to admit their significance. What is concealed is now not accessible for misrepresentation or inspection any more. The artist’s attempt of mimicry actively disempowers the Western modernist aesthetic of Primitivism.¹⁵⁸

Lam’s procedure is not merely an action of juxtaposition of different elements, for he deliberately references the European components through similitude, an alternative to

¹⁵⁷ Max-Pol Fouchet, *Lam*, (Milan: Fratelli Fabbri, 1970), 31.

¹⁵⁸ Merewether, 26.

mimicry's colonial connotations. Similitude in Lam's work may be explained through Griselda Pollock's concept of reference in the context of the avant-garde. Pollock asserts that artists reference fellow members of the avant-garde to affirm their belonging to the group, and at the same time they use difference to set themselves apart from their point of reference, claiming their own style by an act of displacement.¹⁵⁹ Timpano offers a reading of this idea in Lam's work referring to the deliberate resemblance in style to a European artwork, albeit intentionally altering it to a Cuban idiom.

The author illustrates his argument with the comparison of two portraits from the same period; Lam's c. 1943 *Portrait en bleu* (Fig. 31) and Picasso's *Femme au chapeau assise dans un fauteuil* from 1941-2 (Fig. 32). Both frontal portraits depict a woman on a chair clasping her hands in her lap, and the two paintings share a similar palette. Lam's sitter, however, "has morphed into a transculturated figure," referencing his Afro-Cuban inspired *femme-cheval* iconography.¹⁶⁰ Lam created a work in which he deliberately references Picasso's portrait in addition to stressing his difference from it when incorporating Afro-Cuban elements. Therefore, through an intentional strategy of similitude, Lam claims his place in the avant-garde and appropriates Picasso's style in order to rephrase it in a hybridized language that is- by virtue of being both Cuban and European- a new transculturated form. Lam deploys this strategy more extensively in the execution of *The Jungle* (Fig. 33), which presents striking resemblances to Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* (Fig. 34) and whose mimicry will be examined later in this chapter.

¹⁵⁹ Nathan Timpano, "Wifredo Lam, Transculturation, and the Crux of Avant-Gardism," Rutgers Art Review 23 (2007), 56, quoting Griselda Pollock, Avant-Garde Gambits, 1888-1893: Gender and the Color of Art History, 14.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

Considering Lam's ethnic and cultural background and the diverse influences he drew upon, this language is a reflection of his own transculturated persona. Although by evoking his role as a Trojan horse Lam builds a mission of rejecting European art while advancing Cuban art, and his first reaction when he returned to Cuba might very well have been so, ultimately he was not advocating in favor any of the influences he had absorbed in Europe, nor did he claim any specific culture. More exactly, Lam represents a compound of all these. His transcultural identity had the potential to reconcile seemingly paradoxical positions. As Timpano puts it, Lam moved "within, around, and apart from the ambiguous center/periphery constructions of his artistic career," thus, through his own contradictions in both form and subject he created his own idiosyncratic language.¹⁶¹

However, it cannot be overlooked that Lam was interested in the capacity of his work to express a method of transformation and liberation from the Western conception of the "primitive" that Europeans associated with Cuban culture. In paintings such as *The Jungle* (Fig. 33), Lam portrays a primitivist representation of his culture pushed to the point of excess. His composition borders the mockery of the concept of Cuba held by the Western world as a primal, uncontrolled, and menacing culture, and consequently de-authorizes it. Lam is implementing a strategy of inverted Primitivism.

Les Demoiselles de La Havane

The Jungle (1942-43) has been considered the pinnacle of Lam's Cuban period. This responds to different factors: the density and intricacy of elements that represent a

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 63.

biopolitical scenery encoded with symbols within a tropicalized nature, its size, and most probably the fact that it belongs to the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York since 1945, which has helped legitimate Lam's work worldwide.

The painting is a 94 ¼ x 90 ½" gouache on paper that portrays four awesome hybrid figures in a tropical setting of sugar cane and tobacco leaves. The figures have mask-like faces and their prominent buttocks contrast with their thin and extremely long limbs and feet. The composition is stabilized by a regular rhythm of vertical elements and is crammed with visual components that, added to the absence of a focal point, make it dynamic, oppressive, and threatening to the viewer. A mix of dark and cobalt blue fills out a background interrupted by the thick outlines of the figures and vegetation, which are painted in patches of green, orange, bright yellow, off-whites, and some red. Nature, both vegetal and animal, is presented as a wild and untamed element directly referenced in the title: *The Jungle* is a direct commentary on Western notions of "primitive" environments. The "jungle" metaphorically refers to a threatening site governed by unknown barbaric forces, such as imagined African landscapes, and therefore is a site for the expression of misrepresentations. In fact, Lam comments that the title does not refer to the Cuban landscape, where there is no jungle but only open country and woods.¹⁶²

Therefore, in a parodic move, the painter creates a mythic landscape embedded with culturally constructed notions of the "primitive." The grotesque body qualities of the characters of *The Jungle* emphasize Lam's intention of portraying disturbing elements for the Western observer, albeit with what could be considered a parodic twist of an ostensible mimicry of European Primitivism. These monstrous figures are transformed by

¹⁶² Fouchet, 32.

the colonial gaze into hybrid objects of desire, which, enhanced by the tropicalized landscape, are exoticized. In turn, they can be viewed as the “primitives within,” hitting back at the colonial oppressors and the consumers of that “primitive” identity, and unmasking the brutality implicit in their Western representations.¹⁶³

In the hybrid nature of Lam’s figures and in the coexistence and symbiosis of plants, animals, and humans, lies the principle of the unity of life that is characteristic of Afro-Cuban cosmology. In *The Jungle* all elements are merged into a fairly uniform landscape in which all parts combine to convey a state of constant transition. When Alejo Carpentier stated that Lam “starting from simple, immediate elements, ascended toward the myth: toward an American mythology,”¹⁶⁴ he referred to what Lévi-Strauss asserted about the myth’s purpose to “provide a logic model to resolve a contradiction.”¹⁶⁵ Lam is thus attempting to overcome, through mythology, one of the fundamental antinomies of Antillean existence, contending that the multiplicity and transmutability of life represents a dynamic unity and not a chaotic existence. The apparent disorder in his work reflects a different kind of order, distant from the Western conceptions of Euro-American identity.

At the same time the iconography in this painting, especially the symbolic coexistence of tobacco leaves and sugarcane, can be read in reference to Cuba’s socio-political past and its historical association with racial, political, and economic issues. Sugar cane has long symbolized the exploitation of slaves and their confinement to

¹⁶³ Francisco J. Hernández Adrián, “Paris, Cuba, New York: Wifredo Lam and the Lost Origins of The Jungle,” *Cultural Dynamics* 21 (2009), 352.

¹⁶⁴ Desiderio Navarro, *Ejercicios del Criterio* (La Habana: Ediciones Unión, 1988), 167, quoting Alejo Carpentier, “Lam en Caracas” (1955), 126. My translation.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, quoting Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Antropología Estructural* (La Habana: Instituto del Libro, 1970), 209. My translation.

plantations, and consequently the excesses of colonialism and capitalism. In turn tobacco, a native crop, is linked to nationalism and independency. Ortiz' seminal book *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, first published in 1940, is a study of the impact of these two staple Cuban products on its economy and culture. In it, Ortiz refers allegorically to tobacco and sugar and defines them as "the most important characters in the history of Cuba."¹⁶⁶ By way of exposing their contrasts and interactions, and the social consequences brought by them, Ortiz is able to posit the nature of the Cuban nation. Moreover, the counterpoint between sugar and tobacco elucidates the underlying synthesis of elements that determine modern "Cubanness": transculturation.

Therefore, the inclusion of tobacco and sugarcane as the background landscape of *The Jungle*, and other paintings of Lam's Cuban period, remind the viewer of the social connotations of both plants in Cuban history. The landscape also evokes the orisha's habitat (*el monte*) and the sacredness of the land for those who forcedly had to labor it.¹⁶⁷ Pushing the analysis forward, Lam sets the stage to remind the viewer of the processes that entailed Cuba's current situation: colonization, the Middle Passage, slavery, forced acculturation, strategies of resistance, hybridity, neo-colonialism and ultimately the creation of a distinctive transcultural society. *The Jungle* expresses the charged sensibility of Caribbean population and exposes the impact it caused on Lam. In relation, the painting could be adopted as the "visual companion piece" to Césaire's

¹⁶⁶ Ortiz, 137.

¹⁶⁷ Martínez, 92.

Notebook of a Return to My Native Land, in which the Martinican poet proclaimed his homecoming and the break with the colonial cultural assimilation.¹⁶⁸

When interviewed by the Cuban art critic Gerardo Mosquera in Havana Lam acknowledged the subversive intention of his painting in general, and of *The Jungle* in particular. On the use of the pair of scissors on the upper-right corner of the painting he stated that they “mean that it was necessary to create a cut with colonial culture; that it was enough with cultural subjugation.”¹⁶⁹ This anti-colonial gesture indicates a desire for severance with socio-cultural domination, and the poised-to-cut scissors embody the possibility of violence against the exploiters. Moreover, when describing *The Jungle* the painter said: “The guy who is here on the left side with his arm raised is as if he had found a revelation when he sees the rest of the figures in the painting, he is amazed upon the discovery of that universe. He is a symbol of the revelation of our own cultural world. Some say that this is the first picture that is painted as a demonstration of the Third World.”¹⁷⁰ Without admitting it as his own interpretation, Lam indicates the tight bond of this painting with a specific identity, and therefore unveils his intention of affirming and exposing the insurgent spirit contained within insularity.

Interestingly, Lam’s brief reading of the composition inevitably leads to a latent parallel with Picasso’s groundbreaking 1907 painting *Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (Fig. 34). The comparison between both paintings elucidates that ultimately, by way of

¹⁶⁸ Richardson, *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean*, 6-8.

¹⁶⁹ Wifredo Lam, “Mi pintura es un acto de descolonización-Entrevista con Wifredo Lam,” in Gerardo Mosquera, *Exploraciones en la plástica cubana* (La Habana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1983), 183. My translation.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 182. My translation.

mimicry, *The Jungle* posits a new Third-World insular identity and affirms the existence of a transcultural modernism.

A first striking and unavoidable resemblance between *The Jungle* and *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)* is their size: 94 ¼ x 90 ½" vs. 96 x 92" respectively. Considering not only the rareness of exceptionally large square-sized paintings, but more emphatically of two works of practically identical measurements, Lam's reference remains obvious. Moreover, Picasso's cubist composition also features four standing nude female figures (and one crouching) within a fragmented and distorted space. In line with Lam's composition, the figure on the left in *Les Femmes d'Alger* is moving a curtain and observing a scene in which the nudes, in their contorting poses, the African masks, and the blatant stare at the viewer generate an aggressive mood. Interestingly, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, a preeminent institution that helps legitimate modern art globally, acquired both paintings, and since then both paintings demonstrate their spatial, aesthetic, and art-historical closeness.¹⁷¹

As Leighton has pointed out, Picasso maintained an anti-colonial position against France's colonial brutality in Africa. His use of Primitivism contained implicitly the idea that African art was a better art form than European art, "pointedly reveling in ethnic difference and evoking 'tribal' life and art that (Europeans) see as irrational, magic, and violent, by embracing precisely the symptoms of its so-called degeneracy."¹⁷² By

¹⁷¹ Hernández Adrián, 345.

The subtleties of Lam's immersion in the heart of the American art scene and the rhetoric implicit in the handling of *The Jungle* by the MoMA will be discussed in chapter three. MoMA acquired *Les Femmes d'Alger* in 1939.

¹⁷² Patricia Leighton, "Colonialism, l'art nègre, and *Les Femmes d'Alger*," in *Picasso's Les Femmes d'Alger* edited by Christopher Green (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 89-90.

exposing the distorted nude bodies of the *demoiselles* in the context of a brothel, Picasso is denouncing their work as a form of enslavement, such as Lam refers to a similar loss of freedom by way of iconography in *The Jungle*. In both paintings the dramatization of the poses of the sexually charged and grotesque bodies threaten the viewer, who is directly engaged and implicated by the aggressive gazes. Moreover, in both cases, the use of African masks accentuates the brutality of the figures and their implicit violence as “primitive” beings. The inclusion of the “primitive” denounces European associations of Africa and its “idols” with ideas of the savage, irrational, and horrific. Picasso’s painting is clearly referenced by Lam as a painting then thirty-six years old that operates as a springboard for his own displaced artistic discourse.¹⁷³ As Linsley astutely remarks, “the *Demoiselles d’Avignon* have become the *Demoiselles d’Havane*”¹⁷⁴

Adopting the role of a “Trojan horse,” Lam subverted Picasso’s painting and subsequently the artistic tradition Picasso belonged to; a non-European infiltrated Western artistic codes in order to recreate modern pictorial conventions from a peripheral point of view. The Cuban painter established a break from conventions of high modernism, thereby de-centralizing its tradition and authority. Lam’s combative position is therefore more licensed than Picasso’s, who could not and did not aspire to escape the paradox of belonging to the “oppressor’s” society.

¹⁷³ It is not certain that Lam had seen *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* during his early years in Spain, since the painting was not included in the 1936 exhibition of Picasso’s work that the artist attended, but it was mentioned in the catalogue. However, it is probable that he had discussed the painting throughout his friendship with Picasso. It is known that *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* was not exhibited from the period 1916-1936. In 1937 it was shown in the exhibition “20 Years in the Evolution of Picasso, 1903-1923” at the Jacques Seligmann Gallery in New York City. See Sims, “Myth and Primitivism: The Work of Wifredo Lam in the Context of the New York School and the School of Paris, 1942-1952,” in Balderrama, 87.

¹⁷⁴ Linsley, 533.

Merewether posits that despite Lam's efforts to dismantle misrepresentations and concepts of race, the painter remained caught in "a complex imaging of woman, the other (he) could not abandon."¹⁷⁵ According to this scholar, Lam's representation of women resembles the inscrutable and essentialized other in the eyes of the colonizer, and the site of "transgression and taboo" is located in the tropicalized landscape of *The Jungle*. The author argues that Lam's paintings of the Cuban period are at the crossroads of a "direct engagement with and resistance to Western discourse, a kind of dissonant mimesis."¹⁷⁶ However, rather than constituting a disruptive contradiction this statement denotes the paradoxical nature of Lam's work, which is a reflection of his transcultural instruction and identity.

Although Lam was ideologically sensitive to the abuses of the Caribbean's neo-colonial condition, and later he was a supporter of Fidel Castro's regime, he did not conceive his art as a political tool. Nor was he a militant for the recognition of Cuban art.

Nevertheless, his uncompromising position as a cosmopolitan Cuban, and his status at the crossroads of modern circumstances regarding avant-garde values, anti-colonialism, and issues of race, have granted him the condition of being multivalent. The painter, if needed, could be associated with Caribbean, Cuban, Afro-Cuban, Latin American, Parisian, and pushing it further even Chinese-Cuban culture. To the advantage of a diverse market, his work could accompany values associated with Surrealism, Cubism, Negritude, post-colonialism, and the marvelous real. Considering the genealogy of his work in a larger scale, it could even be categorized within Atlantic parameters.

¹⁷⁵ Merewether, 22.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

Lam's work is in constant interaction with these diverse interpretations and incorporates them without leaning toward any of them in particular.

This situation worked to the advantage of the artist, who did not feel at home either in Europe nor in Cuba, and who roamed between Madrid, Paris, Havana, New York and later Italy. Lam became a cosmopolitan modernist with an agenda whose work re-evaluates his position as a modern artist in a complex contemporary moment for the world art scene. In this, he crafted a position for himself within a global art market that takes advantage of his cultural origin, his artistic education, and his consciously strategic synthesis of a broad range of cultural referents.

Chapter III - Becoming a Cosmopolitan Modernist

Since Lam's first representations of Afro-Cuban forms when he returned to Cuba in 1942 his painting subjects continued to reference Caribbean culture until his death in 1982. In contrast to the work of the Cuban *vanguardia* artists, Lam's work was never a direct reflection of visual reality and did not intend to be a truthful illustration of local culture. Instead, his conception of Cubanness was personal and unconventional. His paintings are expressive of a poetic exaltation of an Afro-Cuban culture that had been disdained by the white elite for centuries, and that Lam intended to incorporate in an active modern art scene. The abstract qualities of Lam's evocations of Afro-Cuban religious imagery provided his paintings with a hybrid cultural affiliation, and in this lay their potential to be inscribed within a global discourse of art.

In fact, as Lam began to exhibit his work internationally with more frequency and his name started to have recognition outside the island as that of a prominent artist, his works became increasingly abstract, albeit never losing their intrinsic reference to Cuban elements. The progressive transformation of the backgrounds of the paintings into plain dark (or less frequently white) surfaces, and the representation of motifs in isolation or floating within a homogenous space is revealing of a meaningful evolution in his work (Figs. 35, 36). I contend the evolution of these elements in his work was both a cause and a consequence of Lam's participation in the circle of contemporary international artists and intellectuals active in New York and Paris in the second third of the twentieth century. These acquaintances were ultimately greatly influential in the development of his work, the success of his artistic career, and the crafting of an artistic persona always reflective and concerned but less active and involved with the cultural and political

circumstances of Cuba.

This chapter will address Lam's position within the international art scene and his relationships with foreign artists. It will present significant exhibitions of his work and his participation in an active market, striving to rebalance Lam's position within these. Although Lam's anti-colonial position upon returning to Cuba was undeniable, I consider his multifaceted upbringing and subsequent evolution into a cosmopolitan figure as factors that prevent from establishing a fixed identity for him. In addition, I contend that this multivalence has made possible the assignment of as many interpretations as his oeuvre and his persona could stand without a critical judgment of Lam's ultimate realization of himself as a global modernist who resists a stable definition. Increasingly showcasing his work globally, Lam became a cosmopolitan modernist who not only succeeded individually but who was also able to open the spectrum of interest for art from outside the mainstream.

First Steps from Paris toward an International Showcase

At the dawn of Lam's career his relationship with Picasso was of foremost importance and functioned as a springboard for the international showcase of his work. Surprisingly early, Lam had his first show in New York in 1939. It was held on the occasion of a joint exhibition with Picasso at the Perls Gallery entitled "Drawings by Picasso and Gouaches by Wifredo Lam." The invitation for the exhibition included three drawings by Picasso but none by Lam, a fact that suggests that the novice artist did not quite deserve to be visually promoted in parallel to the great master (Fig. 37). Nonetheless, Lam was experiencing a fast-paced immersion in the international art scene.

The New York show took place only four months after Lam's first solo exhibition in Paris at the Galerie Pierre (Fig. 38) and opened concurrently with the travelling retrospective exhibition "Picasso: Forty Years of his Work" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.¹⁷⁷ Therefore, only one year after Lam's arrival in Paris in 1938 the Cuban artist had forged a significant bond with the already prominent Picasso that facilitated the advancement of his career in the global art scene.

Once Lam left Europe, Breton's endorsement in the United States was essential to continue his international career development. This was possible because when Lam resided in Cuba during the 1940s, Breton was an established prominent figure with an elaborate social circle of influential acquaintances in the Americas. He introduced Lam to the group of artists living in New York who were experimenting with myth and abstraction, and through the interactions with them, Lam gained a rich perspective of the cosmopolitan art scene, its aesthetics, as well as its market tendencies. Later in Lam's transatlantic journey he was able to move independently and without the need of famous escorts, and was able to forge a recognized name in Europe and the Americas, expanding the limits of his international insertion.

As narrated by Lam's second wife Helena Benítez, Picasso was eager to be the liaison between the artist and the Parisian art dealer Pierre Loeb, founder of the distinguished Galerie Pierre. Soon after Picasso met Lam, he arranged a meeting between the two in which Loeb acquired all of Lam's paintings and immediately became his dealer. This meant the "end to the financial troubles Wifredo had endured for so many years as a struggling artist... With the money from his paintings Wifredo was suddenly

¹⁷⁷ Lou Laurin-Lam, *Wifredo Lam: Catalogue Raisonné of the Painted Work. Volume I. 1923-1960* (Lausanne: Sylvio Acatos, 1996), 182.

solvent, if not rich.”¹⁷⁸ Two small portrait photographs of the artist from precisely before this turning point in his career testify to Lam’s own perception of himself as a striving young painter who experienced challenging times (Figs. 39, 40). On the back of each photograph a handwritten note indicates Lam’s later recollection of his difficult past: “I had this photo taken when I left Barcelona, for my passport. I am then 35 and I am already a veteran of life’s struggle. Here I am fat and in a bad mood. W. Lam. Paris, August 30, 1938.” The second photograph reads: “Paris 1938-autumn without a penny and no future. Afterwards, I worked hard in the Hotel de Suede and all went day by day. W.”

These reflections upon his life denote the artist’s need to preserve a memory of harder times in order not to forget his origins and the path he had to negotiate before becoming a recognized artist. Immediately after Lam arrived in Paris carrying the load of “a veteran of life’s struggle” and “without a penny and no future,” he introduced himself to Picasso and his fate changed unexpectedly. The Spanish painter adopted Lam as (some say) his “protégé.”¹⁷⁹ According to Lam’s former wife this came about for reasons of linguistic ties of Spanish and an easy connection of their witty personalities, as well as for their indirect bond through Picasso’s Cuban relatives to whom he often referred calling Lam his *primo* (cousin).¹⁸⁰ Suddenly Lam found himself spending time with members of the Parisian avant-garde. He would gather at the Café Flore on the Boulevard Saint-

¹⁷⁸ Helena Benítez, Wifredo and Helena: My Life with Wifredo Lam. 1939-1950 (Lausanne: Sylvio Acatos, 1999), 22-23.

¹⁷⁹ “Picasso Footnotes: His Drawing; Lam’s Painting,” Art News (November 18, 1939): 22.

¹⁸⁰ Rafael Inglada, Picasso Antes del Azul (1881-1901). I. Documentos familiares inéditos (Málaga: Ayuntamiento de Málaga, 1997), 198-201.

Germain-des-Prés with personalities like Dora Maar, André and Jacqueline Breton, Christian Zervos, Paul Éluard, Michel Leiris, and Jacques Herold.¹⁸¹

However, after these invaluable encounters and Lam's economic improvement, an unforeseen turn of events jeopardized his dream of a successful future. In 1940 the situation was destabilized by the German invasion of Paris, and Lam had to make the decision of leaving for the unoccupied French zone with several fellow intellectuals who were threatened by prosecution. Fearing the loss of his artwork, Lam had photographs taken of himself with all his paintings and memorabilia (Figs. 41, 42).¹⁸² These pictures not only document the artist's belongings and function as an inventory of his latest paintings, but also demonstrate the apprehension he felt in face of the abrupt alteration of events. Due to the 1939 exhibition in New York with Picasso and the subsequent acquisition of one of his paintings by J. D. Rockefeller Jr. who donated it to the Museum of Modern Art (Fig. 43), the artist's career had advanced rapidly and this promising beginning could grant him recognition internationally. Thus, these photographs immortalize the period of accomplishments in the advent of a crisis that rendered Lam's future uncertain. In addition, the fact that the artist chose to be part of the picture is a significant indication of his morale. Lam positions himself surrounded by his paintings and looks straight to the camera, emphasizing his presence in the scene and underlining the importance of the figure of the artist as if in tribute to an idea of himself as the modern creator. In contrast to the passport photographs that showed Lam as an insolvent striving artist, these remind us of his progress as a successful initiate into the art world

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 22-25.

¹⁸² Ibid., 23.

and enunciate his self-esteem. The paintings in the photograph remained in the care of Picasso in Paris, until Lam returned from Cuba in 1946, a gesture of support and trust that indicates the continuous strength of their relationship.

The Parisian art world's regard for objects and forms associated with African tribal culture tinged the welcoming reception of Lam's work and persona. Loeb's enthusiasm for Lam's work was fueled from the start by what the dealer understood as a direct connection between Lam's art and the artist's ethnic heritage. When visiting the artist's studio in 1938 the dealer recalled saying to Picasso: "He is influenced by blacks!" and Picasso asserted, "He has the right, he IS black!"¹⁸³ Interest for "primitive" art was popular among Parisian gallery visitors and, accordingly, Loeb's Galerie Pierre had established a tradition of exhibiting non-western art, such as Oceanic and African. Lam's solo exhibition at the gallery in 1938 received favorable criticism, although some could not avoid imposing preconceived ideas of the artist's race onto the final reading of his work, thereby maintaining Lam's seemingly racially determined bond with European ideas of the "primitive." Charles Théophile in a review from *Marianne* inaccurately compared Lam's paintings to Pre-Columbian art and considered the painter's work as being far from "false archaism" and "false ingenuity" because he painted with "the force of primitive peoples."¹⁸⁴

¹⁸³ Pierre Loeb in *Tropiques* (Galerie Albert Loeb, 1974, unpaginated, cited in Greet, unpaginated).

¹⁸⁴ Charles Théophile, "Wifredo Lam: peintures et dessins," *Marianne* July 12, 1939, in Greet, unpaginated.

Recognition, Independence, and the Creation of an Artistic Persona Across the Atlantic

Lam faced a different cultural situation when he landed in Cuba in 1942. On the one hand, in the eyes of the white elite, the African heritage of the country posed not an asset but a drawback for the culture. Therefore, painting with “the force of the primitive peoples” did not facilitate any entry into the circle of the island’s elite, which included important sources of art patronage. On the other hand, the avant-garde community was interested in exalting the Afro-Cuban heritage of the country and would not discriminate against Lam’s mixed ethnic origins. However, in Cuba Lam did not fit in either of the two circles because the art scene in the island was much smaller and conservative than in Europe and the painter’s long absence had made him a stranger in his own country. Nevertheless, the year 1942 was the most prolific of his career, evidencing the great impact on Lam of several factors, including the exuberant Cuban nature, the re-acknowledgement of his local traditions, and probably a feeling of renewal and freedom from having endured wartime. The catalogue of Lam’s paintings attests that he created one hundred and twenty two works (paintings only), a number that indicates a frenetic creative rhythm when compared to the scarce eight paintings produced in the lethargic year of 1941.¹⁸⁵

It is significant that Lam’s first solo exhibition in Havana took place in 1946, when he had already had three solo shows in New York. This implies that either the artist was better known in the international art scene than in his own country, or that in Cuba he could not find a niche of acceptance for his work in the first years after his return. In fact,

¹⁸⁵ Lou Laurin-Lam, 325.

in 1942 Breton was living in New York and was in contact with the principal figures of the art scene in the city, including the art dealer Pierre Matisse. Breton's esteem for Lam's work and his will for the artist to prosper in his career motivated him to introduce Lam to Matisse who, as Lam's wife attested, "aware of the misery and lack of perspective a painter must experience in Cuba, offered (Lam) a renewable contract that definitely made all the difference in his future work."¹⁸⁶ In a letter from July 1942 from Lam to Breton, the artist states that he accepts Breton's advice of trusting Matisse to exhibit his paintings in the United States and asks him to make the dealer raise the price of the works to give him more freedom to work.¹⁸⁷ Matisse's answer in September was a proposition to become his dealer in North America and to purchase ten of his works, reserving his rights to see all of Lam's new paintings. Subsequently, Lam had five one-man exhibitions organized at the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York between 1942 and 1950 that were of utmost importance to introduce the Cuban painter to an international audience and therefore for the development of his career. Lam also participated in the March 1942 exhibition "Artists in Exile" at the Pierre Matisse Gallery, which included works by Breton, Fernand Léger, Roberto Matta, Piet Mondrian, Max Ernst, and March Chagall.¹⁸⁸

After this exhibition Matisse selected fourteen out of fifty gouaches for Lam's second solo exhibition in November of the same year. Among these was *Les yeux de la grille* (Fig. 44), a painting that depicts a *femme-cheval* (horse-woman) who occupies the

¹⁸⁶ Helena Benítez in William M. Griswold et al., Pierre Matisse and His Artists (New York: Pierpont Morgan Library, 2002), 17.

¹⁸⁷ Griswold et al., 193.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

surface of the picture plane and displays its awesome qualities. Lam employs a cubist technique to portray the figure's body in fragmented and distorted positions, which allows him to render several buttocks, three breasts, and two heads with eyes in twisted circumstances. The repetition of a yellow and green bouquet held by the *femme-cheval*, its disfigured body, and the change of its tonality between light and dark grey implies that the figure is rotating or balancing itself swiftly, and denotes its supernatural and mysterious nature. In this case, Lam does not paint the figure against an intricate natural environment, but rather in an abstract and plain background of varied grey hues, a feature that in later works will develop into a uniform dark background plane that Lam will use permanently.

A review of the exhibition by *Art Digest* points out the fact that Lam was “much under the influence of Picasso” and that “his ingenious creations belong to the ‘eye and angle’ school,” and explicitly emphasizes this idea in the title of the review, “Picassolamming.”¹⁸⁹ The author notes the African component of the paintings, a connection that might have been encouraged by the inclusion of African sculptures in the exhibition, such as in Lam's 1948 exhibition in the same venue (Fig. 45). The all-pervading point about Lam's ethnic background “in whose veins runs both Chinese and Negro blood,” encouraged reading his gouaches under the argument that “maybe (they were) painted under a kind of spell.”¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁹ “Picassolamming,” *Art Digest* (December 1, 1942): 7.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

Remarkably, Lam's Chinese side has never been analyzed in depth, nor did he seem to acknowledge it as a significant influence in his life.¹⁹¹ Lately, a revision of his work for an exhibition in 1987 at the Galerie Albert Loeb mentions Lam's interest in classical Chinese philosophy, as well as his knowledge of the I Ching.¹⁹² Only brief mentions of the Asian part of his heritage appear more generally in critic's reviews that seem to mention it to emphasize (and aggrandize) the global range of his influences: "...a world of fantasy appears, reflecting something of the character of Chinese painting, of Primitive African art and even the many round, otarine heads, a suggestion of the symbolic figures of the Alaskan Indians."¹⁹³

Breton was a foremost facilitator of this kind of exotic reading of Lam's work and its association with the fantastic throughout Lam's career. He wrote the preface to Lam's 1948 exhibition's catalogue brochure in which he acknowledged Lam as an artist who "started off with a great fund of the marvellous and the primitive within him," and characterized him as "the star of the liana on his forehead and everything that he touches glowing with fire-flies."¹⁹⁴

In December 1948, Lam wrote a letter to Breton that revealed his interest in preserving the critical fame he had gained in the last year at the heart of the international art scene while living in Cuba. Interestingly, he found Breton's preface to his exhibition

¹⁹¹ His second wife Helena Benítez did believe that Lam's personality reflected his closeness to his Chinese heritage. See conclusion.

¹⁹² Sims, "In Search of Wifredo Lam," Art Magazine (December 1988), 55.

¹⁹³ Margaret Breunig, "Lam's Magical Incantations and Rituals," The Arts Journal (December 1, 1945), 16 cited in Sims, "In Search of Wifredo Lam," Art Magazine (December 1988), 53.

¹⁹⁴ André Breton, Surrealism and Painting, translated by Simon Watson Taylor (Paris: Editions Gallimard 1928, reprinted 1965; Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2002), 169-71.

to be “marvelous, being at the same time so concrete and so subtle and poetic, that it surprise(d) (him) that scarcely any journalists understood it.” The artist, far from being resentful for Breton’s allusion to his Primitivism, seems rather to embrace this designation that is evidently helping the advancement of his career. Lam thanks the French surrealist for his “proof of a deep friendship” and for his interest in his work, as well as for the titles Breton gave to his paintings.¹⁹⁵ In addition, Breton was responsible for including a number gouaches by Lam in the 1942 exhibition “First Papers of Surrealism,” a title referring to the documents of immigration to the United States. The show was organized in New York by the council of French Relief Services and included works by other recent expatriates as Duchamp, Ernst, Chagall, Léger, Tanguy, and Masson.¹⁹⁶ Breton was also Lam’s intermediary for his affairs in New York, as for example between Lam and Peggy Guggenheim, to whom Lam sent a gouache for her museum via Breton enclosed in the aforementioned letter.

Although Matisse was enthusiastic enough about the ability of Lam’s gouaches to raise the price of the paintings, Lam’s first exhibition at the gallery in 1942 did not have the outcome Matisse expected. However, sales were made to American buyers such as the Baltimore Museum of Art and Joseph Pulitzer, Jr.¹⁹⁷ In a noteworthy letter to Lam, the art dealer justifies the lack of success of the show with the new interest in artworks relating to the current war, and adds: “(the exhibition) was received in the press with very

¹⁹⁵ Letter by Lam and Helena Benítez to André Breton, December 31, 1942, quoted in Sims, “Myths and Primitivism: The Work of Wifredo Lam in the Context of the New York School and the School of Paris, 1942-52,” in Wifredo Lam and His Contemporaries: 1938-1952 edited by Maria R. Balderrama (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1992), 71.

¹⁹⁶ Sims, Wifredo Lam and the International Avant-Garde, 1923-1982 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 72.

¹⁹⁷ Griswold et al., 193.

little understanding except for one critic...I cannot deny that I have not been disappointed in the results of the exhibition but we must hold it against the way things are going in a general way. Therefore it is with complete sincerity that I can assure you that I am still very much interested in your work and that I plan to have another exhibition next year.”¹⁹⁸ His promise of continuous support was earnest and Lam had solo shows at Matisse’s gallery in New York in 1944, 1945, 1950, and 1982.

By the time Lam was exhibiting in New York, critics considered his paintings as reminiscent of Surrealism and Cubism. At this time, other artists living in the city such as Jackson Pollock and Norman Lewis were experimenting with new stylistic idioms, such as textural gesturalism and expressionistic geometric abstraction respectively. Lam’s paintings were paired with the interest in mythology of some artists that resulted in a “new mythic imagery suffused with myth totemic allusions” and that relied on the surrealist connection with the unconscious and on a cubist use of space, as in the examples Adolph Gottlieb and Barnett Newman. However, Lam fundamentally distinguishes his work from the New York painters in the social and political commentaries comprised in his work and a very defined reference to Afro-Cuban forms. In addition, the North American artists made use of less specific sources and arrived to more abstract and improvised imagery.¹⁹⁹

Lam’s ethnicity and its implications in the reception of his work was still a point of divergence between the artist and his New York contemporaries. Despite some thematic similarities to the early New York School, Lam’s work was treated differently

¹⁹⁸ Pierre Matisse in a letter to Lam, February 9th, 1943, in William M. Griswold et al., 106.

¹⁹⁹ Sims, Wifredo Lam and the International Avant-Garde, 1923-1982, 73.

by the critics because of his supposed natural proximity to the subjects he represented; as it was usually alleged, his cultural origin gave his work a certain “authenticity” and coherence. In his work, the Afro-Cuban forms “maintain their cogency and import instead of being mere reductive artifacts to be absorbed into Western perceptual systems.”²⁰⁰

This did not prevent some critics from underlying Lam’s stylistic closeness to some American abstractionists and therefore drawing a direct line between Lam and the New York School. A *Newsweek* journalist leveled the work of Robert Motherwell, Lam, and Adolph Gottlieb, as “America’s own young abstractionists...who, using the surrealists’ method of free association, they evolve shapes, images and ideas out of the subconscious. Unlike the surrealists, however, they do not paint dreams, nor do they paint in literal representational styles.”²⁰¹ The association of the Cuban painter with the mythic imagery of surrealist style of the artists working in New York was also fueled by Lam’s active presence in that art scene. Photographs of the artist and his work were often published in the avant-garde and surrealist magazines *VVV* (Fig. 46), *VIEW* (Fig. 47), and *Tiger’s Eye*. In these, his art appeared alongside with works by Yves Tanguy, Gorky, Miró, Motherwell, and Barnett Newman.²⁰²

Lam’s work was innately independent and far from belonging to a comprehensive group of artists sharing stylistic similarities, a trait that Lam manifestly demonstrated in the following event. In the summer of 1942 Alfred Barr, director of the Museum of

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 74.

²⁰¹ “A Way to Kill Space,” *Newsweek* August 12, 1946: 106-07.

²⁰² Sims, “Myths and Primitivism: The Work of Wifredo Lam in the Context of the New York School and the School of Paris, 1942-52,” in Balderrama, 79.

Modern Art in New York, traveled to Cuba in preparation for the exhibition “Modern Cuban Painters” to take place at that museum from March to April 1944.²⁰³ Barr visited artists’ studios and galleries and purchased paintings by Cuban modernists, including Lam’s *Satan* now in the museum’s collection (Fig. 48). In April 1944 Barr published a short review in the museum’s bulletin about the Cuban art scene, including a brief section devoted to the only book about modern Cuban painting by José Gómez Sicre, a volume that also functioned as the MoMA exhibition catalogue. Although Lam’s work was discussed in the catalogue and he was officially invited to participate in the exhibition, the artist declined the offer.²⁰⁴ Instead, in an emphatic gesture of autonomy, he held at the same time his second one-man show at the Pierre Matisse Gallery.

This event stirred the controversy and the troubled relationship Lam had with his Cuban contemporaries. In a letter to Pierre Matisse, Lam explained that the decision he made was not a criticism of the Museum of Modern Art per se, but because he opposed what he termed the “ghettoization of Cuban Art.”²⁰⁵ Furthermore, he did not appreciate Gómez Sicre’s negative attitude toward him. According to the New York press, Lam’s decision “had made himself tremendously unpopular (among his Cuban contemporaries) because he considered himself too good to join their exhibit at the Modern Museum.”²⁰⁶ In any case, Lam decision was clearly due to his unwillingness to be included in a reductive notion of Cuban painting, and he chose rather to promote his work individually.

²⁰³ Ibid., 66.

²⁰⁴ Giulio V. Blanc, “Cuban Modernism: The Search for a National Ethos,” in Balderrama, 67.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 67.

²⁰⁶ Newsweek (June 1944): 40, cited in Sims, Wifredo Lam and the International Avant-Garde, 1923-1982, 67.

After the journal *Gaceta del Caribe* published a good review of the exhibition but regretted Lam's absence, Barr wrote a letter to the editors explaining the circumstances of the artist's refusal to participate: "I was personally responsible for the selection of artists who appeared in the exhibition, and naturally would have liked to include Lam, whose work the Museum had already appreciated and acquired long before it was recognized in Cuba. However, Mr. Lam, after agreeing in principle to take part in the exhibition, changed his mind and refused to appear in our show, preferring to exhibit his works in one of New York's commercial galleries...I deeply regret Mr. Lam's decision, as his collaboration would have increased not only his own reputation but also the importance of our exhibition."²⁰⁷ Far from disdaining Lam's work, Barr notes its value and shows his disappointment for not having the artist's work in the show. This note further demonstrates that Lam was indeed celebrated in New York as a promising artist, and his work was in demand by important venues even before it was appreciated in his own country.

Although Lam's obstinately independent move gave him the reputation of being in conflict with Cuban artists, after this incident Lam participated in various group exhibitions of Cuban art outside the country. However, his nonpartisan profile persisted in the memory of some critics who kept drawing the attention to Lam's own exclusion from the Cuban art scene. In example, in 1953 an editorial note in *Noticias de Arte* responded to the Argentine critic Romero Brest's surprise over Lam's absence from the

²⁰⁷ Alfred Barr letter to *Gaceta del Caribe* cited in Luz Merino Acosta, "From Havana to the MoMA," in Nathalie Bondil, ed., *Cuba: Art and History from 1868 to Today* (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 2008), 217.

Venice Biennial. It published a list of all the exhibitions from 1944 to 1952 in which the artist had declined exhibiting his works “for very personal reasons.”²⁰⁸

Nonetheless, it should be clarified that Lam was not unappreciative of Cuban artists, but his attitude reflected his will to become an independent and internationally recognized artist beyond nationalistic and racialist concerns, or as he put it “ghettoizations.” In fact, Lam participated in various Cuban group efforts; he cooperated with Enríquez and Portocarrero among others on an anti-Franco committee in 1944, he was a co-founder of the *Agrupación de Pintores y Escultores Cubanos* (Cuban Association of Painters and Sculptors) which organized an exhibition in 1949, the important journal *Gaceta del Caribe* published his drawings in 1944, and he designed the cover for the avant-garde magazine *Orígenes: Revista de Arte y Literatura* on three occasions (although his work was neither reviewed nor published) as did many of his fellow Cuban artists. Outside Cuba, Lam participated in several group exhibitions such as in 1945 at the Centre d’Art in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Moscow followed the same year, Mexico in 1946, Sweden and Brooklyn in 1949, and an important exhibition in Paris in 1951 at the Musée d’Art Moderne.²⁰⁹

Despite the growing interest in collecting and publishing Lam’s work in New York, his first solo show in Cuba was organized only in 1946 by Lydia Cabrera at the Lyceum in Havana, a women’s club that held art exhibitions and was central to Cuba’s cultural life. Cabrera was of foremost importance for the promotion of Lam’s work in

²⁰⁸ Blanc, 68.

²⁰⁹ Blanc, 67.

Amelia Peláez, René Portocarrero, Mariano Rodríguez, Cundo Bermúdez, Roberto Diago were among the Cuban artists who illustrated the cover of *Orígenes*, as did the Mexican artists José Clemente Orozco and Rufino Tamayo.

Cuba. She wrote a catalogue in which was included her 1943 article about the then recently returned artist published in *Diario de la Marina*. She also included short quotations and statements by poets and critics such as Breton, Césaire, Mabile, Péret, Zervos, and Charles Théophile. Lam had only three one-man shows in Cuba, the other two being sponsored in 1950 by the Ministry of Education and in 1951 in a private small gallery.²¹⁰

Lam's preparation for his solo exhibition at the Centre d'Art in Port-au-Prince from January to February 1946 offered him the chance to pursue inspiration from elements of the unconscious and from Afro-Haitian culture. Invited by Pierre Mabile, he spent five months in Haiti, where he reunited with Breton and together they attended events ranging from voodoo ceremonies to art exhibitions (Fig. 49). The year 1946 marked an outstanding advance in Lam's career, holding one-man exhibitions in Port-au-Prince, Havana, London, Paris, and group exhibitions in New York, Havana, Paris, and Mexico City.²¹¹ The artist returned to Europe via New York after his 1946 commitments to examine the post-war conditions in the area in order to assess his possible return, which he eventually considered still non-viable. He had previously written to Picasso to let him know of his whereabouts and intentions of settling in Europe, and of recuperating the paintings he had entrusted to the Spanish master before leaving Paris in 1941. In this journey Lam visited France, Italy, Germany, and Austria with his wife Helena and friends. Upon returning to Cuba, the now internationally recognized artist did not choose to stay permanently on the island, but on the contrary, from 1946 to 1953 he traveled

²¹⁰ Julia P. Herzberg, "Wifredo Lam: the Development of a Style and a World View, The Havana Years, 1941-1952," in Balderrama, 47-48.

regularly to Europe and New York, until establishing his new residence in Italy in 1960.²¹²

The numerous exhibitions abroad in which Lam was increasingly included testify to his growing popularity outside his home country. The Galerie Pierre reopened its doors in Paris after the end of the war and showcased Lam's work in 1945 and 1946. UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) organized the exhibition "*Les peintres de Paris: Picasso, Miró, Lam*" in Paris in 1946, indicating not only the artist's critical fame in this major cosmopolitan artistic city, but also his prominent position amid the renowned Spanish painters, and his acceptance by institution of global reach. Breton organized two surrealist exhibitions in 1947 in which Lam participated, "*Le surréalisme en 1947*" at the Galerie Maeght and a second one in Prague, opening the spectrum for his showcase.²¹³ However, Lam's relationship with Breton and Surrealism changed after the war and his participation in surrealist activities decreased significantly. His inclusion in "*Le surréalisme en 1947*" indicates Lam's efforts to maintain the exhibition of his work in important venues despite not considering himself a surrealist. The consequences of this strategy might be seen in further exhibitions from public and private collections in London and the United States that manifested the incorporation of Lam's works into their patrimony as valuable.

Paradoxically, even though Lam did not conform to the archetypical Cuban artist and he stood mostly outside the art scene of the island, he was perceived internationally

²¹² Sims, Wifredo Lam and the International Avant-Garde, 1923-1982, 83-84.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 84-85.

as the quintessential Cuban artist.²¹⁴ This responded to Lam's global notoriety, his prominent acquaintances, and the multinational acquisition of his works both from private and public collections.

Arguably, the most important sale for the international showcase of Lam's work was in 1945 when J. Johnson Sweeney, the curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, acquired *The Jungle* (Fig. 33) from the Pierre Matisse Gallery for the museum. This institution's interest in the artist's painting despite his refusal to participate in the exhibition organized for Cuban painters the previous year speaks of the value of Lam's work, which evidently was considered an asset for the museum's collection. Lam felt that *The Jungle* was his most important work, and he communicated his desire to sell it to Matisse in a letter to the dealer on occasion of its exhibition at the gallery. In his response to Matisse's good news about the sale, Lam declared: "I consider the acquisition of this painting by that museum of great importance and as you said, I hope it would mark the beginning of many other things."²¹⁵

It was indeed a very important sale for the Cuban painter, but it is possible that at that time it was more valuable for Lam than for the Museum of Modern Art. John Yau questions the approach this museum had to *The Jungle* and criticizes the institution's centrist and linear reading of art history. From its acquisition in 1945 to presumably at least 1988 when Yau published his article, the Museum of Modern Art had downgraded Lam's most celebrated painting to a negligible location, the hallway to the museum's coatroom. As Yau's puts it "the artist's work has been allowed into the museum's lobby,

²¹⁴ Blanc, 66-67.

²¹⁵ Letter by Wifredo Lam to Pierre Matisse, 25 May 1945, in Griswold et al., 200. My translation.

but like a delivery boy, has been made to stand and hold the package in an inconspicuous passageway near the door. By denying Lam and his work the possibility of going upstairs and conversing with Cézanne, Picasso, Matisse...the museum relegates both the artist and his work to secondary status.”²¹⁶ Yau argues that *The Jungle* should instead have been hung opposite to Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J. R. M.)* to highlight the dialogue posed by the two paintings between distinct but complementary strains of modernism. Instead, William Rubin (director of the department of painting and sculpture from 1973 to 1988) failed to recognize Lam’s importance as a non-European artist contributing to the modernist discourse of art.²¹⁷ Yau cites the noteworthy publications by the Museum of Modern Art *Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage* and *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* from 1968 and 1984 respectively, in which accounts of Lam disregard the painter’s Afro-Cuban heritage and the primary importance of its influence in his work. Both texts describe the artist as a surrealist who acquired his style from Picasso, but do not acknowledge his individual contributions to modern art that derived from his Antillean and cosmopolitan perspectives. Yau offers an alternative revised text that would have been more appropriate for the museum to publish about Lam, taking into account his cultural background and work: “Born in Cuba, which is part of the Americas, Wifredo Lam is the first Modernist artist to emphasize his African descent by transforming his personal awareness of cultural practices such as colonialism and ongoing Yoruba religious rituals into a contemporary mode of expression.”²¹⁸

²¹⁶ John Yau, “Please Wait by the Coatroom. Wifredo Lam in the Museum of Modern Art,” *Arts Magazine* 63 (December 1988): 57.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*

It is fair to say that the Museum of Modern Art has changed its esteem of this significant painting and his creator, and for the past six and a half years it has been intermittently on view on the fourth floor and in storage. Although the museum varies the placement of its artworks, *The Jungle* tends to be hung in gallery 15, surrounded by works by Philip Guston, Louise Bourgeois, Mark Rothko, André Masson, Arshile Gorky, and Jackson Pollock.²¹⁹ This certainly responds to the reconsideration done by post-colonial discourses of the importance of art produced in contact zones by artists from outside the mainstream art centers. As the cosmopolitan modernist he became, Lam and his work have since then been granted “the possibility of going upstairs and conversing” face to face with the rest of the works that have been confirmed and validated by the cultural institution par excellence as constituents of the global history of modern art.

After the end of World War II, Lam began to travel to Europe and the United States frequently because of the dynamism of the art scene at those sites, a routine that helped him forge important relationships with international artists and dealers. This prompted his work to be exhibited globally and to be acquired by important public and private art collections worldwide. His paintings are now located for the most part in collections in France, Italy, Spain, Cuba, the United States, and Venezuela, but a significant number of works can also be found in Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic,

²¹⁹ E-mail correspondence with the registrar department of the Museum of Modern Art, March 15 2011. Its placement in storage is probably due to the fragile condition of works on paper and the limits of time allowed for its proper conservation.

Jamaica, Mexico, Argentina, Ecuador, Peru, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Belgium, Israel, Scotland, Lichtenstein, Norway, and Denmark.²²⁰

As his reputation grew outside Cuba, so did his will to be more involved in promoting its development. The period from 1946 when Lam's career was beginning to have ample international recognition, until 1952 when he established his new home (temporarily) in Paris may be considered one of transition. His final departure from Cuba signifies the artist's intention to reside in proximity to a dynamic art scene that was more openly accepting of his work and more appreciative of his established avant-garde persona. Lam did not, however, turn his back on his native country. He frequently returned and spent long periods of time at his home in Havana, until the beginning of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, which nationalized his property, and took his artworks that are now owned by the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes.²²¹

As a cosmopolitan modernist with ample and sometimes contradictory interests, Lam's position toward the Cuban Revolution was ambiguous. Perhaps as a strategy to maintain a welcoming and favorable relationship with his peers, as well as to show a form of loyalty to his anti-hegemonic ideals, he supported the cause. However, he chose not to remain in the country to endure it, and he came back only temporarily in 1963. Previous to the revolution, the artist had completed a mural commission in Havana for the Esso Standard Oil Company building in 1951 (Fig. 50) and a very large painting for the Hilton Hotel in 1956 (Fig. 51), both leading companies of American capitalism. These paintings evoke Lam's Afro-Cuban imagery but demonstrate his evolution toward

²²⁰ Lou Laurin-Lam, Wifredo Lam: Catalogue Raisonné of the Painted Work. Volume I. 1923-1960.

²²¹ Sims, Wifredo Lam and the International Avant-Garde, 1923-1982, 138.

secular subjects represented in increasingly abstract compositions in earthy and tangible colors such as brown, grey, black, and white, in contrast to his more colorful rendering of spiritual themes. Interestingly, using the same stylistic traits of elongated and linear superimposed figures over monochromatic backgrounds of these commissions by American corporations, Lam created during the upheaval of the revolution in 1959 *La Sierra Maestra* (Fig. 52), an homage to the Cuban mountain range where Fidel Castro had his base of operations.²²² These three paintings categorize the artist's stance in the midst of opposing economic and political interests. His transcultural and cosmopolitan identity compelled Lam to carry out a careful negotiation of ostensibly antithetical stances, such as were the American corporate world and the Cuban Revolution, reaching a personal position of acceptance of both situations. Ultimately, Lam demonstrated a continuous negotiation of divergent influences and interests throughout his career, reconciling cultural, political, and economic forces in his work and persona.

A series of photographs of Lam attest to his self-conscious crafting of his public image. In addition, they helped validate his presence among the artistic American and European elite. Taken by professional photographers in New York, these pictures portray Lam as a self-confident, reflective, and sophisticated modern intellectual (Figs. 53-56). Despite his critical fame, pervasive issues of racism in Europe maintained what by now seemed to be Lam's lifetime trend: being in continuous transit. By the mid 1950s and in the midst of the Algerian war, adversity toward African peoples was very much present in Paris, and although Lam's ethnic background was overtly accepted and even celebrated by the artistic world, he was still immersed in the unwelcoming milieu of a

²²² Ibid., 128-38.

racist society. This conflict pushed him into a second exile of two years in Zurich from 1958 to 1960, when he decided to establish his final residence in Albisola Marina, Italy.

Conclusion

Lam's work reveals his position as an artist who negotiates a transcultural modernism. From his direct contact with Cubism and Surrealism in France and his later connection with Surrealism in the Caribbean and the Negritude movement, to his recognition and appropriation of the Afro-Cuban elements of his native Cuban culture, Lam's work is at the crossroads of currents that link the cultural center with the supposed periphery. His work inevitably emerged as a distinct visual language that offered a critical alternative to Euro-centric ideas of modernism.

His transcultural identity and his "chameleon-like" profile in the global art scene entailed his work and persona to remain open to more than one interpretation. Lam himself did not recognize having a distinct connection to any side of his identity. For example, even though critics noted Lam's Chinese heritage, he never identified openly with it. Considering his assertions and artistic choices, it could be inferred that he cultivated a more profound affinity to the African side of his heritage over the Chinese. Yet, his second wife Helena Benítez believed that "the character and living style of Lam owes more to his Chinese ancestry than to his Afro-Cuban origins. The 'African' in Lam's case has been, without doubt, much exaggerated. The 'oriental' impression of his ink drawings, which are almost calligraphic in character, has practically been ignored by the art critics."²²³ This argument is furthered by Lydia Cabrera's assessment of Lam's self-conscious attitude toward being of mixed racial background, a fact that his former

²²³ Helena Benítez in Sims, "In Search of Wifredo Lam," Art Magazine (December 1988), 55.

wife corroborated. Moreover, Benítez declared that Lam never mentioned any memories of his godmother the Santería priestess.²²⁴

From these statements it may be inferred that Lam consciously came to affiliate with his Afro-Caribbean heritage as part of a strategy for the advancement of his career, which marks a distinction between how he marketed himself and how he privately regarded his cultural history. However, in a letter to Benítez written while Lam was visiting Cannes in 1946, he admits the anxiety he experiences at being an Afro-Cuban in Europe: “for better or for worse, my personality, even though it is here (Europe) that my effort needs to be valued, is not European...Sincerely, here I feel artificial, like an exotic being (if the others say so) like a black or Oceanic sculpture from the Pacific, or from wherever, but a transplanted object that becomes here a sterile product, a bizarre object for a museum, which has lost its life that was rooted in its emotional genesis, contingent on the necessities that had been imposed to the society that created it.”²²⁵ This statement marks Lam’s emotional detachment from an imposed exotic identity, but nevertheless remains vague concerning his personal definition of himself. He had previously acknowledged that identity was not a fixed element in his life: “From childhood I didn’t know what was the basis of my ethics or my joy. I was not considered an African nor a Chinese nor a Spaniard nor a creole, because I was cross-bred with many races.”²²⁶ His

²²⁴ Julia P. Herzberg, “Wifredo Lam: the Development of a Style and World View, The Havana Years, 1941-1952, in Balderrama, 50.

²²⁵ Letter to Helena Benítez, Monday 1946, cited in Jacques Leenhardt, Wifredo Lam (Paris: HC Éditions, 2009), 181. My translation.

²²⁶ Valerie Fletcher, “Wifredo Lam,” in Crosscurrents of Modernism: four Latin American Pioneers: Diego Rivera, Joaquín Torres-García, Wifredo Lam, Matta, ed. Valerie Fletcher (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 169.

overall cosmopolitan position ultimately prevented Lam from singling out one component of his identity.

However, the first critical accounts elaborated in the 1940s seem to have fixed to this day the perception of Lam as a modern artist bound to an exotic Afro-Caribbean identity, such as Breton considered him. As Sims puts it: “Lam served to gratify Breton’s preoccupation with the ‘merveilleux’ - that mysterious, marvelous, magical quality of so-called primitive art, an art of children, the insane, and the intuitive or folk artists that formed an ideological base for surrealist thought.”²²⁷ Colonialism had established Europe’s exoticized vision of the Caribbean. Through discourses of race, gender, and nature as elements of the non-Western, and as inherently oppositional to modernity and civilization, the discourses of the Caribbean helped in turn to define the “Western.” Through these politics of difference, colonialism determined the inscrutable Other as “that which was to be either conquered, explored, or entered into.”²²⁸ These circumstances persisted in Cuba under a condition of neo-colonialism, and Lam’s painting functioned as an artistic agent of change that opposed that situation. His work switched the gaze historically set upon his culture back toward the West with the purpose of challenging Europe’s own aesthetic.

Merging elements of Afro-Cuban culture with European pictorial conventions, Lam created a new order that decentralized Western modes of representation within the discourses of modern art. The artist affirmed his own stance within European artistic

²²⁷ Sims, “In Search of Wifredo Lam,” Art Magazine (December 1988), 51.

²²⁸ Charles Merewether, “At the Crossroads of Modernism: A Liminal Terrain,” in Wifredo Lam: a Retrospective of Works on Paper, (New York: Americas Societies, 1992), 15.

modernism, one that disapproved of European racial constructs of the “primitive.” From a privileged perspective he articulated an aesthetics that neither completely refused nor assimilated the European model, but rather balanced it in a personal, transcultural expression.

In a letter to Pierre Matisse on the occasion of his second exhibition at Matisse’s gallery in 1944, Lam asserted that “since (his) incorporation to the Tropics” his paintings were his personal response, and representations of a “very unusual world” where there were “so many possibilities, so much beauty and so many emotions to see and recreate.”²²⁹ Indeed, his depiction of Cuban nature was personal and abstract, avoiding any realism or rationalistic reference to the Afro-Cuban world. In this sense, Lam fell outside the common artistic interest of his fellow contemporaries with whom, considering his absence from the 1944 exhibition “Modern Cuban Painters” at MoMA, he preferred to avoid any direct comparisons.

The combative mood of many of his paintings speaks of the artist’s resistance to be established within any unifying cultural parameters, even those concerning identity. In a letter to Lam, the Mexican art historian Justino Fernández fittingly defined Lam’s individualism: “With the weapons you brought from Europe you have taken possession of your island after leaving a suitcase in Paris and another in Congo, and you have used those weapons to fire your own poetry through and through, a poetry of the mythical you have found alive and that lived inside you since childhood.”²³⁰ On that account, Lam re-

²²⁹ Letter to Pierre Matisse, 17 December 1944, cited in Griswold et al., 200. My translation.

²³⁰ Fernández cited in Edmundo Desnoes, Lam: Azul y Negro (La Habana: Editorial Nacional de Cuba, 1963), 6. My translation.

evaluated the role of the influences in his art and aspired for the construction of an identity that incorporated the multiple contact zones in his life history.

Since the increasing interest (and therefore value) of Latin American art in the international market, Lam has more recently emerged as a sort of ambassador for Latin American art, as his work also fits into this broader rubric. This later appreciation introduces a new and necessary perspective. Lam's work has usually been considered from a European centrality that either defined it from the point of view of his "otherness" as Caribbean, or as emerging from trends in European art. In this later sense, Lam's paintings remained caught in the idea that they had emerged from Surrealism or Cubism to represent a specific Cuban narrative. This perception centers on the authority of a European modernism that allows only a trajectory to proceed from contact with it, rather than toward it, or inscribed in a different prospect. A reconsideration of this European-centered perspective becomes necessary to rebalance the canonical histories.

As a transcultural artist, Lam was able to decenter modernism and to create a different order within it that expanded modernism into a global and pluralizing scale. As Lam portrayed himself, the artist became a "Trojan horse" and interfered with European modernism by making it merely a partner in a dialogue established on the opposite shore of the Atlantic. The Caribbean, a foremost site of migrations and socio-cultural exchanges in the modern era, was the source of Lam's imagery. The deities he portrayed were his own inventions, but were drawn from Caribbean culture, a culture that had re-elaborated African cultural elements into a new model. In Mosquera's words, Lam "mount as an orisha on horse of modernism, making it pronounce different words...It

represents a decolonizing milestone in art, a breaking point of the Western meta-subject that ‘others’ de facto everything else.”²³¹

Because of Lam’s immersion in the international art world, he strove not only to make visible a peripheral culture in a global scale, but also to make it participate in the central dialogue of fine art. The artist implemented the participation of the “popular- non Western- subaltern- peripheral within the ‘cultured’-Western-hegemonic-central,” achieving a constructive and promising interaction.²³² In an era in which examples of transcultural aesthetics and globalism are increasingly valued, Lam assumes a position as a groundbreaker in discourses of art outside of the European metropolises.

²³¹ Gerardo Mosquera, “Jineteando el modernismo. Los descentramientos de Wifredo Lam,” *Lápiz* 16, no. 138 (1997), 24.

²³² *Ibid.*, 28.

Figures



Fig. 1. Wifredo Lam, *Composición I*, 1930. Oil on canvas, 80 x 75 cm. Private Collection, Paris.



Fig. 2. Wifredo Lam, *Douleur de l'Espagne*, 1938. Gouache on paper, 97 x 67 cm. Private Collection.

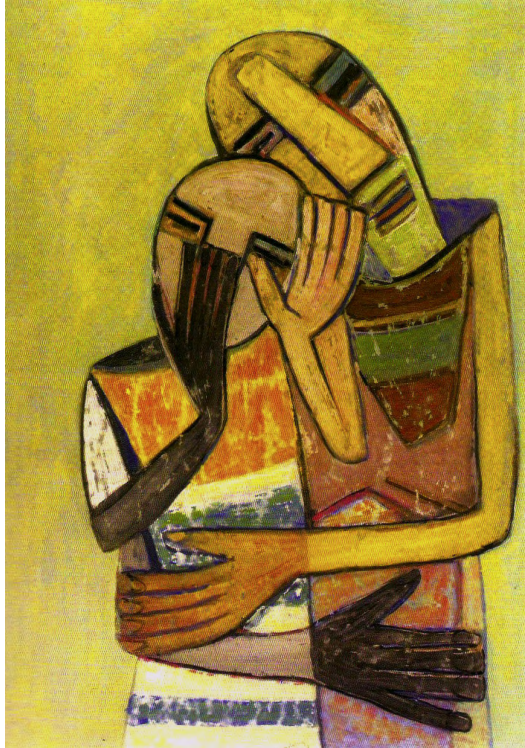


Fig. 3. Wifredo Lam, *Père et enfant*, 1938. Gouache on paper, 105 x 75 cm. Private Collection.



Fig. 4. Wifredo Lam, *Woman in Violet*, c. 1938. Gouache on paper, 95.3 x 65.4 cm. Private Collection.

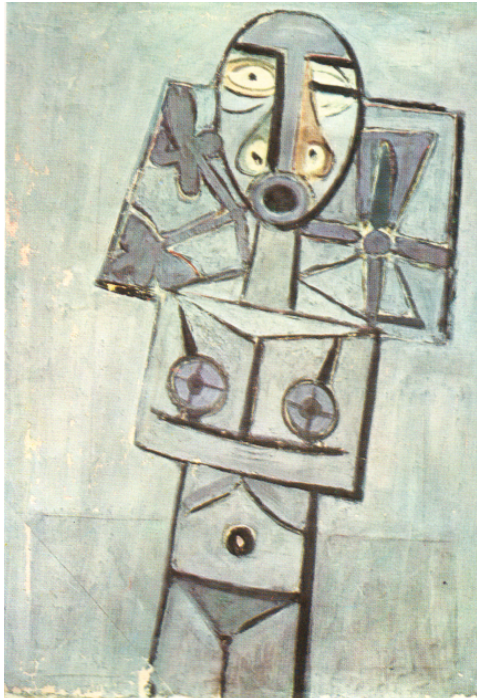


Fig. 5. Wifredo Lam, *Figure*, 1939. Gouache on paper, 105 x 75 cm. Private Collection, Paris.



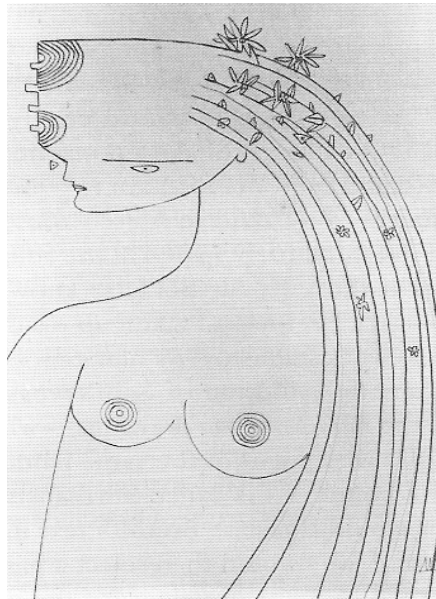
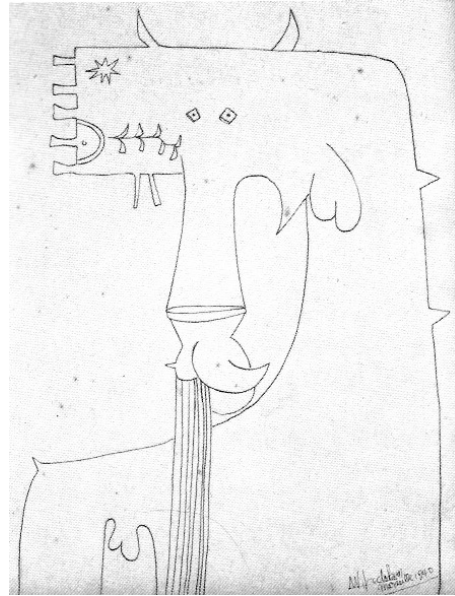
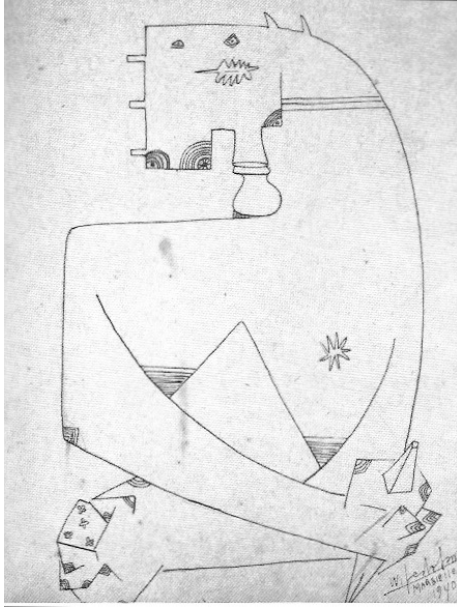
Fig. 6. Wifredo Lam's wife Helena Benítez with his collection of African Art in their house in Havana, 1947.



Fig. 7. Pablo Picasso, *Head of a Man*, 1907. Oil on canvas, 33 x 24.1 cm. Barnes Foundation.



Fig. 8. Wifredo Lam, *Self-Portrait*, 1938. Oil on cardboard, 26 x 21 cm. Private Collection.



Figs. 11-13. Wifredo Lam, drawings for André Breton Fata Morgana, 1940. Pencil and ink on paper.

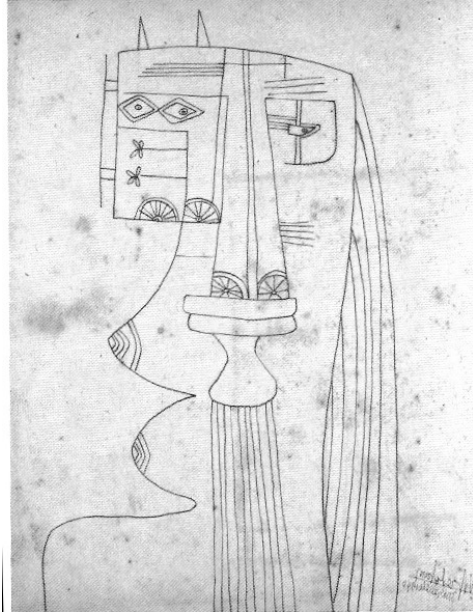


Fig. 14. Wifredo Lam, *Femme Cheval* drawing for André Breton Fata Morgana, 1940. Pencil and ink on paper.



Fig. 15. Wifredo Lam, *Femme Cheval*, c. 1943. Oil on canvas, 104 x 79 cm. Private Collection.

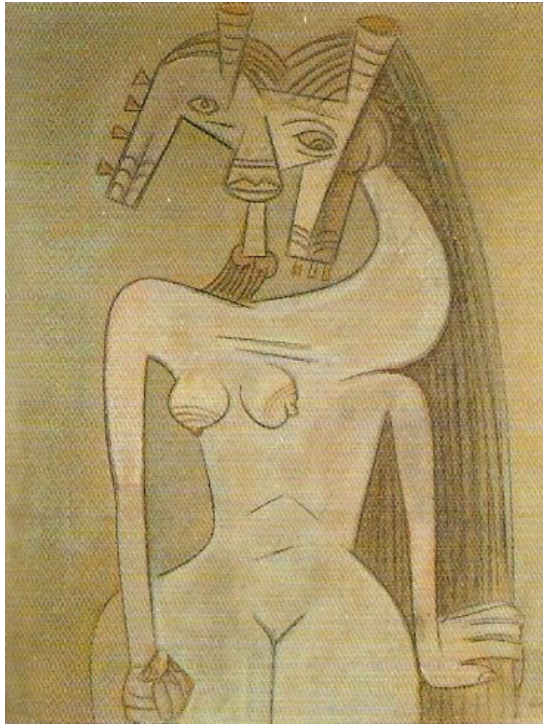


Fig. 16. Wifredo Lam, *Femme*, 1942. Private Collection, Caracas.



Fig. 17. Wifredo Lam, *La langue maternelle*, 1942. Gouache on paper, 106.7 x 87.6 cm. Private Collection, Paris.



Fig. 18. Wifredo Lam, *Le bruit*, 1943. Oil on mounted paper, 105 x 84 cm. Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris.



Fig. 19. Wifredo Lam, *Déesse avec feuillage*, 1942. Private Collection.



Fig. 20. Lam with banana trees and gourds in his garden, Marianao, Havana, 1943.

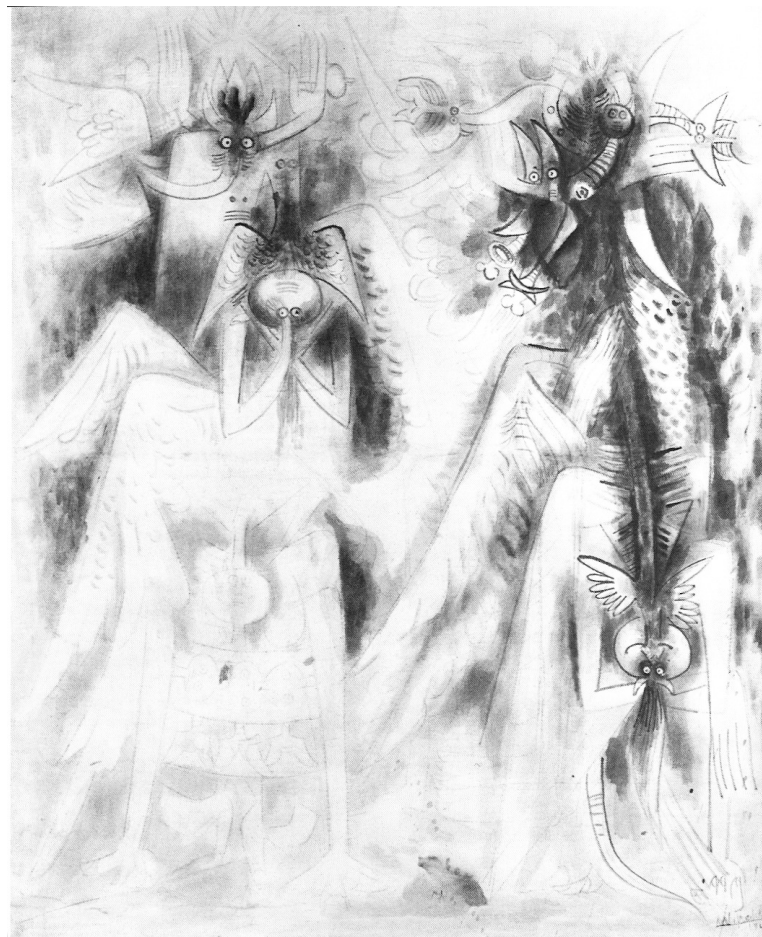


Fig. 21. Wifredo Lam, *L'Annonciation* (Annunciation), 1944. Oil on canvas, 154.3 x 127.6 cm. Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.

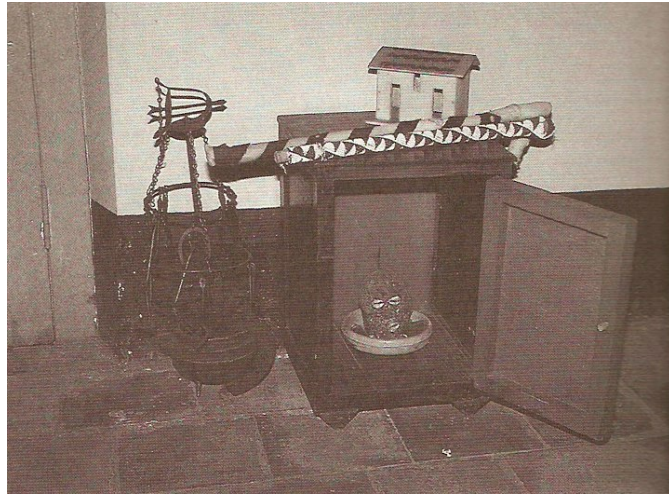


Fig. 22. Elegguá, 20th Century, in the home of a *santera*, Havana, Cuba.
Photo: Arturo Lindsay.

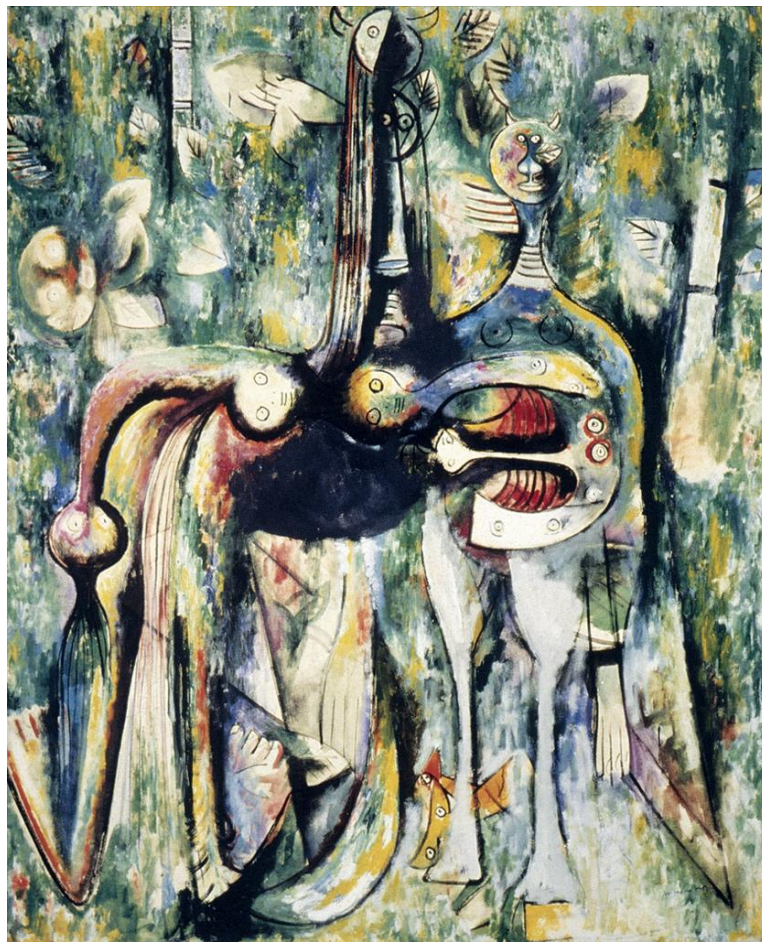


Fig. 23. Wifredo Lam, *Malembo*, 1943. Oil on canvas, 153 x 126.4 cm. Private Collection.

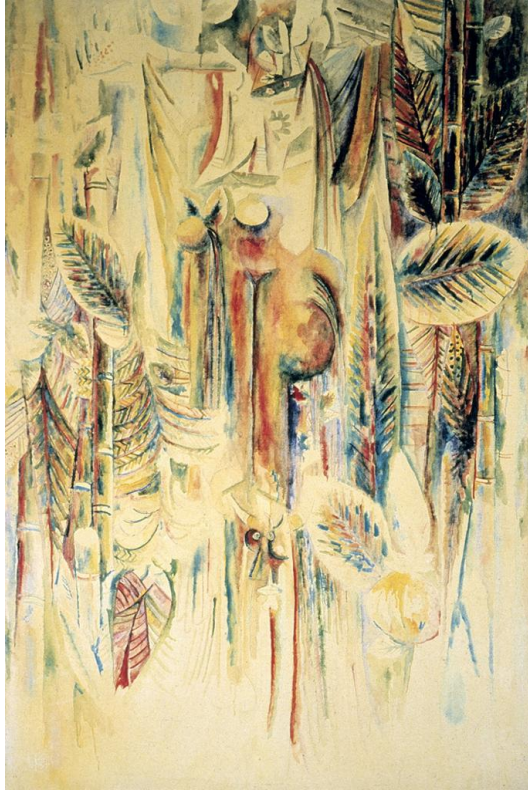


Fig. 24. Wifredo Lam, *Oque Orisi*, 1944. Oil on paper. Private Collection.



Fig. 25. Wifredo Lam, *Altar for Elegguá*, 1944. Oil on paper, 148 x 95 cm. Private Collection.

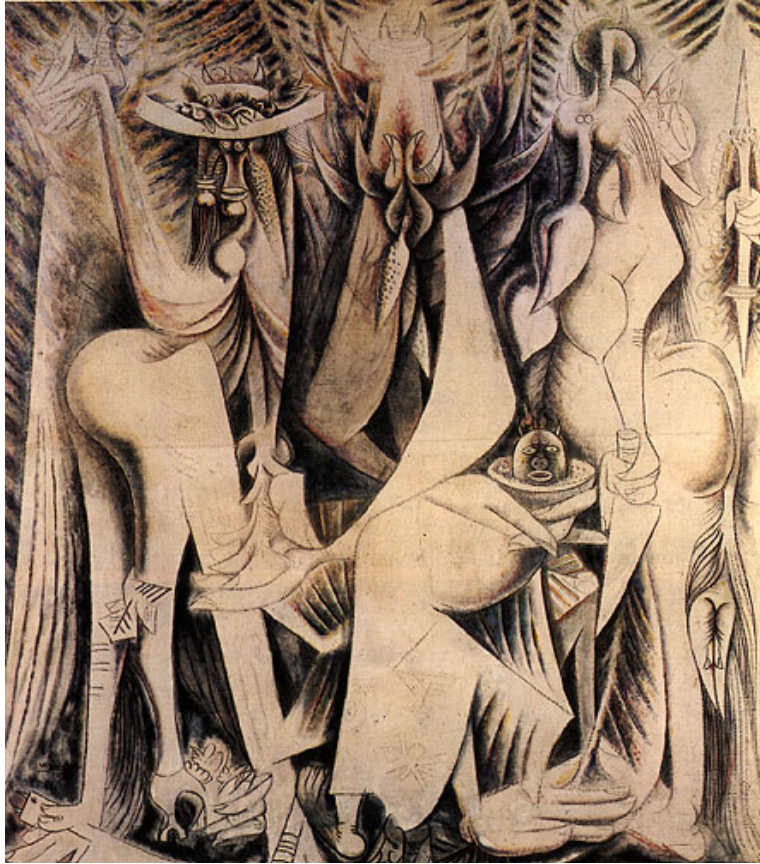


Fig. 26. Wifredo Lam, *The Eternal Present*, 1945.
Oil on canvas, 217 x 197 cm. Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design.



Fig. 27. Eduardo Abela, Logo for the Exhibition of New Art, Havana, 1927. From *Revista de Avance* (May 15, 1927).



Fig. 28. Victor Manuel, *Gitana Tropical* (Tropical Gypsy), 1929. Oil on wood. 46.5 x 38 cm. Museo Nacional de Cuba, Havana.



Fig. 29. Antonio Gattorno. *¿Quieres más café, Don Nicolás?* (Do You Want More Coffee, Don Nicolás?), 1936. 120 x 100.5 cm. Museo Nacional de Cuba, Havana.



Fig. 30. Amelia Peláez, *Fishes*, 1943. Oil on canvas, 115.6 x 89.2 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Fig. 31. Wifredo Lam, *Portrait en bleu*, c. 1943. Gouache on paper mounted on canvas, 107 x 86.5 cm. Collection Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Havana.



Fig. 32. Pablo Picasso, *Femme au chapeau assise dans un fauteuil*, 1941-2. Oil on canvas, 130.5 x 97.5 cm. Kunstmuseum Basel, Basel.



Fig. 33. Wifredo Lam, *The Jungle*, 1942-3. Gouache on paper mounted on canvas, 239.4 x 229.2 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Fig. 34. Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J.)*, 1911-12. Oil on canvas, 243.9 x 233.7 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Fig. 35. Wifredo Lam, *Light of Clay*, 1950. Oil on canvas, 177.5 x 216.5 cm. Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas, Venezuela.

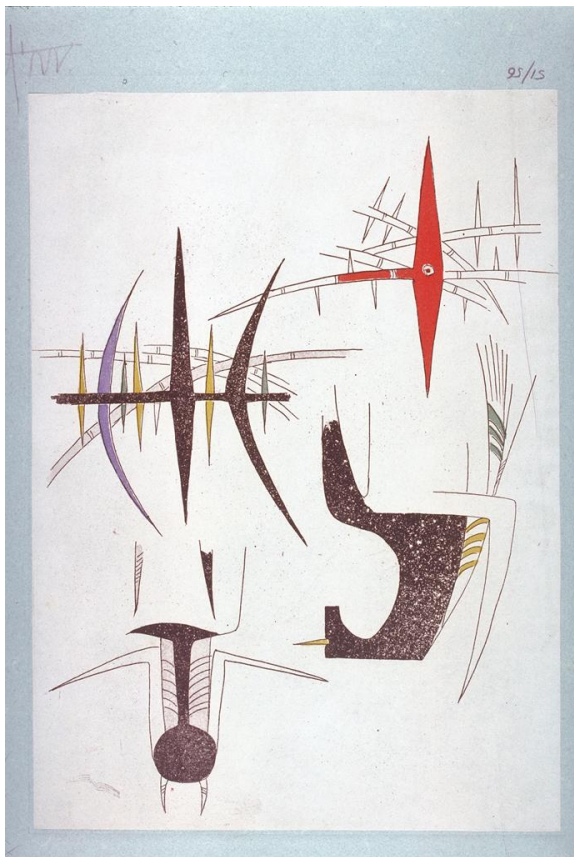
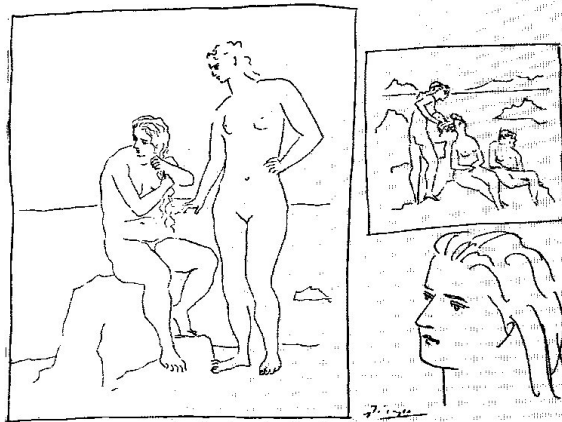


Fig. 36. Wifredo Lam, *Flying Figures*, 1956. Etching and color aquatint on paper, 27.1 x 19.7 cm. Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco.



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Fig. 37. Invitation for the exhibition, 1939.

GALERIE PIERRE
2, RUE DES BEAUX-ARTS
(RUE DE SEINE) PARIS

du 30 Juin au 14 Juillet 1939

PEINTURES
PAR
WIFREDO LAM

Vernissage
INVITATION le 30 Juin à 21 h.

Fig. 38. Invitation for the exhibition, 1939.

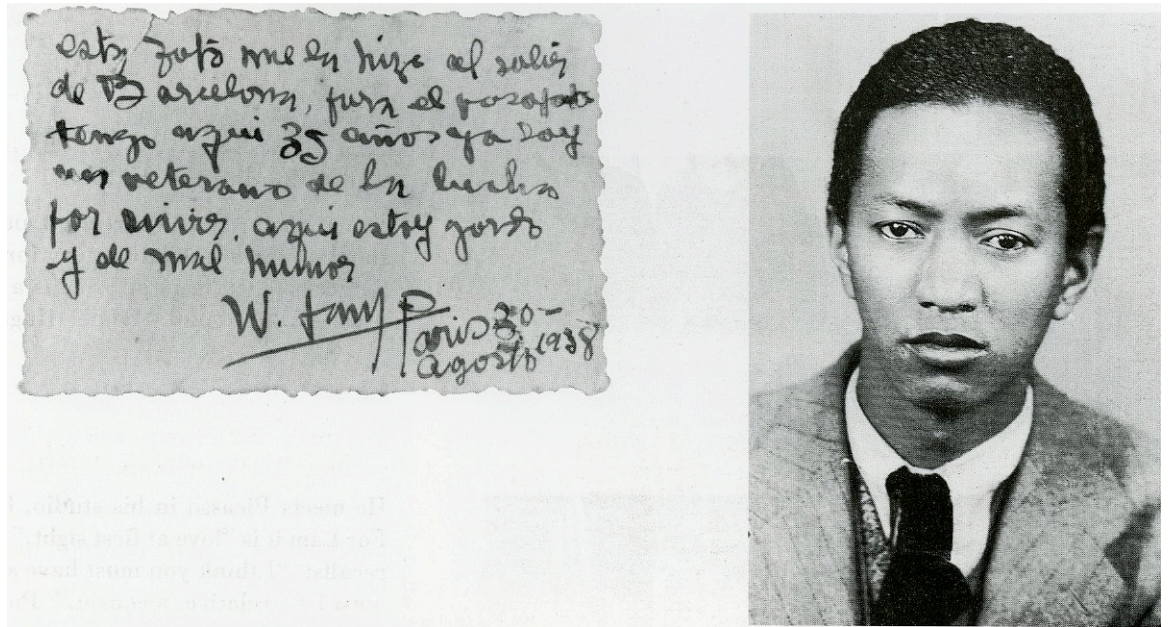


Fig. 39. Passport Photograph of Wifredo Lam taken in Barcelona, 1938.

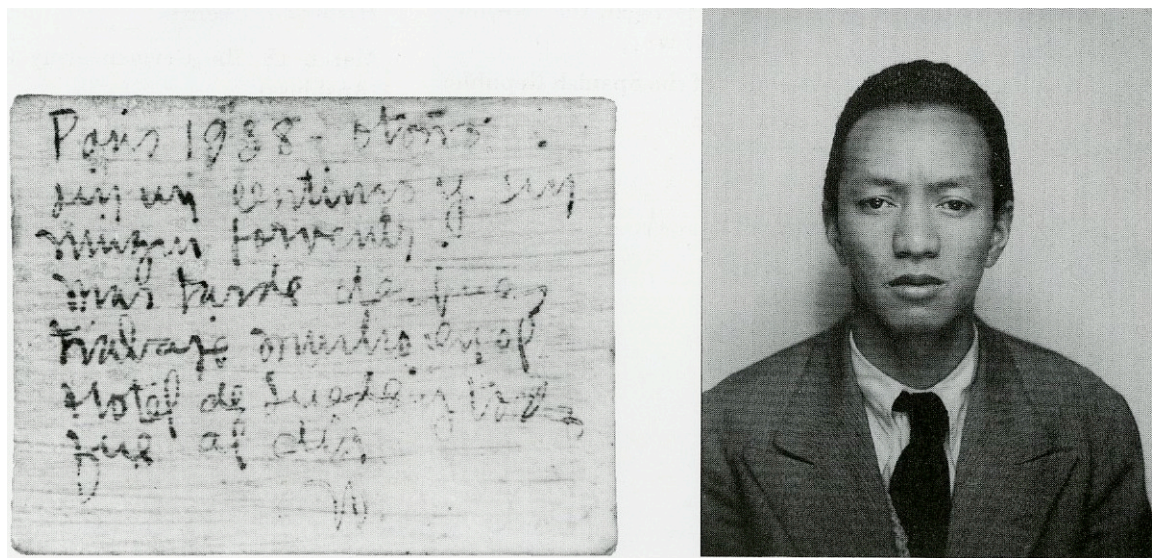


Fig. 40. Photograph of Wifredo Lam, fall 1938.



Fig. 41. Wifredo Lam in his studio with memorabilia, Paris, 1940.



Fig. 42. Wifredo Lam in his studio with his paintings, Paris, 1940.



Fig. 43. Wifredo Lam, *Mother and Child*, 1939. Gouache on paper, 100 x 73.6 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Fig. 44. Wifredo Lam, *Les yeux de la grille*, 1942. Gouache on paper, 104 x 83 cm. Private Collection.



Fig. 45. Wifredo Lam exhibition at Pierre Matisse Gallery including African sculptures, New York, 1948.



Fig. 46. Wifredo Lam with *The Jungle* in his studio in Havana, published in *VVV* no. 4 (February 1944).

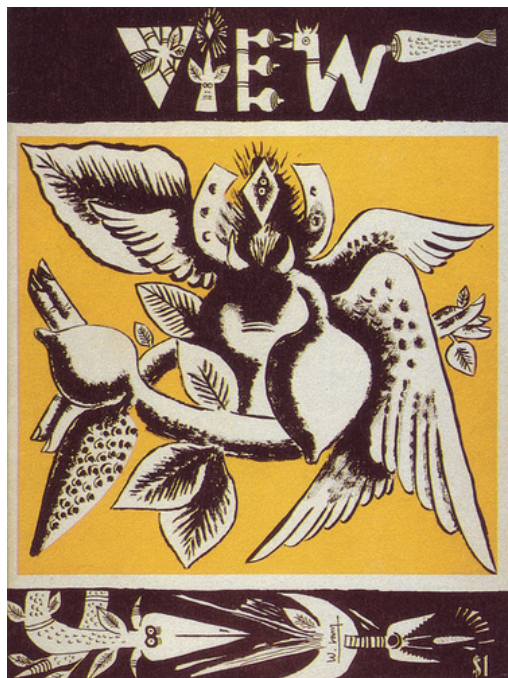


Fig. 47. Cover of *VIEW* magazine by Wifredo Lam, series V, no. 2 (Summer 1945).



Fig. 48. Wifredo Lam, *Satan*, 1942. Gouache on paper, 104 x 86.3 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

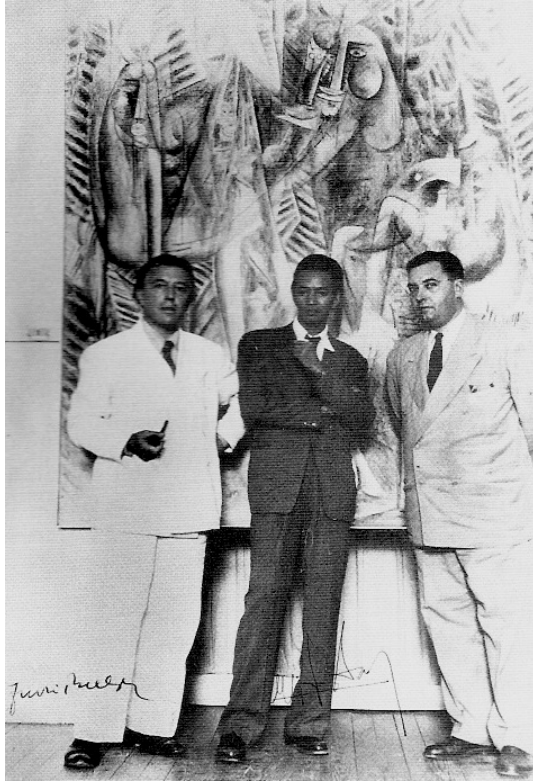


Fig. 49. André Breton, Wifredo Lam, and Pierre Mabile at Lam's exhibition at the Centre d'Art, Port-au-Prince, Haiti, 1946.



Fig. 50. Wifredo Lam, *Fresque (Esso Mural)*, Havana, 1951. Gouache on mortar, 244 x 610 cm.

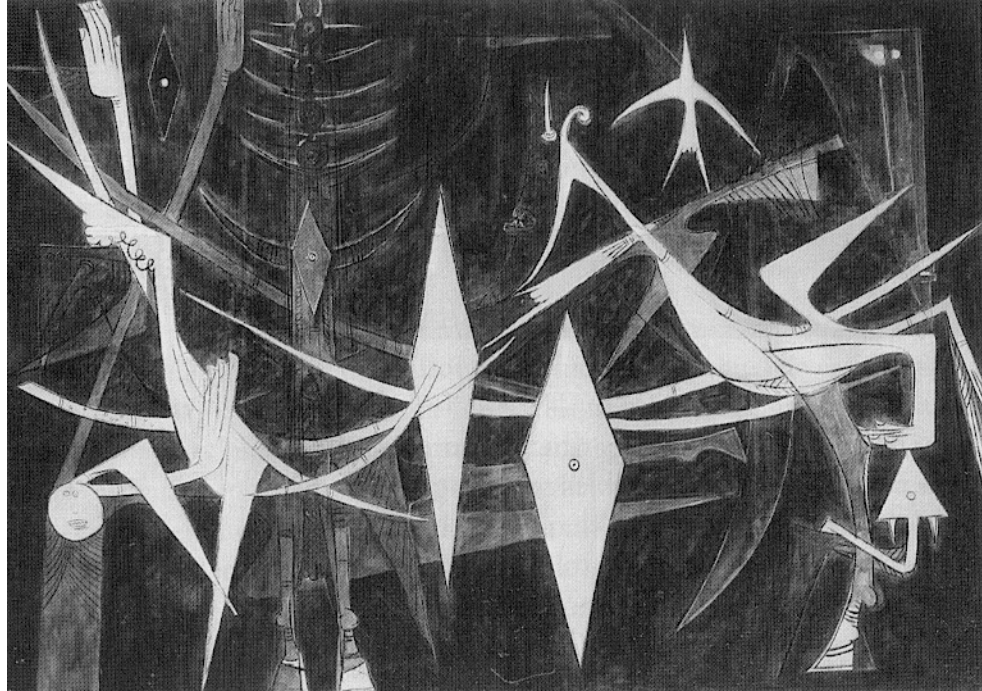


Fig. 51. Wifredo Lam, *Composition [Contrepoint]*, c.1956-1958, completed for Havana Hilton Hotel. Oil on canvas, 205 x 284.5 cm. Collection Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Havana.



Fig. 52. Wifredo Lam, *La Sierra Maestra*, 1959. Gouache on paper mounted in canvas, 247 x 310 cm. Collection Centre d'Art et de Communication, Vaduz, Lichtenstein.

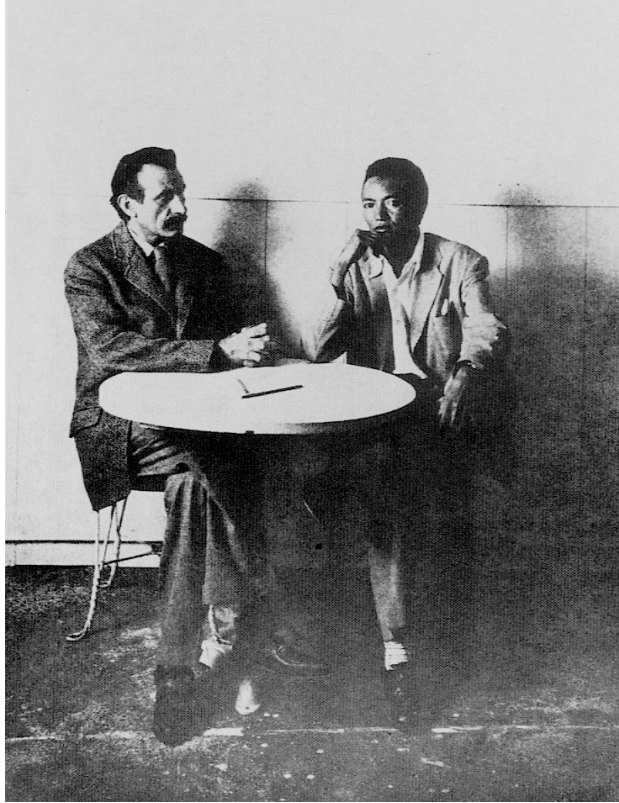


Fig. 53. Arshile Gorky and Wifredo Lam in New York, 1946. Photograph by Irving Penn taken at studio of *Vogue* magazine.



Fig. 54. Wifredo Lam posing with shadows. New York, 1950.



Fig. 55. Wifredo Lam, 1953. Photograph by John Miller.



Fig. 56. Wifredo Lam, 1954. Photograph by Man Ray.

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