

WIFREDO LAM

30 SEPTEMBER 2015 – 15 FEBRUARY 2016

Wifredo Lam (1902-1982) was a link between avant-gardes, a mediator between Europe and the Americas, the modernity of his work being irreducible to any supposed geographical or cultural origin. The Centre Pompidou's first exhibition entirely devoted to him brings together almost 300 works as well as many archival documents and photographs. Organised in five chronological sequences, the exhibition looks at the genesis of his work, his choices of style and imagery, and his collaborations with many painters, poets and intellectuals who left their mark on the 20th century. In following Lam in his journeys, his moves from one exile to another, the exhibition pays tribute to his transcontinental modernity. Deliberately avoiding over-reductively

"culturalist" readings, it offers a fresh look at a body of work conceived as a poetic yet politically engaged manifesto, situating the artist in a history of modern art rethought in terms of syncretisms and cultural exchanges. From the conflicts and encounters of multiple histories, Lam – a man fully engaged with the struggles of his day – distilled a body of work that aimed at the universal, offering another perspective on the post-colonial world. The dialogue between the artist and his time found embodiment in the works presented here, among them numerous acknowledged masterpieces, many on special loan, as for instance Lam's monumental *The Jungle* of 1943, today at MoMA, New York, a work that made Lam one of the best-known artists of his age.

SPAIN 1923-1938

The 1920s saw Wifredo Lam progressively free himself from the academic approach he was taught in Havana and at the Royal Academy of Art in Madrid, where he enrolled in 1923. At first classical in inspiration, his works were profoundly influenced by his study of the old masters he encountered at the Prado. Gradually taking his distance from this tradition, he sought inspiration in the example of the avant-gardes, from Gauguin to the German Expressionists, and above all in Gris, Miró, Picasso and Matisse, whom he discovered in 1929.

Under their influence he simplified his forms, abandoned effects of perspective and laying down areas of flat colour on broad expanses of paper, which became his favoured support. Sensitive to economic and social inequalities that recalled those of the land of his birth, he was attracted to the figure of the Spanish peasant, and in 1932, following the death of his wife and son from tuberculosis, he enlisted in the Republican cause. His Spanish works offer poignant testimony to this period of apprenticeship, poverty, and struggle, which came to an end in 1938, when the victory of the Franquist forces prompted a hurried departure for Paris.

PARIS, MARSEILLE 1938-1941

Arriving in the French capital, Paris, Lam was struck by the influence on European art of the African sculpture celebrated by the avant-gardes that he frequented. His faces became simplified into geometric masks, this expressionist violence reflecting the inner crisis provoked by exile and the recent loss of his wife and child. Here the influence of the Romanesque and of the art of the Cyclades and Ancient Egypt combined with the impact of Late Cubism and his encounter with the African art he discovered at the Musée de l'Homme and at the studio of Picasso, who quickly became a friend and mentor. In 1940, faced with the entry of German troops into Paris, he escaped to Marseille, where he joined Breton and the Surrealists. Lam reacted to the prevailing unease by participating in the creation of joint works – “exquisite corpses” and suchlike automatic productions. He filled small sketchbooks with ink drawings of hybrid figures, both erotic and monstrous, which testify to the formal and psychic freedom to which he aspired.

CUBA AND THE AMERICAS

1941-1952

After 18 years in Europe and two forced exiles, Lam landed in Martinique in the company of André Breton and other friends. There he met Aimé Césaire, the poet of *négritude*, who shared in the same rejection of relationships of racial and cultural domination, a rejection fortified in Lam by his own engagement in struggle and his Marxist reading. He found his return to Cuba painful, being struck by the endemic corruption, racism and poverty of an island whose native culture seemed to survive as no more than a folklorical fakery that he despised. Lam thus turned to the production of works peopled by syncretic figures combining animal, vegetal and human that articulated the distinctive energy and spirituality of Caribbean culture. He was guided in his quest for “Cubanness” by ethnologists Lydia Cabrera and Fernando Ortiz and by the writer Alejo Carpentier, explorers of the complex traditions, aesthetics and history of Afro-Cuban culture.

PARIS, CARACAS, HAVANA, ALBISSOLA & ZURICH 1952-1967

This was a period that saw Lam’s many travels frequently take him away from the studio. Forms are simplified and paintings organised by internal rhythm. In 1952, Lam left Cuba to settle once again in Paris. He began to exhibit more frequently abroad, notably alongside the CoBrA artists whom he met through his friend Asger Jorn. Their spontaneity, taste for collective work and interest in popular art brought him into contact with new materials, such as terra cotta, and prompted experiment with new forms. In the *Brousse* series of 1958 he appropriated the energy of American gestural abstraction in a radical simplification of the luxuriantly vegetal compositions of the 1940s. His simultaneously dreamlike and incisive drawings illustrated many works by the poets and writers among his friends, among them René Char and Gherasim Luca.

PARIS & ALBISSOLA 1962-1982

It was in 1954, invited by Asger Jorn, that Lam discovered the Italian light of Albissola, an important centre of ceramic production. In 1962 he moved there, the town remaining his main base for the rest of his life. He expanded his collection of non-Western art, displayed in his studio, testimony to the multiplicity of his sources of inspiration. Attracted by the spontaneous freedom that came with working in terra cotta and by the chance that intervened in the creative process "with the length and intensity of firing, the interaction and transformation of colours", he would produce almost 300 ceramics in 1975, their symbolism derived from his painting and drawing. These years were again marked by travel – to Egypt, India, Thailand, Mexico – and by growing institutional recognition; they were occupied too with the composition of the autobiographical *Le nouveau Nouveau Monde de Lam*, which offers a comprehensive mapping of his poetical and geo-political affinities. A tireless worker, Lam died in 1982, upon completing, at home, the engravings for *L'Herbe sous les pavés*, his last artist's book, on a text by Jean-Dominique Rey.

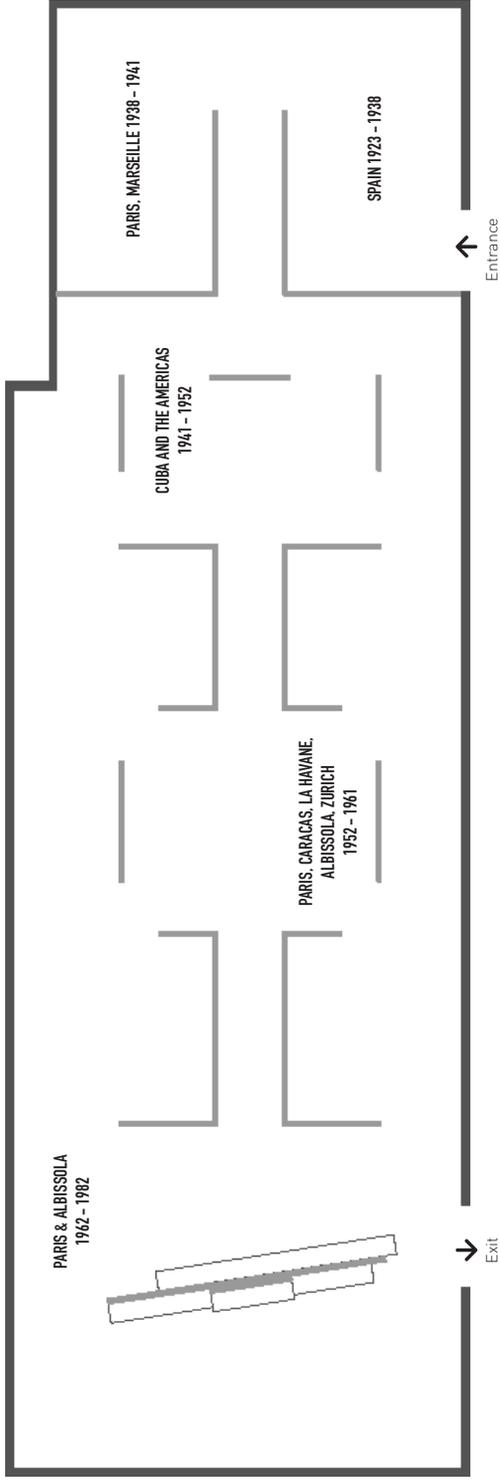
THE JUNGLE

The year of his return to Cuba, Lam worked on *The Jungle*, "a poem barbaric, monumental, superb", in the words of Max-Pol Fouchet. Completed in 1943 and shown in June 1944 at the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York, it was immediately recognized as a major achievement. Charged with a latently violent eroticism, it is a visual rendering of the notion of transculturation developed by Fernando Ortiz and taken up by Lam: "The only thing [...] left to me at that moment was my old desire to integrate in my painting the transculturation that had occurred in Cuba between Aborigines, Spaniards, Africans, Chinese, French immigrants, pirates and all the other elements that go to make up the Caribbean. And I claim all this past as my own. I believe that this transculturation has made something new out of these peoples, something of incontestable human value." Celebrated in Cuba as a symbol of cultural resistance to both dictatorship and Americanisation, it was quickly purchased by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, only to be relegated for many years to the corridor leading to the cloakroom, testifying to institutional incomprehension in the face of a work that escaped the established categories of modern art, though it eventually joined *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* in the main gallery, alongside other landmarks of 20th century art.

"Because he carries in him the secret of the breath, of seed and growth, Wifredo Lam has spoken and upset the academic and the conformist Wifredo Lam, first in the Antilles, addresses himself to freedom. And it is free Of merely aesthetic preoccupation, free of all realism, of any concern for The documentary, that Wifredo Lam, magnificent, embarks on the great, terrible Encounter: with the forest, the swamp, the monster, the night, the flying seed The rain, the liana, the epiphyte, the snake, the fear, the leap; with life."

Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'art*, n°21, Paris 1945-1946

EXHIBITION MAP



EXHIBITION

CURATOR

Catherine David
Assisted by Cécile Zoonens

RESEARCH AND DOCUMENTATION

Sofia Soto-Maffioli

EXHIBITION DESIGN

Jasmin Oezcebi

PRODUCTION

Liliana Dragasev
Marie-Annick Hamon

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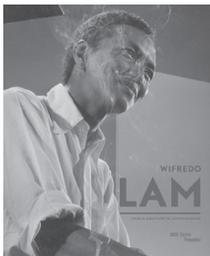
Le Monde

Le Point



CATALOGUE

Wifredo Lam
Catherine David
240 p., 370 ill.
Price: €39.90



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in French, English and Spanish.

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AROUND THE EXHIBITION

GUIDED TOURS (IN FRENCH)

Thursdays

7.30 pm on 7, 22 October, 12 November

Saturdays

11.30 am on 3, 10, 24, 31 October, 7, 21,
28 November, 5 December

3.30 pm on 3, 17, 31 October, 14, 21
November, 15, 12 December

Sundays

11.30 am on 4, 11, 18 October, 1, 8, 15,
29 November, 6, 13 December

3.30 pm on 11, 18, 25 October, 8, 22, 29
November, 13, 27 December

UN DIMANCHE, UNE ŒUVRE

Sunday 15 November, 11.30 pm,

Petite Salle

Talk by Catherine David

on Wifredo Lam's *La Réunion* (1945)

TOURS FOR THE HEARING IMPAIRED

Saturday 7 November

11 am, guided tour with lip-reading
for the hearing impaired

2.30 pm, guided tour in sign language

INFORMATION

+33 (0)1 44 78 12 33

www.centrepompidou.fr

EXHIBITION OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

30 September 2015 to 15 February 2016
Galerie 2, Level 6

Every day except Tuesdays, 11.00 am
to 9.00 pm

Ticket desks close at 8.00 pm

Evening visits on Thursdays until 11.00 pm

Ticket desks close at 10.00 pm

PRICES

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