

Wifredo Lam in North America The Making of an Exhibition



Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University
October 11, 2007 – January 21, 2008

Untitled, 1959, oil on canvas, 17 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 23 $\frac{5}{8}$ in. (45.1 x 60 cm)
Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University
The Mary B. Finnigan Art Endowment Fund, 2007.6

The interest in Cuban modern art among North American museums and collectors dates back to at least the 1930s. Wifredo Lam's art is of special interest today for its global elements linking the cultures of European modernism as found in the cubist works of Picasso and surrealist ideals of André Breton with his rich Afro-Cuban artistic and spiritual heritage. Apart from Lam's visual inventions as an innovative contributor to art history of the twentieth century, his painterly images reveal a deep concern with the suffering of mankind as it is manifest in social justice issues such as race, gender, and politics. The choice of Lam for this exhibition is based in part on these considerations. Lam's art also fits a theme that I have pursued in previous curatorial endeavors at the Haggerty Museum: artists as cultural outsiders, examined in exhibitions featuring Barbara Morgan the modernist photographer, Richard Lippold the sculptor, and painters Jean Fautrier and Roberto Matta. As artists outside the mainstream, they were granted the independence to shape their own beliefs and artistic practices irrespective of the fashions of their time.

Wifredo Lam's independent artistic vision, exceptional talent, and excellence in his artistic endeavors has brought us art of lasting value. Here is a brief recounting of the development of the exhibition *Wifredo Lam in North America*.

Early meetings with Lowery Stokes Sims, who has written widely on Lam, and collector Thomas Monahan were immensely helpful in the initial stages of planning for this exhibition. These early discussions pointed to the need for an exhibition focused on Lam's works in the collections of North America and his involvement with North American institutions and artists.

With this focus in mind, I began a search for information to gain a better understanding of the complexities of the artist's work and his involvement in North America. This search led first to



La mesa, (The Table), 1939
Charcoal on paper, 41 3/8 x 29 1/2 in. (105 x 75 cm)
Collection of Isaac and Cuqui Matz

the literature on Lam's works. Essential to the research was the two volume *Wifredo Lam: Catalogue Raisonné* assembled by Lou Laurin Lam and Eskil Lam.

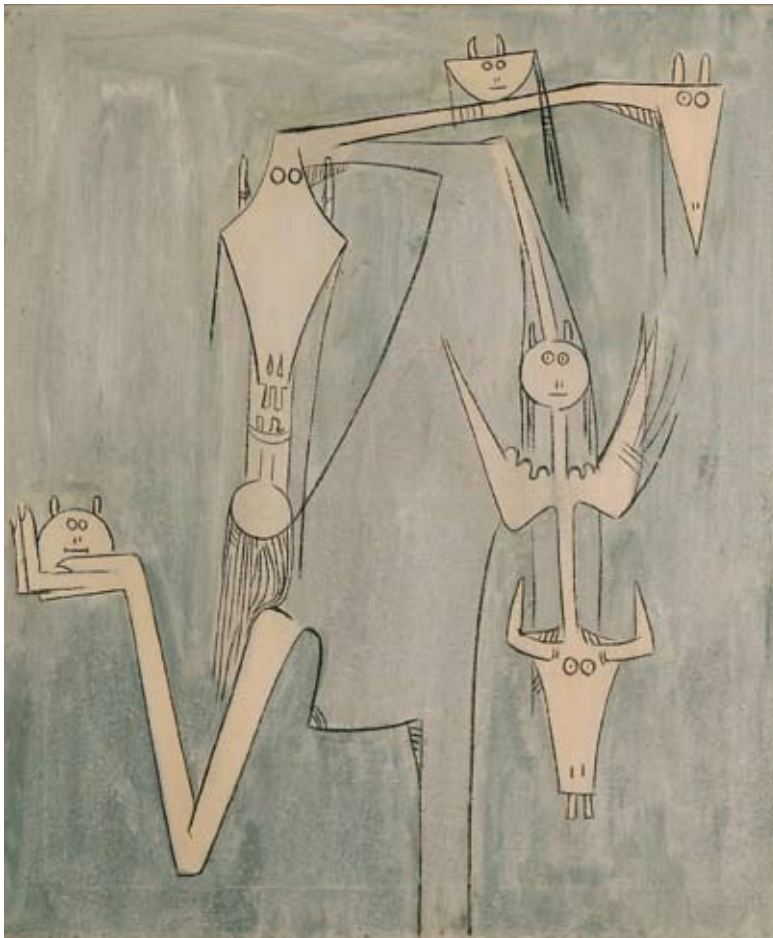
By now there are important texts on the various aspects of Lam's life and works. My search of the literature began with the biography written by his second wife, Helena Holzer. This book proved sufficient to arouse my curiosity, but called for more in depth investigations. Among the books on Lam's work, three were especially helpful, each providing a different perspective on the artist's life and work. Max-Pol Fouchet's *Wifredo Lam* published in 1976 offered an especially useful European perspective on Lam's career. Juan Martinez's *Cuban Art and National Identity* published in 1994 helped to place Lam in the context of Cuban modern art. Lowery Stokes Sims' *Wifredo Lam and the International Avant Garde, 1923-1982* provided important details of the various stages in his development, including his connections to the New York School of Abstract Expressionists. Also noteworthy is Charles Merewether's essay, "At the Crossroads of Modernism: A Liminal Terrain."

The next stage in the research involved tracking down collectors and institutions where the works of Lam could be seen. This process involved visits to the North American museums with holdings of Lam's art including the Museum of Modern Art, where Lam's *The Jungle* is located, as well as the Metropolitan and the Guggenheim Museums in New York. Subsequent visits to the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, the De Menil Collection in Houston, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Francisco, as well as the Museum of the Rhode Island School of Design revealed several of Lam's most important works in North American collections. These visits to museums were followed by a string of gallery visits in search of potential loans from private sources. Gallery Le Long, Mary Ann Martin, CSD Gallery, and Richard Feigen in New York all resulted in helpful suggestions and provided links to prospective lenders. In Miami, the galleries of Cernuda Arte and Grimberg Fine Art opened doors to important private collections. Ramon and Nercys Cernuda's help in contacting Miami area private collections was invaluable in this respect.

A visit in Paris with Lou Lourin-Lam, the third wife of the artist, and their son Eskil provided an important perspective on the artist's work from the family's perspective. Their encouragement gave additional momentum to the project. They generously offered access to photos in the Wifredo Lam archives and other difficult to find materials.

Once the theme of the exhibition has been set and the works identified, an essential part of the project is the selection of authors for the catalogue essays. This exhibition catalogue benefits from the contributions of scholars Dawn Ades, Valerie Fletcher, Lou Laurin-Lam, Lowery Stokes Sims, and Edward Lucie-Smith who joined me as curator of the exhibition in writing essays on various aspects of Lam's art.

All of these cumulative resources contributed to a solid foundation for creating the exhibition. Yet there was one important element missing: a closer examination of the Cuban roots of the artist in his native land. Lam's importance lies in his having linked his European experience as an artist working in Madrid and Paris to his Cuban roots. Because of this factor, it was essential to visit the works still in Cuban collections and the people there who had first hand experiences of Lam's Cuban roots. It was my good fortune to visit Cuba in April 2007 to meet with individuals who could provide the missing information. Among these were the Director Dr. Moraima Clavijo, Vice Director Dr. Luz Merino and curators of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes where a collection of over 200 of Lam's works reside; Dr. Margarita González the Vice Director of the Wifredo Lam Center in Havana; and Dr. Alejandro Alonso, Director of the Museo de la Cerámica, all of whom generously made available their archives and collections in storage. Cuban art specialists Roberto Cobas, Dr José Veigas, and Dr. Ramón Vásquez Díaz provided invaluable information including access to rare documents and their personal views useful to expanding my understanding of Cuban perspectives on Lam's work and his role in Cuban art. Conversations with



Nous sommes présents, (We Are Present), 1962

Oil on canvas, 41 3/8 x 35 3/8 in. (105 x 90 cm)

Collection of Thomas Monahan and Yaco Garcia

the Cuban art historians particularly brought to light the connections of critics Alejo Carpentier and José Gómez Sicre to the understanding of Lam's place in twentieth century Cuban art and culture.

A conversation with Dr. Alfredo Guevara, head of the Latin American Cinema Festival held in Havana each year and

formerly Ambassador to Paris and UNESCO, provided special insights into the artist's life and his place in representing Cuba in the international context. Dr. Guevara was a personal friend of Lam and shared personal anecdotes of his experiences with the artist in Paris and in Cuba.

Living artists including Flora Fong, Sosabravo and a host of younger artists shared their perspectives on the significance of Wifredo Lam for contemporary art practices in Cuba. Based on these conversations, it was apparent that Lam's influence remains strong among the artists working in Cuba today.

My travels to Cuba opened up many new sources and substantially deepened the understanding of Lam that is reflected in the catalogue and the exhibition. All of the people consulted in Cuba generously shared their knowledge and research materials essential to the project.

Travel to Cuba would not have been possible without the generous assistance and support of Ramón and Nercys Cernuda whose knowledge and experience as major collectors of Cuban art facilitated travel arrangements and organized the meetings with officials in Cuba.

And finally, an exhibition of this magnitude relies upon the talent and experience of a dedicated Haggerty Museum staff who assist with all aspects of the transport, promotion, catalogue production, grant writing, installation and educational interpretation of the exhibition.

Curtis L. Carter
Curator

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