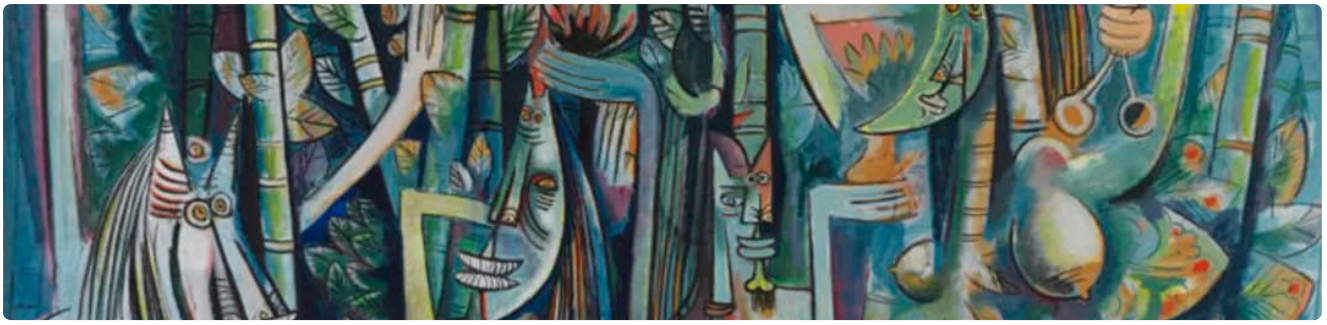
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Wifredo Lam and Transversal Surrealism

Andrea Gremels

Cuban-born artist Wifredo Lam was a key figure of Surrealism's transversal network in the 20th century. His work explored Afro-Caribbean syncretism and the haunting memory of the transatlantic slave trade. His resistance against colonial oppression developed in later collaborative projects with Aimé Césaire and Joyce Mansour.

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The Cuban painter Wifredo Lam's work is representative for the avantgarde's transatlantic exchanges and movements in the first half of the 20^th century. Not only because of his transcultural background as Afro-Chinese Cuban artist but also because of his cosmopolitan biography between Europe and the Americas: his work belongs to a travelling culture that moves far beyond national boundaries, which is the reason why his work has been approached within the framework of *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*, as constitutive of the formation of an *International Avant-Garde*.

The exhibition *Wifredo Lam,* curated by Catherine David and shown at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid, and the Tate Modern in London between 2015 and 2017, also contributed to a paradigm shift that conceives of Lam's position within a transatlantic, and even global, art history instead of Africanizing it or categorizing it as Latin American, as it was done until the turn of the century. I suggest considering his work through the perspective of transversal surrealism. The notion of transversality overcomes a Eurocentric approach by taking into account the multilateral dynamics within the network of surrealism in the first half of the 20^th century. Surrealism did not only expand from Europe to the Americas, but is rather characterized by crisscrossing routes of mutual exchange that can be observed from the very beginning of the movement's activities. From the late 1930s onwards, Lam became a key figure of this transversal network in which Surrealism constantly evolved and expanded.

A multilateral perspective also helps to overcome a Eurocentric perception of Lam's paintings that often prevailed in their discussion and in which they were either devalued as an imitation of European avant-garde trends or exoticized as authentically African. Considering his transcultural background, such essentializing tendencies in perceiving his art as African have to be problematized. Instead Lam can be seen as part of a diasporic black culture of *The Black Atlantic* in Paul Gilroy's sense (1996). [1] In this regard it is also relevant that he was "only a quarter black" [2], as his mother bore African as well as European roots whereas his father belonged to the Chinese diaspora in Cuba. The latter came there among the *coolie* immigrants that were brought to the island from the middle of the 19^th century onwards as indentured laborers because their work force was needed on the sugar plantations after the abolition of slavery. Regarding his African, Asian, European and Latin American roots Lam is a typical representative of what Fernando Ortiz, in his study *Contrapunteo cubano del tabacco y el azúcar* (1940), has called "transculturation."

This is also expressed in his paintings in which he constantly explores the dynamic of hybridity and at the same time reflects the Caribbean traumatic (post)colonial history and its haunting figures of the transatlantic slave trade. For Lam, practicing syncretism, e. g. by alluding to the Afro-Caribbean religions such as *Santería* and *Vodou*, is a means to criticize Western thought and hegemony. His paintings thus create a space of resistance that is meant to decolonize the spirit and the imagination. In this sense, his art provided a strong impulse for surrealism and its transversal network, especially in the 1940s when it was expanding across the Americas. Lam's example shows that surrealism's routes of exchange did not only follow a North-South axis, but also comprised South-South relations. This holds true especially for the friendship between Lam and the *Négritude* poet from Martinique Aimé Césaire who also appropriated surrealism in order to confront the trauma of the transatlantic slavery from a Caribbean point of view.

A Transatlantic Biography

Wifredo Lam grew up in the small town of Sagua La Grande in Eastern Cuba. After studying art at the San Alejandro School of Art in Havana, he left Cuba in 1928 to go to Madrid, where he wanted to establish himself as an artist. He also became politically involved fighting on the side of the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War. With a letter of recommendation from the Spanish artist Manolo Hugué to Picasso, Lam came to France in 1938. Picasso introduced him to the major protagonist of the surrealist movement in Paris, namely André Breton. He also acquainted him with the gallerist Pierre Loeb, who organized Lam's first solo exhibition in Paris at his *Gallerie Pierre* in 1939. The encounter with Picasso and his Cubist engagement with forms and expressions of African tribal art were crucial for Lam as it inspired him to explore his own African heritage. In Cuba and the Caribbean more generally, the legacies of African cultures were often depreciated and not yet recognized as art at the time. Lam's curriculum at San Alejandro was therefore oriented towards European—especially Spanish—art history. From this point of view, it is ironical yet not surprising that he discovered his African heritage in Paris.

Picasso also recommended Lam to visit the ethnographic collection of the Musée du Trocadéro which was inaugurated in 1938. In many of these visits he was accompanied by the French avant-garde writer and anthropologist Michel Leiris who had participated in the ethnographic Dakar-Djibouti mission from 1931 to 1933. By exploring African tribal art, Lam freed himself from his conservative academic formation, and opened up to the formal experimentations and ruptures of the avant-garde. [3] The fact that both formal experimentation and self-exploration played a role in his work during the Paris years 1938-1939 can best be observed in *Self-Portrait III* (1938) in which—turning to a Cubist style similar to Picasso's—he represented himself through an African mask replacing his face.

Lam's involvement in Surrealism intensified with the outbreak of World War II. In June 1940, when Paris was occupied by Nazi Germany, a group of surrealists left France's capital to stay at Villa Air-Bel in Marseille. The surrealist period at Villa Air-Bel was very productive, especially in the form of collective games. Together with artists such as Jacqueline Lamba, André Breton, Victor Brauner, Jacques Hérold, Óscar Dominguez and Max Ernst, Lam created a number of collective drawings and *cadavres exquis* (*Exquisite cadaver*) as well as the playing cards *Alice, Sirène d'Étoile* and *Lautréamont, Génie de Rêve-Étoile* for the Jeu de Marseille (*The Marseille game)*. This sort of tarot game invented by the group was a performative means of playful resistance against the spreading totalitarian forces on the European continent. Breton was enthusiastic about Lam's Marseille drawings. He asked him to illustrate his volume of poetry, *Fata Morgana*, which was to appear in 1942. This artistic alliance between the Cuban painter and the French poet is another evidence of the collective creativity across cultures and media during the Marseille years.



The Surrealist Group in Villa Air-Bel, 1940

Source: Archives Wifredo Lam, Paris

Return to the Native Land

On 25 March, 1941 Lam sailed back to Cuba on board of the *Capitaine Paul Lemerle* that took him and other members of the surrealist group—among them André Breton—to Martinique. After almost twenty years of absence from his native island Lam's return to Cuba has often been described as a culture shock, especially with regards to the conservatism of the Cuban art scene that he found skeptical of the stylistic and formal innovations and ruptures of the European avant-garde. Lam furthermore criticized the exoticist tendencies he observed in the picturesque representations of Blacks in Cuban art and popular culture. He positioned himself against any romanticization of Afro-Cuban heritage and cultural practices with statements like: "No, my painting wouldn't be an equivalent of pseudo-Cuban music for dancehalls, never. No cha-cha-cha!" [4]

Lam's engagement with surrealism can best be observed during his Havana years between 1941 and 1951, the year in which Lam re-emigrated to Paris. His surrealist period was closely related to the exploration of the syncretic expressions of Afro-Caribbean religious practices, such as the Cuban *Santería* and *Ñañiguismo* as well as the Haitian *Vodou* that he made productive for his work. Their syncretism was one of the principal impulses for his work. Through this artistic engagement he became an important protagonist of the surrealist network in the Caribbean and the Americas. Breton, who maintained and expanded the transversal surrealist network from his New York exile, promoted Lam's work to the Pierre Matisse Gallery, which organized a first solo exhibition in 1942. In Cuba, Lam was affiliated with the anthropologists Lydia Cabrera and Fernando Ortiz, who had done pioneering work in the study of Afro-

Cuban religions. The writer Alejo Carpentier also belonged to this avant-gardist circle. He had approached Afro-Cuban popular cultures in his first novel *¡Écue-Yamba-Ó!* as early as 1932 when these were still highly criminalized and discriminated in Cuba.

Lam was also in close contact with Aimé Césaire in Martinique and thus sympathized with the ideas of *Négritude*, a radical attempt to overcome the trauma of slavery and reclaim a black consciousness. Lam illustrated the 1942 Cuban edition of Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (*Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*), an extensive poem that first appeared in the Parisian avant-garde periodical *Volontés* in 1939. Cabrera translated it as *Retorno al país natal* from French into Spanish and the surrealist writer Benjamin Péret who was by then exiled in Mexico City provided the foreword. This collaborative translation project of one of the key works of *Négritude* that Césaire kept on revisiting and changing throughout the years, exposes surrealism's transversal network across the arts. Surrealism's exchange routes in the Americas—with reciprocal inspirations between artists of the Global North and the Global South—can be observed in the surrealist periodicals published during the War years.

The francophone Martinican literary magazine *Tropiques* (1941-1945), [5] edited by Aimé Césaire and René Ménil, reports on Lam's activities at various occasions. The second issue dated July 1941 announces his arrival in the Caribbean in a delightful tone while stressing the importance hybridity plays in his work: "Let us also greet the passage of Wifredo Lam, the astonishing Black Cuban painter in whom we find Picasso's best teachings, together with Asian and African traditions curiously and ingeniously mixed." [6] The review section of *Tropiques*'s number 6-7 (1943) highlights the success of Lam's solo exhibition in New York. The commentary is followed by a short text, in which the gallerist Pierre Loeb, who was exiled in Havana during World War II, emphasizes the innovativeness of Lam's work that he describes as carrying out a "strange mystery" ("mystère étrange") and a "concrete magic" ("magie concrétisée"). [7] Despite the lack of financial and technical means to print illustrations, the editors of *Tropiques*—who apart from precarious economic circumstances also had to fight against the obstacles of the Vichy regime's censorship in Martinique—found a way to incorporate Lam's paintings by publishing these reviews.

The surrealist magazine *VVV* (1942-1944), founded by André Breton, Max Ernst and Marcel Duchamp in New York (with the US-American artist David Hare functioning as its editing director) promoted Lam's work by publishing a full-page artist portrait, which shows him sitting in front of his most famous painting *La Jungla* in his atelier in Havana. The photograph was published in the fourth and last number of *VVV* (1944), in which it is part of a section dedicated to Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Cuban syncretism. It can be read alongside Césaire's poem *Batouque* and the sculptural work of the Brazilian artist Maria Martins. [8] In his poem, Césaire poetically imitates the rhythm of ritual drumming during the Candomblé ceremonies as a moment of frenetic liberation from the oppression of slavery through the power of the unconscious. *Batouque* also relates to the *tam-tam*-poems that similarly appeared in *VVV* with one of them being dedicated to "Wifredo." [9]



Artist Portrait of Wifredo Lam sitting in front of his painting *La Jungla* in Havana (1943)

Source: Archives Wifredo Lam, Paris

This exchange across the Americas demonstrates Surrealism's growing interest in Afro-Caribbean syncretism during the 1940s, especially in its spiritual and performative means of resisting slavery and oppression. The transversality of this exchange makes it clear that Global South artists like Lam and Césaire were not only influenced by surrealism. They rather contributed to re-envisioning surrealist ideas and offered new inspirations. Especially from the 1940s onwards, due to their own experience of exile on the South and North American continent, the European surrealists became increasingly aware of the historical reality of the transatlantic slave trade that contrasted with their former vision of the African continent as the territory of the timeless primitive. Anticolonial resistance strategies, especially those explored in Latin American syncretism, also became important to them as they sought for artistic means to oppose the hegemony of fascism and totalitarianism spreading around the world. [10]

Fort-de-France, Havana, Mexico City and New York were not the only nodal points of the surrealist network across the Americas, so was Port-au Prince. The secret practices of Haitian Vodou turned Port-au Prince into another city of surrealist exchange in the 1940s. Lam came to Haiti shortly after the end of World War II, in January 1946, invited by the French surrealist writer Pierre Mabille who had arranged the solo exhibition *Lam*, for which Breton gave the opening speech talk. Mabille also took his guests Breton and Lam along to attend some Vodou ceremonies. From this visit onwards, beginning with the late 1940s Haitian Vodou had a great impact on Lam's paintings, such as in *Belial, empereur des mouches* (*Empereur of the Flies*, 1948), in which he depicts the demonic figure Belial of the Christian mythology that was syncretically appropriated in Vodou beliefs. This painting is also characterized by the use of a dark violet as background color often associated with the symbolic color of the leading Vodou deities that watch over the dead, such as Baron Samedi and his wife Maman Brigite.



André Breton, Wifredo Lam and Pierre Mabille at the Exhibition *Lam* in Port-au-Prince, January 1946 (photo by Byron Coroneos)

Source: Archives Wifredo Lam, Paris



Wifredo Lam, *La Jungla* (1943), Metropolitan Museum of Art

Source: VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2021

La Jungla and Caribbean Black Atlantic Memory

Lam's most famous painting is *La Jungla* from 1943, celebrated by the surrealists when it was first shown at the Pierre Matisse gallery in New York in 1944. The painting became especially known for Lam's anticolonial engagement as well as his approach to Afro-Cuban spirituality. Considering Lam's solidarity with Césaire's *Négritude*, the painting's haunting and hallucinatory creatures call upon the descendants of slavery to free themselves from colonial structures of domination and (self-)humiliation. *La Jungla* depicts the unsettling and nightmarish landscape of sugar cane tribes, from which hybrid figures and zoomorphic beings grotesquely emerge. Lam makes it almost impossible for the viewer to distinguish between natural and human forms, human or animal body parts, as well as between arms and legs, since the figures' feet appear like hands or even paws resting on the ground. Similarly, the sugar cane trunks can be associated with animal legs as well as with human limbs. Dissolving the borders between human, animal and vegetal forms and representations thus emerges as a main aspect of his "jungle."

Many critics have pointed out that on the island of Cuba a jungle-like flora does not exist. [11] Lam's sugar cane jungle thus does not principally refer to the actual landscape of his island but rather alludes symbolically to the transatlantic slave trade and the traumatic history of the African diaspora's displacement and exploitation on the sugar plantations that has left haunting traces in the Cuban landscape. Formally, the painting has often been associated with Picasso's Cubist style. *La Jungla* can also be associated with Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) as it conveys a similar aggressiveness and violent dynamic that characterizes Picasso's depiction of the Spanish Civil War. According to Lowery Stokes Sims, however, Lam's style goes beyond Cubism, as he expands it by "totemic allusions" and a "Surrealist pictorial

invention." [12] Moreover, what is particularly striking in contrast to *Guernica*, is Lam's use of salient, almost shrill colors and exuberant sexualized body parts that can be understood as a protest against exoticism and a picturesque-romantic colorfulness often found in Caribbean (popular) art.

Lam has compared his role as a postcolonial artist with that of a "Trojan horse that would spew forth hallucinating figures with the power to surprise, to disturb the dreams of the exploiters." [13] Especially remarkable with regards to these hallucinating figures is their troubling hybridity. They mirror the colonizers' *othering* of Black people and their fear of their spiritual practices, which were shunned as "sorcery" in Cuba even after the island's independence from Spain in 1898. Practitioners of the secret society *Ñáñiguismo* in particular were criminalized and persecuted by the Cuban government until the 1930s.

Hybridity became Lam's strategy to confront and disturb the colonial worldview. He does so by alluding to figures and symbols of *Santería*, such as the Yoruba deity Malembo depicted in *The Sombre Malembo, God of the Crossroads* (*Le sombre Malembo, Dieu des carrefours*, 1943). However, these deities are not simply represented in his paintings, but incorporated into a game of metamorphosis and transformation so that they become "unreadable" and purely imaginative. In this fashion, his paintings demonstrate the way Afro-Cubans resisted colonial domination through syncretism and thus rebelled against their forced Christianization. By hybridizing their Yoruba deities—the so-called *Orishas*—with Catholic saints the slaves made their Gods invisible and unrecognizable for their colonial masters. For example, the facade of Saint Barbara covers the highest and most famous *Orisha* called Changó, the god of fire, and the Yoruban healing deity Babalú-Ayé is hidden behind the surface of the Catholic Saint Lazarus. In his painting, Lam relates to his ancestors' tactic of resistance by practicing hybridity and symbolic "unreadability."

There are various explanations about Lam's own initiation into Afro-Cuban *Santería*, especially with regard to his godmother Ma'Antoñica Wilson who in 1888 became one of the first *Santería* priestesses in Lam's native town Sagua la Grande. [14] However, Anke Birkenmaier maintains that the painter was principally introduced to Afro-Cuban religions by Lydia Cabrera's anthropological work. [15] Like his white Cuban colleagues Cabrera and Carpentier, Lam approached *Santería* with the aesthetic interest of an outsider and not as an initiate and active practitioner. His exploration of syncretism should therefore not be misunderstood as an "authentic" expression of lived experience. [16] He rather engaged conceptually with the concealment tactics and visualization of Afro-Cuban syncretism. In this context, surrealism works as the phantasmagorical extension of syncretistic elements. The dynamic and exuberant hybridization of forms, symbols and figures, which is reflected in the anthropomorphic and zoomorphic beings like animal-humans, plant-animals or human-plants became the transcultural characteristics of his paintings. The horse woman, on the left side of *La Jungla*, is a leitmotif in this context, referring at the same time to the divine role of the horse in *Santería* rituals. The practitioners become so-called *caballo de santo* ("the saint's horse") in the moment an Orisha takes possession of them while they are dancing and entering into a trance state. In Lam's pictorial universe the figure of the horse woman thus articulates the power of the unconscious and of syncretic spirituality as well as of the feminization of the divine. As Sims sustains, the horse woman is

> *"Lam's avatar of female power [with] which [he] created a unique synthesis of European modernist vocabularies—specifically Cubism (with its engagement with African forms) and Surrealism (with its engagement of nonempirical phenomena)—and African religious motifs and symbols, which had survived in Cuba."* [24]

Within the network of transversal surrealism, *La Jungla* was not only perceived in the context of the Caribbean's memory of its colonial history. Mabille highlighted yet another aspect in his essay published in 1945 in the twelfth number of *Tropiques*, where he stresses the significance of *La Jungla*'s hybrid dynamics as a counterclaim to Adolf Hitler's totalitarian ideology. According to Mabille, through an aesthetics of transmutation, Lam's art proposes a different world view: "I see an absolute opposition between this jungle [...], ready for all sorts of transmutations [...] and this other sinister jungle where a Fuehrer [...] watches, along the neo-Greek colonnades of Berlin, the departure of mechanized cohorts." [17] Mabille wrote his essay during his exile on the Latin American continent, along with other European surrealist artists and writers fleeing the Nazi occupation of French territory. His reading shows that *La Jungla* did not only speak to the traumatic memory of the Afro-Caribbean *Black Atlantic* in Gilroy's sense, but it also incited a plea for liberty by European writers like Mabille, who were facing Nazism's spreading totalitarianism and the profound and devastating crisis of World War II in Europe.

The Annunciation: A Prophecy of Freedom

Lam's surrealism is closely linked to his spiritual cosmology, which does not only encompass Afro-Caribbean religions but also a mélange of animistic, occult, esoteric and mythological configurations. He thus practices a worldmaking that is meant to disrupt Western beliefs that are grounded in a monolithic Christian worldview. His surrealist world contrasts with the *worlding* practiced by the European colonial endeavor to impose its worldview on non-Western cultures. This can be observed especially in paintings, in which he takes up classical Christian motifs of Western art history such as the biblical Annunciation. Lam is likely to have studied many variations of Annunciation motifs during his numerous visits to the Museo del Prado in Madrid. El Greco's paintings, in particular his *Anunciación* of 1597-1600, most probably served him as an example for the 1944 composition of the same theme. In his version, Lam undermines this central theme of Christian belief by confronting it with his syncretistic worldview. He explicitly practices a sort of transcultural "contamination" and "profanation" of this motif in order to reveal the uncontrollable dynamics of animistic and syncretic beliefs, which were discredited by the colonial system, because they threatened the Christian worldview. For this reason, Césaire, in his poem *Tam-Tam II*, dedicated to Lam, celebrated his friend's paintings as an "orgasm of sacred pollution." [18] By using the oxymoronic metaphor "sacred pollution" Césaire stresses Lam's power to undermine the purity of Christian faith by hybridizing—"polluting"—it with all sorts of animistic and mythic beliefs.

The oil painting gives the impression of being fragmentary and unfinished, as many areas of the canvas remain unpainted. The colors reveal only black and grey tones, reminding the viewers of a drawing or a sketch. At the same time, foreground and background seem to be intertwined with each other to such a degree that they become indistinguishable. This circumstance confuses the identification of the painting's two main figures: the angel on the right and Maria on the left side. Both are at the same time superimposed and underlaid by a variety of zoomorphic figures and forms emerging from—or even growing out of—them: the triangular heads and the smiling round heads with horns, half-moon shapes, and a mask-like form reminding of an ox. They all belong to Lam's pictorial universe and allude to the presence of a multitude of gods, ghosts and mythical creatures. Due to its dark appearance the figure of the angel on the right-hand side could be associated with a black Madonna. Because of the shadowy surface her head simultaneously resembles a black horse, which is crowned by a horseshoe, a traditional talisman symbol. This zoomorphic character of the angel figure can thus also be associated with the powerful symbol of the horse in *Santería*.

The assembly of phantoms, ghosts and hybrid creatures execute a "powerful and menacing effect" on the viewer, as critics have observed. [19] At the same time, the two-winged round heads with horns that are hanging upside down in the painting and smiling directly at the viewers almost appear like caricatures profaning the solemnity of the Christian theme, and simultaneously exposing a stylized primitivism. Mercer argues that Lam's "syncretic vitalism disrupts any dualistic distinction between spirituality and materiality, between the sacred and the profane." [20] By phantasmagorically syncretizing the motif of the Annunciation, the painter challenges the monolithic Christian worldview of European colonialism, confronting it with an uncontrollable dynamic of hybridity. Between Surrealism and *Santería* Lam's transatlantic re-visioning of the biblical theme from the perspective of Afro-Cuban syncretism thus provokes a rethinking of Western art history.

Years later *Annunciation* also became the title of Lam's last collaborative project that once again testifies to his lifelong friendship with Césaire. In 1982, the year of his death in Paris, when he was already weakened by the brain stroke he had suffered in 1978, he gathered a series of ten etchings created during the years 1969-1970 for their publication in the Milanese gallerist Giorgio Upiglio's edition Gráfica Uno where they were accompanied by Césaire's poems. The project was exhibited together with works by Picasso in 2011—the year dedicated to the French overseas departments (*l'année des Outre-mer*)—at the Grand Palais in Paris. It was entitled *Aimé Césaire, Lam, Picasso: "Nous nous sommes trouvés"* ("We have found each other") and curated by Eskil Lam, the director of the Wifredo Lam archives in Paris, as well as the Martinican author Daniel Maximin. The 1982 project includes another version of the Annunciation theme, which is an interpretation of Césaire's poem by the same title. In this case, the annunciation is not related to the biblical promise of God's coming to earth, but to the prophecy of liberation from oppression by discovering the vitality of "the real earth": "[l]e vrai feu de terre vraie." Resonating with Césaire's poem, Lam's painting with its *assemblage* of skulls in the center as well as the demon-like female goddess on the upper side once again embodies the haunting historical violence of the transatlantic slave trade as well as the powerful dynamics of syncretism that resisted it.

Despite his cosmopolitanism and the transversality of his biography, Lam often felt treated like a stranger in Europe although he spent the greatest part of his life there. In a letter to his first wife Helena Holzer, which he wrote during a visit to Cannes in 1946, he confesses that he often feels exposed in Europe like a piece of African or Oceanic tribal art shown in France's ethnographic museums. In the letter, he recalls a conversation with Césaire, in which he said to his friend: "Yesterday they sold the black meat, today they monopolize the spirit and the dreams of the Blacks." [21] From this perspective, the metaphor of the Trojan horse that Lam used for his paintings also functions as a reminder to the oppressed people to reappropriate and liberate their imagination, which colonial domination sought to control.



Wifredo Lam, *L'Annonciation* (1944), Private Collection

Source: VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2021



Wifredo Lam *Connaître, dit-t-il* (1969), Illustration of Aimé Césaire's poem *L'Annonciation*

Source: VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2021

The 1960s and 1970s: Wifredo Lam and the Cuban Revolution

From the 1950s onwards, Lam led an increasingly cosmopolitan life: Paris, New York, Caracas, Zurich, and Albissola in Italy were listed among the places where he lived. Ottmar Ette characterizes Cuban literature as being "without-a-fixed-abode," because it has been produced and perceived in diasporic circumstances. [22] This can also be said for Lam's global art overcoming national boundaries. His cosmopolitanism, which from the 1940s onwards was accompanied by international solo exhibitions in the Caribbean, Latin America, the USA and Europe, turned Cuba almost into a secondary venue of his biography. But Lam never lost touch with his island, least of all in the wake of the Cuban revolution of 1959 that for many artists and intellectuals nourished the hope of establishing a new power balance, which would eventually lead to more equality and social justice not only in Cuba but on the entire Latin American continent. Due to these hopes, Lam remained faithful to the Cuban revolution throughout his life. His ashes were brought to Cuba by his wife Lou Laurin-Lam and buried in an official ceremony at the Colón cemetery in Havana on December 8, 1982, attended by Fidel Castro.

In the course of the worldwide 1968 student revolts, Che Guevara and the Cuban revolution were celebrated by many artists, writers and intellectuals—especially those residing in France. However, the famous Padilla affair (*el caso Padilla*) divided the support as it revealed the Cuban regime's increasingly rigid cultural politics, which repressed and censured writers' voices, namely that of the poet Heberto Padilla who was arrested in 1971 after his volume of poetry *Fuera del juego* was declared counterrevolutionary. Apart from these growing tensions that led to the repressive *quinquenio gris* ('the grey five-year period') of the early 1970s, it is important to consider that the late 1960s were also a period

in which Cuba engaged in intensifying cultural exchanges across the African, Asian and Latin American countries of the Global South. To this end, Lam was responsible for constituting a French delegation, which would participate in the *Congreso Cultural de La Habana* from January 4 to 8, 1968. This event functioned as a forum of debate to discuss the concerns and problems of Global South artists and intellectuals. Lam's French delegation included surrealist writers and artists such as Alain Jouffroy, Michel Leiris and Joyce Mansour. In Havana, they met with Carpentier and Césaire as well as a number of outstanding international writers who also participated at the *Congreso Cultural*, among them Max Aub, Julio Córtazar, Jorge Semprún and Susan Sontag.

Notwithstanding the disillusionment with the Cuban revolution that some of these writers felt after the *Caso Padilla*, the *Congreso Cultural* intensified transatlantic exchanges as well as those within the surrealist delegation. In 1976, Lam and Mansour collaborated for the project *Orsa Maggiore*, which contains twelve colored lithographs by Lam illustrating Mansour's poem *Pandémonium*. The project indicates a shared consciousness of both artists' African heritage, although the cultural differences between Lam's Caribbean background and Mansour's, who was an Egyptian Jew nationalized in France, could hardly be greater. The dark, red-colored demons Lam created for Mansour's *Pandémonium* resonate with the violent claim of her poem's call for a "Frenetic Africa" and for an "Africa of tomorrow," in which "the man who is free will conquer death." [23]

Beyond the period of his most discussed Havana years of the 1940s, his collaborative projects from the 1960s onwards also demonstrate Lam's ongoing commitment with the transcultural memories of what he once called the "drama of his country": the transatlantic slave trade. However, Lam turns to hybridity as a means of resistance. The transversality of his syncretistic art can thus be understood as a rebellion against a *worlding*, through which the European colonial powers imposed a monolithic Christian worldview on non-Western cultures. Surrealism's method of liberating the power of the unconscious and the dreams substantiates Lam's global message to the oppressed people to re-conquer the freedom of their spirit and to disturb all actors of (post-)colonial exploitation in the greatest possible way.



Wifredo Lam and Aimé Césaire at the *Congreso Cultural* in Havana, 1968 (photo by Raul Corrales)

Source: Archives Wifredo Lam, Paris



Wifredo Lam, *Orsa Maggiore* (1976), Illustration of Joyce Mansour's poem *Pandémonium*

Source: VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2020

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NOTES

1. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).
2. Michele Greet, "Inventing Wilfredo Lam: The Parisian Avant-Garde's Primitivist Fixation," *Invisible Culture* 5 (2003).
3. Michele Greet, "Inventing Wilfredo Lam: The Parisian Avant-Garde's Primitivist Fixation," *Invisible Culture* 5 (2003).
4. Max-Pol Fouchet, *Wifredo Lam* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1984), 184. My translation.
5. Aimé Césaire and René Ménil, *Tropiques: 1941-1945 : collection complète*, ed. Jacqueline Leiner (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1978).
6. Original: "Saluons également le passage de Wifredo Lam, l'étonnant peintre nègre cubain chez qui on retrouve en même temps que le meilleur enseignement de Picasso, les traditions asiatiques et africaines curieusement et génialement mêlées". Aristide Mangée, "Revue de Revues," *Tropiques* 6-7 (1943): 77. (My translation).
7. *Tropiques* 6-7 (1943): 61.
8. Terri Geis, "Great Impulses and New Paths: *VVV*, Surrealism, and the Black Atlantic," *Miranda. Revue Pluridisciplinaire Du Monde Anglophone/Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed Journal on the English-Speaking World* 14 (2017): 1-12.
9. In *VVV* 2-3 (1943): 132.
10. Andrea Gremels, "El Único Punto de Resistencia: Cultural, Linguistic and Medial Transgressions in the Surrealist Journal *VVV*," *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas (JSA)* 11, no. 1 (2020): 20-41.
11. Yolanda Wood, *Islas Del Caribe: Naturaleza, Arte, Sociedad* (La Habana: Ed. UH, 2012).
12. Lowery Stokes Sims, *Wifredo Lam and the International Avant-Garde, 1923-1982* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 73.
13. Original: "[J]e serais comme un cheval de Troie d'où sortiraient des figures hallucinantes, capables de surprendre, de troubler les rêves des exploiteurs." Cited in Fouchet, *Wifredo Lam*, 31. (English Translation by Tate Modern)
14. Michel Leiris, *Wifredo Lam*, ed. Jean Jamin (Brüssel: Dedier Devillez, 1997).
15. Anke Birkenmaier, "Alejo Carpentier y Wifredo Lam: Negociaciones para un arte revolucionario," *Anales de Literatura Hispanoamericana* 32 (2003): 205-13.
16. Catherine David, "El monte y el mundo," in *Wifredo Lam*, ed. Catherine David (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2015), 17.
17. Original: "[J]e vois une opposition absolue entre cette jungle-là [...], prête à toutes les transmutations [...], et cette autre jungle sinistre où un Fuehrer [...] guette, au long des colonnades néo-grecques de Berlin, le départ des cohortes mécanisées". Pierre Mabille, "La Jungle," *Tropiques* 12 (1945): 187.
18. Original: "orgasme des pollutions saintes". Aimé Césaire, "Tam-Tam II," *VVV* 2-3 (1943): 132.
19. See Kobena Mercer, "Les routes afro-atlantiques de Wifredo Lam," in *Wifredo Lam*, ed. Catherine David (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2015), 25. And Sims, *Wifredo Lam and the International Avant-Garde, 1923-1982*, 55.
20. In French (catalogue text): "Son vitalisme syncrétique perturbe toute distinction dualiste entre le spirituel et le matériel ou le sacré et le profane". Mercer, "Les routes afro-atlantiques de Wifredo Lam," 25.

21 Original: "Ayer se vendia la carne negra, hoy se monopolisa [sic] su espírito [y] sus sueños". Cited in Jacques Leenhardt, *Wifredo Lam* (Paris: HC éd, 2009), 180-81. With the original manuscript of the letter written in Spanish and a French transcription by Leenhardt. (My translation)

22 Ottmar Ette, *Writing-between-Worlds: TransArea Studies and the Literatures-without-a-Fixed-Abode*, *Writing-between-Worlds* (Berlin et al: De Gruyter, 2016).

23 For an English translation of the poem, see Joyce Mansour, "Pandemonium," trans. Katharine Conley, *Dada/Surrealism* 19, no. 1 (2013).

24 Sims, *Wifredo Lam and the International Avant-Garde, 1923-1982*, 1.