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17th Street and Constitution Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20006

AUDIO-VISUAL PROGRAM

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SET 209
210 **WILFREDO LAM, ARTIST FROM CUBA**

Wilfredo Oscar de la Concepcion Lam y Castilla Mazzola or Wilfredo Lam was born at Sagua la Grande, Cuba, on December 2, 1902. His mother was of mixed African, Indian and European origin. His father was Chinese, a business man from Canton. From his childhood Lam recalls the images of African religions practiced on the island, a cultural debt to the Yorubas.

Lam began his art studies at the Academy of San Alejandro in Havana. By 1924 Lam made his way to Madrid to study at the free Academy there. Later he worked in the studio of Fernando Alvarez di Sotamayor, then director of the Prado. He stayed in Madrid throughout the Spanish Civil War. He took refuge in France after the defeat of the Loyalists. In Paris he met Picasso who encouraged him artistically and financially. It was the Blaue Reiter group of painters from Munich - notably through the latter paintings of Heinrich Campendork - that Lam became first acquainted with primitive Negro Art.

In 1938 the Galerie Pierre organized an exhibition of Lam's paintings. Through Oscar Dominguez, Lam made acquaintance of the Surrealists, Breton, Ernst, Masson, and Brauner. In 1941 Lam returned to Cuba.

Once on native soil his subject matter became more haunted and savage. The domination of his forms by Picasso's diminished. In 1942 the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York City exhibited his works. By 1943 the haunted savage qualities in his work were more evident, especially in the large composition The Jungle, a milestone in his work.

Since 1946 Lam has spent much more time in Paris and Europe. Tall, narrow canvases, like primitive shields, haunting fetishes on panels inscribed with magic symbols are his most frequent expression. A savage elegance is the characteristic which strikes us most forcibly in Wilfredo Lam's work. Beneath the elegance is a suggestion of tension, dread, of unfamiliar forces at work. His art is a nocturnal art full of the cruelty of a tropical sun and dark mystery of the lush jungle. The interior poetry of Lam's painting has its roots in a heritage for which he either has a wise and profound regard, or is unable to shake off.

Although art may transcend natural boundaries, its nurture and insurance is individual and regional. Lam in his art has never succumbed to any temptation to separate himself from the primitive sources of his inspiration. Ritual particularly the ritual of sacrifice, seems to be the image source on which Lam continues to draw, but now in a more refined and anecdotally concentrated manner. Conventional naturalism is reduced to a symbolic minimum. Now his color is cleaner. Elements of composition swim clear against grounds that are laden with hints suggestions and troubled dreams which grew directly out of the medium itself. This ambiguity of representation is one source of his poetry. Its relationship to roots in his spiritual experience seems direct,

museum of modern art of latin america



sound and unself-conscious.

Lam's work shows a relentless love of monotony. Since 1943 there has been no change in the subject matter and technique of his paintings: The horned creatures, the leaves, the elegant and vibrant sense of linearity, the opaque persistence of greys and dark earth tones. the same resolutions of space.

Lam died in Paris in 1982.

Text by Sharon Crockett.

SLIDES SET 209 PAINTINGS BY WIFREDO LAM

- 209 A "Composicion," 1938.
Earth tones, tropical golds and yellows reveal Lam's tropical origins. Although cubistic, the blade like forms of his later work are present in the composition.
- 209 B "Madre Chijo," 1939.
This painting revolves on a vertical and horizontal axis. The woman surrounded by blue is a powerful vertical figure. The background horizontal lines lead the eye to the horizontally held child.
- 209 C "Ta Propre Vie," gouache, 1942. 42 X 33 1/2 inches.
Pierre Matisse Gallery. Foliage and organic parts confront the viewer in this cubistic work.
- 209 D "The Jungle." gouache, 1943. 7 feet 10 1/4 inches X 7 feet 6 1/2 inches.
Collection Musuem of Modern Art, New York. The Jungle suggests some phantasmagoric jungle ritual setting the theme of terror. Tree trunks seem to flow into gigantic animal legs strike the rhythm of the composition, which is punctuated by cruel blade-like forms - actual instruments or palm leaves that echo them in shape. Grey, green, and black are the tones that dominate. Human and animal figures flow in and out of this jungle warp, the paraphernalia of some nightmare sacrifice.
- 209 E "Yosoy," 1949.
This cubistic woman sits as graceful as a Greek muse. The texture of hair contrasts to the solid angularity of the body. A round horned shape at the top of the figure adds an element of mystery.
- 209 F "La Mañana Verde," 1943.
Form and symbol carry over from "the Jungle" in a less dense, threatening manner. The winged figure seems watchful and protective.
- 209 G "Umbral," 1950. 72 X 70 inches.
Lam has layered shapes and lines behind the shield like figures. The round horned head symbol appears at the lower left corner. Are there sacrificial forces at work with the offering lying on the lowest horizontal plane? Color is subdued except for the band of vermillion and yellow.

209 H This untitled work combines animal forms with human form. Ochre and rose accent the muted background and grey tones of the body.

209 I "La Novia para el Dios," 1959.
The new bride for the gods shows several layers of texture, shape and contrast. The background figure is narrow and linear. The dark middle figure is massive. The foreground figure contrasts with the light and dramatic shape.

209 J The "bird" woman is bedecked for a festival with a garland of flowers in her hair and around her neck.



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SLIDE SET 210 PAINTINGS BY WILFREDO LAM

- 210 A "La Silla," 1941. Oil 131 X 97.5 cm.
The chair in white contrasts with the dense foliage. Primary colors accent the green background.
- 210 B The figures move out of a dense jungle. Contrasts between primary colors, bluegreen and the dark central mass and linear aspects of the figure lend this work a primeval force.
- 210 C "Personaj," 1971.
This character assumes the attributes of a cubistic horse and Lam's motif of pointed head creature. Earth tones create an analogous paint surface.
- 210 D Lam has repeated his blade forms, the shield like figure, and reduced subject to a symbolic minimum. There is an elegant and vibrant sense of linearity.
- 210 E In the 1972 painting, Lam uses the horned figure motif. the composition has a pyramid type balance to it.
- 210 F "Personajes," 1973.
More horned figures appear in this composition. Naturalism has disappeared for a symbolic minimum. The figures interact and move together.
- 210 G "El Pájaro Blanco," 1970.
The White bird pierces a shield with his tail. Lam creates his own bestiary of creatures. Muted greys, blacks and blues contrast with the white bird.
- 210 H "Personaj y Pájaro," 1971.
Form has been reduced to a symbolic minimum. The pajarito (bird) and personage exist side by side without interaction. Greys, earth tones, and orange unify the two figures.
- 210 I Personaj, 1973.
This personage resembles a jungle shaman. There is a vibrant sense of linearity. Lam uses the same formula to resolve space.
- 210 J "figura," 1973.
The horned head symbol and blade forms are repeated in this composition. There is an elegant linearity to the work. The thinnest paint washes darken the figure.