APPROPRIATING AND SYNTHESIZING CUBISM AND SURREALISM: WIFREDO LAM’S 1940S CUBAN WORKS

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As a modernist artist, Wifredo Lam used issues of racial degradation and colonialism as a catalyst to create work that directly addressed issues of colonialism in Cuba. Akin to Picasso’s process of appropriating of African motifs within a modern, Cubist style, Wifredo Lam created and appropriated a pastiche of both Surrealistic and Cubist styles into his 1940s paintings. The utilization of these modern styles engendered Lam’s international reputation while providing him with a powerful, creative outlet to express his struggle as an Afro-Cuban. Through the use of African masks and the Santería religion in his paintings during this time period, Lam reappropriated African motifs to their rightful domain within modern art in addition to commenting on racial inequality brought about through colonialism in Cuba. He further berates colonialism through the image of women in his paintings suggesting that colonialism begat European beauty ideologies, sexual exploitation, and the degradation of the African race within Cuba.

Wifredo Lam in Europe

Wifredo Lam’s tenacity to both escape the hardships of Havana and enrich his artistic education provoked him to study abroad in Madrid at the age of twenty-one, which introduced him to avant-garde styles and artists. In Madrid, Lam studied under Salvador Dalí and Fernando Álvarez de Sotomayor y Zaragoza, the curator of the Museo del Prado. These connections familiarized Lam with the famous artists in the Prado, including Hieronymus Bosch, in addition to the Surrealism movement. He began experimenting with less formal elements, creating animal-hybrid figures within his paintings, figures utilized by both Bosch and Surrealists. The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, however, forced Lam formalize his style when he decided to create propaganda art and posters after siding with the Republic. One year later, he
was introduced to Pablo Picasso whom he later befriended. Lam later moved to Paris in the late 1930s where he began working with Picasso and members of the Parisian Surrealist group.

Pablo Picasso provided Lam with support and stylistic influence; Cubism’s style and ideologies permeated Lam’s work. This artistic movement, created by Picasso and Braque, focused on flattening objects on the canvas, providing multitudinous viewpoints, and incorporating non-western, primarily African, motifs their works. Lam assimilated such techniques into his work but remained adamant that Picasso’s impact was rather minimal. He states, “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 my confidence in what I am doing from his approval.”

For Lam, one of the most pivotal and troubling aspects of Cubism appears to be the use of African motifs in a Cubist, European environment. Cubism used this morphology aiming at a formal transformation and revitalization of western art. Lam was not interested in the analytical or synthetical research of figuration carried out by Cubism. He strives to return to western painting using the vocabulary created by modernism, thus introducing the mythical representation of a different weltanschauung or view of life. Lam viewed modernism as an opportunity to reintroduce African motifs in a famed style but to do so within the proper context. Picasso, along with other modernists, used non-western motifs to differentiate their work from their peers; this led to a plethora of African sculptures, masks, and motifs being taken out of


context as seen in Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (fig. 1). The woman squatting in the bottom right-hand corner of this work sports a mask that bears remarkable similarity to that of traditional masks from Africa. This mask does not appear in its proper context, however, which would most likely be used in a ceremony. It is instead used and associated with prostitution and sexual deviancy. Lam sought to create modernist works that followed the stylistic parameters of Cubism, but to properly contextualize any references to African culture that may be incorporated.

Lam was later introduced to André Breton who further enriched Lam’s painting technique. Breton, the leader of the Surrealists, introduced Lam to Surrealist ideologies including blurring the lines between the real and the unconscious. Surrealism freed Lam from traditional representation and opened up the possibilities for subversion of the naturalistic that results in endless surprise and delight. In this regard he was deeply influenced by Breton’s insistence that painting, like language, must refuse to copy nature. He built upon his earlier use of human-animal hybrid figures in Spain and used them as the primary subjects within his paintings which can be attributed the Surrealism’s use of *cadaver exquis* or the exquisite corpse: fantastic, imaginative creatures created through a collaborative game that had players add on to previous player’s drawings.

The challenge for Lam was to find a visual language that could communicate the religious beliefs of a syncretistic of African origins who had survived uprooting, slavery, and colonialism, and Afro-Cubanism, his own personal legacy provided him with that imagery.

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4 Ibid., 37.
With the modernist visual vocabulary that Lam acquired while in Europe, Lam forged his own style synthesizing the abounding viewpoints and flattening of subject matter from Cubism with human-animal hybrid figures and the incorporation of the unconscious and surreal from Surrealism. The interest in non-western motifs by both Cubists and the Surrealists provided Lam with appropriate styles to re-contextualize these motifs. “Cubism, along with Surrealist methods, allowed Lam to give a cultural edge to this widespread modernist mode. Cubism was the most compatible springboard for his evolution into an artist of significant reality, but Lam transformed it into an instrument of cultural revolution.”

In his appropriation of the techniques of the European avant-garde, Lam would create work that resembles these styles without completely adopting them. By linking himself to these methods “just enough,” he clarifies his location in relation to the hegemonic discourse and his own agenda in deconstructing these methods of representation.

In the summer of 1941, Lam returned home to Cuba after being released from prison after the outbreak of World War II. Despite the artistic success and praise he received in Europe, Lam found himself in the same situation as when he left in Cuba: not well-known and a victim of colonization. He states:

“I had to start from scratch, as it were, and I no longer knew where my feelings lay…I found myself in the same situation as before I left Cuba, when I had no great horizons before me…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.”

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Lam did not remain submissive to such colonial power, however, and used his angst towards colonization and racism as a catalyst to produce artwork that commented on these issues using in his uniquely formed Cubist, Surrealist style. Lam’s return to Cuba began a period of intensive output and creative activity, inspired by tropical vegetation and Afro-Cuban culture. During this period his style evolved from the flat, cubistic works of Paris to a more complex and surrealistic technique. He began to blend European and African aesthetics to create his own unique effect.⁸

Racial Inequality in Cuba

In spite of an eleven-year absence from Cuba, racial inequality remained flagrant; both Afro-Cubans and mulattos remained second-class citizens. Mulatto refers to a specific population in Cuba that has mixed ancestry that is most often African and European. The mulatto population was created when slaves were brought from Africa to Cuba to work on sugarcane plantations. Albeit being part European, the superior race in Cuba as seen by colonizers, mulattos were treated as lower class citizens due to their partial African roots. Lam, a mulatto, experienced racial prejudice and discrimination firsthand both before and after his stay in Europe. Over the course of the 1940s and 1950s, the period during which Lam was living in his native Cuba, the living and working conditions of the Afro-Cuban were extremely poor.⁹ Full legal equality for both Blacks and mulattos was not attained in Cuba until 1940, when a new constitution banned discrimination. Even then, change came slowly. Lam was angered when he realized how segregation and racial arrogance affected the daily life of his mother, an Afro-Cuban. He

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⁹ Ibid.
determined that his art should “express her sadness and melancholy as reflecting the fact that she was part of a rejected people.”  

African Motifs in Lam’s Work

In order to create art that would speak to the Afro-Cuban community Lam painted images that contained specific African motifs including African masks and depictions of the Santería religion, a common religion among this population that stems from Africa. The incorporation of these elements within his works celebrated their shared African roots. Although what Lam comes to understand as “Africa” comes from Paris as that of the other modernists—it becomes the representation of a different cultural experience. Its approach stems from the Afro-African discourses. These images, forged using a modern style, commented on racial inequality and colonization while properly contextualizing African motifs. Lam states:

“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 paint the drama of my country, but by thoroughly expressing the negro spirit, the beauty of the plastic art of the blacks. 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. I knew I was running the risk of not being understood either by the man in the street or by the others. But a true picture has the power for set the imagination to work, even if it takes time.”

The series of paintings that Lam created in the 1940s bolsters this statement; his work confronts colonization ideologies through addressing such issues within an African context. Framing these works within a modern context allows Lam to be recognized by the art world while giving him a venue to return African images to their rightful domain.

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10 Valerie J. Fletcher, "Wifredo Lam: Art of Pride and Anger," 52.
Lam drew upon a series of masks and sculptures from different parts of Africa, including Baule sculptures and “fire spitter” masks, to create his paintings that allude to his African roots and represent the Afro-Cuban population. This interest in the art of Africa may have stemmed from the European fascination for Baule sculpture. Europeans favored the sculpture from this region in western Africa for its precise detail, extensive patterns suggestive of scarification, and highly-polished finishes. Having recently arrived from Europe, Lam would have been familiar with and possibly influenced by this passion for Baule sculpture. Using a pastiche of masks and sculpture from different parts of Africa as inspiration, Lam adorned many figures in his paintings in masks harkening back to his African roots.

The incorporation and influence of African mask and sculpture can be seen in The Astral Harp (fig. 2). Lam’s use of stacking figures on top of one another in front of a background of leaves and sugar cane emits a feeling of chaos. He flattens the figures, similar to Cubist works, leaving little visual depth. Similar to other works, many figures appear to be Surrealist hybrids constructed from elements of plants, animals, and humans. This work features a number of long faces with small, round eyes. These faces reflect the plasticity of African masks in their exaggerated proportions, stylized geometric features, and incised details. One face features a small, oval mouth while the others display full, protruding lips. Both types of mouths can be found on numerous examples of masks from West Africa.

Lam often contextualizes these masks within the African religion by integrating facets of the Santería religion within his paintings, which further connect his artwork with the Afro-Cuban population. This religion, like the masks, inks back to Lam’s African roots. Santería, the primary

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13 Michael J. Asplan, "Painting the Drama of His Country: Racial Issues in the Work of Wifredo Lam, 1941-1952."
14 Ibid.
religion of the Afro-Cuban population, can be traced back to the Yoruba region of Africa. Its mythologies, traditions, and ceremonies originated with the Yoruba people, who brought their religion with them when the Spaniards transported them as slave laborers to Cuba.\textsuperscript{15} Followers of \textit{Santería} use ceremonies and rituals to contact \textit{orishas}, the spirits and gods, some of the most popular being Shango and Ogún. By using iconography from a religion primarily known to Afro-Cubans, Lam appropriately contextualizes African motifs. These motifs, symbols, and ritual scenes would be embedded with messages that only Afro-Cubans could understand.

Lam’s familiarity with this religion differentiates himself from peers such as Picasso as Lam understood the origin and meaning of such symbology and, thus, respected it:

“He had been trained in this Afro-Cuban religion when he was young. Lam’s evasiveness on the subject would have been predicated on the strictures of taboo and the code of secrecy that would bind adherents of these religions…He states: ‘I have never created my images according to a symbolic tradition, but always on the biases of poetic excitation.’”\textsuperscript{16}

Many of his works reference \textit{Santería} abstractly and “just enough” for the viewer, the Afro-Cuban, to grasp the meaning. His paintings demonstrated his interpretations of \textit{Santería} ritual rather than recreating rituals from real life. Lam may incorporate the names and images of specific \textit{orishas} of this religion but would never portray them in ways that may be construed as taboo or inappropriate.

\textit{Le Sombre Malembo, Dieu de Carrefoure} (fig. 3) exhibits Lam’s utilization of specific \textit{Santería} iconography and symbology and utilization of African masks. The main figure is an \textit{orisha} that is created in a Surrealist style through placing a human head on horse’s body.

Although more fluid than fragmented Cubist works, he still focuses on the flattening of figures

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
and the background giving the viewer a shallow perspective. The two figures in this work blend together only recognizable by masks. Many figures in Lam’s paintings from this time spent in Cuba, including the two figures in this work, are depicted with two small horns protruding from the top of the head. Horns are often found on masks or pieces of sculpture from many parts of Africa such as with “fire spitter” masks from the Senufo region in Western Sudan.\(^{17}\) His incorporation of these masks most likely alludes to Lam’s ancestry and African roots.

The horse figure in the center alludes to a ritual being performed. In Santería ceremonies, the practicant is often referred to as a horse because it is believed that this person who may be a priest, priestess, or devotee is the mount that the orisha, the god, has selected to “ride” for the ceremony. The horse motif alludes to an individual being possessed by a specific orisha. While in possession of the orisha, the mount is said to possess the personality and characteristics of the particular god that has chosen to ride them.

This painting includes further symbolism related to Santería ceremonies including a horseshoe and the forest. The decision to include a horseshoe, which is associated with the orisha Ogún, has been theorized to link the Afro-Cuban community with this specific deity:

“This inclusion of an iconographic element indicative of Ogún may have been a subtle reiteration of the former slavery of Africans in Cuba. The mythological story of Ogún’s commitment to labor reflects the life of the majority of Afro-Cubans at that time…Like Ogún, Afro-Cubans spent their lives dedicated to their hard work. The association of Ogún with war might parallel internal strife within the Afro-Cuban and mulatto community.”\(^{18}\)

The lush, dense vegetation found in both Cuba and the background of the painting is essential to Santería. El monte, the jungle, is the site of the rituals of Santería, as well as the source of the

\(^{17}\) Michael J. Asplan, ”Painting the Drama of His Country: Racial Issues in the Work of Wifredo Lam, 1941-1952.”

\(^{18}\) Ibid.
herbs and plants used for cures. The orishas inhabit el monte and imbue the vegetation for ashé or power. El monte is integral to this religion and to Afro-Cubans, and thus becomes the setting of the majority of Lam’s works done in Cuba.\textsuperscript{19} This abstract symbology in this painting was, most likely, only understood at the time by followers of Santería who would be the Afro-Cuban community in Cuba; his work, thus, is only relatable to a specific population, the group of people that Lam felt the need to make his paintings for and about.

The orisha Shango is directly acknowledged in The Eternal Presence (fig. 4). Lam states, “The vessel on the right, full of rice and with a head emerging from it, represents religion, the mysteries. And in the central figure with folded limbs we can see the dream…in the upper right corner I placed the symbol of Shango, the god of thunder.”\textsuperscript{20} The incorporation of faint red and blue hues also alludes to Shango who is said to represent the hot, red, and cold, blue, in everyone. Addressing the mystery and supernatural essence of Santería, Lam depicts different aspects of this religion without depicting anything that would be misconstrued as taboo. This scene, which portrays a series of hybrid Surreal-like bodies that are almost inseparable from one another performing a ritual for Shango, does not represent an actual ceremony but, instead, Lam’s interpretation of one. By representing Santería in this manner, he makes this image relatable without risking blasphemy as representing accurate depictions of orishas and Santería ceremonies in art for the general public could be misconstrued as offensive or disrespectful. This symbology, similar to that in Le Sombre Malembo, Dieu de Carrefoure, would, most likely, only be understood by Afro-Cubans.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
Wifredo Lam addresses racial discrimination and colonization in his one of his most well-known works: *The Jungle* (fig. 5). This painting is an attack on colonialism: firstly because any assertion of Africanicity by a colored within the colonial context is an act of defiance; and secondly, or so Lam hoped, through the shock value of its hybridization of plants, animals and people, corresponding to Surrealist use of language. Akin to previous works discussed, Lam creates a space where a plethora of hybrid figures are juxtaposed in front of a sugarcane field. These figures, distinguishable by their African masks with protruding lips, large eyes, and crescent shape, blend with dense vegetation creating a chaotic scene. Incorporating both Surrealism and Cubism techniques, Lam frames this work within a modernist context providing commentary on the harsh living conditions of the Afro-Cuban community.

The disconnect between the title of the work and the scene depicted further comments on race in Cuba. *The Jungle*, upon closer inspection, does not depict a jungle but, instead, sugarcane. Lam stated that this painting was a psychic state not an actual depiction of a jungle. The juxtaposition of the sugar cane with the series of figures adorned in African masks may allude to the environment that Africans found themselves in after arriving in Cuba. Slaves were transported from Africa to Cuba for the sole purpose of working the sugarcane fields; in spite of the abolishment of slavery in Cuba, the conditions for the Afro-Cuban community had not changed much. The sugar cane might even been seen as the bars of a cage, keeping Africans from a life different from that of their ancestors. The cage creates the psychic state of which Lam spoke. Through this image, Lam castigates the treatment of this population that has been

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22 Michael J. Asplan, "Painting the Drama of His Country: Racial Issues in the Work of Wifredo Lam, 1941-1952."
continually reinforced through colonization hegemony by showing Afro-Cubans as trapped by the same hardships faced by their slaved ancestors.

Further berating colonization and its impact on racism, Lam includes a pair of scissors in the top right hand corner of *The Jungle*. Most likely the scissors allude to the division between races in Cuba. The scissors may be, in essence, cutting apart the races.\(^{23}\) The scissors, which are depicted upright and open, are being actively used instead of passively displayed. These scissors may also represent the necessity to sever ties with such hegemonic ideologies; Lam declared that it was “necessary to sever all ties with colonial culture.” Lam achieves this by disrupting the aspirations of European representation through the appropriation of non-European art.\(^{24}\) Lam makes this statement using hybrid figures donned in African inspired masks who may be representative of the Afro-Cuban community; the juxtaposition of the scissors with these figures suggests that Lam believes that they need to sever ties with colonialism, and it is up to them to make the change since colonialist ideals have not changed for decades.

Weaponry is again utilized as a call for change in *The Eternal Presence*. Lam says, “The figure on the right has a knife, the instrument of integrity, 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.”\(^{25}\) This figure symbolizes the submission of the mulattos. Colonialism and its encouragement of racial inequality has been despised yet little has been done by the oppressed to change these issues. By equipping this figure with a knife and the figure in *The Jungle* with scissors, Lam demands change insisting that it needs to come from the mulattos and Afro-Cubans; passivity is

\(^{23}\) Ibid.
\(^{25}\) Michael J. Asplan, "Painting the Drama of His Country: Racial Issues in the Work of Wifredo Lam, 1941-1952."
not the way to equality. He attempts to supply them with the ammunition for an uprising through the messages and criticisms in his paintings but remains unsure if mulattos will actually stand up against colonialism.

_The Green Morning_ (fig. 6) further expounds the history of the treatment of the Afro-Cuban population in colonial times by using African motifs and symbology that liken the main figure to the Afro-Cuban community. A winged figure composed of both human and animal attributes sits amidst sugarcane stalks. This figure appears to have multiple heads or figures stacked on top of one another; the simplistic brushstroke gestures give each face a faint outline identified by eyes, a nose, or protruding lips. Not only are the facial expressions simplified and stylized so are the appendages. The elegance and simplicity of the rendering of the central figure echoes the seductiveness of sculpture from western and central Africa.²⁶ The attenuation of the appendages in addition to the accentuation of the breasts can be likened to those of Baule sculptures. The legs and arms of such appear exaggerated in order to elongate the figure. Lam ties this figure to the Black and mulatto population through his use of the sugarcane and African motifs. The colonization of Cuba, no doubt, engendered the transport and utilization of African slaves, but also bolstered racial discrimination with White being the ideal. _The Green Morning_ comments on the hardships faced by Afro-Cubans in spite of so-called equality in Cuba during this time. The winged creature in the center may represent African’s freedom from slavery. The large wings, which envelop the figure metaphorically, depict flight from captivity to freedom. The Afro-Cuban population is still bound by racism and economic hardship to a life little improved from that of their parents.²⁷ This beautiful winged figure remains ensnared in sugarcane, the very crop that engendered slavery in Cuba. Lam used this background to again

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²⁶ Ibid.
²⁷ Ibid.
relate to Afro-Cubans as many still worked on sugarcane plantations and suffered financial hardships similar to their African slave ancestors and are unable to fly far from their situations much like the main figure in this painting.

The Role of Women in Lam’s Work

Sexual abuse and exploitation became a byproduct of colonization in Cuba. Racial discrimination not only existed within the confines of the treatment of male workers but also the treatment of females who were often forced into prostitution. Afro-Cuban women were constantly degraded and seen as subhuman sexual objects or exotics rather than actual human beings. Wifredo Lam utilized the image of the prostitute within his work to chastise the effects of colonialism; these prostitutes allude to colonialism as the root of degradation for the African race in Cuba, the dismantling of desire based on race, and beauty ideologies engendered by colonialism.

*The Eternal Presence* embodies the biracial population in Cuba and its relationship to the degradation of Africans. Wifredo Lam states: “The figure on the left is a stupid whore. With her two mouths she feels ridiculous. From her heart comes nothing but an animal’s paw. In her heterogeneity she evokes cross breeding, the degeneration of the race.” The figure on the left, referred to by Lam as a whore, most likely represents the biracial population of Cuba at this time. Created through the exploitation of African female slaves by their White owners, mulattos remain largely discriminated against and exploited. Black female slaves, according to Lam, are the source for degradation of the African race in Cuba; all descendants of these slaves who still bear some resemblance in skin tone are subjugated to racial discrimination and prejudice. For

Lam and his contemporaries, the use of the mulatta, her body, her feminine characteristics, even in rejection, was a reaction to the imperialism of European history.²⁹

Lam thematically addresses desire, shame, and race in *Zambezia-Zambezia* (fig. 7). A female, a White prostitute, stands in front of her male courtesan. This intimate moment is made shameful however through the Black man who, instead of acknowledging the woman, hides behind her. “Perhaps this is suggestive of the taboo of inter-racial relationships in Cuba. The female figure may be seen in one sense as being unattractive because of her betrayal of her race, whereas the male figure may be perceived as hiding in shame for his indiscretion.”³⁰ This relationship between a White woman and Black man alludes to ideologies of desire engrained in the minds of men by colonization. White has been continually equated to beauty and attractiveness while Black has been equated with ugliness or the exotic. Lam, too, has been influenced by this dichotomy of beauty who may be commenting on his preference to White women through this painting. Robert Linsley, a contemporary art historian, theorizes:

> He is attracted to the White woman of Europe for colonialism has made her desirable above all others; yet his deeper feelings are pledged in loyalty to the Black woman of Africa, to whom he is tied by blood. The bestiality of Lam’s women expresses the fear and repulsion that must be mingled with attraction to both White and Black women in this socially and sexually conflicted situation.³¹

This inner struggle between sexual attraction and societal expectation causes Lam to further evaluate the impact of colonialism within biracial relationships and desires.

Hegemonic ideologies of beauty remained prominent in Cuba during the 1940s forcing Lam to redefine and deconstruct such ideals. Female nudes in Lam’s works, including those in

³⁰ Michael J. Asplan, “Painting the Drama of His Country: Racial Issues in the Work of Wifredo Lam, 1941-1952.”
The *Eternal Presence*, *Zambezia-Zambezia,* and *The Jungle,* have features that enable viewers to identify them as African including thick lips, prominent buttocks, and large feet. Some of these figures may seem appear to be caricatures, but that was no his intention. Lam was making a statement of racial pride: African, rather than European, standards of beauty apply here. Redefining beauty within the context of Africa gave Lam the opportunity to berate colonialism through another avenue; bringing attention to other beauty standards encouraged viewers to rebel against colonialist ideals instead of remaining passive to them.

The *femme cheval,* or horse-woman, provided Lam with another tool to deconstruct beauty ideals existing within the confines of colonialism. These figures, which are comprised of both a woman and a horse, allude to *Santería* rituals but also represent the deconstruction of European notions of beauty. Creating powerful, important women that *orishas* have chosen to mount with African attributes, such as a mask or facial features recognized as African, Lam suggests that African attributes are just as beautiful, if not more beautiful, than European. The *femme cheval* is seen again in his work *Untitled* (fig. 8). The woman in this work is European. In the mirror she sees an image of herself reflected back as one of Lam’s Africanized avatars of female power, the *femme cheval* who symbolizes a possessed a devotee of the Afro-Cuban religion of *Santería.* It is a potent image in which Europe literally reframes its self-image through the reflection of the “other,” i.e., Africa. *Untitled* recontextualizes beauty through an African lens touting the significance of such attributes in the face of colonialism, which denounced such features.

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32 Valerie J. Fletcher, "Wifredo Lam: Art of Pride and Anger," 52.
Utilizing the flattening of figures, non-western iconography, and hybrid figures, Wifredo Lam developed a pastiche of Surrealism and Cubism that related himself to modernism while also commenting on the impacts of colonialism in Cuba. His works incorporated similar motifs found in Cubism, such as African masks and sculptures, but reintroduced them within their rightful domain. Lam adorned many of his figures with masks that were inspired by several different culture groups of Africa; these masks were usually the definitive feature for each figure in his work as many of them were almost indistinguishable from one another through his stacking of figures. Many of his works demonstrated his understanding and respect for Santería, a religion that traces back to the Yoruba people of Africa, further associating Lam and his paintings to his African roots. The orishas and their mounts symbolized the Afro-Cuban community who Lam encouraged to fight against racial degradation brought about by colonialism. Supplying weaponry to the Afro-Cubans through images of weapons and his actual paintings, Lam believed that an uprising was essential to creating a better life for this community who, although free, still felt the wrath of colonialism through racial discrimination and prejudice. Using women as subjects in his work further bolstered Lam’s idea that colonialism had significant pejorative impacts on Cuba; sexual exploitation, beauty ideologies, and degradation of the African race were brought about through the sexual abuse of African slave women. Wifredo Lam’s recontextualization of African motifs in a modern painting context allowed him to be remembered as an affluent figure in both Cuba and Europe; his work challenges preconceived notions of race, colonization, and beauty in a Surreal and Cubist style that is both visually intriguing and unsettling.
Bibliography


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Illustrations

Figure 1:

Figure 2:

Wifredo Lam, *The Astral Harp*, 1944. Oil on canvas. 210 cm x 190 cm.

Figure 3:
Wifredo Lam, *Le Sombre Malembo, Dieu du Carrefoure*, 1943. Oil on canvas, 153 cm x 126.4 cm.

Figure 4:


Figure 5:

Figure 6:

![Image of The Jungle](image)


Figure 7:

Figure 8: