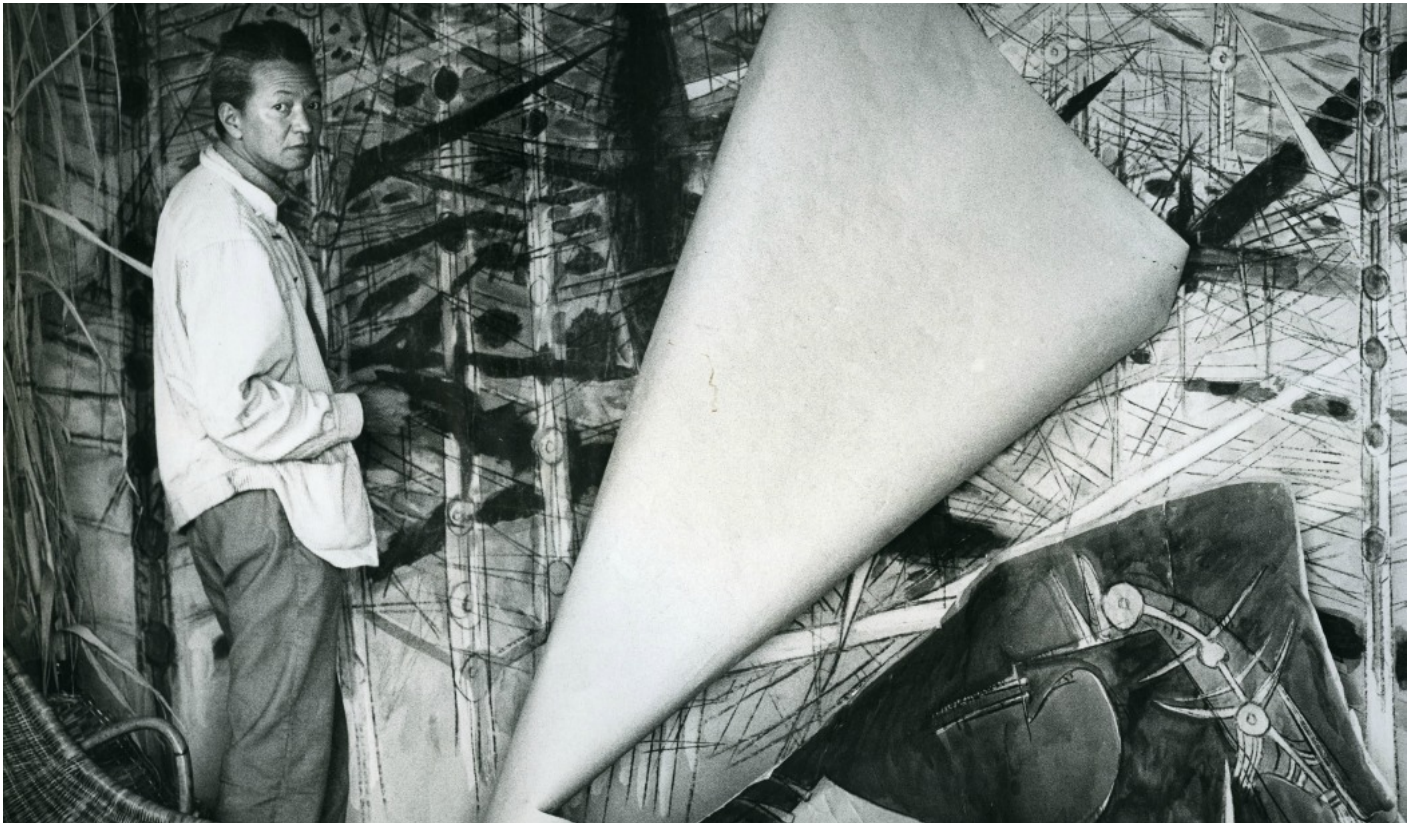


## The Art of Wifredo Lam Reframed at Centre Pompidou Paris

BY NICHOLAS FORREST | OCTOBER 01, 2015

---



Wifredo Lam, Albissola («Brousses» series, 1958 -1963) © Archives SDO Wifredo Lam

“Wifredo Lam” at the Centre Pompidou in Paris is the first major retrospective of the internationally renowned Cuban painter’s work since 1983, a year after his death. Spanning the 1930s to the 1970s, the exhibition aims to reposition Lam’s work within an international history of modern art through more than 400 works including paintings, drawings, photographs, reviews, and rare books. Beginning with his early years in Cuba and the time he spent in Spain from 1924-1938, Lam’s singular career unfolds over five themed sections corresponding to the different phases in the artist’s career.

Even though there has been a resurgence in interest in his work since his death in 1982 and following the decline of his reputation that began in the 1960s, Lam remains a relatively misunderstood and underappreciated figure compared to other modernist masters such as Pablo Picasso, André Breton, Georges Braque, and Fernand Léger. The Centre Pompidou exhibition is comprised mainly of major museum loans including his masterpiece “The Jungle” (1943) which has been lent by the Museum of Modern Art New York for the first time to another institution.

Born in 1902 in Sagua la Grande, Cuba to a Cantonese Chinese father and a mother of African slave and Spanish ancestry, Lam’s multicultural heritage had a major influence on his work. Drawing inspiration from his own unique cultural identity as well as the artists, poets, intellectuals, and members of the Parisian avant-garde that he encountered throughout his career, Lam developed a unique style that fused Western modernism with Afro-Cuban imagery, positioning himself as a champion of creative freedom and human dignity.

In an interview with Max-Pol Fouchet published in 1976, Lam states: “I wanted with all my heart to paint the drama of my country, but by thoroughly expressing the black 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 by either the man in the street or by the others. But a true picture has the power to set the imagination to work even if it takes time.”

Exhibition curator Catherine David says in the catalogue essay that Lam’s work is still subject to a number of misunderstandings and well-intentioned but reductive modes of appreciation despite the flurry of publications and exhibitions that followed the artist’s death in 1982. “Certain ‘culturalist’ approaches have over-simplified or distorted perceptions of a complex body of work that both emerged from and addressed a plurality of differing geographic and cultural spaces, situating itself in the tension between the supposed centres and peripheries of the modern,” says David.

According to Mathias Rastorfer, CEO + Co-Owner Gmurzynska Galleries which represents the estate of Wilfredo Lam, it is highly satisfying to see one of the most outstanding surrealists of the 20th century, whose work was already collected by the MoMA in the 1940s and a close friend of Picasso, to be looked at in his proper context again. “Due to intense research, exhibitions and publications over the last 4 years, (</artists/wifredo-lam-5857>) [Wifredo Lam](/artists/wifredo-lam-5857) (</artists/wifredo-lam-5857>) is seen again as the international artist with a long lasting influence, including on Jean Michelle Basquiat,” says Rastorfer.

