

Touring Points for IMAGINING NEW WORLDS: WIFREDO LAM, JOSE PARLÁ, FAHAMU PECOU

Always remember to **use Artful Thinking Routines** (Colors/Lines/Shapes; Color/Symbol/Image; Step Inside; See/Think/Wonder; Beginning/Middle/End; Claim/Support/Question; Think/Puzzle/Explore)

WIFREDO LAM:

Spain (1923-1938)

Awarded a scholarship, Lam left Cuba for Madrid at age twenty-one to study under the academic realist artist F. Álvarez de Sotomayor, court painter to King Alfonso XIII and director of the Museo del Prado. Sotomayor introduced Lam to Madrid's aristocracy, for whom he produced portraits, still lifes, and cityscapes (like several displayed here) in his mentor's style. These commissions supplemented his meager stipend; however, Lam said he quickly grew bored with academic painting. He turned his attention to the avant-garde activities surrounding him, including the nascent Spanish Surrealist movement pioneered by such figures as Salvador Dalí.

Surrealism was grounded in the premise that the rational and logical must be disavowed in favor of their opposites. In the wake of the First World War's catastrophic destruction, Surrealism provided an alternative worldview that many European intellectuals welcomed. While in Madrid, Lam also encountered the work of Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse, prompting him to experiment with imagery drawn from the arts of Africa as well as geometry and patterns. In 1938, months before the end of the Spanish Civil War, Lam, who had sided with the losing Republican faction, left Spain for Paris.

Plaza de Segovia, Madrid, 1923



- This cityscape is one of the first that Lam painted after arriving in Madrid during the fall of 1923 (he was mentored by the Director of the Museo del Prado and learned how to paint like the great 17th century Spanish Baroque Masters)
- Lam captures a typical Castilian scene of inhabitants engaged in early morning pursuits: What examples (of these morning pursuits) can you find in the painting?
- An old woman with a cane passes by conversing priests; a woman and young man with a guitar across his back enter the square; a girl exits with a laundry bundle held high, what else?
- How does the painting make you feel? What time of day do you think it was painted? What do you see that makes you say that?
- Lam's academic training is evident in his rendering of urban depth, with its fidelity to the delicate shadows, uneven façades, and rosy glow of red Castilian brick under the early morning sun. Notice the clear delineation between sky and city as well as the crisp realism of this piece.
- This style of painting was very popular with aristocrats at this time, and Lam supplemented his income painting portraits, still lifes, and landscapes in his mentor's academic style. Yet Lam quickly grew bored with academic painting... and 4 years later, he painted this:

Casas Colgadas, III, 1927



- How is this similar to/different from *Plaza de Segovia*?
- What words would you use to describe this painting? Colors/Lines/Shapes; Step Inside—what is it like to be *in* the painting?
- Unusually tall houses have black windows that peer out at the viewer like vacuous eyes. Curved forms replace the rectilinear architecture in *Plaza de Segovia, Madrid* from four years earlier.
- Discuss Surrealism: During this time, Lam turned his attention to the avant-garde activities surrounding him, including those of a literary group known as *Generación del 27* and Surrealism (particularly the art of Dali)
- Surrealism was an artistic, literary and intellectual movement of the early 20th century that was instrumental in defining Modernism-- Surrealism was characterized by a profound disillusionment with and condemnation of the Western, bourgeois emphasis on logic and reason (after the devastation of World War I). Thus, the dark, somber shades of the buildings convey a sense of alienation, characteristic of surrealist literature. Surrealists sought to channel the unconscious (e.g., dreams) as a means to unlock the power of the imagination and their methods drew from the psychoanalytical theories of Sigmund Freud relating to the irrational and instinctual drives of the unconscious. Using Freudian methods of free association, their poetry, prose, and art drew upon the private world of the mind, traditionally restricted by reason and societal limitations, to produce surprising, unexpected imagery: oftentimes curving, continuous lines out of which emerge strange and symbolic figures that are products of an uninhibited mind and/or organic forms and twisted lines that create an imaginative world of fantastic figures (in the next gallery, you can see a series of pencil and ink drawings—hanging just to the left of the “Untitled,” 1943 Fan work—which served as illustrations for the poetry of André Breton, the leader of the Surrealist Movement). Through the use of unconventional techniques such as automatism (“doodling” with no conscious intent or structure), Surrealist artists attempted to tap into the dream-world of the subliminal mind, visualizing its secrets and mysteries, arguing that this alternate reality, or *sur*-reality, was the truest, most liberating, most authentic (and therefore most radical) form of expression.

You can do this compare/contrast between Lam’s Academic Realist paintings and his early Abstract paintings using a number of other comparisons:

Campesina Castellana, 1927



This drawing of a Castilian peasant demonstrates Lam’s mastery of the realist style during his early years in Madrid. Heavy creases in the woman’s face echo details in the folds of her robe. The smooth curves and patterns in the woman’s shawl and headscarf complement her softer visage, and she seems to meet the viewer’s eyes with a suspicious gaze. Distressed by the abject poverty he encountered in Spain and sympathetic to the

plight of peasants like these, Lam would later declare his support for the anti-monarchist second Spanish Republic—a move that would eventually lead him to relocate to Paris in 1938. Lam’s realist works such as this reveal that he was a skilled draughtsman and that he knew how to make art the “correct” academic way—however he deliberately chose to distort/abstract his works in order to arrive at a more authentic and profound conceptual reality (instead of an accurate visual reality).

Composición, 1931



What if you stepped inside this painting? Describe your experience.

This complex image, filled with mysterious references and strange occurrences, presents a kind of “dream reality.” Lam plays with scale in details such as a colossal foot, which eclipses a number of buildings and tiny figures. Made the year Lam lost his wife and son to tuberculosis, the painting takes on personal significance in the cluster of women in the foreground. The woman dressed in red on the far right holds a small child. They are caught up in the surrounding chaos; the green pallor of their skin is symptomatic of tuberculosis.

A sense of despair and resignation pervades this canvas painted in the year that Lam lost his wife and son to tuberculosis. Women cluster in the foreground. They are not sexual objects as in *Composición, I*, but sacred mothers with somber, ghostly faces. Joyless and passive, they convey resignation.

Bodegón, II, 1927



This *bodegón* (still life) betrays the influence of several studied by Lam in the Museo del Prado by Spanish baroque painters Francisco de Zurbarán, Juan Sánchez Cotán, and Alonso Cano. Lam’s *bodegones* found patrons among Spanish aristocrats who had long revered their baroque counterparts.

La Plume verte (Still Life), 1955



What is different about this Still Life? Explain what has happened in Lam’s life after his encounter with Surrealism, Matisse, and Picasso along with his return to Cuba—and how this influences his painting style. In this painting Lam continues to integrate his signature motifs; the Elegguá, signifying the spiritual world (from Santería religion), and the green leaf, representing the natural world. Included in the natural world is a bird, symbolized by a single green feather. In fusing leaves and the green feather, Lam creates, in more abstract form, a hybrid akin to those in his earlier works. According to folklorist Lydia Cabrera, animal mascots, like the bird, protect deities and saints.

Untitled, 1931



While in Spain, Lam often returned to commissioned portraiture to support himself. This work reveals his skill with shadow, composition, and framing—techniques that found new forms in his later work. The portrait's subject, a stylish member of Spanish society, gazes boldly at the viewer while pinching a delicate flower between two fingers. She sits in front of an idyllic landscape of rolling hills, variations of which appear in most of Lam's academic portraits from this time period. This painting demonstrates his skill for rendering beautiful women. The female figure becomes a leitmotif in Lam's work.

Retrato de la Sra. García de Castro, II, 1937



This portrait is one of the last Lam painted of his friend Balbina Barrera de García de Castro, shortly before leaving Spain for Paris just before the fall of Barcelona to the Nationalists in the Spanish Civil War. Lam turned to de Castro, a fellow Spanish Republican, for support after the death of his wife and son in 1931. She sits pensively; her fallen gaze in combination with the work's dominant blues give it a sense of gloomy fatigue. This painting shows Lam in stylistic transition (influenced by the French avant-garde painter, Matisse): the more gestural lines of the sitter's face have a warm, fleshy tone, but the background and table are composed of flattened geometric patterns. While in Madrid, Lam also encountered the work of Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse, prompting him to experiment with imagery drawn from the arts of Africa as well as geometry and patterns. In 1938, months before the end of the Spanish Civil War, Lam, who had sided with the losing Republican faction, left Spain for Paris...

Paris and Marseilles (1938-1941)

Le Repos du modele, 1938



How does Lam's work change once he moves to Paris and Marseilles? What words would you use to describe these paintings?

What is different about this painting? How would you describe the figure's facial features? What about the space the figure inhabits? What shapes do you see?

Lam arrived in Paris with a letter of introduction to Picasso from a mutual friend. He presented himself at Picasso's studio, bringing along some of his work. Picasso admired Lam's art and encouraged him to experiment further with African imagery. Lam viewed African art and Surrealism as being aesthetically and ideologically compatible, and the visual influence of each appears in his work from the period.

This composition's flattened shapes—which lack the painterly illusions of space, shadow, and natural tones as well as the traditional perspectives so masterfully framed in Lam's earlier work—reveal his changing style following a move to Paris in 1938 and his introduction Pablo Picasso. The reclining female nude is a recognizably historical subject, with roots in classical art, and favored by Renaissance and later academic artists. Lam reconceived it with a modern aesthetic, simplifying the form and placing it against a geometric background indebted to the work of Picasso.

Untitled, 1940



What do you see in this painting in addition to a female figure gazing at us? While African features still dominate her visage, she cradles close to her head a new element, a bird-like creature, whose feathers are sometimes difficult to distinguish from her hair. Thus, the painting reveals an early phase of Lam's blending human and animal imagery. This mixing- or fusion- of various elements is in keeping with a surrealist tradition, best known through Picasso's fascination with the Minotaur, a character from Greek mythology that combined a bull's head with a human body.

Martinique (1941)

Lam left France on the ship *Capitaine Paul Lemerle* on March 24, 1941. Other intellectuals and artists on this ship included his muse, translator, and future wife, Helena Holzer; ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss; and André Breton and his family. After the ship docked in Martinique on April 24, 1941, Lam was placed in an internment camp for non-French citizens. Free to roam the island, Breton met Aimé Césaire, a Surrealist follower and a founder of the literary and ideological Négritude movement, in which francophone black intellectuals rejected French colonialism and established solidarity in their shared racial background. Lam's amalgamation of Surrealist and African imagery and his introduction to Négritude formed the seedbed for the singular style he developed on his return to Cuba.

Cuba (1941-1945)

Synthesizing Human, Animal, and Vegetal

How does Lam's art change once he returns to Cuba? What do you notice in this painting that you don't see in his earlier paintings?

Anamu, 1942



In works from his first Cuban period, Lam distinguished himself from other Cuban avant-garde artists by inventing new motifs. This composition introduced rich vegetation in the form of leaves framing the figure's face. By the end of 1942, Lam was working closely with ethnologist and folklorist Lydia Cabrera, who helped to reacquaint him with Cuban culture. In consultation with Cabrera, Lam titled this painting *Anamu* after an herb used by practitioners of Palo Monte, an Afro-Cuban religion from the Congo.

Le Sombre Malembo, Dieu du carrefour, 1943



Explore this painting using “Colors/Lines/Shapes” and “See/Think/Wonder” (even “Step Inside” might be fun). How would you describe the mood of this painting? How is this painting different from the others that we’ve seen thus far? Why might his style have changed after returning to Cuba?

In 1941, Lam returned to his native Cuba for the first time in nearly twenty years. He attested that he had never experienced racism while living in Spain and said that, on his return to the island, he felt terrible sadness: “The whole colonial drama of my youth seemed to be reborn in me.” Lam used his paintbrush as a weapon against the repressed condition of black people in Cuban society. He regarded his painting on the island as “an act of decolonization,” joining in the Négritude movement’s struggle for equal respect for all of humanity. Lam turned to Latin America’s colonial history, landscape elements (particularly sugarcane and tobacco leaves), tropical fruits, and black culture to inform his new work. His Surrealist imagination evolved with the creation of fantastical figures combining the human, animal, and vegetal. Lam also was swayed by magical realism—the simultaneous representation of rational and supernatural views of reality—promoted by his close friend, preeminent Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier. Lam’s painterly lexicon would continue to harness the imagination of Surrealism and wed it to the new consciousness of magical realism.

In what was then the Belgian colony of Congo, Malembo was one of the most active ports of departure for the slave ships that separated millions of Africans from their land. Lam depicts Malembo as a composite of body parts removed from a surrounding green forest. Lam recalls his fascination for “Cuban light” which he incorporates with the greenery here: “*The transparency of light produces a magical effect on colors. Our light is so transparent that the leaves of some trees give the feeling that they are illuminated from inside because here the sun, even with closed eyes, gets inside, through the mouth, through the ears. I live a constant drunkenness of light in Cuba. In fact, I cannot speak about how I see colors but rather I speak of their transparency, which begins to suggest unprecedented relationships among their own values.*”

The foremost Cuban writer of the period, Alejo Carpentier, found in Lam’s painting the embodiment of his theory of *lo real maravilloso* (“magical realism”). Carpentier affirms: “*It had to be an American painter, the Cuban Wifredo Lam, who showed us the magic of the tropical vegetation, the uncontrolled creativity of our natural formations—with all their metamorphoses and symbioses—on monumental canvases whose expression is unique in contemporary art.*” Various *orishas* (horned figures), spiritual manifestations of gods in the Yoruba religion, emerge from this painting’s prismatic green background. Rather than presenting Malembo—one of the most active ports of departure for the slave ships from Africa—as a solemn place, Lam instead filled the scene with a profusion of rich color, evoking the stunning transparency of light he experienced in his native Cuba. The lush forest perhaps references a mythical Africa that welcomes back wandering spirits of the diaspora from across the ocean.

Cuba (1946-1951)

Incorporating Syncretic Religion

L'Annonciation, 1944



Explore with “Color/Symbol/Image,” “Beginning/Middle/End” or “Headlines.” What is happening in this painting? What symbols do you notice/recognize in this painting?

While in Cuba, Lam maintained relationships with French Surrealist writers André Breton and Pierre Mabille. In December 1945, Mabille, who had become the French cultural attaché in Haiti, invited Lam to visit and exhibit his work there. During his four-month stay, Lam participated in Haitian Voodoo ceremonies. Voodoo combines elements of African religions with aspects of Catholicism and European spirituality. When he returned to Cuba, Lam added to his works imagery related to Santería, also a syncretic religion—that is, one composed of parts of two or more distinct religions. Santería combines Yoruban and Roman Catholic traditions. Practitioners identified Catholic saints with Yoruban orishas, or deities, with the attributes of Christian saints. Orishas—for example, the deity of metals, Oggún, often represented by a knife, or the horned messenger god Elegguá—frequently appear in Lam’s work. Lam placed wings on his Elegguá, suggesting an association with the Christian angel Gabriel. Lam’s Christian titles for compositions with Afro-Cuban iconography belie expectations and startle the viewer. As a result, these Cuban works take on a subversive character.

In “L’Annonciation,” Lam fuses the iconography of various religions in this interpretation of the moment the angel Gabriel tells the Virgin Mary that she will become the mother of Jesus. To the right is the upsidedown Elegguá, a mischievous Afro-Cuban deity, whose wings associate him with the Angel Gabriel. Multiple winged spirits encroach upon the praying figure at the left, who also has wings. The effusion of forms imbues a traditionally peaceful scene with far more ambivalence, suggesting that this momentous encounter will bring difficulty.

Femme-Cheval, 1948



Now that you’ve gotten to know some of Lam’s favorite ‘characters,’ who do you recognize in this painting? Why do you think it is entitled “Femme-Cheval” (Horse-Woman)?

Lam’s *femme-cheval*, literally “horse-woman,” demonstrates the Surrealist personal iconography that defined his mature work after returning to Cuba. The *femme-cheval* reappeared as the subject of many of Lam’s paintings during the mid to late 1940s. This particular rendition has two heads, one facing away and the other engaging the viewer’s gaze. The cartoonish figure that appears a few times throughout the painting is the mischievous Yoruban deity Elegguá, who is also important in Cuban Santería.

Paris (1951-1970)

Grande Composition, 1960



How is this painting different from the others—what has changed? What looks familiar?

In this monumental composition, Lam reintroduced many of the motifs he had explored throughout his career. Ethereal blue-and-white *femmes-cheval* and hybrid figures with masklike faces emerge from a mottled-blue background. Although the work is a painting, Lam emphasized drawing by using thin, meticulous lines to demarcate and embellish his figures.

After Lam's marriage to Helena Holzer ended in 1951, he returned to Paris. For the rest of his life, he lived in Europe and Cuba, making frequent trip to the United States. During the 1950s, his style became more abstract. Inspired by the New York Abstract Expressionists, he experimented with gestural splattering and ink splotching. New Guinea's art and culture also attracted Lam, and he collected totemic sculptures from the region. The sculptures' disturbing appearances are reflected in new morphological variations in Lam's work that integrate masks and elongated figures reminiscent of their African counterparts. In his series of monumental paintings from the 1960s, Lam resolved the tensions evident between figuration and abstraction. He continued to create variations on his characteristic motifs, especially the horse-headed woman, rhomboid and cup-headed deities, and florid tobacco leaves and sugarcanes intersected by scythes. Over time, these variations became increasingly grotesque. Fanciful creatures drawn in black over washes of color are indebted to the artist's graphic work, which he pursued in earnest in the 1960s. His mastery of etching, aquatint, and drawing accounts for the elegant, linear character of some of his late paintings.

JOSÉ PARLÁ and FAHAMU PECOU

What is Lam's legacy? Curator Michael Rooks wanted to make Lam's work relevant to today by emphasizing connections between contemporary artists and Lam: "These exhibitions will provide visitors with a more nuanced understanding of Lam's enduring impact by presenting two truly unique perspectives on the work of one of the most defining artists of the 20th century. It will be fascinating for our audiences to experience the full arc of Lam's oeuvre in relation to the evolving careers of José and Fahamu, who share so much in common personally yet have very distinct styles."

Rooks notes 3 elements that tie the 3 artists together:

1. Location/Place
2. World of Images (imaginary/dream-like and real)
3. Identity

José Parlá's "wall paintings" in the first gallery are about place and memory



- Mention that Brooklyn-based Parlá recently created a 90-foot mural for the entrance lobby to the new One World Trade Center—dubbed by the NY Times as the world’s largest welcome mat.
- The artist has told us that these works are, in part, about his memories of particular places and times throughout his life—and that they ‘represent’ the feelings that these particular places and moments evoked
- How do these works make *you* feel—do they evoke any particular feelings or memories for you? Can you guess what each one might mean to the artist? How are they different from one another and how are they alike (why did he use certain colors/lines/shapes for one and different ones for another)? How do you think they were created (what do you think Parlá looked like when he was painting them—show me how he might have moved!) If you could choose one word for each work, what would it be?
- The installation presents group of sculptural paintings that suggest cultural fragments salvaged from urban sites that have experienced social and cultural upheaval and transformation. As do segments of the Berlin wall, Parlá’s sculptures bear witness to waves of history that seem to be inscribed on their surfaces, told in an expressive and poetic language of the street. These works act as palimpsests, surfaces bearing layers of marks, on which ensuing generations might imagine their own manifestos and declarations of selfhood
- These large-scale works evoke impressions of the landscape as well as decaying walls along city streets, suggesting both an urban density and density in nature that evolve over time through an accumulative process. Layers of mark-making on the surfaces of his work establish an abstract skein of information that relates to transgenerational histories and their associated memories.
- Each wall evokes a particular moment in the artist’s life—particularly crossroads during his life, which is specified by a particular city where he was at the time.
- Like Lam, Parlá’s work is not to be read literally—both artists play with forms, where one image slips into another with no particular rhyme or reason. They are creating from the unconscious, where nothing is supposed to make sense! Their works encourage us to let go of our need to label and categorize and in turn, set our own imagination free. Encourage your visitors to do just that!

Fahamu Pecou

Native Tongue / Ogbe Oyeku, 2015



- What does this painting remind you of? “See/Think/Wonder”
- For this painting, Fahamu Pecou took as his inspiration *Negro Digest*, the first publication of Johnson Publishing Company. *Negro Digest* was initially conceived in 1942 as an alternative to *Reader’s Digest*, and in a second incarnation served as an important voice in the Black Arts movement. At the center of the painting, Pecou placed a self portrait, which operates as a commentary on contemporary and historical black masculinity.
- Pecou combines hip-hop and Negritude in paintings of himself in the guise of a hip-hop star. He invented this persona in order to embody his critique of hip-hop’s materialism and machismo, revealing how “notions of Black heritage, Black intellectualism, and Black creative expression remain not only relevant but a necessary and rich dialogue now and into the future.”

- Can you imagine yourself on the cover of a magazine? Which magazine would it be? How would you pose? Show us!
- Atlanta-based artist and scholar Fahamu Pecou (born 1975) pushes the boundaries of fine art and popular culture through his blending of performance and traditional visual media. Pecou is particularly engaged with the commonalities found within the intersections of *Négritude*—the mid-century movement by black Francophone intellectuals to create a black identity separate from that of their French colonizers—hip-hop, and Yoruba spiritual cosmology.
- In both his performance art and painting, Pecou presents himself as a boastful alter-ego that operates as an intermediary within the fraught dynamics of black masculinity, both historically and contemporarily. A virtuosic painter, Pecou takes visual cues from the covers of vintage periodicals from the Johnson Publishing Company. The first black-owned publishing company, Johnson Publishing fought American stereotypes of blackness by showcasing a rising black middle class beginning in the 1940s. Together, this body of work challenges the viewer to reimagine the roles individuals are asked to play in the production of art and culture.

Pecou’s sound station invites viewers to take on the role of co-creator, producing their own musical compositions inspired by hip-hop and DJ culture. The experience is purposefully ephemeral; the inability to save or share the work rejects the commoditization of our creative impulses brought about by the proliferation of social media platforms. The installation resonates with Pecou’s performance work as the writer and star of the irreverent talk show *The 15 Project*.

“Altar to the Imagination”



Conceived as an “altar to the imagination,” the installation examines the boundlessness of imagination, a theme explored across all three presentations, and further investigates the influence of Santería on Lam’s work as well as the religion’s impact on the artistic practice and personal lives of Parlá and Pecou. The intersecting walls represent a crossroad, an idea bearing multiple cultural significances. The crossroad serves as a liminal space between the past and present, between life and the afterlife. In Afro-Cuban Santería and Yoruba faiths, crossroads are associated with the *orisha* Elegguá, a deity who frequently appears in the art of Wifredo Lam as a horned figure. Elegguá is a trickster who guards the intersection between the natural and supernatural worlds. The cross formation of the walls may also allude to Christian iconography. These differing cultural allusions coalesce into what the artists term an “altar to the imagination,” the place where memories are deposited and new ideas germinate as well as the site of artistic creation. Students involved in the LaAmistad program contributed the artwork on the surrounding walls, and Parlá and Pecou created the painting over their inscriptions. LaAmistad works with Atlanta-area Latino students to help further their educational, career, and personal goals. Have visitors explore the works and look for familiar imagery (there are some Elegguá peeking out from the light switches in the gallery). Also have them read the text written by the students and share what resonates with them most (the students were instructed to write about identity, dreams, and goals). If you could write something, what would it be? What are your dreams and goals?