

## Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía

**Sabatini Building**  
Santa Isabel, 52

**Nouvel Building**  
Ronda de Atocha s/n  
28012 Madrid

Tel. (34) 91 774 10 00



[www.museoreinasofia.es](http://www.museoreinasofia.es)

**Opening hours**  
Monday to Saturday  
and public holidays  
from 10:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m.

**Sundays**  
from 10:00 a.m. to 2:15 p.m.  
the whole Museum is open,  
from 2:15 p.m. to 7:00 p.m.  
are open Collection 1  
and one temporary exhibition  
(check website)

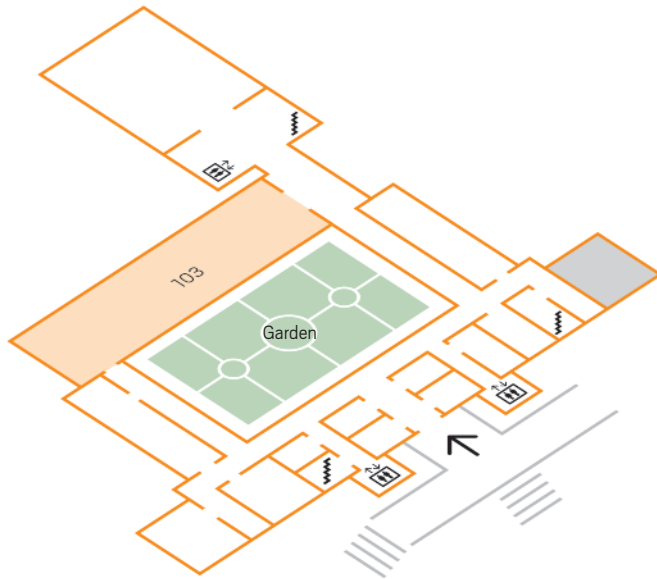
Closed on Tuesdays

Exhibition rooms in all venues  
will be cleared 15 minutes before  
closing time

### Related activities

**A propósito de...**  
*Wifredo Lam*  
Guided visits with commentary  
by the Mediation Staff  
Fridays at 7.15 pm  
Sundays at 12.30 pm  
(From April 8)

**Audiovisual season**  
*Toward an impossible cinema*  
*Documentary and avant-garde in*  
*Cuba (1959-1972)*  
June 2-July 8, at 7 pm  
Sabatini Building, Auditorium



Exhibition organized by Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, Paris, with the collaboration of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid and Tate Modern, London

Sponsored by

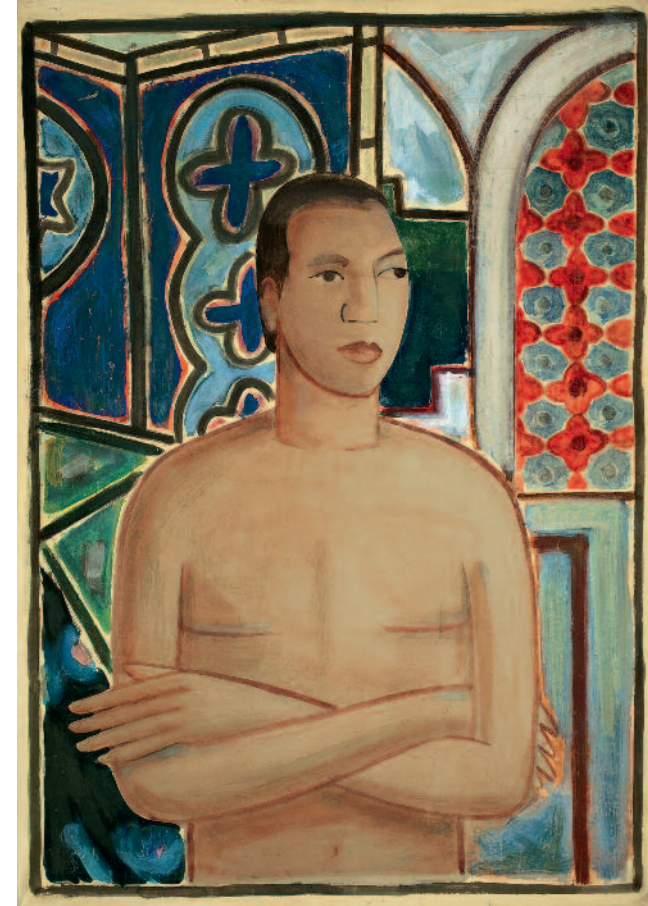
Education program developed  
with the sponsorship of  
Fundación Banco Santander



**Exhibition** April 6 - August 15, 2016

Sabatini Building, Floor 1

# Wifredo Lam



*Autoportrait, II, [Self-portrait, II], c. 1938. The Rudman Trust*  
© Wifredo Lam, VEGAP, Madrid, 2016

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**MUSEO NACIONAL  
CENTRO DE ARTE  
REINA SOFIA**



GOBIERNO  
DE ESPAÑA

MINISTERIO  
DE EDUCACIÓN, CULTURA  
Y DEPORTE

Wifredo Lam occupies a paradoxical place in 20th century art. His work is the fruit of the circulation of ideas and languages, and of a desire to configure a singular medium of his own from which to introduce a destabilizing tension to all sorts of certainties and categorizations. It thus opens a breach in linear readings of eurocentric modernism, proposing a divergent and eclectic narrative that invites constant reconsideration of his practice and of the binary relations between center and periphery.

Born in Sagua la Grande, Cuba, in 1902, he went to Spain in 1923 with a grant to study at the Academy of Fine Arts in Madrid. His work was impregnated with many references, the result of close observation of his context, beginning with the Old Masters at the Prado and ranging across the forms of German Expressionism and the avant-garde art of Pablo Picasso, Juan Gris, Henri Matisse and Joan Miró. Nevertheless, he kept a certain distance from these movements, taking up a personal position from which he could problematize European languages and motifs. With a predilection for working with paper, his forms advanced from an initially somewhat classical approach along a path of simplification and refinement.

Interested too in the sociopolitical issues around him, with a view of relations of dominance influenced by Marxist readings, he incorporated social figures and settings in works like *Campesino* [Peasant, 1926] or *Campesina castellana* [Castilian Peasant Woman, 1927], and in the thirties he espoused the Republican cause. Added to this critical conscience was his growing concern with colonial reality and its integration within various structures, such as the social and the artistic. Shortly before, he had suffered one of his greatest personal tragedies when his wife, Eva Píriz, and their son both died of

tuberculosis. These events were translated into two self-portraits, one of which –*Autoportrait, II* [Self-portrait, II, c. 1938]– is shown in this exhibition. The severely schematized faces are rendered as monochrome ovals in an Expressionist idiom that works with the notion of the mask, conflicting identity and the fractured psyche.

In May 1938, the course of events in the Civil War forced him into exile in Paris, where he went on Picasso's advice to see the Black African statuary at the Musée de l'Homme. Two years later, the occupation of Paris by the German troops obliged him to leave once more, and he made his way to Marseilles. There he coincided with André Breton and part of the Surrealist circle, who awakened his interest in collective and automatic practices (*cadavres exquis*, collective drawings, the cards of the *Jeu de Marseille* [Game of Marseille]). Lam took part in these sessions and filled numerous sketchbooks with drawings in India ink whose hybrid figures anticipated the work of his return to Cuba.

In 1941, with his spirits sunk after two exiles, he returned to his native land. The Cuba of Fulgencio Batista's government, wracked with poverty, corruption and racism, deeply disappointed him, and he made contact with the island's artistic and intellectual circles



*La fruta bomba*, [The Pawpaw], 1944  
Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid  
© Wifredo Lam, VEGAP, Madrid, 2016

with a view to constructing a divergent account of Cuban identity. With Lydia Cabrera, Fernando Ortiz, Virgilio Piñera, José Lezama Lima and Aimé Césaire, he shared a desire to trace out new narratives, resisting imposed forms of portrayal and advocating “another” modernism. From Fernando Ortiz, Lam took the concept of “transculturation” and approached it from a plastic perspective, defining his painting as “an act of decolonization”. He thus vindicated the plurality and cultural interchange that constituted the island's collective identity as well as his own, unstable and hybrid. In his works of the forties, like *El sombrío Malembo* [The Dark Malembo, 1943], *La luz de la jungla* [The Light of the Jungle, 1944], *Oyá, divinidad del aire y de la muerte* [Oyá, Divinity of the Air

and of Death, 1944] or *El rumor de la tierra* [The Sound of the Earth, 1950], María Zambrano detected a musical and orphic sensibility, dominated by increasingly schematic figures, with which the artist reveals and records the rhythm, sounds and uneasy silence beneath the apparent calm of tropical nature. The dialectic of the mask reappears along with the tension between the visible and the invisible, and between imposed and vindicated readings.

From 1952, as his international stature grew, the artist went on various journeys and eventually took up residence again in Paris. His international shows multiplied, especially those in which he exhibited alongside the artists of CoBrA, who were introduced to him by his artist friend Asger Jorn. The group's spontaneity, collective dimension and interest in popular art led him to confront new materials like terracotta, a medium which drew him with its promise of spontaneous liberation and its element of chance when working with it. In 1954, he went with Asger Jorn to the Italian town of Albissola, an important center of ceramic production where he bought a house in 1962, living there on a regular basis until the end of his life. In 1975 he made about three hundred ceramic pieces whose symbolism refers back to his paintings, and he also started work on the autobiographical *El nuevo Nuevo Mundo de Lam* [Lam's new New World], which he exhibited in 1976. This is an atlas of poetic and sociopolitical affinities that reflects a rich array of references and languages and a determination to fashion them into a personal discourse. The life of this tireless worker came to an end in 1982 after he had completed the engravings for his last artist's book, *L'Herbe sous les pavés*, with texts by Jean-Dominique Rey.