



Today's Masterpiece: Wifredo Lam, [Untitled](#), ca. 1969. Oil on canvas. Museum purchase with funds from the Bequest of Dr. Janet Brody Esser, 2023.48.



Welcome back to Masterpiece Minute at Virtual SDMA. This is your host, Rachel Jans, Associate Curator for Modern and Contemporary Art at The San Diego Museum of Art. Drop in each month to hear a new mini talk led by SDMA curators or guests focusing on works from the Museum's collection.

In today's episode we will delve into the world of Wifredo Lam, a Cuban-born artist who played a significant role in the development of modern art in the twentieth century. Born in 1902 to a father of Chinese ancestry, and a mother of African and Spanish descent, Lam lived in countries around the world, giving rise to a rich and profoundly transcultural body of work.

Lam's boundary-crossing art is characterized by a fusion of African, Caribbean, and European artistic traditions. He left Havana, Cuba in 1923 for Spain, where he studied and lived in Madrid for nearly fifteen years, eventually moving to Paris in 1938. During this formative period in France, he befriended Pablo Picasso, who introduced him to many artists, including Surrealists, with whom he was associated for the remainder of his career.

Lam's untitled painting from 1969 encapsulates the artist's peripatetic life and distills signature elements. The work is painted loosely on a ground of rich gold and brown hues, and features three horned mask-like faces suggestive of African sculpture. These faces allude to an orisha or deity from the Afro-Cuban religion, Santería. Lam began to include symbols and references to Santería when he returned to Cuba from Europe in 1941. His godmother was a Santería priestess, and allusions to Santería would course through his art for the remainder of his career. The horned faces allude to Eluggua, an orisha that appears throughout his body of work, and is an impish guardian of doors, gates, and crossroads. With this central motif, Lam not only pays homage to Afro-Cuban culture, he also invokes the transatlantic paths he forged through his life and art across Latin America, Europe, and North America.

Encircling these masks on the left of the painting is a schematic rendering of a horse head, reminiscent of the femme-cheval, or horse woman figure, another reoccurring subject in his art. This equine imagery is also related to sacred Santería rituals, in which the worshiper is said to be possessed, akin to the way a horse is mounted by its rider. Yet the figure of the horse also illuminates his relationship to European art traditions and his probing of colonial history. As he reflected on his career: "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... A true picture has the power to set the imagination to work, even if it takes time."

Thank you for listening! This has been **Rachel Jans** on **Masterpiece Minute at Virtual SDMA!**



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