

Clairiere, from Pleni Luna
Wilfredo Lam



Date : 1974
Lithograph
25 1/2 x 19 3/4 in.
Edition of 262
Pencil signed and numbered

Artist bio

Wifredo Óscar de la Concepción Lam y Castilla, better known as Wilfredo Lam, was Cuban artist, known for his unique Surrealist aesthetic that combined European artistic movements with the imagery of his native country.

He was of mixed-race ancestry: his father, Yam Lam, was a Chinese immigrant and his mother, the former Ana Serafina Castilla, was born to a Congolese former slave mother and a Cuban mulatto father. In Sagua La Grande, where he spent his childhood, Lam was surrounded by many people of African descent; his family, like many others, practiced Catholicism alongside their African traditions. Through his godmother, Matonica Wilson, a Santería priestess locally celebrated as a healer and sorceress, he was exposed to rites of the culture African called “orishas”. Eventually his contact with African celebrations and spiritual practices proved to be his largest artistic influence.

Born on December 8, 1902 in Sagua la Grande, Cuba, the painter moved to Madrid, Spain in 1923 to study with Fernando Alvarez de Sotomayor, who had also taught the noted Surrealist Salvador Dalí. Influenced by Joaquin Torres-García and Henri Matisse early in his life, Lam later moved to Paris after seeing an exhibition of Pablo Picasso’s works while it was traveling through Spain. While in Paris, Picasso became his mentor and he would introduce Lam to the so-called Primitive Art, which would figure heavily into the paintings he made during the 1930’s and after. In 1929 he married Eva Piriz, but both she and their young son died in 1931 of tuberculosis; it is likely that this personal tragedy contributed to the dark nature of his work.

Upon returning to Cuba, the artist infused his work with the mystical and religious imagery of his homeland: *“I responded always to the presence of factors that emanated from our history and our geography, tropical flowers, and black culture”* Lam had said.

Throughout his long career, his work addressed themes of social injustice, nature and spirituality, that challenged prevailing attitudes held by western artists about other cultures. Wilfredo Lam died September 11, 1982 in Paris, France at the age of 79. His work continues to bring a historical perspective to contemporary issues.