

Wifredo Lam breaks free of Picasso's long shadow at last

The Cuban artist's 400-piece retrospective allows his work to be recognised in its own right

MODERN ART

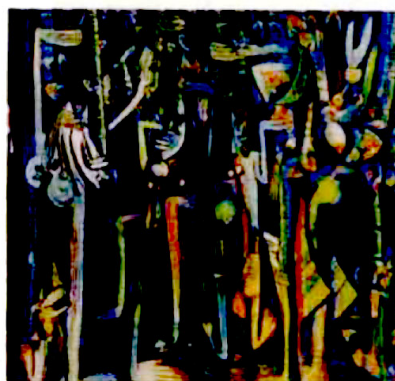
Paris. "A true picture has the power to set the imagination to work, even if it takes time," said the Cuban artist Wifredo Lam. In the case of *The Jungle* (1943), his gouache on paper measuring almost 8 sq. ft, it took three decades for the Museum of Modern Art in New York to promote it from a downstairs corridor by the cloakroom to the permanent galleries. "Now it isn't far from *Les Femmes d'Alger*," says Catherine David, the deputy director of the Centre Pompidou in Paris. This month, the work will take pride of place there in the Wifredo Lam retrospective David is organising, along with more than 400 other paintings, drawings, prints and documents. The show is due to travel next year to the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid and Tate Modern in London.

Out of the pigeonhole

Lam was "without a doubt one of the great Modern artists", David says, but interpretations of his work have focused unduly on his connections with the European avant-gardes. "The question now is to take [him] out of the 'follower of Picasso', 'Surrealist' pigeonholes and to really consider the complexity of his work and his relationship to the world". For the Pompidou, David says, it was especially "important to inaugurate a series of major monographic exhibitions dedicated to great Moderns who

didn't come from the self-proclaimed centres of Europe and the US".

The chronological sweep of the exhibition traces the dramatic movements of Lam's life. Born to a Chinese father and an Afro-Cuban mother in 1902, the year Cuba gained independence, he won a grant to study art in Spain, staying for 14 years and fighting for the Republican side during the Spanish Civil War. He left hundreds of canvases behind when he fled to



Lam's *The Jungle* (1943) will be a central focus of the Centre Pompidou show

Paris in 1938 with a letter of introduction to Picasso. "One of the surprises was the reappearance of the Spanish work after he died," David says. The opening display of some of these "uneven but promising" paintings gives "a much wider view of the developments of his work".

Monstrous, hybrid creatures

A sequence on Lam's brief but decisive period in Paris and Marseilles – waiting

with the Surrealists for a passage to the Americas from Vichy France – includes his illustrations for André Breton's poem *Fata Morgana*. These drawings of monstrous, hybrid creatures shaped the iconography of his later works, such as *The Jungle*, which was painted two years after his return to Cuba during the Second World War.

The exhibition also makes room for a lesser-known area of Lam's art: print-making, his core medium from the late 1960s until his death in 1982, David says. The final section features books made with poets and writers, including the manuscript of René Char's *A la santé du serpent* (1951-52), a rare loan from the Bibliothèque nationale de France that will not go to Madrid or London.

Hannah McGivern

• Wifredo Lam, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 30 September-15 February 2016