

Cultural Encounters

ART OF ASIAN DIASPORAS IN LATIN AMERICA
& THE CARIBBEAN, 1945–PRESENT

AMA ART MUSEUM of the AMERICAS
ORGANIZATION of AMERICAN STATES

TRAVELING EXHIBITION SERVICE

IA&A INTERNATIONAL
ARTS AND ARTISTS

“The fusion of different ethnicities is extremely important and gives rise to new cultural phenomena... in language, arts, values, and beliefs.”

— Sociologist Mario Margulis and historian Birgitta Leander

Inspired by the permanent collection of the **AMA | Art Museum of the Americas of the Organization of American States** and expanded to include loans from other sources, *Cultural Encounters: Art of Asian Diasporas in Latin America & The Caribbean, 1945–Present* features approximately 75 important works of art by Latin American and Caribbean artists of Asian heritage. This exhibition demonstrates how this work is the product of multi-directional global dialogues between the artists, their Asian cultural heritages, and their Latin American or Caribbean identities as well as their colloquy with the major artistic movements of their times.

Included in the exhibition are paintings, works on paper, sculptures, and mixed media works by artists from **Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Guyana, Mexico, Panama, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago**. Showcasing the work of influential artists such as **Wifredo Lam, Manabu Mabe, and Tomie Ohtake**, among many others, *Cultural Encounters* demonstrates their contributions to the major art movements of their times. Historical photographs, documents, and video interviews with living artists provide context to understanding the complex and multifaceted nature of cultural diversity in modern Latin American and Caribbean societies.

COVER IMAGE: Tomie Ohtake, *Untitled*, 1968, oil on canvas, OAS AMA | Art Museum of the Americas Collection

A HISTORY OF ASIAN MIGRATION TO LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

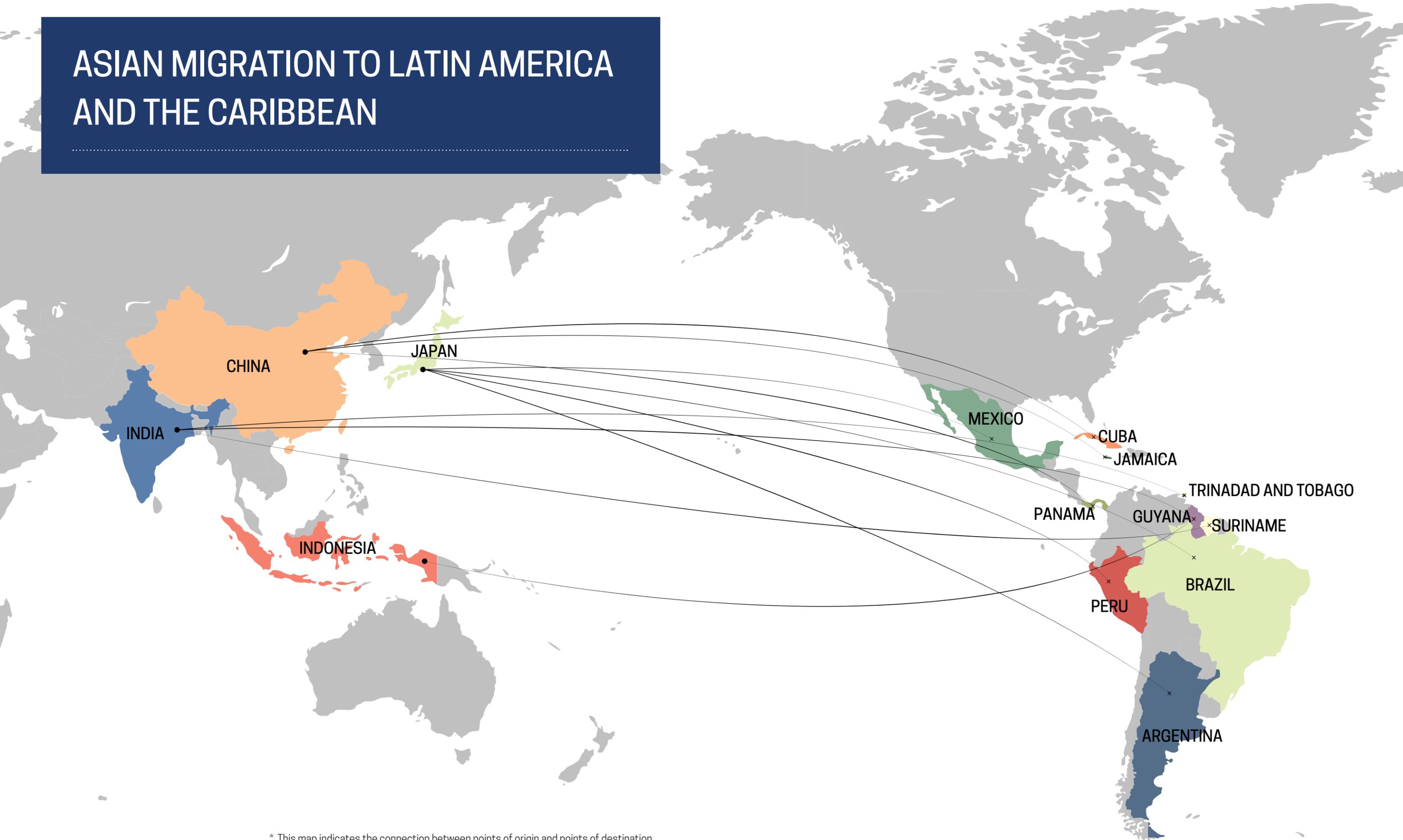
“Although Japan is indeed part of my heart and veins, I am profoundly Peruvian and Latin American.”

—Venancio Shinki

Asian migration to the Americas was largely the result of labor shortages around the continent beginning in 1807 with the United Kingdom’s passing of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, in addition to other economic factors unique to each country. The British, Spanish, and Dutch governments who colonized the Caribbean, along with newly independent countries such as Peru and Brazil, saw the importation of labor from Asia—mainly from India, China, Indonesia, and Japan—as a solution to the rising demand for workers.

The difficult circumstances encountered by these laborers coming to the Americas included arduous migratory journeys, lack of knowledge about working conditions on plantations, as well as exploitation and discrimination. While most of the thousands of workers who came to the Americas returned to their countries of origin, many settled in their new homeland, living through long and difficult periods of assimilation.

ASIAN MIGRATION TO LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN



* This map indicates the connection between points of origin and points of destination, but is not intended to illustrate travel routes.

ASIAN MIGRATION AND ARTISTIC EXPRESSION IN LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN COUNTRIES

The exhibition, organized according to each artist's country of origin, allows the viewer to explore how an artist's unique experience of migration has shaped his or her work. Featured artworks drawn from AMA's permanent collection include selections by Brazilian artists **Manabu Mabe**, **Tomie Ohtake**, **Yukata Toyota**, **Tikashi Fukushima**, and **Kazuo Wakabashi**; Argentine artist **Kasuya Sakai**; Peruvian artists **Venancio Shinki**, **Arturo Kubotta**, **Carlos Runcie Tanaka**, and **Eduardo Tokeshi**; Trinidadian artist **M.P. Alladin**; Mexican artist **Luis Nishizawa**; Cuban artist **Wifredo Lam**; and Surinamese artist **Soeki Irodikromo**.

BRAZIL

Brazil boasts the largest ethnic Japanese community outside of Japan and is home to several internationally known artists, including **Manabu Mabe**, **Tomie Ohtake**, and **Tikashi Fukushima**. These artists' abstract expressionist styles are greatly influenced by Japanese calligraphy and by the principles of the postwar Japanese group **Gutai Kyokai**, an avant-garde collective founded in Ashiya, near Osaka, in 1954. Gutai revitalized Japanese traditional arts, while pushing the boundaries of abstract art by its experimental use of non-traditional materials and forms. The group gained worldwide notoriety for the **Gutai Art Manifesto**, which declared: "[W]e impose no rules. Ours is a free site of creation wherein we have actively pursued diverse experimentations, ranging from art to be appreciated with the whole body to tactile art to Gutai music."



Detail of Tikashi Fukushima, *Verde (Green)*, 1972, oil on canvas, OAS AMA | Art Museum of the Americas Collection



Detail of Manabu Mabe, *Agonia (Agony)*, 1963, Oil on canvas, OAS AMA | Art Museum of the Americas Collection

PERU

Peru has the second-largest ethnic Japanese population in South America, composed mainly of immigrants who settled there before World War II. Despite weathering the anti-Japanese sentiment and persecution during World War II, Peruvian artists, including **Venancio Shinki**, **Arturo Kubotta**, **Eduardo Tokeshi**, and **Carlos Runcie Tanaka**, explore the preservation of traditional Japanese arts, while simultaneously embracing Peruvian culture. Kubotta's abstract style, which incorporates earth tones and rough textures, calls to mind Pre-Columbian art, while his gestural strokes echo Japanese calligraphic lines. Runcie Tanaka's origami crab—a symbol, by way of the traditional Japanese art-form, of the first Japanese groups to arrive in Peru—evokes both the travails of migration and the multicultural background of his family.



ARGENTINA

During the great migrations of the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth centuries, Argentina was second only to the United States as a haven for immigrants, many of them Japanese. Argentina and Japan had negotiated an immigration pact; nevertheless, most of the Japanese arriving in Argentina came through Brazil and Peru. Interestingly, Japanese immigration and settlement in Argentina followed virtually the same pattern as in Peru, with a significant majority locating to the capital city to work as domestic servants and factory workers. Unlike in Peru, however, the Japanese in Argentina were spared the devastating disruptions of internment and relocation;

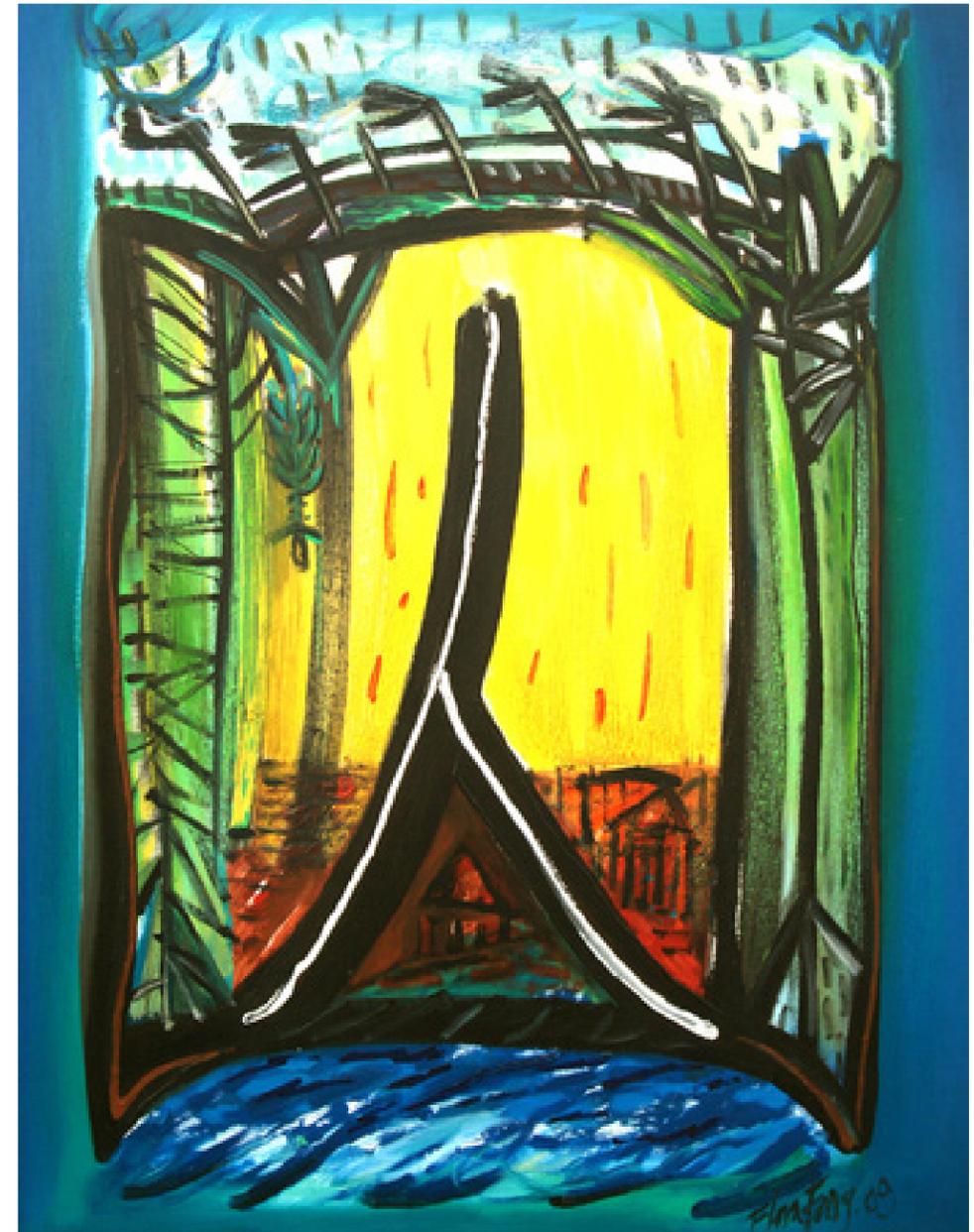
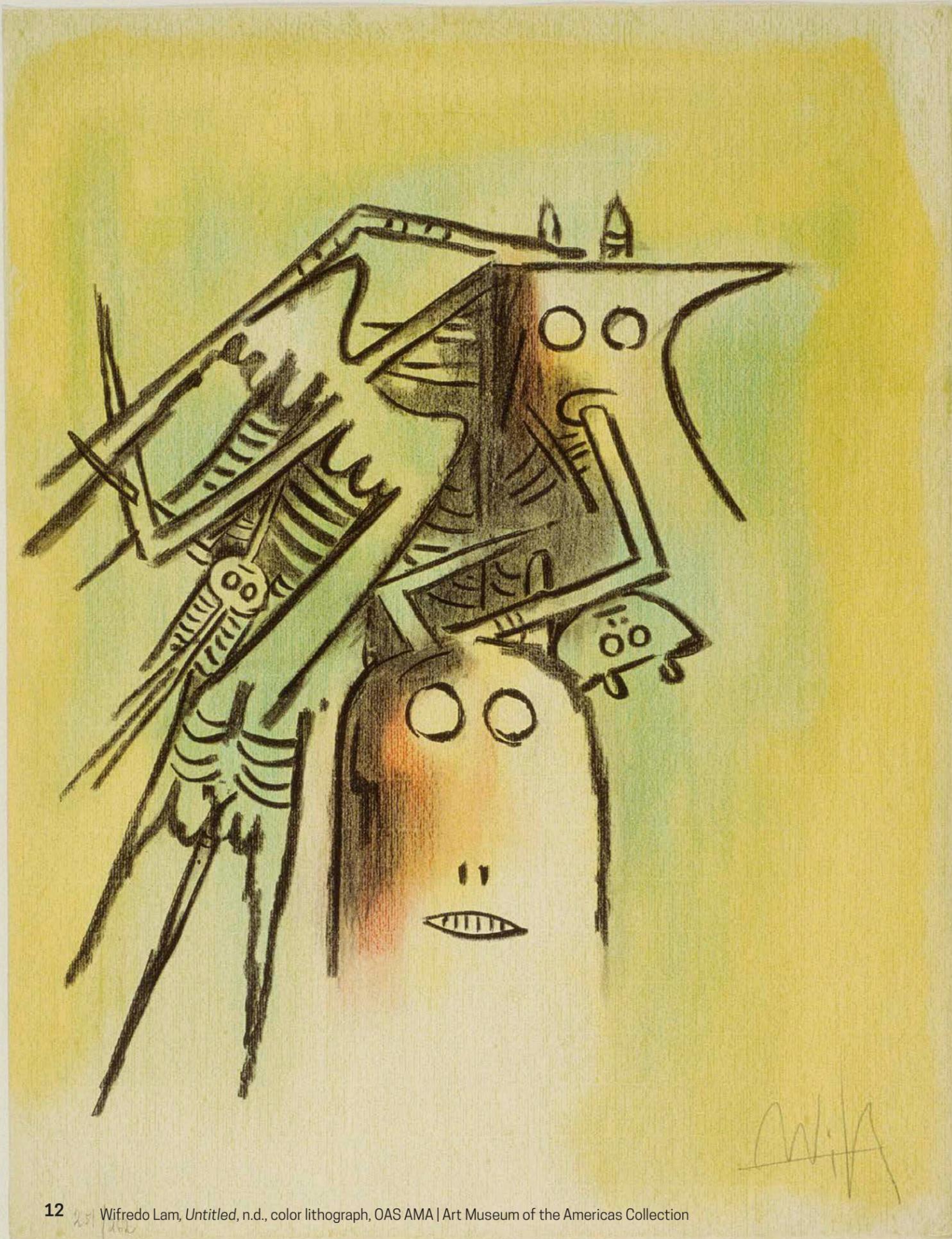
this was due to such factors as the timing of their arrival and the pro-Axis orientation of the Argentine government during World War II. Born in Buenos Aires to Japanese parents, **Kazuya Sakai** saw his oeuvre in the same way he saw his identity—as a unification of Eastern and Western influences. His early works incorporate Zen philosophy, Japanese calligraphic strokes, and influences from the American Abstract Expressionists as well as the Gutai Group. His later work digressed into a style notably popular in Argentina: geometric abstraction, which is characterized by controlled lines, hard edges, and a focus on basic linear shapes.

MEXICO

Japanese immigration to Mexico began in the late Nineteenth century, and by 1910 nearly 10,000 Japanese had settled in the country. Most early Japanese were laborers who moved to the southern states to work in coffee plantations or mines. With the end of the Mexican Revolution in 1920, vibrant communities of cotton farmers, fishermen, and small merchants began to flourish in Mexico's northern regions of Baja California. Today there is a constant fluctuation of Japanese artists who work in Mexico and travel back and forth between the two countries. Japanese-Mexican artist, **Luis Nishizawa's** works are dedicated to nature, the universe, and the human figure. Much of the arresting imagery can be traced to his childhood encounters with the landscapes of Mexico, as well as to Japanese visual sources, such as traditional Buddhist Zen landscapes, the Gutai Group style, and traditional materials.

PANAMA

Although there are countries with greater numbers of Chinese, Panama—which has the fourth largest population of people of Chinese ancestry in the Americas—is a rather special case in that it is a small country with a lower overall population. The first significant wave of migration from China arrived in Panama in the 1850s, attracted by the California gold rush; this influx brought new life to the dormant project of building a railroad between Panama and the United States, and its completion was largely dependent on the labor of Chinese immigrants. Panama soon became a bustling transit-point between China and such destinations as the United States, Cuba, and Peru. This led the Panamanian government to adopt severe policies of exclusion in order to stem the tide of would-be immigrants. In spite of this, thousands of Chinese immigrants, many of whom entered Panama illegally, nevertheless managed to assimilate into their new culture. Today there are numerous second- and third-generation contemporary artists in Panama who treat themes of acculturation and identity, among them **Cisco Merel, Samuel Romaldo Choy** and **Laura Fong Prosper**, whose Panachina project addresses these issues.



Flora Fong, *Chino en el Caribe (Chinese in the Caribbean)*, 2009, mixed media, Cernuda Arte, Miami

CUBA

After a period of open immigration that brought Chinese contract laborers into Cuba—following the cessation of the African slave trade and the boom of the Cuban sugar industry—the flow of Chinese workers into Cuba under labor contracts was prohibited by the Cuban government. In spite of these laws, and despite facing virulent discrimination, young Chinese men continued to arrive in great numbers, many of them marrying Cuban women and establishing a flourishing Chinatown in Havana,

where they could maintain strong ties to their cultural traditions and beliefs. Though **Wifredo Lam** denied any influence his Chinese heritage had on his work, a reconsideration of his oeuvre reveals possible influences from China, as well as modern European art movements. A generation later, works by **Flora Fong**—with her use of a vivid color palette and thick black lines—can almost be seen as a dialogue with Lam.

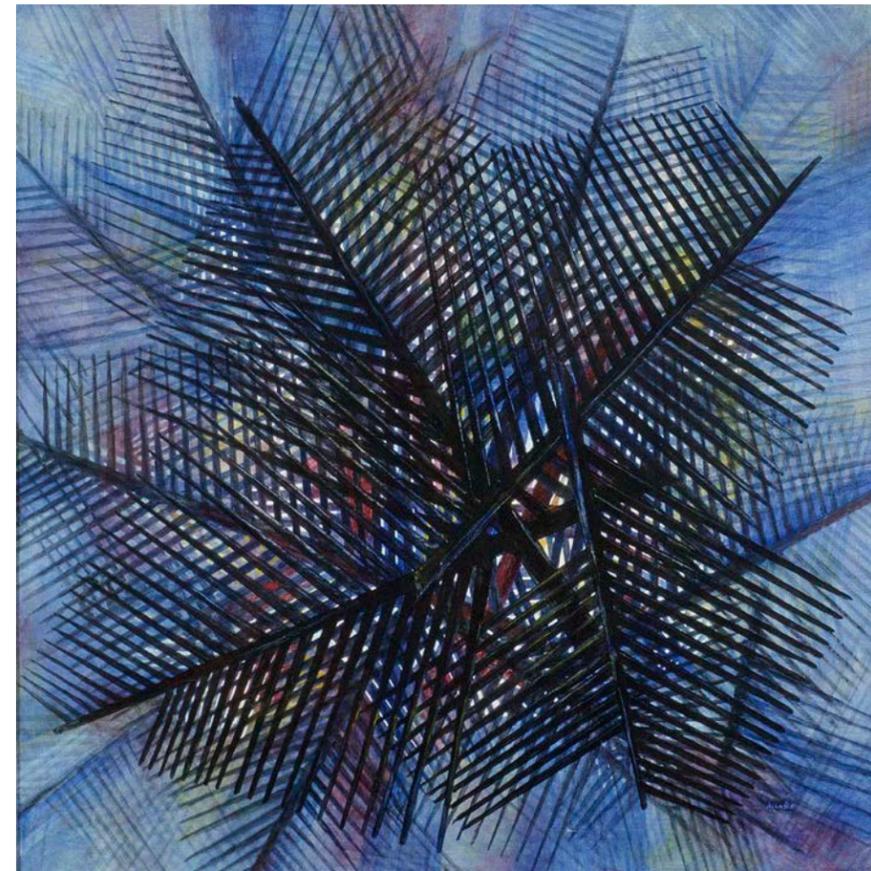


JAMAICA

As in other parts of the Caribbean, Chinese immigrants settled in Jamaica en masse to work on plantations. This migration occurred in two waves from 1854 to 1940, and led eventually to the establishment of Chinese family businesses, such as grocery stores and carpentry shops. Such are the origins of artist **Margaret Chen**, whose familiarity with wood has shaped her artistic journey into one of carving and sculpture, yielding abstract works that mix elements of Chinese watercolor with traditionally Jamaican motifs. Similarly, works by **Albert Chong** detail his journey to reconstruct his own identity as Chinese-Afro-Jamaican by way of artful photographs and found objects that address race, identity, family, nationalism, mysticism, and spirituality.

TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

The manpower shortage that followed the 1834 abolition of slavery led British authorities to look to East India as a source of indentured labor for Trinidad's plantations. On May 30, 1845, 225 enslaved Indian workers arrived in Trinidad, and by 1917 the population of Indian nationals in Trinidad reached more than 145,000. The assimilation of Indian culture in Trinidad was a complex, syncretic process, as different languages, castes, and religions (such as Hinduism and Islam) amalgamated with Trinidadian music, cuisine, and art. While artists were trained to value the traditional subject matters of the Western or European tradition, artists such as **M.P. Alladin** and **Wendy Nanan** express how the Indian migration to the island permeated and influenced Trinidadian culture.



OPPOSITE: Albert Chong, *My Jamaican Passport*, 1992, silver gelatin print, Collection by Albert Chong

TOP: Detail of Wendy Nanan, *The Baby Krishna Series*, 2011, paper mache, courtesy of the artist

BOTTOM: M.P. Alladin, *Las Palmas (The Palms)*, 1973, acrylic on canvas, OAS AMA | Art Museum of the Americas Collection



SURINAME

The first major Javanese migration of workers to Suriname took place in 1890, orchestrated by the Dutch as part of a political initiative to lessen their dependence on the British Colonial government in India. A second wave of Javanese migration followed from 1930 through World War II, as entire families were encouraged by the Surinamese government to populate the country. Javanese culture in Suriname has converged in fascinating ways with many other cultures in the country, including Indian, Indigenous, African, and Dutch. Born to Javanese parents in Suriname, **Soeki Irodikromo** aims to synthesize Eastern and Western cultural elements and to transcend the ethnic divisions which exist in his home country. His paintings incorporate Javanese iconography and the multicultural heritage of his country in an abstract and highly decorative style.

Soeki
78-17

GUYANA

The Asian migration to Guyana is similar to that of Suriname and Trinidad and Tobago: Indian indentured laborers were imported from the sub-continent of India to the West Indian colonies, ostensibly to fill the void created by the mass exodus of ex-slaves from plantation labor following the abolition of slavery. **Dhiradj Ramsamoedj's** installation *Adjie Gilas* juxtaposes elements that deal with his religious identity and his relationship with his maternal grandmother, "adjie." Each cup, dinged and dented from years of use, is printed with the face of his grandmother and carefully placed in a room laid out in a Mondrian-like grid. The room features images of the Indian deities Ganesh and Krishna, since—according to Ramsamoedj—the gods were already in the room, so he incorporated them in the space as a component of adjie's religious identity. Ramsamoedj's investigation of mixed identity, otherness, his own memory, and relationships to family and place is a deeply personal journey that resonates across cultural boundaries.

Cultural Encounters orients the viewer to this history through wall panels, object labels, and graphic materials, such as archival documents and photographs that provide historical and cultural context. A large-scale globe graphic traces migratory routes from nations of origin to destinations in Latin America and the Caribbean, and a companion website allows viewers to follow their own interests in gaining a deeper understanding of the history of Asian migration to the Americas. The exhibition considers how assimilation, acculturation, and transculturation influenced not only the fabric of these countries, but also modern and contemporary Latin American and Caribbean art.



Detail of Dhiradj Ramsamoedj, *Adjie Gilas*, c. 2011, installation, courtesy of the artist



Dhiradj Ramsamoedj, *Adjie Gilas*, c. 2011, installation, courtesy of the artist

ABOUT THE CURATOR

Adriana Ospina has been the OAS AMA | Art Museum of the Americas Permanent Collection Curator since early 2014 and Educational Program Manager since 2008. She also oversees AMA's Archives of Modern and Contemporary Art of the Americas and has organized exhibitions such as *Fusion: Tracing Asian Migration to the Americas through AMA's Collection* (2013) and *Femininity Beyond Archetypes: Photography by Natalia Arias* (2014). Currently, Ospina is coordinating a book project that aims to re-contextualize AMA's art collection, and is contributing to the *Documents of 20th-Century Latin American and Latino Art: A Digital Archive and Publications Project* in cooperation with the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Ospina is a Colombian art historian and holds an M.A. in Art History from George Mason University.

ABOUT OAS AMA | ART MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAS

The OAS AMA | Art Museum of the Americas is the oldest museum of modern and contemporary Latin American and Caribbean Art in the United States. It is part of the Organization of American States (OAS), an international public organization whose aim is to promote democracy, peace, justice, and solidarity among its 35 member countries. AMA's origins date back to the Visual Arts Unit of the Pan-American Union (now the OAS), and in the mid-twentieth century grew as one of the first catalysts of the parameters of modern art in Latin America and the Caribbean. Today AMA's permanent collection has more than 2,000 works complementing and documenting this international focus.

Much of the importance of this art collection resides in its attention to works that proved instrumental—particularly in the United States—in the launching of careers of many who are now regarded as masters of mid-twentieth century Latin American and Caribbean art. The collection represents significant artistic trends that have developed in Latin America, including New Figuration, Lyrical and Geometric Abstraction, Conceptual, Optical, and Kinetic Art, among other movements. AMA continues to organize exhibitions and programs for young and emerging artists, providing a space for cultural expression, creativity, and dialogue, while highlighting the issues central to the OAS and its public diplomacy strategy (democracy, equitable development, human rights, justice, and innovation) through the arts.

SPECIFICATIONS

Number of Works:

Approximately 75 works of art, video and ephemeral items

Organized by:

International Arts & Artists in collaboration with AMA | Art Museum of the Americas at the Organization of American States, Washington, DC

Credits:

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Curator:

Adriana Ospina
Collection Curator and Educational Programming
AMA | Art Museum of the Americas at the Organization of American States

Requirements:

High security; 250-300 linear feet

Shipping:

IA&A makes all arrangements; exhibitors pay outgoing shipping within the contiguous U.S.

Booking Period:

12 weeks

Tour:

2020 - 2022

Contact:

TravelingExhibitions@ArtsandArtists.org