



Current Comments

The Psychedelic Art of the Huichol Indians

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In a recent editorial I stated that I am not much of a collector.¹ At one time, all I collected was saxophone recordings. However, a few years ago I started to collect Huichol Indian yarn paintings. I now have a sizable collection. My friend Anne Geary introduced me to the craft of these Mexican Indians. It was through her that I met Olga and Bob Brooks, from whom I buy the paintings. They run a small import business in Northern California. They purchase the paintings from a merchant in Mexico who buys them from the Indians.

At present my collection numbers over 40 paintings, including two that are eight-feet long. They light up my apartment and my life. My collection is so large that I needed some help in cataloging it. So Olga Brooks recently translated for me the "Spanish-Indian" handwritten notes on the back of each painting, which explain the painting's symbolism. For example, one large painting about the Huichol children is enhanced by this description: "The children take an imaginary trip to the land of peyote at the feast of the corn and squash. They sit out in the sun on the laps of their mothers while the shaman recounts the entire imaginary pilgrimage. He uses the butterfly to symbolically lead them to Wirikuta."

The yarn paintings are created by pressing strands of colorful yarn into sunwarmed beeswax spread over plywood. The Huichols use extremely bright, contrasting colors. A series of these paintings on a wall creates a psychedelic vision not unlike that which originally inspired the artist.

The Huichols are a relatively small group of about 10,000 to 15,000 Indians living in a 1,500 square mile area of Mexico's Sierra Madre mountains. The name Huichol is a corruption of the Indians' native name Vixarica.² Although scholars disagree on the point, most believe that the Huichols have lived in their present location at least since the arrival of the first Spaniards in Mexico in 1519.^{2,3} Despite the efforts of the Spaniards and their missionaries to "civilize" and Christianize the Indians, the Huichols remained basically unchanged until the 1960s. At that time, the Mexican government introduced major programs to aid the Indians. Especially important was the building of airstrips into the almost inaccessible Huichol territory. This made outside contact relatively easy.

The Huichols remain, however, an agricultural people. They are dependent upon corn, which they plant by dropping a few kernels into a hole made with a digging stick. The planting, raising, and harvesting of corn are surrounded by religious ceremony, as is all of Huichol life. Susan Eger, former field director for the Foundation for the Indians of the Sierra, explains: "To the Huichols, religion is not part of life, it *is* life."⁴ Carl Lumholtz, a Norwegian ethnographer who was the first outsider to study the Huichols, and whose work about them is considered classic, observed, "that religion in one manifestation or another permeates all of life for the traditional Huichol, including economics, social relations, and even technology."³ The Huichol religion is also the major motivation for most of

their art. Huichol life is a continuous chain of ritual and devotional exercises to the gods. The gods are everywhere—in trees, hills, and lakes. Even stones have souls. Tatewari, Our Grandfather Fire; the God Káuyúmarie, the Blue Deer; and Tatéi Kukurú'Uimári, the Mother of Maize, are among the most important of the Huichol gods.

One of the best known of the Huichol rituals involves the use of peyote, a hallucinogenic cactus that grows in the Wiríkuta desert. This desert, which lies 300 miles northeast of the Huichol homeland, is considered by them to be their spiritual land of origin. A yearly pilgrimage to Wiríkuta to gather peyote is the climax of Huichol religious life. The peyote contains, among other things, the non-addictive drug mescaline.⁵ It is eaten with great ceremony, both in Wiríkuta and year-round at home, so that one can communicate directly with the gods. In their visions, the Huichol shamans often "meet" the gods, who reveal their knowledge to them. Peyote visions frequently provide ideas and motifs for Huichol artwork.

A significant part of the Huichol religion, in fact, centers around their art. Explains Peter T. Furst, professor of anthropology at the State University of New York and research associate in ethnobotany at the Botanical Museum of Harvard University, "For the Huichol, art is prayer and direct communication with and participation in the sacred realm. It is meant to assure the good and beautiful life: health and fertility of crops, animals, and people; prosperity of the individual, the kin group, and the larger society."³

According to Eger, "The Huichols use their artwork as a means of coding and channeling sacred knowledge, insuring the continuity and survival of the legacy left to them by their pre-Columbian ancestors."⁴ As a result, says Furst, "Almost every Huichol woman is skilled in the arts of weaving and embroidery, and many men and women excel at stringing tiny colored beads into beautiful earrings, bracelets, and

necklaces whose motifs derive from the communal inventory of sacred symbolism."³ Olga says these symbols are so firmly entrenched that Huichols from different areas who have never met before can produce exactly the same patterns.⁶

In addition to weaving and embroidery, the Huichols produce much votive, or offertory, art. Among these, the rukuri, or votive bowls, are considered by many to be the precursors of yarn paintings. These bowls, made from the bottom half of a calabash gourd, are decorated by pressing beads or yarn into their beeswax-coated inner surfaces. They are made as offerings and prayers, with the design usually symbolizing what the maker wishes the god to provide.

About 40 years ago when commercially produced yarns and fiberboard became available, the Huichols developed the art of yarn painting for sale to the public.⁷ Most of the paintings are done by men, although a few women are also involved in this craft. Olga explains that while the paintings often symbolize religious events and objects, they have no religious significance themselves, and have no place in the traditional Huichol culture. Unlike other Huichol artwork, they are not sacred. They often, however, represent religious things, such as ceremonies, feasts, and the gods.⁶ Paintings may also illustrate a story from Huichol mythology by showing a vision seen by the artist while taking peyote. The paintings in Figure 1 and Figure 2 (which appear in full color in the insert in this issue) each illustrate a specific observance or story.*

According to Olga, Huichol yarn paintings have become quite popular in the US in recent years. Some scholars lament this fact, however, explaining that, as a result, many Huichols, and even outsiders, are producing cheap versions, which are devoid of meaning.⁸ Phil C. Weigand, associate professor of anthropology at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, believes that most of the Huichol artwork sold today

falls into this category. "Crafts of dubious quality," he says, "are often produced in factory-like surroundings, with many workers—not all of them Indians, let alone Huichols—mass-producing bead-encrusted cigarette boxes, god's eyes, bead bracelets, woven bags, and even yarn paintings. Fortunately, the best artists have shunned this type of commercialism."⁹ Olga adds that a trained observer can easily tell the difference between authentic, meaningful Huichol work and rapidly-made, cheap imitations. In addition, she believes that since the Huichols dislike and distrust outsiders, they are not likely to commercialize their artwork any more than necessary. Nevertheless, most of the paintings that are sold to tourists are produced by Huichols who have gone to live in the towns nearest their original villages. In many ways, they are no longer traditional Huichols.

In any case, the Huichols are being exposed more and more to modern society. Olga and others are concerned that the Huichols may soon become "Mexicanized" as a result of that contact, and will perhaps eventually accept and adopt Christianity. While this is indeed possible, Olga believes that the Huichols' strong cultural associations,

combined with their dislike of outsiders, will enable them to preserve their own way of life.

Like many other primitive art forms Huichol art may become popular for a while. There are currently two exhibitions of Huichol artwork traveling across the US. I saw one of these exhibitions in Chicago several months ago. It displayed the work of two prominent Huichol artists, Tutukila and José Benítez Sánchez. While I admire the prolific work of these artists, I admire even more some of the themes and styles in my collection. Some of them have a childlike quality reminiscent of Grandma Moses. In fact, my own mother did a painting at the age of 60 which is so similar in character and color that it does not clash at all with the Huichol art that surrounds it.

If you are interested in knowing more about the Huichols and their art I can recommend the work edited by Kathleen Berrin, *Art of the Huichol Indians*,¹⁰ and *In the Magic Land of Peyote*, translated from the Mexican Spanish edition of a work by Fernando Benítez.¹¹ You may also wish to read Lumholtz' classics *Symbolism of the Huichol Indians*,¹² and *Unknown Mexico*.¹³

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Note: * The figures mentioned here were originally printed in color.