

Huichol Art at ISI: "Pilgrimage to Wirikuta" by Emeteria Rios Martinez and "Niños huicholes" by Lark Lucas

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During the past five years I have often discussed the art and culture of the Huichol Indians of Mexico.^{1,2} Huichols who still live in the traditional ways of their ancestors are becoming something of an "endangered species," trying to survive the onslaught of modern life. My enthusiasm for collecting Huichol art has inspired me with a determination to help preserve the story of their culture. Thanks to Olga Vasquez, the art specialist who first introduced me to the Huichol people, I also met Emeteria Rios Martinez, the Huichol artist who created for ISI[®] the two largest yarn paintings in the world.^{2,3} Over the years, Emeteria and Olga have become a part of the ISI family and are close friends.

Emeteria has continued to create works that we commissioned for a variety of occasions. Her paintings adorn many walls at ISI. More recently, she created a panoramic work that dominates the executive conference room adjacent to my office. (See insert in the center of this issue.) Olga and I discussed the theme of this special commission with Emeteria during a visit to Mexico in 1984. Since there's so much interest in the use of peyote by the Huichols, I asked, "Why not tell the story of the annual pilgrimage to Wirikuta [the sacred land of the Huichols' deified ancestors]? And let the background be orange to light up our daily deliberations."

Many months later, two large crates arrived from Mexicana de Aviación. As always, Emeteria had written the story of her painting in great detail (in a mixture of Spanish and her native Huichol, a language belonging to the far-flung Uto-Aztec family) on the backs of the two

five-foot panels. Her painting joins a corporate art collection that currently includes more than a dozen major works. Several of these—such as "Woman of the Earth" and the murals in the ISI Caring Center playground—will be the subjects of future essays.

"Pilgrimage to Wirikuta"

In keeping with Huichol tradition, Rios Martinez did not give a title to the 2' x 10' (61cm x 305cm) painting that we have chosen to call "Pilgrimage to Wirikuta" (see Figure 1 in the insert), which depicts the Huichols' ceremonial search for the peyote plant. The use of peyote—a cactus containing, among other alkaloids, the powerful hallucinogen mescaline—is one of the best known and most studied of Huichol rituals.^{1,2} The plant grows in the high plateau country the Huichols call Wirikuta, a desert some 300 miles east of their homeland.² Yearly pilgrimages to Wirikuta, which the Huichols consider their spiritual land of origin, are for many the high points of their religious life. With great ceremony, the peyote discovered on the trip is eaten during special fiestas, enabling the Huichols to commune directly with their gods.²

Figures 2 through 6 show the details of Emeteria's depiction of this central Huichol rite. The painting consists of six scenes; the artist provided a separate commentary for each on the reverse side. The gray serpent undulating its way across the entire work is the messenger of Tatei Nuarihuame, Our Mother Messenger of the Rain. It also symbolizes the path followed by the pilgrims to Wirikuta and back to their homes. The various

symbols along the pathway indicate the ceremonial stops the pilgrims, or *peyoteros*, make along their journey.⁴

As noted previously,² the peyote pilgrimage is one of three major ceremonies celebrated by the Huichols during the year. According to anthropologist Barbara G. Myerhoff, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, the Huichols believe that their deified ancient ancestors, the First People, once dwelled in Wirikuta in harmony and freedom as nomadic hunters.⁵ Ages ago, however, the First People were driven out into a mortal, agrarian existence in the Sierra Madre Occidental. "Every year," Myerhoff states, "small groups of Huichols—men and women, young and old—are led by a *mara'akame* [shaman] in a return to Wirikuta to hunt peyote."⁵ (p. 56)

The 600-mile round trip to Wirikuta takes several weeks. To reenter their sacred land, the *peyoteros* must, through a complex series of rituals and ceremonies, transform themselves into deities.⁵ This entails ritual fasting and minimizing bodily functions, such as sleeping, to help the pilgrims shed their humanity. At specific locations along the journey, they also adopt more and more of their divine identities. They reenact the behaviors and assume the feelings and attitudes attributed to the First People.

The journey begins at the *tuki*, or temple, pictured as the triangular object on the far left of the first panel, near the tail of the serpent (Figure 2). The pilgrims are gathered around Tatewari, Our Grandfather Fire: "All of them are preparing their packs, in which they will carry the peyote," Rios Martinez writes.⁶ "They meet in the house of the *mara'akame*, who has been awaiting them."

The trip to Wirikuta is always preceded by a ritual confession around a fire, during which each pilgrim is spiritually cleansed in preparation for the journey. During this ritual, the members of the expedition step forward and confess their sins; the *mara'akame* records each sin by tying a knot in a cord. When all have confessed, the cord is tossed into

the fire and the participants are reborn and renamed as one of their ancient deities.^{2,4,5} After confessing, the pilgrims gather provisions for the journey, including gifts for the gods. "They all carry different offerings for each god," Emeteria writes. "Each one of them also carries a feather [the symbol of the hawk and the eagle, birds sacred to the sun god] to offer the gods. They carry these things in order to be spiritually full when they arrive."⁶

For the peyote hunt to be successful, the pilgrims must have complete trust in and loyalty to both the *mara'akame* and one another.⁶ Indeed, unless all are in complete accord and unconditionally give their hearts to one another, they will not only fail to find any peyote, but they may also lose their souls: the journey is beset by evil spirits and demons intent on turning the *peyoteros* away. Only the *mara'akame*, who has assumed the aspects of Tatewari, and the strength of the pilgrims' bonds to one another protect them from the dangers of the journey.

In Figure 3, the pilgrims encounter just such an obstacle—Kieri, the evil Tree of the Wind (the gray shape adorned with green and yellow rods). Myerhoff and anthropologist Peter T. Furst, State University of New York (SUNY), Albany, and the Botanical Museum of Harvard University, Cambridge, note that Kieri is actually jimsonweed (*Datura innoxia*), a hallucinogenic plant of the nightshade family;⁷ unlike peyote, however, it is poisonous, making those who use it sick and giving them, the Huichols believe, evil visions.⁸ (p. 161) According to Huichol myth, Kieri was once a great sorcerer who was defeated by Tamatz Kaenyumari, Our Elder Brother Deer, with the aid of peyote. "The pilgrims confront many dangers," Rios Martinez writes, "but they continue to move forward. The pilgrims need to clear their consciences well, so as to avoid or pass by the dangers the evil spirit puts in their way; the evil spirit will die when it sees the pilgrims push on."⁶ The *mara'akame* leading the way cleanses the area and clears a spiritual

path for the pilgrims following behind.

Once the pilgrims pass the Tree of the Wind, they have successfully skirted all the dangers awaiting them.⁴ In Figure 4, they come to the mountain peak, symbolized by the two deer heads, that marks the threshold of the gods—the first of many sacred altars at which they will offer sacrifices. It is here that they are met by the double-headed eagle (the yellow and green bird between the two deer heads), the messenger of the gods of the sky, and Kauyumari, the representative of the gods of the earth.⁴

In Figure 5, the pilgrims finally enter the sacred land of Wirikuta, signified by the large, red-and-yellow, free-form shape.⁴ They eat some dust scraped from the desert floor to prepare their tongues to speak the language of the gods. Of this scene, Rios Martinez writes: "The gods offer the pilgrims many things, such as magic silver. They also offer them good luck in the coming peyote hunt and the knowledge to cure sicknesses. Each pilgrim receives gifts of the gods according to his or her requests."⁶

The pilgrims encounter the god Tamaspovica (Figure 6), who fulfills all their worthy desires.⁶ The eagle becomes aware of this and descends from the heavens on white wings and clouds. The eagle hears the words of the *marakame*, who leads the pilgrims, and receives the sacrifices of the *peyoteros*. These offerings are symbolized by the dark circle to the left of the eagle; they are also received by Kauyumari, represented by the horned, aqua-colored circle decorated with four white streamers in Figure 5.⁴ He transmits their sacrifices to the other gods. The white streamers descending from the top of the scene in Figure 6 represent the gifts from the gods.

If all the ceremonial thoughts and actions are properly performed, then the peyote, which the Huichols believe springs from the tracks of Kauyumari, will allow itself to be found.⁴ The party camps upon arriving in Wirikuta, and the *marakame* then stalks the peyote-deer. To the right of the double-headed

eagle (Figure 6), they discover the peyote for which they have been searching. Myerhoff—who, with Furst, was allowed to accompany a band of *peyoteros* on their pilgrimage to Wirikuta—writes that the peyote is then ceremonially "slain" with a bow and arrow. "The *peyoteros* weep with joy at having attained their goal and with grief at having slain their brother."⁵ (p. 57)

The peyote is dug up and the "bones"—the roots of the cactus—are cut away and saved for burial later so that the peyote-deer can be reborn.⁵ The cactus is then cut into segments by the *marakame*, who gives a slice to each of the pilgrims; in turn, one of the pilgrims then administers a segment to the *marakame*. In the yarn painting by Rios Martinez, the pilgrims have visions as they partake of the peyote (Figure 6), perceiving it as it is seen from the heavens: four yellow circles surrounding a larger, inner circle. Each pilgrim, however, perceives it in a slightly different way, for each has a unique vision. At the far right of Figure 6, the large, green circle is the symbol of the pilgrims.⁶

The moment when the pilgrims first share peyote marks the fulfillment of the highest goals in the Huichol religious life.⁵ They have traveled to paradise, transformed themselves into deities, and communed with their gods. The path from their houses to the sacred lands begins and ends in the same place⁴—that is to say, it has no beginning and no end. Thus, the serpent symbolizing the pathway takes on a connotation found in Western cultures: that of Ouroboros, a dragon or serpent with its tail in its mouth, continually devouring itself and being reborn from itself.⁹ Found in the mythologies of both ancient Egypt and Greece, it symbolizes Nature's perpetual cycle of destruction and rebirth. Ouroboros also inspired nineteenth-century German chemist Friedrich August Kekulé von Stradonitz to conceive of the benzene molecule as a ring of linked carbon atoms.⁹

Like Ouroboros, which is its own beginning and its own end, the road the pilgrims take is always open for them to go

back to Wirikuta, even as they return to their houses carrying the peyote for their festivals.⁵ The pilgrims leave the sacred land precipitately, for it is dangerous to remain too long in the realm of the gods. They return to the Sierra as mortals, exhausted and exhilarated by the enormous undertaking.

Emeteria Ríos Martínez and the Art of Yarn Painting

When Olga Vasquez arranged for Emeteria to make her first trip out of her native country, I seized the opportunity to invite them both to ISI. After a tour of California, they flew to Philadelphia and conducted a workshop and lecture seminar. We had invited many local art librarians and friends to hear this remarkable woman. Emeteria spoke in Spanish of her life and work. Her tranquil manner was marvelous to behold. This mother of 10 children and creator of hundreds of paintings was an inspiration. She epitomizes the best in humanity—creativity, sensitivity, and compassion.

She then proceeded to teach the group how to create yarn paintings. Emeteria could indeed show each person how to press yarn into beeswax, but she could not tell us how to generate the endless variety of images that come from her fertile mind. Using the ideographic language of the Huichol mythology, she creates an endless variety of psychedelic images in her work. The symbolic representations she "paints" vary according to her current thoughts and mood.

Olga provided a simultaneous translation of Emeteria's talk and the written description of "Pilgrimage to Wirikuta." Olga was able to add parenthetical comments about the customs of the Huichols, since she has lived with them. However, Bob Kendrick of the ISI indexing translation staff later provided a literal translation of the text.

The most distinctive characteristic of Huichol yarn paintings is their unusual combination of bright, contrasting colors. They are created by pressing strands of yarn into warm beeswax spread over plywood panels.^{1,2} These techniques originated from those used to create a

nierika—a small, disc-shaped, devotional object made from the bottom of a gourd. The surface of the gourd is coated with *cera compache*, a mixture of wild bees' wax and soap, and decorated with strands of brightly colored yarn.⁴ Often deposited in a sacred location as an offering, the *nierika*, or "god's face," symbolizes a threshold or passageway to the supernatural realm.^{2,10}

The Huichols are an intensely religious people, immersed throughout their lives in ritual and sacred symbols.^{11,12} Furst paraphrases the classic, pioneering works of Norwegian ethnographer Carl Lumholtz^{11,13,14} when he states that "religion in one manifestation or another permeates all of life for the traditional Huichol, including economics, social relations, and even technology."¹² (p. 19) Nowhere is this more evident than in Huichol arts and crafts. Their art is a means of direct communication with their deities. According to Furst, sacred art may be variously meant to ensure prosperity, health and fertility, bountiful crops, and to promote the general welfare of the whole community, but it is always functional as well as beautiful.¹²

Furst notes that among the many aspects of the Huichol religion, one of the most remarkable has been its steadfast resistance to "all but the most minor modifications" from Western sources.¹² (p. 19) Among the changes the modern world *has* inspired, however, is the relatively recent innovation of yarn painting. As the Mexican government has introduced schools, medical services, modern agricultural methods, and improved communications to the Sierras, the Huichols have grown to accept more and more of the trappings of modern civilization, including a money-based economy.¹⁰

When their sacred art drew the attention of outsiders at the same time that their financial needs increased, the Huichols—expanding on articles that previously had been religious in nature—began to produce items expressly for commercial purposes. Aside from yarn art, among the most common objects for

sale are beaded necklaces, bracelets, and handwoven bags that may be either beaded or embroidered in colorful patterns.

Although most yarn art is still based on interpretations of traditional religious stories, yarn painting has become very much an urban enterprise.¹⁰ Many Huichols, including Emeteria, have left their homeland in the rugged and isolated Sierra Madre Occidental mountains of the west central Mexican states of Jalisco and Nayarit to live in small towns and cities; there they find a dependable supply of plywood—the indispensable base of yarn paintings—and outlets for their creations. Some artists—again, including Emeteria—derive their livelihood through their art. And when the supply exceeds the current demand, or under desperate economic conditions, the Huichols often lower their prices to subsistence levels.

While many Huichol yarn artists learn their trade in urban centers,¹⁰ Emeteria, as a child in the mountains, was taught traditional methods by one of her distant relatives, José Benítez Sánchez. Benítez Sánchez is the best known student of Ramón Medina Silva, who was the first Huichol to develop yarn painting into a marketable art.⁴ Emeteria embarked on her own career when she entered and won a workshop competition designed to train young, aspiring artists.

She now lives with her family in the town of Compostela, just a few hours' drive from the Pacific coast. Though removed from the Sierra Madre, she has not abandoned her traditions, remaining spiritually united with her people through her art. In the last few years, Emeteria, while working on commissions from ISI, has finished her primary education. She is currently studying to be a nurse's aide in workshops offered by the Mexican government and hopes to return to the mountains of her birth to work in a clinic.⁴

"Niños huicholes"

Among those who have been captivated by the unique culture of the Huichols is Lark Lucas, a native of Salt Lake City,

Utah, now living in Ben Lomond, California, just south of San Francisco. She executed for ISI "Niños huicholes," two ceramic-tile portraits of Huichol children, a boy and a girl (see insert). Each 18" x 36" (45cm x 90cm) portrait consists of nine glazed terra-cotta tiles mounted on a plywood panel. Each tile measures approximately 6" x 12" (15cm x 30cm). They stand in my office and remind me daily of my faraway friends.

The portraits are based not on actual subjects, but upon a collage of Lucas's memories, culled from visits to Mexico over a 25-year period.¹⁵ They show a preadolescent boy and girl in traditional Huichol costume. These costumes, like all Huichol everyday implements, are sacred. According to Robert Mowry Zingg, University of Chicago, Illinois, the cleanliness and overall condition of the clothing supposedly indicates the moral state of the wearer. He notes, however, that Huichols don't take this aspect of their religion too seriously.¹⁶

Embroidered symbols and patterns are cross-stitched into the clothing of both sexes, young and old alike.⁸ (p. 184-97) The boy's hat is decorated with squirrel tails and the feathers of eagles and hawks, the symbols of the first peyote hunt. The hems of the boy's loose trousers bear the flower pattern of the peyote plant. The horse motif on the boy's shoulder is testimony to Western influences in the Huichol culture.⁸

The peyote-flower theme is again visible in the borders of the girl's skirt, her belt, and the sleeve of her blouse. She, too, bears a sign of the inroads made by the West: her handmade fiddle. Although an instrument of Western origin, it, together with the guitar, has acquired a prominent role in the peyote hunt, for when the peyote is first discovered, the Huichols will often dance the night away, accompanied by joyous melodies from their instruments.¹⁷ The girl is also holding a *tsikuri*, a wooden cross with strands of yarn wound about it in a diamond pattern. This is sometimes called a "god's eye" by non-Huichols. A symbol of the power to perceive and understand the unknowable, the *tsikuri* traditionally

serves as a type of votive offering to the guardian god of a child; each year the father adds a section to the object, which is left in sacred places. It still serves this function today, but is also made for the tourist trade.¹⁸

Even the borders of the portraits convey a feeling of the Huichol culture. "I wanted to put down some of the scenes that run through their artwork," Lucas said, "such as, for instance, the peyote plant and the animals and the deer. But I wasn't able to get it all into their costumes because I couldn't get the detail. So that was the beginning of the large borders; I picked up the themes of their artwork and put them into the borders. I see these themes in their embroidery, in their beadwork, and in their yarn paintings and votive bowls."¹⁵

Lucas believes that artists are "transmitters" or "historians" of the fabric of a society, expressing how the members of a society feel about themselves and the world around them.¹⁵ She says that the somber, almost mournful expressions on the faces of the children in "Niños huicholes" are a reflection of the anguish the elder Huichols feel over the decline of their culture in the face of modern civilization.¹⁵ "The children intuitively feel that they're losing their identity, los-

ing their culture," Lucas explains.

Although yarn paintings and portraits of Huichol children preserve a bit of Huichol culture, only a dedicated effort on the part of both the Mexican government and the Huichols themselves can help prolong, if not preserve, this vanishing way of life. It is encouraging that, while many Huichols are moving out of their traditional communities, others are ingeniously combining the advantages offered by government educational and assistance programs with various aspects of their traditional culture.¹⁹ For instance, the traditional Huichol social unit, the *comunidad* (a chartered land grant from the Spanish crown), has emerged as a successful foundation for the business of cattle-raising—an enterprise in which the Huichols are beginning to specialize. Perhaps, suggests anthropologist Phil C. Weigand, SUNY, Stony Brook, the Huichols are undergoing a period of dynamic change—a period from which, it may be hoped, their culture will emerge with a new vitality and stability.¹⁹

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