

Interview with Juan Negrin
on behalf of J. de Marez Oyens
by John H. Bowles

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Regina, Juan The Huitcho Creation of the World, Sacramento, P.E. Crocker
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J.N. - I first want to respond a little to the idea of the consequences of an exhibit, or a series of exhibits, in major museums in Europe, which is what we're proposing. So far, my experience with the Huichol over the past ten years has shown me that the Huichol, as a group of approximately twelve thousand individuals, cannot defend their rights and culture solely by dint of the number of people they represent, but rather on account of the unique importance of the humanistic perspective their culture exemplifies.

When I first approached Salomón Nahmad and other Mexican officials from the National Indian Institute in 1974, they were not interested in doing a publication on the Huichol because they considered that what had already been published by Peter Furst had sufficiently dealt with the mythology and art of the Huichol Indians, and that there was no need to add any more data to what was already known. It took my coming to the United States and organizing several exhibitions* and the publication of a major catalogue** before members of the National Institute of Anthropology and History could say that, "of course, this is wonderful, this definitely must be published, we had no idea that the

*e.g.: 1973, at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

1974, at The Municipal Art Gallery, Los Angeles; The Ankrum Gallery,

Los Angeles, The Corcoran Art Gallery, Washington, D. C..

1975, at the Crocker Art Gallery, Sacramento.

1976, at the San Jose Museum of Art, San Jose.

** Negrín, Juan The Huichol Creation of the World, Sacramento: E.B. Crocker Art Gallery, 1975.

Huichol did anything like this, were capable of anything like this, or that their culture was as rich as these artworks indicate." So at that point we were able to hold a show at the Regional Museum of Jalisco, in Guadalajara, in 1977, as well as having a major catalogue published by the University of Guadalajara in conjunction with the National Institute of Anthropology and History. They did this under a peculiar spell, known as "malinchismo" in Mexico, in which the appreciation, by a recognized outside cultural group, of the value of a Mexican cultural artifact, eventually reverberates in the minds of the Mexicans themselves, thereby enhancing their own recognition of its value. In this respect, it was also important to have a group like "Cultural Survival," headed by professors from Harvard University, take an interest in the value and importance of the Huichol culture; this also showed Mexican intellectuals, university people and government officials that, indeed, the Huichol culture was more than a vestige or remnant of a sub-Aztec culture that never reached the material sophistication of the Aztecs themselves.

My primary goal is to demonstrate what Huichol culture really is, so as to impress Mexican official and institutional thinking with the depth and accomplishments of this culture, which would, in turn, help them recognize the irrevocable impact certain new government policies will have upon the future of the Huichol. There's no question that if the Huichol, twelve thousand people, are respected for the cultural lessons and insights that they can offer to all contemporary peoples, it will speak in their favor. It can help them stand as

a strong cultural and ethnic group, rather than just as a group of marginated and impoverished Indians without much to offer anybody, draining the Mexican economy by thier need to be subsidized and their resistance to the development of their land's resources.

The impact of European people taking an interest in an indigenous Mexican culture would, in my opinion, have very positive influence in Mexico. It would encourage Mexicans to develop greater respect and understanding in dealing with issues concerning this previously isolated people with whom they're now becoming more involved. In this respect it is most important to understand the economic, social, and political context that the Huichol live in at present.

Roads are being built in the Huichol territory for the first time in history. Five years ago, the first major road was constructed for logging purposes that have turned out to be exploitative of the Indians. More recently, a thousand kilometers of roads have been scheduled for completion within a year and a half from now. Already a major part of these new roads has been built. These roads will greatly jeopardize the future of the Huichol who, until lately, have been neglected by outside interests mainly because of the inaccessibility of their lands and their evasive aloofness towards outsiders. The building of roads will increase their exposure to outside interests, interests that ideally should be channeled in ways that will enable the Huichol to maintain economic independence and cultural integrity.

To date, I have been extremely secretive about the Huichol, the only thing I haven't been secretive about is the importance of recognizing the ability of

individual Huichol to be major artists on a par with great artists of any other culture, not just from an ethnic curiosity perspective. Meanwhile, I have not talked about the Huichol or their country, rituals, ceremonies, or religious mysteries because I have felt that that was something that I could not expose to the outside world. But now that there is a major effort under way to present the Huichol as unproductive peasants with large tracts of land that are going to waste, (an image which justifies outside development of their land's resources that would have dire ecological impact), it becomes ever more important to encourage a better appreciation of Huichol culture. The opposition of the Indians does not represent much if the Indians themselves don't represent much in the minds of the average Mexican, the Mexican politician who facilitates developments, or the uninformed intellectual establishment. Consequently, the point of an international exhibition is not to expose where and how the Huichol live, and by what means one can gain access to them, but is rather a matter of relating the unique perspective and importance of a minority culture in a world where culture is becoming more and more uniform. The Huichol represent an alternate way of seeing the world and this is something that they express with great beauty and impact in their artworks.

The reason that we should approach the proposed exhibiton in an artistic rather than an anthropological manner is precisely to avoid ascribing too many formal classifications to the ethnic group while giving the public an opportunity of directly seeing this culture through the windows provided by its artistic geniuses. I do not see how, at this point- when the roads are being built into the Huichol

mountains, when new economic programs are under way to force non-productive lands to become productive, when the school program is becoming more and more influential and diffused throughout the Huichol mountains, when the government is considering the area in terms of a touristic development as well- it is difficult to see how an abstract exhibit, which is in essence what we propose, will be damaging to a people who can only be harmed because they are not respected, because they are not heard when they say "We do not want our woods to be cut down."

To date, the Huichol are little appreciated as a group on account of the demographic value that they represent, and a good exhibition in Europe can do much to improve their recognition. There is a possibility of going to the Museum of Man in Paris, and traveling the exhibit on to the Volkanderung Museum in Vienna, and perhaps a few other select institutions. However, I've been somewhat apprehensive of that approach because I think that the Huichol should not be presented as a frozen culture or an anthropological specimen because they are a constantly evolving and creative people. To generalize their culture does an injustice to them as individuals; in fact, their culture is a kind of hymn to the individual's power of direct revelation and ability to express the originality of his vision. This makes the Huichol different from typical portrayals in anthropological studies and exhibitions.

I find that a major problem is precisely the exposure people have had to Huichol culture through exhibits prepared by anthropologists like Dr. Peter Furst and Dr. Barbara Myerhoff; their approach tends to emphasize the outward forms

of the culture while neglecting to convey its inner depth and vitality. Like many people who study and write books about the Huichol, Furst and Myerhoff do not qualify, in my opinion, as people who study the Huichol, primarily because their studies have only involved a very few acculturated Indians living outside of the Huichol mountains.

The reason I've worked for ten years with the Huichol is that it takes a long time to establish channels of communication with members of a culture so different from ours. In the first three years I worked with artists and craftsmen and received the basic vocabulary of their culture by studying the themes and subjects of their art. Later, with this basic background, I was gradually able to comprehend religious concepts of greater complexity. My relationship then grew into one of participation as I accompanied some of their more serious artists on pilgrimages. I followed the practice of their rituals and became increasingly involved with their religion. It was only then that they became willing to share some of the deeper aspects of their culture. I also discovered that their artwork could convey deeper significance than that which they were accustomed to produce for tourists and traders.

Over the years I have learned how very difficult it is to establish a reliable rapport with the Huichol. I was dismayed to find out that my first three years of exposure to them served but to nurture my own projections and preconceptions rather than nourish any true appreciation of their culture. The Huichol are particularly good at playing on what they see that you understand, what they see that you expect from them. None other than Carl Lumholtz recognized that; as

the first explorer who really wrote about them, he described them as being the most extraordinary liars of any tribal group that he had ever met. He was able to recognize this only after spending nine months with them in the mountains, which is something that no established modern anthropologist or published ethnographer has done. Consequently, the majority of the information, material, and artifacts gathered after Lumholtz, at best only weakly suggest the complexity, richness and vibrance of Huichol culture. This has resulted in the belittlement of Huichol culture in the eyes of the Mexicans and the world public, as well as institutions like UNESCO which usually take an active interest in small cultures because of their irreplacable value to humanity.

This is where the subject gets difficult, when one speaks of such abstractions; but the point that I'm trying to make is that the Huichol have actually been harmed by the superficial exhibitions that have taken place. People who have seen those exhibits have often commented, (as can be seen in responses to the 1978 de Young Museum exhibit published by the San Francisco Chronicle), that this didn't seem to be a very high culture since a purported shaman like Ramón Medina was killed for dancing with someone else's woman, which indeed could not have occurred with true shamans and truly devout Huichol. In Mexico, during conferences and lectures on the Huichol, some of the audience express such strong reactions as: "How can you speak of a culture when it comes to these people? They're actually savages, they have no culture, this cannot be considered a culture." And so it becomes imperative to establish that, yes, the Huichol are a culture, from an aesthetic point of view and from a general philosophic point of

view as well. This can also be established by organizing a few select international exhibitions; it's not a question of making a lot of noise but rather a question of being able to feed back information that can be helpful in Mexico.

Now I would also like to mention the matter of Huichol sculpture. Carl Lumholtz, our earliest source of data on the Huichol, was the first to record finding statues in their caves. Instead of taking the pieces he found, he managed to get a shaman, possibly the same shaman who had made them, to reproduce those pieces for him. The statues represented two deities, Tacutsi Nakawé and Tukákame, and the pieces he brought back are now in the collection of the Museum of Natural History in New York.

The reasons that Huichol sculpture has not been mentioned very much are multiple. One is that after Lumholtz reproduced some photographs of the caves and mentioned the sculptures (which were also later referred to, without illustrations, by a Frenchman called Léon Diguét), there was sacking of Huichol caves and pieces disappeared. Also, up until about forty years ago, priests and missionaries were asking the Huichol to allow them to destroy some of the sculptures that were in their caves. For that reason missionaries were banned by the Huichol community of Santa Catarina for thirty years thereafter. Although this does not occur anymore, a more recent phenomenon is the opening of the Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City, which has acquired examples of Huichol sculpture. Unfortunately, their collection, organized by Alfonso Soto Soria, actually contains pieces that were stolen by a Huichol individual from the Huichol caves. The discovery that stolen pieces had been acquired by the Museum of

Anthropology upset the Huichol very much. As a consequence, the man who stole those pieces left the mountains under banishment by his community.

What is not widely known is that, to this day, certain Huichol shamans are still producing such sculpture. I agree with Lumholtz, there can be no justification for stealing sculpture that remains part of a living religion. Yauxali, a Huichol shaman who is also an accomplished sculptor, has agreed to carve representations of certain deities, not primarily for exhibition purposes but in order to establish a durable assembly of the general Huichol pantheon for study purposes. This would allow the sculpture to be appreciated without violating the forbidden caves of the mountains.

If an Indian group could become proudly conscious of its culture before it is dissipated, before our alien culture makes its impact, there's the chance that they will develop into a much stronger and more creative people than would otherwise be possible. Doubtless, the fate of most tribal peoples confronted with the modern world has usually been less positive.

It is important when considering the Huichol to recognize that we are not dealing with a culture that is now destroyed, or looking back at the remnants of something, recording a past that a few elders say they recall hearing about from their elders; instead we're dealing with something that's still alive, separate, and still not syncretized with outside culture. Because this is so, it is still possible for them to reflect upon themselves for what they are. Furthermore, if the Mexican public, officials and institutions had greater respect for them, then they wouldn't have a tendency to look down on themselves as they do when

the outside world approaches them only as anthropological objects of curiosity or inferior beings. I think that this is what justifies exhibitions abroad, for the right kind of European response could give the Huichol greater self-respect by enhancing their image in Mexico.

From the beginning I have known, as a Mexican, that Mexico cannot be pressured with respect to internal policies. There is no question that criticism from an American public, individual, or institution accusing Mexico of racism, ethnocide or insensitivity to poverty would be deemed absurd because the history of the United States does not justify such a self-righteous stance; immediately the point being made is lost. It's actually a fact that, if the Americans say such things Mexicans are apt to find such statements impertinent. This is very understandable from any developing nation, but the more so with Mexico because of its historical and political relationship to the United States, which has been a highly sensitive matter ever since Mexico lost fifty percent of its territory to the States. In general, the application of critical pressure by any foreign interest is a terrible mistake.

Our intent is to apply positive pressure. It can do no harm to speak positively about a cultural phenomenon, to demonstrate its beauty, to speak of its depth. That's not the same thing as attempting to apply negative pressure by denouncing the treatment of the Indians, which would be dismissed because the Mexican government has treated Indians relatively well, even in times of poor economy.

J.B. - One could say that Peter Furst and Barbara Meyerhoff also spoke positively about the Huichol. How would you differentiate the kind of influence

that their relatively superficial international exhibitions have had on Mexico from the influence of exhibitions that you've organized?

J.N. - The main difference is that I consider Mexico to be the nucleus and focal point of my activities, and I've sought comparatively little exposure outside of Mexico. The primary aim of the Mexican exhibitions is to provide the Indians with a platform. For example, José Benítez Sánchez is always directly involved with Mexican exhibitions of his work. I also try to get Indian leaders to come to these exhibitions and speak with reporters. I use exhibits in Mexico as platforms and those outside of Mexico as sort of seals of approval that make the Mexicans look with more interest and reappraise in greater depth.

The problem of the positive approach of Peter Furst and Barbara Méyerhoff is that, although their presentations of the Huichol are favorably received, they are not considered terribly important. This is because their shows are misrepresentative: the contemporary art they exhibit is never of very high quality and the anthropological information they offer is either shallow, incorrect, misleading, or socially inconsequential.

Both Furst and Méyerhoff base their understanding of the Huichol on field work done with one individual, and one individual cannot convey the collective sense of being Huichol and living in a Huichol manner.

J.B. - Furst and Méyerhoff contend that their informant, Ramón Medina, was an authentic shaman with a deep understanding of his culture. Would you in any way question the nature of Medina's status or the reliability of the information he made available to Furst and Méyerhoff?

J.N. - Well, Peter Furst explains that he accompanied Ramón Medina on Ramón's fourth pilgrimage to Wírikuta, (the Eastern Holyland). His documentary film of that pilgrimage shows that Ramón and his fellow pilgrims went by car, taking a "shortcut" approach to the pilgrimage, which would be considered ineffective by any traditional Huichol in the mountains. In fact, said pilgrims were urbanized Indians who only occasionally left the city ghettos to visit a nearby rancho, called El Colorín. Even El Colorín is five days away from the Huichol mountain communities. Thus, none of these Indians were integrated into any clan, ceremonial center or tribal group; they lived a dependent economic relationship with modern Mexico. In this light, it is not surprising that Peter Furst met Ramón Medina in Zapopan working for the Franciscan missionaries there, which already indicates that he wasn't a typical Huichol. The only Huichol community which has accepted Franciscan missions is San Andrés Cohamiata, while the other two have refused to let them settle anywhere.

So the question is then, how was Ramón Medina following a traditional type of shamanic education outside of the Huichol mountains? Being on his fourth and fifth pilgrimages with Peter Furst, it is hardly likely that he was a savant, as five pilgrimages to Wírikuta are duly expected of any Huichol. Nonetheless, Peter Furst writes that with five pilgrimages one automatically becomes a shaman. In the Huichol mountains Peter Furst would have found out that everybody has to carry out five pilgrimages; there, young men are initiated into ceremonial clan centers and partake in five years of ceremonies, including pilgrimages to the desert, sacred rituals and hunts. Nonetheless, fulfilling the five year commitment

does not confer shamanic recognition.

Another problem with the information from Furst and Meyerhoff is that the pilgrimage to Wirikuta, which is the only pilgrimage that they describe, is really just a part of a whole cycle of rituals, ceremonies and pilgrimages. Their writing gives the simple impression of a religion solely based around a single psychedelic substance like peyote when, in fact, the Huichol make many other kinds of pilgrimages and have far more complex and varying relationships to psychotropic plants. A small minority actually find that the peyote is taboo for them and are, instead, involved with the Tree of Wind. Ramón Medina, being unfamiliar with the Tree of Wind, portrays it like a tolache, or datura plant, instead of portraying it the way that it looks. Now we know, scientifically, that it's not a toloache or datura, in fact, and so it doesn't look like Ramón Medina's representations. Thus, the problem of approaching the Tree of Wind or kieri, through an individual like Medina is that he didn't directly know anything about it; he knew about it folklorically, through hearsay, through what other people said about it, other people for whom the kieri was taboo and to be regarded with suspicion. One could, on the other hand, approach other individuals devoted to the kieri tree, for whom peyote is taboo, and get completely contrary accounts.

For a Huichol to be able to say that he has made a pilgrimage, and not a "visit" (and they have such a terminology), requires the fulfillment of a great number of ritual obligations. In any case, one cannot visit a sacred place without being thoroughly cleansed, and the circumstances of Medina's fourth and fifth pilgrimages were inappropriate for making a pilgrimage, much less serving as a means of becoming a shaman.

I have no question that Ramón Medina was a very strong, magnetic individual, and that he very well could have become a shaman, that he had the gift to become a shaman. But he did not live in circumstances compatible with that aim, which require involvement with all the rituals, living in isolation, and participating in all of the festivities relating to cornplanting, harvesting, cleaning the fields, hunting the deer, and so on. This is something that Ramón could not do, because he lived mostly in Tepic and Guadalajara.

There are a lot of anecdotes about Peter Furst's informer, Ramón Medina, how he even laughed at himself for being taken to be what he knew very well that he wasn't. I think it's a sore topic and I don't really like to discuss it. He had potential as an artist, but he died too soon, and that, according to the Huichol, is exactly what one expects when a person is seeking shamanic clarity or employing shamanic powers without first fulfilling certain prerequisites. Such a person is expected to be severely punished by death, and this is what happened to Ramón Medina.

When speaking about shamanism, it is important to note that there are various levels of accomplishment. "Shaman" is used all too vaguely, as all students of shamanism have decried. The Huichol have several terms; for example, they have one term for a man who is a healer and another for a man who is a hexer. A hexer is one who harms, and as such has the lowest kind of spiritual knowledge. The healer is slightly higher, and at a yet higher level one finds the chanter who does chant healings. Finally, what is extraordinarily rare is the healer who can produce crystals.

One is only recognized as a shaman after being appraised as such by previously recognized shamans.

J.B. - And Ramón Medina did not have any such recognition?

J.N. - There were not people surrounding him who could give him such recognition. I know the people in the area where he lived, there are two men there who are considered to have shamanic power, but they have no standing compared with a shaman in the mountains. What disturbs me is not that Ramón Medina was considered a shaman when maybe he wasn't, but that Ramón Medina was exemplified by Peter Furst and Barbara Meyerhoff as the perfectly accomplished Huichol shaman. At the very most he was a mere novice fulfilling his basic duties of reaching Wírikuta for the fifth time. I have known other Huichol who have made enormously rigorous pilgrimages to Wírikuta over the five-year cycle, only to conclude that they had no gift for being shamans. A few Huichol have made as many as twenty-three pilgrimages to Wírikuta, (as well as to many other sacred places in the mountains, by the ocean, to the north, etc.) and still consider themselves unable fully to comprehend what is known to a great shaman.

If you have read about great shamanic cultures, what you hear about Ramón Medina, even assuming it was true, must seem a little trivial. However, if presented with the same tablas and folkloric material over and over again, one's apt to assume that the material is rather limited, which is actually far from the case. This is something that can be corrected by presenting a richer range of material.

At least Barbara Meyerhoff stated the truth when she admitted that she had never been to the Huichol mountains. Furst does not even give you the context within which he approached the Huichol, which is wrong both anthropologically and scientifically; one should always discuss the circumstances of one's informants.

Furthermore, it is usually very difficult to make use of a shaman as a steady informant. One must be devoted to waiting around for them, for a shaman is constantly being invited to major ceremonies to chant and therefore can't be sitting around being interviewed in Guadalajara or Tepic. A shaman must perform his collective duties to his community, and these duties are very difficult, sometimes demanding that he chant for five days or hunt for a month; also, as a doctor, he is always on call to perform healings. This is not evident in popular studies by Furst and Meyerhoff.

In my opinion, the reason that Ramón Medina was approached by certain Huichol was not for the knowledge of a great shaman, (whom they wouldn't seek in Guadalajara, much less in Franciscan mission quarters), but rather for information about the city, the Franciscans, the urban housing, the food situation, etc.. It is likely that a steady stream of people would come to seek his help, but not the kind of help one would seek from a shaman.

J.B. - Juan, would you briefly explain the nature of the Foundation that you and certain Huichol have recently established in Guadalajara?

J.N. - Last November we established the Foundation for the Preservation of Traditional Sacred Art of the Huichol. It's important to outline its general aims, for one can look at the charter* and get quite lost. The Foundation is directed

exclusively by Huichol shamans recognized by their peers for their chanting skills; we expect that it will not fall under the control of persons lacking the shamanic expertise necessary to ensure the integrity of the Foundation.

Besides the four shamans who are its directors, there is a manager (who formerly served as President of Communal Goods for the traditional Tuapuri ((Huichol)) tribe), and the Foundation's administrator, (myself). Neither of us are directors because we are not shamans.

The primary purpose of the Foundation is to preserve culturally significant artworks and records of sacred knowledge by the Huichol for future generations of Huichol. The main category of artworks will be religious sculpture, which has never been made commercially available. The sculptures are carved softstone representations of deities complemented by their votive male and female attributes, arrows and gourd-bowls that feature symbolic and ideographic designs. Each sculpture also has a beaded shield, called nierica, which is a vision of the deity as reflected in a sacred mirror.

The Huichol have never traded or sold such sculpture because to do so would be sacrilegious. Its very existence has been, and should continue to be, a matter of some discretion. The sculpture's symbolism and meaning is extremely esoteric and hermetic even among the Huichol themselves. Certain Huichol, however, have understood the need to preserve such sculpture and the knowledge about it for their people without exposing it indiscriminately, and that is one of the purposes of the Foundation. When such pieces in the Foundation's collection

* Sr. Negrin will mail a copy of the charter to Amsterdam.

were exhibited last Fall in Guadalajara, information explaining their symbology was not offered. Nonetheless, they served as a mute testimony to the strength and mystery inherent in the Huichol religion.

The Foundation's prime objective is to develop a sculptural pantheon with all its symbolic attributes so as to record and convey the essential features of Huichol religion. It is an ambitious project, covering over a hundred specific deities and their attributes, and eventually involving expert shaman sculptors from more than one tribe. This will allow comparison between various Huichol religious traditions which will, in turn, eventually help determine what is most generic to Huichol culture as a whole.

One of the big problems that students of the Huichol culture have had is that, individually, they are unable to approach intensively more than one clan or tribe. Consequently, data on the Huichol is often contradictory. In the best of circumstances we have a lot of data gleaned superficially from numerous tribes that doesn't make sense for any tribe in particular. The Foundation and its collection can be used to make an in-depth study of the different tribes, with especially serious consideration of the communities of Santa Catarina and San Sebastián, the least acculturated of the three Huichol tribes, (otherwise known as Tuapuritari and Wautuári). The third tribe, (known as Tatéi Kitari), is found in the community of San Andrés.

Each of the Huichol tribes is itself divided into clans; for example, in Santa Catarina we're dealing with three active clans, while in San Sebastián there were once five or six active clans. The headquarters of each clan is a

ceremonial center, (tukipa), with a temple, (tuxi), and god houses, (xirikixi), which are occupied at times by clan members entrusted to carry out pilgrimages, hunts and rituals for the collective group during five year periods.

This brings us to the matter of acculturation. By the end of the last century San Sebastián and San Andrés were both divided into two communities: one becoming extremely acculturative and the other remaining more traditional. But in Santa Catarina there has never been a break-up of the tribal entity, which makes it, for me, the most interesting of the three tribes. The other thing that makes Santa Catarina interesting is that it is the only tribal area that hasn't had any regular communication with the outside world. Whereas one finds regular airplane routes to different parts of San Sebastián and San Andrés, there have never been any into Santa Catarina. There is also, as yet, no road reaching into Santa Catarina, whereas six years ago we had the first road into Huichol mountains reaching into San Andrés, last year another road was run into the southern part of San Sebastian, and now yet another route is under way into Santa Catarina. Naturally, wherever roads are built acculturative interests and influence follow.

The tribe that is so far missing representation from the Foundation is the tribe of San Andrés Cohamiata, and this is because it's the most different of the three tribes as well as having undergone the greater changes. One symptom of acculturative change is that the governor of San Andrés Cohamiata is no longer a political entity, which is not the case with governors of the other tribes. Until four years ago, the governor of San Andrés Cohamiata was the key moving factor

for any social change in the area, which he is no longer.

In any event, I suppose that San Andrés would have a representative to send but one problem is that the tribes are divided among themselves and are, in fact, very much opponents to each other. Since I don't have participatory status with the people of San Andrés, it is more difficult for me to approach someone from there who would be helpful in the Foundation. The situation is such that if a person from Santa Catarina felt that I had strong links with a person from San Andrés he would actually be suspicious about my relationship with him. This is bound to change, and yet, for the present, the dialogue is different between San Andrés and the other two tribes. I have no doubt that San Andrés will eventually be included too, but we're not in a position to do that now.

J. B. - My guess is that once they see what is happening with the cultural preservation of the other two tribes, San Andrés will be attracted and want representation of its own.

J. N. - That's my impression too, but of course we first have to go some steps further in what we're doing with the other tribes. The Foundation was just accepted last November of 1980, and it is only now beginning its collection.

Now how can the Foundation be more than culturally interesting, how could it be socially active? I feel that it's very important for a group, any group, to retain a culture in as pristine a form as possible, through its own endeavours, in order for that cultural group to remain autonomous in any respect. Any group that is autonomous, culturally speaking, is going to be more socially and politically effective. Many of the Indians hope that the Foundation could be used

along with government schooling to provide a bi-cultural education for their own children. It's really a question of having one's own educational resources at one's fingertips. Can you imagin how a Frenchman would feel if he could only have access to his culture through translated forms, say, through the interpretations made available to him by an Englishman? But in this case the difference is even more extreme. All of us western-oriented people are, in effect, conquistadors, and for us to interpret and convey Huichol cultural concepts in our terms makes little sense to the Huichol themselves.

What's important at this point, which cannot be done later, is to create an archive of indigenous material that the Huichol will be able to refer to later. Thus, in addition to the production and study of sculpture, there will also be recordings of their oral literature and music.

J. B. - Would you explain the nature of such recordings?

J. N. - Yes, for instance, we made a four and a half hour tape recording of three shamans assembled to speak about the Huichol's sacred history. Each one spoke for one and a half hours, starting with the oldest man, who is over ninty-five years old, and going down to the youngest shaman, who is somewhere over fifty years old. This information represents not four and a half hours of folkloric stories but rather four and a half hours of extremely hermetic text. A young Huichol who was about sixteen years old attended that session and later confessed to me that he did not understand what the shamans said. So we're dealing with four and a half hours of really compact information, information that the Huichol themselves could later take apart and reassemble, analyze and study. To me that's very important.

Also among those present at that session were two musicians who work with the most active of Santa Catarina's three ceremonial centers. One of them is the xaweri player for the group while the other plays the canari * - both relatively high responsibilities among the people who have a religious charge in the clan. They also commented that they had never beheld a situation in which three shamans got together and discussed such esoteric matters.

This reminds me of occasional encounters I'll have with a low or middle level shaman who will complain to me of how he did hear things from certain elder members of his tribe when he was twenty or thirty years younger, and that he only wishes he were now able to recall and chant that history the way that he originally heard it. So you can see how urgent it is to gather this invaluable data now.

It was necessary to establish a Foundation so that the Huichol would be guaranteed that they could have information that would be really useful to them. It may take a year or two of work by other Huichols and myself to arrive at some understanding of that four and a half hour session. Meanwhile, the more immediate task of the Foundation is gathering this raw data which would be inaccessible to outsiders; assuming I were to let somebody, or myself, study and photograph these pieces and listen to the tapes etc., it would be quite unlikely for us to interpret the meaning of what is there. That data must actually be sifted through and worked upon by the Huichol themselves, particularly those who are the more knowledgeable.

It is also important for the Foundation to establish a permanent place where

* modified Huichol versions of the violin and small guitar.

the sculpture, tablas, artifacts and recordings can be kept in the best manner possible. This place should also serve as a congregation center where shamans could go and establish a workshop in order to fill gaps and elaborate on or contradict material that has already been developed. It's important that this collection not just be preserved but preserved in a place which inspires people to work further and in different fields.

J. B. - Juan, does the fact that Huichol shamans are now willing to "compare notes" indicate a desire on their part to establish the underlying continuities of their religious traditions, continuities that underlie the varying nature of individual shamanic revelation and interpretation? Do some of them also have a historical sense of how closely their religion has maintained concepts once prevalent in pre-Columbian times?

J. N. - Well, in the first place, the Foundation will offer a testing ground for some of these theories you've just mentioned. Presently we don't very well know the answer to those questions. What we do know is that, in certain clans, certain traditions are very well established. And we also know that, among all primitive peoples, what a seventy or ninety year old elder has to say is considered more important than other versions, and if a certain Huichol has worked under a shaman famous for a particular specialty, then he is more likely to have the capabilities and insights of his mentor.

Being able to refer to authoritative sources is of exhilarating import to the Huichol. Nothing thrills them as much as relating to valid documentation about themselves, although they are vexed by false and exploitative enterprises.

J. B. - Are contradictions in Huichol mythology found between the accounts of separate tribes or clans, or do they differ more according to the level of shamanism achieved? Along what lines do the differences and contradictions arise?

J. N. - Well, there are various factors responsible for these differences. For instance, there are two psychotropics that the Huichol employ: the peyote, which is the most commonly used, and the "Tree of Wind," or kieri, which is the less frequently used. There are traditions which relate to each, and there are families that will not use one or the other, and there are families that use both. All this will make for differences and variations. In other words, the kieri tree will not be prominent in the mind of somebody who considers that the kieri tree is something simply not to be touched, something taboo. Another kind of difference is specific to location; if you live in San Sebastián, for instance, there are certain ancient historical spots that are critically important to that community, whereas the people of Santa Catarina may not take into account more than one or two holy places in the community of San Sebastián, and vice-versa. Then there is the question of the primary deities adored by a particular ceremonial center or clan group. Such deities will take precedence over others simply because that clan group finds a particular affinity with a given deity. One clan group that I know of in the area of San Andrés is devoted to a deity for whom the pilgrimage to Wírikuta was not a particularly trying event, and for them the pilgrimage is a simpler affair, with fewer fasts and fewer strict rituals and disciplines to be followed. Or there are ceremonies like a certain form of carnival held in two areas of the Huichol mountains but not in Santa Catarina, a

ceremony actually relating to the conquest of the Indians by the Spaniards, recounting certain events of that encounter. However, one cannot approach that history through Santa Catarina very well because they have not performed that ritual for a few generations. There is yet another kind of knowledge, both intimate and esoteric, regarding sacred places. In such cases few Huichol are genuinely knowledgeable; at most perhaps only half a dozen people will know about very ancient sites. Information regarding such places must be gathered from those people and archived in the Foundation for future reference.

Instead of it being a question of which accounts are right and wrong, it's a question of who knows more about a particular mystery. Well, it's obvious that the people who can tell the most about a subject are the people who are empirically and existentially involved with it, either because they go to a pilgrimage spot that has special meaning to their family and ancestors, or because they participate in a certain ceremony which has been completely dropped by other Huichol.

J. B. - So variations in the Huichol religion fall along lines that can be specific to local historical events and geography, which plants the devotees and shamans use...

J. N. - What animals they use as allies as well.

J. B. - But why would a shaman of one tribe listen to a recorded account of a shaman of another tribe? Is it to trigger his response to an unfamiliar version or is it in order to discover a single tradition believed to underlie all possible variations?

J. N. - That's a good question and it's important to answer it. All Huichol, regardless of their tribe, recognize that the people from other tribes have specific knowledge that they don't have. For instance, a Huichol from Santa Catarina knows that the people from San Andrés are extraordinarily good at hexing, and that their shamans are by far the best aggressors. On the other hand, the people from San Sebastián and Santa Catarina have the advantage that they can build up extraordinary 'shields'. Each tribe not only has a certain general degree of animosity towards the other tribes but also an awe and admiration for individual members of the other tribes. Underlying all these variations we find a wide range of shamanic roles and concepts.

J. B. - How assured can we be of the continuity of current Huichol religious traditions with those of pre-Columbian civilization?

J. N. - Comparative studies between the Huichol and the Aztecs reveal an enormous number of parallels. As noted by Krickenberg and Preuss, we're dealing with people who can actually teach us more about the pre-Columbian civilization of the Mexicas than can much of the archaeological and collective data that the Spaniards gathered five hundred years ago. Most literature on pre-Columbian, Mexican mythology yields striking correspondences to Huichol rituals and religion, and there are equally numerous and striking parallels with the Hopis and the Anasazi. Therefore, it seems that we're dealing with a culture which has not only vigorously maintained its pre-Hispanic religion but also forms a strategic geographic and cultural bridge between two very different native American cultures.

I've emphasized to you that I think there's a great difference between

discussing religious matters and acting out that religion by behaving according to its principles and tenets. There is a great difference between telling a story and talking about something which is felt to be tantamount to the difference between survival and disintegration, which is the way that the Huichol still relate to their mythology. The Huichol are not "maybe" dealing with a corn doll and "maybe" with Our Mother Corn, who is a corn doll only in an "objective" anthropological sense. In dealing with the fire under certain circumstances, it isn't a question that "maybe" it's bad for them to throw something into a sacred fire, for they are sure that if something is thrown into the fire there will be dire repercussions.

J. B. - Then they are dealing with concrete theophanies of their gods, actual revelations rather than just means of worship?

J. N. - Right, not a theory or an intellectual sense. And that's a directness that the Huichol still have which I feel has been lost by most Indians. The Huichol shamans feel that they are interacting with primordial events and essences. Even if one approaches the average young Huichol in his twenties, he will say that once he himself wondered whether what his father was saying was or wasn't true, or how really meaningful it was to him; then he will tell you that after he saw, with his own eyes, how a shaman could damage or heal a person, after he personally experienced the power of the shaman, then he no longer could say "I wonder if..." because his feeling is "I have felt it has happened to me, so-and-so gave me a drink and after a few hours I was extremely ill and I know that it was his attitude towards me, his "evil eye" and he's convinced of it. Even when the Huichol are coming from a skeptical vantage point, which often is the case,

they are, nonetheless, ultimately Believers.

J. B. - A moment ago you described certain parallels between the religion of the Huichol and that of other native American peoples. Depending on how liberally one draws similarities between cultures, one could likewise find isomorphic parallels between a given native American religion and one of, say, Africa or Asia. In what way are the parallels you've mentioned between the Huichol and the Hopi or Aztec actually based on a continuity of tradition?

J. N. - Well, we find words that are the same. The specific references to the sun, for instance, are the same: "Our Uncle," "The Uncle," for the Hopi, Taiowa is considered the uncle of Sótuknang, and he is the most ancient god; likewise, the Huichol use the word Tatata, which means "Our Uncle" or "Godfather" for the sun. Another way in which the sun is called by the Hopi is "Our Creator," and it's interesting that among the Huichol we find another term for the sun is Tawevícame, which etymologically means "Our Creator." We also find the same preeminence of the corn and the ants in both Huichol and Aztec myths regarding the origin of life. Yet another example can be found in the concept of virgin birth, or birth that does not come from the physical interaction between the gods: the birth of Huitzilipochtli among the Aztecs and the birth of the sun among the Huichol. There are innumerable such correlations that can be made, it's not just a question of comparing the idea of something...

J. B. - ...but, rather, specific linguistic correspondences and identical myths.

J. N. - That's right. Then what is also important to me about the Huichol has something to do with the comparative value of their religion to shamanism in

general. One could, for instance, compare the Huichol use of crystals to similar shamanic practices found among the Hopi, Siberians, Australian aborigines, or Amazonian Indians as well. One can also consider the mirror, which had extraordinary importance to the Aztecs as well as being one of the most important objects used by a Huichol shaman. The Huichol fascinate me, not so much because they are a pre-Columbian people who are still doing things as they did "once-upon-a-time," but because they share in so many of the generic beliefs fundamental to all shamanic religions.

J. B. - The peyote cult that gained such popularity with United States Indians in the 1890s was motivated by the socio-political factors of native identity and solidarity, as well as by spiritual needs. By contrast, the traditional use of the peyote by Huichol shamans is much older and seems to arise from more purely religious motivation.

J. N. - According to Weston La Barre, the North American Indians of Canada and the United States had no tradition involving intake of peyote, while the Huichol are the Indians who have retained the use of peyote that was prevalent in pre-Columbian Mexico. In Mexico today we know of only two groups of Indians that employ peyote communally, namely the Tarahumaras and the Huichol. Therefore, if one wants to deal with the ancient incorporation of psychotropics into a native religion, one can only deal with either the Tarahumaras or the Huichol, and if compared at face value, it is immediately obvious that the Tarahumaras have not retained their culture as the Huichol have. Lumholtz already observed this a century ago, for even then there was no comparison

between Huichol and Tarahumara artifacts and retention of ancient knowledge. That is even more the case now because of the railroad, the tree exploitation, and other inroads into the Tarahumara area.

Other Indians who use psychotropics, such as those described by Gordon Wasson or filmed by Marina Sabina, have concepts and values which seem syncretized and confused by comparison with the Huichol. The Huichol religion is not a copy of ancient concepts that are not understood any more, which you'll find is the makings of a folklore. A folklore, as I understand it, is a careful copying of tradition, rather than a matter of spontaneous creations; the shamanism of the Huichol is based on revelation rather than abstract models.

Many current misconceptions about Huichol religion arise from the writings of persons who, in my opinion, have never really known the Huichol. This is particularly the case when you're dealing with the writings of Peter Furst or Barbara Meyerhoff, neither of whom has ever experienced the Huichol engaged in their collective rituals in the mountains. They were, instead, dealing with Huichol living in acculturated environments engaged in family rituals at best. As a result, their studies evince a very concrete lack of field work. Portrayals of the Huichol by Peter Furst and Barbara Meyerhoff, (or Prem Das, to take a more current ethnographer), document a few individuals doing strange things, but never indicate that there exists a mass of people engaged in activities of a very coordinated and synchronized sort. Were one to ask someone like Peter Furst to show photographs of ancient carvings and so on, he would say either that they didn't exist or that he wouldn't have them to show you, and that is because he

has never gone into the mountains and caves to do the necessary field work.

Other anthropologists, like Barbara Meyerhoff, will theorize that there is no such thing as a ritual for reverting to normal attitudes after a pilgrimage, becoming "desacralized" if you will, when there is just such a ceremony held in the mountains.

Peter Furst in his first little booklet says that the Huichol are the best example of pre-Hispanic culture, all the way down to central America, and it's sad that he didn't have the wherewithall to back up that statement; later, after ten years of not doing any field work, he came to the conclusion that maybe his information had not been corroborated by subsequent findings because he was dealing with an especially mystical group. In fact, it's the opposite, for his findings make less and less sense because he was dealing with an especially non-mystical group that was somewhat estranged from their own culture.

It's surprising how uninformed most "authorities" on the Huichol can be. This is especially the case when three to five hundred Santa Catarina Huichol meet in one ceremonial center for their most popular gathering, the Peyote Dance (a desacralization ritual), which accepted anthropologists consider non-existent.

J.B. - In brief, how do you account for the greater reliability of your findings compared to those of a recognized anthropologist such as Peter Furst?

J.N. - Simply because I have spent time with the people and he hasn't; because he refers to one informant while I can refer to numerous individuals. Otherwise, it is the evidence available that is indicative. I can make a photographic portfolio available for documentation in addition to an extraordinary collection of

claim that religious arts didn't exist beforehand, because examples are given by Lumholtz and others; I too have evidence to that effect. My influence helped initiate a comprehensive sculptural project which has never before been attempted, but Huichol shamans agreed to make a sculptural pantheon only because they too recognize that it would be impossible to do so later. The pieces that are in caves and other places have been disappearing, so now is the time to establish the models before all the originals are gone.

J. B. - To someone who doesn't know you personally, Juan, the fact that an "outsider" has conceived and initiated such a project may seem suspicious.

J. N. - I think that what is here relevant is that if you went to the Huichol sierra and approached the people in any of the three tribes and asked them who Peter Furst is, they wouldn't know what you were talking about, whereas if you asked them about Juan Negrín they would immediately react, because I am a person who is very familiar to them. I think that's an important point, because I have participated with them not only in their religion but, moreover, in dealing with major problems they have faced as a collective group. They had never named any outsider to be an honorary counselor of their tribe until they did so with me; papers exist that have been sealed by chiefs of the community stating that they have given me those positions; papers also exist stating that I have been entrusted to organize studies that preserve their environment, and now I am also working to develop their status as owners of resources, not just land. At first my major involvement was to help prevent the loss of twelve thousand hectares of their land which was one fifth of the territory of Sant^a Catarina. This involves enabling them

to utilize their wood resources so that other people won't be able to take those resources away from them under the pretense that they are not producing, or that they don't know how to produce. That's what I am doing now, which is unique compared to what any other outsider has done.

J. B. - Oyens used the word "meddling."

J. N. - I assume that when we are talking about "meddling" we are not talking about a satisfactory conclusion. To me, it is a satisfactory conclusion that they did not make a contract with the wood company, that they did not lose the wooded areas through political maneuvers. I have the papers, I have a few hundred fingerprint marks that demonstrate what kind of battle we were in, what kind of petition we were making to the government, what kind of problem they had. From the government's point of view, there's no question that I was "meddling," and if that is objectionable, then so be it.

J. B. - What about non-political "meddling," your efforts in cultural preservation, in encouraging artistic projects and such? These might be matters more subtle to understand.

J. N. - When we deal with cultural "meddling," I've been a "meddler." At first I approached the Huichol culture, not through its religious savants, but through its craftsmen, and I found out that the outside world considered their arts a uniform activity: there was Huichol craft, and there were Huichol craftsmen who did these crafts. Such a simplistic ^{att}itude offered no way of looking at the product of any given Huichol as being an extraordinary product for the Huichol or, for that matter, an extraordinary product for us. One of the first things that

I tried to demonstrate was that not every Huichol was capable of making an extraordinary product from the point of view of the Huichol themselves. As I later discovered, this applies not only to the commercial crafts that are available to the outside public but also to purely religious artifacts such as a shaman's chair, a shaman's drum, or a great violin. According to the Huichol, only a few of their people can create such things. Thus, for the outside world to look upon Huichol arts and crafts as a uniform product was a mistake that I wanted to "meddle" with, to prove that that wasn't the case. I approached about fifty craftsmen and discovered that there were a handful of them who could do something extraordinary in relation to what others were capable of.

J. B. - "Extraordinary" by the Huichol's own criteria too?

J. N. - Yes, the Huichol's own criteria, and, as it turns out, the Huichol's criteria are also shared by the outside world. When a Huichol sees a piece by Tutukila, José Benítez, or other such masters, he is astounded. When an outsider sees them, or rather has them pointed out to him, (our world being so visually congested that a little guidance is necessary), then he also notices a radical difference in quality between the work of some Huichol and that of others.

Above all it is imperative to get the Mexicans themselves to recognize that they are doing damage to the Huichol culture and an injustice to the Huichol individuals by limiting them to a type of craft that has a certain categorical value. I "meddled" to the point of getting certain Huichol (most especially José Benítez Sánchez), accepted as outstanding Huichol artists, and eventually as outstanding Mexican artists.

After years of working with the crafts, making pilgrimages and participating with shamans, I realized that the shamans themselves could also produce outstanding artworks and that's what I am pursuing at this point. In that respect I am not, in my opinion, "meddling" with their culture, but providing a channel for personal communication, incentive and a new opportunity to develop already proven skills.

It's not a public issue among the Huichol that this Foundation exists, or that it is utterly important to them. However, it is fundamental to the shamans who make recordings with me that the purpose of these efforts is to preserve this knowledge for their descendants. Otherwise the recordings simply could not be produced.

J. B. - In 1978 the de Young Museum of San Francisco held an exhibiton that traveled about the United States, an exhibition entitled "Art of the Huichol Indians." How would you characterize that exhibition in contrast to exhibitions that you organize?

J. N. - Well, in Mexico I have a letter which you have seen from the Museum of Natural History in New York in which their curator in charge of that exhibit writes that he was upset that my pieces would not be included in the show, because a key member of the de Young staff vetoed their display. He felt the show would be impoverished on that account. That's a pretty clear statement right there.

J. B. - Was the exhibition further impoverished by including many third rate works, impoverished to the point of distorting the truth about the Huichol...?

J. N. - Which harms the people, yes. Such exhibitions are degrading, and I feel that in order for these people to survive with their culture intact they must achieve

a degree of respect among the general Mexican population. They're certainly never going to achieve a marked degree of respect if they're considered on the level from which they are depicted in the de Young catalogue. As you know, if you look at the pieces illustrated in that catalogue, many of them are done by Guadalupe Medina in slavish imitation of Ramón Medina, and therefore can't even purport to be showing us something original. I have pieces here by Ramón Medina that I collected ten or eleven years ago that are either identical or very nearly identical to those later copies by Guadalupe Medina. Ramón himself had a way of copying his own work, which is legitimate except that it becomes a great limitation. We're dealing with the output of a man who created forty original pieces which were then multiplied over and over again. The de Young collection features a prime selection of maybe twenty such works.

I don't know if it's true or not, but I have practically come to the conclusion that the reason that the show was done the way it was is because Peter Young, the man who collected the pieces, is a member of the de Young family in some manner, and that he donated the pieces to the de Young Museum before the show was ever considered. They then had to do their best to demonstrate that they were the proud owners of a significant group of Huichol artifacts.

When an exhibition I had organized was actually rejected by the Museum of Natural History, I had to conclude that there were private reasons behind that decision. When I talked to the people at the de Young four years before their exhibition and showed them the examples of the work I had access to, while explaining to them that one could go to Tepic and bring back pieces identical to those by Guadalupe Medina included in their exhibit, they did not claim that I

was not telling the truth, they simply tried to divert me from that topic. Nor did they try to claim that the pieces they had were worthwhile, aesthetically speaking. Instead, I think it became obvious to them that to hang a tabla by José Benítez next to works in their collection would become an embarrassment. Moreover, if I had to be placed on a one-to-one basis with Peter Furst in some sort of a debate and had to correct him about some wrong facts or terminology, he would become the laughing-stock of the lecture, and that would also put them in an uncomfortable position. So it seems that they conspired to eliminate me from their catalogue and debates.

One thing I think should be mentioned is that I have, to date, been very reluctant to show anybody very much about the Huichol because I do not want to help expose them to invasions by tourists and thrill seekers by making them famous. This is the reason I've never published photographs in color or written for popular audiences, even though it would have been to my own benefit in terms of recognition in the field. I have felt, perhaps paternalistically, that the Huichol are not ready to take an invasion of their territory by interested anthropologists and tourists because they do not understand our world as well as they might, and so are less able to fend off invasions that might prove harmful.

But now their situation is changing. At this point there's no question that the government in Mexico is taking a great interest in their area, pin-pointing the Huichol zone for change and the Huichol people as a group that are problematic with respect to their planning. And new laws have been conceived, particularly since December of last year, of 1980, making it so that now it is legally possible

to use the resources of the Huichol if they themselves are not using them. This changes the situation quite radically. Another thing that changes the situation radically is that the government has started building roads on a very accelerated basis, expecting to have a thousand kilometer network of roads completed before the end of the sexennium, in 1982.

This means that secrecy about the Huichol's existence is no longer a good tactic, since they're now going to be exposed to exploitative interests, regardless of their fame. This has changed my attitude and makes it extraordinarily urgent for something to be done while the Huichol are still in an unacculturated state, a state in which their myths are not stories but still experienced phenomena. This is what changes very shortly after the roads go in and the people start getting involved with an industriousness which is not traditional.

There's no question about what is happening to Huichol culture during this generation. Even now the older Huichol express to me that their people have been taking more advantage of roads during their pilgrimages and are thus neglecting disciplines and rituals necessary to true comprehension of the metaphysical nature of their religion. Huichol elders will indicate to me in very specific terms how a pilgrimage group is not going the way it used to, or how there were once several shamans in Santa Catarina who were able to perform the rare feat of catching the Deer Spirit as a crystal, whereas now there are only two with little prospect of any successors. They see their traditions as alive but in decline and therefore urgently in need of preservation.

I feel that there is hope for their continued cultural and political autonomy to

the extent that they maintain economic independence. To the degree that they remain autonomous they can retain an independant frame of mind when it comes to their cultural reality. If the Huichol develop a cottage industry utilizing the wood from their forests they will remain more independent than if they become the pawns of an enterprise that deals with their forests as a raw material, rather than in terms of a product that they themselves could finish.

Autonomy, to me, is essential in the preservation of a culture. If a Jewish ghetto, for instance, is semi-autonomous because of its independence, then it has a far greater chance of cultural survival. The reverse is also true, for if the Jewish ghetto retains its traditions and historical self-awareness, it is more capable of economic and political autonomy. My sense of the Huichol's type of culture is that it's highly incompatible with ours, and that our values invlaidate theirs. That's why it's important to me that they retain as much autonomy as possible.

You say that José Benítez creates yarn tablas out of an incentive to lay down a record. I agree with you that that was one of the ways in which our partnership makes sense of José. In addition to acquiring artworks from him I was always interested in learning about their content and how that content compared to information available in the field. That is why our relationship blossomed into such productivity.

A nother of José's incentives in creating his art was his desire to regain a psychic wholesomeness that he felt had been jeopardized by his own past exposure to the outside world; since that time his art has served as a sign of reintegration

and a bridge between two very different worlds. He uses his art to preserve himself as well as his culture, yet, ultimately, if it weren't for his personal convictions and needs I don't think he'd be so interested in the preservation of his culture.

J.B. - When we discuss José's art, or the contemporary tablas of the Huichol in general, it is difficult to know what kind of classification to use. Art historians have a whole armory of terms (e.g. - "folk," "primitive," and "decorative") while anthropologists have other sorts of terminology, (such as "acculturated," "ethnic," or "souvenir," etc.). Do you feel that any of these terms are applicable? J.N. - I tend to divide Huichol art into three categories. First there is José's

art, which can be characterized as extremely personal fine art. Then there are tablas that are technically well made but lack originality and individual style, mostly due to a tendency to repeat patterns or ineptly imitate the styles and compositions of master artists like José. Then a third category can be considered

as truly shamanic, as seen in tablas by Yauxali or Guadalupe González Ríos; such works are more strictly intuitive in style than those of José, their content can be more readily identified and comprehended by the Huichol themselves who

recognize such work as typically shamanic. With José's tablas they wonder what is expressed while marvelling at their beauty and complexity. Over the years

José's work has become increasingly impressive as it reflects a deepening of religious insight while retaining extremely sophisticated mastery of color and composition.

J.B. - In what way would you characterize the stylistic development of his art?

insights; does it follow that his understanding is more subjective than accurate

J.B. - You say his is a very personal art, that he has achieved ever deepening

has done more pilgrimages, and has deepened his understanding.

gods, in a real sense, than he was before; he portrays them better because he

might eventually reveal the spirit. He's now working more with the established

spirit. He then elaborated forms from the spirit rather than seeking forms that

rituals at his ranch that he simultaneously went back to the nierika- the soul, the

he became absolutely determined to subsist off his fields and carry out the

Even his life style has influence in determining changes in his art. It was when

vigils and subsequently come up with a new way of representing certain forms.

pilgrimages and talk to me about specific experiences that he had on certain

J.N. - It's completely personal, very personal. He will come back from

they reveal a deeper understanding of well-established traditions?

J.B. - Are his later expressions so personal that they become ideosyncratic or do

beyond simple narration.

eye, as a focal point in his yarn paintings. It was that which helped him develop

of Huichol art, was his rediscovery of the importance of the nierika, the soul or

images. His big breakthrough, which brought him back to the shamanic roots

into other forms, which in turn could be resolved into a variety of composite

or a wing. He also discovered how forms, such as a snake, could be permuted

certain formal analogues, such as the resemblance of a deer antler to a feather

the development of his artistic virtuosity, he became aesthetically aware of

J.N. - At first I think his work was more at a story-telling level. Then, with

in an anthropologically objective sense?

J.N. - No, it's not entirely subjective by any means; if I make a pilgrimage to Wirikuta five times, then it means that I'm also objectively getting to know it

better.

J.B. - Do you know it better because you are traveling with fellow pilgrims who explain...

J.N. - Assuming that we took it on the most banal level that would be true, but

on a more sophisticated and real level one can be highly responsive to a particular place. José can be in a cave doing a vigil and not feel or see anything, or

else he can be in that cave doing a vigil and feel and see an inordinate number of things. The latter is not likely to happen in the experience of any Huichol on the

first or second time around. But after a time, when one's eyes become open

enough to see - in a sense become clear enough to feel what is really there -

one can perceive things in ways beyond that which is just anthropologically "objective". During pilgrimages one is guided by a shaman, accompanied by other Huichol,

and performs rites, dances, and rituals all of which yield what we usually

consider "objective" information. But such information is not considered true

knowledge until it has been mystically assimilated and understood. The experience comes first, then its assimilation, and then finally the possibility of its artistic

expression. José may see something that he will not understand until later. He

may hear something from a shaman as a child, for instance, and it will make

no difference to him at the time; only later, after hearing a relevant word or

term used on a pilgrimage during a certain ritual will he then be able to recall and finally understand what he'd been told years ago. In this way he understands the

meaning of a word which previously didn't mean anything for him. José

progresses in this way and he is now actually looking forward to becoming a shaman, whereas when I first met him he was more like an anthropologist among his people, interested in learning about the cultural baggage of his

heritage which he hoped would enrich his artistic imagination. Now he has

become more involved with what he can learn by himself from his own instant
revelations and preceptions.

J.B. - It would be good if we could conclude this interview with a short summary of the Foundation's prime objectives.

J.N. - The Foundation will ultimately be a repository for a permanent collection of the finest works of Huichl art. Eventually, if our efforts are successful, we

will establish a structure which would include a warehouse, a small exhibition space, and a place where the Huichol who are working on the projects will be

able to meet and inspire themselves. It will house and protect, in Mexico, a collection of the finest masterpieces of Huichol art and key records of Huichol

culture.

Interview made for European Huichol Tour

1981