

THE HUICHOL: PRESERVING A WAY OF LIFE

This fund-raising exhibit for the Huichol, *Wixaritari*, is made necessary by their rapidly changing surroundings. For, while it is easy to appreciate from the United States of America, that change may be the most characteristic seal of the end of the 20th century, it is especially difficult to escape its jagged impact on Mexico. There, suddenly reneging on an inveterate tradition of separateness from its English speaking First World Northern neighbors, Mexico seeks to emerge as economic partners of the American champions of change. The uncontrollable growth of cities like Mexico, D.F. and Guadalajara or the decimation of its forests with the help of technology are harbingers of change that must be mitigated by our personal and collective sense of responsibility to preserve life. Imagine the changes borne upon the Huichol whose territory was not effectively interlocked to the rest of Mexico until 1975, by the first dirt-road.

Historically, the most outstanding feature of the Huichol has been their ability to remain autonomous from the Aztec empire in pre-hispanic times and later from the Spaniards, who only penetrated their land in 1722, 200 years after the conquest of Mexico. The first Catholic curate among the Huichol was built in 1733 by the Franciscans, in the Community of San Sebastián (*Wautüa*), only to be abandoned by 1812¹. In any case, an outpost in *Wautüa* could impose little efficient mental control over the then vaster Huichol territory. This is even clear today, when we observe the separate nature of the other two small tribal groups, which prefer marriages within their own tribes. They are divided by topographical barriers, separate political organizations, dialectal and religious differences and mutual distrust over disputed patches of land.

It is considered that they installed themselves in the Sierra Madre mountains of Northwestern Mexico by the 7th century A.D.. They still form an indigenous cultural refuge of frequently endogamic clans, made up of extended family units often living next to each other in groups of three to four ranches (*rancherías*). The *rancherías* are organized around a *tukipa* or ceremonial center where several hundred may meet about ten times a year to celebrate religious ceremonies and discuss common concerns. Three or more clans form the larger political units, which we call small tribes, although the Mexican Government has tried to administer them as a single group.

The greatest possession of the *Wixaritari* may well turn out to be their cultural heritage. That is why they have guarded

¹ Dr. Phil Weigand, Themes of Indigenous Acculturation in Northwest Mexico.

it with the same care they have demonstrated for their territory. Secrecy and deceit have proved major weapons. Numerous times in history, they have witnessed how forthright aggression against a major imperial power restricts the freedom to carry on their way of life even more thoroughly. One clear case was when the Coras, their

linguistically related Uto-Aztecan neighbors, were finally defeated by the Spanish army in 1722.

For a long time the Huichol had been united in a coalition dominated by the Coras to resist the Spaniards, but near the end several Huichol leaders helped the invaders and were consequently never forced to settle in villages around Church centers. The Coras, on the other hand, were gathered in some form of strategic hamlets, where they were reorganized under the earnest supervision of the Jesuits; many of their important relics being destroyed. Today few of them know the path to the Eastern holy land of *Wirikuta*, which was once a common sacred ground. Their religion appears more fused with Catholicism and they have significant villages, unlike the Huichol. The latter's ceremonial centers (*tukipa*) seem well inhabited when a clan gathering is in course for three or more days, although they are deserted afterwards.

The first study on the development potential of the Huichol region, was carried out by the Mexican Government in the mid-1960's. It concluded that the Huichol had scarcely altered their outlook on life over the centuries and that they had upheld and preserved the traditions of their world, which they considered to be incomparably superior to the civilized world, even when the latter was presented to them as highly desirable.² This is but an echo of Carl Lumholtz's remarks from *Unknown Mexico*, volume II 1902: "Today, however, the churches are in ruins, and there is no priest living among the Huichols. Many are clever enough to put on an external show of Christianity toward people from whom they expect some favor. The impress the victors made was superficial, and today the natives are practically in the same state of barbarism as that which they enjoyed when Cortés first set foot on American soil."³ Catholic missionaries are as shocked today as they were in their reports from the 18th and 19th centuries at how much the Christ⁴ and the Virgin cults⁵ have been paganized.

² Plan Lerma 1966, Engs. J. Manuel Arreguín and Mónico Rosales.

³ Lumholtz was the first ethnographer to visit the Huichol, in 1895, with the backing of the American Museum of Natural History.

⁴ N.B. 1 The Christ, given various names, is seen as a polifaceted intermediary spirit for money; small crosses are covered with coins adhered with native wax.

Native deities on the other hand appear in vigorous form, ie. unsyncretized with the names or ways of Saints. Today a number of Huichol shamans visit other resilient native groups like the Tepehuanos to perform healing.

When I came in contact in 1970, the most functional means of contact was through the Franciscan Church headquartered near Guadalajara, Jalisco. Yet, they were only allowed to set up boarding schools in the Communities of San Andrés Cohamiata (Jalisco State) and Guadalupe Ocotán (Nayarit State), representing the tribe of *Tatéi Kié*. Whereas the other two Huichol tribes: *Tuapuri*, Community of Santa Catarina Cuexcomatlán, and *Wautüa*, Community of San Sebastián Teponahuatlán and its annex Tuxpan de Bolaños, still adamantly reject the

presence of any missionaries Catholic or, worse yet, other. The Mexican government only began to seriously approach the area after installing a post of the Federal National Indian Institute (I.N.I.) at Mezquitic, Jalisco in 1962. Although this is the closest mestizo municipal center to the seats of the three Huichol tribes, it required a two to three day exotic expedition to reach them, until the government set up landing strips in key high plateau locations. Between 1970 and 1976, President Echeverría put in motion a major plan to establish I.N.I. government boarding schools and development programs, while extending landing strips throughout the flat highlands and building the first dirt road (to San Andrés).

The 10,000 or more *Wixaritari* (singular *Wixárica*) have preferred to remain relatively dispersed in the poor highlands and ravines of Northern Jalisco and eastern Nayarit, rather than integrate in more desirable agricultural and urban areas. Many a tourist and even a few Mexican officials have regretted walking into their communities without defining their purpose clearly and obtaining specific consent from the indigenous authorities. Frequently outsiders literally 'land in the stocks', a tradition they gladly picked up from the Franciscans. Fortunately, I allowed the Huichol to become familiar with me, over the course of 5 years, before I dared take a camera with me and never photographed without previous consent.

Meanwhile, the value of their forests has spiraled for outside logging industries. Ironically these pine and small oak forests were until recently both a natural barrier to outsiders and a complementary source of food as hunting grounds (deer, squirrels, rabbits). Since the introduction of single-shot 22 caliber rifles around the 1930's, replacing snares and arrows, the fauna is disappearing. The 'non-productive forests' are the magnets of outside attraction and provoke attempts at land despoliation. Now

⁵ N.B. 2 The Virgin known as *Tanana*, Our Root, is the spiritual intermediary for the health of cattle, a Spanish import.

that truck roads make them accessible, external sawmills have become well capitalized and other sources of wood are becoming scarce. The buildup of an infrastructure of communication with the rest of Mexico, numerous primary bilingual boarding schools manned by the first significant Huichol generation of primary school teachers, numerous development projects based on gifts or credits, including a few trucks, and some clinics have allowed the Government to instill more radical changes since 1970 than any previous attempts.

The skepticism or outright rejection (not always overt) with which the Huichol approach new concepts and models of behavior, coupled with their reverence for the ways of some elders and the Ancestors, tempt us to classify them as archetypes of conservatism. But then, we see how enthusiastically they adopted new musical instruments like the violin and the guitar, which they have for generations learned to make and play very much in their own manner: according to their own 'costumbre' (tradition). We can also note how their penchant for bright colours and contrasts has led them to use aniline dyed acrylic fibers more and more frequently in their arts and crafts. More than the appearance and forms of change, what they have instinctively rejected are essential changes opposed to their way of life. They have accepted change when they have seen it as helpful to their own collective and individual quests, but not when it has been forcefully imposed (value of the natural refuge). Some of the causes and manifestations of their tribal separateness from the homogenized Mexican mixed-blood or the even more distinct white outsider shall be observed as we move along.

EVERY DAY OCCURS IN A SACRED DIMENSION

Day to day life varies according to several factors: Dry season and rainy season require a different way of life. From the first steady rains in late June to the October celebrations for the first fruits of new corn, beans, squash and amaranth, the Huichol are involved in the responsibilities of primitive slash and burn, digging stick (coa) hillside agriculture. Until after the November harvest is over, this is when most of them, male, female and children are found close to or at home. Indeed the prehispanic style of once a year seasonal agriculture is still the Huichol's main source of survival. At this time, they are isolated by impassable roads and their stone age, self-sufficient way of life is most apparent. Their buildings, mostly one room, are traditionally made of stones bound together with adobe and roofed with straw sustained by a couple of main posts. Today adobe blocks and even bricks are becoming popular in their highland plateaus and on the fringes of civilization.

The male does most of the farming, some small game hunting and gathering of wild roots or fruits to complement scarce resources from the previous harvest, according to the example of the first cultivator and purely human male (*Watákame* or *Tuamuxawi*). The female spends most of her time with the children and elders.

She uses the stone metate to prepare tasteful thick blue and red tortillas, complementing her cooking utensils with the mortar and pestle, clay pots and calabash gourds. The gourds serve as water containers and their wider bottom is used as a serving bowl. Machetes, spoons, corn grinders and a few other metal implements are widely used, as are some used plastic implements.

The rainy season is the season of fertility, dedicated to life and to Our Mothers, *Tateteima* (sing. *Tatéi*): the Ocean, which is the originator of Life and of the primal Word, the Rains from the four cardinal points, Fertile Earth, Corn and the first female mother. The latter initially appeared as a black bitch, although she embodied the Earth whom the cultivator had taken along with other animals and seeds, on a canoe he built according to the instructions of Our Great Grandmother: *Tacutsi*. *Tacutsi*, a primordial being par excellence is known as *Nacawé*, the essence of Growth and of Devastation, as progenitor of the Flood.⁶ As *Kiecari Mahame*, she is the originator of social order and the home. Finally, she is *Tacutsi Metseri*, Our Great Grandmother Moon. The home with its central patio and separate family shrine or god-house (*xiriki*) is the main gathering point. There are a few ceremonies, especially the Dance of Our Mother, which are usually celebrated at the extended family home in addition to the clan's ceremonial center and the tribal seat. Then, at the climax of the thanksgiving ceremonies to Our Mothers, particularly Maize, Our Father the Sun, is invoked to ripen the fruits of the season and supplant the rains.

The dry season is a time when many Huichol leave their homeland, often to retrace the path of the "Ancestors" (*Kakauyarixi*). They prepare votive offerings to carry to the latter's places of birth on the surface of the earth or of culminating death and transformation into life sustaining beings or petrified examples to mankind. The *Wixárica* male, often accompanied by

wife and children, will frequently stay by the coast and work on the tobacco harvest to support the costs of the journey to the West, to Our Mother Ocean *Tatéi Haramara*. As a family or as a five-year officer of the ceremonial center (women included), they also travel to the East, where the Sun first rose to illuminate and dry the land, as Our Creator (*Taweviécame*), or as Our Father (*Tayau*). There Our Mother Peyote (*Tatéi Hikuri*) is found at the culmination of a pilgrimage involving great deprivations from most food and all salt, as well as from sexual relations. Until the building of dirt roads and the loan of vehicles by the Government, such cleansing journeys lasted at least a month. Thus, the rituals on the path of the caterpillar, *cawí* as they call it, involved great shared

⁶ N.B. 3 The great flood is a 'myth' they share with many ethnic groups across the earth.

disciplines walking at least a week through the desert after leaving the Sierra. It is important to note that *Tatéi Hikuri* is approached traditionally after eating nothing but food from Our Mother Maize, *Niwetsica*. In fact, corn in the form of dry chips and toasted ground cereal is an ideal lightweight meal for such a long journey. They follow the steps of Our Elder Brother Fawn of the Sun, *Tamatsi Kauyumari* who first made the pilgrimage under the leadership of Our Grandfather (Fire) *Tatewarí* to the Eastern desert of *Wirikuta*. In primordial times, Our Father *Tayau* rose over Burnt Peak, becoming the Sun in the heavenly realm of Our Mother Young Eagle Girl (*Tatéi Werica Wimari*). The leader of the pilgrimage reembodies Our Grandfather while *Kauyumari* transmits the shaman's words to Our Ancestors and vice-versa. In *Wirikuta*, the *urucuacame* (leader, who bears the arrows) locates the sacred Deer, shoots him, and Our Elder Brother's heart turns into a pierced peyote cactus: a multi-petaled flower *tutú*.

The end of the rainy season is invoked at the feast of the first fruits to thank Our Mothers (Rain, Earth, Heaven and Corn, in particular) for their bounty and call on Our Father to ripen the harvest. During this October ceremony, known as the Dance of Our Mother, the pilgrimage is fantasized by the children who are led by a shaman chanting the steps along the path. They sit in the rays of the sun, playing small gourd rattles (*caitsa*) to the sound of a standing drum (*huehuetl* in Nahuatl, *tepo* in Huichol). Their souls are symbolized by cotton tufts on a string attached to an arrow by the base of the drum and leading upwards to the symbol of the god's eye (which they share with Tibetan Buddhists and call *tsicuri*), of the rising sun.

All these beings are metaphors for energies or natural powers as reflected in the context of a Huichol pilgrim. They are different faces or aspects of ultimately one God. Even though people often refer to the Huichol "gods" of Fire, Wind, Sun and Stars or "goddesses" of Earth, Corn, Ocean, Waters etc..., the Huichol themselves are not so simplistic. They feel God has both male and female mirrors or images which reveal the omni presence of a being who everywhere leaves testimony of his/her reality, as a giver of life through self-sacrifices and transmutations that sustain human life. Since our life is posited on these manifestations of God's being, they are collective Ancestors. To the Huichol it is improper to pay unbalanced tribute to both aspects of God. There is the embryonic nature of primordial life, best envisioned in the darkness of the womb, in the world hidden below and in the Pacific Ocean to the West. It may be represented in prayer bowls made from the wide bottom of calabash gourds and decorated on the inside with relevant designs made of beads, yarn, seeds and shells pressed on with an indigenous adhesive wax. The sky is also like a gourd bowl. So, we are in the center of an axis, symbolized by an arrow: our life rises from the underworld, from Our Roots (*Tananari*), passes through this earthly plane and perhaps, hopefully, reaches heaven as a third abode. On

this plane there are power spots where homage is paid to Our Ancestors at the four cardinal points and the center, home. Thus, the Huichol can use the number 7 to symbolize our existence. While the bowl (*xucuri*) is made to reflect a female aspect of God and our needs, the arrow (*urú*) reflects the male aspect. A personal vision of both is represented in the *nierica*, a roughly hewn oval sheet of wood. At the center it often has a hole representing the face of God behind/beneath matter, sometimes there is a mirror instead, where God may reflect from above, like patterns drawn by the rays of the sun on a water-hole or on the cheeks of a pilgrim returning from a journey to the East.

Certain places from the West, which is more evocative of the female aspect of God, to the East, to the South where an island in a large lake represents the spot where the flood receded, to the North and particularly in the center are appropriately considered power spots: there, the pilgrim leaves the offerings, always sprinkled with blood from a previously sacrificed animal. Indeed, just as Our Ancestors sustain us and even answer specific prayers, so we must vow to sustain them with our thankful offerings, lest God remind us of our neglect through droughts, diseases and chaotic events.

With a good ration of food from the harvest, experienced shamans (female as well as male) transfer their knowledge to promising family members. Children as young as five are taken on the actual pilgrimage to the Eastern Holyland of *Wirikuta*. Pre-adolescents are good initiates as long as they can weather the arduous pilgrimage without losing heart. They will not yet be distracted by sexual urges and be diverted from a path to hidden knowledge and the power to heal. Relatives endowed with shamanic powers will guide sons to a place like the Cave of the Wolves *Turikita*. There, the boy will typically spend a day and a night in a vigil possibly hearing howling wolves. Let a wolf, the prototypal hunter, transmute into his being! A girl may be initiated elsewhere⁷ by her mother, leaving offerings like a miniature loom.

In any case, once an individual has earnestly started out on these journeys, by making vows to Our Ancestors in return for insight, he will have to renew his visits to numerous sacred spots for at least five years. It really takes a sixth journey to even be able to comprehend the meaning of the five basic ones, and no major slips! For instance, all sexual relations outside of marriages (which may be polygamous) must be confessed openly before all the co-pilgrims, so Our Grandfather's flames can cleanse them. The embarrassment suffered by the adulterer may become manifest in derogatory nicknames, like that of the *Mattress*, which most clan members use to refer to a woman, who was once a ceremonial center officer. This is not to say she is ostracized thereafter, since she is now respected for her knowledge and is married to an important tribal leader after becoming a widow. However, the name, created by her fellow pilgrims as a joke that became a hit, is a

⁷ N.B. 4 The author is not as familiar with the female rites.

blemish that she carries many years later: few remember her other first names. The worst is not to acknowledge the sins, because the *hikuri* cactus is reputed to make one lose all social masks and feel unveiled, which leads to a form of temporary madness and panic. Shortcuts along the path may endow the seeker with power to harm others, instead of healing.

On certain pilgrimages, I encountered small stores near key places, like an oasis, or a generous family by the route which offered enticing meals, but our shaman gave the example of refusing. It was like a modern day reenactment of Christ in a desert refusing to use his powers to mitigate his craving for food, despite Satan reminding him of how easily he could indulge. As we resisted the temptations, the Biblical anecdote took on personal meaning because we were living a similar situation, not just thinking about it as an irrelevant event for our own existence. These Huichol have no inkling of such Biblical episodes, but over and over we see them existing in a religious world that makes one feel there must be common grounds to their sense of the Sacred and what is depicted in other religions behind different forms. The strength of their example is that their belief system is based on a real pursuit of examples set by the Ancestors.

For them, to talk about religious questions without having fulfilled complex vows by going along the paths that test us is a major joke. Thus, the *tsicuaki*, a masked 'clown', possibly wearing the features of the mixed-blood Mexican, is a major feature at the celebrations, when the pilgrims return from *Wirikuta*. He is very extroverted and willing to explain in detail what occurred during the pilgrimage, unlike his companions. About 20 pilgrims return to a large ceremonial center, like the *Tukipa* of *Kieuruwitüa*. They already bore new names when they left, corresponding to the Ancestors whose shrines surround the patio. The large circular one is the abode of Our Grandfather, the *tuki* where all gather. Every year or two, the pilgrims more or less successfully reincarnate Our Grandfather and others. They come back with yet another set of new names, from "honey bee" to "rotten corn". During the long journeys the pilgrims have in fact agreed to rename common objects. In the course of sleepless vigils by the light of Our Grandfather (Fire), of Our Elder Brothers (stars) and under the glowing gaze of Our Great Grandmother Moon, *Tacutsi Metseri*, they have begun learning a religious language, that most do not understand. Without food or water, they have been uplifted along hunting trails and they have sought a form of communion in power spots, using the stamina and hypersensitivity that Our Mother *Hikuri* offers the pilgrims. Scorpion stings become harmless, but most significantly the pilgrim may begin to see the sacred aspect, the *nierica*, that is reflected in the surface of the oasis, the cheeks of his companions or the flowers of the field. However the pilgrim knows that he cannot gain *nierica* without a long term commitment to fully acknowledge the gifts and grace of God in his/her many forms. The search for *nierica* must be approached with

the utmost respect and vows not broken. Perhaps he feels it would be useless and incomprehensible to render an account of his experiences to uninitiated clan members. Maybe he becomes jealous of his hard-earned insights and it would be a breach of privacy. In any case, this insight is transmitted by the *tsicuaki* in confusing, inverted and contrary terms. The Huichol laugh off his apparent ignorance and brazen irreverences, unlike a superficial observer who might take the *tsicuaki's* comments at face value. This is an example of how a traditional hermeticism has been exercised for a long time. It has probably helped them better protect their culture.

ART: A NIERICA OF HUICHOL CULTURE

This exhibit offers a modest *nierica* on Huichol culture. We do so now because many Huichol have recently seen ignorance of their culture used against them. Inept representations of their arts as repetitive and meaningless designs made by interchangeable, anonymous craftsmen have encouraged crafts dealers to obscure their value as people who are still creating from a culture that is full of vigor. The soul of America manifests its life in the best of Huichol crafts when they are transformed into universal art by none other than contemporary artists.

The author first became aware of the Huichol by spotting "yarn-paintings": a unique religious craft which they have developed into a commercial form since the mid-twentieth century. The religious *nierica* is limited by the small size of the circular wooden disk and by its theme, which is symbolically descriptive of the aspects of one Ancestor for whom it is made. Yarn-paintings, made on plywood boards, can reach the size of 4 X 8 feet, although they average 2 X 2 feet. Because the pure wax from small native bees is both scarce and very expensive outside of the mountains, commercial yarn-paintings are normally made with an initially more malleable form mixed with resin and/or animal fat. Unfortunately, the impure form cracks and loses all its adhesive qualities when it dries, within a year, whereas the one used for religious purposes softens in the heat and does not lose its adhesive nature. The manufacturers of yarn-paintings for the tourist market are typically urbanized or fairly acculturated in agricultural hamlets, distant from Huichol tribal land. Most of them have not been initiated in the sacred spots along the path from West to East or in the ceremonial center of a clan. They have not, from a Huichol perspective been able to develop *nierica*, the spiritual insight which allows the religious artist to draw and to reflect the presence of specific Ancestors, using archetypal symbols in precise

configurations and juxtapositions. Their labor is not charged with *iyari* (heart and ancestral memory) because they have not practiced the disciplines that confer personal meaning to metaphors and function to symbols. At the same time, the Huichol commercial artist does not wish to attract the attention of the Ancestors, whom he is neither thanking, nor calling upon in his work. Thus, when yarn-paintings or 'tablas al estambre' became commercial objects in the 1960's, the visual vocabulary of the sacred crafts which they drew on was used decoratively to avoid provoking the Ancestors. Images were used out of context, usually without the necessary complementary symbols and incorporating extraneous motifs. The majority of craftsmen I met in the seventies, who produced nearly all the 'yarn-paintings', were urbanized Huichol who had no first hand experience of the traditional culture, although they served as occasional hosts for visiting relatives from the mountains. But the direct archetypal appeal of borrowed Huichol designs, however gratuitously or mechanically applied, the striking colour combinations and the novelty of the native medium attracted a great demand for these yarn-paintings which were distributed by the Franciscans in Zapopan, Government Institutions and tourist stores in Mexico City, Guadalajara, Tepic and Zacatecas.

Anthropologist Peter Furst⁸ encouraged Ramón Medina, a Huichol who had impressed the Franciscans with his talent for making yarn-paintings, to use the medium as a means of depicting native mythology. Thus Medina returned a meaning to the Huichol symbols he used to illustrate some of the popular stories shared by even the acculturated Huichol. As Medina's sense of the importance of his work for Furst grew, he became more involved with his native tradition, leaving the urban environment sporadically to perform rituals in a Huichol rancho called El Colorín, far from the traditional communities in the highlands, yet close enough to his native environment to enable him to pursue his aim of becoming a *maraacame*. Unfortunately Medina was killed there in 1971. Other artists, however, were anonymously developing their own mastery of the medium. José Benítez Sánchez, Tutukila, Juan Ríos Martínez and Guadalupe González Ríos, whose yarn-paintings we have selected for this exhibit, became the most prominent artists after Medina's death. They refrained from reproducing Medina's well-known compositions. In fact by 1973, their compositions had become the new models for the scores of craftsmen (some non-Huichol), whose yarn-paintings filled the tourist stores of Tepic. What distinguished them from other artisans of yarn-paintings was the visionary imagination that enabled them to produce spontaneous representations of their subjective experience. Significantly they were also better informed and more closely involved with

⁸ Peter T. Furst, *Myth in Art: A Huichol Depicts His Reality*, Los Angeles, 1968

traditional disciplines. They were thus well equipped to use yarn-paintings to communicate deeper aspects of Huichol culture when presented with an opportunity to create compositions that were 'importante', as they put it.

Since the yarn-paintings were not produced for devotional purposes, they had to develop a special relationship with someone who would sponsor non-decorative work. However, the artists could not develop meaningful themes or their symbolic elements: at first I was an attentive student of the simpler elements of their lore, which they conveyed with disarming clarity. As my understanding evolved in the course of separate pilgrimages with Guadalupe González and José Benítez, their virtuosity in the medium encouraged them to develop more complex themes, strengthened by a sense of shared experiences and mutual growth. Tutukila was my first host in the remote Community of Tuapuri, while he unfolded his particular style. Juan Ríos Martínez demonstrated his artistry on the Huichol violin (*xaweri*), as well. In the late 1970's, *Yauxali*, a chanter, healer and pilgrimage leader, from whom I hoped to gain relatively esoteric insights, demonstrated that a professional shaman can produce some of the most exciting compositions, while ensconced in a remote part of *Wautüa*. We collected the work of these five artists without cease, until the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City recognized our selection was worthy of being exhibited to their fellow citizens in July, August and September of 1986. We are adding to pieces from that selection an example of the talent displayed since then by *Tsitaima*, whom her husband *Yauxali* promoted both as a shaman and an artist. At another end of the spectrum, some earnest efforts are carried out by yarn-painters like Marcelino Robles Cosío who gives us a sample of descriptive yarn-paintings. The contents of his work are practically realistic, but not decorative either.

The stone sculptures are part of a study carried out for us in the late 1970's and early 1980's by *Yauxali* and his brother *Matsuwa* initiated with help from Cultural Survival, Inc., in 1979. I wondered if these people were still making idols after all these years of conquest. Finally, after about 15 years, I had achieved the intimate friendship of one of *Tuapuri's* five main elders, as a *compadre*. He explained to me that there was only one God but, when I insisted on knowing the name of that entity, he was a bit baffled. He said, well it is like *ios*, a deformation of the Spanish "Dios", but unsatisfied, he explained that his name could not be expressed. Curiously the *Wixaritari* do not say thank 'you' but *pamparios*: essentially "thank God"! And anyone who has really worked at length with the *Wixaritari* will appreciate that is what is deeply meant: Thank God we do something for each other! The implications of this are that we must allow them to continue developing their own philosophy.

The following are some comments about five Huichol

artists. Finally, we will approach a most ignored and obscure theme: Tribal Politics.

JOSE BENITEZ SANCHEZ

By the time we met in 1971, José Benítez was recognized as the foremost mastercraftsman by other yarn-painters in Tepic, having instructed several dozen Huichol apprentices in the technique. Among them, Juan Ríos distinguished himself by mastering his own forms to produce a personal style with a fresh aesthetic sense. Others worked out a superficial style while basically sticking to simple compositions, which they had helped their master produce, by filling in the background areas and figures that Benítez had outlined in the beeswax matrix. Some professional craftsmen worked for Benítez just in order to learn new designs, though admitting they did not fully understand their meaning. Thus, he acquired the status of a shaman among his colleagues and the degree of his inventiveness was such, that craftsmen who had worked with him were baffled to see his new stylistic approaches after a few months. Seeing the changes in his work from 1972 to 1986, it is obvious that we are not dealing with the master of a folk-art form who would settle on a fixed vocabulary of stamped figures in a variety of arrangements.

Benítez constantly seeks ways to integrate the forms of his figures in the overall drama of his compositions. The forms flow organically into each other, or they may be set off against one another in dramatic opposition. The precise outlines of figures are molded by their dynamic interrelationship to each other. Larger units of form are created by the linkage and contrast of smaller figures; background spaces become all encompassing masks or figures in another plane. Drama and tension abound in Benítez's compositions, their figures become more flexible and their elements more malleable, expressing their chameleonic nature. Thus antlers, which are like the antennae of Our Ancestors, become visually homologous with the powerful tail-feathers of the shaman's arrow, which transmits prayers. The gourd-bowl, wherein prayers are depicted and blood offerings are smeared, is like the womb of Our Mothers and like a flower in bloom. Likewise, a shaman's basket, the repository of the instruments with which he addresses the Ancestors is akin to a mouth that emits the words of prayer. The aim is not to add more features to a figure, but instead to bring out its most essential characteristics, so as to retain the multivalence of a symbol.

For Huichol artists in general, and José Benítez in particular, artistic creation is the only effective means of bridging the deep gap separating their subconscious and spiritual life from the culture acquired adapting to modern Mexican civilization. Through expressing his culture in ideographs, the Huichol artist defends an indigenous outlook which confers meaning on his life. As a spokesman for his culture, Benítez identifies himself with the mythical personages participating in the drama of the pictures. His inner conflict is exteriorized in the figures

full of movement, magnetism and polarity, which are held together almost as if by muscular tension. Indeed, art is the creative therapy Benítez uses to reconstitute his fragmented psyche (to paraphrase Herbert Read). Nonetheless, the loftier purpose of exalting his culture is a central justification for its elaboration. Thus, Benítez stated in an interview that if his pictures were exhibited as mere ornaments, this would be an affront to his "forebears". His work crystallizes precious memories springing from an *iyari* (heart/memory) laden with the tales of his grandfather, his adopted father and other *maraacate*, and now stamped with the imprint of his own sacred disciplines and revelations. The artist insists that no figure is insignificant, no symbol is hollow; thus the verbal account underlines the fact that none of the parts of a composition are gratuitous fill-ups, as is also apparent in aesthetic terms. The art illustrates a philosophy and a historical tradition that demand to be acknowledged.

It is significant that Benítez's growing dedication to art as a serious endeavor, beyond its economic value, was paralleled by a return to his family rituals and pilgrimage disciplines, a return to sowing corn and hunting the deer, even living in the mountains. His themes are intimately tied to his dreams and his religious experiences which provoke them. The psychotropic *hikuri* cactus which is consumed at the end of a yearly or bi-yearly pilgrimage plays a central role in stimulating the visions dormant in the *iyari*, although it is used as a sacrament and not on an everyday basis or as a means for specifically creating art. *Hikuri* according to the artist (as well as other Huichols) is a *nierica*, moreover: "*nierica* is like what we see in our mind and our mind is like *Watetüapa* (the Underworld)". In other words, *hikuri*, like dreams and revelations produced by vigils, fasts and dances, is a mirror or a pre-conscious, pre-linguistic inner time and space. In Benítez's recreated visions, the simultaneous experience of physically disconnected times and spaces is faithfully conveyed as a harmonious unit both visually and thematically. Without *nierica*, he would not see the images of his dreams and capture their meaning; it is the eye of his soul, that sheds light on the spirit world. Addressing himself to *Kauyumari* in a song of his composition, the artist exalts his Elder Brother: "*Kauyumari's* speech, *niukiteya* (his words), and his figures, his designs, his thoughts never come to an end as manifested in his pulse, *matsuwa* (adorned bracelets), and in the sacred designs of his face, *uxa*". With his *nierica* fixed on *Kauyumari's* changing aspects, José Benítez surveys a kaleidoscopic world in which the physical fuses with the metaphysical. He enables us to explore universal archetypes contained in a deep-rooted religion expressed with highly individual artistry. "Our memories", says Benítez, referring to *Kauyumari* and himself, "will stay here in our designs and compositions". The spectator will note the prevalence of the round *nierica* symbols, especially in recent work. Thus in his artistic and spiritual progression, Benítez explicitly returns to the concept of the *nierica*, organizing his compositions around one or more such focal points.

José Benítez Sánchez draws his forms with a virtuosity acquired over many years of uninterrupted, full-time dedication to yarn-painting. He slashes out a web of interconnected lines outlining indistinct forms in a tortuous film of dark beeswax, possessed by single-minded urgency: to crystalize a fleeting inner vision. His strong sense of rhythm and balance reflects the skill he displays in performing Huichol music and dances. The clarity of his visual perception is brought to life by his bold use of colour. As with his forms, he has no preestablished concept of how he will combine his colours; the choice is made on the spot from a wide array of dyed wool yarn. He uses both thick and fine wool to achieve rich textures and to avail himself of a wider range of colour tones.⁹ Significantly, he produces more work than most of his peers, yet he finds it abhorrent to reproduce his own compositions or those of another craftsman.

José Benítez Sánchez was born in 1938 from Huichol parents of the Community of *Wautüa*. His grandparents gave him the native name *Yucauye*, "silent", and the gods named him *Cucame*, "he who walks". Thus in Huichol his name is *Yucauye Cucame*, "Silent Walker". He was raised by his adoptive father Pascual Benítez, a practicing shaman, and his maternal grandfather, who died at the age of 105, after leaving a strong imprint in José's memory. He started working in the fields with his father when he was eight, and the next year, his father decided to train him as a shaman. José recalls vividly the ceremonial hunt that initiated his religious training. The master shaman and his young apprentice searched the canyons for deer trails, setting rope snares (*nierica*) to trap their magic prey. The next day they found a deer caught in a snare. Pascual Benítez considered it a good omen that the animal was still alive. José covered the deer's snout with his mouth, sucking its breath until it expired. Afterwards, young José was instructed to go into mourning for six years during which he should not touch a woman, nor spice his food with salt. During the next four years he made yearly pilgrimages on foot to the Pacific Coast and to sacred caves deep in the Sierra. When he reached the age of fourteen however, his parents arranged a marriage for him, according to the Huichol custom. Soon thereafter he ran away, seeking work in the coastal fields and went out into civilization without knowing any Spanish. "When I started working as a coastal laborer, I left my Huichol clothes and my sandals, changing them for Mexican clothes and I soon felt like a mestizo (mixed-blood). I never forgot my traditional customs, but it was not the same, because I had abandoned my plans for becoming a *maraacame*." It was not long before José came in contact with government officials in charge of rural communities. He started working for them in various capacities, sweeping their offices and eventually travelling to every community in the Sierra and its foothills as a

⁹ Since about 1982, wool yarn disappeared from the market and only acrylic yarn has been used since then.

spokesman for the Mexican authorities. In the meantime he started (1963) to try out his skills at making yarn-paintings: "I could not draw the figures as they ought to be represented, but I began to think back about the lives of my grandparents and parents and the sacred lore." By 1968 he was recognized as one of the foremost practitioners of Huichol arts and invited to perform Huichol music and dances at the Olympic Games in Mexico. During the next three years he headed a workshop for the performance of Huichol dances and he tutored other Indians in the manufacture of yarn-paintings, under a program sponsored by INBA

(National Institute of Fine Arts). After this, Benítez returned to the INI (National Institute for Indigenous Affairs), being placed in charge of the selection of authentic Huichol crafts in a government program that was aimed at supporting the heavily exploited Indian artisans. He soon left this position which made him a critic of the crafts of his own people, instead of allowing him to direct his creative energy. When we decided to work together in 1973, he turned exclusively to his art in order to express the religious vision of his heritage and rekindled his urge to fulfill the shamanic path.

In 1974, his work along with that of Guadalupe González, Tutukila and Juan Ríos was exhibited at the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery and singled out for the Corcoran Art Gallery in Washington, D. C.. It is noteworthy that the Los Angeles Art Gallery had just previously rejected another exposition of Huichol yarn-paintings, which were considered to have a puerile and folkloric appeal. However, they recognized that the work of these artists transcended such categories and deserved an art forum. Their decision was hailed by the art critics of the Los Angeles Times, and echoed over the course of a few dozen exhibits in such publications as the Christian Science Monitor, the New York Times, the Washington Post and the Boston Globe. José Benítez travelled to the United States on two occasions in 1975, at the invitation of the Ankrum Gallery in Los Angeles and the E. B. Crocker Art Gallery of Sacramento, California.

His work was the central subject of two illustrated catalogues and essays written by Juan Negrín: The Huichol Creation of the World published in 1975 by the E. B. Crocker Art Gallery (which included work by Tutukila) and El Arte Contemporáneo de los Huicholes published in 1977 by the University of Guadalajara, Mexico (including a masterpiece by Guadalupe González Ríos, as well). Benítez's art has also been chosen to illustrate several books on shamanism and art. Most importantly, it has recently been accepted as a major art form by Mexican fine arts institutions and as such has opened up a new platform for the discussion of cultural despoliation. Indeed, the increasing awareness of the Huichol as a cultural group capable of engendering important art grounded in a rich philosophical tradition represents a major hope for the cultural survival of the Huichol as a whole. José Benítez has provided to the outside world a new form of narrative, mirrors of the sensitivity of his people, that cuts through ethnic

idiosyncracies by tapping the universal language of beauty. We are moved to reconsider the irreplaceable value of one of the last remaining native cultures, the creative force of which has not been absorbed or 'mummified' by materialistic values of the modern world.

TUTUKILA

Along with Benítez, Tutukila was the main inspiration for the evolution of yarn-paintings into a serious art form depicting the Huichol tradition. However, his approach to the medium reflects a different background and a didactic viewpoint. When Tutukila began making yarn-paintings, he had just left the home of his parents in the remote highlands of the highly traditional Tuapuri tribe. Encouraged by an uncle, he decided to become educated through the Mexican school system. During our collaboration from 1973 through 1975, he produced an epic history of the feats of the mythological Ancestors, incorporating carefully gathered information from close relatives who are noted shamans.

Despite his relative youth, Tutukila at 24 had been making yarn-paintings longer than most older craftsmen. He was recognized by the other artists for his peerless craftsmanship, which he used to carefully detail important symbols and to forcefully represent the prototypal figures of the Ancestors, influencing changes in the style of his fellow yarn-painters. A close look at his art reveals his intricate manipulation of detail, which lends more realism to his figures than we find in the work of José Benítez and other artisans. He slowly forms the figures in his compositions, working with great application and concentration, without any outlines sketched on the beeswax. Even in large yarn-paintings, the artist will render all the major features of each figure before beginning to form the next one. The colour field that surrounds his figures follows their contours carefully, enabling the artist to create unique linear patterns that radiate their forms and integrate them into the overall composition. The vibrancy created by Tutukila's harmonious textural approach confers an inner vitality to his figures. Since he found it difficult to enlist the help of equally meticulous apprentices,¹⁰ he worked mostly by himself or with his wife Turuima ("corn stalk"). Tutukila's art is more reflective and style-conscious than Benítez's, partly because of his painstaking technique and partly because he intends his art to reflect his themes in faithful detail. In effect, Tutukila views his art as part of an effort to capture the significance and richness of his culture. He is keenly aware that other Mexicans and outsiders regard his people as ignorant members of an inadequate culture. He hopes that mestizos and young Huichols will come to realize that the Indian culture is valid.

¹⁰ One of his apprentices was Mariano Valadez, whose figures today still reflect the forms developed by his ex-master.

Tutukila was born in 1949 on a ranch belonging to the *Tuapuri* Community. His Mexican name is Tiburcio Carrillo Sandoval and his indigenous name is *Niucame*, "sprouting corn". Later he adopted the name *Tutukila*, which he derives from *tutú*, a flower associated with corn, and *kixa*, which refers to the action of beating the corn stalks with a stick to release the pollen or dust before the harvest. In 1963, he began his formal education to "become civilized in the mestizo (Mexican) culture". In 1975, having passed the equivalent of seventh grade, he was one of the better educated Huichol, in contrast to Benítez who never entered first grade. He started making commercial yarn-paintings in 1963 as an apprentice to a fellow *Tuapuritánaka* (member of the *Tuapuri* tribe), named Andrés Valenzuela. "Andrés", he writes, "did not want to teach me how to work properly, but by observing him I dedicated myself to forming certain figures as a game or for a decorative effect. With time my designs improved although they remained crude." The next year he left school to go to Guadalajara seeking work as a craftsman. "... there, I met the unforgettable craftsman and artist Ramón Medina who was working with Father Ernesto" (Ernesto Loera, former head of the Franciscan Mission near Guadalajara). Medina, whose compositions treated meaningful themes, hired *Tutukila* to assist him in making yarn-paintings. After four months *Tutukila* returned to the highlands, seeking to further his knowledge about his own culture by asking his father pertinent questions. The father responded by telling his son that he would orient him later, if he continued demonstrating an interest in his people's history. Consequently, *Tutukila* furthered his religious education by visiting the sacred dwelling spots of the great Ancestor-Spirits. At the same time, he continued pursuing his craft and his Mexican education, visiting Guadalajara and eventually Mexico City. In order to learn

more about his culture, *Tutukila* has interviewed elder wise people in his tribe. "...but", he writes, "even in these last few years none of them has told me the truth; so, I have relied on my own insight and the teachings that my father has divulged to me." When he was working in earnest with me, from 1973 to 1975, he had to perform special rites and sacrifices for revealing aspects of sacred history to an outsider, in hopes that his culture might receive more respect from those who would like to change it radically.

Tutukila sought to create a bicultural bridge with his art to express his culture's 'history'. As he wrote: "...we cannot develop well among the mestizos (mixed blood Mexicans) because they don't understand our religion and our culture. But they don't realize how we would suffer, since they want us to lose our religion and our traditional ways, to become just like them. But I say it is not right to lose everything that is ours in exchange for something we don't have the means to defend." He added, the outside culture is important "but so is ours; I believe we are losing it, now the young are losing their very language." However, *Tutukila* stresses the Huichol ethic of not revealing the truth to

those who have not reached religious maturity through active practice and rigorous devotion on a long-term basis. The Ancestors achieved their ends by often resorting to treachery and by testing those who seek their help. Today the wise shamans, having gained their knowledge through penitence and discipline, will not instruct others who seek knowledge gratuitously, especially youngsters who would earn a living outside their culture by prostituting the mysteries of a well guarded heritage. After 1975, he ceased making yarn-paintings and has since received his teaching credentials.

JUAN RÍOS MARTINEZ AND GUADALUPE GONZALEZ RÍOS

An account of Huichol yarn-painting would be incomplete without mentioning these two artists whose unique styles express their distinctive experience and outlook. A sense of human warmth, passion and joy of life exude from Juan Ríos' compositions, while Guadalupe González renders the impressions of an ascetic mystic in humble awe before ineffable visions.

Juan Ríos traces his figures with enveloping curves and sensual forms. His compositions denote the physical experience of working in the fields or ritual penance; he evokes the lushness of the fertile earth strewn with flowers that symbolize the blessings of life, as well as the naturalistic harshness of violence and scatology. His elastic figures achieve expressionistic effects, adopting exaggerated dimensions according to their subjective importance. His musical sensitivity which has made him a virtuoso player of the *xaweri*, a Huichol-style violin, links him intimately to his native culture and carries into his yarn-paintings.

Juan Ríos was born in 1930, receiving the native name *Taurri Mutuani*, "Painted Red" because of his flushed aspect at birth. He grew up in the lowland mountains overlooking the Great Santiago river, among other Huichol displaced from their native communities by the violent post-revolutionary conflicts that devastated their tribal lands. At a very tender age, he was 'called' by the *Kieri* tree (a dangerous psychotropic plant of the *solandra* family) to fulfill a cycle of devotions for five years, having unknowingly grabbed a branch of the plant which

made him lose his senses for three days. His devotions to the *Kieri* endowed him with a special grace for playing the *xaweri*. His father was a famed player of this instrument, who was constantly invited to play the sacred and profane music at the major ceremonies performed in the dispersed pockets of Huichol ranches in the region. By the age of nine he was his father's companion and occasional substitute. He later made a foot pilgrimage to the holyland of *Wirikuta* which lasted 90 days, however, he considered the shamanic path too arduous to fulfill over years of similar pilgrimages. Since then, he moved further away from native Huichol territory and settled in the rural countryside with a Mexican wife. Nonetheless he never abandoned the sacred tasks of the traditional

cultivation of maize and the ritual hunt of the deer. He considers that his devotion to the deer is the source of his spiritual insight; when he catches the sacred animal alive he sucks its saliva "because I think it gives me something useful, a grace that allows me to depict what I think".

As the other artists we selected, he dedicated himself with the utmost seriousness to create "important" work when given the opportunity. He decided to consult extensively with an uncle who was a shaman in the tribal territory of *Tatéi Kié* and at night his dreams were filled with visionary imagery from the sacred accounts he heard. Thus he qualified the work he did between 1973 and 1975, as having *iyari*, "carrying much thought". In these pictures he inlaid the yarn one strand at a time, which permits a control and precision that folkloric yarn-painters lack, being made expediently produced with two strands applied simultaneously. However, he also recognized the delicate nature of drawing the attention of the Ancestors through his work and found it taxing to reciprocate for their bestowal on him of all the *iyari* he poured into his art.

Guadalupe González Ríos, *Ketsetemahé Teucarieya*, meaning "Godson of Coupled Iguanas", was born around 1920 in the region to the West of the Huichol highlands, where according to several natives his father was the most noted *maraacame*. He is a solitary man of few words, seeking little human contact outside of his family. He belongs to a small minority of Huichol devoted primarily to the *Kieri*, which most consider far too treacherous to vow themselves to. Each year he undergoes strict fasts and makes a pilgrimage to the highest peak, where he sits through the night on a rocky precipice next to the plant. The *Kieri* is feared as a jealous master who will not permit sexual indiscretions, often provoking madness or death if it is angered. When the *Kieri* caused his wife to become insane for nine months because of her adultery, they descended to the ghetto section of Tepic where he learned to make yarn-paintings for a living. During the first years, he too had lost his grace for becoming a *maraacame*, because of his wife's infraction. But he renewed his devotions to the *Kieri* and to his rural habitat, having since then fulfilled his vows after some twenty pilgrimages to the peak. Now the *Kieri* 'speaks' to him in his dreams and allows him to heal.

Guadalupe González's yarn-paintings convey a different view-point influenced by his devotions. The *Kieri* is considered a special *nierica* of *Watetúapa* and the world of the dead. It constantly changes its form, often appearing to the novice as a tempting person of the opposite sex luring one over the edge of the cliffs, but if mastered it bestows great power on the devotee. Meditations of punishment and mercy saturate the artist's mind. His compositions often evoke a spatial vacuum and a break in the sense of gravity. His figures of people are fragile prototypes,

suspended without mass in space; there is little corporeality outside of the central figure of the god/ancestor whom each

painting invokes with humble fervor. The sense of human drama, so prominent in Juan Ríos's art, is substituted by an abstract tapestry of prayers arrayed by Guadalupe González all about the overwhelming appearance of a central Ancestor appearing in various guises. Bowls, arrows, candles, the 'toys' and instruments of the Ancestor, evoke a hymn of praise, punctuated by multicolored drops (blood, raw corn gruel, water and chocolate) and *niericate* that make the pictures pulsate with an elusive rhythm and a mystery that cannot be spoken.

SHAMANIC YARN PAINTINGS: YAUXALI

While the artists mentioned above have all been direct participants in the shamanic culture of the Huichol, none of them is an expert of the shamanic arts, particularly the long chants and sacred history. Benítez and Ríos have both expressed that "only the *maraacame* sees, hears and speaks with the 'gods'". The *maraacame* must represent the Ancestors "as they are": in the esoteric symbolism of votive objects like arrows and gourd bowls, wooden disks with yarn and carved stone sculptures. His long intimate experience of the sacred allows him to draw precisely from a great range of symbols that describe his vision in correctly assembled ideographic units.

Yauxali, meaning "Costume of the Sun", was born circa 1936 in the tribal highland community of *Wautüa*. Pablo Taisán de la Cruz, by his Mexican name, has lived semi-nomadically, settling in various ranches between the community of *Wautüa* and the coastal lowlands. Although his father was not a *maraacame*, *Yauxali* and his two brothers all persevered in the shamanic path. *Yauxali* began to lead ceremonial chants after some twenty years of uninterrupted disciplines and pilgrimages. Many of his foot pilgrimages have traced the entire path from the coast to the eastern holyland of *Wirikuta* and back. His disciplines include periods of abstention from salt and from sexual relations with his two wives, that last up to six months per year. In 1975, during one of several pilgrimages in which *Yauxali* was my guide, I was struck by the handsome wood carving of a deer-head in the sacred cave of *Tuamuxawi*, the prototypal cultivator. *Yauxali* informed me that he had carved it as an offering for an earlier pilgrimage. He had 'seen' the deer-head as a vision after fainting from exhaustion while cultivating his fields. *Tuamuxawi* 'spoke' to him, requesting that he reproduce the head and take it to his sacred dwelling.

In 1977, following subsequent pilgrimages, *Yauxali* and his brother *Matsuwa* began making sacred carvings in stone, to be kept as a repository of symbolic guideposts for future generations of Huichol. With the help of Cultural Survival, Inc.¹¹ I was able to form "The Foundation for the Preservation of the Sacred Traditional Huichol Art" in Guadalajara, with the participation of

¹¹ A non-profit organization with headquarters in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

shaman chanters and an elder *cawitero* from the *Tuapuri* tribe. *Yauxali* began making yarn-paintings in 1978 as part of an effort to explain the role of the Ancestors and of

their symbols in Huichol sacred history. Thus he became a rare exception among 'yarn-painters': an expert *maraacame* who approached his work primarily as an accomplished master of purely sacred art. His output is sporadic and his explanations are couched in specialized shamanic vocabulary, but we sense in his work the nervous energy and sincere conviction suggested in the best work of Guadalupe González, as if a hidden magnetism guided his lines and the artist allowed himself to become an impassioned intermediary of the messages of "Our Ancestors".

In this manner the magic and mystery conjured by the *nierica* have been returned to the yarn-painting medium by five artists who offer us five different sets of screens into the Huichol culture. As genuine artists, their expression is distinctly personal and is bound up with the experiences which have had an impact on their 'hearts' and memories. Their themes are related to seasonal events or intimate happenings such as a dream, a birth, an illness which recall generic events. Since the visions and experiences which move their inner being are ever fresh, each work is unique. The pictures are a testimony of what the artist sees through his own *nierica*, his inner mirror which has been polished by his sacred experience. The forms emerge from the *iyari*, that 'heart' which according to Aztec tradition is a "picturebook". Since erroneous and superficial images of the Huichol have conspired to denigrate their way of life and speed up their cultural disintegration, this handful of native artists have managed to harness their genius at a critical historical juncture.

The most relevant journey that these works of art undertook outside of Mexico, in the 1980's, was a European tour produced by Mr. John Hargrove Bowles and the Kolla-Landwehr Foundation: The Shaman-Artist, Contemporary Art of Huichol Indians of Mexico. The exhibit traveled to Amsterdam, Bremen, Copenhagen, Stockholm, Goteburg and Paris. Most significantly, it encouraged Mexico's National Institute of Fine Arts to help me reintroduce them to Mexico in the most appropriate forum: The Museum of Modern Art.¹²

The most revolutionary (in a literal sense) trip these yarn-paintings ever made was to Mayorca, Spain, where they were exhibited in the Church of Santo Domingo de Pollença, in October 1991. The ribbon was cut by her Majesty Sofia, the Queen of Spain. Imagine the shock of Santo Domingo, shown in a medieval painting

¹² N.B. 5 In a curious twist, it was Mexico's English-speaking newspaper, The News, which gave it the greatest rave review, calling it the best show of 1986.

burning heretic texts and now surrounded by Huichol *iyari* in twenty yarn-paintings! A beautiful limited edition catalogue and the tour were sponsored by Basilio Baltasar and the Municipality of Pollençá. May their art and their poetry speak clearly to our hearts about the relevance to humankind of the survival of their endogenous cultural development.

TRIBAL POLITICS

Typically, relatively wealthy Huichol, owners of healthy cattle, will hold major celebrations at their own ranches. Practically all neighbors, relatives and friends are invited to share an unusually rich meal, consisting of the meat of a sacrificed bull, the blood of which is offered in thanks to Our Ancestors and smeared on the votive offerings. Corn beer (*nawá*), tortillas and broth are made to serve many. In a traditional setting, relative wealth is associated with a mature man, who has at times served his Community for free as a leader. The highest political positions are those of *Tatoani* or traditional governor (for 1 or 2 years) and of President of Communal Goods (3 years). Most Huichol have not sought these positions because they will have to spend much time tending communal problems, not family matters, travelling to hostile and distant urban centers, not to speak of preparing general assemblies and giving public reports regularly. As an intimate witness of such gatherings can report, the leaders can be carefully questioned by any suspicious group or individual of prestige and issues are settled by a consensus that may take three days (or more) to reach among 200 or more heads of family. Top leaders are sometimes removed in mid-term for activities harmful to the territorial integrity. Some, disloyal to their tribe, have been banished from the land. But the relatively wealthy have also frequently made it clear that they had special insights into the outside world or into their own culture, as *maraacame* (healer/chanter, 'shaman'), often an impetus or ability to surmount problems, which make them eligible to serve the whole tribe. Thus, a score of wise elders, *cawiteros*, who are responsible for reaching an initial consensus on who to tap for leadership keep their decision secret for about 5 months, before it is publicly proposed at the Change of Staff Ceremony in early January. At that time, the traditional leaders, as they are known, will transfer their bamboo power-staffs to the new 'governor, judge, captain, sergeant and their messengers'. If only the candidates knew, they would very possibly dream up a way to avoid showing up at such an important meeting despite the pressure of police-messengers, *topiles*, calling on all male fathers to be present. New leaders will have to be convinced or pressured by the consensus to serve the common good, as it was initially revealed that they could in the dreams of the *cawiteros*. The latter know

the path of the caterpillar (*cawi*) from experienced pilgrimages and the seemingly endless *cawitos*: the oral history that has been carefully transmitted from specialist to specialist. Let us note that the purpose of the *maraacame* is to acquire *iyari*, a word which means the heart, but also refers to the memory of the tribe, its collective knowledge.

The internal political system of the *Wixaritari* has been a major barrier to outside influences. Since the Mexican Revolution, it was established that indigenous nations be divided into communities. Their land titles were newly confirmed in the 1950's and 1960's. Each of the five Huichol Communities is now also led by a President of the Commissariat of Communal Goods, a President of the Council of Vigilance, a Secretary and a Treasurer. These new authorities have been instituted according to traditional *Wixárica* methods of consensual democracy, preceded by consultation with the elders. The Huichol today recognize that their top non-traditional leader must be relatively literate and versed in the ways of the outside world to properly defend territorial integrity and the legal rights of their relatives. However, it also requires the seal of the *tatoani* or 'governor' to legitimize documents. Unlike many other

agricultural societies, the Huichol have not been ruled by "caciques": leaders who draw indefinite power from their connections and backing in the outside world. In 1970, the Federal Government created the position of a President of the Supreme Huichol Council, who was supposed to represent the leaders of all the Communities. However, he stopped consulting with legitimate grass-roots general assemblies. The second one, stayed in power for about 12 years, unconfirmed by elections and his abuse of power was sufficiently denounced, that the position disappeared near the end of President López Portillo's six year term. Now, there is a so-called Union of Indigenous Huichol Communities in Jalisco State (UCIHJ), which is headed for 3 years by the President of one of the Huichol Communities. It is more responsive to different tribal opinions, but not as representative of the heterogeneous tribes as their own traditional and non-traditional leaders.

Enormous economic and political pressures are applied on the non-traditional Presidents, whose sole authority is sometimes deemed sufficient to set in motion business deals and political changes. There is generally little cash available in the communal chest funded by tribal members, so leaders must find money elsewhere to make important trips. The lumber companies, which have been paying a pittance to plunder the forests of *Wautüa*, have plenty to spare. Meanwhile Huichol authorities perform their task as a free service and must be very acculturated to effectively deal with abstruse documents.

The Federal Government National Indian Institute is an important counterbalance to regional economic and political pressures, often rectifying injustices suffered by the Huichol with

no legal recourse locally. It has also promoted many programs to integrate the natives into the modern stream of life. Bilingual education has allowed them to face up better to the outside world and some programs for development of agricultural and animal husbandry have been useful. The recent introduction of clinics has made medical help available in inaccessible regions. However, it is difficult for officials in Mexico City to appreciate the consequences of their development programs on the Huichol culture and environment or to recognize the needs of the grass-roots people, because little profound contact occurs over the six year national presidential mandates: much is learned that does not get transferred to the following authorities. The attachment that the natives feel for a religious way of life is thoroughly incomprehensible and does not seem to harmonize with national production plans.

The author was requested in 1979 to serve the *Tuapuri* Community as an adviser to save its forest lands from destruction or confiscation, because its leaders were advised by some important authorities to either contract their timber or risk losing their most wooded regions. It eventually became clear that a standstill would not be a long term solution to the pressure brought to bear on the tribe. So, we formed the Association for the Ecological Development of the Western Sierra Madre (of Mexico), A.D.E.S.M.O. in 1987.¹³ We have followed requests spelled out in official Communal documents to create workshops, where the Huichol are taught to develop their skills as carpenters. This is a non-governmental organization, recognized by the

State as a non-profit association. Since 1990, A.D.E.S.M.O. has been funded largely by the American Jewish World Service since 1990. In that year, it also received a shipment of small, semi-mobile sawmills from the Austrian Institute for International Cooperation (I.I.Z.). The aim is to finish setting up the first sawmill in *Tuapuri*, where some 20 Huichol have been trained in basic carpentry. Once boards are produced locally, the workshop can be a significant cottage industry developing at its own pace to offer more job opportunities. Between 20 and 40% of the value of the boards will enter the community chest. More and more tribal members will learn the added value of wood turned into boards, when not furniture.

The carpentry workshop program, which we set up later in *Tatéi Kié*, gave the Huichol the capability to produce all the non-metallic parts of a foot-loom, warper and other instruments to make their own weaving-workshop. The example was greeted and followed in 1986 with open enthusiasm by the *Tuapuri* Huichol, who have been guided by Cirilo Carrillo Montoya, in many ways a son to Yvonne da Silva Negrín and the undersigned and presently the Secretary of

¹³ Its members range from experts in ecology and forestry to a Tarascan carpenter and native leaders.

Communal Goods. This project also responds to official requests by the Community, which has great needs for cotton muslin cloth. Those who become privy to the exquisite patterns embroidered, mostly by women, to pass on aspects of family *iyari*, can understand how dispossessed they felt when good, dense cotton cloth became unavailable in Mexican markets. Now it produces for the needs of its embroiderers. Currently they are learning the manufacture of spinning wheels and very interested in expanding their ability to produce dyes locally. No one can wait to see what will come out of their palette!

The strategy of the natives had been to pretend to abide by the rules of the dominant outside group, while covertly resisting them, once it became impossible to withdraw further in their mountain fastness. One of their classic answers to delicate questions is "jauki", which translates as "Knows?": neither "I know" or "I don't know", nor "who knows?" or "someone else knows". The inquirer is meekly sent back to his starting point, as ignorant as ever. Unfortunately one of the principal consequences of ignorance these days has been the outright contempt of some authorities, who publicly denounce the ignorance, the laziness, the lack of family ties or internal political organization of the Huichol. Ironically, while we hope to show these are comments worthy of the ignorance of the commentators, we realize that the writings of famous contemporary American anthropologists¹⁴ lend support to those views. Thus spiteful politicians claim a solid basis when they state that the Huichol represent an anchor into the past that actually prevents Mexico from successfully entering the 21st century. Nonetheless, Mexico's President Salinas de Gortari was able to successfully promote a constitutional amendment in early 1992, which guarantees the rights of Indian nations to retain their religious traditions and their internal legal/political systems. Once these are better understood, recognized and respected for what they are, the *Wixárica* may stand a better chance in the future of retaining a greater degree of autonomy, as he desires.

Knowing that the Huichol live primarily in the State of Jalisco, this writer has been shocked to discover that people from its capital who notice Indians begging in the street assume they must be Huichol, when that way of life is in fact not accepted by them. Besides being sought after as seasonal field workers, a great many of them are skilled craftspeople. Nonetheless, the *Wixárica* considers that sacred duties are of foremost importance, thereby not putting in motion the energy to make his land produce the way most statesmen

¹⁴ N.B. 6 Most disorienting is the work of Drs. Peter Furst and Barbara Meyerhoff, who even 'filmed the Huichol' without ever practically setting foot in their tribal Communities. At least Dr. Myerhoff admits it, while at the same time writing that they had no social-political structure beyond the head of family!

would like. Thank goodness, their tradition is replete with the ethics of respect and responsibility for Nature, as Our Collective Ancestors. Not a far step from an ecological awareness? Let us help them keep it.

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