Portfolio

The magazine of the visual arts

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Cover: Saint Francis by Giovanni Bellini. Late 1470s. Panel. Courtesy The Frick Collection.

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It is no longer news that Americans are showing an unprecedented interest in art. Museum attendance is setting records, and the crowds at auctions are growing steadily as more and more people enter the world of collecting.

Yet despite what has been described as the "art boom," something has been missing from the coverage of art. There are, of course, scholarly magazines or ones that bring you reviews and trade news. There are the general magazines that provide an overview of the major shows and trends. But there has been no single publication with the diversity and beauty of a great museum, and the excitement and authority of an eloquent lecturer.

Until now, that is. Portfolio intends to be America's most comprehensive, attractive and readable magazine on art. It will cover the entire range of the visual arts: European and American painting and sculpture; folk, primitive and decorative arts; photography; architecture and design.

Portfolio is the first magazine for people like you and me—people who are vitally interested in art, but are not necessarily historians, dealers or curators.

As you turn Portfolio's pages, you will discover a magazine that has been carefully and elegantly designed. We like to think of Portfolio as something of a work of art in itself.

This Premier Issue gives you a taste of the magazine's variety, from Colin Eisler on Bellini's Renaissance masterpiece, *Saint Francis*, to Hilton Kramer on the newest painted reliefs by Frank Stella. Gail Buckland's article on Fox Talbot includes reproductions of twenty of Talbot's photographs, many of which have never been published before. Also in this issue is a list of the FBI's Ten Most Wanted Paintings, drawn up for Portfolio to call attention to the growing problem of art theft.

In each issue of Portfolio, you can look forward to touring the art and architecture of a different city—in this case, contentious, vital Chicago.

Our other regular sections include: *Artcalendar*, a listing of important exhibitions; *Scholars' Digest*, which brings you abstracts of articles from academic journals; and *Collectors' Notes*, a survey of developments in the collecting field.

It all adds up to a highly unusual magazine. We are pleased to share it with you.

Edwin S. Grosvenor

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Sacred Colors of the Huichol

By pressing bright yarn into beeswax, Mexico's Huichol Indians depict myths as old as the ancient ancestors they worship

by Fred Strebeigh

Lloyd Patrick Baker

José Benitez's Dismemberment of Watakame, *1973, keeps alive the story of a simple farmer who survived flood and devastation to found the Huichol way of life. When Watakame died, the various parts of his body transformed into plants to enrich the earth. In Benitez's vivid painting, the hero's soul and memory have turned into gentle flowers, as his bones and vital organs begin their metamorphosis*

The images have the crude ferocity of ancient mythology: warriors brandish their weapons at fleeing victims; immense deities loom over their worshipers; otherworldly beasts roam fantastic gardens.

Produced by pressing brightly colored yarn onto waxed wooden panels, these images indeed have their sources in centuries-old tradition. But the art in which they appear, practiced by a small group of Mexico's Huichol Indians and known as yarn painting, is in fact the product of a unique collaboration between the descendants of an ancient culture and the world of modern anthropology.

That collaboration began only in 1965, when an anthropologist named Peter T. Furst persuaded a Huichol artisan to begin portraying his cultural heritage in narrative form, using age-old yarn techniques. But the result, despite its relative youth on both the art-historical and anthropological scales, has developed a considerable following in recent years. Examples of yarn painting are included, for instance, in the exhibition of Huichol culture organized by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and now on nationwide tour. The scientific aspects of the form are no less important. According to Furst, yarn painting has become a valuable anthropological link to what he describes as "the only sizable population in Mesoamerica whose indigenous religious universe has remained basically unaltered by the influence of Christianity."

Due to the complexity of their faith and their traditional mistrust of out-

Lloyd Patrick Baker

The artist Tutukila's glowing Idol of Tatewari, *1974, recalls the myth of our Grandfather Fire. Before he died, the god bequeathed the knowledge of fire to man and requested, in return, that his likeness be made and worshipped. Here, Tutukila depicts the Master of Fire's idol with a red heart that seems to burn with inner strength. For the Huichol, the heart symbolizes a commitment to live in the way of their divine ancestors. Plumed arrows protruding from the idol's head represent the power to heal illness. the round* nierika *at left is the traditional "god's face", a disk decorated with symbolic figures.*

siders, that universe has long remained almost as inaccessible as its wild homeland in Mexico's Sierra Madre Occidental. As a result, the religious and mythological traditions of the Huichol have survived virtually intact since the Spanish conquest more than four hundred years ago. Even today the outsider who ventures into the area usually returns more mystified than enlightened by exposure to Huichol society.

Over the centuries of isolation the Huichol developed a religion of ex-

Fred Strebeigh

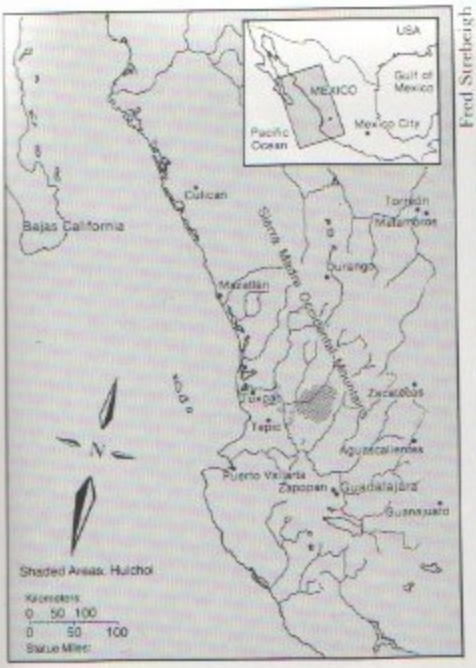
Guillermo Aldana

Above: *Splendid but forbidding mountains divide the Indians' isolated ranchos from modern Mexico. The rugged land often forces Huichols to seek work elsewhere.*

Left: *Labor of his wife's love, the symbolic embroidery of this pilgrim's costume is intended to excite admiration in his fellow men and, it is hoped, the pleasure of his gods. Striking designs of Huichol handcrafts reveal an extraordinary sense of color.*

traordinary complexity. Huichol gods, for example, take different names at various stages of their development, and myths surrounding events have been passed on in differing forms. In their religious ceremonies the Huichol seek spiritual enlightenment through the use of peyote, a hallucinogenic cactus first used, they believe, by the gods themselves. The rich imagery of this tradition long ago began to take representative form in Huichol art, as anthropologist Carl Lumholtz discovered during an extended visit with the Huichol in the 1890s. "The immense wealth and depth of their religious thought, and their ingenuity in expressing it pictorially," Lumholtz wrote, "can not help but fascinate."

The pictorial representations Lumholtz found included carved idols and decorated votive gourds. But he also collected numerous *tsikuris*, popularly



Fred Stebeigh

Above: *Remote from conquests that swept Mexico, the 10,000 Huichol speak an ancient language related to Toltec and Aztec. Among Mesoamerican groups, they are probably the least affected by Christianity.*

Above: *Huichol artists create their paintings by pressing yarn onto beeswax covered boards. Their art, however, has become plagued by assembly line imitations from "factories" like this one in Mexico City.*

Below: *Chanting his epic song from dawn to dusk, a shaman leads children of his village on an imaginary pilgrimage to gather peyote. When older, many will make the 300-mile trip on foot "to know the gods."*

Fred Stebeigh

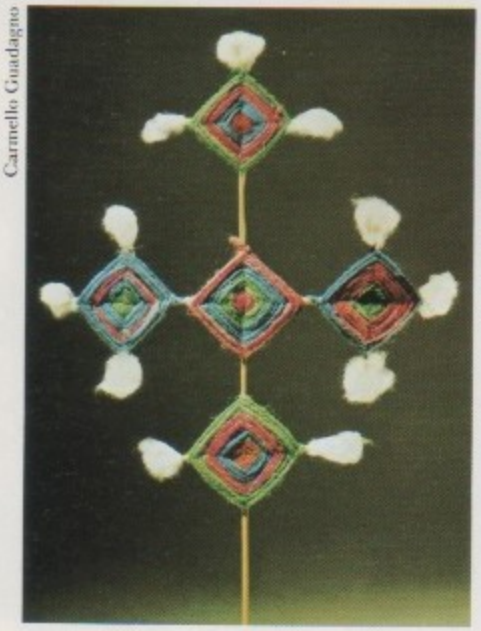
Peter Furst

Left: *The paintings of the late Ramon Medina lack the sophistication of work by later artists. But as the first Huichol to incorporate religious themes into his work, Medina transformed a simple decorative art into a new tradition of great strength and beauty.*

In this yarn painting, made in 1966, a shaman prepares for his difficult journey on the pathway to the afterlife. According to Huichol tradition he must recover the soul of a deceased shaman in the form of a star-shaped crystal (top right). Once returned to earth, the former shaman's soul will dwell among his former relatives as a guardian spirit.

Right: *Energy emanates from the hands of a god in Benitez's* Watakame Separating the Waters. *The Huichol myth of the flood relates that Watakame extended the habitable earth by dividing the waters of the rivers from the seas. Aided by Elder Brother Deer Spirit (left), a peyote pilgrim (right) envisions Watakame's feat. The Huichol share the flood myth with many ancient cultures that predate Christianity.*

Carmello Guadagno



Below: *The "god's eye" or* tsikuri*—made with yarn woven on a bamboo cross—is offered to the gods. Said to symbolize the "power of seeing and understanding unknown things" to the Huichol, they were common to many pre-Columbian Indians.*

American Museum of Natural History

Below: *Forerunner of yarn painting, this nineteenth century* nierika *or "god's face" was woven of yarn and bamboo. It allowed shamans to gaze into the supernatural realm of the ancestors. The Huichol also made* nierikas *from yarn adhered to wood.*

known as "god's eyes," diamond-shaped objects made of yarn woven around small wooden frames. He also discovered decorated disklike objects known as *nierikas*, or "god's faces." Some of these, made with woven yarn or yarn pressed onto wood coated with wax, were precursors of modern yarn painting, but considerable controversy preceded the blossoming of the form as it is known today.

Some forty years ago, a few Huichol artisans who had left their mountain homes for Mexico's cities began to manufacture what had been primarily religious objects for sale in tourist markets. For many of the new urban craftsmen, however, a secular nierika was worse than a contradiction in terms—it was blasphemy. There apparently existed a fear in the minds of the Huichol artisans that their ancestors would become enraged if symbols on commercial paintings had the power to call them forth.

Religious taboos, the demands of urban merchants, and the use of such new materials as plywood combined to

Lloyd Patrick Baker

create an odd product—an eviscerated form of decorative art, slavishly reproduced and deprived of all magical significance. Its offspring can still be purchased in the crafts centers of Guadalajara and the bus station of Tepic.

The first artist to break the barrier dividing Huichol art from Huichol tradition was Ramón Medina, a craftsman who had moved from the mountains to the outskirts of Guadalajara. He was introduced in 1965 to Peter Furst, who at that time was studying Huichol religious life.

"From the first there was something about the man that was difficult to define," Furst later recalled, "some special quality, another dimension barely hidden behind the easygoing, jocular manner, the feigned ignorance of Huichol 'secrets,' as he called them, the patently distorted stock explanations of Huichol symbolism which he gave inquisitive tourists. It struck us that Ramón might be wearing a false face, but that it was barely possible that by approaching him through his art we might some day be allowed to look at the real man, and through the man, at his culture."

Furst had the remarkable idea of asking Medina to turn his skill with yarn to narrative purposes.

"From having worked with the Huichol," says Furst, "I was familiar with parts of the mythology. So I said, 'Why not make a yarn painting that tells a story? Take one of your myths—how about the birth of the sun?' " And with the backing of the Museum of Cultural History at UCLA, Furst offered to commission twenty paintings.

Though reticent at first, Medina came to feel that his paintings, and the detailed descriptions of them that he recorded, would, according to Furst, "not harm but rather help preserve all that goes into 'being Huichol.' "

Medina did the paintings and added accompanying narratives, all of which were published by the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History and also in a widely available edition in Mexico. Thus Medina became the first Huichol artist to escape anonymity, and his collaboration with Furst set the pattern for other Huichol artists—and their imitators as well.

Ramón Medina died in 1971 at the age of forty-five in a shooting at his ranch in the foothills of the Sierra. Due to the availability of his work in published form, he is, ironically, memorialized primarily by shoddy imitations of his designs, which are often made assembly-line fashion, with perhaps one craftsman applying wax to plywood boards, a second framing the boards with yarn strips, a third applying yarn to form the symbolic figures, and a fourth laying in background color.

Fortunately, the creation of original Huichol yarn painting continues despite the imitators, largely through the efforts of three artists dedicated to this relatively new "tradition."

The most meticulous of the contemporary artists is a Huichol named Tutukila. Born in 1947 in the community of Santa Catarina in the Huichol Sierra, Tutukila began making commercial yarn paintings in 1963. The next year he was hired as an apprentice

The Huichol believe Kauyumarie, the Elder Brother Deer Spirit, to be omniscient. Knowing all thoughts and prayers, all things that happen, he stretches to every corner of the world. José Benitez painted the Deer Spirit gathering words, represented as colored dots, in The All-Encompassing Aspect of Tamatsi Kauyumarie. *Benitez, the most prolific Huichol artist, trained to be a shaman and has taught many of the forty or more Huichol who now create yarn paintings. Despite their common tradition, a great variety of paintings has emerged.*

Lloyd Patrick Baker

Only by the self-sacrifice of a young boy, according to Huichol myth, could the sun be born and the world freed from darkness. The Persecution of the Sun Boy, *1974 is the first of ten paintings by Tutukila that chronicle the birth of the sun.*

"In the highlands of the still-dark earth," says Tutukila, "there lived a young boy (bottom right) who was unaware of his destiny to become the sun. He played with his bows and arrows, but kept to himself because people beat him with sticks.

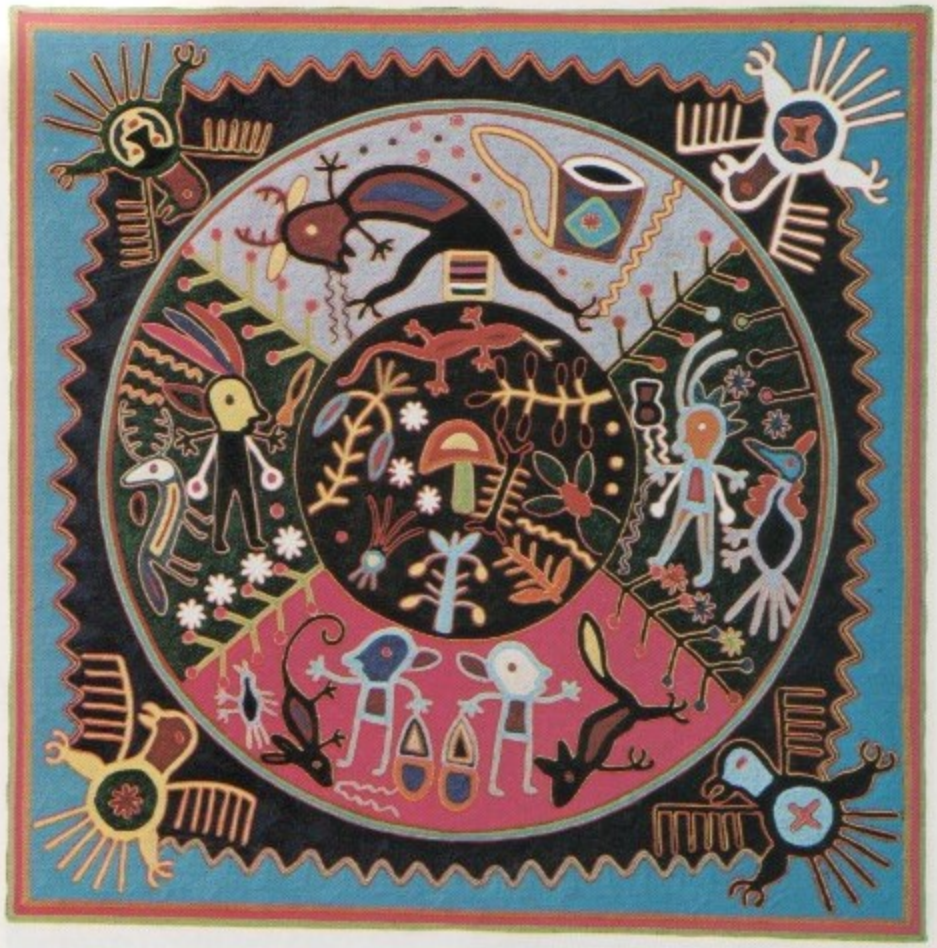
But the god spirits in the hills told him not to hurt his fellow men, because some day he would be something special. One day (center) his arrow changed to a torch, telling him that he would become a source of flames.

The spirits sent him a nierika *(top right) telling him not to resist his pursuers. He was beaten with sticks and taken to a place where all could see him die."*

Lloyd Patrick Baker

Eagles with outstretched talons guard the corners of the world during its creation in José Benitez's painting The Womb of the World, *1974. According to Huichol myth, the world was originally a woman. The deer spirit Kauyumarie (above) entered her womb, which expanded as though she were pregnant. Straddling a circular field (at center), he sows the wild plants that the first Indians will gather—mushrooms, wild onions, wild tomatoes, chili peppers, and prickly pear cactus. Amidst this abundance, he places an edible worm and a red iguana.*

In the Creation, Kauyumarie was assisted by the gods of fire and the sun. Our Father Fire (at left) watches over a small deer. Feathers of fire spring from his head and gourds of tobacco are slung over his shoulders. Our Grandfather Sun (at right) guards a turkey, an animal sacred to him. Watching (bottom) over a rat and small squirrel are lesser Huichol deities— Young Vulture as a Person (bottom left) and the Spirit of Dawn.



Lloyd Patrick Baker—E.B. Crocker Art Gallery

The newly-born sun struggles to break free from the mountain where it was born, in a work by Guadalupe Gonzalez. The myths of the Huichol, like those of many other long-lived cultures, vary from area to area. In The Birth of the Sun, *1973, Gonzalez recounts a version of the sun's creation that differs somewhat from the narrative of Tutukila (preceding page).*

In the beginning, the world was dark, according to Gonzalez. Four wise men of the deer people found a boy unerringly accurate in archery (below) and pushed him to a river where he accepted a sacrificial destiny and jumped into the current. After journeying below the earth, the young sun ascended through a mountain. In this painting, he cries from the exertion of his feat.

Five animals try to name the sun, and the turkey (upper right) eventually speaks its true name, "Tau".

John Knaggs

Lloyd Patrick Baker

Sacrificed for the good of the world, the boy destined to become the sun is thrown into a pot of boiling water (center) while a guard (right) stands watch. The Boy is Sacrificed, *1974, is yet another chapter in Tutukila's series on the birth of the sun. (see page 62, bottom). As the Sun Boy dies, he sighs, and blood spews from his mouth. Beside him (lower left) lie the bows and arrows with which he once played.*

by Ramón Medina. Impressed by Medina's serious treatment of Huichol myths, Tutukila began to make numerous trips to the mountains to study his culture.

To his dismay he was treated with the distrust typically accorded to outsiders trying to penetrate the secrets of the faith. In the years since, Tutukila has tried to interview elders of his community, but, he says, "Even in these past few years none of them has told me the truth, and so I must rely on my insight and the teachings that my father divulged to me." (Even his father, a Huichol holy man, was at first reluctant to discuss more than superficial topics.)

Very different from Tutukila in technique and inspiration is the artist Guadalupe González, born around 1920 in the western region of the Huichol mountains. Compared with the tight spatial relationships in Tutukila's work, the figures in González's paintings are free-floating, as if unaffected by gravity.

Far from seeking out the sources of Huichol tradition, González's religious inspiration comes largely from his solitary devotion to the use of a hallucinogenic shrub known to the Huichol as *kieri*, or "the tree of wind." Many Huichol believe that kieri can teach tradition even more rapidly than peyote.

The most productive of Huichol artists is José Benítez. Born in 1938 near the ceremonial center of San Sebastián, he was trained as a child to become a shaman, but at age fourteen he left the Sierras to work as a coastal laborer. Later he joined a Mexican government program dealing with native arts and in 1968 was invited to perform Huichol music and dances at the Olympic games in Mexico.

Meanwhile, in 1963, he began making yarn paintings and later became a mentor to many Huichol artists. He resumed his spiritual devotions—making pilgrimages to sacred caves, to the sea, and to the holy land where peyote grows. "Among Huichol artists there seems to be a parallel between their religious concern and their ability to produce a fine painting," says Juan Negrín, a young Mexican who was educated in France and at Yale and has played a major role in helping Huichol artists receive recognition and reasonable prices for their work. (One large Benítez work sold recently for $2,000, though prices of a few hundred dollars or less are more common.)

The visionary dimension that characterizes all fine Huichol art work is also the source of their most important aesthetic common ground, the striking use of vibrant colors. The brightest yarns are preferable because they come closest, as Furst was told by Medina, "to that which one sees when one has eaten peyote."

There is, however, far more than mere aesthetics involved in the visions of the contemporary Huichol artist. "If the people of Mexico don't realize what our life is," says Benítez, "they won't take us into account. In my work I am describing the sacrifice of the Huichol. For our people, sacrifice means to walk for two or three days in the mountains to visit sacred places, or to go as pilgrims to gather sacred peyote—eating nothing more than ground-up corn and dry tortillas, not washing and drinking almost no water, doing it because the gods demand this kind of sacrifice."

His purpose is shared by Tutukila. "What we want," he says, "is to come to know ourselves through our own history. We want people to understand our myths and our lives. It is precisely this that we seek—that people will understand who we are." □

Fred Strebeigh, a free-lance writer, spent two months in Mexico among the Huichol.