



Photos by Dante Barrera

Huichol Art

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Many authors—from Karl Lumholtz¹ to Fernando Benítez, Ramón Mata, Peter Furst and Juan Negrín, most ethnologists or anthropologists— have studied Huichol art and even influenced its development.² But, what should be understood as Huichol or Wurrárica art?

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The Wurráricas, or soothsayers, as the Huichol call themselves, are an exemplary artistic people and one of those which best preserves its traditions and customs. Their art is part of every aspects of their lives: their magnificently embroidered clothing; the rustic architecture of their homes and churches; their furniture (chairs, stools and *equipales*, wicker chairs with leather seats and backs); their hats, girdles and game bags; their bows and arrows for hunting; their musical instru-

ments; their necklaces, bracelets, rings and pendants; the crosses called “God’s eyes”; the animal totems made of clay or wood (like the jaguars decorated with beads); the many ceremonial objects (bowls, containers, sculptures, shields, mats, arrows, fetishes, feathers, altars, etc.); the wooden masks decorated with beads; the yarn boards with scenes from their mythology or customs; their face paint; their dances and songs; their stories, and, in general, their oral tradition.



Their art expresses their collective values and beliefs; it shows the images and symbols of their cosmogony and mythology. In this collective framework, the artist expresses his individuality. In addition, their art is sacred and centers around their deities, artistic visions and the memory of their ancestors. Many of their works of art are used as prayers or offerings or by their *marakames* (shamans) as part of the paraphernalia for magical-spiritual medicine. Embroidering a cloth, making a yarn drawing or decorating a mask with beading, concentrating on what the figures symbolize, is another form of active prayer, of being spiritually united to the dimension of their deities and ancestors.

Wirrática art is also utilitarian: all the objects or artistic creations have a specific function in the life of the community. They are used in ceremonies and fiestas, as decoration or clothing, as containers for food, in their homes, in hunting, medicine, trade, entertainment, etc.

Traditionally, these objects now considered artistic, were destined to be used by the maker. The role of artist, as such, did not exist. In general, all members of the community practice some form of artistic expression, in addition to being farmers, hunters, shamans, housewives or

carrying out some other activity. Being an artist was part of daily life. With the arrival of modern culture to Wirrática communities, this changed; they began to make art objects with the sole aim of selling them outside their community for money that would lessen their dependence on agriculture and animal husbandry. In this way, some Wirráticas became “artists,” specializing in the production and sale of their creations, which began to be displayed in museums, galleries and tourist shops in Mexico’s main cities and abroad, where potential buyers live.

This external destination for their art led the Wirráticas to begin to design it for their new clientele’s tastes, needs and possibilities. They invented the yarn boards and objects of all kinds covered in beads; spectacular-sized “God’s eyes”³ in

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striking colors that are in great demand among tourists. Unfortunately, the result has been that the objects have become degraded, estranged from their original magical-sacred use, their symbolism changed to make them merely decorative, like any of the Mexican curios that abound in the marketplace. Today, relatively cheap objects are produced for mass consumption, side by side with very sophisticated, intricately designed, dramatic-sized, original items which take many hours of work to produce and are signed by the artist—in the Western style—generally made to be sold abroad at very high prices.

Unfortunately, the Wirráticas were forced to sell their art due to economic necessity or because they were seduced by this way of becoming modern, and they adopted this new identity of “indigenous artisans” to be able to sell to domestic and foreign tourists. Given this, it is appropriate to ask what will happen in the future with traditional Wirrática art and its magic-religious function, as well as with the group’s ancestral identity. Trading artistic and craft products is a two-edged sword: it provides subsistence for the artisan and a way of superficially disseminating some aspects of their tradition



(superficial because the buyer almost never knows what symbols or stories are represented in the object he or she purchased). On the other hand, it is also a way of alienating one's own culture, changing the traditional function of the creations and giving priority to the commercial end.

Westerners yearn to possess objects or beautiful creations from strange or "exotic" cultures and we assemble collections to exhibit them, even if we never have any real contact with the community or the artisans who made them.

In contrast, when the object itself makes us take an interest in the artist and the community that produced it, then it is fulfilling an important function: it becomes a symbolic ambassador and a magic bridge charged with energy, that acts as an intermediary in the meeting of two different mentalities or cultures. The role of spiritual ambassador of a culture is nobler than that of a mere maker of



Huichol Art Museum, Zapopan

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items for sale. Hopefully, the Wirrática artists will become the spiritual ambassadors of their culture. **NM**

NOTES

¹ The Huichol community lives in the Sierra Madre Occidental, in the states of Jalisco and Nayarit, in the northwestern part of Mexico. At the end of the nineteenth century the Huichols were practically unknown, until Karl Lumholtz, a Norwegian anthropologist, traveled to their region and was the first to present their art to the world. Early in this century he systematized and analyzed it in his book *México desconocido*, later published by the National Indigenous Institute.

² As Fernando Benítez points out in his introduction to Lumholtz' book (Mexico City: National Indigenous Institute, 1986) this influence can be seen in the example of the relationship between anthropologist Peter Furst and the apprentice Ramón Medina, who, like all the Huichols, knew how to make offerings of yarn stuck to a board with wax. Medina sang about his myths, and Furst had the idea that they be described using the same method as for making offerings. This happened around 1960 and was the origin of the yarn boards representing scenes from Huichol mythology and customs, which have become famous the world over.

³ The *nierika*, or "God's eye", is a small square in a round board with a hole in the middle that represents the magic eye through which Man and God can see each other.



Huichol Art Museum, Zapopan



The Symbolism of Huichol Art

“The art of the Huichols is religious and esoteric, mainly found in offerings to the gods.”¹ Their perception of the world is not seen through the eyes, but in the spiritual attitude of Man toward nature. The Huichols represent their myths, hopes and fears with great artistry which might confuse the unschooled observer, who may see in Huichol design only deceptive simplicity.

Without exception, both men and women know how to embroider and make arrows, recipients and votive boards without altering traditional patterns. Invariably, they make these objects with the same symbols and similar formal treatment. However, their meaning, together with the complexity of the design, give Huichol art a depth difficult to unravel without the necessary information.

It is also geometric, a play of rigorous variations on certain models: the flower,

which represents peyote, the Shining Divinity; the deer; the *bule* (a container for water); the Sun; the star; the squirrel; the serpent. Surprisingly, these designs decorate men's and not women's clothing. Women dress in any way they please.

Learning to embroider includes a complex initiation ritual: it is a form of prayer, of pleasing the gods and imposing order in the cosmic disorder.

The number five has a tyrannical hold over the Huichols: the world was created in five days; things must be done five times before thinking they have been done well (only “done well,” since for the Huichols, perfection is a prerogative of the gods); the Huichol gods and Christ do everything five times; they worship the gods of the four cardinal points and a fifth god, the god of the center.

Despite its complexity and beauty, Huichol art is in danger of extinction, because it is static and difficult to market. At the same time, it is being mass produced, which contradicts its very nature: art made in a waking dream, its lines and colors dictated by the gods. ■■■



¹ Quotes and information were taken from Fernando Benítez, *Los indios de México* (Mexico City: Biblioteca ERA, 1968), pp. 515 on, and from Benítez's introduction to *El arte simbólico y decorativo de los huicholes* by Karl Lumholtz (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional Indigenista, 1986), pp. 7-8.