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Current Comments®

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Huichol Art and Culture: Vanishing Treasures of the Sierra Madre

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Introduction

Current Contents® (*CC*®) readers are familiar with my long fascination with Huichol art, the brightly colored "paintings" made by pressing strands of yarn onto plywood covered with beeswax. This psychedelic art, inspired by religious pilgrimages to the Wirikuta desert during which the Huichol Indians partake in a peyote ritual, was first described in *CC* in 1979.[1] Other essays have described Huichol mythology,[2] my visit to a Huichol settlement in San Andres in the Sierra Madre mountain range in Mexico,[3] and the symbolism of "Pilgrimage to Wirikuta," a yarn painting by the Huichol artist, Emeteria Rios Martinez.[4]

What first attracted me to this exciting art form was its bold use of bright primary colors and the primitive, almost childlike compositions. As my collection grew through the help of Olga Vasquez, now at the University of California at San Diego, I learned more about the Huichol Indian culture and religion. By talking with Emeteria and visiting San Andres, I became aware of the bleak hardships under which the Huichols live in their remote communities in the rugged Sierra Madre. Perhaps of even greater concern was the fact that the Huichol people, and their unique way of life, were dwindling under the relentless encroachment of modernization in the form of new roads, airstrips, and economic pressures that encourage ever greater numbers to migrate away from their rural homelands to the cities.

Preserving an Endangered Species

In a literal sense, Huichol yarn paintings and other arts and crafts are the last flowerings of an ancient culture that traces its origins to the Toltec and Aztec refugees from the Spanish conquest.[5] Others have suggested even older links with the Nayarit tribes which settled in the Sierra Madre long before the Aztecs entered the valley of Mexico.[6] Consequently, it became even more important to me to commission Emeteria's yarn paintings as a way to preserve the memory of a vanishing way of life.

The gradual extinction of the Huichol culture was brought home in a very direct and personal way when Emeteria found that she suffered from uterine cancer. With our help she was treated by specialists and her cancer appeared to be in remission. However, she recently had a relapse and is resting under doctor's orders. But she still finds the time and strength to continue creating yarn paintings which, no doubt, nurtures her spirit.

Recently, donations from my collection of Huichol yarn paintings were made to various institutions in Philadelphia to share their beauty with a larger audience. These include the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology as well as the Caring Center, a West Philadelphia child care facility that evolved from the ISI Caring Center for Children and Parents.[7] The mural in the museum can be seen at the entrance to the Kress Gallery.

In addition, we have presented countless small yarn paintings to ISI visitors from all over the world.

Revisiting the Huichol Culture: Maria von Bolschwing

The opportunity to discuss Huichol art and culture again arose when I recently met Maria von Bolschwing. I had read her recent article on the Huichols in *Whole Earth Review*.[8] She founded the Huichol Art Center in Sausalito, California, in 1983. While discussing our mutual interests in the Huichols, Maria described her activities in Yelapa, Mexico, a small island fishing village and artist colony south of Puerto Vallarta where she now lives. After inviting her to contribute an essay for *CC*® she sent several papers for consideration. Her 1992 article from *Hola Amigos!* entitled "Dancing Through the God's Eye" is reprinted here.[9]

The paper describes Huichol sacred art, including not only yarn paintings but also music and dance, ritual ceremonies, beadwork crafts, prayer bowls, and embroidered clothing. However, it mainly focuses on the shamanistic religion and worldview of the Huichols as well as their life on the "ranchos," loose-knit communities organized around ceremonial centers. She also poignantly describes her visit to Rancho Matatita, a four-hour hike from San Andres. Finally, she discusses the precarious position of Huichol culture today as their shamanic tradition is disintegrating under the pressures of Mexico's modernization.

About the Author

Von Bolschwing, a native of South Africa, emigrated to San Francisco in 1959 and later became a US citizen. She received a bachelor's degree in librarianship from the University of Cape Town before studying at San Francisco State University, where she earned a bachelor's degree in history and art history as well as a master's degree in English literature.

While an English literature teacher at Santa Rosa Junior College, she became interested in tribal art on a visit to Guatemala. She discovered Huichol art at a Guadalajara museum and, for the past 20 years, has frequently traveled to the Sierra Madre. After resettling in Yelapa, Maria founded the Huichol Art Center to preserve this vanishing art form and help Huichol artists to create and market their works. The center also supported needy Huichols with food, shelter, and alternatives to migrant work. For more information, contact Maria von Bolschwing at P.O. Box 637, Sausalito, California, 94965. She can be reached at (415) 332-3415 or by fax at 415-331-6334.

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Dancing Through The God's Eye

by

Maria von Bolschwing

Maria von Bolschwing

High in the mountains of Western Mexico, approximately 10,000 Huichol Indians continue to live a lifestyle that is closer to Pre-Columbian times than that of any other indigenous people on this continent. Protected by their wild terrain, they never fell subject to invading Spaniards, and even long after the signing of a treaty with the Mexican Government, they continued to resist acculturation. Only recently have airstrips and roads given access to a tribe still strikingly similar to that described in 1898 by one of the first anthropologists in the Sierra Madre, Norwegian, Carl Lumholtz.

One can only marvel at the tenacity with which these remarkable people have retained their own cultural and religious autonomy.

How exactly has this aboriginal group survived with their original tribal structure, religion and art intact? What has kept the Huichols—despite poor soil, lack of rain and Mestizo land encroachment—dancing so enduringly through the Eye of God?

The Huichols are, in a sense, a tribe of shamans; it is said that over half of them take up this way of life. Religion for the Huichols is personal rather than institution-

alized, yet communal too, in that all understand that they comprise the whole of it. Because so much of Huichol art stems from this strong shamanic tradition, it would seem important to place it in a wider panhuman perspective. This art is prayer; not art for art's sake, it is Art for All's sake.

In this society, shamans are the consummate artist—the specialists in their traditional religious system. They know how to tap the metaphysical world, seeing it as a reservoir of power from which the artist can envision, translate and create designs. Such Shamanic art provides a vital link to our Paleolithic past. Many ancient tools and keys, ignored for so long, are disappearing before we can rediscover from them how to reconnect with the forces underlying our planet.

So what exactly are shamans and what do they do?

Somewhere between a psychologist, a priest and a psychic, the shaman is on the heroic journey, adventuring into the spirit-world to return with information otherwise unobtainable for the rest of us. The shaman does this while in a state of trance, and the beginnings of not only religion and medicine, but art and dance are intimately connected with revelations gained in such states. Shamans, moreover, effectively use knowledge gained in trance to cure the sick and restore equilibrium to the group.

Bob Masla, in his "Healing Art of the Huichol Indians," posits that the very name "Huichol" means Feather Healing People, and explains a healing process they use to achieve a life of balance.

How to live a life of balance? First, one must work to heal the Self. Beginning with the heart, one must undergo a fine tuning, so to speak, of all aspects of the soul. Secondly, one works to heal one's immediate circle of family, friends and neighbors, something traditionally made easier through the customary use of Hikuri, which brings people to much the same vibrational state while experiencing everything from story-telling to pilgrimage. Thirdly, the Huichols concern themselves with the wider concept of healing the Earth Mother. In all three stages, it is the shaman who experientially leads the way.

Feathers, which are the heart of God, are the shaman's power and his instrument of communication with the Gods. They act as the shaman's telephone. When the shaman points his prayer feathers to the sun, it is seen as touch-tone dialing, with God on the other end of the line. Shamans all have their own sacred basket containing feathers, arrows and mirrors, and they must also undergo long years of initiation and trial. Many fail to complete the arduous training required, but those who return from their final days alone on a cliff after eating Hikuri, have reached a state of existential harmony which can be used to help others.

In our more complex Western social systems, we tend to have institutionalized specialists who transmit art and information from one generation to another without explicit recourse to the supernatural. In fact, we have only recently come back to recognition of psychic forces as underpinning factors in our lives. In direct contrast, shamanic art encodes and channels sacred psychic knowledge and it is this consciousness of the intricate balance between physical and metaphysical phenomena which makes of the finest Huichol art talismans which can restore to our lives the magical connections we have lost.

Moreover, in shamanic societies, where there are no governments or bureaucracies to stand between people and future uncertainties (ie., no one to blame), life becomes everyone's responsibility. This is so, both collectively and individually. The shaman's ability, here as a sacred technician, capable of making contact with other realms, helps to explain and ease the vicissitudes of fate. The shaman travels not only internally and cosmically, but within an international network which understands that each art piece, each "niereka," or mirror of God, serves to reflect us back to ourselves.

RANCHO LIFE

Huichols know from their mythology that they are most likely to encounter the gods when they go off to hunt in their best finery, and it is with this in mind that the women outfit their men in such magnificent weaving and embroidery. Like the Sufis, the Huichols believe themselves to be that part of God which entertains the rest—so to remove them from their religio-cultural base quickly turns them into more alienated Mestizos in jeans. The older and more conservative members of the community, knowing this, try to keep roads from bringing progress to their territory; but borders are increasingly disputed, and each year more land-hungry Mestizos with rifles kill off more deer and annex more Huichol land. Nevertheless, in most remote canyons and mesas, life continues much as it has always done.

Huichols have never liked to live in villages, belonging instead to loose-knit communities called "ranchos" which center around ceremonial centers. There, the Huichols gather around their "tukis" or temples, for fiestas or events such as the changing of their governors. It is a sign of how far the rancho of San Andres has slipped from the old ways that it functions more as a village and less as a religious center.

Of the five major communities, San Andres, San Sebastian, Tuxpan, Guadalupe Ocotan, and Santa Catarina, only the latter, being the most remote and with the most sacred caves, has, so far, managed to hold out against road and airstrip alike. Santa Catarina is an 18-22 hour hike from the San Andres airstrip, described by intrepid photographer and ethnobotanist, Peter Collings, as being more like mountaineering. Jim Madden's account of his stay there (*Hunters of the Heart*), movingly describes life in this Shangri-La as he experienced it 15 years ago. My own visit was to Alejandro Carrillo's ranch, four hours hike from San Andres Cohiamata.

Rancho Metatita, high on the pine-clad mesa and circled by hawks and eagles, still gives the impression of being as undisturbed and remote as it was a hundred years ago. The first time I arrived was on mule-back, and the descent to the valley floor where the compound of huts nestled was so steep that I was fearful of slipping and tumbling down the cliffside. However, my concern soon dissolved as I lost myself in the tranquil beauty of the scene below. Bathed in late afternoon sunlight, turkeys were strutting beneath a mango tree, some dogs lay sleeping against warm adobe walls, two women in bright kerchiefs sat embroidering on a blanket. Nearby, babies played in the dirt, and an older sister, wielding a pail, came wobbling back from the waterhole.

From far off came a tinkling sound, increasing in volume as we reached level ground. The goats and sheep were coming home after a day at pasture. Entranced, I moved closer, eager to get a better look at the colorful motifs the women were creating as they continued to sit working without looking up until we were right upon them.

Susanna was beading a prayer bowl that day, her dark eyes far away as she seemingly picked at random from the profusion of colorful glass jumbled before her. Yellow butterflies were chasing red squirrels around the interior of the bowl. Her mother, Lupita, whose face wore the same intensely inward smile, fingers dipping rhythmically in and out of the cotton manta, was embroidering a skirt-hem with a diamond-like design in glowing blues, purples, and golds. That they should be creating such brilliant designs with no inspiration other than the skyline and the simple vegetation around them impressed me until I recalled that Hikuri, their sacred cactus, gave colorful visions and the ability to see the auras of things. In fact, a physicist friend had once commented on the Huichols' remarkable ability to depict patterns invisible to the naked eye—designs otherwise only discernible through microscopes.

There was a brief flurry of excitement—dark eyes obliquely taking us in, palms of hands gliding gently across ours—as we

were all introduced. Almost at once, life flowed on as though we were not there. Our host, having dismantled the mule, took his place with the rest to continue beading a mask, his son thonged some sandals, the daughter with the pail of water was adding it to corn to soften it before it was ground into masa for tortillas. A baby goat jumped into my lap, and I wished I'd brought something to do with my hands, as the whole family sat absorbed working in the last rays of the setting sun.

Time seemed to slow and grow gold and thick. In the hush, all that could be heard was the light twittering of birds and the sighing of the wind through the pines. Then suddenly, on some unspoken signal, everyone put their work down and turned to watch the clouds flushing as the sun sank behind the mesa and the day slowly darkened into a night sky of countless stars. From somewhere appeared a Huichol with an enormous log which he proceeded to light. The women disappeared into the cooking casita, to which we were soon summoned, to partake of savorsome blue corn tortillas flavored with beans and tiny seeds popped from a pod. Clearly, this simple repast was supper, to be followed by enamel cups of strong sweet coffee. We were called to eat in relays, as there were only 3 cups, 3 plates and even less cutlery. The Indians simply scooped their beans with rolled tortillas.

For a while we sat around the blazing fire. Although it was February and bitterly cold, the family wore no more than their usual cotton outfits. After much storytelling and laughter, our host indicated that it was time to retire to the casita where the whole family slept under one blanket. We were given the far end to lay out sleeping bags, but the wind was whistling through the slats and the strangeness of it all made it impossible to sleep, especially as a small group was forming around the fire and talking in low tones.

It appeared that we had arrived on a night when a woman from a neighboring compound was to undergo a healing. Propped up beside her husband, she looked very frail and weak. Yet after much chanting and communion about the fire, and as the shaman continued to wave his prayer feathers over her head, the woman began to rally.

By dawn, everyone was gone from the fire except for the shaman, sleeping off the effects of the tequila he had used. In fact, Alejandro was just returning from having ridden over to a nearby rancho for some sacks of corn. He was clearly in good humor and had stuck a cluster of white flowers in his hatband. Flowers were scarce and much prized in the mountains. The Huichols call them "Gods Prayers."

Soon the women were up and getting things ready for breakfast, lighting the fire below the clay stove. Breakfast was much the same as supper, but with the addition of some scrambled eggs.

Once again their daily routine took off around us. Water had to be brought from the dank weed-covered sumps some distance away, corn had to be softened and ground, animals needed to be fed. Soon everyone was back at their artwork. Some threaded earrings, a woman diligently worked a backstrap loom, the man who had brought the log the night before was finishing a drum he was carving. It turned out he was the husband of the woman who had been sick. He broke out into smiles as we expressed our good wishes for her health. Some time later he strode enthusiastically away with the drum under his arm, off to fulfill a religious obligation at some fiesta. He was a musician, we were told, and it was unthinkable for him not to go no matter how sick his wife might have just recently been.

Indeed, all the Huichols seemed to do whatever had to be done directly, and with no fuss. Everything, whether it was weeding the fields or beadwork or wandering off into the woods to look for healing herbs, happened with a sort of unspoken fluidity; everyone seemed to intuit what the others were doing and respected their reasons for doing it.

That night, as I lingered around the slow-dying embers, feeling curiously at peace with myself, I reflected on the differences in our lifestyles. When these men are home, they spend time with their wives and families simply doing what has to be done. There is time for laughter, for storytelling, for loving as well as for work. When the men go out to hunt or travel, however, the women gather to sit in a circle in the middle of the compound with their artwork. This same circle, a Huichol friend told me, acts as a cone of psychic power into which distant hunters can tune into their ranchos whenever they wish. The ritual of pausing to watch the sun go down achieves the same telepathic contact between those at home and those far away. For Huichols, such mystical networks are not part of life—they *are* life. No matter where they are, they seem to experience God in everything they see and do. This attitude, reflected in their art, is their gift to us.

SACRED ART

Huichol sacred art is both mystical and communal. Among the tribe, every adult is an artist. Learning as children, all men know how to do beadwork and make votive paraphernalia, while the women do the weaving and embroidery. In marked contrast with Western art (perhaps the most individualized aspect of our civilization), what the Huichols do functions instead as a mystical vehicle through which their sacred collective knowledge is passed on. They firmly believe, furthermore, that if one of their cantadors, or singing shamans, alters any of their oral literature or mythology, at once disaster follows. This inherent belief prevents the sacred oral knowledge from being diluted or altered.

Furthermore, whereas specialization in civilized art reduces participation to mere looking or passive listening, art for the Huichols is a living thing which they experience directly. Their young need no schools, for their education occurs naturally as they participate in daily activities and in the sacred ceremonies. These ceremonies, which contain the rudiments of true drama, enable the Huichols to take part once more in the re-creation of mythical events and happenings of the earliest times. The script of their sacred drama is their unwritten mythology and the plots reenact such things as the first pilgrimage to the homeland of the Gods, or various rain ceremonies. It is important here to remember that such mystical participation enables the actors to become their Gods.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, to find that as individuals the Huichols take responsibility for the creation of their own realities. This attitude leads to a remarkable tolerance of individual behavior. Rarely will a mother, even one who has already lost children to the steepness of the cliffs, warn them to stay away from dangerous ledges. Neither will Huichols attempt to dissuade others from committing suicide. Such things are considered to be a matter of choice. In much the same way, it is accepted that each family will take care of itself, so that charity in the Mestizo's sense is virtually unknown. If a bean or corn crop fails, one does not beg for help from one's neighbors, but struggles on—or starves.

Such extreme pride and passion for freedom make it all the more important to know how to connect with and affect the Gods. Although such use of "magic" can be a life-and-death affair, the Huichol word for 'work' is the same as their word for 'dance', considering the latter to be a mystical form of work as vital to the growth of corn as the weeding of the fields.

Huichols really love to dance, and also to listen to Mexican or even rock music on their prized portable radios. Most Huichol men play crude violins and guitars of obvious European origin, but their 'serious' music (which often goes on for as long as 12 hours), is the chanting of the sacred myths. Although it is the cantador who chants, sporadically joined by others, the altar must be continually watched and the chanting listened to attentively all night, lest disaster follow.

Huichol mythology can be arranged in three major cycles; the dry season, the wet season, and the Christian cycle, which represent the assimilation of missionary teachings into the earlier myths. In the reenactment of these dramatic cycles, the Gods are portrayed as personifications of natural phenomena. In this primitive philosophy, attempts are made to assemble the universe into order through the means of a mystical mythology which inclines the Gods to act as the people wish them to. The sacred paraphernalia with which this past is achieved is the symbolic art of the tribe. It is also the collective oral tradition, never to be tampered with, lest the miracle requested not happen. In other words, should any individual attempt to vary from the sacred norms, he or she would be jeopardizing the entire group. In this prelogical tradition, the group morale is reinforced by the shaman, and this is what has held the tribe together for so long against outside influence.

Many ancient tools and keys, ignored for so long, are disappearing before we can rediscover from them how to reconnect with the forces underlying our planet.

At the Ceremony of the Parched Corn, which I was invited to experience in May, 1989, we were repeatedly aroused at the first sign of drowsiness, prodded to get up and dance, and slap our sandals on the ground in such a way that the Gods would hear our prayers. Sometimes the men in the half-circle around the shaman would join in with the chanting, while at other times there would be a break in which the violins would pick up and we would all dance enthusiastically. At one such interval, we were led in a circular step by a male dancer wearing a deerskin about his shoulders. Everyone imitated the graceful running of the deer and there was much friendly laughter at my ineptitude and the way I kept bumping my head on the low hanging mango branches. Toward dawn, two of my women friends called me to link arms with them and dance as the sun rose. This is the traditional way women dance to purify the corn and make it edible, along with the actual parching of the corn kernels on the brazier by a woman wearing the shaman's plume of eagle feathers. Such time-honored ways, watched by the children who will soon participate themselves in the dancing and chanting, ensure the mystical interaction with the Gods.

Just as wet season dancing honors the Rain Goddess and precedes the corn planting, once October comes the male gods are invoked at the dry season ceremonies to provide enough sun to harvest the corn. The Huichol pantheon thus gives equal credit to both female and male deities.

For a Huichol woman, handiwork is a completely natural activity. In the morning, after feeding the family (if there is anything to eat), she will seat herself down in the yard against the wall of the house to embroider or do beadwork until the afternoon. Not all women are able to do this as most of them do not have the necessary materials and in the Sierra there is no place to buy them; and this is where such places as the Huichol Art Center are able to help with the provision of materials at greatly reduced prices.

Beadwork is one of the major art forms of the tribe; Huichols call anything made of beads "kuka" or beauty. Long before the Spanish Conquest, the Indians had perfected the art of beadwork using bone, clay stone, shell, coral, turquoise, pyrite, and jade. Beads were colored with vegetable or insect dyes and the colors combined into shapes from nature and geometric designs.

The dexterity of the Huichols and their mastery of any material they work with date from ancient times. When the production of beads became mechanized, the Hui-

chols simply availed themselves of the new materials.

Beads also have ritual uses. Prayer bowls, or "jicaras," are commonly seen in both Huichol ceremonies and on their permanent altars in their God-houses. Highly sacred because of their ability to communicate directly with the Gods, these gourds have colored beads artistically arranged to express innermost wishes. It is believed that the Gods, thus addressed, will drink their prayers from the bowls.

Patterns placed upon the dried gourds represent a variety of requests, such as a successful hunt, plentiful crops, or health for an individual or a family. Most are requests for abundance. Sometimes the bowls depict little household gods waving prayer feathers, while in others the bowl is made as a mirror of one of the states of God, most frequently seen as the trilogy of deer, corn and peyote.

Perhaps the best known form of their art is their yarn painting. Originating with the small wooden tablas which were left as offerings, yarn paintings as we now know them originated about fifty years ago. These larger squares were originally covered with beads rather than yarn, in the manner of prayer bowls. This practice was given up in favor of yarn because of the costliness of the beads. Both yarn and beads are purchased by Huichol traders venturing down into the cities. The texture and cost of yarn paintings is dependent on the quality of the yarn and the time taken to make them.

Although Huichols are known for their use of bright colors, their choices are affected by the rainbow-like auras they see while on peyote and most painters prefer to use subtly vibrant colors. American artist Christopher Moses, who has incorporated some of their color schemes into his own paintings, maintains that Huichol knowledge of the spectrum is very finely tuned. Well aware of which juxtapositions create the illusions of other shades, they achieve precise effects akin to 'op-art'. He found that the alteration of even one color tone affected the entire overall effect.

Each primary color has a traditional symbolic meaning. Red and orange are related to sun and fire, blues and greens relate to water and rain. Successful combinations give the artists much joy in their work. Eligio Carrillo once explained how, during the creation of one of his larger works, he had "...become drunk with the colors of the Gods." As with Tantric Art, such ritual use of color adds a rich dimension of mood.

Yarn paintings are made from boards spread with beeswax or pine resin, into which the yarn is pressed. Although methods differ, very few yarn painters first cut an outline in the wax, preferring to simply work as their intuition tells them. Some begin in one corner and spread outward. Others fill in the edges and work inward toward the center (very difficult to do). Yet others press ongoing outlines in one strong color and fill in later.

It should be noted also, that in early yarn paintings, especially the spaces between, things look markedly cellular, serving to remind how the interior visions brought on by the sacred cactus go way beyond the sight afforded by the physical eye. Yarn paintings often depict mystical states in much the same way medieval stained glass did (i.e., the rose windows of cathedrals). At their most sacred, such yarn paintings fulfill the requirements of being a 'nierika'. Nierikas can be defined as 'cosmic holes' through which the Gods emerge to pass from one plane to another, as 'likenesses' or 'mirrors' of god-like states of being.

In this era of significant change for the Huichols, when traditional ways are threatened with breakdown, it is heartening to find so many artists still at work with techniques which basically can be traced back to the ancient feather mosaics of the Mixtecs and Aztecs. These modern nierikas continue to pass on energy from one plane of

the universe to another: like seeds sown by the artist, they germinate in our consciousness and the magic connects us to the source.

THE HUICHOL INDIANS TODAY

The Huichol Indians, whose pre-Hispanic culture still survives in the remote ranges of Mexico's Sierra Madre, live a life intricately woven of magic and sacred mythology. Both men and women keep alive the ancient shamanic traditions which have become a precarious reality in the last years of the 20th century. Soon, all that will be left of this complex link to our Paleolithic past will be memories and artifacts, such as yarn paintings, in the hands of museums and collectors.

Yarn paintings originated with patterned bowls placed in sacred places as offerings or prayers, and each one is a personal nierika, or mirror-image reflecting 'Essence'. They are a form of creative visualization, of sympathetic magic which obliges the Gods to respond.

In their land of canyons, sparse rainfall and uncertain livelihood, the Huichols depend heavily upon their shamanic connections with the elements and natural forces in order to survive. Their sacred art depicts prayers to the Rain Goddesses, thanks to the Sun God, and all various intricate psychic ties existing between them and the plant and animal life around them. Such art is not only often of a high order, but serves to remind us of the fusion with natural forces we have lost. They are talismans and amulets in a fast-changing world.

Ironically, the finest Huichol art is now as endangered as the disappearing shamanic lifestyle which creates it. The Mexican Government is making every attempt to integrate the Huichol Indians with the Mexican mainstream. Roads, schools, clinics, airstrips, and lumber mills are bringing about the disintegration of traditional ways with great rapidity. Suddenly the Indians find themselves constantly needing money to survive. They not only need cash for land taxes, but for modern medicines, beads and yarn for their votive arts, cattle for ceremonies now that their deer have disappeared, and transport money for pilgrimages which formerly were made on foot (not to mention seeds or food).

With no other resources other than the stony, drought-ridden land, and without the ability to farm or hunt, the Huichols are forced down to coastal sugar factories and tobacco plantations where they are exploited as a cheap labor pool. Once they leave the protection of their homelands, they fall prey not only to the ridicule and violence of Mestizos' attitudes toward "Indios" but also to diseases for which they have no immunity. Once uprooted, they can no longer participate in the ceremonies which connect them to their land, their well being, and their shamans, which in turn disconnect them from their Gods.

Once at the very heart of Huichol life, the shamans find themselves losing both control and credibility in the face of civilized diseases and the droughts caused by the overall changes in the earth's weather patterns. Increasingly driven down to the foothills by untenable conditions, the Huichols are forced to enter the Mexican mainstream by way of plantations and city slums where the loss of faith in their shamans soon threatens the very fabric of their traditional culture, religion and art.