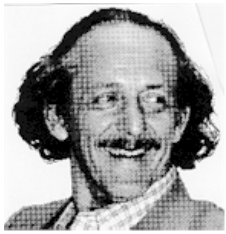

Current Comments

Huichol Mythology and Culture. Part 1. World's Largest Yarn Painting Is Latest in Series of ISI-Commissioned Artworks

Number 28 Click here for Part II July 13, 1981

Last year I told you about the psychedelic art of the Huichol Indians.[1] That essay included some color reproductions of a few small yarn paintings, as well as a photograph of our new building. Then a few months ago, I told you about two murals we had commissioned.[2] Shortly afterwards, we installed a third mural. It is in fact an 8′ x 12′ (243.84cm x 365.76cm) mural-sized Huichol yarn painting—the largest ever executed. ISI®'s new yarn painting is also atypical because Huichol paintings are normally executed by men. The artist who executed "The History, Gods, Myths, Rituals, and Future of the Huichol Indians" is a woman—Emeteria Martinez Rios.

Previously, the largest yarn paintings had been two 8′ x 4′ (243.84cm x 121.92cm) panels in my personal collection. The size of the Huichol yarn painting has traditionally been limited by the size of the available plywood panels. So I suggested to Bob and Olga Brooks, the importers from whom I purchase my Huichol art, that this size restriction could be overcome by combining three 8′ x 4′ panels into one 8′ x 12′ triptych. They arranged this on a visit to Tepic, in the Mexican state of Nayarit. The mural summarizes much of the basic Huichol mythology, much as I asked the artist to do. It is not immediately apparent that it is in fact 12 separate yarn paintings. This is shown by a special sketch (which appears in the color insert) that gives the outline of each painting. The 12 stories cover the gods of Fire, the Moon, the Sun, Corn, and Water, as well as the Flood myth, the Earth myth, the Fiesta of Squash and Corn, the Fiesta of the Drum, the peyote pilgrimage, rituals surrounding the planting of corn, and the future of the Huichol people as seen by the artist.

For those of you who have not read the earlier essay, the Huichol Indians are a community of some ten- to twelve-thousand people, who live scattered among the southern mountains of Mexico's Sierra Madre Occidental Range.[3] Known to themselves as the Wixarika, the Huichols are thought by some to be the descendants of the Toltecs and the Aztecs;[4] others believe they are linked with the coastal tribes of Nayarit, and had settled in the Sierra long before the Aztecs had entered the valley of Mexico.[5] In either case, the strength of their pre-Columbian culture and religion has resisted centuries of outside influences.[4] In fact, anthropologist Peter T. Furst, quoted in *Portfolio*, calls the Huichols "the only sizable population in Mesoamerica whose indigenous religious universe has remained basically unaltered by the influence of Christianity."[6]

One wonders how long Huichol culture or traditions can be preserved, considering that the Huichols have no written language. The culture is preserved in oral traditions only, passed from one generation to the next. If the

language dies, the Huichols, some think, may also die. While every language changes eventually, Huichol, in spite of its contact with Spanish, is still spoken daily. And to date, the traditions seem to be maintained in spite of economic and other pressures.

Helping to preserve the memory of a vanishing way of life is one of the reasons I am so proud that ISI has commissioned the yarn painting by Rios. This yarn painting, which for simplicity's sake I will refer to as "Huichol Mythology," was executed especially at my request. As a matter of fact, I selected its theme and recommended the use of the dark background. One of my favorite Huichol paintings uses this combination. I knew of course that the rest would be executed in varied, bright colors such as orange. Several views of the new painting can be found in the color insert in this issue. I hope you will save it as a souvenir from ISI.

Yarn painting is a relatively recent innovation of the Huichol culture, but the techniques employed to create the paintings are as old as the Huichols themselves.[6] These distinctive yarn paintings are created by pressing strands of brightly-colored yarn into warm beeswax spread on a plywood panel. This form of art was born in 1965, when Furst persuaded a Huichol artisan to portray his cultural heritage in a narrative form, using techniques that had previously been used only in the creation of devotional items such as *nierikas*.[6] A *nierika* is a "god's face," a bridge to the supernatural realm of the Huichol gods and ancestors that allows the shaman (or *mara'akame*) to peer into that realm and view the very fabric of reality. A *nierika* generally is small, disk-shaped, and made of wood or gourd. Symbols and designs of power are imposed on the *nierika* by adhering strands of yarn to its surface.[4,6]

The *nierika* itself has been transformed by the art it gave birth to. No longer just an artifact or powerful talisman, a representation of it has come to be included in many of the religious Huichol yarn paintings—which are generally not intended for sale to the public—as a symbol of the passageway that a true *nierika* opens. Another characteristic of Huichol yarn paintings is their proclivity for extremely bright, contrasting colors. Combined with the Huichol penchant for ignoring Western notions of perspective, Huichol paintings often look like drug-induced visions. As a matter of fact, that is often just what they are.

One of the best-known and most-studied of the Huichol rituals involves the use of peyote, a cactus containing, among other things, the hallucinogenic drug mescaline. Peyote grows in the Wirikuta desert some 300 miles northeast of the Huichol homeland in the Sierra Madre. A yearly pilgrimage to Wirikuta, considered by the Huichols to be their spiritual land of origin, is the climax of Huichol religious life. Peyote is eaten with great ceremony during specific fiestas, to enable the Huichols to communicate directly with their gods. Peyote-induced visions frequently provide the ideas and motifs of Huichol artwork, and on the reverse side of every Huichol painting the artist writes in Spanish his, or occasionally her, mystical interpretation of the image.

In keeping with this tradition, Rios wrote extensive notes on the reverse side of the giant yarn painting she executed for ISI. A translation of her comments was prepared by Olga Vasquez Brooks. In a preface to the translation, Olga remarked:

> [Rios] has combined the supernatural with the profane so gracefully that they are indistinguishable in the painting. It depicts the magical world of the Huichol in which everything is possible. It exemplifies their perception of being equal with their gods, and being in harmony with their universe. And, although the artist has chosen to locate the gods at the top of

the painting, it by no means indicates that a Huichol considers himself subservient to them, or that the gods reside in the heavens. They are considered to exist at all levels of nature, and the Huichols evoke and consult them for all of their feasts. In fact, there is no word for 'god' in the Huichol language. The names of the gods are all terms of kinship. 'God' is a corruption introduced by the use of the Spanish language.[3]

One of the ceremonies in which the Huichols attain total union with their gods, and with a primordial time when the gods undertook the first trip to Wirikuta, is in the peyote pilgrimage. In a *calihuey* [temple], before departing on the journey, the *mara'akame* [shaman] recounts the birth of fire, the moon, and the sun. The upper portion of the painting begins with the creation myths of these divinities.

What follows is a translated, annotated, and edited version of the artist's interpretation of her painting. Keep in mind that it is not always possible to explain the paintings in a completely "logical" fashion, nor are the explanations themselves always logical.[7]

In a future essay, I will discuss "In the Garden," a mural by Jennifer Bartlett, and "Interpenetrations," an abstract oil painting by the Welsh artist, Handel Evans. In the next part of this essay, I plan to tell you more about the Huichol Indians themselves. But in closing this description and introduction to "Huichol Mythology," I must express the joy which this work brings to me and to all who see it daily at ISI. It is with the deepest sincerity that I say you are all cordially invited to visit ISI to experience this magnificent work personally. While we take great pride in the work we do at ISI, a visit to ISI's building can also be a rewarding artistic experience. Ranging from this primitive expression of the concern of a Huichol woman for the future of her people to the modern sophistication of artists like Jennifer Bartlett and Handel Evans, the humor and warmth of Bill Granizo, and the power of Joseph Slawinski, it is an experience you will not soon forget.

* * * * *

My thanks to Stephen Bonaduce for his help in the preparation of this essay.

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Figure 1: Interpretation of Huichol yarn painting. Numbers correspond to areas in the painting. Discussion in quotations by Emeteria Martinez Rios. Most of the bracketed elaboration was contributed by Olga Vasquez Brooks. (See schematic in accompanying insert.)

The Fire God

1. "The Fire God was born out of a light that Our Mother the Earth, Tatei Urianaka, gave off as she tried to raise herself through the five levels of the underworld. On the highest level this light was seen as a small fire. It was Tatewari, Our Grandfather Fire [whom the Huichols call Tai]. He suddenly sprang on a deer that was dazzled by the light, hung him on a spit, and got under him to cook him. From the drippings, Tatewari acquired the shape of a man with a blaze for a heart. The animals

were encouraged by the wind god to hunt him down. When he was shot, he fell down as an old man. Then Tamatz Kayumari, the Blue Deer, sent for him. [Kayumari, the Elder Brother Deer Spirit, is omniscient. Knowing all thoughts and prayers, and everything that happens, he is present over all the earth.[6] The deer is the most sacred animal in the Huichol pantheon.[4]] But [the fire] would not come back to life until the specified votive offerings of logs had been made for him. When this was done, two other deer helped him up and immediately a large fire was formed." [The large arrow to the right of the fire symbolizes the gift of fire that Tai gave to man. The bottom of the section shows the pilgrims evoking Tai for guidance and protection during the peyote pilgrimage.[7]]

The Birth of the Moon

2. "While the fire was still being protected by the deer, an old blind woman tripped and fell into it. No sooner had her body turned to ashes when the deer felt something move over the east, and the sickle shape of the moon appeared. Five times it moved, growing progressively fuller, until it reached full size. And thus the moon was born, and is pictured here next to the Fire God." [In some parts of the Sierra it is believed that when the old woman lived on the earth, she ate people. Today if a child is born without a limb, the Huichols attribute this to Takutzi Me'kima Emena's having eaten it.[7]]

How the Sun Was Born

3. "Tamatz Kayumari, the Blue Deer, overseeing the development of light on earth, was not pleased with the amount of light given off by the moon. He ordered several children to be thrown into the fire as a sacrifice. But to everyone's surprise, when the first four were thrown in, birds came flying out of the fire. In this way the earth was populated with birds. Then a sickly child afflicted with many diseases was chosen. At first he refused to be sacrificed until certain votive objects were offered: prayer arrows adorned with a pair of sandals [which serve to guide the feet and prevent them from stumbling on the trail[4]], a *nierika* ["god's face"; a disk decorated with symbolic figures[6]], and eagle feathers. After this was complied with, he jumped into the fire, creating a whirlwind of sparks out of the diseases he'd had, and all those sitting around the fire became afflicted with them. In this way, the sun was born." [There are many versions of this story. In one, the boy who becomes the sun is a lame child who was thrown into a black pit.[7] In others, a boy who is lame and unerringly accurate with a bow and arrow is convinced to immolate himself.[6] The trait that most versions seem to have in common is that the voluntary self-sacrifice of a young boy was necessary for the sun to be born.]

The Goddess of Corn

4. [The fourth deity with whom the Huichols are in constant contact is the corn goddess, seen here in a *calihuey*, or temple. For the corn fiesta, the *calihuey* is decorated with flowers and corn products.[7]] "It is told that one time a young man went out in search of food. He met some ants along the way who invited him to search for corn, but that very night [while he slept], they walked off with his hair and eyelashes. This left him blind, and he couldn't continue his search until he heard the song of a dove that led him to the house of the corn goddess, Our Mother Kukuruku. The goddess introduced him to the five different-colored daughters who symbolize the different colors of the corn that Huichols have. He selected the black one to take home as his wife. He

was warned by the goddess that she must be placed in the *calihuey* for five days and not be allowed to work. But the mother-in-law became impatient and shamed the girl into grinding corn. She immediately began to bleed. As soon as that happened, the corn was diminished and the young man went out again to ask for more corn. This time he was given five ears of corn that he planted with the utmost of ceremony, as prescribed by the corn goddess." [To this day, the Huichol farmer selects a part of his *milpa*, or cornfield, to plant the seeds from those first five ears of corn that have been passed down from generation to generation.7]

The Water Goddess

5. [The Water Goddess, Aramara, is seen here with two corn plants. It is said that the Huichols travel far to obtain holy water to ceremonially bless their corn plots and votive offerings. It is believed that Aramara lives near the coast, and it is to her that the Huichols pray for rain and clouds for their corn.7]

The Flood Myth

6. [The myth of the Flood and the beginning of the Huichol people is depicted in the next scene. Nakawé, the Earth Mother, is shown with lightning rays extending out like protective arms, symbolic of her guardian role over this period of Huichol mythical history.7] "Wata'kame, a hard-working man [Clearer of the Fields, survivor of the Flood and devastation, and founder of the Huichol people and their way of life4], tries to clear a plot of land, but finds that each day on his return the trees have grown back again. On the fourth day, he stays behind and discovers at dawn an old woman, who raises her cane to the four cardinal directions and causes the trees to grow. Wata'kame attempts to kill her, but she warns him of the impending Flood, and of the actions he must take in order to save himself.

"He is instructed to make a canoe, to collect seeds and votive offerings, and to find a black female dog. On the fifth day [following her warning], she appears to bid him farewell. As he sets sail, he hears the screams of his fellow countrymen as they are eaten by their utensils, which have been transformed into wild animals. He sails to the west, to the east, to the north, and finally to the south. He is ordered to stop and disembark at Rapavillemeta. Nakawé tells him to walk in the four directions, plant the seeds, offer the votive objects in her name, and to build a home.

"As Wata'kame begins his work again, he finds that his food is ready for him on his return each day. He decides to return early one day to see who is doing this, and discovers that the little black dog sheds her fur, hangs it up, and goes off to the river to bathe in the body of a woman. He tosses the fur into the fire and immediately hears the yelping of the dog. He rushes to bathe her with ground corn juice, and gives her the name Tashiwa. From the union of Wata'kame and Tashiwa, the earth became populated once more."

Mother Earth

7. [In the upper right portion of the painting, the artist shows the story of how Tamatz Kayumari, the Blue Deer, discovered the Mexican Mother Earth.7] "It was a land he [Tamatz Kayumari] had set aside for the gods and goddesses, and he was trying to gain access to it by shooting arrows into it. Each of the first four arrows he shot failed to attach to the mark, but fell and became [respectively] a palm tree, a grove of trees, a stack of coconuts, and a pile of sand and rocks. Then Kayumari dreamt that he had shot a fifth arrow smeared with his own blood. The arrow and its trajectory then turned

into a road and he was able to connect the two worlds. The gods then crossed over to this world, but when the sun came up the next day they were burned and became invisible."

[This road is symbolized by the round, yellow *nierika*, the passage from one world to the next. The *nierika* contains all the votive objects that Kayumari ordered to be used as offerings to supplicate the gods. Today, these offerings are often smeared with the blood of a deer to symbolically represent the sacrifice that Tamatz Kayumari made.7]

The Fiesta of Squash and Corn

8. [The middle strip of the painting shows three of the fiestas that the Huichols celebrate during the year. They average a fiesta a month, and these usually last two to three days and nights. The participants sleep little and drink a lot. An animal is always sacrificed, but because deer are now scarce a bull is often used.

[The beginning of the middle strip starts with the first fiesta—the fiesta of *calabasa* and *elote*, that is, squash and maize. It is the first fiesta of the year and comes at the end of the rainy season. The first thing shown is a *calihuey* filled with offerings. A deer has been hunted with the greatest solemnity and has been brought into the village with all the honor that would be bestowed on a special guest. The women offer it miniature tortillas and tamales as well as pieces of cheese and gourds filled with *tequino*, a fermented corn liquor.

[Around the orange object in the painting, they have gathered to pray to the gods to accept their offerings. The power of their prayers is symbolically represented by the arrow and its trajectory, which have gone through the *nierika*, a symbol of the passageway to another world. To the Huichols, an arrow symbolizes a message. The blood of the deer is sprinkled on the votive objects and on the participants. The *mara'akame* also dips his *muvieries*, or his ceremonial accoutrements, into the deer's blood to augment his power with that of the greatest shaman, Tamatz Kayumari, the Blue Deer.7]

Fiesta of the Drum

9. [The second fiesta is the fiesta of the *tambora*, or drum. All of the children of the host of the fiesta must sit in the sun for a full day and shake a rattle. The married daughters of the host often come from far off to take part in the fiesta. During the ceremony, the shaman chants the entire peyote pilgrimage to Wirikuta that someday the children are expected to make. He guides their spirits to all the shrines along the way, describes them in detail, and fully explains the rituals that must take place at each stop. He thus creates a pattern in their memories that they will never forget. At the top, the scene also shows an animal being sacrificed, and the lines from it to the gods and to the *calihuey* at the right represent the Huichols's prayers being received. The scene also shows musicians who play during the ceremonies.7]

Peyote Pilgrimage

10. [The third fiesta, or ceremony, in the middle strip is the peyote pilgrimage itself. Here the women bid the men farewell from the patio of the *calihuey*. The candles they are holding represent the illumination that everyone, including even those who will stay behind, will receive. The distance between the *peyoteros* and those left behind is erased by the spiritual communion between the two.

[The *peyoteros* leave behind a cord tied in knots, which represent the various stops they will make. The first stop is where the participants cleanse themselves of their sins by the power of Tatewari, Our Grandfather Fire. It is a

critical stop and the success of the journey will be determined by how they conduct this ceremony.

[Each member steps forward one at a time and confesses his sexual transgressions. The women at home do the same thing at the same time. The leading *mara'akame*, or Tatewari, as he is called during the trip, records each sin by tying a knot in a cord. When all have confessed, the cord is tossed into the fire to symbolically cleanse the sins, and the Fire God is asked for protection for the remainder of the trip. This is the manner in which the Huichols reenact the first peyote hunt done by the gods, and each pilgrim takes the name of one of the gods. The mounds along the feet of the pilgrims in the painting represent the sacred places where the party will stop for the night to make offerings on their way to Wirikuta.

[If all the ceremonial thoughts and actions have been complied with as mandated by the gods, then the peyote (which is thought to spring from the tracks of Tamatz Kayumari, the Blue Deer) will allow itself to be found. In the painting, the peyote is seen as a deer adorned with *nierikas*, which represent the passage into the other world made possible only through the hallucinogenic power of the peyote. The double-headed eagle who reigns over the upper world is seen here watching over the entire ceremony.[7]]

Corn Fiestas and Rituals

11. [The bottom strip is mainly concerned with the Huichols's daily preoccupation with corn. The annual planting of corn is imbued with ritual and ceremony. A Huichol farmer is shown in the bottom left of the painting asking a *mara'akame* to sanctify the plot of land he has found among the ravines. The *mara'akame* uses deer blood and holy water brought back from a faraway sacred place. He offers the gods *tequino* and tamales, which is a corn food prepared in corn husks. The farmer then selects a portion of the plot, where he plants the sacred seeds that have been passed down to him, and he treats this section of ground from then on as if it were an altar. The Huichols believe that it is the corn goddess herself who is planted.

[When the young plants sprout, the *mara'akame* is again called to conduct another ceremony. After this, the farmer stays home and lets nature take its course, relying on the rain to sustain his corn. He comes back after the rainy season to cut some of the sweet young ears of corn, but he cannot eat them until a fiesta has been given in honor of the corn goddess.

[Several days in advance of this final fiesta, the women begin the preparations. They boil ground corn sprouts to make *tequino*, and make large quantities of tamales for guests. During the ceremony, the *mara'akame* gives thanks and offers to the goddess the fruits of the host's labors. The guests and most of the family members eat and drink for several days to the beat of drums and the chants of the *mara'akame*.[7]]

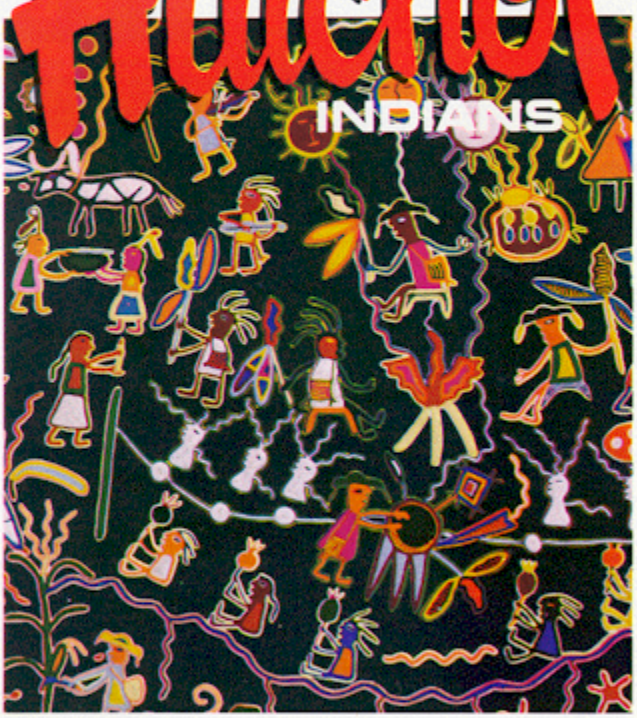
The Future

12. [Possibly the most ominous aspect of the entire painting is in the lower right-hand corner. Here the artist expresses a thought that has been in the mind of every Huichol since the time of the *conquistadores*: the end of their way of life. Rios gives her culture twenty more years before this scene takes place. She sees wise old men lamenting that there are no young men left to pass on their knowledge to, or to host the necessary fiestas to appease the gods. They have all left the Sierra to work on the coast or in the United States. She does include a ray of hope, however: she depicts the splitting of the earth into four parts, symbolizing a rebirth.[7]]

Myths and Rituals of the

Huichol

INDIANS



As depicted in the
Emeteria Martinez Rios mural at isi®

The Huichols of Mexico—

The Huichol Indians are a community of some twelve thousand people scattered among the southern reaches of Mexico's Sierra Madre Occidental. They are thought by some authorities to be descended from the Toltecs and the Aztecs. Yarn painting is a recent innovation of the Huichols, but the techniques employed are as old as the Indians themselves. The paintings are created by pressing strands of brightly-colored yarn onto sunwarmed beeswax spread on plywood panels. Yarn paintings often depict Huichol mythology or everyday activities, but motifs are also frequently evolved from visions induced by the consumption of peyote. The peyote cactus, which contains the hallucinogenic drug mescaline, is eaten with elaborate ceremony because it enables the Huichols to communicate directly with their gods.

Above. A Huichol in traditional clothing. Shirts and trousers, which are generally made of cotton, are often embroidered and cross-stitched with various bird and animal motifs. The elaborateness of the designs vary, but do not indicate rank or importance.

⑥ The Flood

This section depicts the myth of the Flood and the origins of the Huichols. The Earth Mother goddess Nakawé is shown with lightning rays extending from her body like protective arms, symbolizing her guardian role during this period in Huichol history. In this Huichol version of the flood myth, a hard-working man named Wata'kame is warned by Nakawé of the impending flood and instructed to build a canoe and acquire a certain black female dog. Wata'kame thus escapes the fate of his countrymen. After the Flood, Wata'kame resumes his work and finds his food ready for him each day upon his return from the fields. Returning early one day to find out who is responsible, he discovers the dog shedding her fur, and watches as she hangs it up and bathes in the form of a woman. Wata'kame quickly tosses the fur in the fire, and from his union with the woman, Tashiwa, the earth is populated once more.

⑧ The Fiesta of Squash and Corn

The center of the composite painting pictures the three major fiestas celebrated by the Huichols. The first is that of *calabasa* and *elote*, or squash and corn, at the end of the rainy season. The others are the fiesta of the *tambora*, or drum, and that of the peyote pilgrimage (see 10). The orange object in this section, around which the Huichols are shown gathered, is a *nierika*, symbol of a passageway to another world. The arrow symbolizes the messages and prayers of the Huichols, which are transmitted to the gods by means of the *nierika*.

(10) Peyote Pilgrimage

Every year the Huichol women bid farewell to the men as the latter make the 300-mile trek to the Wirikuta desert in search of the peyote cactus, whose hallucinogenic properties the Huichols believe enables them to speak directly with their gods. The candles carried by the figures in this section represent the illumination that everyone—even those left behind—will receive. The distance between the men hunting the peyote, the *peyoteros,* and the women awaiting their return is erased by the spiritual communion between them. The peyote can be seen in the painting represented as a deer adorned with *nierikas,* the symbols of the passage to another world made possible by the power of the peyote. The double-headed eagle who reigns over the upper world watches over the entire ceremony.

(12) The Future of the Huichol Indians

This section is possibly the most ominous aspect of the entire painting. Here the artist, Emeteria Martinez Rios, expresses a thought that has been on the mind of every Huichol since the time of the *conquistadores:* the end of their way of life. Rios gives her culture twenty more years before this scene takes place. She sees wise old men lamenting that there are no young men left to pass on knowledge to, or to host the necessary fiestas to appease the gods. She does include a ray of hope, however: she depicts the splitting of the earth into four parts, symbolizing a rebirth.

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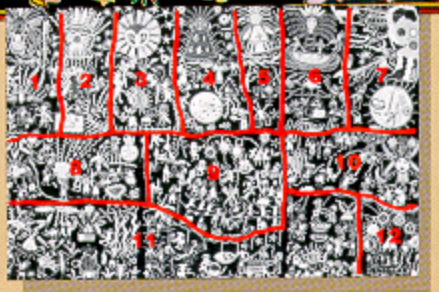
Left and above. "The History, Gods, Myths, Rituals, and Future of the Huichol Indians," the largest Huichol yarn painting in the world. On display at ISI.



Right. Schematic outlining each of the twelve separate sections making up the composite work.