



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.