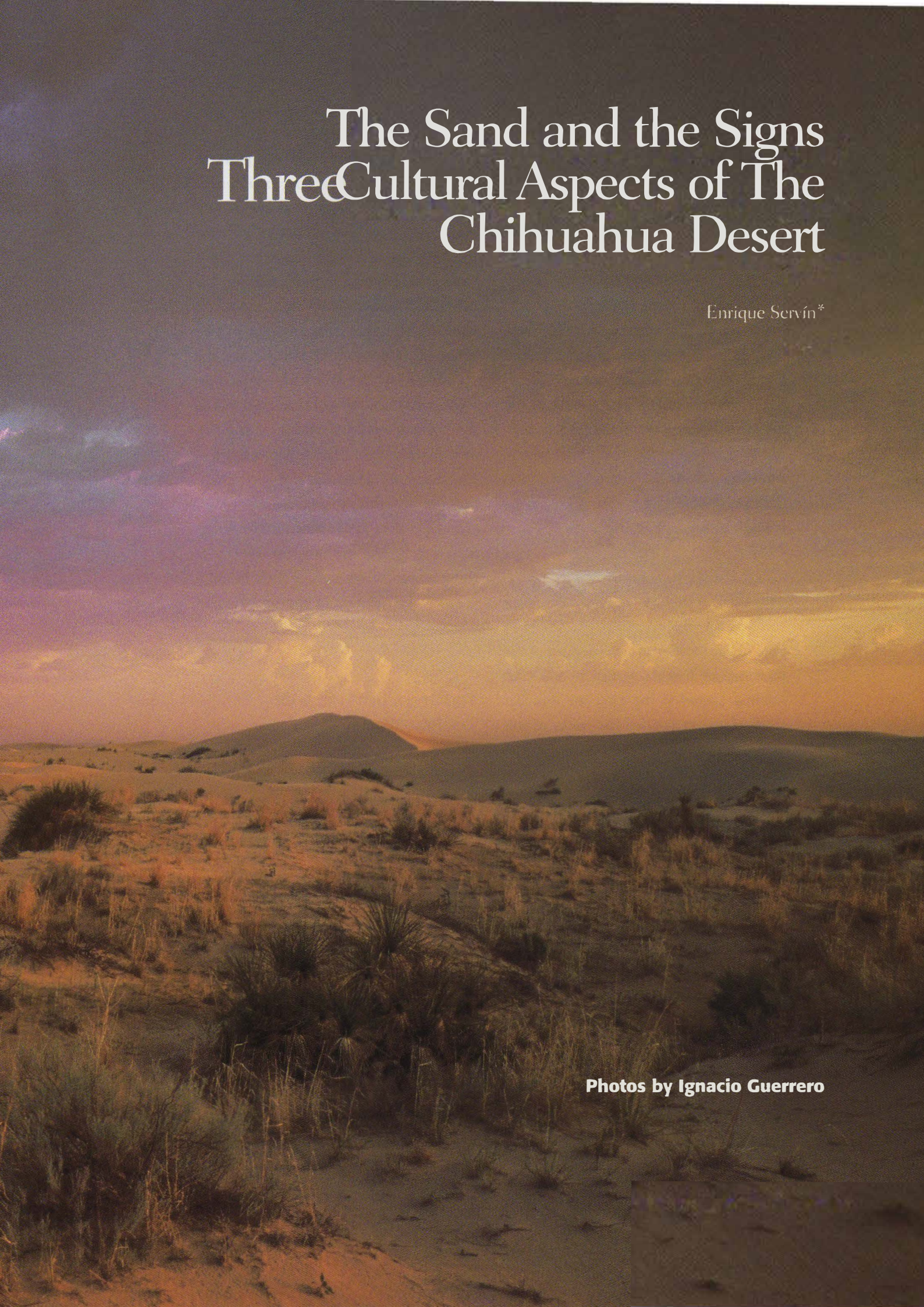




The Sand and the Signs Three Cultural Aspects of The Chihuahua Desert

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Photos by Ignacio Guerrero



One of the most ecologically pristine and best preserved areas on our planet is the Chihuahu Desert, the largest in North America. Its geographic expanse, covering parts of Mexico and the United States, including the states of San Luis Potosí, Durango, Coahuila, Chihuahua, New Mexico and Texas, contains some of the hemisphere's most spectacular scenery: vast blue valleys, dunes and canyons of architectural beauty that have known human activity for several millennia. The history of the interaction between humanity and its habitat in this region has been original and sometimes dramatic. Three facets of this ancient, complex relationship should be enough to serve as examples.

THE WORLD OF CAVES

One of the most enigmatic vestiges of the presence of human beings in the Chihuahu Desert is the cave art that has marked and beautified the rocks of this region during different periods and in various styles. Finding archaeological remains in a forest or a fertile plain is not as impressive and surprising as finding them in the middle of a sand deposit or a desert mountain range. Some of the hills and knolls of the Chihuahu Desert are true galleries of rock glyphs, constellations of schematic, ambiguous signs whose original meaning we may not be able to completely understand, although their magical-ritual intent seems evident. In this way, Man in the Americas first impressed his concerns and conception of the world on the desert

surface, changing it and giving it a profoundly human meaning.

Finding a single one of these pictures can be an intense, exciting experience: some seem to be simple abstractions; others, magical insects; still others look like the language of cultures closer to us in time, with hunting animals, men on the plains and women giving birth: a mythical woman that perpetuates the human presence in the cosmos. Centuries after the appearance of the first rock engravings, Man's transformation of the desert would develop to the point of producing irrigation systems and cities as complex as those of the Paquimé. Although the rock drawings are not, strictly speaking, the oldest signs of culture in the desert in the Americas, their beauty and longevity have made them beautiful symbols of their humanization, their historical appropriation by Man.

THE OTHER DIMENSIONS OF THE REAL WORLD

The general style of the desert pictographs brings to mind the hallucinogenic effects of one of the other most important links of the Chihuahu Desert with the history of culture: peyote, which, in Nahuatl (*peyotl*) can be translated—depending on the etymology—as “luminosity.” For Amerinds, peyote is the door to other dimensions of reality, the recovery of the original language through which all beings (the elements, plants, animals, men and gods) originally communicated. With some variations, this vision was shared in the past by many cultures which historically had contact with each other and, despite half a millennium of Hispanic and mestizo cultural pressure, it is still shared by some contemporary ethnic groups linked to the Chihuahu Desert, like the Tarahumara

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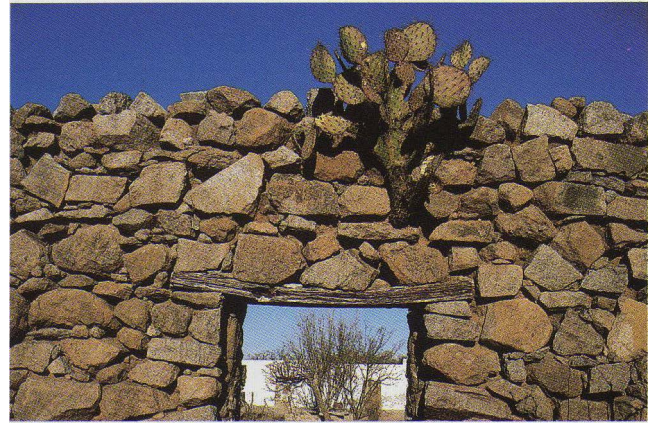
and the Huichol. Both the art and the religion of the first peoples of this desert—and even others from southern Mexico and the northern United States—are difficult to explain if we do not understand what this cactus indigenous and exclusive to this region has meant to them. The use of peyote for rituals and its influence in the desert cultures has not only not diminished, but over the last 100 years has spread northward considerably to the United States, as can be seen in the case of the Navajo, the country's largest indigenous minority. What is more, given its place in anthropological and even literary works—suffice it to mention the novels of Carlos

Castaneda and his followers—the plant is known worldwide and has become an additional symbol of the relationship between nature and culture.

THE THRESHOLD OR THE LAST FRONTIER

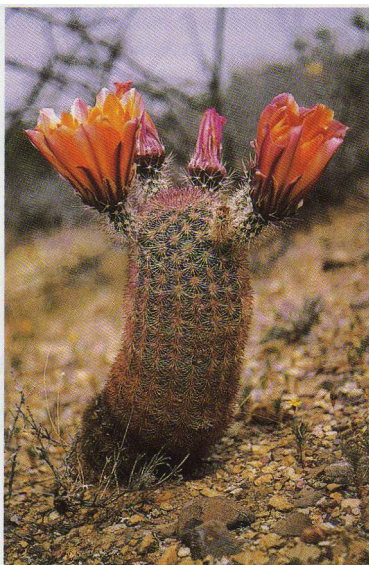
Lastly, from the viewpoint of the collective imagination in the modern societies that share this geographical expanse, the Chihuahua Desert has taken on at least two very defined and very different—depending on whether it is in the Anglo-American or the Mexican culture—mythological forms. While to the north





In Mexican culture the desert is an almost magic, virgin space, sometimes peopled by phantoms.





of the border, the desert gave rise to the myth of the boundary, the challenge of the last frontier (a savage expanse appropriate for the epic of national expansion and the forging of the U.S. character), in Mexican culture, the desert has appeared as an netherworld threshold, an almost magic space, sometimes uninhabited and virgin (a metaphor for the universe), and at other times peopled by phantoms and the apparitions of our cultural archetypes: the weeping woman, the orphan, the patriarch.

In the United States, the myth of the boundary has been played out in films with the Wild West, as well as in fiction, one of whose most intense moments has

been the novels of Cormac McCarthy. In Mexico, the myth of the threshold has given rise to equally splendid works of literature, among them *Pedro Páramo*, by Juan Rulfo, whose ghost town, Comala, inhabited by souls in pain and located in a desert of unknown location, serves as the scene of the drama of the Mexican and universal man. Also noteworthy are the stories of Jesús Gardea, where the Chihuahua Desert appears incandescent and limitless, more a state of being or a dimension of the imagination than a geographical region: the imaginary space in which the heaven and hell of all men merge. ■■