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Cover: Gathering baskets, Yakima, c.1940. Coiled cedar root with imbricated overlay of beargrass. Left: 16" x 14½" (41 x 37 cm); right: 14" x 14½" (36 x 37 cm). The coiled stitch on Yakima baskets is concealed by imbrication. These baskets draw a contrast between the traditional design of diagonal rows on the left and Euro-American-influenced floral design on the right. Both baskets were probably made for sale (Tisdale 2001:100). Courtesy Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma, Cat. Nos. from left: 1948.39.369, 1948.39.370. Photograph by Don Wheeler. (See article pages 54–63.)

THE ORIGINS OF HUICHOL INDIAN YARN PAINTING

Hope MacLean

The Huichol (wee-chol) Indians of Mexico produce brilliantly colored yarn paintings that depict myths and ceremonies from their traditional shamanic culture. The paintings' glowing colors and mystical symbolism are attracting the attention of growing numbers of collectors around the world.

Huichol yarn paintings are one of the great success stories of indigenous arts. In just forty years, Huichol yarn paintings have evolved from tribal religious offerings into an international art sold around the world. They have been exhibited in museums and galleries in Germany, Austria, France, Spain, Japan and the United States. Prices have risen from a few pesos to hundreds or even thousands of United States dollars for work by the best artists. Where did this art come from? Who contributed to its dramatic transformation? Who are the mysterious artists who produce it, many barely known even to the dealers?

1. Photograph of Huichol artists selling their work directly to tourists in Tepic, Nayarit. The colorful embroidery on their clothing shows designs such as deer, eagles and peyote cactus. These motifs are also frequently seen in yarn paintings. Photograph by author.

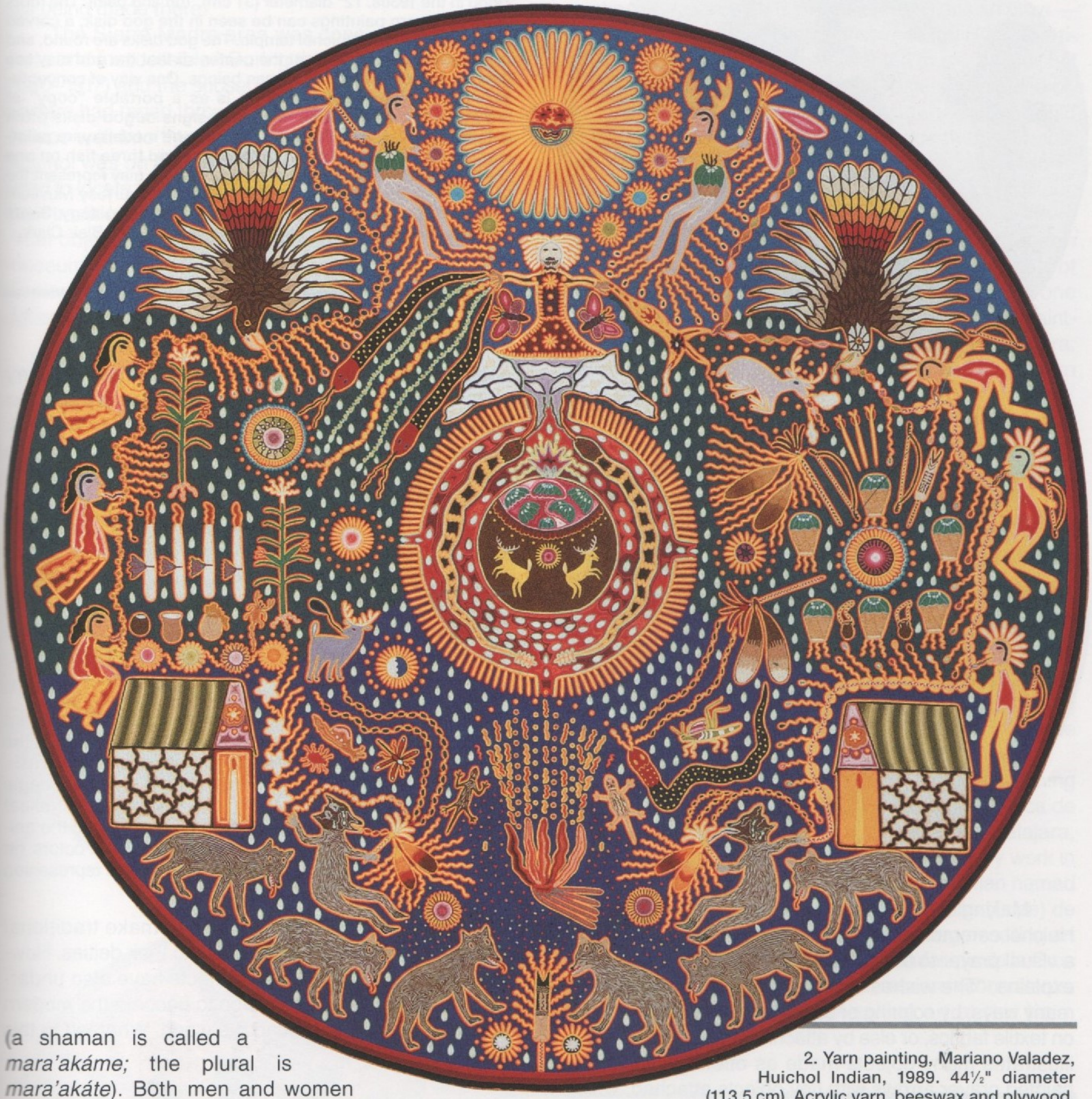
Despite the number of yarn paintings moving through the markets, there is surprisingly little written about them. Only three authors have written about yarn painting at any length, and this mainly on three artists: Peter T. Furst on Ramón Medina Silva (1968–1969, 1974, 1978; Furst and Myerhoff 1966); Juan Negrín on José Benítez Sánchez (1977, 1979, 1986); and Susana Eger Valadez on Mariano Valadez (Eger Valadez and Valadez 1992). Most other references to commercial yarn painting are passing remarks in articles concerned with other matters. Little has been written about the paintings' origins or about the many artists who have produced thousands of paintings over the years.

These unanswered questions led me to travel around the remote Sierra Madre mountains, tracking down the Huichol artists and interviewing them about their lives and their art. I also interviewed dealers, anthropologists and government officials who played a part in the dramatic transformation of Huichol painting. Between them, I pieced together the story of how this art began, and how it was transformed from a little known religious offering to a modern art form.[1]

Origins

The Huichol Indians, who call themselves Wixárika, live in the precipitous Sierra Madre Mountains of northwest Mexico. As of 1995, there were about twenty-five thousand Huichol Indians. They still farm corn, beans and squash using traditional techniques. However, increasingly the Huichol are forced to supplement their income, either by working as day laborers on plantations or by making art for sale (Fig. 1).

The Huichol were not conquered by the Spanish until 1722 (Franz 1996), almost two hundred years after the Spanish invasion of Mexico. Sporadic missionary efforts were hampered by outbreaks of war over the next two hundred years, and so the Huichol managed to reach the twentieth century with their traditional shamanic religion still intact. An early traveler and ethnographer, the Norwegian Carl Lumholtz (1900:6), commented that among the Huichol every third person was a shaman; even today, many families include one or more shamans



2. Yarn painting, Mariano Valadez, Huichol Indian, 1989. 44½" diameter (113.5 cm). Acrylic yarn, beeswax and plywood. This large and complex yarn painting shows the trend of the 1980s and 1990s towards increasing detail in yarn paintings. Mariano Valadez often paints plants and animals in relatively realistic and naturalistic detail. For example, the wolf people have wool colors which suggest the natural texture and colors of fur. The feathers of the eagles, the skin of the lizards and the shapes of various insects are all much more clearly outlined than in the stick figures of the early yarn paintings. This painting depicts shamanic wolf people who learn to use power objects such as gourd bowls, candles and shaman's plumes (wands with feathers), in order to see and hear the bright lights and colorful communication of the gods. The peyote cactus is shown on the left, and a bowl full of peyote buttons is in the center. Above the bowl are the goddess Takutsi Nakawe and Deer-spirits with hearts of peyote. Courtesy Girard Foundation collection, Museum of International Folk Art, Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe, Cat. No. FA 1989.28-1. Photograph by Blair Clark.

(a shaman is called a *mara'akáme;* the plural is *mara'akáte*). Both men and women may be shamans. The shamans have many roles: they lead religious ceremonies, heal the sick, dream who the political leaders should be and offer prayers to bring much needed rain for the Huichol's crops. A person becomes a shaman by making pilgrimages to places of power, leaving offerings and making vows to the spirits who live there. Perhaps the best-known Huichol religious practice is the peyote pilgrimage (seen recently in an episode of the film series *Millennium*). In the desert the Huichol call Wirikuta, located in the north-central state of San Luis Potosí, the pilgrims collect and consume peyote, a hallucinogenic cactus, in order to gain visions and shamanic insight.

3 and 4. Stone God disk, Huichol Indian, collected by Robert Zingg in the 1930s. 12" diameter (31 cm). Tuff and paint. The roots of modern yarn paintings can be seen in the god disk, a carved stone disk kept in a Huichol temple. The god disks are round, and often have a hole or circle at the center, so that the god may see through it into the world of human beings. One way of conceptualizing an offering yarn painting is as a portable "copy" of the stone disk. The rough incised designs of god disks often reappear in more sophisticated forms in the modern yarn paintings. This disk has a design of two deer and three fish on one side. On the other side is a spoked figure which may represent the sun. Both sides are painted in blue and red. Courtesy Museum of Indian Arts and Culture, Laboratory of Anthropology, Santa Fe, New Mexico, Cat. No. 14066/12. Photograph by Blair Clark.

Making art or decorating objects is central to most Huichol ceremonies and pilgrimages. These objects are a visual prayer to the gods. As Lumholtz (1902:v. 2, 200) explains, "The wishes of the supplicant are itemized in many ways, by coloring or carving or representation in or on textile fabrics, or else by attachment." Lumholtz (1900) illustrates many objects made as offerings, including painted prayer arrows with tiny objects attached, which represent specific prayers to the gods; gourd bowls; flat wooden boards; and small statues of deities or animals carved in wood or stone. The bowls, boards and statues are often decorated with beads and/or yarn, which are glued to the object with beeswax. From these religious offerings has grown the modern art of yarn painting.

Traditional yarn paintings were made using a small piece of wood, often roughly shaped in a circle or oval. They had fairly simple designs of a few symbols shaped in wax. Either yarn or beads could be embedded in the wax to emphasize the elements of the figure. Sometimes the wax was fully covered, but often the wax showed through. The paintings were small (from a few inches to about a foot in diameter), so they would be easy to carry on long pilgrimages. Sometimes both sides of the object were covered with symbols (Figs. 5–6). Berrin (1978: 152–153) illustrates three such offerings, which were collected by Lumholtz in the 1890s and anthropologist Robert M. Zingg in the 1930s.

According to Huichol mythology, yarn paintings have the power to bring into creation whatever is painted on them. Once painted, things "simply came to life, and the world knew them as real things, plants, animals, and the *santos*" (Zingg 1938:629). A myth describes how the culture hero Kauyumáli made a yarn painting to bring animals into the world:

> *Kauyumáli* was painting prayers that he wished to be granted by the great gods. With beads and colored wool placed in the wax on the board, he painted a snake, a rattlesnake, a fish, a coyote, and a skunk....He also created the royal eagle (double-headed Hapsburg symbol), hawk, parrot, parrakeet [*sic*]...quail, "tiger," wolf, and a singing-shaman. All the animals, hens, turkeys, and everything else in all colors he painted. The colored rocks of the five points were represented in the painting (Zingg 1938:629).

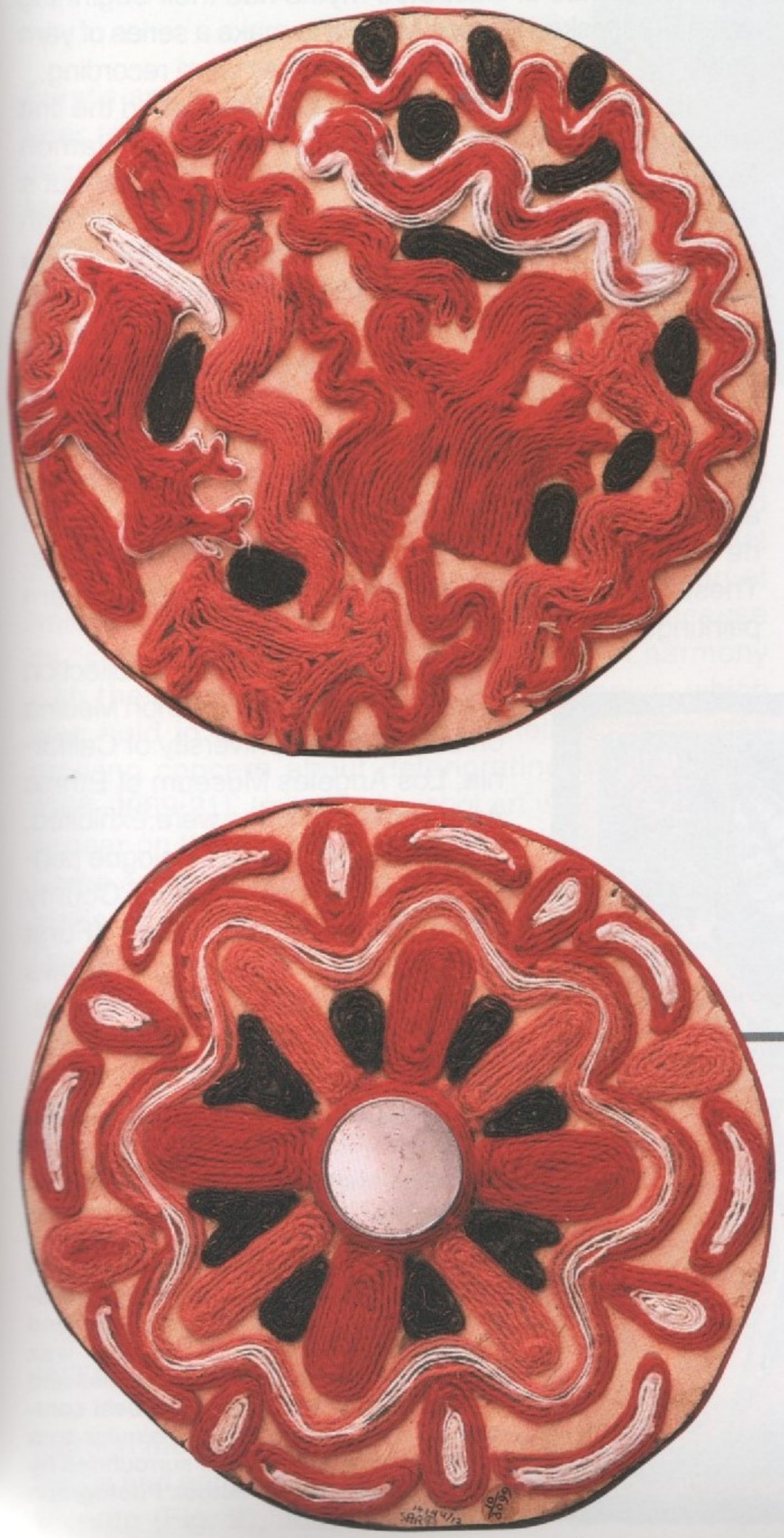
Even today, the Huichol continue to make traditional yarn paintings to leave as offerings to their deities. However, the simple ceremonial objects have also undergone a dramatic transformation to become the modern commercial art sold around the world. What led to this evolution?

Beginnings: The 1950s and 1960s

The story of modern yarn painting begins with Alfonso Soto Soria, a Mexican anthropologist. In an interview in Mexico City in 1996, he told me that *"Yo soy el culpable* [I am the guilty party]" in the transformation (Soto Soria 1996). Soto Soria recounted that, in the 1930s and 1940s, there was a growing interest in Mexican folk arts, fostered by aficionados such as artists Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo. By the 1940s the Museum of Folk Arts (the Museo Nacional de Artes e Industrias Populares) was founded in Mexico City. The director, Daniel Rubín de la Borbolla, hired the youthful Soto Soria and assigned him the task of exploring the almost unknown mountains of

northwest Mexico in order to discover what arts were still being made there.

The Sierra Madre area was considered to be remote and inaccessible.[2] During the Mexican Revolution (1910–1917) and the subsequent Cristero Revolt, bloody warfare had raged through the mountains of the state of Jalisco well into the 1930s. The only way to reach the Huichol was on foot or on horseback. Soto Soria managed to locate the Huichol and brought back examples of their traditional arts, such as weaving, embroidery and ritual objects, like yarn-painted offerings. In 1954 the museum exhibited his collection — apparently the first display of Huichol art — and published a catalogue (Museo Nacional de Artes e Industrias Populares 1954).

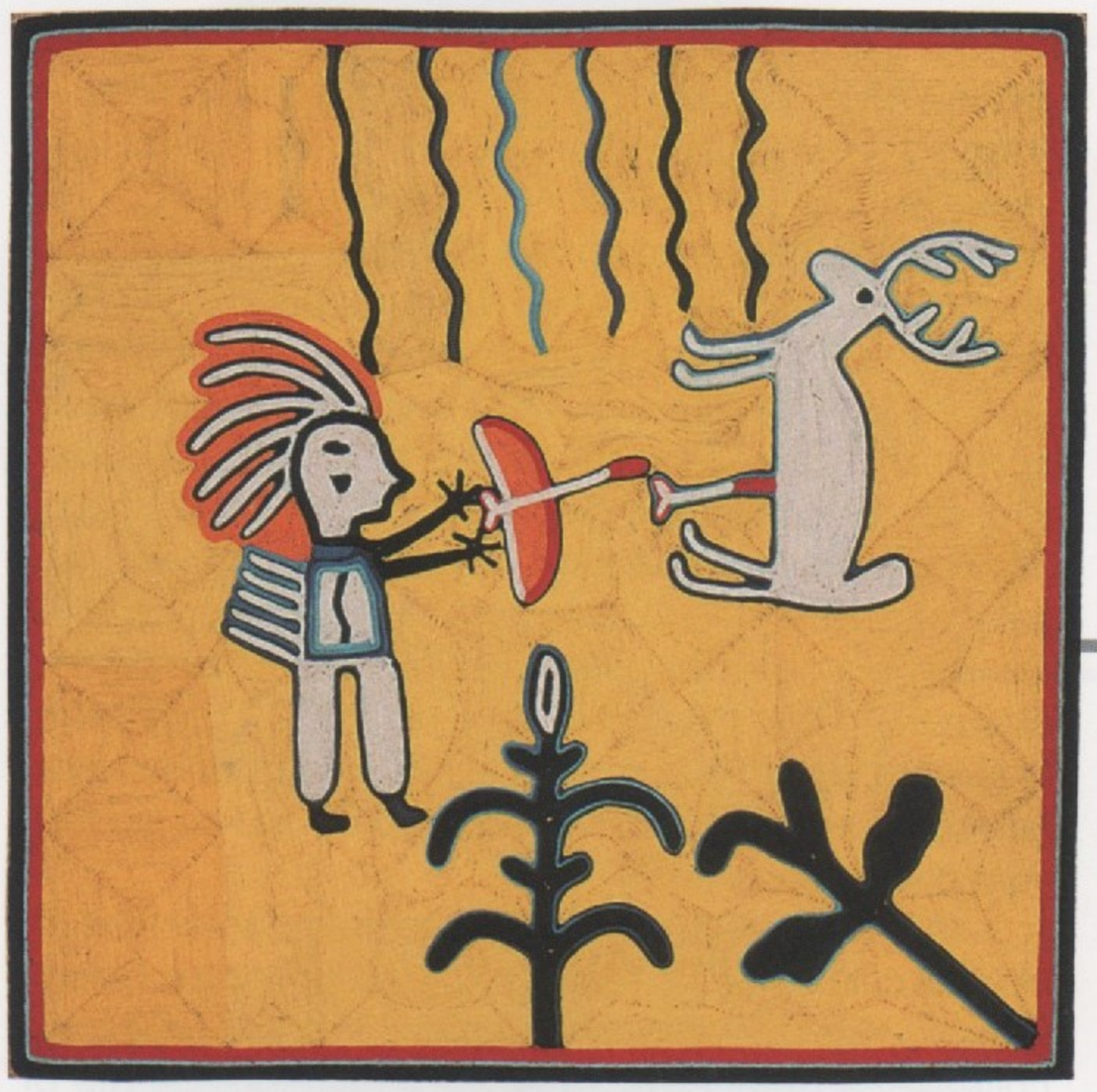


As a result, the governor of the state of Jalisco, Augustín Yáñez, decided to award a prestigious art prize — normally given to a Western artist — to the Huichol artisans. To justify his choice, he wanted to exhibit Huichol art in a form that would appeal to Western tastes. He offered Soto Soria an airplane and materials if he would fly into the Sierra Madre and persuade the Huichol to produce Western-style art. Soto Soria flew into the town of Tuxpan, Jalisco, and enlisted the help of a local leader, who soon organized a group of Huichol men to make paintings. Their productions were the first modern yarn paintings, designed to conform to Western concepts of art. For example, they were flat and decorated on one side only so that they could hang on a wall. These paintings were shown in a second exhibition in Guadalajara, Jalisco. They were immediately popular, and so modern yarn painting was born.

In the mid-1950s Soto Soria curated an exhibit on Huichol culture for the National Museum of Anthropology (Museo Nacional de Antropología) in Mexico City. He collected a number of small yarn paintings, some of which had been purchased in Mezquitic, Jalisco; others may have been made on site at the museum. According to the museum's archivist, Soto Soria brought Huichol Indians from the Sierra Madre to Mexico City to help construct the exhibits (Lahirigoyen 1993). Raúl Kamffer (1957:13) visited Soto Soria at the museum and saw several Huichol Indians from San Andrés, Jalisco. One man was "sticking colored yarn on a waxed board, designing a curious eagle with two heads, one normal and the other in the shape of a cross."

By the early 1960s yarn paintings were becoming better known. The Franciscan priests at the Basilica de Zapopan, a cathedral on the outskirts of Guadalajara, sold Huichol art to help support their missionary work in the Sierra Madre. A Huichol from San Sebastian named Ramón Medina Silva and his wife Guadalupe (Lupe) de la Cruz Ríos moved to Guadalajara and began selling art through the basilica.[3] According to Guadalupe de la Cruz Ríos, who was one of my principal research consultants, there were very few Huichol selling art at this time;

5 and 6. Sacred round board with mirror, Huichol Indian, collected by Robert Zingg in the 1930s. 9½" diameter (24.5 cm). Wood, yarn, mirror and beeswax. This round painting has a mirror embedded in the center of a design that may represent the sun. The mirror is used by Huichol shamans for divination. There is a single Huichol word — *nierika* — which refers to the mirror, the yarn painting and many other objects which depict the world of the gods. The obverse of the yarn painting shows a design of animals that are often represented in god disks and yarn paintings, including snakes, deer and a bird which could be an eagle. The design is strongly reminiscent of the myth of how Kauyumáli created animals by painting them in a yarn painting. Courtesy Museum of Indian Arts and Culture, Laboratory of Anthropology, Santa Fe, New Mexico, Cat. No. 14144/12. Photograph by Blair Clark.



7. Yarn painting, Guadalupe de la Cruz Ríos, Huichol Indian, 1972. Mythological interpretation by Ramón Medina Silva. Collected by Peter F. Young. 23½" x 23½" (60 x 60 cm). Three-ply wool yarn and beeswax on plywood. This painting depicts the ceremonial hunting of a deer, so that its blood may be offered to the gods. The sacrifice ensures a good harvest of corn, which the Huichol rely on for survival. The painting shows the *mara'akame* or shaman, shooting his arrow at the deer. The small blue spot on his neck is his voice box, which indicates that he uses speech and singing to tell about the gods. The rainbow of colors at the top is the *kupuri* or life force of the maize, and also of the *mara'akame*, the deer, and the Huichol. Courtesy Peter F. Young collection, San Diego Museum of Man, San Diego, California, Cat. No. 1974-64-8. Photograph by Ken Hedges.

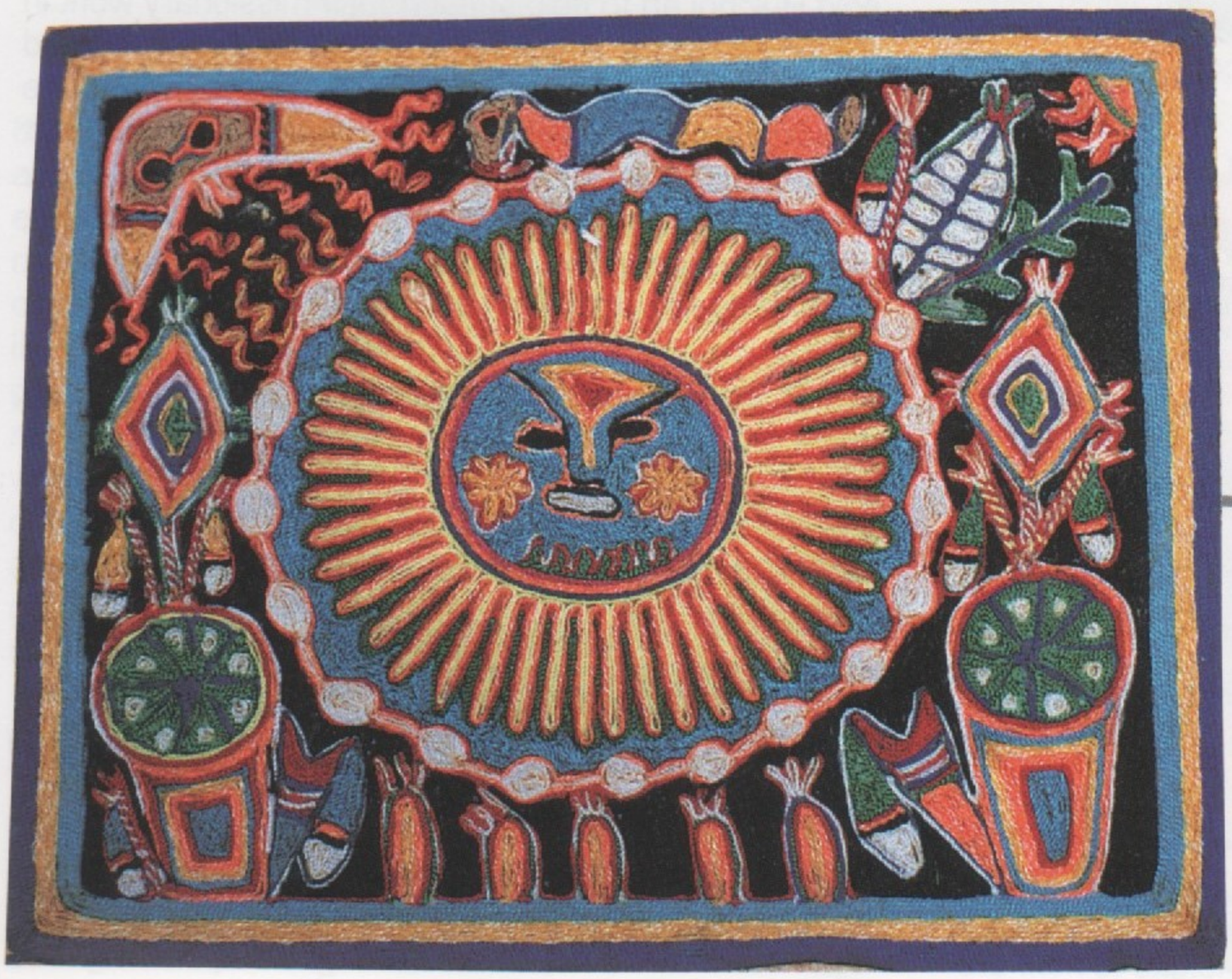
indeed, she and her husband were almost the only ones to do so (de la Cruz Ríos 1994). This couple were the first Huichol Indians to become internationally known as individual artists, rather than anonymous folk artists.

In 1965 Padre Ernesto Loera Ochoa, a priest at the basilica, introduced the couple to two American anthropologists, Peter T. Furst and Barbara G. Myerhoff. Furst and Myerhoff began recording myths and stories as told by Ramón Medina. According to Furst (1968–1969: 21–22), up to this time, most yarn paintings had been simple depictions of a single object or a group of symbols such as "deer, flowers, eagles, butterflies, snakes, sun, moon, clouds, trees." However, narrative yarn paintings that told stories or illustrated myths had their beginning when Furst asked Ramón Medina to make a series of yarn paintings to accompany the myths they were recording.

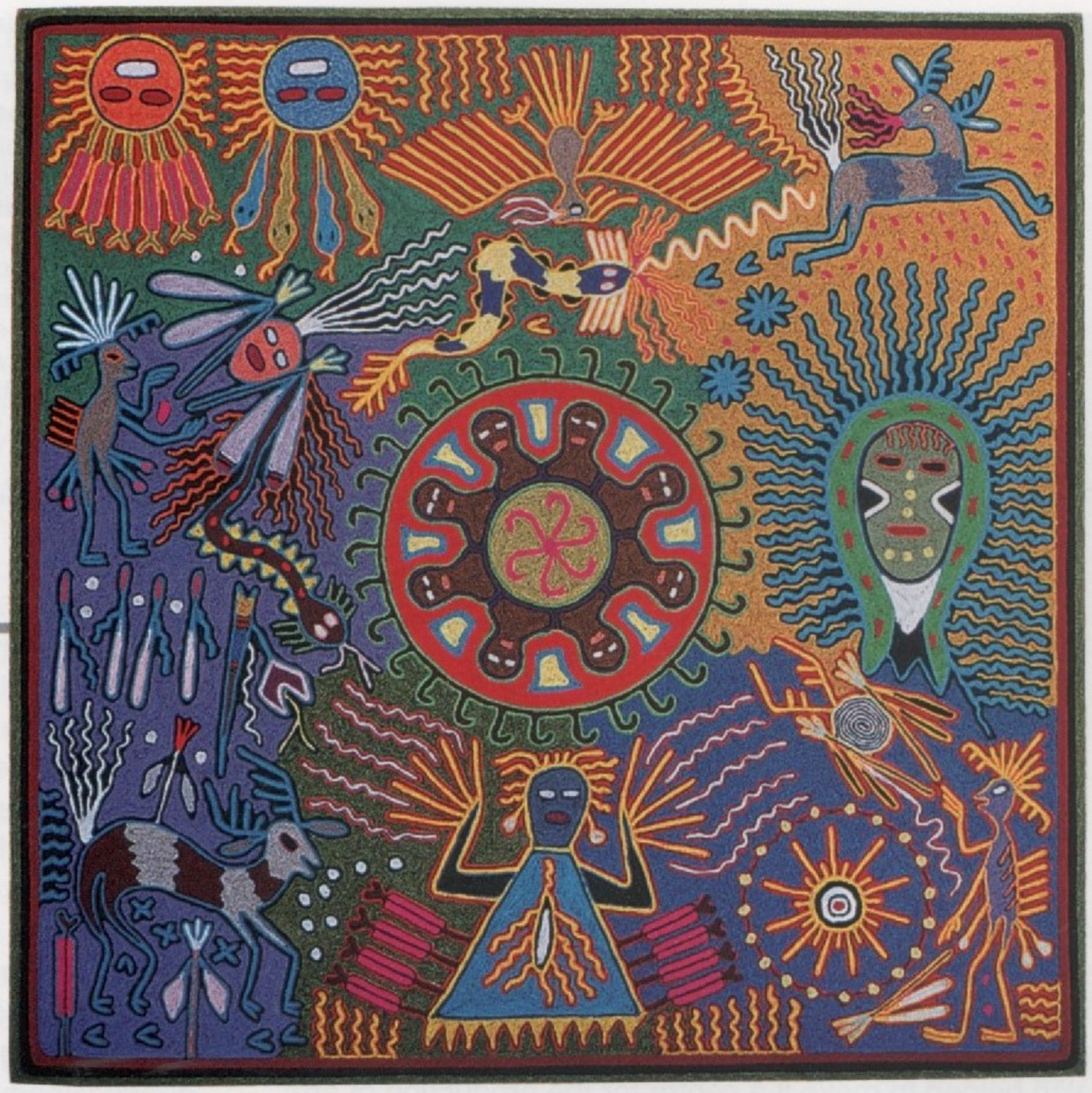
In 1966 Furst and Myerhoff (1966) published the first article resulting from their collaboration with Ramón Medina. This article analyzes a series of myths about a datura plant known as *kieri.* The article is illustrated with three paintings by Ramón Medina showing how datura lures the unwary into sorcery and how it was vanquished by the Deer god, Tamatsi Kauyumari (Fig. 17). This seems to be the first discussion of yarn paintings in the English language literature.[4]

Ramón Medina invited the anthropologists to accompany him on a peyote pilgrimage. He also made a series of yarn paintings based on the dreams or visions he experienced while under the influence of peyote. These are the first recorded examples of visionary yarn paintings (Fig. 12).

Furst commissioned a collection of yarn paintings from Ramón Medina on behalf of the University of California, Los Angeles Museum of Ethnic Arts. These paintings were exhibited, and are illustrated in a catalogue published by the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History (Furst 1968–1969). The catalogue shows twenty paintings with associated texts.



8. Yarn painting, artist unknown, Huichol Indian, 1993. Yarn and wax on plywood. 7¾" x 9" (20 x 25 cm). Purchased November 1993 in Mexico City. Although this yarn painting was purchased in 1993, it resembles the traditional offerings. It is small and roughly sketched. In places, the wax shows through. However, its color use and dynamic design are equal to the best commercial work. The design is similar to a stone god disk with the sun surrounded by symbols. Collection of author. Photograph by c.j. fleury.



9. Yarn painting, Eligio Carrillo Vicente, Huichol Indian, 1999. Yarn and wax on plywood. 23½" x 23½" (60 x 60 cm). Purchased from artist Eligio Carrillo, December 1999, near Tepic, Nayarit, Mexico. This painting has the bold and innovative color use of a master artist. It has interpenetrating blocks of color in unusual combinations, and a wide range of colors. Eligio Carrillo began doing yarn painting with Guadalupe de la Cruz Ríos in the early 1970s, and since then has trained a number of younger apprentices in the Santiago River region. The painting depicts a shaman curing his family, so that they will be happy and contented at home, without wanting to wander far away. Various gods and spirits are shown helping the shaman. Collection of author. Photograph by c.j. fleury.

Furst's article from the catalogue was later translated into Spanish, and the same twenty pictures reprinted in the Mexican book, *Mitos y Arte Huicholes* (Furst and Nahmad Sittón 1972). Ramón Medina was also interviewed by the Mexican journalist Fernando Benítez (1968), whose book on the Huichol, *Los Indios de Mexico,* Volume 2, was illustrated with three yarn paintings by Ramón Medina.[5]

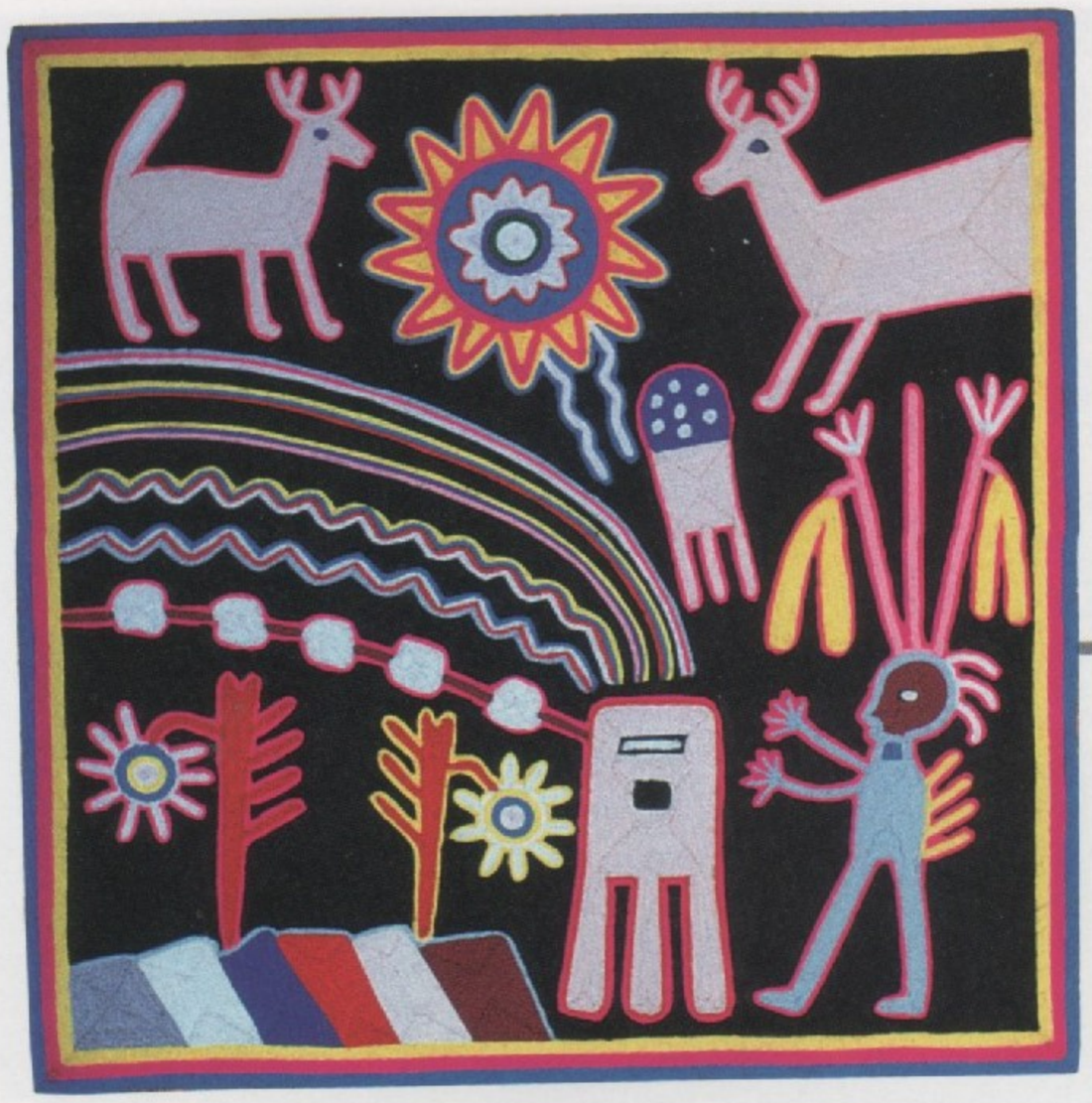
By 1967 the Mexican government was taking notice of the yarn paintings and becoming interested in promoting them. Stromberg (1976:156) explains that the government was especially interested in the art of northern Guerrero and the Huichol Sierra, because its "somewhat psychedelic quality" was in harmony with the artistic theme of the 1968 Olympics, which was held in Mexico City. Nevertheless, there was growing concern about deteriorating quality (Furst 1968–1969:21). Imitation Huichol art was beginning to appear on the market, harming the Huichol economy. Some entrepreneurs were encouraging the Huichol to make tourist souvenirs, such as Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck yarn paintings.

In order to preserve high quality and traditional workmanship in yarn paintings, the National Indian Institute (Instituto Nacional Indigenista, known as INI) invited Ramón Medina to come to Tepic, Nayarit to teach yarn painting to the Huichol living there. The school was directed by the Mexican anthropologist Miguel Palafox Vargas. I spoke to one artist who attended this school, but most artists do not seem to have learned through the INI school. Many Huichol Indians began to make yarn paintings in the late 1960s; however, most seem to have learned by apprenticing themselves to other Huichol artists.

A number of artists told me that they learned from Ramón Medina and later from his wife during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Among them were Eligio Carrillo Vicente (Fig. 9), José Benítez Sánchez, Guadalupe González Ríos, Domingo González Robles and José Isabel (Chavelo) González de la Cruz (Fig. 10). Many of these artists were relatives of Ramón Medina and Guadalupe de la Cruz Ríos or came from the same communities in the foothills surrounding Tepic. In addition, the Franciscans of Zapopan maintained a house in Guadalajara, and there was also a government-sponsored house in Mexico City where Huichol could come from the Sierra Madre and stay to do crafts. I interviewed several artists, now in their thirties and forties, who learned yarn painting in these houses.

In 1971 the popular Mexican magazine *Artes de Mexico* published two issues on Huichol art and culture, with texts by Ramón Mata Torres and photographs by Padre Ernesto Loera Ochoa.[6] One issue contains a short article on commercial yarn paintings and the ceremonial art forms that preceded them, as well as a number of illustrations of yarn paintings. Unfortunately, the artists of the paintings are not identified. Mata Torres (1980:31) notes that yarn paintings appear to have been exclusively an urban phenomenon, and that he saw only small offering paintings in the Sierra Madre.

During the 1970s commercial production of arts and crafts began in the Sierra Madre. The impetus came from Plan HUICOT, a government development project that opened the previously inaccessible Huichol Sierra (Manzanilla n.d.).[7] FONART, the Mexican government craft marketing agency, began flying into the Sierra Madre to purchase crafts. Some observers felt that this



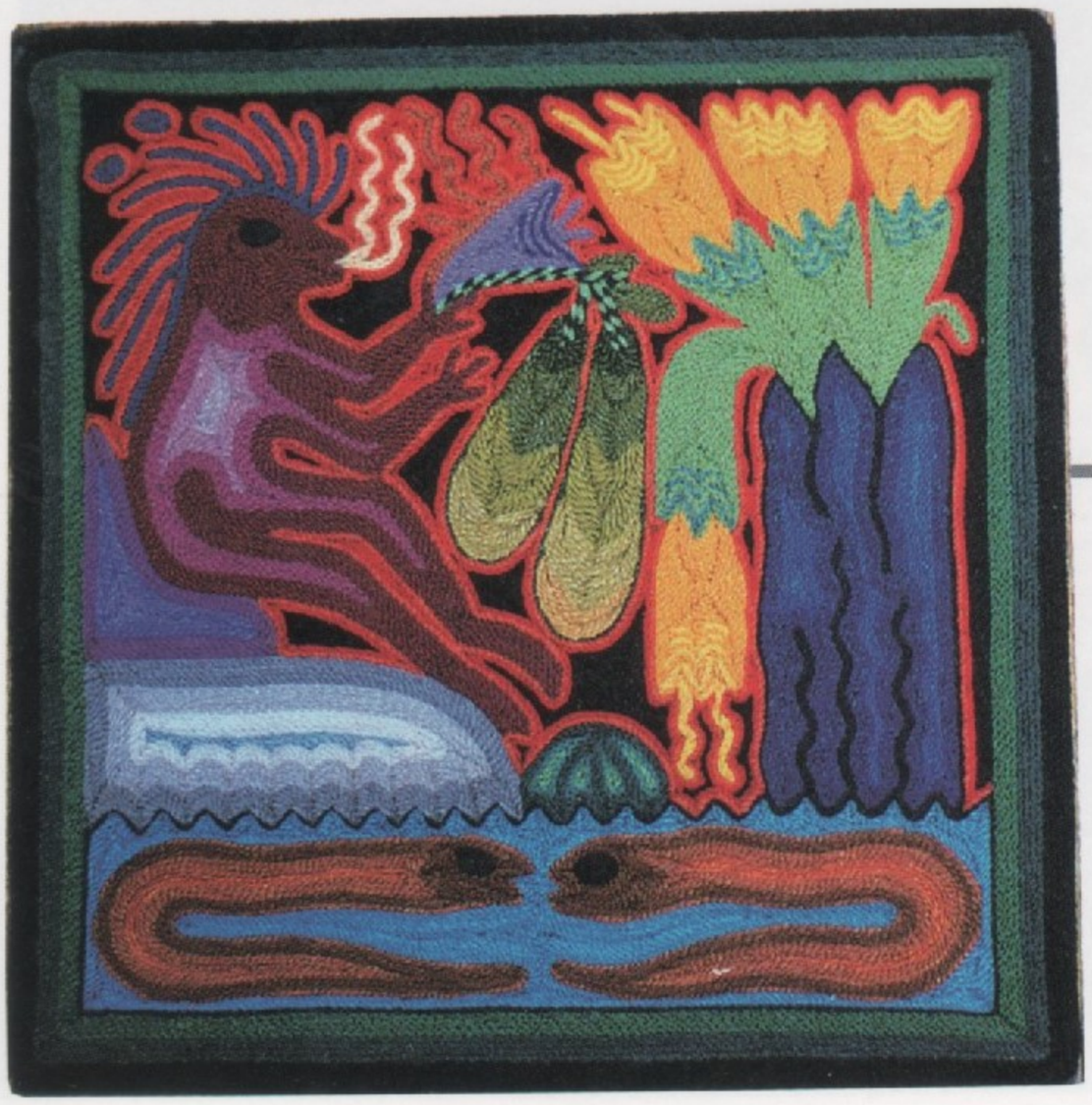
10. Yarn painting, José Isabel (Chavelo) González de la Cruz, Huichol Indian, 1988. Yarn and wax on plywood. 23⅓" x 23½" (60 x 60 cm). Purchased from Guadalupe de la Cruz Ríos, October 1988, in Wakefield, Quebec. This painting uses the medium weight wool sold under the brand name, El Gato para Todo, and used in paintings in the 1970s and 1980s. Artists using this wool tend to fill in large blocks of single colors, and to use relatively few colors within a single figure. The design of two deer facing a *nierika* (spoked figure) is traditional. However, the drawing of a shaman playing a three-legged drum is modern. The painting depicts the messages going out from the drum (wavy lines) and the direct response of the gods (straight lines.) The artist apprenticed with Guadalupe de la Cruz Ríos. Collection of author. *Photograph by c.j. fleury.*

development led to a decline in quality of the crafts produced, because FONART purchased almost everything that was offered, regardless of quality. Several Westerners who moved to San Andrés, Jalisco during this period also helped to make it a center for the production of arts and crafts (Muller 1978:97). In particular, Peter Collings and Susana Eger Valadez encouraged the Huichol to do better quality work, supplied materials and marketed the products.

With the new air and road routes, it became physically possible to make yarn paintings in the Sierra Madre and ship them out. However, despite this possibility, it does not appear that many yarn paintings were actually made there. Kal Muller (1978:96) discusses government efforts to foster a commercial arts and crafts program, but notes that yarn paintings were seldom made in the Sierra Madre because of the cost of moving heavy plywood. Even today, most artists do not try to make yarn paintings in the Sierra Madre and carry them out.[8] The plywood is simply too heavy to carry in any quantity, and the paintings are too fragile; instead, the artists prefer to go to the city to make them. There they can buy wax, yarn and sheets of plywood; make the paintings and sell them; then go back to the Sierra Madre with cash or goods. Beadwork and fabric items, such as embroidery and weaving, are lighter to carry, and they tend to be made more in the Sierra Madre.

Growth and International Popularity

The growing Mexican and international interest in Huichol arts led to a number of gallery and museum exhibitions during the 1970s and 1980s. The yarn painter José Benítez Sánchez collaborated with Juan Negrín, a writer with a longstanding interest in Huichol culture (Negrín 1977, 1979, 1986). Negrín (1977) mounted an exhibition in Guadalajara; most of the works displayed were by Benítez Sánchez, but the exhibit included some paintings by three other Huichol artists: Tutukila (Tiburcio Carrillo Carrillo), Juan Ríos Martinez and Guadalupe González Ríos. Further exhibitions were mounted in Mexico City



11. Yarn painting, Santos Daniel Carrillo Jiménez, Huichol Indian, 2000. Yarn and wax on plywood. 11¾" x 11¾" (30 x 30 cm). Purchased from artist Santos Daniel Carrillo, February 2000, in Tepic, Nayarit. This painting uses the thin threads typical of paintings in the 1990s. Although it is a quarter the size of the preceding painting, the finer thread allows a great deal more detail in drawing. Also, more colors may be combined within a single figure. One technique of combining colors is to move through a gradation of colors, such as the pale yellow through dark yellow in the flowers, and the dark red through pinks to white, seen in the figure of the shaman. Color combining of this type has become increasingly popular in yarn paintings of the 1990s, particularly among artists from the Huichol community of San Andrés. Collection of author. Photograph by c.j. fleury.

and internationally (Richmond de Mejia 1993). Negrín (1986) reprints an essay on Huichol art written for an exhibition in Mexico City and gives a detailed description of three yarn paintings by Benítez Sánchez. These descriptions are longer than the short descriptions usually attached to yarn paintings; in them, Negrín and Benítez Sánchez clearly try to present the deeper philosophical underpinnings of Huichol cosmology.

In 1978–1980, the Museums of Fine Arts in San Francisco sponsored a major exhibition of Huichol arts, which also traveled to Chicago and New York.[9] The catalogue for this exhibition, *Art of the Huichol Indians* (Berrin 1978, now unfortunately out of print), is the best source available for photographs of traditional and modern Huichol arts. The catalogue presents yarn paintings by five artists: Ramón Medina, Guadalupe de la Cruz Ríos, José Benítez Sánchez, Cresencio Pérez Robles and Hakatemi.[10] Furst's (1978) article in it describes his collaboration with Ramón Medina. The yarn painter Mariano Valadez worked on site, and his wife Susana Eger Valadez, an American anthropologist, was there to answer questions (Berrin and Dreyfus n.d.).

During the late 1970s it appears that some smaller exhibits of Huichol art were organized, perhaps through local art galleries and museums. Several artists told me that they had participated in tours to the United States and Canada, but there is little reference to these exhibits in the literature.[11]

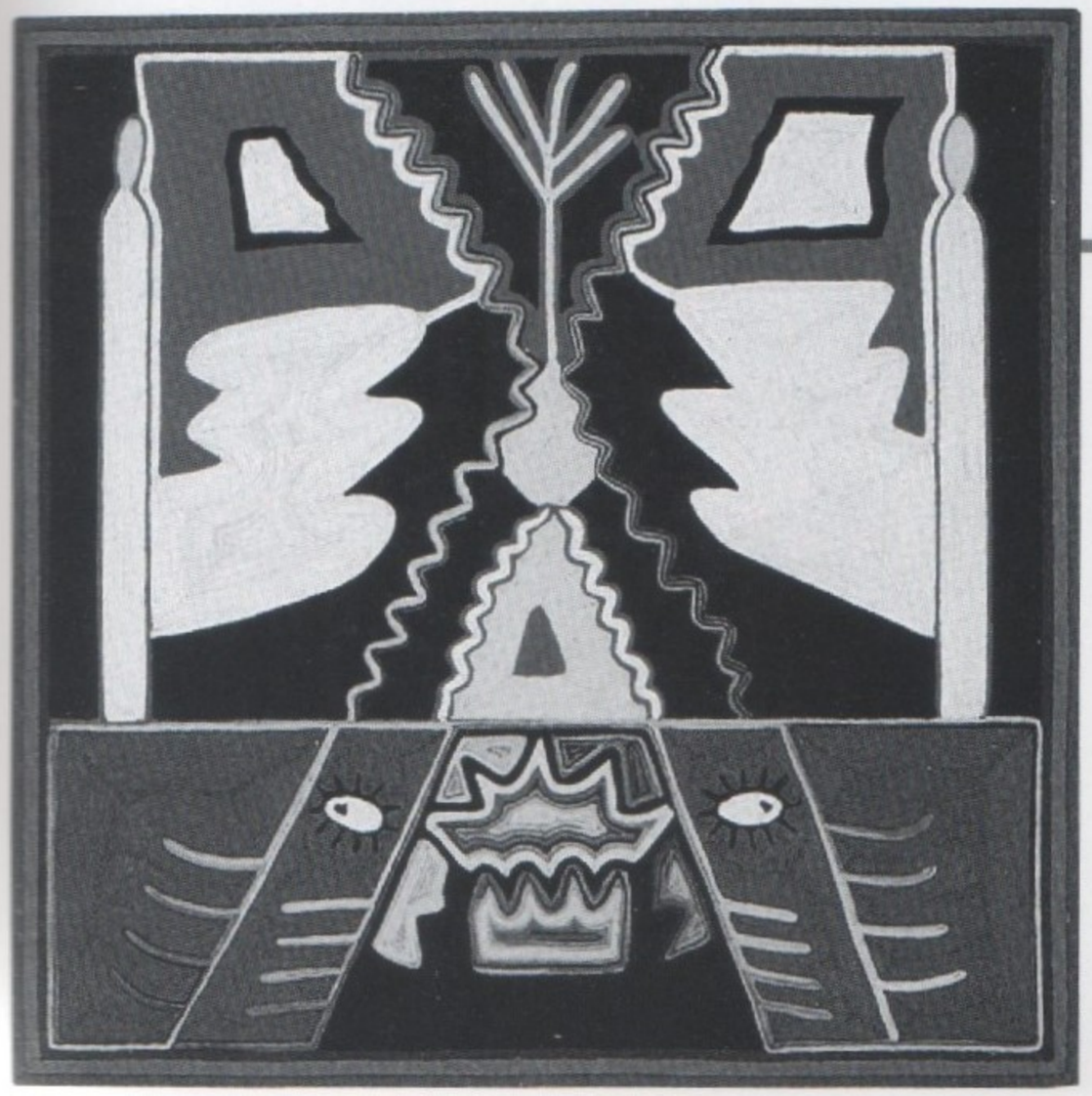
In 1986 another major exhibition of Huichol art was held in California at the San Diego Museum of Man in cooperation with the Huichol Center for Cultural Survival and Traditional Arts. This center was established in Santiago Ixcuintla, Nayarit by Eger Valadez and Valadez. *Mirrors of the Gods* (Bernstein 1989) is the proceedings of a symposium that accompanied the exhibit. It shows yarn paintings by Valadez and traditional arts such as embroidery and weaving. Eger Valadez and Valadez's most recent publication is *Huichol Indian Sacred Rituals* (1992), which shows a number of his paintings reproduced elsewhere as greeting cards and calendars.

By the 1990s there was a large, well-developed market for Huichol yarn paintings both within Mexico and internationally (Fig. 2). Much yarn painting is bought and sold in Puerto Vallarta, Jalisco, a town on the coast near the Huichol Sierra. There are several galleries that specialize in Huichol art, and one often sees the artists making the rounds of the galleries, carrying boxes of crafts for sale. There are also stores specializing in Huichol art in Tepic, in Guadalajara — particularly at the Basilica de Zapopan — and at the Ciudadela Market in Mexico City, where one can buy directly from the Huichol artists themselves (Fig. 1). Quite a few artists now go on tours outside Mexico to museums and galleries, and local exhibitions have become relatively common.

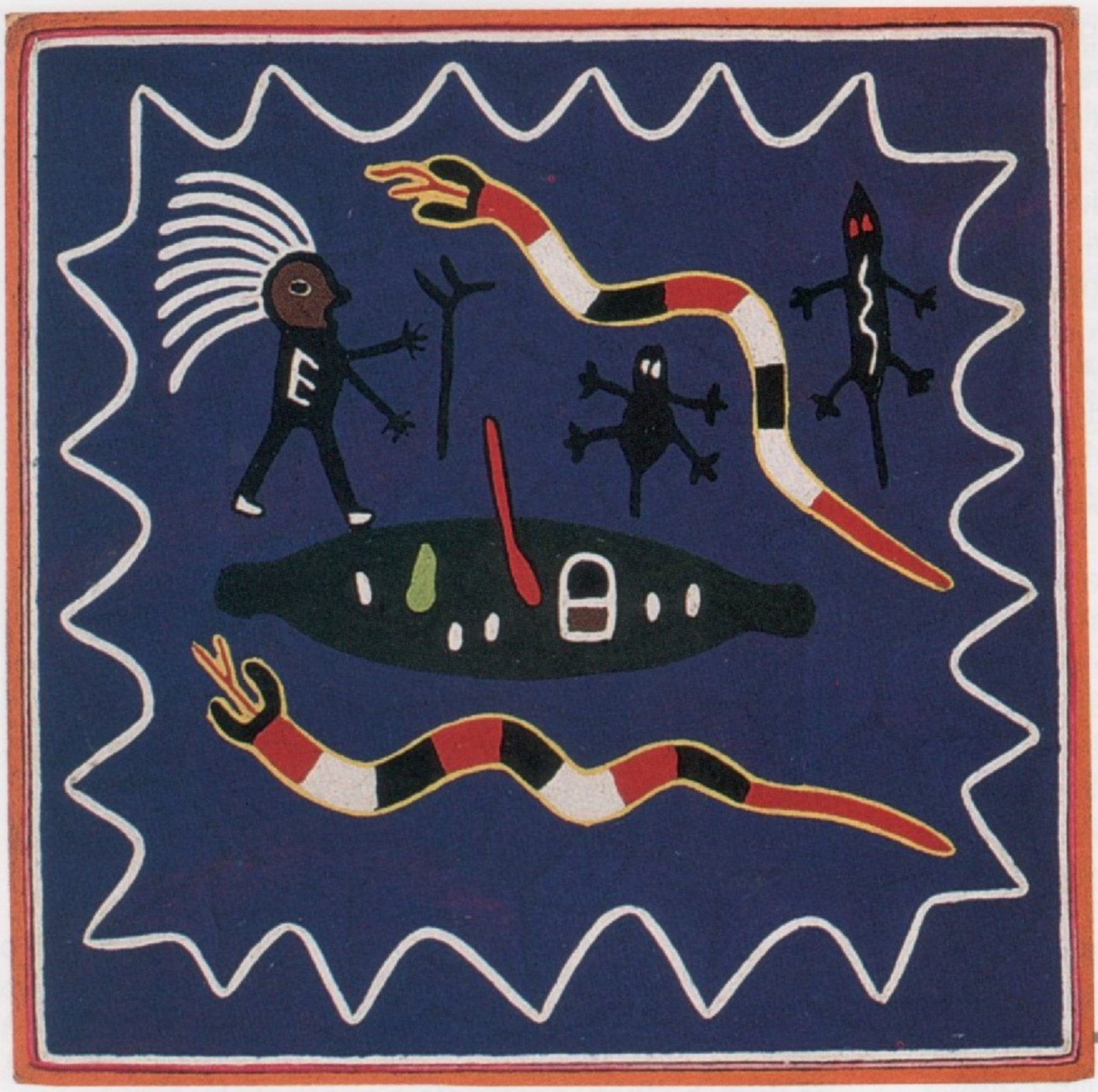
Technical Changes

Modern commercial yarn paintings are flat pictures. A square of sixty by sixty centimeters (23½" x 23½") is a standard size; this may be cut into smaller pieces such as thirty by thirty centimeters or twenty by twenty centimeters. Occasionally, the artists use other shapes such as circles and rectangles.

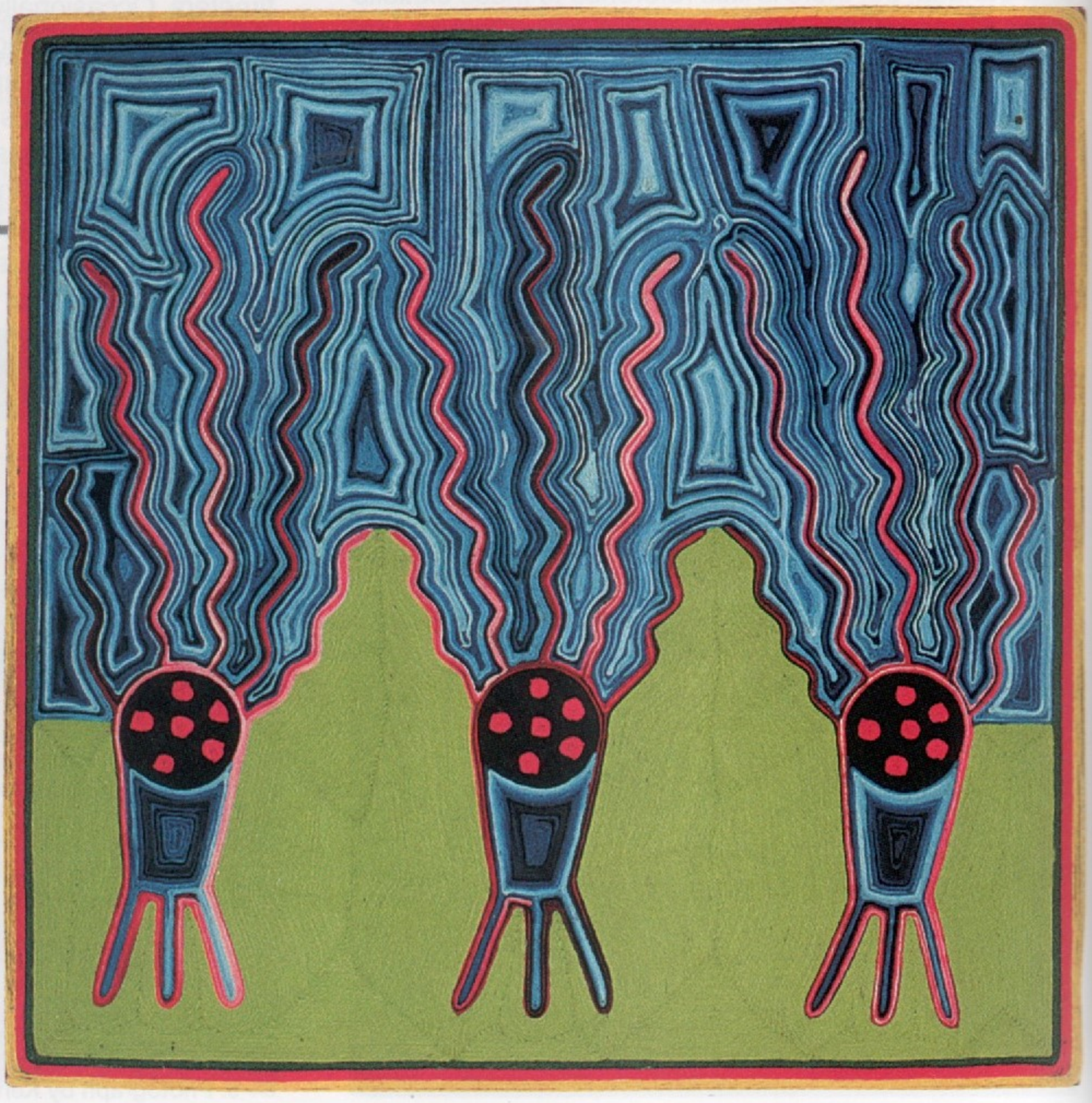
The paintings are made by spreading a thin layer of beeswax on one side of a board, usually plywood or masonite, then pressing yarn into the wax, one or two strands at a time with a finger. This technique of making yarn paintings appears to have originated with Huichol Indians, and is still used mainly by them.[12] Occasionally the artists use other materials in a yarn painting, such as small, round, commercial mirrors (Fig. 6). Recently I have seen some experimental work that includes mixed media, such as beads, feathers or snakeskin.



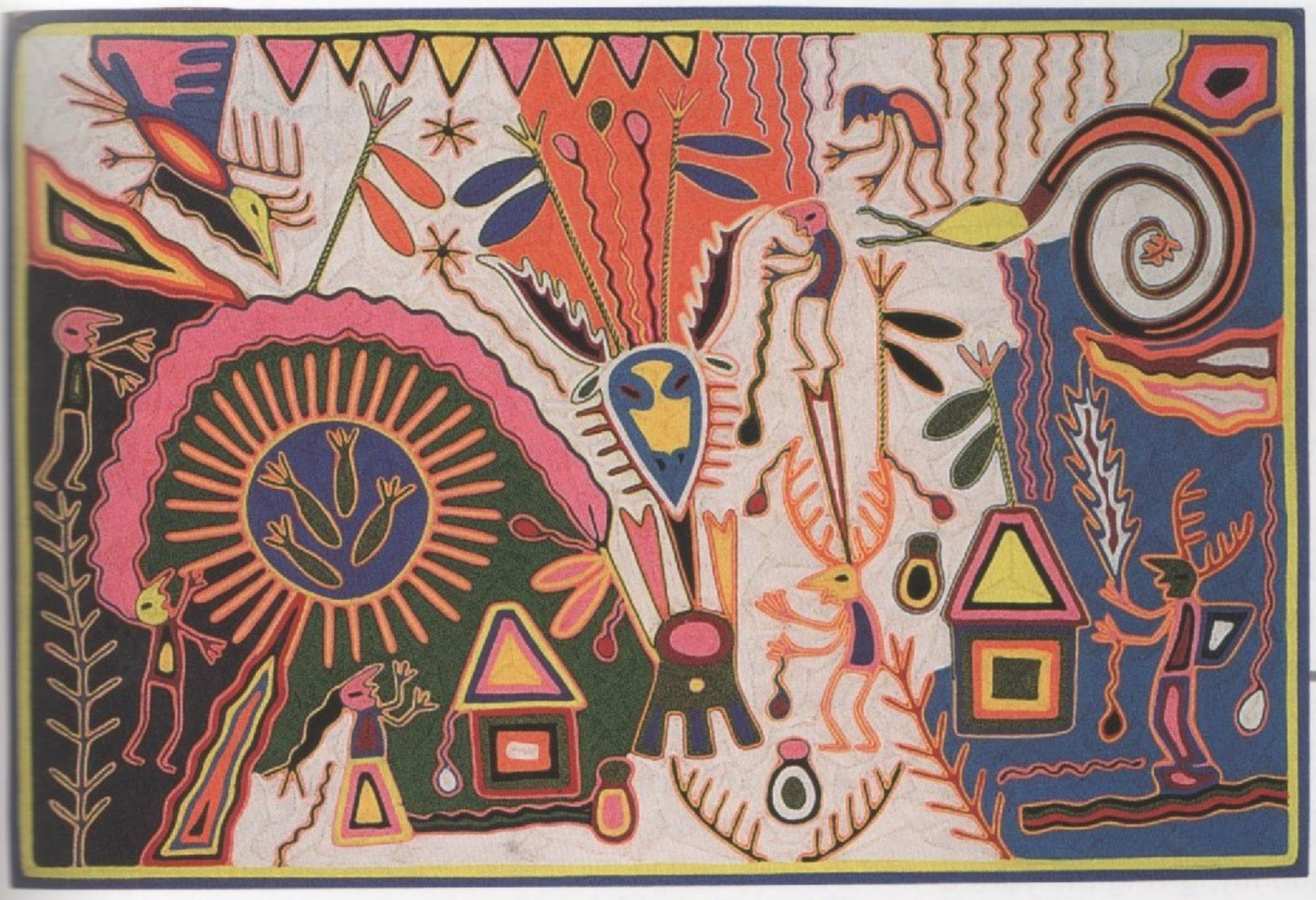
12. Yarn painting, Guadalupe de la Cruz Ríos, Huichol Indian, 1974. Mythological interpretation by Ramón Medina Silva. Collected by Peter F. Young. 23½" x 23½" (60 x 60 cm). Three-ply wool yarn and beeswax on plywood. This painting depicts a vision that Ramón Medina experienced while eating peyote, a hallucinogenic cactus. The painting shows the Fire-god, called *Tatewari* in Huichol. He is both below in the ground and above in the sky. Below the ground are his roots, which are symbolized by the red in the center. To each side are his eyes which watch the peyote pilgrims on their journey to Wirikuta. *Tatewari* is their guide on this journey and protects them from evil spirits during the dangerous passage. Above ground, *Tatewari's* flames rise into the night sky with many colors. At the top is a shaman's plume which is also *Tatewari's* because *Tatewari* was the first shaman and is the master and teacher of all shamans. To the left and right are candles. It was *Tatewari* who ordered that candles be used to support the earth and the sky. Courtesy Peter F. Young collection, San Diego Museum of Man, San Diego, California, Cat. No. 1974-64-9. Photograph by Ken Hedges.



13. Yarn painting, Guadalupe de la Cruz Ríos, Huichol Indian, 1974. Mythological interpretation by Ramón Medina Silva. Collected by Peter F. Young. 23½" x 23½" (60 x 60 cm). Three-ply wool yarn and beeswax on plywood. This painting was made by Guadalupe de la Cruz Ríos in 1974, using designs originated by her and her husband, Ramón Medina Silva. After Ramón Medina's death, Guadalupe and her family continued to make paintings that reproduced his style, or were actual copies of his work. Even today, one still finds copies of his paintings for sale. In Huichol culture, there is no particular value placed on original work or authorship; these are Western concepts. Therefore, Huichol artists often make copies of well-liked paintings, though they may vary the colors or images somewhat according to their personal tastes. This painting shows the white-haired Goddess of the Earth, Takutsi Nakawe, holding her staff. When Nakawe decided to send a flood to drown the world, she told Kauyumari to make an ark or canoe to escape. Kauyumari took with him a black female dog, fire, corn, beans and squash stems. The two serpents represent the flood waters, and other animals who live in the sea are also shown. The blue background represents the flood waters and the wavy white lines are the clouds. Courtesy Peter F. Young collection, San Diego Museum of Man, San Diego, California, Cat. No. 1974-64-8. Photograph by Ken Hedges.



14. Yarn painting, Guadalupe de la Cruz Ríos, Huichol Indian, 1973. Mythological interpretation by Ramón Medina Silva. Collected by Peter F. Young. 23¾' x 23¾" (60.6 x 60.5 cm). Three-ply wool yarn and beeswax on plywood. Huichol artists often use rainbow-colored wavy lines to depict life force or soul energy, called *kupuri*. All living things have life force or *kupuri,* including gods, spirits, peyote, maize, people and animals. *Kupuri* resides in the front of the head in people and animals, and rises from them as a powerful rainbow having many beautiful colors. The *kupuri* of the deer, maize and peyote is especially powerful since these are the earthly manifestations of the gods. The painting shows the *kupuri* rising from the centers of three peyote plants. Each plant has five segments represented by the five dots around the central dot. The number five is sacred to the Huichol and peyote plants with five segments are especially sacred and powerful. Courtesy Peter F. Young collection, San Diego Museum of Man, San Diego, California, Cat. No. 1974-64-6. Photograph by Ken Hedges.



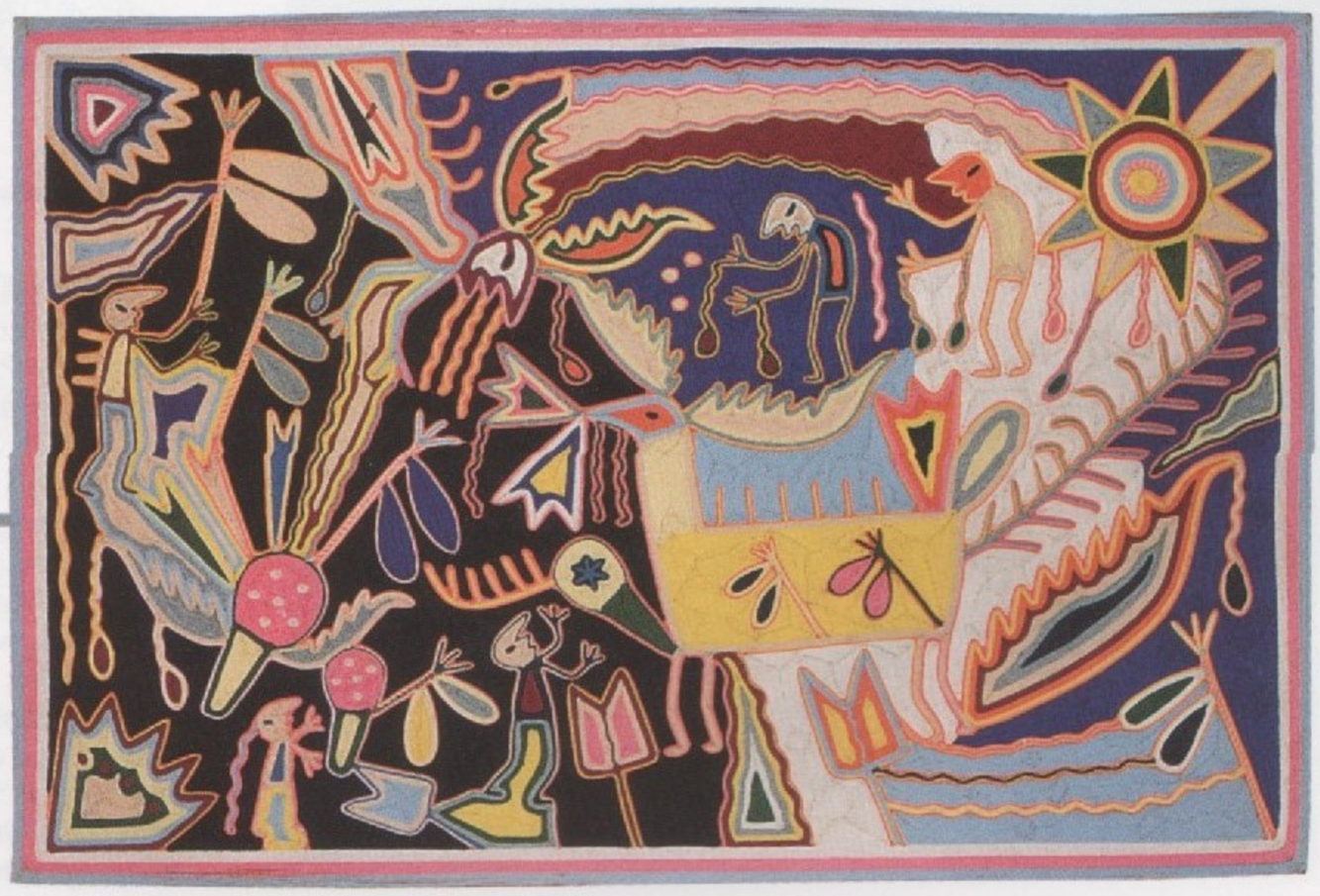
15. Yarn painting, Martin de la Rosa, Huichol Indian, 1975. Acrylic yarn and beeswax on plywood. 31¾" x 48" (81 x 122 cm). Many yarn paintings depict Huichol ceremonies, which are held on a regular cycle throughout the year. This painting shows the Fiesta of the *Elote* (new corn), a preharvest ceremony. On one side, there is a bowl that holds the cobs of the new corn. In the center is a drum and the head of a deer. On the side is a rattlesnake. Gift of Joe Desmond. Courtesy San Diego Museum of Man, San Diego, California, Cat. No. 1986-35-2. Photograph by Ken Hedges.

Two types of wax are used. One is a white beeswax mixed with pine resin that can be identified because it smells of pine. The other is an orange beeswax, called cera de Campeche, which smells like honey. Most painters now use cera de Campeche because it is easier to work with and stays sticky longer.

The yarn used today is commercial acrylic, dyed with aniline dyes. There is little record of any Huichol using pure wool or natural dyes.[13] In fact, the Huichol prefer the bright colors and range of hues available in aniline-dyed acrylics. Acrylic yarn is cheaper than wool and easy to find in Mexican stores; it may also be more practical than wool because it resists damage from the acids in the wax base, as well as from insects and moisture. This is important in the Huichol Sierra's climate during the rainy season.[14]

The main change in yarn painting materials over time has been in the yarn itself. According to de la Cruz Ríos, in the 1960s she and Ramón Medina used a comparatively thick yarn sold under the brand name El Indio (de la Cruz Ríos 1994). By the 1970s the artists had begun to use a thinner yarn sold under the brand name El Gato para Todo. By the 1990s the artists were using very thin, thread-like yarns, such as Cristal, Diamante, Estilo and Acrilan.

The change in yarn thickness has had a considerable impact on the designs. When thick yarn was used, the paintings had few figures or colors. With thinner yarns, the amount of detail possible in a yarn painting has increased considerably. A small yarn painting using thin yarns now has as much detail as a yarn painting of four times its surface area that used the thicker yarn. This change has affected the amount of labor required to make a painting; it takes the artists longer to complete a painting because many more strands of yarn are required to cover a given surface area. In the 1960s a 23½" x 23½" (60 x 60 cm) painting could be completed in one or two days; now a painting of this size may require four to eight days to complete. The longer production time affects profitability. Even if the artists charge four times the price that they did twenty or thirty years ago, they may not be receiving



16. Yarn painting, Martin de la Cruz, Huichol Indian, 1975. Acrylic yarn and beeswax on plywood. 31¾" x 48" (81 x 122 cm). This yarn painting depicts the ceremonial pilgrimage to the desert of Wirikuta to collect peyote. When the pilgrims eat the peyote, they see visions, and the Deer-god. Gift of Joe Desmond. Courtesy San Diego Museum of Man, San Diego, California, Cat. No. 1986-35-3. Photograph by Ken Hedges.

more for their labor because the paintings take four times as long to make.

In fact, unless the artists manage to sell into the upper levels of the market, they may not make much more than the Mexican minimum wage. As a result, yarn painting is not highly profitable for many artists, and they may be willing to abandon it for other crafts, such as beadwork, if the return drops much below the minimum wage level. The low profitability of yarn painting, in turn, threatens the future survival of the art. The Huichol are still acutely impoverished and cannot afford to make art for art's sake.

Aesthetic Values in Yarn Painting

It is difficult to generalize about aesthetic values in yarn painting, since there is a good deal of variability in artists' styles. The commercial artists usually try to achieve a smooth, even coverage of the board, with the yarn tight and well packed. For durability, the yarn is laid down with few long, straight strands, except in the border. Usually the artists turn directions frequently, giving the yarn a textured appearance. However, some artists still use the cruder style of the religious offerings, with the wax showing through in places (Fig. 8).

Color is a vital aspect of yarn painting quality. The best artists are consistently inventive, creating new combinations of colors worthy of the best Western fashion designers. The Huichol themselves value what they call "color combining," which includes the ability to move back and forth between what they call *fuerte* (strong) and *bajito* (soft) colors. The painting by Santos Daniel Carrillo Jiménez illustrates one form of color combining (Fig. 11). Another version is the juxtaposition of colors in inventive combinations, exemplified by the work of artist Eligio Carrillo Vicente (Fig. 9).

The Huichol aesthetic value also requires that the artists strive to depict the ideas, myths and stories of their religion accurately. A competent artist should know what the painting means, if asked, and be able to explain it. For this reason, the paintings often have a description of their meaning written on the back. The paintings are intended to be an accurate representation of the gods and spirits that give the Huichol culture its most important meanings.

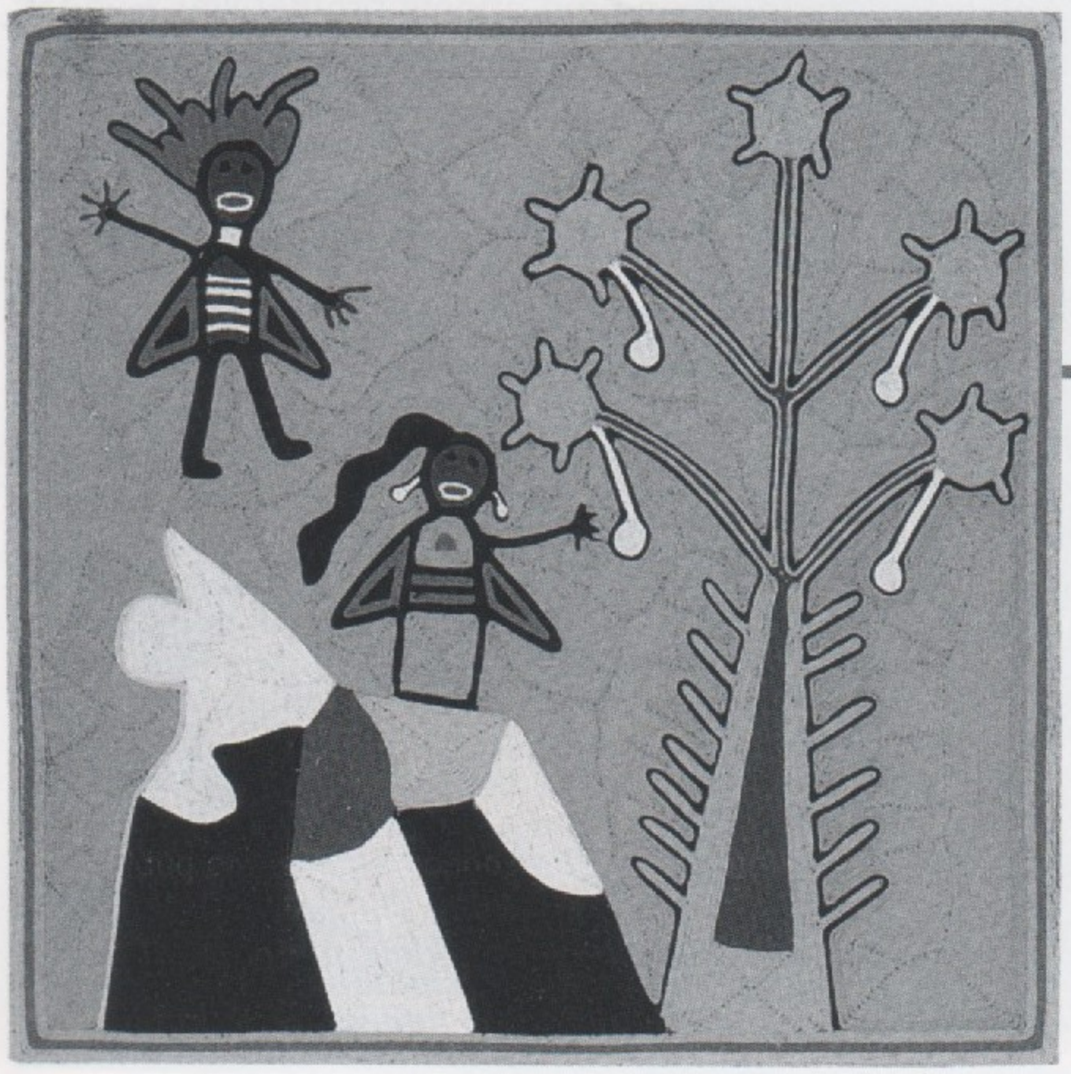
In the Huichol language, the usual term for a yarn painting is *nierika,* (nee-eh-ree-kah), which means a face, an eye, a mirror or a doorway to the world of the gods. It applies to yarn paintings because a *nierika* is a depiction of the world of the gods, as though one were seeing into their world from a distance through a telescope or in a mirror. Huichol shamans often gaze into a small pocket mirror to see into the world of the gods or foretell events. (The Huichol use of mirrors is similar to the Western psychic's use of a crystal ball or bowl of water for seeing and divination.) The mirror the shaman uses is also called a *nierika.* Thus, a yarn painting *nierika* is a painted version of what the shaman sees through the mirror *nierika.*

Huichol yarn painting has changed form in its transition from a religious offering to a commercial, and even a fine, art. However, the deeper religious meanings are still present in the images. A close study of the paintings and their meanings provides Western society with a detailed lesson on the ancient shamanic beliefs of the Huichol, and a window into pre-Columbian and contemporary Mexican Indian mysticism and spirituality.

Footnotes

[1] My doctoral dissertation (MacLean 1995) described the history of yarn painting and the role of Huichol aesthetics and shamanism from the perspective of the indigenous artists themselves. A recent dissertation (Grady 1998) addresses yarn paintings from the perspective of their authenticity. MacLean (2000) discusses the source of yarn painting imagery in light of Huichol soul concepts. This article will be followed by a second one about Huichol yarn paintings in the magazine's next issue.

[2] The perception of remoteness is that of Soto Soria, and may reflect Mexican administrative knowledge. In fact, several non-Mexican researchers had entered the Huichol country in the 1930s, including Robert Zingg, Otto Klineberg, and photographer Edwin F. Myers (Vogt 1955:250).



17. Yarn painting, Guadalupe de la Cruz Ríos, Huichol Indian, 1972. Mythological interpretation by Ramón Medina Silva. Collected by Peter F. Young. 23½" x 23½" (60 x 60 cm). Three-ply wool yarn and beeswax on plywood. This image was one of the first narrative yarn paintings produced by Ramón Medina Silva to illustrate a series of myths taped by the anthropologists Peter T. Furst and Barbara Myerhoff. The painting shows a young girl who is being seduced by the spirit of a dangerous hallucinogenic plant, called *kieri* in Huichol. The girl has climbed a cliff to reach the plant, which has convinced her that she will be able to fly if she eats it. The cliff is shown as colored square shaped rocks. This version of the painting is a copy of the original, made by Guadalupe de la Cruz Ríos after the death of her husband, Ramón Medina, in 1971. Courtesy Peter F. Young collection, San Diego Museum of Man, San Diego, California, Cat. No. 1974-64-1. Photograph by Ken Hedges.

[3] In Huichol culture, first names are more commonly used than surnames. Indeed the Huichol did not use surnames until Spanish census-takers required them to do so in the late 1800s (Lumholtz 1902:v2, 98–99). I follow the common Huichol practice of referring to people by their first names.

[4] Kamffer (1957) appears to be the first to refer to yarn painting in English, but he does not discuss the paintings in any depth.

[5] A segment of this book was translated into English and published as *In the Magic Land of Peyote* (Benítez 1975), with an introduction by Peter T. Furst.

[6] These issues were reprinted in 1980, though with black-and-white rather than color illustrations; my references are to the 1980 edition.

[7] HUICOT is an acronym of Cora, Tepehuane and Huichol. It was part of an ambitious scheme to develop the Santiago (or Lerma) River system through the Sierra Madre, including building dams and roads, and bringing in government services, such as schools and stores.

[8] One artist I met did manufacture yarn paintings in the Sierra Madre, but he purposely chose to live at the end of the road into the region. Most Huichol live farther on, down narrow mountain trails, where the only means of transport is on foot or on horseback.

[9] The exhibit began in San Francisco (November 4, 1978 to March 4, 1979), then traveled to the Field Museum of Natural History (May 1, 1979 to September 3, 1979), and then to the American Museum of Natural History, New York (November 7, 1979 to February 10, 1980; Berrin and Dreyfus n.d.).

[10] No Spanish name is given for Hakatemi.

[11] A mimeographed catalogue of an exhibit at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver is in the National Library of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario (Knox and Maud 1980).

[12] Recently some Cora and Tepehuane Indians have begun to make and sell yarn paintings. While the manufacturing technique is the same as the Huichol paintings; the color use and designs are different.

[13] Ramón Medina's yarn paintings from the 1960s were almost all done with wool; I have not seen any artists using pure wool yarn today. The only reference to this practice I have noted is a 1986 statement by John Bowles that the yarn painter José Benítez Sánchez used wool (San Diego Museum of Man n.d.:catalogue notes, 1986-35-2).

[14] The stability of the materials was pointed out by conservators Jan Vuori, Renée Dancause and Janet Mason of the Canadian Conservation Institute (Vuori 1997; Dancause 1997; Mason 1997).

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