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Huichol Woven Designs: Documenting the Encoded Language of an Ancient Mesoamerican Artform



Research Year: 1996

Culture: Huichol

Chronology: Contemporary

Location: Jalisco, México

Site: San Andrés Cohamiata

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Introduction

The objectives of my project sponsored by the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. (FAMSI), were to record and document Huichol Indian woven designs from the Mexican sierra community of San Andrés Cohamiata, Jalisco, and disseminate the information to scholars, Huichols, and interested general audiences. Huichol Indians, more so than most other indigenous groups in Mesoamerica, have maintained beliefs, customs and traditions with antecedents dating back to pre-Columbian times. Huichol women carry on the ancient art of back-strap loom weaving; a study of their designs is invaluable for gaining greater information, and hence, insights into traditional Mesoamerican cultures. Through their looms, weavers create and recreate a vast repertoire of designs that serve as symbols important to

Huichol culture. Weavers from the community of San Andrés Cohamiata have maintained their textile design traditions to a greater degree than other Huichol communities.

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About the Research

My research during the granting period, September 1995 to August 1996, was accomplished in five phases. The first phase took place during the 1995 - 1996 academic year and involved organizing and photographing Huichol woven designs from my own textile collection. This enabled me to gain greater visual fluency in recognizing the kinds of designs being woven by Huichol women in present times. I also consulted with Dr. Nancy Moyer, Professor of Art at the University of Texas-Pan American, who oriented me to the technology available for scanning these designs into a computer and saving them on a CD ROM for archival purposes. Storing the woven designs in this manner allows for greater flexibility and higher resolution in producing copies of the images on plain paper, as photographs, and as slides.

While I was teaching and carrying out my other professorial duties at the University of Texas-Pan American, I received an unexpected visit from my Huichol weaving teacher, Estela Hernandez, her husband, and three of her children (the oldest one being my goddaughter). Estela has been my weaving teacher, major consultant, and comadre for the past ten years. This was her and her family's first trip to the United States, and during the month's time that they were visiting I used this opportunity to conduct in-depth tape-recorded interviews with her about the meaning and significance of the designs in my weaving collection as well as those published in the 1904 memoirs by Carl Lumholtz, *Decorative Art of the Huichols*.

Their visit was also an opportunity for my students, faculty, the University and Rio Grande Valley community to learn about Huichol culture, their artwork, and the importance of their designs. I organized various presentations which informed the audiences about Huichol culture within the context of greater Mesoamerican culture, and my Huichol family demonstrated how they make their art and answered questions from interested individuals. (Los Arcos Spring 1996: vol. 2, no. 3)

The second phase of my project was carried out at the end of the academic year when I traveled to the American Museum of Natural History in New York City and spent over a week researching and photographing the Huichol textile collection that Lumholtz acquired in the Huichol communities of San Andrés Cohamiata and Santa Catarina in the 1880s. The curators in the anthropological department who attended to me, Dr. Charles Spencer, Ms. Lisa Whitall, and Dr. Anahyd Akaghuh were most helpful, and through their efforts I was able to photograph a majority of the woven collection and copy the documentation Lumholtz had made on the textile pieces. Photographs of a selected number of these textiles are included as an appendix at the end of this report.



Figure 1. Huichol back-strap loom weaving.



Figure 2. Huichol back-strap loom weaving.

In early July I began the third phase of the project which involved traveling to San Andrés Cohamiata and interviewing more Huichol women about the meaning of the woven designs. I showed many Huichol women and men photos of the Lumholtz textile collection. Every time I pulled out the photos to show, Huichols showed great enthusiasm and admired the pieces, often times adding a comment here or there: that they have some of the designs in the photos, that their mother or grandmothers used to weave a certain design or weaving style, etc. I was surprised, however, that so few women were able to explain the significance of the designs, especially the more

abstract, geometric ones. Fortunately I was able to work with two weavers well versed in design symbolism because they, like Estela Hernandez, have actively participated in traditional Huichol rituals and practices all of their lives.

I spent ten days with an older Huichol woman, Maria Paulita Mijares, who is a weaver and shaman, tape recording interviews with her based on photographs I had of designs from my textile collection and the designs I had recently photographed of the Lumholtz collection. Her son, who is fluent in Huichol and Spanish served as our interpreter. Following these interviews, I conducted additional interviews with another Huichol weaver, Benita Mijares, regarding her interpretation of these designs.

I discovered as I interviewed these weaving consultants that some designs have a general meaning upon which they all agree, such as corn, flowers, peyote, deer, hummingbirds, eagles, etc. Nevertheless, each weaver was able to expound upon the theme of these designs providing myths, stories, analogies, and metaphors that enabled me to gain more information about the symbolic nature of the objects depicted in the designs. The more geometrical designs were interpreted differently by the women. The variations in their responses, I realized, were based on each one's own life experiences and knowledge of their culture and environment.

An example of this was a zig-zag design; one woman interpreted this to be a design on the back of a snake, another said it was the design of a centipede repeated over and over. Other differences I found among these weavers and their design interpretations were based on their perceptions of the world. Estela looked at woven textiles that had more than one design as a whole picture, not as a textile with isolated designs. Maria Paulita explained that some of the designs were face painting designs, *uxa*, which capture the essence of their gods. According to Maria Paulita, particular designs not only portrayed but emanated the divine power of these supernatural entities. Benita, on the other hand, saw the designs as storytelling devices that provided information about the myths and religious traditions associated with the themes of the designs. She said that one design of a vine with flowers was a particular plant called *taukawuwu* and is the vine that connects the souls of Huichols to the sky. In the traditional Huichol temple, this vine is hung from the rafters in the four cardinal directions and the sacred center.



Figure 3. Huichol back-strap loom weaving.

The fourth phase of my project involved disseminating information about Huichol woven designs to Mexican, American, and European anthropologists at the Sociedad Mexicana de Antropología Mesa Redonda in Tepic, Nayarit, in August 1996. At the conference I presented a paper and slide presentation titled "Los dibujos tejidos por las mujeres huicholes" and shared insights I had learned about Huichol designs. The papers from this conference will be published in the proceedings of the conference; my paper will also be included in the publication.

The fifth and final phase of my project culminated in meeting with the director of the Fowler Museum of Cultural History at UCLA, Doran Ross, regarding an exhibition and catalogue focusing on Huichol designs that I would guest curate in spring 1999. I presented him with a proposal for the exhibition and discussed the pieces considered for display from the American Museum of Natural History; the Museum of the American Indian; The Southwest Museum; the Laboratory of Anthropology in Santa Fe, New Mexico; and the Fowler Museum. Mr. Ross and several members from the Museum staff showed me how, from my computer, I will be able to access their Huichol collection and card catalogue through the World Wide Web. This, in turn, will enable me to carry out further research and selection of objects from the Fowler Museum's collection for the exhibition.

In addition to the exhibition and catalogue on Huichol woven designs, I will be working on scanning all of the photos of the Huichol designs into the computer at the University of Texas-Pan American and putting these on CD ROM. Hopefully I will find funding to employ a work study student to help me accomplish this task. I will also be transcribing the extensive interviews I tape recorded with my Huichol weaving consultants to add to

my data base. In the next few years I plan to work jointly with Huichols and linguists at the Universidad de Guadalajara to make these designs available to preliterate and literate Huichols through the publication of a trilingual book (Huichol, Spanish, and English) as well as Mexican, American, and all other interested individuals.

Conclusion

In closing, over the last year I have been very productive in accomplishing the majority of the goals I had set out to complete for my research project on Huichol Indian woven designs. I believe the planned publications based on my research will be of great interest to Mesoamerican scholars and will provide a base upon which scholars can compare and contrast the design motifs of other indigenous groups, past and present, living in Mesoamerica with those of the Huichols. The success of my research would not have been possible without the support of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies Research Grant. I wish to thank the members on the board of the Foundation for their support and interest in my work and I will be most happy to send the Foundation copies of my future publications on this subject.

Appendix of Photographs

Lumholtz Collection:

All images Copyright ©Lumholtz Collection, American Museum of Natural History.



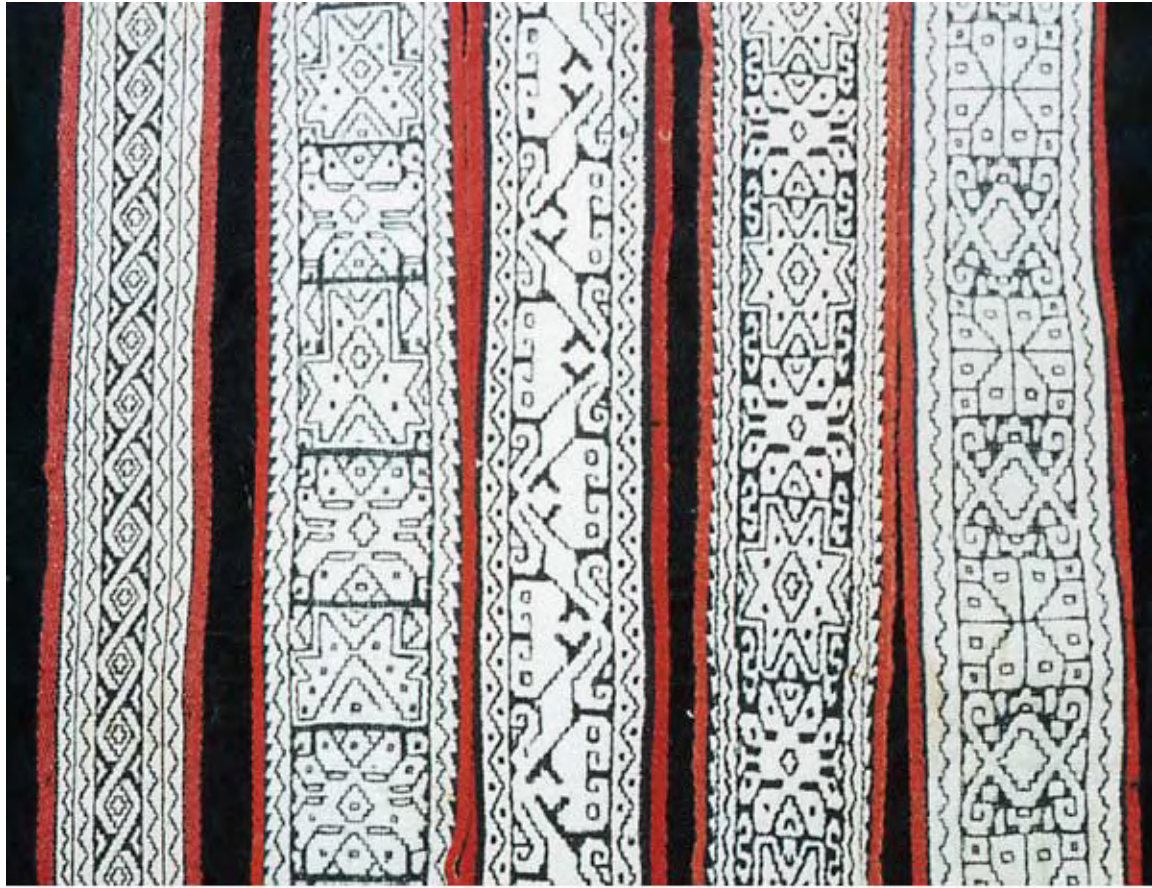
American Museum of Natural History
Lumholtz collection
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American Museum of Natural History
Lumholtz collection
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American Museum of Natural History
Lumholtz collection
65/269



American Museum of Natural History

Lumholtz collection

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American Museum of Natural History
Lumholtz collection
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American Museum of Natural History
Lumholtz collection
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American Museum of Natural History
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American Museum of Natural History
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American Museum of Natural History
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Lumholtz collection
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American Museum of Natural History
Lumholtz collection - San Andres Cohamiata
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American Museum of Natural History
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Lumholtz collection - San Andres Cohamiata
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Lumholtz collection
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American Museum of Natural History
Lumholtz collection
65/1372

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