foreword

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Hope Maclean's book, the first to treat in real depth the uniquely Huichol art of "painting" with colored yarns—and from the "inside out," that is, from the artist's viewpoint, rather than only from the "outside in"—brings to mind the transformation from the mundane to the sacred of a yarn painting that looked no different from those made for sale, to which I was witness in December 1968 on the second of the two peyote pilgrimages in which I was a semiparticipant-observer.

There were seventeen Huichol *peyoteros* in our party, thirteen adults and three children, the youngest barely a week old when we started out from an overnight stay on the left bank of the Río Lerma. Across from our temporary encampment was a rural settlement of Huichol peasant farmers and their families. They had left their homes in the mountains and canyons of the Sierra Madre Occidental for lack of arable land, but had never lost touch with their old homes and the relatives they had left behind. Nor had Ramón Medina Silva, a multitalented artist but also a lifelong peasant farmer, who led this pilgrimage, as he had in December 1966, when the late Barbara G. Myerhoff and I had the great good fortune of being the first anthropologists to witness the peyote hunt, of which the Western world had first learned at the turn from the nineteenth to the twentieth century from Carl Lumholtz, the pioneering Norwegian ethnographer of Huichol art and symbolism.

For Ramón, this was the high point of his life. Long ago he had pledged five peyote pilgrimages to his tutelaries, Tatewari, Our Grandfather, the ritual kin term for the old fire god and tutelary of earthly shamans, and Tayaupá, the Sun Father, and this would be his fifth, when he would have the right to call himself a *mara'akame*, Huichol for the shaman who not only cures but sings the many nightlong sacred chants.

Our goal, three hundred miles to the east, was the sacred peyote desert in the north-central Mexican state of San Luís Potosí. The Huichol call the desert "Wirikuta," and they are convinced it was the homeland of their ancestors.¹ One of the Huichols in our party was an exceptionally handsome young

woman named Veradera. As soon as we camped on the first night out, I saw her pull a small rectangular piece of quarter-inch plywood from her woven shoulder bag and cover it with a thin layer of brown wax from the indigenous stingless bee. It certainly looked as though she was preparing the board for one of the yarn paintings that the Huichol have been making for sale since the 1950s and early 1960s, only smaller than usual. By the time we arrived in Wirikuta, she was putting the finishing touches on a wool yarn design that now covered the entire board; after returning it to her bag, she rejoined her companions for the “hunt,” literally with bow and arrow, for the little visionary succulent that, for the Huichol, is the transformation of the sacred deer.

Except for the painting's size, perhaps five inches across, in technique and appearance it was no different from those the Huichol make for the tourist trade. True, even in the Sierra you rarely see Huichols, even young children, without something in their hands—a weaving, an embroidery, a string of beads for weaving into rings, necklaces, or ear ornaments—when not otherwise engaged in agricultural or household chores. But why would someone apparently every bit as charged as any of her fellow pilgrims with anticipation of her first encounter with the ancestors and the visionary peyote distract herself—or so I thought—with thoughts of future income?

I could not have been more mistaken. This young artist—who, like her companions, had taken on the name and identity of one of the divine participants in the primordial peyote hunt and, also like them, was addressed as one of the Tateima, Our Mothers, for the duration—turned out to be as deeply immersed as her fellow pilgrims in this, the most sacred, longest-lasting, and physically and mentally most demanding ritual in the crowded ceremonial round.

The first day in Wirikuta was spent “stalking” and harvesting peyote, which, because it is only a few inches across and a dusty grey-green in color, and grows low to the ground under the protection of thorny vegetation, is not easy to spot. The roots are long and come to a point, and no Huichol would fail to leave the bottom portion in the ground to assure cloning and future growth. That night, everyone assembled in a circle around the fire that was the manifestation of Tatewari, Our Grandfather, the old fire god and tutelary of human shamans,

1. Recently published DNA studies have shown this to be “real history” framed in the language of myth, a reminder to anthropologists to give more credence to the people whose culture they are studying than to their own biases. See C. Jill Grady and Peter T. Furst, “Ethnoscience, Genetics, and Huichol Origins: New Evidence Provides congruence,” *Ethnohistory* 58, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 283–291.

continuing what they had done in the afternoon: sharing their bounty with their companions and slowly masticating slice after slice. Some also watched for the reaction to the very bitter taste of a young boy peyotero, who was probably ten or eleven years of age.

Ramón was feeding him slices of peyote, urging, as he had everyone, to “chew it well, chew it well, so that you will find your life.” Whether the boy liked it was important: if he did, the Huichol say, he was likely to become a shaman; if not, it was cause only for laughter, not shame. As we could see, our young companion, his mouth full of chewed peyote, was grinning from ear to ear and nodding his approval. So the omen was favorable.

But it was the young yarn painter who would soon catch everyone’s attention. Sitting perfectly upright, she was taking her time before returning to everyday consciousness, so much so that lighted candles were placed around her, each a miniature manifestation of Tatewari, to shield her from hostile witches who might try to steal her soul while it was traveling out-of-body to Other-worlds. It was not the only time that she kept her companions waiting, eyes closed and with an expression of wonderment, for the return of her soul, and on each occasion her companions saw to it that she was protected by a ring of “little Tatewaris.”

But it was on the following day that no one, not I nor her fellow Huichols, could have missed the power of her spirituality, a power that with a simple gesture would send her yarn painting full circle from commercial art back to its origin as visual prayer and means of communication with the ancestor gods.

The Huichols were again assembled around the fire, into whose flames Ramón and his chief assistants were placing various kinds of offerings, including the small wart gourds in which the Huichol keep the nicotine-rich “tobacco of the shaman,” *Nicotiana rustica*, which they smoke in maize husk cigarettes to put themselves into a state of mind receptive to the peyote experience.

Veradera, seated with legs slung under, took her little yarn painting from her shoulder bag and, with its muslin cover removed, placed it on the fire, watching intently as, in its reincarnation of art as prayer, it was consumed by the flames: to give pleasure to the deities in exchange for hoped-for benefits, a baby, perhaps, or a calf, or rain and enough of the sacred maize to feed the family. To make sure that not only Tatewari, in his guise as the flickering flames, but also the Sun Father received her gift, Ramón gestured the smoke in the direction of the summit of an extinct volcano towering over Wirikuta, from which, in the time of the ancestors, the sun was born in a fiery eruption.

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The yarn paintings made for sale are not in and of themselves sacred. But they do tell sacred stories. And though it may not always be available, for the wax into which the yarn is pressed, Huichols much prefer that of the indigenous stingless bee. Of that little insect, which does not sting but can inflict a little nip, there is a treasure house of sacred stories. And as Veradera's sacrificial yarn design attests, what matters most in the end is the artist's motivation and the depth of his or her relationship to the past.