



The Huichol People of Mexico

For hundreds of years, the Huichol (wee-chōl) Indians of northwestern Mexico have been creating some of the most beautiful folk art and textiles. Although the Huichol are known to be natural artists, their art is more than an aesthetic expression. The symbols in their yarn and bead paintings reflect their spiritual knowledge and wisdom that connects them to their past and their ancestors. Through their art, they celebrate and honor creation and the natural and spiritual worlds.



The Huichol people of Mexico have maintained a very strong cultural identity independent from mainstream Mexican society. Their way of looking at the world and the universe continues to be present in their art and their culture. The Huichol people celebrate life through the seasons and advocate harmony with nature and the environment. Their belief system is centered on elements of nature such as fire, earth, wind and water. Through their rituals and symbols, they advocate for communities to be respectful of the earth and call to the spirits of the universe so they can empower them and help the universe stay in balance.



The Huichol people believe that all living things such as flowers, rivers, trees, seeds, rain, clouds, plants, crops and even rocks are alive and therefore sacred. The spirits of nature give life, energy and nourishment to the world and its living things. For example, Water quenches the thirst of all living plants and animals. Earth provides life, food and shelter. Sun lights and keeps the earth warm while providing energy so things can grow. Wind gives breath to all, and Fire lives in all the stars, providing light, energy, heat. In order to continue to maintain all living things in balance, the Huichol make offerings, prayers, pilgrimages and festivals. In doing so, they thank the spirits for all living things and gifts in the world.



Living in the semi-arid land of the Western Sierra Madre mountain range, the Huichol annually celebrate a large number of ceremonies in honor of their rain and water deities. Their principal ceremony is in honor of the *jiculi* (peyote cactus), which is celebrated with a journey to collect the cactus as they reach *Wirikuta*, their sacred site. Also in the service of their ceremonies and rituals, the Huichol create folk art that serves as offerings and prayers. *Nierikas*, or yarn paintings pressed onto wax and wood, are often offered as prayers, while the *tsikuri* (god's eye), candles, and prayer arrows embellished with feathers, are offered to pray for rain, health, food, and protection from harm.

The Huichol are also experts at creating objects for daily use. Utilitarian objects such as belts, sashes, bags, hats, and clothing whose designs date from ancient Mexico, are made by women in traditional looms and embroidered with complex geometric, animal and floral designs. Both men and women wear earrings, rings and bracelets made of multi-colored beadwork. This beadwork is also used to embellish gourd prayer bowls used in religious rituals. Musical instruments such as drums, rattles, horns, flutes, guitars and violins (the last two of European influence) are made of wood, reed, gourd, bone and animal hide, and are played during religious ceremonies.