



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## **From Gods to tourists: A new audience for Huichol art: The workings of Huichol religious art on the commercial market**

Mol, Alyssia

### **Citation**

Mol, A. (2023). *From Gods to tourists: A new audience for Huichol art: The workings of Huichol religious art on the commercial market.*

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [License to inclusion and publication of a Bachelor or Master Thesis, 2023](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3715192>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# From Gods to tourists: a new audience for Huichol art

*The workings of Huichol religious art on the commercial market*

Alyssia Mol

s1915304

[s1915304@vuw.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:s1915304@vuw.leidenuniv.nl)

Prof.dr. Pieter ter Keurs

MA Arts and Culture: Art History

Academic year 2023-2024

## *Table of Contents*

Introduction	<b>3</b>
Defining Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics	<b>5</b>
Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics	5
Specifics of Huichol culture	8
Ethnic art and tourism	9
Chapter One: Art within the scope of Huichol religion	<b>11</b>
Early Huichol art during the contact period	12
Religion	13
Shamanic art versus art for shamanic purposes	18
The Huichol on aesthetics and the ‘beautiful’	19
Chapter Two: The meaning of religious art in the tourist sphere	<b>23</b>
The place of the native on the art market: on being the ‘Other’	26
Separation of religious art and commercial art	29
Chapter Three: Commercialized religious native art: Survival or evolution?	<b>33</b>
Perceptions on Huichol art	33
Survival versus evolution of the Huichol culture	36
Conclusion	<b>43</b>
Bibliography	<b>45</b>
Illustrations	<b>50</b>
Illustration sources	<b>59</b>

## INTRODUCTION

When travelling to Latin-America as a tourist, it is not an uncommon sight to see people of indigenous communities selling their artisanal works on the streets or at markets, proudly displaying the typical designs and artforms of their culture. This includes textile works, trinkets, jewellery, sculptures and instruments, but more interestingly, they also sell artworks that have historically and traditionally held religious and shamanic importance to their respective cultures. One of the frontrunners of the indigenous art market are the Huichol, a native people of the Sierra Madre in Western Mexico. Since the mid-twentieth century, the Huichol have been commercialising their traditional artworks – such as their yarn paintings – and taken the global ethnic art marketplace by storm. Now, the first thing you will see when you search for ‘Huichol art’ on the internet, is a myriad of websites that sell both original and copied works of Huichol yarn paintings. Nevertheless, most of the buyers of Huichol art, which are mainly Western tourists, have no true comprehension of its rich traditional, religious and sacred context, and merely see it as another colourful ‘exotic’ artisanal work to commemorate their trip to Mexico.

The subject of indigenous art is relevant because not only is Latin-America a region that is nowadays the subject of more and more art historical, social and cultural research, but issues of indigeneity and how traditional communities are functioning in the globalising modern are becoming of major importance too. The effects of the modern world and tourism are ever increasing, thus it is relevant to discuss the status of indigenous cultures, how they are changing both artistically and culturally, and all the negative and positive aspects of said change. This thesis aims to research and analyse the close relationship between art and religion of ethnic tourist art with a focus on Huichol culture, in order to uncover how this relationship affects the massive contemporary commercialisation of ethnic art. I foremostly focus on the Huichol yarn paintings as an artform, as those make up the largest portion of the commercial market (fig. 1). However, other traditionally votive objects shall also be discussed in this context, such as votive gourd bowls and beaded figurines.

Firstly, I am evaluating the Huichol religion and culture as a whole, as well as highlight some ambiguous concepts that cannot be separated from this discussion, such as the Western idea on aesthetics and art within the anthropological sphere. Also, the term ‘art’ in this context is discussed, as it needs to be (re)defined specifically for this thesis. Moreover, an analysis of how the concepts of art and aesthetics function in the Huichol culture and religion is deemed prudent. From research, the Huichol – as well as other Latin-American indigenous

communities – have a different idea about what art is and what it is meant for. The Huichol greatly value the production process itself of any artform, so the significance of how the process of art-making is involved in the religious sphere will also be considered. Consequently, I can research if art can be seen and produced separately from a religious context in the Huichol community, and if so, under what conditions. As the concept of aesthetics is viewed differently by the Huichol, I also discuss indigenous views on how aesthetics functions in Huichol culture, if such a concept even exists. Secondly, this thesis analyses the effects that commercialisation has on the religious aspect of Huichol art and culture in order to investigate if and how the Huichol art has adapted and evolved over the years in order to be able to commercialize their art to such an extent. An important point of discussion to elaborate upon is thus how the context or meaning of commercialized art has changed, and if the art produced for the market is viewed as a whole different category separate from religious art. Thirdly, the findings of the previous chapters will be applied so that I can analyse if the commercialisation of the Huichol art is purely survival or a form of cultural and artistic evolution. Highlighting the asymmetrical relationship between the modern world and traditional communities is of great importance in this chapter, as both the Western side and the Huichol communities perspective on the intense commercialisation of indigenous art are discussed. I argue both the positive and negative effects of ethnic art commercialisation in terms of cultural survival and evolution, such as it being a catalyst for spreading more awareness and information about indigenous communities, while on the other hand contributing to a precarious and dependent position of native people in the commercial market. As a whole, these steps allow this thesis to ponder upon the relationship between art and religion of the Huichol culture, and how the process of commercialisation of native art on the tourist market has effected changes in artistic and cultural processes.

## DEFINING ANTHROPOLOGY, ART AND AESTHETICS

As this thesis ventures into the field of anthropology in its analysis of native art in the commercial and tourist market, it would be prudent to first discuss the extraordinary place that art occupies within this field. In this effort, one must keep in mind the historical and contemporary views on ‘ethnic’ art and art production, as well as the notion that art does not have a universal terminology and has different meanings in different cultures. Additionally, this thesis deals with indigenous art *and* tourist art – both which have a complex and contested status within art history – so I remain mindful of different interpretations of the concepts of art and aesthetics, realizing that multiple perspectives exist besides the dominant so-called ‘Western’ perspective. Therefore, I will delineate these terms in this chapter in order for them to be tailored to the research in question.

### *Anthropology, art and aesthetics*

A considerable increase in research done about the place of art in anthropology came about in the second half of the twentieth century, coming to a head in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Despite the growing interest and establishment of ‘art in anthropology’ as a research field within social and cultural anthropology, it remains a highly debated and complex field of study. According to Jeremy Coote, the anthropology of art studies material objects of different cultures, and analyses these objects as things that play a decidedly big role in a culture and religion, thus not merely being regarded as of purely ‘aesthetic’ value.<sup>1</sup> This perspective has not only generated changes in how objects are perceived as ‘art’, but how cultural objects can be seen as artforms in its specific context. The introduction of Ellen Dissanayake’s art as a form of play that is essential to the human sociality and her ideas of art as an act of ‘making special’ has been largely influential in the art-anthropological discourse.<sup>2</sup> According to Dissanayake, ‘making special’ refers to “an activity or behaviour involving the intentional making or expressing of something that is more than necessary for practical purposes”.<sup>3</sup> In later works, Dissanayake refers to this process as ‘artification’. Although Stephen Davies has argued that ‘making special’ and art are not always synonymous,

---

<sup>1</sup> Coote, Jeremy on “Anthropology of Art”, RAI, accessed 13 October 2023,

<https://www.discoveranthropology.org.uk/about-anthropology/specialist-areas/anthropology-of-art.html>

<sup>2</sup> Dissanayake, Ellen. “A Hypothesis of the Evolution of Art from Play.” *Leonardo* 7, no. 3 (1974): 211–17.

The term ‘making special’ was officially introduced in: Dissanayake, Ellen. “Aesthetic experience and human evolution” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 41 (1982): 145-155.

<sup>3</sup> Dissanayake, “Aesthetic experience,” 146.

Dissanayake's general concept of art as a way of 'making special' is of interest to this thesis.<sup>4</sup> As will become clear in this research, Huichol objects such as votive gourd bowls and yarn paintings have been visually 'artified' by beads, patterns, shapes and usage of special materials. Dissanayake notes that 'artification' does not only apply to visual arts, but also includes artforms such as poetry, music and dance; artforms which also have great significance within Huichol culture.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Huichol culture seems to 'artify' and 'beautify' their objects in a more religious sense, as will be discussed later.

Works of Alfred Gell and Robert Layton further analyse art within the anthropological field as a phenomenon that is an active agent within culture and society.<sup>6</sup> Gell presents the idea of art objects as not merely passive objects of aesthetic value, but as social agents that are meaningful in the culture that produced them.<sup>7</sup> Applied to the Huichol culture, it will become clear in the first chapter analysing Huichol art and religion, that to them art objects take on an active role in society and are given an exceptional amount of cultural and spiritual agency. By all means, the Huichol votive objects can be seen as objects that are active agents in their culture and have been 'made special' through its production, with the intention to imbue the objects with a certain sense in order to "attract attention and manipulate emotional response".<sup>8</sup> Thus, the term 'art' used within the context of this research ought to be understood looking through the lens of 'making special'. Hence, in order not to get entangled in the age-old discussion of "what is art?", I permit the use of the term 'art' to refer to the works made by the Huichol, keeping in mind the aforementioned boundaries. In similar breath, when the term artist is used, it shall be based on this interpretation of art: namely the creators of the art objects that are discussed. The Huichol who fashioned the yarn paintings shall be referred to as the makers of the artwork or artists. It should be noted that in their own culture, oftentimes they do not consider themselves to be artists, as many people – if not all people in the community – are in some way involved in the making of such objects, seeing as their culture and economy relies heavily on the production of the art objects. Nonetheless, since the distinction between religious material objects and commercial art on the tourist

---

<sup>4</sup> Davies, Stephen. *The Artful Species* (Oxford: University Press, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Dissanayake, Ellen. "Genesis and development of 'Making Special': Is the concept relevant to aesthetic philosophy?" *Rivista di Estetica* 54 (2013), 83-98.

<sup>6</sup> Layton, Robert. *The Anthropology of Art*. New York Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 1981.

Geertz, Clifford. "Art as a Cultural System." *MLN* 91, no. 6 (1976): 1473–1499.

Gell, Alfred. *Art and Agency. An anthropological theory* (Oxford: University Press, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> Eyck, Caroline van. "Living Statues: Alfred Gell's Art and Agency, Living Presence Response and the Sublime," *Art History* 33, no. 4, (2010): 4.

<sup>8</sup> Dissanayake, "Genesis and development," 90.

market (and even slow entrance in the museum space) has become quite complex, referring to the makers as artists parallel to the usage of the term 'art' seems pertinent.

Another term that needs delineating is the often-used concept of 'aesthetics'. As this applies heavily to the debates surrounding issues of authenticity of ethnic tourist art, I must approach the concept of aesthetics with the necessary caution. The philosophy of aesthetics seem to be invading all art historical issues and thus cannot be kept out of this research. Even though the words 'aesthetic' and 'beautiful' are often conflated or used interchangeably, the concept of aesthetics encompasses more than merely an object having the value of external beauty. The concept has already been critically assessed for its 'Westernized' interpretation of what beauty should be. As native cultures of Latin America have a different view on both beauty and art, this will also be touched upon in this research. Esther Pasztory has analysed aesthetics of Pre-Columbian art as compared to Western views on aesthetics, including focusing on the evident relationship between religion and art.<sup>9</sup>

In their publication *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*, editors Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton take on the task of navigating the complex relationship between these three concepts (anthropology, art and aesthetics) and what this means for indigenous and ethnographic art.<sup>10</sup> Coote notes the difficulty of being able to explain the indigenous aesthetic system, as it is vastly complex and different from the dominant Western idea of aesthetics.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, indigenous aesthetics are often tied to religion by reason of beautifying their objects for their deities. In his chapter, Shelton discusses aesthetics in Huichol art particularly, and how it manifests in their objects and functions within their culture as a whole. Shelton also touches upon the issues of commercialism and how Western ideas of aesthetics influence the Huichol art on the market. Aesthetic judgement is not universal and there are many factors to consider that differ greatly from culture to culture about what aesthetics actually is. Shelton's research on Huichol aesthetics offer a deeper insight in the aesthetic system of a Pre-Columbian culture that is helpful for understanding Huichol art and its presence on the tourist market.

---

<sup>9</sup> Pasztory, Esther. "Aesthetics and Pre-Columbian Art" RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics no. 29/30 (Spring - Autumn, 1996): 318-325.

<sup>10</sup> Coote, Jeremy & Anthony Shelton (eds.). *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> Coote, "Introduction" in *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*, eds. Jeremy Coote & Anthony Shelton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995): 8.



### *Specifics of the Huichol culture*

Research done on the culture of the Huichol has become more plentiful since the second half of the twentieth century, when a fascination emerged for indigenous cultures and their approach to art and sociality. The first extensive research on the Huichol community specifically was done by ethnographer Carl Sofus Lumholtz (1851-1922) during his stay in Mexico between 1890 and 1910.<sup>12</sup> Many of the academics specialising in Huichol culture acknowledge the importance of Lumholtz accounts for historical research in the matter. His two-volume work *Unknown Mexico* was published in 1902, detailing his expeditions throughout northwestern Mexico, and laid the groundwork for many future researchers who were interested in the area and its peoples, their customs and their art.<sup>13</sup> According to Luis Romo Cedano, the studies of Lumholtz about the native communities differ from contemporaries in that Lumholtz wrote in a distinctly anthropological sense, describing the peoples themselves, their culture, day-to-day life and their objects without much of the political bias usually present in other contemporary research about Mexico.<sup>14</sup> It is therefore quite unique that the works of Lumholtz are not overtly saturated by political bias or a negative attitude towards the rural Mexican peoples, but rather had a positive outlook on their future.<sup>15</sup> It must be taken into account that Lumholtz's expeditions were funded and protected by president Porfirio Díaz during a very unstable time in Mexico, which was on the brink of a revolution. This fact might have influenced Lumholtz to write in a more positive manner about the area and the way it was governed. This source might be representational of Huichol culture in the early twentieth century but not of the situation today per se, so I will remain critical of any stated facts about the Huichol as much is likely to have changed over the course of an entire century. Shelton thereupon argues that a tremendous amount of external and internal changes have taken place in the Huichol society since Lumholtz's first accounts.<sup>16</sup>

From the 21<sup>st</sup> century onwards, increasingly more in-depth field research has been

---

<sup>12</sup> Romo Cedano, Luis. "Carl Lumholtz y el México Desconocido" in *La imagen del México decimonónico de los visitantes extranjeros: ¿un estado-nación o un mosaico plurinacional?*, Manuel Ferrer Muñoz (ed.). Serie Doctrina Jurídica, no. 56. México D.F.: Instituto de Investigaciones de Jurídica: 332-3.

<sup>13</sup> Lumholtz, Carl Sofus. *Unknown Mexico; a record of five years' exploration among the tribes of the western Sierra Madre; in the tierra caliente of Tepic and Jalisco; and among the Tarascos of Michoacan* (London: Macmillan & Co. Limited, 1902).

<sup>14</sup> Romo Cedano, "Carl Lumholtz", 331.

<sup>15</sup> Romo Cedano, "Carl Lumholtz", 335.

<sup>16</sup> Shelton, Anthony. "Predicates of Aesthetic Judgments: Ontology and Value in Huichol Material Representations" in *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*, eds. Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), .

done on Mexican indigenous communities of the Sierra Madre, also in relation to the spectacular growth in their presence on the tourist art market. This change in the direction of field research meant that it not only described and analysed the indigenous cultures of Latin-America, but also included the perspectives of the native peoples themselves. Anthropologist Hope Maclean has done considerable research on the Huichol culture, religion and function of sacred objects, supported by firsthand communication with Huichol natives, specifically shamans.<sup>17</sup> These sources are of interest especially in the first chapter of this thesis, in order to get a broader perspective of the Huichol culture as a whole and its views on art and religion. Moreover, an interesting discrepancy can be found in sources that research the Huichol people as to the origin and traditional use of yarn paintings, as well as the overall attitude towards the commercialisation of the Huichol art objects. In order to further investigate the origin of yarn paintings and how its meaning might have changed over time, I am delving deeper into the functioning of the tourist market itself, and what position ethnic crafts occupy in the commercial market.

### *Ethnic art and tourism*

There are contrasting viewpoints on how tourist art qualifies in the art world. It is easy to imagine ‘tourist art’ in its most classical form: trinkets you buy in designated tourist locations or shops that offer a simple souvenir of the place you have visited. It is art that has been specifically and contemporaneously created locally for outsider consumption.<sup>18</sup> However, in the sphere of art and anthropology, tourist art encompasses a much broader and more complex concept. When discussing tourist art made by native communities especially, one needs to be apprehensive about such an abridged definition. Most of the time, the art sold by indigenous communities on the tourist market has been created specifically for outsider consumption, but its forms and function finds its origins in religiously or culturally important objects. In Erik Cohen’s research on ethnic arts and crafts, and its place on the commercial market since the 1980s onwards, the reader made familiar with the workings of the tourism

---

<sup>17</sup> MacLean, Hope. “Sacred Colors and Shamanic Vision among the Huichol Indians of Mexico.” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 57, no. 3 (2001): 305–23.

MacLean, Hope. “The ‘Deified’ Heart: Huichol Indian Soul-Concepts and Shamanic Art.” *Anthropologica* 42, no. 1 (2000): 75–90.

Maclean, Hope. “Huichol Yarn Paintings, Shamanic Art and the Global Marketplace”, *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 32, no. 3 (September 2003): 311-335.

<sup>18</sup> Jules-Rosette, Bennedetta. *The Messages of Tourist Art: An African Semiotic System in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Plenum Press, 1984): 9.

industry, its effects on ethnic art and vice versa.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, his work highlights both the positive and negative sides of ethnic art commercialisation and the role of the local communities themselves in this process. As indigenous art often has gained the commercial aspect later on through external (economical) pressures, ethnic tourist art is also frequently subjected to questions of authenticity. George Marcus and Fred Myers focus on issues of authenticity on the tourist market in their work *The Traffic in Culture*, discussing in various chapters the criticisms on the role of authenticity and how it functions on the local tourist market.<sup>20</sup>

Another source that has been influential in the area of study has been Nelson Graburn's *Ethnic and Tourist Arts*, which critically discusses the legitimacy of terms such as 'non-Western' and 'traditional' arts.<sup>21</sup> Graburn uses the term 'Fourth World' to signify a collective name for "all aboriginal and native peoples whose lands fall within the national boundaries (...) of the countries of the First, Second and Third World."<sup>22</sup> Graburn very aptly describes the art of the Fourth World as "changing arts", as they are highly influenced by the continuous transformations that these ethnicities, identities and cultures have to go through due to commercial and colonial catalysts.<sup>23</sup> Accordingly, when discussing the Huichol art we should not merely look at it as 'primitive' art or even Pre-Columbian art, but as a contemporary artform made by an existing community.

Overall, I favour Dissanayake's ideas about 'making special' for the native art as discussed in this research, as it applies well to both ethnic and religious artforms. With the now more clearly defined interpretation of art and aesthetics and an elaborated explanation on the workings of art and culture in the tourism sphere in mind, I can continue to analyse art in the context of Huichol religion.

---

<sup>19</sup> Cohen, Erik. "Authenticity and Commoditization in Tourism" *Annals of Tourism Research* 15, no. 3 (1988): 371-386.

Cohen, Erik. "The Commercialisation of Ethnic Crafts." *Journal of Design History* 2, no. 2/3 (1989): 161-68.

<sup>20</sup> Marcus, George E. & Fred R. Myers (eds). *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring art and anthropology*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1995.

<sup>21</sup> Graburn, Nelson H.H. *Ethnic and Tourist Arts: Cultural Expressions from the Fourth World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

<sup>22</sup> Graburn, *Ethnic and Tourist Arts*, 1.

<sup>23</sup> Graburn, *Ethnic and Tourist Arts*, 2.

## CHAPTER 1: ART WITHIN THE SCOPE OF HUICHOL RELIGION

Part of what makes the Huichol culture such an interesting subject for research is the unique position of their art in both anthropological and art historical debates. A lot of native art in (ethnographic) museums falls somewhere between being valued as an art object and anthropological object. As Shelton states, Huichol art and material culture cannot on good conscience be displayed in ethnographic museums because it would simply devalue their artistic material culture as mere functional objects.<sup>24</sup> The concept of aesthetics does not exist within their culture in the manner the Western philosophy has dictated it, and thus Huichol art offers a different perspective on beauty and purpose.<sup>25</sup> In this chapter, I specify the culture and religion of the Huichol in order to understand exactly what role art plays in the society.

The Huichol occupy the northwestern region of Mexico called the Sierra Madre, their primary territory consisting of the states Jalisco, Durango and Nayarit. The name Huichol is used to refer to both its people and their language; the name 'Huichol' itself is a Spanish given name, as the Huichol originally call themselves *Wixárika*, which roughly translates to 'healers' in their native language.<sup>26</sup> As of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the number of Huichol speakers in Mexico was registered at between 30,000 and 47,625, amounting to less than five percent of the Mexican population.<sup>27</sup> They are primarily an agricultural society, mostly relying on the production of maize, gourds and beans, as well as some fishing.<sup>28</sup> Being small in numbers, the Huichol have remained a rather isolated community and still have their own shamanistic religion that they uphold. They also enjoy a rather autonomous status within the Mexican state, having their own form of government and special drug laws that allows them a much freer use of *peyote* and *ayahuasca* for their religious rituals.<sup>29</sup> The fact that they retain this

---

<sup>24</sup> Shelton, Anthony. "Predicates of Aesthetic Judgments: Ontology and Value in Huichol Material Representations" in *Art, Anthropology & Aesthetics* ed. Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995): 209.

<sup>25</sup> Shelton, "Predicates of Aesthetic Judgments", 209.

<sup>26</sup> Olguín, Enriqueta. "Los huicholes en la gran Chichimeca. Especulaciones en torno a las relaciones entre huicholes y guachichiles" in *Tiempo y Región. Estudios históricos y sociales* ed. Carlos Viramontes Anzures (Universidad Autónoma de Querétaro, 2008): 371.

<sup>27</sup> "Conoce más sobre los Huicholes," Gobierno de México, accessed October 25, 2023, <https://www.gob.mx/epn/articulos/conoce-mas-sobre-los-huicholes>

<sup>28</sup> Gobierno de México, "Conoce más sobre los Huicholes".

<sup>29</sup> Dawson, Alexander S. *The Peyote Effect: From the Inquisition to the War on Drugs* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), 314-315.

*Peyote* is a type cactus native to Mexico that contains an alkaline substance called mescaline, which has similar effects to LSD. In indigenous customs, it is either dried and eaten or made into a tea. This is the most widely used means of hallucinatory drug used in Huichol (shamanic) rituals and healing. "Native American Church", Britannica, accessed 16 November, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Native-American-Church>.

*Ayahuasca* is a hallucinatory drink made from Caapi vines of the and supplemented by leaves of the Chacrana plant. Both *peyote* and *ayahuasca* can create powerful visionary hallucinations, as well as cause nausea,

isolationist status likely has to do with their retreat to the mountainous areas of the Sierra Madre during the hostile Conquista efforts of the region from the early sixteenth century onwards.<sup>30</sup> Their art is characterized by their bright use of colours and materials that are found also in their designs for garments, architecture and musical instruments. Their art and ritual objects mostly depict religious imagery of Huichol deities or other subjects that are of ritual importance. Their artworks mostly come in the form of traditional ritual objects, such as bowls, arrows, yarn paintings and effigies. The objects that are most widespread and popular on the tourist market include the famous yarn paintings and decorously beaded figurines.<sup>31</sup>

### *Early Huichol art during the contact period*

Precious little is known about the Huichol culture before the contact period. As the Huichol – like many native communities – only adapted written language after the arrival of the Spanish in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, ascertaining what their culture was like before is largely guesswork. Another important thing to note is many sources are based on Spanish accounts, which were highly biased and did not include the indigenous perspective. A consensus about Huichol art amongst scholars, is that it is one of the closest artforms to pre-Columbian society: rather than becoming acculturated, the Huichol have dedicated themselves to develop the artforms that existed before the contact period.<sup>32</sup> According to the first-ever study about Huichol development of the Mexican government in 1965 as described by Juan Negrín, he argues that the Huichol “had changed very little or even nothing about its traditional ways over the centuries, being the one people that has defended and conserved the traditions of its world”.<sup>33</sup> However, as this study was conducted in 1965, it can be said with considerable certainty that a lot has changed in the last sixty years or so. Although the Huichol are nowadays much more exposed to the ‘modern’ world and are exceptionally active in the commercial art industry,

---

vomiting and diarrhea, thereby often used in ‘purging’ rituals. “Wat is ayahuasca?”, Jellinek, accessed 16 November, 2023, <https://www.jellinek.nl/vraag-antwoord/wat-is-ayahuasca/>

<sup>30</sup> Olguín, Enriqueta. “Los huicholes en la gran Chichimeca”, 370.

<sup>31</sup> Gobierno de México, “Conoce más sobre las Huicholes”.

<sup>32</sup> Negrín, Juan. “Los Huicholes: una cultura viva anterior a Cortés” in *El Correa de la UNESCO* (February, 1979): 17.

Primosch, Karla, and Kathy David. “Instructional Resources: Art of the Huichol People: A Symbolic Link to an Ancient Culture.” *Art Education* 54, no. 6 (2001): 26.

<sup>33</sup> Negrín, Juan. “Los Huicholes”, 17. Negrín refers to Plan LERMA, also known as ‘Operation Huicot’, a project that focused on the development of the Huichol region which the purpose of integrating them by introducing infrastructure, education and alimentation. Quote translated by author of this research.

Soto, Onésimo Soto. “El Plan Huicot En El Sur De Durango, 1965-1976” *Revista De Historia De La Universidad Juárez Del Estado De Durango*, 10 (January 2018): 130.

they still hold on to their values and religion of old. As mentioned, the Huichol did not have a written language before the contact period, and art was their main form of communication, especially for religious communication.<sup>34</sup>

When discussing societies of Pre-Columbian origins, it seems art and religion are inherently intertwined, all the while not having a word for ‘art’, let alone ‘art for art’s sake’. According to Esther Pasztory, although having no official word for ‘art’, artistry is more often than not quite evident in the production of religious objects.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, ritual or sacred objects of importance have often also been produced with apparent visual simplicity, roughly made or constructed of found materials.<sup>36</sup> It is difficult for Western art historians to put art of Pre-Columbian societies within their idea of ‘aesthetic art’, or even in the category of art itself. The art of Pre-Columbian culture has been developed separately from the so-called ‘Old World’ and therefore does not follow the Western idea of linear progress of art (from abstraction to naturalism). Rather, art of Pre-Columbian cultures has had disjointed changes between abstract and naturalist styles.<sup>37</sup> Due to these disjointed changes, the Western world put these societies in the ‘primitive’ or ‘tribal’ box, with their art being described as crude and lacking development.<sup>38</sup>

As art and religion are so closely intertwined, artists are seen to have special powers, and their artistry derived of supernatural power and created to appease the gods.<sup>39</sup> Overall, Pasztory argues that even though these societies had their versions of art and artists, it had no philosophy of art.<sup>40</sup> Although this mostly applies to Pre-Columbian era societies, this line of thought is still visible nowadays in many indigenous cultures across Latin-America in the ways art functions in their cultures. One such culture is the Huichol community, which still upholds its Pre-Columbian religion and many of its cultural presets.

### *Religion*

The Huichol religion is quite intricate; for the sake of the length of this thesis, I explain the most important aspects of the religion, focusing on how it functions in the culture and effects on artistic production. The Huichol follow an animistic and shamanic religion, revolving

---

<sup>34</sup> Primosch, Karla, and Kathy David. “Art of the Huichol People”, 31.

<sup>35</sup> Pasztory, “Pre-Columbian Art”, 320.

<sup>36</sup> Pasztory, “Pre-Columbian Art”, 320.

<sup>37</sup> Pasztory, “Pre-Columbian Art”, 320.

Noting that in the twentieth century, this idea of abstraction to naturalism was turned around with the emerging abstract artforms such as Cubism.

<sup>38</sup> Pasztory, “Pre-Columbian Art”, 322.

<sup>39</sup> Pasztory, “Pre-Columbian Art”, 320.

<sup>40</sup> Pasztory, “Pre-Columbian Art”, 323.

around worship of a complex system with multiple deities which can be divided into three categories: solar deities, water deities and a fire deity.<sup>41</sup> The most important deities of the first category are the Sun God *Taweviékame*, the trickster Blue Deer called *Kauyumarie* and the Eagle Goddess *Tatei Werika Wimari*. Of the water deities, the most influential goddess is *Takutsi Nakawé*, translating in English to Grandmother Growth. These two deific classes are considered to be antagonistic. The last category separates itself from the first and second in two ways: it only contains one god, namely Fire God *Tatewari*, and it is the only deity not considered to be antagonistic.<sup>42</sup> Out of all the deities, the Trinity of the Blue Deer, *Peyote* and Corn are the most noteworthy in Huichol material culture and most often seen represented on their art objects, especially on the tourist market.<sup>43</sup> As is deducible from the descriptions of these three deific categories, the deities are related to the climate, and more specifically representative of the dry and wet season, as Shelton argues.<sup>44</sup> The Huichol believe the gods begrudgingly withhold everything from the humans, thus the appeasement of the gods is of great importance to the agricultural cycle, and in turn the very existence of the Huichol themselves. For example, the gods withhold essential rains for a successful harvest until they are appeased in prayers and worship.<sup>45</sup> Only through continuous prayers and devotion can the gods be supplicated, so that they will relent into giving the Huichol rain necessary for cultivation.<sup>46</sup>

The most important objects produced by the Huichol are votive bowls (*xucuri*), woven materials (*itsari*), and devotional arrows (*urú*), intended as religious goods to be used in rituals and other worship.<sup>47</sup> The *xucuri* – bowls made of split gourds decorated with beaded designs – are of the highest religious significance for offerings (fig.2). The hollow bowls represent the womb and are thus in its form also a symbol of fertility, often associated to the eminent goddess *Takutsi*, Grandmother Growth.<sup>48</sup> The *urú* are also called shaman's arrows, and are designed to direct a person's prayers, often decorated with feathers and with yarn or string twisted around (fig. 3). The arrows represent the relationship between the worshipper

---

<sup>41</sup> Shelton, "Predicates of Aesthetic Judgments", 210.

<sup>42</sup> Shelton, "Predicates of Aesthetic Judgments", 210.

<sup>43</sup> Primosch & David, "Art of the Huichol People", 26.

<sup>44</sup> Shelton, "Predicates of Aesthetic Judgments", 212.

<sup>45</sup> Lumholtz, Carl Sofus. *Unknown Mexico; a record of five years' exploration among the tribes of the western Sierra Madre; in the tierra caliente of Tepic and Jalisco; and among the Tarascos of Michoacan*, vol. 2 (London: Macmillan & Co. Limited, 1902): 9.

<sup>46</sup> Shelton, "Predicates of Aesthetic Judgments", 211-12.

<sup>47</sup> Shelton, "Predicates of Aesthetic Judgments", 211.

<sup>48</sup> Negrín, Juan. "The Path of Nierika: Heart, Memory and Visions" in "Huichol Art," *Artes de México* 75, eds. Margarita de Orellana et al. (2005): 80.

and the ancestors.<sup>49</sup> The *itsari* are ritual objects that are woven or twined – such as yarn paintings and prayer mats – and serve as a form of visual prayer to the gods.<sup>50</sup> Briefly described, the religious efforts of the Huichol focus on how placate the perpetual anger of the deities; an anger that is eased only by a continuous production of religious objects.<sup>51</sup> What must be kept in mind is that the production of said votive objects can be seen as equally important as the material object itself, such as the creation of the distinguishing designs as well. The votive objects are meant to call the attention of the deities in specific manners.

It must also be noted that (the production of) ritual object is not only limited to religious purposes. Ritual items are also made and exchanged in husband- and wife-taking relationships.<sup>52</sup> The difference lies in the types of art objects that are made: votive gourd bowls and shaman arrows are not used for these interhuman exchanges, but are solely for human-god communication. Religious objects meant for offering often have a particularly special status in Huichol culture. The religious offerings of the Huichol to their deities are called *nierika* (also: *neali'ka*), which does not simply refer to the art object itself, but rather the intrinsic religious value it holds. As life-long Huichol researcher Negrín describes, *nierika* are the “focal point on which powerful beings concentrate their energy”.<sup>53</sup> As complex as it is to aptly describe such a concept, in a way one can say that *nierika* serve as mirrors – sometimes literally represented by holes created in the votive artworks – through which the deities and ancestors are able to communicate with the world of the living.<sup>54</sup> Overall, *nierika* is supposed to represent something beyond the religious art object; in a sense, the *nierika* has the power to become the deity or ancestor themselves. It is believed to be an appearance of them, not simply a devotional object to them.<sup>55</sup> In precolonial times, the *nierika* likely also served as a form of sacred shield against armed forces – quite literally in times of the Spanish Conquest – however nowadays it is mostly interpreted as a ‘shield’ against temptations that lead away from the ritual path.<sup>56</sup> Yarn paintings and other votive objects are not intrinsically

---

<sup>49</sup> Shelton, “Predicates of Aesthetic Judgment,” 216-217.

<sup>50</sup> Maclean, “Huichol Yarn Paintings,” 314.

<sup>51</sup> Shelton, “Predicates of Aesthetic Judgments,” 218.

<sup>52</sup> Shelton, “Predicates of Aesthetic Judgments,” 218-219.

Husband-wife taking relationship within Huichol culture also has a religious dimension, as is visible in many other cultures. Marital ceremonies, exchanges and vows all have a ritual component meant to appease the gods.

<sup>53</sup> Negrín, Juan. “Introduction to Huichol art,” *Wixarika Research Center*, 2003: 1.

<sup>54</sup> Primosch & David, “Art of the Huichol people”, 27.

<sup>55</sup> Neurath, Johannes. “Paths of the initiate. Ancestors in the making: A living tradition” in “Huichol art” *Artes de México* 75, eds. Margarita de Orellana et al. (2005): 71.

<sup>56</sup> Lumholtz, *Symbolism of the Huichol Indians* (Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History, vol. 3, 1900-1907): 18, 35.

Negrín, Juan. “The Path of Nierika,” 81.



*nierikate* (plural of *nierika*), but can become a *nierika* through its process of making, function and symbolic meaning that is given to it.

As briefly mentioned beforehand, the designs, colours and patterns created on ritual objects have influence on the function and meaning of said objects. Certain colours and patterns are used for distinct purposes, or to differentiate between the deities to whom the objects are dedicated.<sup>57</sup> The choice of colours is especially interesting, as the colour palette used for designs and ornaments are dependent upon the colours seen in shamanic vision.<sup>58</sup> Shamans (*mara'akate*) have an extremely important role within Huichol culture. They act as the spiritual leaders, being able to communicate with the deities and being responsible for healing illnesses.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, shamans have to complete extensive training that takes them years if not decades to complete. Among other things, the shaman communicates with the gods through *peyote*-induced trance, a drug that is known to produce very powerful colour visions.<sup>60</sup> In Maclean's interviews, a Huichol shaman named Eligio C explains that colour is seen as the language of the gods that can be interpreted by a shaman in more ways than just visually.<sup>61</sup> These colours that are so vividly experienced in shamanic visions are used in the designs of votive objects, such as the beading of ceremonial gourd bowls as well as the dyes used for the popular yarn paintings (fig. 4).

In the communication between Maclean and shaman Eligio, the latter points out sixteen sacred colours on Pantone swatches brought by Maclean.<sup>62</sup> The colours were shades of orange-brown, blueish pink, purple, violet, blue, chocolate brown, light grey and fluorescent yellow.<sup>63</sup> Maclean notes that in communication with artist Chavelo González de la Cruz, he created a yarn painting based on shamanic vision that used colours very similar to the ones Eligio describes as sacred, possibly confirming relationship between the colours seen during *peyote*-induced visions and colours used in creation of devotional art objects.<sup>64</sup> In the creation of yarn paintings these colours are primarily used, which is especially interesting as these are the types of art objects that circulate so widely on the commercial market.

---

<sup>57</sup> Maclean, "Sacred Colors," 309, 317.

Shelton, "Predicates of Aesthetic Judgments," 213.

<sup>58</sup> Maclean, "Sacred Colors," 308.

<sup>59</sup> Maclean, "Sacred Colors," 306.

<sup>60</sup> Maclean, "Sacred Colors," 307.

<sup>61</sup> Maclean, "Sacred Colors," 309.

Shamans and members of many indigenous communities often have more than one name; their given name, a name for their role as shaman and an 'outside' name for interactions with people that are not from their community (these three are not the only possible usage for different names).

<sup>62</sup> Maclean, "Sacred Colors," 314.

<sup>63</sup> Maclean, "Sacred Colors," 314.

<sup>64</sup> Maclean, "Sacred Colors," 315.

As mentioned, I focus largely on yarn paintings, since they make up most of the commercial market for the Huichol nowadays and because of their interesting history. Simply put, yarn paintings are crafted by placing threads of yarn on a beeswax covered wooden surface in an intricate design. Some debate exists over the origins of the yarn paintings, with academics such as Maclean stating that yarn paintings were firmly utilised as visual prayers from as early as documented.<sup>65</sup> She uses Lumholtz's 1902 account of the Huichol to support her convictions, which describes yarn painting-like art objects being used as visual prayers during pilgrimages (fig. 5).<sup>66</sup> However, Shelton opposes this by stating that yarn paintings were not extant before capitalism, having found no traces of its existence as a 'traditional artform' in his research.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, Shelton denounces its status as ritual art object due to the idea that the yarn paintings were made outside of the core spiritual area and nowadays also is crafted from modern materials, such as acrylic wools and fiber-board.<sup>68</sup> Negrín argues that yarn paintings have slowly evolved out of other forms of ritual woven objects, such as prayer mats or *na'ma* – elaborately decorated 'back-shields'.<sup>69</sup> These objects were not waxed on board, but rather the yarn was interwoven and strung between pieces of split bamboo.<sup>70</sup> Despite its varying origins, most academics seem to assume that yarn paintings were originally or evolved from ritual objects that existed since precolonial times. It should be noted that nowadays and throughout the twentieth century at least, yarn paintings are seen as ritual objects, also by the Huichol themselves, and continue to be created as such. Despite the lack of knowledge about the true origins of yarn paintings, it becomes clear that Huichol highly value the religious component in their art, nowadays seemingly as much as in Pre-Columbian times.

Now that the Huichol religion and material ritual culture has been detailed, I will discuss the Huichol stance on how they view art. As has become clear in this chapter already, a very close relationship between Huichol religion and art exists. Art objects are primarily made for ritual purposes in order to appease and supplicate the deities to which they are offered. Objects themselves, as well as their designs and colours are chosen deliberately for its religious symbolism and function. The fact that religion and art are closely intertwined is

---

<sup>65</sup> Maclean, "Huichol Yarn Paintings," 314.

<sup>66</sup> Maclean, "Huichol yarn paintings," 314.

Lumholtz, *Unknown Mexico*, 200.

<sup>67</sup> Shelton, "Predicates of Aesthetic Judgment," 226.

<sup>68</sup> Shelton, "Predicates of Aesthetic Judgment," 226.

<sup>69</sup> Negrín "Huichol yarn paintings," 2.

Lumholtz, *Unknown Mexico*, 93.

<sup>70</sup> Lumholtz, *Unknown Mexico*, 82.

not new in so-called ‘tribal’ and native cultures of Pre-columbian origin.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, artistic change in native cultures is something to be considered, not only in stylistic terms, but in its techniques, motivation and inclusion of new materials.<sup>72</sup> Without a doubt, the Huichol have adapted and changed their art forms to better fit the dynamism of the modern world.

As artistic processes of all cultures are dynamic and continuously changing, it is no surprise that the Huichol art has changed since the world is becoming more and more globalised. This process has become especially evident since the second half of the twentieth century. The 1970s even saw the introduction of yarn paintings as museum-exhibited tableaux and with artists such as Ramón Medina Silva (1930s-1971) and José Benítez Sánchez (1938-2009) as frontrunners of the Huichol artistry (fig. 6 & 7).<sup>73</sup> They have created yarn paintings that retains the symbolic value of Huichol ritual art, but is in itself not presented as a religious art object per se. Medina Silva was also a shaman-priest (*mara 'akame*), and crafted yarn paintings himself after *peyote*-induced visions he has had. Shamans and visions play an important part in the creation of yarn paintings, as mentioned before in the usage of colours seen in shamanic visions. The question to keep in mind is whether all yarn painting subjects are considered ‘shamanic’ and how this can be applied to commercial Huichol art.

#### *Shamanic art versus art for shamanic purposes*

Maclean describes three types of art when it comes to the Huichol yarn paintings: art with a shamanic subject, art of shamanic ritual and art of shamanic vision.<sup>74</sup> It is wise to discuss these concepts in order to see how it might be possible for the Huichol to be able to find a suitable separation of their religious art or *nierika* from their commercial art.

The first category is the broadest and easily definable: art with a shamanic subject refers to all types of art that have shamanism as a subject without needing to be made by a shaman or a shamanic culture. The second category, art of shamanic ritual is art that is made or used to be part of a shamanic ritual. This includes ritual chants, dances and costumes. Maclean clarifies that yarn paintings as offerings fall into the latter category.<sup>75</sup> The third category, art of shamanic vision is art that is based upon the vision of the shaman. This category can be divided into two types: art made by the shaman himself based upon his own visions, or art

---

<sup>71</sup> It must be noted that those cultures are not at all isolated and static, but rather dynamic and continuously changing, albeit not in the same linear way that the Western world holds as a standard for ‘progress’.

<sup>72</sup> Coote, “Introduction,” 6.

<sup>73</sup> Shelton, “Predicates of Aesthetic Judgment,” 226.

<sup>74</sup> Maclean, “Huichol yarn paintings,” 319-320.

<sup>75</sup> Maclean, “Huichol yarn paintings,” 320.

made by someone else who has taken a shaman's vision as reference, where the vision is borrowed by the artist and produced after careful description by the shaman.<sup>76</sup> From these categories, it can be said that all yarn paintings are factually art with a shamanic subject, as all of them depict Huichol religious matter. However, only a select few of them also belong to the other two categories. This might allow the Huichol community to condone the creating and selling of yarn paintings that have not been made for shamanic purposes. If one is to make a similar division between 'art created with ritual purpose' and 'art created with commercial purpose', it might be easy to completely separate the yarn paintings on the market from the yarn paintings as ritual offerings. However, as will become clear in the next two chapters, this separation is more difficult than that, both within the Huichol community itself and from the buyer's side. Additionally, to make matters more complex, artists have also seemed to make yarn paintings that were described as 'shamanically inspired' or made after the artist's own visions, despite not being a shaman.<sup>77</sup> Other artists have made copies of copies and so forth of yarn paintings that were made after a shamanic vision. This includes artists that sell their paintings on the commercial market. If the colours, design and inspiration are the same, how can I categorize these yarn paintings? Although Maclean's categories offer a concise insight in the differences in purpose of art creation, the categories remain simplistic and arbitrary at best. The complexities of whether it is truly possible to categorize art objects as purely secular or religious will be elaborated upon in the second chapter. For now, an important aspect to discuss in light of art in Huichol culture is their ideas about aesthetics and beauty.

### *The Huichol on aesthetics and 'the beautiful'*

In order to see how these changes have affected the art in Huichol culture, I do not merely discuss the idea of art, but that of aesthetics as well. As mentioned in the chapter before, the Huichol have their own unique vision on what aesthetics signifies. As Pasztory mentions, all cultures have a concept of the beautiful, that is often equated with values of the good and the powerful, highlighting a relation between beauty and the gods.<sup>78</sup> However, how this manifests in art forms differs from culture to culture. I cannot take the Western ideals of aesthetics and haphazardly apply them to indigenous artforms, especially since pre-Columbian societies have a different way of looking at the beautiful.

---

<sup>76</sup> Maclean, "Huichol yarn paintings," 319-320.

<sup>77</sup> Maclean, "Huichol yarn paintings," 325.

<sup>78</sup> Pasztory, "Pre-Columbian Art," 322.

Since the insurgence of aesthetics in art in the 1950s in Western societies, it has become a highly used concept in art history and often is used in ascribing value to art. It becomes a troublesome concept when a particular Western view of aesthetics is applied to pre-Columbian art. Western aesthetics and standards of beauty are valued on form and style alone, separate from religious context and their ethics, and thus the Western aesthetics concept is prone to value the beauty of indigenous art in similar fashion. Moreover, in anthropological sense, it adds an extra dimension of difficulty, as the function of indigenous and ethnic art is often said to be ‘utilitarian’ as opposed to the ‘free’ art – art for art’s sake – in modern Western societies, so claims Pasztory.<sup>79</sup> What adds credence to this, is the idea that pre-Columbian societies do not explicitly have a concept for aesthetics, moreover not even equating it with beauty per se.<sup>80</sup> That said, there are plenty of native cultures who do value ‘art for art’s sake’ and the criterion of outer beauty in their work, such as the Lakota people, a subculture of the Sioux, who seemed to make objects and designs simply for artistic sake.<sup>81</sup> The Huichol, however, seem to have no form of ‘art for art’s sake’ or conceptions of aesthetics as the West knows it.

For the full perspective of indigenous aesthetics in material culture, one needs to keep into account a variety of things; amongst others the context of an object’s production, how the object is used and their meaning. Coote adds to this the notion that the Amerindian indigenous aesthetic system is quite complex, that especially the “fundamental ontological categories underlying of the ascription of value” are of importance, meaning I must look at what exactly makes the Huichol interpret an object as valuable or exquisite.<sup>82</sup> For the sake of this thesis, the explanation of the Huichol view on aesthetics is somewhat simplified.

As mentioned before, the mere observation that the Huichol culture does not have a term for aesthetics, does not mean that it automatically does not exist. The Huichol aesthetic system focusses more on internal value and quality, unlike the modern Western idea of external value sought in outer beauty, symmetry, stylization or elaborate ornamentation.<sup>83</sup> As Coote aptly interprets Shelton’s chapter on Huichol aesthetics, their “aesthetic valuations are based on a recognition of essences underlying material expressions and refer to ideal

---

<sup>79</sup> Pasztory, “Pre-Columbian Art,” 322.

<sup>80</sup> Pasztory, “Pre-Columbian Art,” 322.

<sup>81</sup> Bol, Marsha Clift. *Gender in Art: A Comparison of Lakota Women’s and Men’s Art, 1820-1920*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, 1989.

Meyer, Leroy N. “In Search of Native American Aesthetics.” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 35, no. 4 (2001): 37.

<sup>82</sup> Coote, “Introduction,” 8.

<sup>83</sup> Pasztory. “Pre-Columbian Aesthetics,” 322.

conditions exemplified in ancestral mythic themes”.<sup>84</sup> What this means is that material objects and art are given value based on intrinsic qualities or the essence it carries with regard to religious or ancestral significance. In such terms, Shelton argues that Huichol aesthetics do not exist independently from their religious context.<sup>85</sup> Leroy Meyer supports this notion by stating that art derives its meaning from the culture’s core itself, adding that the ‘religious art versus secular art’ division is arbitrary, as there is often no such thing in indigenous culture.<sup>86</sup> Art is seen as an extremely powerful tool that is able to access the realm of the forbidden and become a vessel directly connected to the gods.<sup>87</sup> Especially votive objects are considered ‘beautiful’, since the artistry is believed to have been taught by the gods. In that manner, artists are guided in their art production by the deities themselves.<sup>88</sup>

Although the Huichol do not ascribe the concept of beauty to their art objects as it is known in the West, a quality that can be applied to their material culture – and is seen as important by the Huichol themselves – is *clarity*. To the Huichol people, clarity is in this sense a “form of revelation of arcane knowledge” which means that an object is imbued with a sacred quality.<sup>89</sup> Thus, clarity can be seen as a form of beauty, one that is more related to the godly, the powerful or the arcane. Huichol employ a system of beauty that is not only based on external qualities separate from its religious context and ethical codification, but rather the context and ethics are an important aspect that is included in the aesthetic value of an object.

Valuing objects aesthetically in terms of clarity also proposes an interesting take on tourist art, as Shelton states that commercial Huichol art is created outside the sacred core and contains no clarity in its production or function, therefore losing this essential component of beauty.<sup>90</sup> Additionally, on the tourist market the art objects are often changed in both form and meaning in order to fulfil the tourist’s standards of aesthetic foreign objects. Huichol art and many other ethnic artforms on the lucrative market have often been only been considered aesthetic by the Western modern lens in terms of being ‘exotic’ or ‘primitive’.

Having defined the Huichol culture and religion in relation to its art objects, it has become clear that art and religion is often inseparable, being intrinsically intertwined with each other. Religious art objects are seen as representations and personifications of deities. It

---

<sup>84</sup> Coote, “Introduction,” 8.

<sup>85</sup> Shelton, “Predicates of Aesthetic Judgment”, 235.

<sup>86</sup> Meyer, “Native American Aesthetics”, 41-42.

<sup>87</sup> Leach, Edmund. ‘Levels of Communication and Problems of Taboo in the Appreciation of Primitive Art’ in *Primitive Art and Society*, ed. Anthony Forge (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 227.

<sup>88</sup> Pasztory, “Pre-Columbian Art”, 323.

<sup>89</sup> Shelton, “Predicates of Aesthetic Judgment,” 236.

<sup>90</sup> Shelton, “Predicates of Aesthetic Judgment,” 237.

stylization and form are dictated by the gods themselves and imbued with beauty and clarity because of its relation to the deities. With this, it is possible to conclude that Huichol art present on the commercial market might conflict with the ritual function of said art, as well as take away from the essential aspects of godly beauty. The interesting question thus remains how 'religious Huichol art' exactly functions in the tourist sphere and if the commercially sold objects are in fact nullified of its religious significance.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE MEANING OF RELIGIOUS ART IN THE TOURIST SPHERE

The previous chapter explored the culture and religion of the Huichol in relation to their art and material culture, and concluded that religion and art are very intertwined. I will now analyse how the Huichol are able to sell 'religious art' on the tourist market by undoing its sacred significance in order to find out how commercialisation affects the religious aspect of the Huichol art and vice versa.

The commercialisation of local art products is a process that is visible all over the world. However, it is a more interesting phenomenon when local tourist art and ethnic minorities meet. Often it is part of the informal market, indigenous salespeople of native art products are seen as nothing more than creating cheap trinkets to specifically appeal to tourists, and is often not even regarded as a form of art, merely a form of inauthentic handicraft. Since the expansion of tourism as a multibillion income industry after World War II, Erik Cohen argues that in both art history and anthropology, commercialisation of ethnic arts and crafts are seen as a debasement and tourism seen as an active contributing factor to the degradation of its authenticity and craftsmanship.<sup>91</sup> However, Cohen himself also highlights the more beneficial aspects of tourism for the local indigenous communities, not only the unfavourable tendencies it is said to have on the indigenous communities and overall valuation of ethnic art.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, the way tourism functions in a society is not a universal process, but shaped by a variety of factors, such as vitality of the local culture in question and how the process of commercialisation was initiated.<sup>93</sup> Therefore, Cohen devised a classification scheme that divides indigenous cultures in four types of processes of commercialisation: complementary (A), substitutive (B), encroaching (C) and rehabilitative (D) (see fig. 8).<sup>94</sup> Complementary commercialisation is the phenomenon where native cultures largely produce art objects for internal purposes, but will sell their art to outsiders in small amounts with little to no changes made in traditional designs.<sup>95</sup> The commercialisation is not deemed necessary as the cultural is not in danger of decline. Substitutive commercialisation is different in that manner, as the culture is seen as dwindling, and craftsmanship is not appreciated as much.<sup>96</sup> The tourist market offers these communities the

---

<sup>91</sup> Cohen, "Ethnic Crafts," 161.

<sup>92</sup> Cohen, "Ethnic Crafts," 161.

<sup>93</sup> Cohen, "Ethnic Crafts," 161-162.

<sup>94</sup> Cohen, "Ethnic Crafts," 162.

<sup>95</sup> Cohen, "Ethnic Crafts," 162.

<sup>96</sup> Cohen, "Ethnic Crafts," 162.



opportunities to spontaneously generate new crafts and art objects in order to revitalize their culture and economic position. Both type C and D are different from the latter two in that the process does not happen spontaneously, but is initiated and sponsored by external parties. Encroaching commercialisation happens when a party sponsors a vital culture which has little access to the tourist market itself.<sup>97</sup> The sponsoring party thus becomes a middle-man or agent for the culture to sell their goods. Rehabilitative commercialisation concerns declining cultures which face active attempts by sponsors to be revitalized through the sale of art on the tourist market.<sup>98</sup> According to Cohen, most native cultures fall into the last category on the modern commercial market.

Nelson Graburn mentions a similar structuring device for the so-called Fourth World regions; part-societies within nations that are excluded from modern society, uncontacted or have overall different living standards than the country in which they exist.<sup>99</sup> Under this term fall indigenous communities such as the Huichol. Graburn, however, focuses on the processes of artistic change due to outside influences such as colonialization, acculturation and influence of ethnic tourism.<sup>100</sup> His scheme investigates the intersection of the intended audience (internal versus external) with aesthetic-formal sources and traditions (minority society, novel/synthetic society and dominant society), including examples for each category (fig. 9).<sup>101</sup> This in turn leads to six categories of artistic processes: functional traditional and commercial fine (made by minority societies), reintegrated and souvenir novelty (made by novel or synthetic societies), and popular and assimilated fine (made by dominant societies).<sup>102</sup> Graburn moreover separates the categories in art for internal or external audience, meaning for example that a minority society creates *functional traditional art* for an internal audience, an artform that is rooted in material cultural tradition and for proper practical use, and a dominant society creates *assimilated fine* for an external audience, which are art goods specifically produced to appeal to other audiences but have no significance within their own.<sup>103</sup> Whereas Graburn notes that the categories are arbitrary since no one community only fits into one category alone, it seems Cohen's categories is a lot more fixed in his article. However, processes of commercialisation are not only sponsored or only

---

<sup>97</sup> Cohen, "Ethnic Crafts," 163.

<sup>98</sup> Cohen, "Ethnic Crafts," 164.

<sup>99</sup> Graburn, Nelson. *Ethnic Tourist Arts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976): 2.

<sup>100</sup> Graburn, *Ethnic Tourist Arts*, 5.

<sup>101</sup> Graburn, *Ethnic Tourist Arts*, 8.

With minority, novel/synthetic and dominant societies, Graburn refers to how well-known the communities and its art are overall.

<sup>102</sup> Graburn, *Ethnic Tourist Arts*, 8.

<sup>103</sup> Graburn, *Ethnic Tourist Arts*, 5, 7.

happen spontaneously, sometimes – if not most of the time – it is a combination of multiple processes that happen simultaneously or alternatingly. Nonetheless, Cohen does mention that the processes are not unidirectional, but also have an effect on the indigenous culture themselves.<sup>104</sup> Despite this, both these tables are handy, if simplified tools for seeing how indigenous cultures react to commercialisation processes and the booming tourism industry in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Especially Cohen’s sponsored categories (C and D) are interesting to discuss in terms of Latin-American indigenous societies, as many government and museum funded programmes exist to integrate native cultures in modern society. Moreover, besides being the most widespread variety of ethnic commercial tourism, sponsored art processes are ambiguous in its intent and outcome, having both positive and negative effects.

I have already discussed the Plan Huicot of 1965 that focused on the aid of the Huichol people, which primarily focused on providing healthcare, education, infrastructural support, and so forth. Oftentimes, museums and cultural institutions play an important part in the development of native culture and art as well. One of these examples as clearly researched by Kelley Hays-Gilpin is the involvement of the Museum of Northern Arizona (MNA) in the expansion and development of Hopi art.<sup>105</sup> Hays-Gilpin researched the Hopi and their close relationship to the MNA, which has had a very active role in the Hopi culture and education from the 1960s onwards. I discuss this case study of Hopi culture because I believe it touches upon a widespread issue of the asymmetric relation between native cultures, possible sponsors and the commercial market. The Hopi are one of the more minor cultures in southern United States area, being largely overshadowed by the more well-known Navajo and Zuni cultures in terms of arts and crafts. The MNA issued a programme to promote Hopi art in order for the Hopi to be able to differentiate their art from the bigger native cultures.<sup>106</sup> Amongst others, the MNA helped revitalize Hopi material culture by spurring them to use Hopi archaeological symbols found by the museum for new jewellery, educating buyers on Hopi art and helping the Hopi innovate their art by using modern technology and materials.<sup>107</sup> The result was a more widespread knowledge about Hopi culture, a bigger presence in museum collections and a greater appreciation of their art. This

---

<sup>104</sup> Graburn, *Ethnic Tourist Arts*, 8.

<sup>105</sup> Hays-Gilpin, Kelley. “Crafting Hopi Identities at the Museum of Northern Arizona,” in *Unpacking the Collection: Networks of Material and Social Agency in the Museum*, eds. Sarah Byrne, Anne Clarke, Rodney Harrison & Robin Torrence (New York: Springer, 2011), 185-208.

<sup>106</sup> Hays-Gilpin, “Crafting Hopi Identities,” 187-189.

<sup>107</sup> Hays-Gilpin, “Crafting Hopi Identities,” 192-193, 197-198.

resulted in the Hopi being able to assert their culture and social identity on a higher level. However, this case presents the obvious double-edged sword of sponsorship from an external party: the help and revitalisation of the Hopi's art has also resulted in a strong deviation from traditional craftsmanship and might now call into question their authenticity. In addition to the usage of new technologies and materials, the MNA also proposed the usage of different designs that would appeal more to a Western audience. Even with the education of art collectors and buyers, the Hopi are still pressured into using more rigid, geometrical designs that are known to be aesthetically pleasing to the Western buyers, thus usually giving up their traditional designs that were of religious importance.<sup>108</sup> The MNA also had a hand in the commercialisation of more ritually important objects, such as *katsinas* – a type of ritual doll – which the Hopi were reluctant to bring into the commercial market.<sup>109</sup> According to Hays-Gilpin, the Hopi themselves now even refer to the commercial *katsinas* as 'stylized sculptures', removing the ritual context completely.<sup>110</sup> As is visible with the case of the Hopi, the MNA's stance seems to be that commercialisation is the key to revitalization of a native culture, though it can be equally harmful and beneficial. The commercial art market itself also remains a difficult terrain for the native communities to navigate, as the native is often regarded as the 'Other' by the tourists, which I discuss next.

*The place of the native on the art market: on being the 'Other'*

The asymmetric relationship of native commercialism is not always between a native community and a sponsor, but with the tourist market themselves as well. A pressing issue in art exchanges between local indigenous communities and tourist is the idea of 'the Other' and the exoticism of native cultures. An important concept in this type of situations is authenticity, which will reappear continuously throughout this debate. As the native communities themselves often exert very little control over the commercialisation process in between possible sponsors and tourist demands, there are multiple ways in which they try to seize control. The asymmetric relationship manifests in multiple ways; as mentioned, being presented as 'the Other' on the market by the tourist and meaning-alteration of art objects by the indigenous communities themselves.

By simply being present on the commercial market tailored to foremostly Western, white tourists, the native is painted as 'the Other' and its art regarded as exotic, a notion that

---

<sup>108</sup> Hays-Gilpin, "Crafting Hopi Identities," 198.

<sup>109</sup> Hays-Gilpin, "Crafting Hopi Identities," 201

<sup>110</sup> Hays-Gilpin, "Crafting Hopi Identities," 201.

is especially difficult to separate from ethnic arts. According to Molly Mullin, there is an immediate affirmation of cultural difference on the tourist market between the native community and the (Western) tourist, highlighting the native commodities as produced by ‘Others’, which is part of its popularity.<sup>111</sup> According to Marcus and Myers, the culture of the native ‘Other’ was often seen as ‘primitive’ and traditional as opposed to Western culture, yet at the same time heralded for being more authentic.<sup>112</sup> More than just art, native communities sell a cultural image: the art objects represent their people, religion and culture to the buying tourist.<sup>113</sup> Especially in native art of (Latin) America, there is a need to satisfy the demand of an ancient American past, with the native art market functioning as a “basis for a distinctive and independent American national culture and identity”, according to Marcus and Myers.<sup>114</sup> Of course, this can be seen as a positive movement in the art world; the appreciation and circulation of indigenous art forms is important to the self-production of native peoples and helps to represent their culture and identity in the existing modern world.<sup>115</sup> Mullin argues that promoting native arts and craftsmanship is often seen as a form of pure philanthropy, all the while not taking into account the more negative effects it might have on the native culture itself and its artistic process.<sup>116</sup> This has become visible in cases such as that of Hopi art and the MNA, as discussed above.

The entire process of commercialisation of native arts is twofold: on one hand the growing commercialisation allows for the indigenous communities to claim and spread their identity, and shows remarkable dynamism in doing so. On the other hand, the commercial additions of art objects and expansion of its designs only happened because of external pressures from Western tourists.<sup>117</sup> Designs play into the Western ideas about mythical, pre-Columbian cultures and employ more commercially desired geometrical patterns, bolder colours and borrowing designs from other media. The beginnings of Huichol commercial

---

<sup>111</sup> Mullin, Molly H. “The Patronage of Difference: Making Indian Art ‘Art, Not Ethnology,’” in *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring art and anthropology*, eds. George E. Marcus & Fred R. Myers (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1995): 166.

<sup>112</sup> Marcus, George E. & Fred R. Myers. “The Traffic in Art and Culture: An Introduction” in *The Traffic in Art and Culture*, eds. George E. Marcus & Fred R. Myers (Berkeley and Los Angeles CA: University of California Press, 1955): 14-15.

<sup>113</sup> Ballengee-Morris, Christine. “Cultures for Sale: Perspectives on Colonialism and Self-Determination and the Relationship to Authenticity and Tourism” *Studies in Art Education* 43, no. 3 (2002): 232.

<sup>114</sup> Mullin, “Patronage of Difference,” 171.

Marcus & Myers, “Introduction,” 16.

<sup>115</sup> Myers, Fred R. “Representing Culture: The Production of Discourse(s) for Aboriginal Acrylic Paintings” in *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring art and anthropology*, eds. George E. Marcus & Fred R. Myers (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1995): 57.

<sup>116</sup> Mullin, “Patronage of Difference,” 173.

<sup>117</sup> Mullin, “Patronage of Difference,” 177.

efforts and active changing of designs were actually spurred by joint effort of state governor of Jalisco, Augusto Yañez, and reputable anthropologist Alfonso Soto Soria, according to personal communication between Yañez and Maclean.<sup>118</sup> In the 1950s, the two Mexican officials held an exhibition promoting Huichol art, with Soto Soria working with the native community “to make paintings that were more like the Western conception of art”.<sup>119</sup> This included making the yarn paintings bigger, brighter, and overall more complex and detailed as per Western demand.<sup>120</sup> Yarn paintings for commercial use are moreover bigger, and one-sided so that it can be hung on a wall like a regular painting.<sup>121</sup> Of course, it is only natural for an artist or salesperson to reply to the question-demand issue that is present in any economical industry, however sometimes native communities go to greater length to alter their art and market presence to appeal to tourists. Native communities have their own ways to manipulate the art market in their favour, as is presented by Christopher Steiner.<sup>122</sup> In order to understand Steiner, I will now also remark upon backstage and frontstage tourism, a concept first described by sociologist Erving Goffman and later elaborated upon by Dean MacCannell.<sup>123</sup> In simple terms, the front stage is the part that is manipulated in order to accommodate the tourists and managing what they see and experience, whereas the back stage is the private environment of the locals.<sup>124</sup>

That said, the front space of tourist market itself often plays a part in the alteration of native arts and crafts, as the indigenous communities often go to ample lengths to change and shape their commercial art in order to meet Western aesthetic standards on the tourist market.<sup>125</sup> Since this widespread commercialisation of native tourist art, questions of authenticity have also arisen over the later decades, with art critics reducing ethnic art products on the market as fakes, inauthentic and cheap souvenirs. Tourism goes hand in hand with growing criticism of inauthenticity of native art, even going as far as to introduce

---

<sup>118</sup> Maclean, “Huichol Yarn Paintings,” 314.

<sup>119</sup> Maclean, “Huichol Yarn Paintings,” 314.

<sup>120</sup> Maclean, “Deified Heart,” 78.

<sup>121</sup> Maclean, “Deified Heart,” 78.

<sup>122</sup> Steiner, Christopher B. “The Art of the Trade: On the Creation of Value and Authenticity in the African Art Market,” in *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring art and anthropology*, George E. Marcus & Fred R. Myers (eds). (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1995): 151-164.

<sup>123</sup> Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1959).

MacCannell, Dean. “Staged Authenticity: Arrangements of Social Space in Tourist Settings.” *American Journal of Sociology* 79, no. 3 (1973): 589–603.

Apchain, Thomas & Dean MacCannell, “Back to Front: Erving Goffman’s Past and Future Impact on Tourism Research. An interview with Dean MacCannell,” *Mondes du Tourisme* 21 [online] (June 2022): 1-13.

<sup>124</sup> Apchain & MacCannell, “Back to Front,” 3-4.

<sup>125</sup> Ballengee-Morris, “Cultures for Sale”, 235.

authenticity guidelines for commercial art of native communities.<sup>126</sup> As Cohen mentioned, the external commercialisation process might have a revitalizing effect on native art, but could very well be destructive for the reason that it creates new meanings that have little to do with the original, ‘traditional’ culture.<sup>127</sup> Thus, while keeping into account this idea of front- and backstage, Steiner argues that the tourist market is often meticulously staged in order to appeal the most to the tourists. Not only the art objects are materially manipulated in order to give off the illusion of authenticity (such as making objects look older than they are), but also the presentation on the market itself and accompanying information given to tourists.<sup>128</sup> Steiner argues that the entire front-stage is manipulated to meet western taste criteria.<sup>129</sup> One of those techniques Steiner mentions is giving the tourist the illusion of stepping into the backstage: giving the tourist access to a sectioned part of the shop with ‘more special’ artworks in order to make give the tourist the sense that they are closer to an authentic experience of the local culture.<sup>130</sup> Authenticity – even only the illusion of it – is seen as an important part of tourism art and often a motivation for the tourist for buying it. However, on the other side its inauthenticity is deemed necessary for the native communities in order to separate the commercial art from its religious counterparts, as will become clear in the next section. Therefore, changing the appearance of an object is not solely influenced by Western tourist demands, but rather also by an internal need for distinction between religious and commercial art, something that is also present in Huichol tourist art.

### *Separation of religious art and commercial art*

The question remains how the Huichol themselves create a division between commercial art and religious art. The Huichol have been one of the native communities that has been especially called out for being inauthentic and overcommercialised by art critics and anthropologists such as Mexican historian Fernando Benítez.<sup>131</sup> The Huichol tourist art market mainly consists of yarn paintings varying in size, beaded figurines and sculptures, beaded bowls and patterned textiles or apparels. Yarn paintings are undoubtedly the most popular artworks, being offered in abundance online as well, especially since the COVID-19

---

<sup>126</sup> Mullin, “Patronage of Difference”, 174, 180.

<sup>127</sup> Cohen, “Ethnic Crafts”, 165.

<sup>128</sup> Steiner, “Art of the Trade”, 155, 157, 159.

<sup>129</sup> Steiner, “Art of the Trade”, 152.

<sup>130</sup> Steiner, “Art of the Trade”, 155.

<sup>131</sup> Barnett, Ronald A. “Huichol art, a matter of survival I: Origins,” *MexConnect*, January 1, 2009. Accessed September 10, 2023, <https://www.mexconnect.com/articles/3262-huichol-art-a-matter-of-survival-i-origins/>

epidemic.<sup>132</sup> There is ample evidence to suggest that the Huichol are consciously creating a clear separation between external commercial art and internal ritual art.<sup>133</sup> It might seem difficult to create a visible distinction between commercial and ritual art, as the entire art creation process seems to be ritually inclined. However, there seem to be multiple ways in which the Huichol attempt to differentiate between the two artforms throughout their respective creation processes. Three categories will be discussed in order to be able to distinguish between commercial and ritual Huichol art: 1) changes in design and materials, 2) changes in intention and 3) changes in religious context of production.

The first category does not need much explanation: it deals with the visual and stylistic changes that the Huichol make to their commercial artwork. This is done for two reasons: to appeal to the standards of Western aesthetic as discussed in the previous section, and to remove any ritual meaning from the objects that it originally derived from its specific designs. As mentioned in the first chapter, the use of beads, colours and materials has a ritual significance as well, with specific colours and bead designs referring to a particular deity. Commercial art objects employ a greater range of colours and a more diverse palette, including colours that have no particular shamanic significance.<sup>134</sup> This difference in commercial art is notably seen in Huichol gourd bowls. Neurath and Kindle note that commercial gourd bowls are brighter in colour and the geometric bead designs are taken from Huichol embroidery.<sup>135</sup> The designs of garments and embroidery are never applied to ritual objects, also because the beading on ritual gourd bowls more sparse and do not cover the inside surface of the entire bowl.<sup>136</sup> Moreover, the designs of commercial bowls are often in hexagonal patterns, which would not be used in ritual bowls as their patterns need to be structured according to the five cardinal directions: meaning only the North-South and West-East axis, and the Centre (fig. 2 & 10).<sup>137</sup> For commercial art objects, the Huichol often use imported glass or plastic beads. Notwithstanding, Lumholtz already recorded the use of high-

---

<sup>132</sup> Heir, Nadine. "El e-commerce empodera a la comunidad: artesanos indígenas incursionan en el mercado global digital", *Contxto*, 14-09-2023. Found on: <https://contxto.com/es/soapbox-2/e-commerce-empodera-artesanos-indigenas/>

The online environment has become an increasingly important platform for indigenous artisans, showing an increase of 10-20% in online commerce amongst native minorities since COVID-19.

<sup>133</sup> Ballengee-Morris, "Cultures for Sale," 238.

Neurath, Johannes & Olivia Kindle. "Paths of Yarn: The Materials of Huichol art" in "Huichol Art," *Artes de México 75*, ed. Margarita de Orellana et al. *Artes de México 75* (2005): 76.

<sup>134</sup> Neurath & Kindle, "Paths of Yarn," 76.

Maclean, "Sacred Colors," 314-316.

<sup>135</sup> Neurath & Kindle, "Paths of Yarn," 76.

<sup>136</sup> Shelton, "Predicates of Judgment," 215.

<sup>137</sup> Neurath & Kindle, "Paths of Yarn," 76-77.

quality glass beads in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century for their ritual art objects, which the Huichol seemed to prefer beads of mollusc shells, which were used previously to the introduction of glass beads.<sup>138</sup> Although the use of new or imported materials does not always immediately point at commercial art objects, it is something to hold into account. Since the introduction of modern technology in the Huichol community, it is far more likely to see commercial yarn paintings made from acrylic yarn and fibreboard while the same materials are not as often used in ritual art objects. As Shelton states, ritual objects are likely to be created from materials found in the core area, as it is the site of important deific presence and myths of world creation, making the natural materials found in the area used for art-making carry religious importance.<sup>139</sup> The production process itself also plays a part in this, which will be discussed in the third category.

The second category focuses on changes in intention of the creation of an artwork, that is to say, with what purpose it has been created. Obviously, one purpose of creation is ‘commercial’ and the other ‘ritual’, but the distinction is expressed in more than mere words. I have already discussed Maclean’s categories of shamanic art, and although these categories are arbitrary, they do show how the initial intention and purpose of an artwork can play an important role in its ritual status.<sup>140</sup> Maclean stated the importance of shamanic vision as a guiding light for the creation of *nierika*: its colours, patterns and subjects are all derived from vision.<sup>141</sup> Although there are salespeople that declare their yarn paintings to be made after own visions or dreams, these artists are generally not shamans, according to Maclean.<sup>142</sup> Some Huichol artists have stated that the “heart-soul-memory [is considered] to be the most important factor in making art”, as per Maclean.<sup>143</sup> This means artists consider their work as “shamanically inspired” if their heart-soul-memory was clear and in communication with their deities.<sup>144</sup> However, shamanically inspired art does not equate art with a shamanic or religious purpose. There is some debate among Huichol artists themselves about whether such art is truly based upon shamanic vision (or copied after it) or simply a product of artistic imagination.<sup>145</sup> Notwithstanding, I must not equate shamanically inspired commercial art with art made for specific religious purpose, as shamanic inspiration alone does not elevate

---

<sup>138</sup> Lumholtz, *Symbolism of the Huichol*, 161.

<sup>139</sup> Shelton, “Predicates of Aesthetic Judgment,” 224.

<sup>140</sup> Maclean, “Huichol yarn paintings,” 319-320.

<sup>141</sup> Maclean, “Huichol yarn paintings,” 319-320.

Maclean, “Sacred Colors”, 312, 316-317.

<sup>142</sup> Maclean, “Huichol yarn paintings,” 324.

<sup>143</sup> Maclean, “Huichol yarn paintings,” 324-325.

<sup>144</sup> Maclean, “Huichol yarn paintings,” 324-325.

<sup>145</sup> Maclean, “Huichol yarn paintings,” 325.



the status of the art object to *nierika*, as its intention was not to create an art piece for religious offering. The creation of *nierika* and ritual objects start with its intention, and since commercial art has no religious intention, it can never function as ritual art.

The third category is the change in (religious) context of production, meaning that the conditions of the production process are considerably altered in order to undo it of ritual significance; this may be done either expressly or unintentionally. As mentioned before, the production process of an art object is already heavily ritually inclined and plays a big role in its meaning-making. Shelton notes the importance of the area in which a ritual object is created; he states that *nierika* and religiously important objects need to be made in the rural core area of the Huichol people (the *Sierra Madre*) and that art objects made in urban areas outside this region have automatically no real ritual value.<sup>146</sup> Shelton also argues that ritual objects usually must be made of materials that are native to the *sierra* that the Huichol inhabit, but does mention that the use of imported materials is on a small scale also used nowadays in *nierika* and the likes, as is seen in the use of imported glass beads.<sup>147</sup> He also notes that the Huichol have to use imported materials for their popular yarn paintings in order to satisfy the demand of the commercial market, as the amounts of yarn and board used cannot be found in their small rural area.<sup>148</sup> Besides increased quantity, commercial figurines and bowls are much more densely beaded and yarn paintings produced in much bigger sizes, leading to a necessity of using modern materials. The use of imported materials and change in region in which it is created is not only meant to alleviate the sizeable production, but also gives the Huichol reason to allow for an easier commercial production. Since the creation process itself is already voided of ritual context by means of mass-production, use of different materials and changes in design, it is possible for the Huichol to create these art objects for commercial ends.

These three reasons contribute to a clearer separation between religious art and commercial art. As the intention itself, production process and used materials and designs are altered, commercial art cannot attain the same ritual value as religious art. It remains difficult to fully separate the two artforms and the presence of native communities on the tourist market creates tension outside as well as within the indigenous communities themselves, which will be discussed in the third chapter.

---

<sup>146</sup> Shelton, "Predicates of Judgment", 224, 226.

<sup>147</sup> Shelton, "Predicates of Judgment", 225-226.

<sup>148</sup> Shelton, "Predicates of Judgment", 226.

## CHAPTER THREE: SURVIVAL AND EVOLUTION

In the previous chapter, I have discussed how indigenous art is repurposed to become commercial art, and more specifically, how the Huichol have chosen to change their designs to be able to separate their ritual art from their commercial art. Therefore, one might conclude that Huichol art on the tourist market has no to little religious value to the Huichol themselves, even though the ritual or occult aspect is one of the reasons why tourists buy such art. As commercial art is the artform that circulates more widely than Huichol religious objects for internal use, critics have argued that the tourist market has negatively impacted Huichol cultural development and made it an inauthentic, cheap and meaningless shadow of the original ritual artforms. Questions arise whether the Huichol art can still be considered traditional art when it has changed so greatly on the commercial market (that is, changed in the eyes of the external public). Mexican anthropologist Fernando Benítez even went as far as claiming that the Huichol commercial art was a falsification of its traditional form and had an almost Walt Disney-like feeling to it.<sup>149</sup> Of course, it must be noted that this is about commercial art only, the artform that has been explicitly and purposefully altered by the Huichol to be distinct from its so-called ‘traditional’ religious art. It should not be much of a surprise that the outcome is a more commercial, tourist-tailored art product. The biggest issue might be that it is the commercialized artform that is becoming well-known around the world, with buyers possibly misconstruing conceptions of what Huichol art is. Therefore in this chapter, I will analyse the effects that the separation of commercial and religious art have on its reception in the art world, and how these effects are viewed by both the internal and external audience (Huichol versus the West and tourists). Moreover, I will discuss the issue of survival versus evolution of Huichol art by naming reasons for survival and evolution as to why the Huichol are so present on the commercial market, in order to establish that both factors contribute to the changing Huichol artforms.

### *Perceptions on Huichol art*

As discussed previously, there is a group of academics, art critics and buyers that criticize the Huichol art of having lost touch with its authentic, traditional roots. The biggest complaints

---

<sup>149</sup> Quote by Benítez in Barnett, Ronald A. “Huichol art, a matter of survival I: Origins,” *Mexconnect*, January 1, 2009. Accessed on September 10, 2023, <https://www.mexconnect.com/articles/3066-huichol-art-religious-or-secular/>

Uribe, Carlos Rios. “In the track of the deer” *Art Education* 48, no. 5: 6.

are that the designs and materials used are inauthentic and do not reflect the traditional artform as it was known before the booming tourist industry halfway the twentieth century. As mentioned by Maclean, buyers often purchase ethnic art for its indigenous religious value: the element of mysticism is often the foremost why tourists buy certain indigenous art pieces.<sup>150</sup> Maclean discloses thus how commercial Huichol art clashes with the ideas that the tourists when buying it; the Huichol make it void of ritual value, while that is the very thing that attracts tourists to buy it.<sup>151</sup>

A very noticeable element in many publications is the use of the terms ‘authentic’ and ‘traditional’, which are repeatedly used in these kinds of debates. As I have mentioned in the previous chapter, however, is that these terms are not neutral when discussing in affairs of ethnic art and tourism. I believe that academics often stare blindly at these two concepts when researching ethnic art in relation to tourism. Maruyama argues that authenticity of tourist art has often been dismissed in twentieth century academia, however more recent publications have re-evaluated its authenticity, keeping in mind the social conditions of its manufacture and valuation as well.<sup>152</sup> According to Maruyama, tourist art of indigenous local communities is specifically made to signify the primitive and ethnic in order to appeal to the western public.<sup>153</sup> On the other hand, ritual art objects obviously do not share this connotation in the Huichol community. In order to value Huichol art, a more conscious distinction should be made between commercial and religious indigenous art, which academics often neglect to do. I believe that the two artforms are not synonymous and cannot be subjected to the same standards of value equitably.

Moreover, the perspectives of the Huichol themselves must be considered, as there are varying opinions within the community itself about the Huichol presence on the commercial market. The perspective of native communities themselves about commercialised art is often overlooked in academic debates or simply has never been presented. Similarly, the opinions of the Huichol are unfortunately sparse in much of the academic literature. As discussed, Huichol often consciously change their art production and designs specifically for commercial purposes. As Maclean argued in her communications with Huichol artists, they have stated that they should not sell yarn paintings meant for offering, but were quite content

---

<sup>150</sup> Maclean, “Huichol yarn paintings,” 327.

<sup>151</sup> Maclean, “Huichol yarn paintings,” 327.

<sup>152</sup> Maruyama, Naho, et al. “Perception of Authenticity of Tourist Art among Native American Artists in Santa Fe, Mexico” *International Journal of Tourism Research* 10 (2008): 454.

<sup>153</sup> Maruyama, “Perception of Authenticity”, 453.

Errington, Shelly. *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art and Other Tales of Progress* (University of California Press: Berkeley, CA, 2008): 2.

with selling copies of said paintings.<sup>154</sup> This is a phenomenon that is seen more often in indigenous societies; the original object with religious value is not considered similar in significance to a (near exact) copy, as the difference lies in the intention of the artwork's creation. Maclean moreover notes that the Huichol artists believe that the gods understand the Huichol's need for economic support and thus allow them freedom to sell commercial art objects.<sup>155</sup> What has been more outspoken besides the commercialisation of their art by themselves, is the appropriation of their artforms by others. Artist Cesar Menchaca and his studio, for example, has incorporated Huichol beadwork and patterns in his artworks that are visible all over the world.<sup>156</sup> Despite being the self-proclaimed "biggest promoter of Huichol art", such appropriation of culturally important designs can lead to friction with the native community itself as these artworks are controlled by non-Huichol artists.<sup>157</sup> There have even been discussions of communal rights claims over Mexican traditional art and designs, meaning indigenous communities are trying claim artistic rights of their distinctive designs.<sup>158</sup> However, with regard to their own commercialisation, it seems the Huichol themselves are mainly worried about the survival of traditional means of art production in terms of their younger generations.<sup>159</sup> Maclean states that younger artists are less in touch with their cultural roots, have less understanding of shamanic importance of art and are more prone to use easier attainable materials for their artworks.<sup>160</sup> This of course, is not merely an issue specific to the Huichol, but is seen in many indigenous communities, as stated by Maruyama about the indigenous artists in Santa Fe.<sup>161</sup> Additionally, there are a number of Huichol artists that are exhibited in museums, such as Ramón Medina Silva, who have no issue with the extent of the commercialisation of their art. Medina Silva himself is a shaman who himself proclaimed that his works and painting subjects were specifically changed and simplified for a Western audience, and despite anthropologists attributing shamanic inspiration and knowledge to his work, it might not have been present in Medina Silva's

---

<sup>154</sup> Maclean, "Huichol yarn paintings," 326.

<sup>155</sup> Maclean, "Deified Heart," 89.

<sup>156</sup> Thelmadatter, Leigh. "The art (and controversy) of promoting Mexico with Wixárika beads", *Mexico News*, June 20, 2023. Accessed December 8, 2023, <https://mexiconewsdaily.com/culture/promoting-mexico-with-wixarika-beads/>

<sup>157</sup> "Sobre Menchaca Studios", *Mecnhaca Studios*, accessed December 8, 2023, <https://menchacastudio.com.mx/>

Thelmadatter, Leigh. "The art (and controversy) of promoting Mexico with Wixárika beads."

<sup>158</sup> Thelmadatter, Leigh. "The art (and controversy) of promoting Mexico with Wixárika beads."

<sup>159</sup> Maclean, "Deified Heart," 88.

<sup>160</sup> Maclean, "Deified Heart," 88.

<sup>161</sup> Maruyama, "Perception of Authenticity," 461.

initial intention.<sup>162</sup> Overall, it seems the Western art critics have more difficulty accepting the ‘traditional’ Huichol art on the market than the Huichol themselves. The Huichol seem to have accepted commercial art as both an economic necessity and an addition that does not take away from their ritual art.

One of the concerns of critics and academics about the inauthenticity of commercial Huichol art, is the notion that the commercial art objects are actually the artforms that are becoming known around the world as typical for Huichol material culture, thereby inadvertently miseducating the public on its designs, significance and visual imagery. On the other hand, academics and critics are also aware that participation in the tourism industry is rather necessary for many indigenous cultures in order to survive. Therefore, an important question to keep in mind is if the tourism industry contributes to a gradual decline in culture or safeguards the survival of a culture. Another aspect to consider is the Huichol’s own voluntary participation in the tourist market, who might regard the expansion of commercial art as merely a form of evolution of their material culture.

#### *Survival versus evolution of the Huichol culture*

Due to there being such a strong divide between commercial and religious Huichol art as argued in the second chapter of this work, it might be more arduous to analyse exactly how the commercial artform functions within the larger scope of art history and the issue of cultural survival. Oftentimes, the presence of indigenous communities on the tourist market is seen purely as a form of economic survival, being forced into making many stylistic alterations to art objects in order to appease the Western tourists’ aesthetic. This view, however, overlooks the notion that being part of the tourism industry can be an active choice of the native community itself. As mentioned by Cohen, participation in the tourist market does not always have to be sponsored, but can be spontaneous (initiated by the natives themselves) for various reasons.<sup>163</sup> Ballengee-Morris aptly describes the situation of many indigenous communities on the commercial market by stating that “maintaining identity, culturally and economically, while participating in the world of tourism has led to an interesting phenomenon – selling a cultural image”.<sup>164</sup> Simply put, for many native communities, commercialisation of its art – and the subsequent commercialisation of the

---

<sup>162</sup> Negrin, Juan. “Crossed Paths: Luminaries of Huichol Art” in “Huichol Art,” *Artes de México* 75 (2005), eds. Margarita de Orellana, et al: 85.

<sup>163</sup> Cohen, “Ethnic Crafts”, 162.

<sup>164</sup> Ballengee-Morris, “Cultures for Sale”, 232.

culture itself – is born from the necessity to maintain their identity in an ever globalising and modernising world. Ballengee-Morris describes the tourism industry as a place of confluence for economic opportunities, issues of education and (cultural) autonomy.<sup>165</sup>

It is clear that the tourist market might have negative impacts on a cultural image, but also is a place of positive opportunities where cultural identity can be more prominently established in the modern world. The phenomenon of commercialisation as a means of survival, will be discussed by highlighting 1) the economic position of indigenous communities in Mexico, 2) its reliance on aid programmes of the government or cultural institutions, and 3) their need for idiosyncratic cultural survival in the modern world.

The first of these three categories shall come as no surprise, as it is one of the main reasons why poorer communities decide to participate in the (informal) tourism industry. Due to historical reasons such as colonialism, discrimination, and expropriation of territory and resources, the economic and social development of indigenous peoples is severely lagging behind. According to the United Nations, indigenous peoples make up over 15% of the poor class, and over 33% of the extremely poor rural population.<sup>166</sup> Besides often being below the poverty line, the employment and literacy rate amongst native peoples are also very low. Additionally, as communities such as the Huichol are historically reliant on income of seasonal work such as agriculture, many indigenous peoples are pushed towards more lucrative markets such as tourism for a more steady economic position. Cohen also asserts that the added “demographic and ecological pressure [...] sway them into the tourist industry”, which are likely the direct results of centuries of territorial dispossession and a continuously dwindling population.<sup>167</sup>

As a result of the economic disparity between indigenous peoples and the rest of a nation’s citizens, many developmental programmes have been put into motion by national governments, international organisations and other institutes such as museums (in the cultural field). Generally, however, the aiding institution and programmes can be extra contributing factors that push the native communities towards tourism and commercialisation of art. Shelton In the case of the Huichol, Shelton specifically mentions the INPI, the National Institute of Indigenous Peoples; a Mexican federal agency that is geared towards the integration and aiding of indigenous peoples in Mexico. Shelton states that in case of many

---

<sup>165</sup> Ballengee-Morris, “Cultures for Sale”, 232.

<sup>166</sup> “Economic and Social Development,” United Nations, accessed December 2, 2023, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/mandated-areas1/economic-and-social-development.html>

<sup>167</sup> Cohen, “Ethnic Crafts,” 161.

native communities, agencies such as the INPI extend loans, which have “decreased financial and cultural independence” and makes the area reliant on other types of work outside of the core area, such as the tourism industry.<sup>168</sup> Additionally, in the preceding chapter I mentioned the case of the MNA and the Hopi community, and the MNA’s active encouragement of tailored Hopi art for the commercial market. As discussed, promoting native art was seen as philanthropic, but sponsored art promotion mostly does not happen on equal ground and can often be experienced as undesired support by the indigenous peoples. Cohen argues that sponsored commercialisation of declining cultures is the most common form of massive commercialisation of native art.<sup>169</sup> Usually, these sponsoring agencies also introduce strict regulations pertaining to quality, designs and aesthetic with the goal of creating a wider range of buyers.<sup>170</sup> Another problem that can arise with sponsored ethnic commercialism is the creation of an economically favourable market for tourists at the economic expense of the indigenous communities. According to Cohen, in such exploitative scenarios, the native peoples are expected to create their art objects with more expensive materials and sell them for small prices, or owe the sponsoring agency a portion of their profits.<sup>171</sup> As for the Huichol, Maclean discussed how the two government officials Yañez and Soto Soria prompted them to begin repurposing their religious art as saleable art.<sup>172</sup>

As all cultures have different paths and speeds of development, a necessary consideration is that the tourism industry can contribute to substantial change in culture and artistry of an indigenous community – albeit often seen as a negative change – but additionally, without the opportunities of the commercial market, many cultures would simply die out.<sup>173</sup> This is a sentiment shared with many native communities themselves, as is disclosed in an interview between Ballengee-Morris and the chief of a *Guarani* community near São Vicente in 1998.<sup>174</sup> The chief shared his perspective on the commercialisation of his culture by stating that by trying to survive in both the dominant world and Guaraní world,

---

<sup>168</sup> Shelton, “Predicates of Judgment,” 224.

Shelton uses the acronym INI (*Instituto Nacional Indigenista*), but since 2018 it is known as the *Instituto Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas* (INPI) by presidential decree of Andrés Manuel López Obrador. “AMLO anuncia creación del Instituto Nacional de Pueblo Indígenas; Adelfo Regino, el titular,” *El Financiero*, accessed December 2, 2023, <https://www.elfinanciero.com.mx/transicion/amlo-anuncia-creacion-del-instituto-nacional-de-pueblo-indigenas-adelfo-regino-el-titular/>

<sup>169</sup> Cohen, “Ethnic Crafts,” 164.

<sup>170</sup> Cohen, “Ethnic Crafts,” 164.

<sup>171</sup> Cohen, “Ethnic Crafts,” 161.

<sup>172</sup> Maclean, “Huichol Yarn Paintings,” 314.

<sup>173</sup> Cohen, “Ethnic Crafts,” 164.

<sup>174</sup> Ballengee-Morris, “Cultures for Sale,” 239-240.

The *Guarani* are a native people of Paraguay and surrounding provinces in Brazil, Argentina and Bolivia.

he understands that the community now needs money.<sup>175</sup> He does argue that the concept of being rich is traditionally rejected by the Guaraní, but the dominant cultures insistence on the benefits of money is quickly changing the communities routines and is distancing the Guaraní youth from their cultural traditions.<sup>176</sup> These social-cultural impact of the capitalist market on culture and art are especially palpable in native societies and create a high dependence on the commercial market for survival, while at the same time eroding the culture's customs and values.<sup>177</sup> A similar phenomenon is seen in the Huichol community according to Maclean, who entered the commercial industry both to purchase basic needs such as food, as well as needed materials for their art products.<sup>178</sup>

The commercial market seems to create plenty of opportunities for the impoverished native communities such as the Huichol, both as seen also creates a dependence on selling a cultural image in order to survive both economically and socio-culturally. Despite the dependence on commercial art for economical gain, the presence of indigenous peoples on the tourist art market should not only been seen as an involuntary mechanism for survival. There are a multitude of reasons for the native people to voluntary be a part of the commercial industry, as native art commercialisation also seems to be as a process of artistic and cultural evolution incited by the indigenous communities themselves. In spite of the criticism on the authenticity of native tourist art, one cannot deny that spreading of their cultural image has many positive side-effects. Art, even commercial art, has the opportunity of educating the public on a previously unknown or underrated culture. This is especially important in the modern world, as awareness about native peoples is often needed for their cultural survival. Being part of the commercial market is often an active choice of the native peoples as they realize the world has greatly changed, and pushes them to commit to change as well. Although this can mainly be seen as a cultural survival strategy, it is in its essence also a form evolution of the cultural and artistic process. The tourism industry often provides a much safer and easier route for the indigenous communities of making the necessary market. In case of the Huichol, creating the high-in-demand yarn paintings and other art objects is a much better means of income than labouring on the fields and plantations for little salary.<sup>179</sup> The sale of yarn paintings has done so well that government support and promotion

---

<sup>175</sup> Ballengee-Morris, "Cultures for Sale," 239.

<sup>176</sup> Ballengee-Morris, "Cultures for Sale," 239.

<sup>177</sup> Cohen, Erik. "The sociology of tourism: Approaches, issues, and findings," *Annual Review of Sociology* (November 2003): 385, 387.

<sup>178</sup> Maclean, "Huichol Yarn Paintings," 316.

<sup>179</sup> Maclean, "Huichol Yarn Paintings," 316.



seems to have become almost obsolete since the 1970s.<sup>180</sup> Moreover, Huichol yarn painters specifically seem quite open about the meaning and context of their work, according to Maclean, resulting in a better knowledge of their significance and Huichol culture for the buyers or other interested parties.<sup>181</sup> Ballengee-Morris mostly sees the commercialisation of native art as a form of survival more than cultural evolution, but does state that commercialisation is not equal to a complete loss of culture.<sup>182</sup> She also proposes a bigger emphasis on the education of buyers of the objects they buy, all the while promoting respect for said cultures.<sup>183</sup>

Education of native peoples is also one of the reasons that the indigenous communities are part of the commercial market. Maruyama argues that expanding their art to the commercial market is seen as an ‘enlargement’ of their culture rather than a loss of authenticity.<sup>184</sup> Seeing as the native peoples do commercial art as an addition to their culture that is scrupulously separated from their religious art objects, loss of authenticity is less an issue. Most artists and artisans of native communities understand that all art transforms continuously over time, so why not native art? According to Maruyama – who interviewed many native artists in Santa Fe, Mexico – noted that “eight of the nine artists made supportive comments about transformed or newly innovated art products”.<sup>185</sup> Moreover, the artists often use terms such as ‘progress’ and ‘transformation’ to allude to their commercial innovated art.<sup>186</sup> More emphasis is placed on an authentic manufacture process, such as using traditional materials, tools and equipment.<sup>187</sup> Regulations of authenticity only seem to be placed on ethnic art by external parties, which moreover seem to accentuate the notion of the ‘primitive other’ needing to be traditional (and thus authentic). Maclean notes that the Huichol ‘ways of knowing’ persist even throughout the commercial art production, stating that even though the materials and art objects themselves change, the “epistemological concepts may be resistant to change and may be manifested in so-called ‘tourist’ art”.<sup>188</sup> With this, Maclean means that even in commercial art, sacred knowledge and identity of the Huichol is intrinsically present.

That is also a large reason for the native peoples to be present on the commercial tourist market: it is a way of retaking their own identity in the modern world. The historical

---

<sup>180</sup> Maclean, “Deified Heart,” 77.

<sup>181</sup> Maclean, “Deified Heart,” 782.

<sup>182</sup> Ballengee-Morris, “Cultures for Sale,” 241-242.

<sup>183</sup> Ballengee-Morris, “Cultures for Sale,” 244.

<sup>184</sup> Maruyama, “Perception of Authenticity,” 453.

<sup>185</sup> Maruyama, “Perception of authenticity,” 460.

<sup>186</sup> Maruyama, “Perception of authenticity,” 460.

<sup>187</sup> Maruyama, “Perception of authenticity,” 461.

<sup>188</sup> Maclean, “Deified Heart,” 88.

Western ideas stemming from colonialism and imperialism have painted the native peoples as the ‘Other’ for centuries. Ballengee-Morris has stated that the tourist market itself is a system of permeating thoughts about Otherness and exoticism of native communities, however for the indigenous peoples it can serve as a platform for decolonisation of the indigenous identity. The commercial market is used to catalyse their heritage into the modern world at the very least educating the public on their existence, if nothing else.<sup>189</sup> Additionally, the commercial market itself is often a stepping stone for indigenous artists into the museum space as well. I already mentioned that multiple Huichol artists such as Ramón Medina Silva have made their way into exhibitions and museum spaces, thus having a greater platform through which to educate the public on their art and culture. The rise in appreciation of indigenous art is also often seen as a decolonizing movement, a retaking of their identity apart from the colonial Western standards and the extant ideas of indigenous art as merely a lower form of artisanship.<sup>190</sup> The decolonizing movement stresses the right to self-determination for native communities in the modern world, allowing them to reclaim their own historicity.<sup>191</sup> On the commercial market, this might mean the decolonisation of how they are represented on the market and a bigger inclusion of native community itself in ethnic art debates and curatorial practices in museum spaces.

In a similar stream of thought, Larson discusses the ideas of ‘curing’ through mutual recognition in the assimilation or acculturation process of two cultures.<sup>192</sup> Although Larson mainly focuses on native Latin-American literature, I believe the concept of ‘curing’ can be applied as well to other aspects, such as native American commercial art and culture. According to Larson, the ‘curing’ phenomenon is an attempt to cultural bridging between the native culture and the dominant Western culture, where the native culture is given priority over the other.<sup>193</sup> It must be noted also that there is no desire to destroy the other culture (here that means the Western culture) or to purify the native culture. According to Larson, the success of the ‘curing’ process could offer “a possible deliverance from racial polarisation

---

<sup>189</sup> Heir, “El e-commerce.”

<sup>190</sup> Rivera Cusicanqui, Silva. *Ch'ixinakax utxiwa : una reflexión sobre prácticas y discursos descolonizadores* (Tinta Limón: Buenos Aires, 2010): 54.

Osava, Mario. “El arte indígena descoloniza galerías, teatro y literatura en Brasil,” *Inter Press Service*, accessed September 16, 2023, <https://ipsnoticias.net/2023/07/el-arte-indigena-descoloniza-galerias-teatro-y-literatura-en-brasil/>

<sup>191</sup> Mol, Alyssia. “De strijd om de restitutie van de 'Penacho': De complexiteiten van de cultuur, politiek en maatschappij rondom het restitutedebat tussen Mexico en Oostenrijk” (Bachelor thesis, Leiden University, 2021): 7.

<sup>192</sup> Larson, Sidner. “Native American Aesthetics: An Attitude of Relationship.” *MELUS* 17, no. 3 (1991): 59, 60-61.

<sup>193</sup> Larson, “Native American Aesthetics,” 60.

and an education of the populace to alternatives which could improve all of society”.<sup>194</sup> In a similar manner, the cultural bridging in commercial art on the tourist market might offer the buyers a different insight to native cultures and eventually liberate them from biased concepts such as the ‘Other’ and the exotic. Indigenous communities see ‘curing’ through cultural bridging as a phenomenon that actively involves *both* cultures, so that both may grow and benefit.<sup>195</sup> Therefore, one can see that the tourist market also offers great opportunities for cultural bridging, establishing autonomy and retaking their identity for native cultures.

In this chapter, I have analysed how Huichol tourist art is viewed within the community itself and by the external party. It brought to light that Western buyers and critics are primarily focused on issues of authenticity in Huichol commercial and the belief that it makes the material culture prone to decline. On the other hand, the Huichol themselves have vastly different beliefs about authenticity of their art and how it functions on the commercial market. Overall, tourism and commercialisation have an ambiguous influence on native cultures, with it being indispensable for economic and cultural survival and providing the opportunity for native peoples to reclaim their identity in the modern world. The Huichol themselves, like many native communities, do not regard the commercialisation process as merely a means of survival that encourages inauthenticity, but rather a process of transformation of a culture that is exposed to the modern world. As a non-dominant culture, their evolving art and willingness to try to reclaim their identity attest to the resilience of the native communities.

---

<sup>194</sup> Larson, “Native American Aesthetics,” 66.

<sup>195</sup> Larson, “Native American Aesthetics,” 66.

## CONCLUSION

In order to understand the relationship between religion and art of the Huichol on the tourist art market, this research has analysed the function of art in Huichol society, how religious art is separated from art with commercial purpose, and if this phenomenon is born from cultural survival or a more natural cultural evolution of native communities in the modern world. I have established that art holds an interesting and important position within many native cultures: art is often intrinsically linked to their religion and seen as an active agent in society that carries the essence of their worshipped deities. The Huichol religion requires a continuous production of ritual art objects in order to appease the gods, in which form, design and the production process itself all play an important part in their worship. Created art objects all have a shamanic subject, and the highest forms of religious art are based upon shamanic vision, from which they largely lend their sacred colours, designs and patterns. In such a manner, the Huichol consider their art 'beautiful' because it is directly connected to the godly and the powerful, and less so because of any external qualities it might possess as is often seen in Western aesthetics. Art is seen as the handmaiden of religion and artists as the agents whose hands are guided by the gods themselves. Therefore, I can conclude that all forms of art in the Huichol culture traditionally have ritual value, and that a separation of commercial art and religious art is necessary for the Huichol to be able to sell their art objects.

Moreover, I have researched how commercialisation of ethnic art objects can affect the religious value that the art has and to what degree the Huichol have separated their commercial and religious art. Tourism and growing commercial globalisation has had a hand in commercialisation of local ethnic art, often sponsored by external parties with the goal of promoting native cultures on the market. However, this has automatically created an asymmetrical relationship between the native communities and the art market, making it a space where they are presented as the 'Other' and highlighting the aspect of exoticism in order to sell more indigenous art objects. This has resulted in a high degree of (meaning-)alteration of commercialised art among the native communities, not only to sell more art, but also to remove any true religious significance from their saleable art. This includes changing of designs to appeal to Western aesthetics, changes in the production process itself – such as using imported materials and tools – and manipulation of the tourist space. Although this has created issues around authenticity of native art objects by external parties, this change in production is necessary to be able to more appropriately separate commercial and religious

art.

Now that the Huichol have created an entirely new category of art, namely commercial art, questions arise about whether the commercialisation of their de-ritualised art objects is more a mechanism of survival or evolution, in which I have both included the perspective of the Western tourists and critics, and the native community itself. Of course I stated early on that it is always both survival and natural cultural change in cases of commercial ethnic tourist art. The Huichol, like many indigenous communities belong to the poorest class in Latin-America, living in isolated rural areas and historically having been discriminated and ostracised. The tourist art industry has created ample economic opportunities for the Huichol, but also has made them more dependent on the demands of the tourist market. The commercialisation of art objects is often seen as the selling of an cultural image that is necessary for the Huichol in order to establish their identity in the modern world. Being a part of the tourist market also allows for the native cultures to educate the Western public on their culture and repossess their identity in a more controlled and vocal manner. Commercialisation can also be seen as a key to ‘curing’ the native identity as a part of cultural bridging in the exchange between cultures on the tourist market. The Huichol themselves have differing viewpoints on the commercialisation of their art objects, stating that it is very much a form economic and cultural survival, but can offer favourable circumstances as well. The addition of the commercial artform in the modern world is often not seen as a detriment to their culture, but rather an enlargement of their art in a dynamic and continuously changing society like any other.

Religion traditionally holds a lot of value in Huichol art, but the culture has altered and expanded its art over the years in order to adapt to the modern world. The tourist market has been a driving force in the addition of commercial art as a separate, de-ritualised artform. The Huichol, like many native communities – are reliant on their commercial art for income and the survival of their culture.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Apchain, Thomas & Dean MacCannell, "Back to Front: Erving Goffman's Past and Future Impact on Tourism Research. An interview with Dean MacCannell," *Mondes du Tourisme* 21 (June 2022): 1-13.
- Appadurai, Arjun, ed. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511819582.
- Ballengee-Morris, Christine. "Cultures for Sale: Perspectives on Colonialism and Self-Determination and the Relationship to Authenticity and Tourism" *Studies in Art Education* 43, no. 3 (2002): 232-245. DOI: 10.1080/00393541.2002.11651721
- Bol, Marsha Clift. "Gender in Art: A Comparison of Lakota Women's and Men's Art, 1820-1920." Ph.D. Dissertation, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, 1989.
- Byrne, Sarah, Anne Clark, Rodney Harrison & Robin Torrence (eds.). *Unpacking the Collection: Networks of Material and Social Agency in the Museum*. New York: Springer, 2011.
- Cohen, Erik. "Authenticity and Commoditization in Tourism" *Annals of Tourism Research* 15, no. 3 (1988): 371-386. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004728758902700366>
- Cohen, Erik. "The Commercialisation of Ethnic Crafts." *Journal of Design History* 2, no. 2/3 (1989): 161-68. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1315805>.
- Cohen, Erik. "The sociology of tourism: Approaches, issues, and findings," *Annual Review of Sociology* (November 2003): 371-386. DOI: 10.1146/annurev.so.10.080184.002105
- Coote, Jeremy & Anthony Shelton (eds.). *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995.
- Davies, Stephen. *The Artful Species*. Oxford: University Press, 2012.
- Dawson, Alexander S. *The Peyote Effect: From the Inquisition to the War on Drugs*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018.
- Dissanayake, Ellen. "A Hypothesis of the Evolution of Art from Play." *Leonardo* 7, no. 3 (1974): 211-217. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1572893>.
- Dissanayake, Ellen. "Genesis and development of 'Making Special': Is the concept relevant to aesthetic philosophy?" *Rivista di Estetica* 54 (2013): 83-98. <https://doi.org/10.4000/estetica.1437>
- Dufrene, Phoebe. "Exploring Native American Symbolism." *Journal of Multi - Cultural and Cross - Cultural Research in Art Education* 8, no. 1 (1990). <https://www.proquest.com/openview/bc9e9c41b865eb04895402972c1688eb/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=40077>
- Eyck, Caroline van. "Living Statues: Alfred Gell's Art and Agency, Living Presence Response and the Sublime," *Art History* 33, no. 4, (2010).
- Errington, Shelly. *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art and Other Tales of Progress*. University of California Press: Berkeley, CA, 2008.

- Geertz, Clifford. "Art as a Cultural System." *MLN* 91, no. 6 (1976): 1473–1499.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2907147>.
- Gell, Alfred. *Art and Agency. An anthropological theory*. Oxford: University Press, 1998.
- Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1959).
- Graburn, Nelson H.H. *Ethnic and Tourist Arts: Cultural Expressions from the Fourth World*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976.
- Hays-Gilpin, Kelley. "Crafting Hopi Identities at the Museum of Northern Arizona," in *Unpacking the Collection: Networks of Material and Social Agency in the Museum*, eds. Sarah Byrne, Anne Clarke, Rodney Harrison & Robin Torrence, 185-208. New York: Springer, 2011.
- Jules-Rosette, Benedetta. *The Messages of Tourist Art: An African Semiotic System in Comparative Perspective*. New York: Plenum Press, 1984.
- Larson, Sidner. "Native American Aesthetics: An Attitude of Relationship." *MELUS* 17, no. 3 (1991): 53–67. <https://doi.org/10.2307/467240>.
- Layton, Robert. *The Anthropology of Art*. New York Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 1981.
- Layton, Robert. "Art and Agency: A Reassessment" *The Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute* 9, no.3 (September 2003): 447-464. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3134597>
- Leach, Edmund. "Levels of Communication and Problems of Taboo in the Appreciation of Primitive Art" in *Primitive Art and Society*, ed. Anthony Forge, 221-234. London: Oxford University Press, 1973.
- Liu, Yang (et al.). "More Information, Greater Appreciation: The Correlation between Background Information and Aesthetic Judgment of Tourist Crafts" *Behavioral Sciences* 12 no. 7 (June 2020): 217-234.  
[researchgate.net/publication/361641835\\_More\\_Information\\_Greater\\_Appreciation\\_The\\_Correlation\\_between\\_Background\\_Information\\_and\\_Aesthetic\\_Judgment\\_of\\_Tourist\\_Crafts](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/361641835_More_Information_Greater_Appreciation_The_Correlation_between_Background_Information_and_Aesthetic_Judgment_of_Tourist_Crafts)
- Lumholtz, Carl Sofus. *Symbolism of the Huichol Indians* vol. 3. *Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History*, 1900.
- Lumholtz, Carl Sofus. *Unknown Mexico; a record of five years' exploration among the tribes of the western Sierra Madre; in the tierra caliente of Tepic and Jalisco; and among the Tarascos of Michoacan*, vol. 2 (London: Macmillan & Co. Limited, 1902).
- MacCannell, Dean. "Staged Authenticity: Arrangements of Social Space in Tourist Settings," *American Journal of Sociology* 79, no. 3 (1973): 589–603.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2776259>
- MacLean, Hope. "The 'Deified' Heart: Huichol Indian Soul-Concepts and Shamanic Art." *Anthropologica* 42, no. 1 (2000): 75–90. <https://doi.org/10.2307/25605959>.
- MacLean, Hope. "Sacred Colors and Shamanic Vision among the Huichol Indians of Mexico." *Journal of Anthropological Research* 57, no. 3 (2001): 305–23.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3631425>.

- Maclean, Hope. "Huichol yarn paintings, shamanic art and the global marketplace," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 32 no. 3 (September 2003): 311-335.  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/249842912\\_Huichol\\_yarn\\_paintings\\_shamanic\\_art\\_and\\_the\\_global\\_marketplace](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/249842912_Huichol_yarn_paintings_shamanic_art_and_the_global_marketplace)
- Marcus, George E. & Fred R. Myers (eds). *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring art and anthropology*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1995.
- Maruyama, Naho, et al. "Perception of Authenticity of Tourist Art among Native American Artists in Santa Fe, New Mexico," *International Journal of Tourism Research* 10, no.5 (September 2008): 453-466. DOI: 10.1002/jtr.680
- Meyer, Leroy N. "In Search of Native American Aesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 35, no. 4 (2001): 25–46. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3333784>.
- Mol, Alyssia. "De strijd om de restitutie van de 'Penacho': De complexiteiten van de cultuur, politiek en maatschappij rondom het restitutedebat tussen Mexico en Oostenrijk." Bachelor thesis, Leiden University, 2021.
- Mullin, Molly H. "The Patronage of Difference: Making Indian Art 'Art, Not Ethnology,'" in *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring art and anthropology*, eds. George E. Marcus & Fred R. Myers, 166-198. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1995.
- Myers, Fred R. "Representing Culture: The Production of Discourse(s) for Aboriginal Acrylic Paintings" in *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring art and anthropology*, eds. George E. Marcus & Fred R. Myers, 55-95. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1995.
- Negrin, "Crossed Paths: Luminaries of Huichol Art" in 'Huichol Art' *Artes de México* 75 (2005), ed. Margarita de Orellana, et al: 84-89. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24316167>.
- Negrín, Juan. "Introduction to Huichol art," *Wixarika Research Center*, 2003, 1-2.  
[https://www.wixarika.org/sites/default/files/public-files/nierika\\_article\\_for\\_website.pdf](https://www.wixarika.org/sites/default/files/public-files/nierika_article_for_website.pdf)
- Negrín, Juan. "Los Huicholes: una cultura viva anterior a Cortés," in *El Correo de la UNESCO* (February, 1979): 16-27. [https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000044064\\_spa](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000044064_spa)
- Negrín, Juan. "The Path of Nierika: Heart, Memory and Visions" in "Huichol Art," *Artes de México* 75, eds. Margarita de Orellana et al. (2005): 80-81. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24316167>.
- Neurath, Johannes. "Paths of the initiate. Ancestors in the making: A living tradition" in "Huichol art," *Artes de México* 75, eds. Margarita de Orellana et al. (2005): 71-74.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/24316167>.
- Neurath, Johannes & Olivia Kindle. "Paths of Yarn: The Materials of Huichol art" in "Huichol Art," *Artes de México* 75, ed. Margarita de Orellana et al. *Artes de México* 75 (2005).  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/24316167>.
- Olguín, Enriqueta. "Los huicholes en la gran Chichimeca. Especulaciones en torno a las relaciones entre huicholes y guachichiles," in *Tiempo y Región. Estudios históricos y sociales* ed. Carlos Viramontes Anzures (Universidad Autónoma de Querétaro, 2008): 369-388.  
<https://repository.uaeh.edu.mx/bitstream/handle/123456789/13609>
- Orellana, Margarita de (et al.). "Huichol Art." *Artes de México* 75 (2005): 69–100.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/24316167>.



- Pasztor, Esther. "Aesthetics and Pre-Columbian Art" RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics no. 29/30 (Spring - Autumn, 1996): 318-325.  
<https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/RESvn1ms20166957?journalCode=res>
- Presidencia de la República EPN. "Conoce más sobre las Huicholes." Gobierno de México. Last modified: December 4, 2013. <https://www.gob.mx/epn/articulos/conoce-mas-sobre-los-huicholes>
- Primosch, Karla, and Kathy David. "Instructional Resources: Art of the Huichol People: A Symbolic Link to an Ancient Culture." Art Education 54, no. 6 (2001): 25–32.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3193912>.
- Romo Cedano, L. "Carl Lumholtz y el México Desconocido" in *La imagen del México decimonónico de los visitantes extranjeros: ¿un estado-nación o un mosaico plurinacional?*, Manuel Ferrer Muñoz (ed.). Serie Doctrina Jurídica, no. 56. México D.F.: Instituto de Investigaciones de Jurídica: 331–368.
- Rivera Cusicanqui, Silva. *Ch'ixinakax utxiwa : una reflexión sobre prácticas y discursos descolonizadores*. Tinta Limón: Buenos Aires, 2010.
- Shelton, Anthony. "Predicates of Aesthetic Judgments: Ontology and Value in Huichol Material Representations" in *Art, Anthropology & Aesthetics*, eds. Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton, 209-244. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995.
- Soto, Onésimo Soto. "El Plan Huicot En El Sur De Durango, 1965-1976" in *Revista De Historia De La Universidad Juárez Del Estado De Durango* 10 (January 2018): 129-150.  
<http://revistahistoria.ujed.mx/index.php/revistahistoria/article/view/112>.
- Steiner, Christopher B. "The Art of the Trade: On the Creation of Value and Authenticity in the African Art Market," in *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring art and anthropology*, eds. George E. Marcus & Fred R. Myers, 151-165. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1995.

## WEBSITES

- Barnett, Ronald A. "Is Huichol art religious or secular", *Mexconnect*, January 1, 2009. Accessed September 9, 2023, <https://www.mexconnect.com/articles/3066-huichol-art-religious-or-secular/>
- Britannica, "Native American Church." Accessed 16 November, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Native-American-Church>.
- El Financiero, "AMLO anuncia creación del Instituto Nacional de Pueblo Indígenas; Adelfo Regino, el titular," accessed December 2, 2023, <https://www.elfinanciero.com.mx/transicion/amlo-anuncia-creacion-del-instituto-nacional-de-pueblo-indigenas-adelfo-regino-el-titular/>
- Heir, Nadine. "El e-commerce empodera a la comunidad: artesanos indígenas incursionan en el mercado global digital", *Contxto*. Accessed September 14, 2023, <https://contxto.com/es/soapbox-2/e-commerce-empodera-artesanos-indigenas/>
- Jellinek. "Wat is ayahwasca?." Accessed 16 November, 2023, <https://www.jellinek.nl/vraag-antwoord/wat-is-ayahwasca/>

- Gobierno de México. “Conoce más sobre los Huicholes.” Accessed October 25, 2023, <https://www.gob.mx/epn/articulos/conoce-mas-sobre-los-huicholes>
- Gobierno de México. “Huichol.” Accessed October 25, 2023, [https://sic.gob.mx/ficha.php?table=inali\\_li&table\\_id=29](https://sic.gob.mx/ficha.php?table=inali_li&table_id=29)
- Menchaca Studios. “Sobre Menchaca Studios.” Accessed December 8, 2023, <https://menchacastudio.com.mx/>
- Osava, Mario. “el arte indigena descoloniza galerias, Teatro y literature en Brasil”, *Inter Press Service*. Accessed September 16, 2023, <https://ipsnoticias.net/2023/07/el-arte-indigena-descoloniza-galerias-teatro-y-literatura-en-brasil/>
- RAI. “Anthropology of Art.” Accessed 13 October, 2023, <https://www.discoveranthropology.org.uk/about-anthropology/specialist-areas/anthropology-of-art.html>
- Thelmadatter, Leigh. “The art (and controversy) of promoting Mexico with Wixárika beads”, *Mexico News*, June 20, 2023. Accessed December 8, 2023, <https://mexiconewsdaily.com/culture/promoting-mexico-with-wixarika-beads/>
- United Nations. “Economic and Social Development.” Accessed December 2, 2023, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/mandated-areas1/economic-and-social-development.html>

ILLUSTRATIONS



**Figure 1.** José Benítez Sánchez, *Yarn Painting*, 2003, wood, yarn and beeswax, 121.92 cm x 121.92 cm, (Pennsylvania, PA, Penn Museum, 2003-19-1).



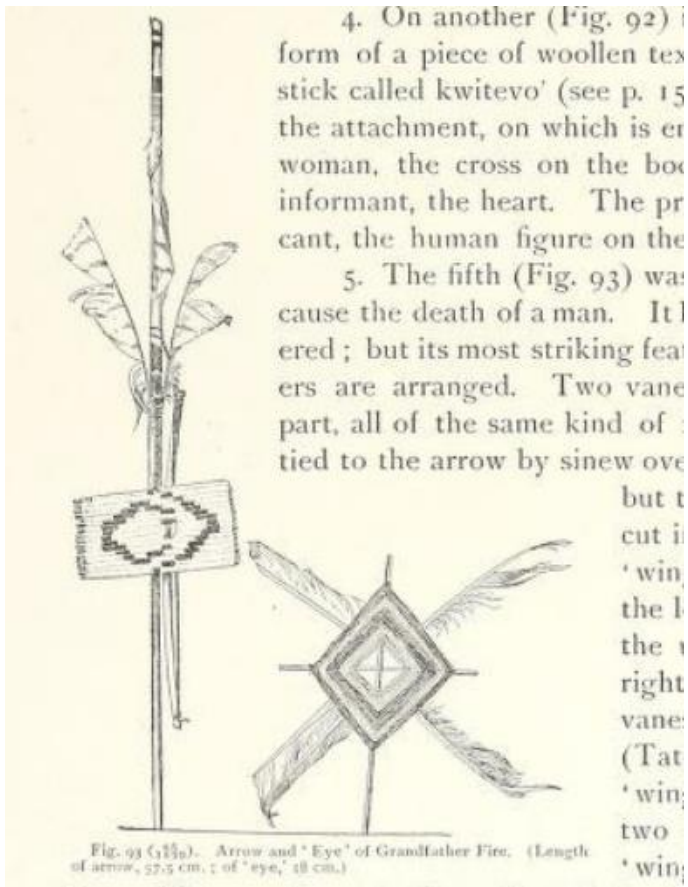
**Figure 2.** Unknown artist, *Votive bowl*, acquired 1938, gourd, beads, beeswax and lacquer, 2 x 9.5 cm, (Pennsylvania, PA, Penn Museum, 38-23-127).



**Figure 3.** Unknown artist, *Ceremonial arrow*, acquired 1987, wood, feather and yarn, 58 cm, (Pennsylvania, PA, Penn Museum, 87-14-18).



**Figure 4.** Unknown artist, *Yarn Painting*, late 20<sup>th</sup> century, wood, yarn and beeswax, 30.2 x 30.2 x 0.5 cm, (Winston-Salem, NC, Timothy S. Y. Lam Museum of Anthropology, 1994.01.E.30).



**Figure 5.** Rudolph Weber, *Arrow and 'Eye' of Grandmother Fire*. Representation of a front- and back-shield.



**Figure 6.** Ramón Medina Silva, *Yarn Painting*, ca. 1926-1971, yarn, beeswax and fiberboard, 61 cm x 61 cm, (Los Angeles, CA, UCLA Fowler Museum, X67.51).





**Figure 7.** José Sánchez Benítez, *Tatéi N+'ariwame Releases the Rain Serpents*, 1980, yarn, beeswax & plywood, 48 cm x 48 cm x 2 cm, (Mexico, Wixárika Research Center).

Culture	Source of Initiative	
	<i>Spontaneous</i>	<i>Sponsored</i>
Vital	(A) Complementary commercialization	(C) Encroaching commercialization
Declining	(B) Substitutive commercialization	(D) Rehabilitative commercialization

**Figure 8.** Cohen's table of types of commercialisation.

Aesthetic-Formal Sources and Traditions			
	Minority Society	Novel/Synthetic	Dominant Society
Intended Audience	Minority Fourth World <i>Functional Traditional</i> e.g., Lega, Maori marae, some pueblo pottery	<i>Reintegrated</i> e.g., Cuna molas, Pueblo kachinas	<i>Popular</i> e.g., Zaire, Mozambique, Navajo jewelery
	External Civilizations <i>Commercial Fine</i> e.g., Maori woodcarving, New Guinea shields	<i>Souvenir Novelty</i> e.g., Seri, Makonde carving; Xalitla amate	<i>Assimilated Fine</i> e.g., Santa Fe Indian painting, Namatjira watercolors, Eskimo prints

**Figure 9.** Graburn's table of aesthetic-formal sources and traditions.



**Figure 10.** Unknown artist, *Votive bowl*, acquired 1938, gourd, beads, beeswax and lacquer, 7 cm x 21 cm. (Pennsylvania, PA, Penn Museum, 38-23-119)

## ILLUSTRATION SOURCES

**Fig. 1.** Downloaded December 13, 2023 <https://www.penn.museum/collections/object/368784>

**Fig. 2.** Downloaded on November 16, 2023,  
<https://www.penn.museum/collections/object/11489>

**Fig. 3.** Downloaded on November 16, 2023.  
<https://www.penn.museum/collections/object/351334>

**Fig. 4.** Lumholtz 1900, fig. 93.

**Fig. 5.** Downloaded on December 6, 2023,  
<https://lammuseum.catalogaccess.com/objects/1896>

**Fig. 6.** Downloaded on October 31, 2023. <https://fowler.ucla.edu/product/x67-51-yarn-painting/>

**Fig. 7.** Downloaded on October 31, 2023. <https://www.wixarika.org/objects/tat%C3%A9i-nariwame-releases-rain-serpents>

**Fig. 8.** Cohen 1989, 162.

**Fig. 9.** Graburn 1976, 8.

**Fig. 10.** Downloaded on December 8, 2023,  
<https://www.penn.museum/collections/object/131457>