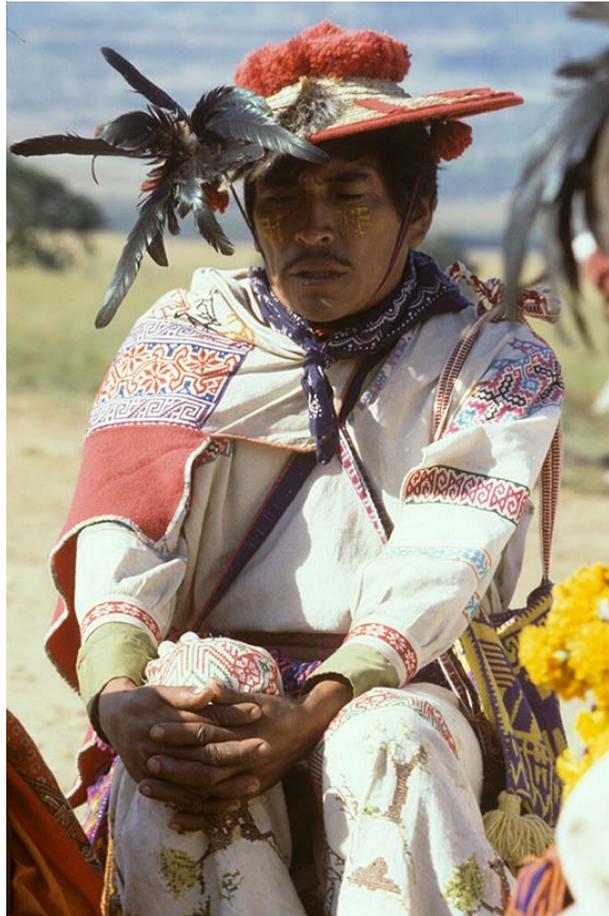


## José Benítez Sánchez

In our efforts to discover the more gifted craftspeople and learn what they could tell us about their artwork's symbolic and legendary meanings, we ventured into different parts of the states of Jalisco and Nayarit, where the Huichol are concentrated. In 1971, we met José Benítez Sánchez, who had set up his workshop in Tepic, Nayarit, and whose reputation as a yarn painter was beginning to eclipse that of most of his peers.

He was born in 1938 on a ranch called San Pablito in Nayarit and given the name *Yucauye Cucame*, "Silent Walker," in the Huichol language. His religious tradition and family ties link him to the Huichol subgroup of *Wautüa* (the community of San Sebastián Teponahuastlán). He was brought up by his maternal grandfather, who died at the age of 105, leaving a strong impression on José's memory, and his stepfather, Pascual Benítez. Both of them were *mara'akate* (shamans).



José Benítez Sánchez 1977

Following the proper disciplines with his stepfather and his grandfather, José worked in the fields when he was eight; the next year, his stepfather decided to train him as a shaman. He caught a deer in a snare before it died; this was a good omen. He was told to breathe in the last exhalations of the sacrificial deer and thus began to initiate a shamanic career by the age of nine. Afterward, he was instructed to go into mourning for the deer for six years, during which time he should not touch a woman or spice his food with salt.

During the next four years, José Benítez made yearly pilgrimages to Our Mother Ocean and to the holy spots in the canyons deep in the Huichol mountains. When he reached the age of fourteen, however, his stepfather died and he was forced by his relatives to marry, according to Huichol custom. Soon thereafter, he ran away, seeking work in the coastal fields and going out into the civilization of Mexico without knowing any Spanish. José Benítez said, "When I started working as a coastal laborer, I left my Huichol clothes and my sandals, changing them for Mexican clothes, and I soon felt like a *mestizo*. I never forgot my traditional customs, but it was not the same, because I had abandoned my plans for becoming a *mara'akame* (shaman)."

It was not long before José came in contact with government agents in charge of rural communities. He started working for them in various capacities, sweeping their

offices and eventually traveling to every community in the Sierra and its foothills, as a spokesman for the Mexican authorities. During this time, in 1963 he started to try out his skills at making yarn paintings: "I could not draw the figures as they ought to be represented, but I began to think back about the lives of my grandparents, my parents and our traditional customs." By 1968, he was recognized as one of the foremost practitioners of Huichol arts and invited to perform Huichol music and dance with other companions, when the Olympic Games were taking place in Mexico City. In 1971, he was still working for the government through its Coordinating Center for the Development of the Huicot<sup>1</sup> Region. Besides producing his own yarn paintings, he was a middleman between the government and those Indians whom he trained or whose crafts he sold through its offices.

José Benítez came to be recognized as an undisputed master of original dramatic compositions, and his knowledge of the culture was respected by other craftsmen specializing in this medium by 1971. Many copied his style as best they could, a few achieving personal touches that kept their own work original. But José Benítez remains unsurpassed in the abundance and inventiveness of his art over the long span of his still-evolving career. The first craftsmen who introduced me to Benítez touted him as an important shaman, although Benítez told me soon afterward that he had not really achieved that status yet. Towards the beginning of this millennium, he claims to have reached it, after many pilgrimages and related sacrifices.

At that early point, Benítez had taught several dozen Huichol how to make yarn paintings. His apprentices were Huichol who had become urbanized enough to eke out a living without depending entirely on their subsistence-farming tradition. Among them, Juan Ríos Martínez mastered his own forms and style and went on to produce beautiful and original compositions. Others worked out a superficially personal style while basically sticking to simple compositions that they had at one time helped their master produce, filling in the background for the figures that Benítez had already designed. It became apparent to us that José Benítez was the anonymous living source of the designs produced by many inferior craftsmen. His work easily surpassed that of the relatively famous and accomplished Ramón Medina, who had been killed in 1971.

By 1972, my wife and I were residing permanently in Mexico and working constantly with many native people. Most significantly, at that time I made my first forays into the deepest canyons of the Huichol mountains—to *Teakata*, the temple of Our Grandfather (Fire)—with Benítez, who had begun his initiation there as a youth. Circumstances had interrupted his shamanic practice until I prompted him to return with me. This led to many ensuing pilgrimages to the holy power spots in the mountains, to the peyote desert in the East, to Our Mother of the Ocean in the West, and to Our Mother of the South Waters, in all of which he and I participated under the direction of two shamans, who were brothers. These were Yauxali and Matsuwa, or Pablo and Francisco Taizán de la Cruz, exercising the functions of *mara'akate*, shamans, in the community of Tuxpan de Bolaños and in Mesa del Tirador, annexes of San Sebastián Teponahuastlán, *Wautüa*.

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<sup>1</sup> "Huicot" stands for Huichol, Cora, and Tepehuano Indians, and their region includes portions of the states of Jalisco, Nayarit, Durango, and Zacatecas.

Eventually, José Benítez's artistic expression became more complex, and I became more able to distill a deeper meaning from his works due to our shared experiences. As a result of our pilgrimage in early 1972, he dedicated himself exclusively to developing his artistic talent and renewing his links with his religious tradition. His pending vows would persecute him in agitated dreams until he externalized them as visual images, and we eventually reached the spot where the sacred offerings had to be taken again. That experience would lead to many more visionary understandings of traditional reality.



José Benítez Sánchez – Wirikuta 1977

Together, we went on five journeys to *Wirikuta*, in the East. On three occasions we walked and fasted in the desert for seven days, and walked several times to the most holy spots in the mountains: *Tuamuxawitá*, the cave of the First Cultivator; *Nüariwametá*, the falls and the niche of Our Mother the Messenger of Rain; *Teakata*, the prototypical ceremonial center

above the birthplace of Our Grandfather (Fire). We went to the edge of Our Mother Ocean by the white peak in the sea called *Waxiewe*, Our Mother Who Is like White Vapor Escaping, and to *Xapaviyemetá*, the lake in the South named after its wild fig tree, where it is said that the new earth first appeared after a five-year flood.

Benítez took extended breaks from pursuing his art when he undertook these pilgrimages, and eventually reintegrated himself into the Huichol community of *Wautüa*, where he followed the tradition of cultivating the land and participating in all the ceremonial rites attached to that cycle. At that time (the early 1980s), the artist said "This is how the *xutúrite* (the flower offerings)<sup>2</sup> suffer: without food or sleep, without possessions or knowing where they are headed, poor and innocent, but rich in their *kupuri* (soul) and in their *tukari* (spiritual life)."

In a composition he wrote for a Huichol *xaweri*, a native adaptation of a violin, he chants in praise of *Tamatsi Kauyumari*, Our Elder Brother Fawn of the Sun, saying, "My Elder Brother's word and his figures, his designs, his thought is never-ending in the drawings of his *matsuwate* (wrist guards or bracelets) and in his *uxa* (the yellow pigment painted on his face)."

<sup>2</sup> *Xutúrite* are natural or paper flowers attached to an offering, and also the nickname for the Huichol in the language of Our Ancestors.

He was conscious that many of the yarn paintings he produced in partnership with me are reflections of the ancestors, and he said, "Our memory will stay in these paintings." These were visual expressions of what Benítez had learned under the spiritual guidance of Our Elder Brother, which he wanted me to understand in depth by tape-recording explanations that allowed me to pursue their meaning in detail.



**The Four Aspects of the Spirit**

Important traditional shamans from the mountains have visited me, and they are often struck by the lucidity of Benítez's work, reflecting deeply on its meaning in their own way. His art underwent firm changes until 1982/85, when wool yarn and the native bee's wax used to hold it in place disappeared. His figures have always been bold and dramatically placed in dynamic juxtapositions, with a deep understanding of color and contrast (see *The Four Aspects of the Spirit*, a 2' x 2' yarn painting). They started out as relatively ingenuous depictions and within a few years became more complex, as well as more intricately connected.

José Benítez created some pieces in a 4' x 2½' size, like *The*

*Dismemberment of Our Great-Grandmother Nakawé* and *The Dismemberment of Watákame*, from 1973, which show surprising parallels to the finest works of surrealist and contemporary fine art. He evolved from a classical to a more baroque style, as his narratives became more complex and his inventiveness was invigorated by the many pilgrimages and his return to his roots. Another painting of this size from 1979, titled *The Nierika of Our Great-Grandfather Deer-Tail*, exemplifies this inspired complexity. By 1980, José Benítez's art had become extremely sophisticated, and the meaning was difficult to extrapolate from his greatest work. A good example of this is his 4' x 8' yarn painting from 1981, called *The Transcendental Vision of Tatutsí Xuweri Timaiwe'eme* (Our Great-Grandfather Who Was Self Created and Found Knowing Everything). It toured many world museums until it was donated to the National Museum of Anthropology and History in Mexico City, for permanent exhibit, in September of 1999, by George H. Howell, who had purchased it from me. A Spanish-language CD-ROM kiosk has been installed next to the painting in the exhibition hall, from which a detailed description of Huichol culture can be gleaned as one searches through the meanings of the symbols in the yarn painting. The description is based partly on the transcription of a tape-recorded interpretation the artist made with me, and partly on the anthropological perspective of the Western Section Curator, Dr. Johannes Neurath at that time.

A constant characteristic of Benítez's art is that his figures are abstract enough to remain symbolic prototypes, yet are reproduced in many unique variations, transformed by the presence of other figures in a context that is full of interlinking energy fields and sharp contrasts. His strong sense of rhythm and balance reflects

his early skill in performing Huichol music and dances. He used both thick and thin wool yarn to achieve rich textures and to avail himself of the widest range of color tones, later he used thin acrylic yarn to develop a style that can be creatively baroque or more symmetrically ornate.

Many years ago, the artist left the community of *Wautüa*, after a short stay, when his community indicated it felt he could not be trusted because he was too ambitious. He then moved back to Tepic and fought for the rights of many Huichol who lived in the slums and on the periphery of town. In the 1990's, they were able to claim homes in a colony called *Zitakua*, which is today a refuge for many Huichol who have left the mountains to pursue crafts in the city. It has its Huichol *tatuani*, or governor, and a *tuki*, or round temple, at the top of a hill on the outskirts of Tepic, the capital of the state of Nayarit.

José Benítez is no longer an anonymous Huichol craftsman, although the public in general has still not properly recognized him as an artist, since the presentation of his work at the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City, in 1986. However, José Benítez has always performed better than the average Huichol in resisting anonymity. In 2001, he created the largest yarn painting to date, which was commissioned by the government and placed behind a huge glass frame in a subway station in Guadalajara. In 2003, the Museo Zacatecano of Zacatecas gave prominent display to one of his circular 4' x 4' paintings, and he shared a national prize of "Ciencias y Artes", Sciences and Arts. A detail of one of his yarn paintings illustrates the cover of the 2005 magazine *Artes de Mexico* #75 dedicated to Huichol art.

José Benítez Sánchez lived a remarkably intense life, full of experiences, responsibilities, abundance and service. His charisma was such that he attracted many a spouse to his side and fathered more than his share of children. He would tell me a couple of years before his death that he probably had more than fifty grandchildren.

A few years ago, we sought the help of our friend Rocío Echeverría in Guadalajara, who diagnosed him with an ailment of diabetes by sending him to hospital check ups in that city. He recovered and swore off the use of alcoholic drinks, refreshments and tobacco, to prevent further deterioration of his weakened condition. Age does take its toll after all, and we knew that it would be difficult for a person given to José's mood swings to remain totally abstinent. Thus, he passed away in Tepic on July 1, 2009, a few days after an unsuccessful surgical attempt at saving his life.

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