
Insects in Art and Religion: The American Southwest

BY J. L. CAPINERA

MANY OF THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES of North America were virtually dependent on local hunting, gathering, and crop production for sustenance. Trade, especially among different groups, was limited to a few valuable items and rarely consisted of food. These peoples lived off the land, and thus were at the mercy of whatever fate provided: drought, flood, pestilence, and so forth. That pestilence did occur was well documented by settlers of European descent as they moved into the American west. Plagues of Rocky Mountain grasshoppers, *Melanoplus spretus* (Walsh), and Mormon crickets, *Anabrus simplex* Haldeman, are two well-known examples of pests that made life difficult or intolerable in earlier times. How did the indigenous peoples feel about insects? Were they viewed as enemies, threats to survival, and did these peoples actively practice pest control?

We will never fully understand the habits and beliefs of many North American native cultures, because the tribes usually were destroyed quickly by Europeans (sometimes with the aid of other native tribes, European diseases, and the overuse of natural resources). However, the tribes of the desert Southwest were among the last to be subjected to European culture and religion, and even after subjugation they remained largely isolated geographically and insulated culturally.

Anthropologists had more opportunity to study southwestern pueblo peoples than nearly any other, and their ancient cultures were more easily assessed because these peoples constructed permanent, communal dwellings, engaged in pottery making, and lived in a very dry environment that is conducive to preservation of artifacts. Thus, the writings of early anthropologists and archaeologists studying the Southwest offer tantalizing glimpses into the psychology of native Americans and their attitude toward insects. Here I present information on insects in art and religion.

No discussion of early southwestern native art is complete without inclusion of Mimbres pottery. Produced by a now-extinct people inhabiting the Mimbres River Valley of southwestern New Mexico and southeastern Arizona, Mimbres pottery is unsurpassed both as a historical artifact and an artistic expression.

The Mimbrenos inhabited their valley from about A.D. 100 to 1450. A branch of the Mogollon culture, they began producing painted bowls about A.D. 650. Their "classic" period, an era when the sophistication of their artistry reached a pinnacle, was about A.D. 1050–1150. The Mimbres culture collapsed soon afterward, probably as a result of long-term and widespread drought.

In Mimbres villages the dead were interred beneath the floors of the dwellings. Bowls and other offerings were included in the burial process. Initially in the evolution of Mimbres culture, intact pottery was buried; this was followed by a period when pottery was broken and the pieces scattered and then by a period when only a hole was punched in the bottom. Many of the highly decorated bowls from the classic period contain holes. Nevertheless, the figurative paintings are in remarkably good condition.

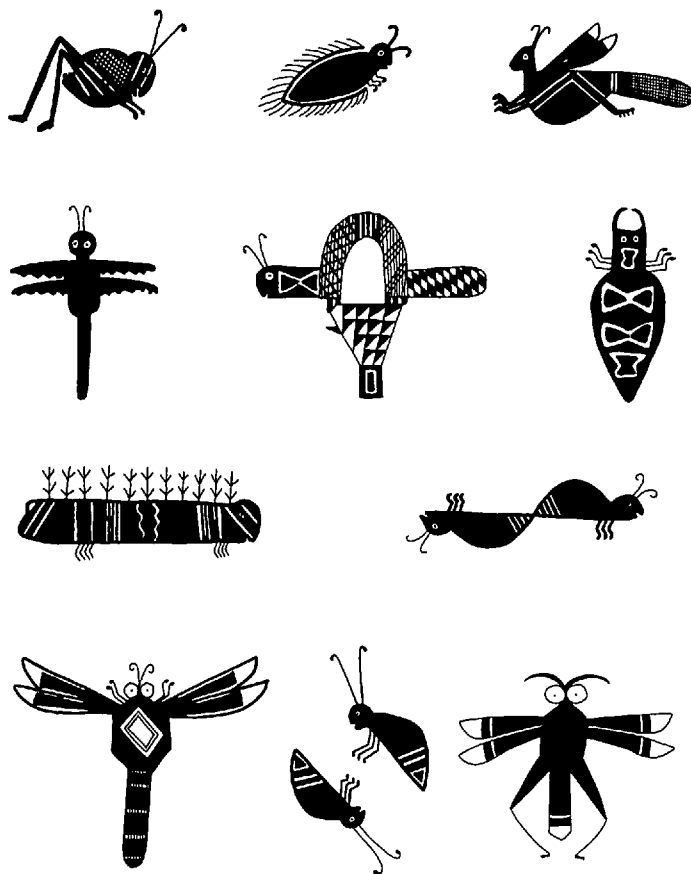
The Mimbrenos produced refined, sophisticated, hand-molded pottery adorned with surprisingly natural and realistic animal characterizations, often with a caricaturelike quality. Most pottery was painted black-on-white, although white-on-black occurs and sometimes red or brown was used. Geometric designs adorn much of their pottery also, and many animal depictions display combinations of realism and geometric design.

Analysis of 733 pottery vessels by pioneering archeologist J. W. Fewkes showed a strikingly high proportion of insect subjects: 12% of the subjects were insects as compared with 29% nonhuman mammals, 23% birds, 14% humans, 13% fish, 11% amphibians and reptiles, and 9% mythic creatures (occasional use of more than one subject per vessel accounts for the total exceeding 100%). Common insect subjects were grasshoppers, antlion larvae, caterpillars, and dragonflies, but many other insects were portrayed. Identification of subject matter is easy in some cases, but tentative in many. Mimbres artisans differed in their attention to detail; almost all insect subjects were painted with prominent antennae even if, as in the case of lepidopterous larvae, this is inappropriate. This may explain, in part, why antlion larvae were displayed frequently, but anthropologists fail to identify antlion adults on Mimbres pots. Perhaps many of the so-called dragonfly subjects were antlions, but precise identification confounds entomologists, so it is not surprising that anthropologists would have difficulty

distinguishing between the two insects. Conversely, these ancient artists may not have been attempting realistic portrayals.

The naturalistic designs found on Mimbres pottery suggest close and unusual association with nature. Insects appear more frequently than in art of European cultures. Except for occasional butterflies and other insects with ornamental value, we rarely find insects associated with serious European art, and almost never as the primary subject. It is surprising that other natural phenomena such as plants, sun, stars, and moon were rarely pictured by Mimbres artists. Some of the subjects favored by these ancient peoples were important food sources, (e.g., rabbits and pronghorn). Others (e.g., bighorn), however, were favorite subjects for artistic expression yet their skeletal remains occur rarely in houses and villages, suggesting that they were a rare food resource.

Interpretation of Mimbres imagery is difficult. About one-third of the designs found on bowls are unique to mortuary environs; they are not found on bowls used for cooking or storage. Also, many of the funerary bowls show no sign of



Insect drawings found on Mimbres pottery, circa A.D. 1100 (after Fewkes 1923, Cosgrove & Cosgrove 1932). Drawings apparently depict: (top row, left to right) cricket, case bearer, grasshopper; (second row, left to right) dragonfly, looper, antlion larva; (third row, left to right) buck moth caterpillar, leaf beetles; (bottom row, left to right) dragonfly, leaf beetles, grasshopper.

wear, which suggests that they were produced specifically for burial. Ancient peoples throughout the world commonly buried their dead with valuable possessions or utensils needed in the afterlife. What possible value could be associated with the insects portrayed so frequently by these agriculturalists? We will never know with certainty, but some insight can be gained by examining the role of insects in the culture of kindred peoples. It is thought that several tribes still dwelling in New Mexico and Arizona may be descendants of the Mimbres or were influenced by the Mimbres culture.

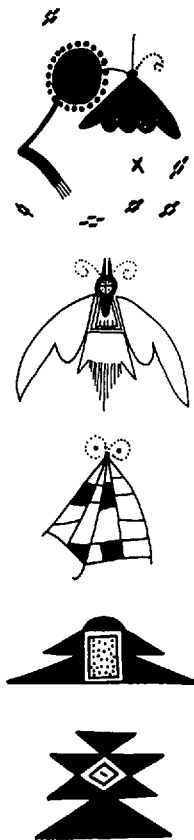
The Hopis, a branch of the Pueblo group and descendants of the Anasazi culture, are a sedentary people who engage in intensive agriculture in northern Arizona. Several of their ancient pueblos have been excavated, revealing painted pottery and wall murals that reveal some insight into their cultural history. In contrast to the Mimbres, they did not favor naturalistic designs. Insect paintings are not abundant, but some do occur. Perhaps insects were more important in aboriginal life than we suspect because the Hopis practiced an art form that was so highly stylized that distinguishing insects from other animals (particularly birds) is extremely difficult.

A Hopi art form where insects definitely occur is the kachina ceremonial. Kachina is the most important ceremony in the Hopi religious calendar and is unique among religious ceremonies in that every man, woman, and child is initiated. Kachina is not limited to Hopis. Nearly all Pueblo villages observe kachina ceremony in some way. It also is ancient. Prehistoric art, including petroglyphs, documents the presence of masked dancers well before the arrival of Europeans.

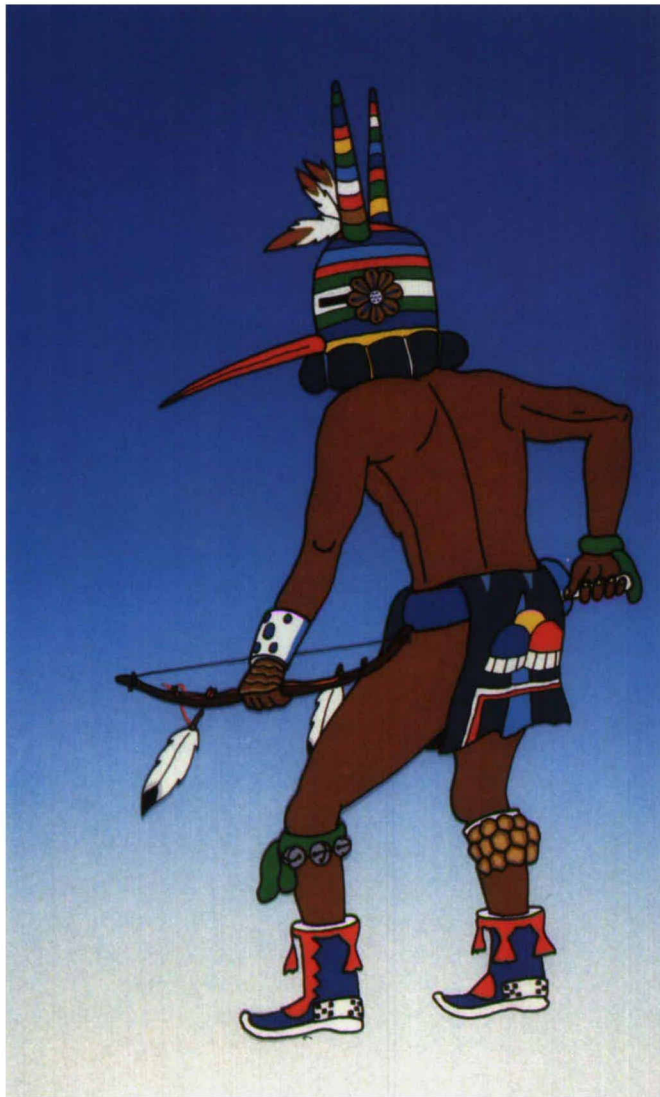
In Hopi mythology, kachinas were beneficent spirit-beings who accompanied people from the underworld, the origin of all peoples. The supernatural kachinas helped the Hopis prosper in their new environment, but they all were killed when the Hopis were attacked by their enemies. Although the souls of the kachinas returned to the underworld, their costumes were left behind. The Hopis believe that benefits formerly provided by the benevolent kachinas (e.g., rain and good crops) can be accrued by wearing the kachina paraphernalia. Kachinas are not worshiped; kachina spirits are not believed to be gods. Rather, they are a link between humans and god. Kachinas are expected to carry petitions of people, especially the village elders, to their gods. To a lesser degree, kachinas are believed to represent the spirit of the dead, and of course the costumes, dancing, and chanting serve a social as well as a religious function. Several insect kachinas are known, including bee, wasp, cicada, butterfly, robber fly, cricket, and dragonfly (see page 224). Spiderwoman, one of the most frequent characters in Hopi mythology, also is represented by a kachina figure. Kachina figures have specific roles, and many occur only in certain ceremonies. Cicada kachina, for example, appears early in the year, presumably as a prayer for the arrival of summer when the real cicada occurs.

The link of kachina insect figures to Hopi religion and mythology is important in understanding the relation between insects and indigenous southwestern peoples. Although the specific roles of most insect-form kachinas seem to have escaped description, their mere presence documents a religious role. However, the insect in Hopi culture extends beyond being a messenger to the gods; Hopis believe that their ancestors in the first underworld had insect forms. This is not an uncommon belief among southwestern cultures, but perhaps nowhere is the relation between insects and humans so intertwined as in the well-documented Navajo culture.

Hopi Kachinas



Drawings from ancient Hopi pottery, possibly from the 1400s. Fewkes (1919) believed that they all represented butterflies drawn with varying degrees of realism.



Tatangaya, a Hopi wasp kachina and Maha, a Hopi cicada kachina (both after Wright [1973]).

Navajo Drypainting

The Navajo tribe dwells in northern Arizona and contiguous areas of New Mexico and Utah. They are not closely related to the Hopis but are related to various Apache groups. They are much less sedentary than the Hopis; their traditional economy was based on herding and hunting. Today they engage principally in sheep herding.

Navajos perform highly ritualized ceremonials adopted to combat particular diseases or misfortunes—maladies often thought to be brought on by breach of taboo or witchcraft. Taboo sometimes is violated by coming into contact with dangerous objects. Some animals are considered dangerous, and among them are moths, ants, long-horned grasshoppers, and camel crickets.

Drypaintings, which usually are incorrectly called sandpaintings, are an integral component of ceremonials. The elaborate paintings are made from sand, ash, pollen, and other dry material and are unfortunately destroyed as part of the ceremony. They are rarely displayed to outsiders; even relating the complete ceremony is considered taboo. Nevertheless, they have long been of great interest to anthropologists and many complete ceremonials (chantways) are known. Examples include Hailway, which is performed to cure illness resulting from cold; Waterway for illness resulting from rain; and Shooting Chant, which alleviates problems brought on by lightning, arrows, and snakes. The ceremonies are prolonged, usually 3–9 d. The complexities are difficult to master. The Nightway, for example, contains 576 songs. Thus, a singer or chanter usually specializes in performing only two or three ceremonies.

Many drypaintings, taboos notwithstanding, have been portrayed by anthropologists. Insect figures are often included. Some of the insects depicted by Navajos are shown at right.

Sometimes insect figures are purely symbolic. Dragonflies are the best example of this: a dragonfly, or more commonly four dragonflies, located around a circle is used to symbolize pure water.

More commonly, the insects have important roles in the mythology underlying the ceremonial. "Big fly," for example, is an important instructor-helper in Navajo mythology. Big fly can go anywhere, mediates between humans and deities, and often gets the hero out of difficulty in Navajo tales. In drypaintings, big fly is often portrayed at the eastern end, or opening, of the painting. Big fly is quite literally a large fly; Navajos usually associate tachinid flies with this character.

"Cornbug" or "ripeners" sometimes is found guarding the eastern openings in drypaintings, although its primary function is to symbolize reproduction. Cornbug is portrayed in myths as both an insect and a girl, and is often highly anthropomorphized in drypaintings. Although called corn beetle by some authors, Navajos generally associate lacewings with this mythological character.

Ants are important in Navajo myths, but are not especially common in drypaintings. Navajos associate their traditional house structure, or hogan, with ant mounds. Ants are the only insect for which an entire chantway is named: Red Antway. This ceremony is performed to counteract the deleterious consequences of consuming or disturbing ants. Ants are the most anthropomorphized of all the insect characters; many depictions show no insect features, so without being fully aware of the story line an observer would not realize the importance of ants. In some drypaintings they are represented only by red dots.

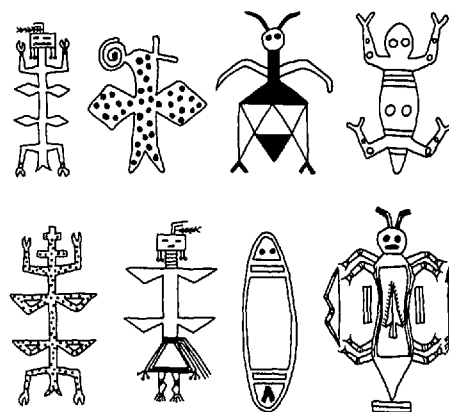
Ants are not the only insects that are important in Navajo mythology but that show up rarely in drypaintings. Other examples include bees, wasps, hornworms, butterflies, and also spiders. This is possibly because of the Navajo belief that all these organisms are poisonous. The Navajos are correct, of course, in the case of bees, wasps, and spiders, and admittedly hornworms appear to be harmful. The association of butterflies with danger is more surprising but is well established in their culture.

The butterfly is the symbol of love, temptation, and foolishness to Navajos. It also symbolizes moth madness. *Moth madness* is the dread disease among Navajos and is applied to any malady wherein the victim displays fainting, frenzy, spells, trembling, or motor seizure. Thus, an epileptic is assumed to have come into contact with a moth.

The butterfly also symbolizes the Mothway myth. In the Mothway legend, a bisexual god named Begochidi was leader of the butterfly people and serviced the sexual needs of both male and female butterflies. However, Begochidi reputedly decided to leave the country, and the butterfly people decided it was better to commit incest than to marry outsiders. This made the butterfly people "go wild," which is currently manifested, for example, in a tendency of moths to rush into flames.

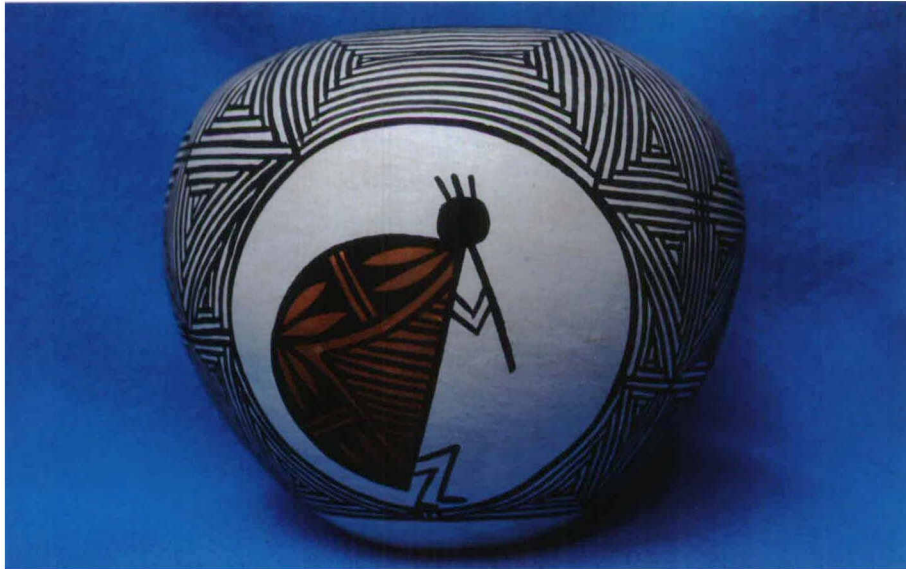
The basis for the Mothway myth is the widespread concern about incest in small, isolated groups. Small inbreeding populations may have resulted in some of the aforementioned physical afflictions. Thus, the Mothway legend is, to Navajos, an explanation of the prohibition against sibling and clan incest.

Navajos classify objects readily, even to the point of having a binomial nomenclature system where *genus* is a small group of organisms that superficially resemble each other (e.g., beetles) and *species* is further qualification, often color or habit (e.g., black beetle or burrowing beetle). There are five *phyla* within the Navajo animal *kingdom*: animals that live in water, animals living in the ground, four-footed animals, flying animals, and crawling animals. Thus, insects occur in all *phyla*. As nearly all humans, Navajos make no attempt to differentiate insects from other arthropods. Surprisingly, they regard bats as insects.



Representative depictions (after Wyman & Bailey 1964) of insects displayed in Navajo dry-paintings: (top row, left to right) big fly, moth, blowfly, and cicada; (bottom row, left to right) dragonfly, cornbug, hornworm, and ant.

Navajo Ethnoentomology



Contemporary vase from the Acoma Pueblo showing the humpbacked flute player, the human form of cicada.

Navajos use insects freely in their myths and ceremonials. In the most complete treatise on the subject, anthropologists L. C. Wyman and F. L. Bailey analyzed 61 Navajo myths for reference to arthropods. They reported 623 referrals, with 138 in important roles, distributed among 55 myths. Big fly and cornbug are the most frequent actors, but many others are involved. The greatest variety of insects occurring in a single myth is in the legend of Upward-Reaching-Way, with 14 different types named.

A good example of how insects are integrated into most aspects of Navajo life can be seen from legends

surrounding weaving. The Navajos believe that spiderwoman was a Pueblo woman taught to weave by a spider. Traditionally, weavers paid tribute to this by leaving a hole in the center of each woven blanket, similar to the hole commonly observed at the center of spider webs. White traders refused to purchase blankets bearing holes even though there was a cultural basis for this artifact, so weavers changed their acknowledgment to spiderwoman by inserting a *spirit outlet* in the design. This takes the form of a thin line from the center to the edge of the weaving, and to the casual observer appears to be a defect. Navajo women believe that the spirit outlet prevents spiderwoman from spinning cobwebs in their brain, an ailment also known as *blanket sickness*.

One of the most common mythological figures found on pottery, blankets, jewelry, wall murals, and even in ancient petroglyphs is the *humpbacked flute player*. The widespread occurrence of the humpback flute player among different tribes throughout the Americas clearly demonstrates an intermingling of religious beliefs or a common heritage, or both. The flute player is the human-form of cicada (the anthropological literature uses the obsolete term *locust*); cicada assisted the Navajos' ancestors in attainment of the present world (see *The Navajo Story of Creation*, below). The flute player is distinctly portrayed as a humpbacked, or at least archbacked, anthropomorphic figure, although sometimes he bears a prayerstick instead of a flute. Flute player created warmth by playing his flute, and in his hump he carried seeds of plants and flowers. Other humpbacked creatures such as bison or bears are considered powerful, but flute player is especially powerful because of his part in generation and reproduction. In many depictions he is shown with a long penis to symbolize the seeds of human reproduction. Although he is widely recognized as a fertility symbol, his insect origins are less commonly appreciated. This is not entirely surprising because European-influenced cultures have difficulty relating to concepts such as interconversion of humans and "wild" animals. Nevertheless, Navajos and many other indigenous peoples believe that all animals were men at one time and have the ability to assume human-forms when necessary.

The Hopis have a humpbacked kachina called *Kokopelli* whose origin is a robber fly. Often Kokopelli occurs without a flute. The name Kokopelli is often applied incorrectly to all humpbacked figures.

The Navajo Story of Creation

The Navajo legend of creation, also referred to as *The Emergence*, is the most sacred of Navajo ceremonials. It is told in a 9-d event called Blessing Way. There are numerous variations of this myth recorded, but they all share a common theme.

The Navajos believe that there are four underworlds beneath (not necessarily physically below, however) the present fifth world. Above is another world

where all things blend into the cosmos. The first world, the origin of Navajos, was a small island surrounded by oceans and inhabited only by people who were insects. The Insect People were of 12 types: dragonflies, red ants, black ants, red beetles, black beetles, white-faced beetles, hard beetles, yellow beetles, dung beetles, bats, cicadas (locusts) and white cicadas (locusts).

The Insect People committed adultery and quarreled constantly, and were expelled from the first world for this behavior. Their gods sent a wall of water from all directions to drive them out. They took flight and water covered their land. While flying, desperately seeking a new home, a cliff swallow called them to a hole in the sky of the first world. Thus, they emerged into the second world.

The second world was inhabited by Swallow People living in mud houses. The Insect People sent out couriers, the cicadas and white cicadas, to explore the new world. The cicadas reported finding nothing but bare ground. Although it appeared to be a poor environment, the Insect People decided to inhabit the land of the Swallow People. This was not meant to be, however. After 24 d one of the Insect People "made too free" with the wife of the Swallow People's chief, and the Insect People were expelled. The Insect People took flight again with the cicadas in the lead. They attained the sky, but had a hard time finding a place to penetrate. The white face of the wind appeared and told them of an opening. Thus, they emerged into the third world.

*Religion
among natives
in the Southwest
touches on
animism,
polytheism,
nature worship,
and magic.*

The inhabitants of the third world were Grasshopper People, who lived in holes in the ground. Like the second world, the Insect People found the third world to be barren; nonetheless, they requested permission to stay, which was granted by their new hosts. Again, after 24 d, the Insect People were found guilty of philandering and were expelled by the chief of the Grasshopper People. The Insect People took flight, flew upwards, and found a hard, impenetrable sky until a red face of the wind appeared and told them of an opening into the fourth world.

Again when the Insect People emerged into this new world they sent out cicadas to explore. The fourth world was found to be more populated, as in the snow-covered mountains they found tracks of deer and turkey. To the north they found strange people who cut their hair square in front, cultivated fields, and lived in houses. These strange people (Pueblos) visited the exiles and shared food with them. The Insect People decided to change their ways and coexist peacefully with the Pueblos.

Eventually, the Insect People were visited by gods who indicated that they wanted to make more people, but in a human form rather than insect. The gods performed a ceremony in which humans were created from ears of corn. Different types (colors) of corn were transformed into different tribes. The Insect People intermarried with the new humans and eventually their descendants no longer resembled insects.

In time, the men and women had a great argument and they decided to live apart, separated by a river. The women found that living alone was more difficult than they had anticipated and eventually were starving. They, as well as the men, participated in unnatural sexual acts during their separation. Although the men and women eventually reunited, the gods were displeased by the sins of the people and sent a wall of water thundering down upon them. The people observed animals running and set cicadas to investigate the cause of this disturbance. With the water closing in rapidly, the people desperately sought safety, eventually climbing inside a fast-growing giant reed and plugging the opening.

The people sheltered inside the reed directed various animals upward to attempt to break into the fifth world. Eventually cicada was able to gain entry, where he discovered that this world was populated by grebes. The grebes informed cicada that if the cicadas could survive challenges that the grebes could survive, they could have the fifth world. The challenge the grebes had in mind was to plunge arrows into the heart. This the cicada was able to do, although to this day they bear the scars (spiracles?) in their side, and to this day the Navajo people populate the fifth world.

Religion and Indigenous Peoples

The indigenous peoples of the American Southwest engaged in a religion that was quite foreign to explorers and settlers with a Judeo-Christian heritage. Navajos, for example, lack a traditional word for religion and have no center of worship. It is reported that whites lived with Navajos for several decades before realizing that they had any form of worship.

Religion among natives in the Southwest touches on animism, polytheism, nature worship, and magic. It is not a separate entity, however, because it pervades every aspect of the traditional culture. The central tenet is that all components of the universe are interrelated. Humankind is only one element in nature, and humans must obey its many laws. To maintain a harmonious relationship, humans must appreciate that every element in nature, even insects, has a purpose. These beliefs are directly in conflict with the anthropocentric Christian creeds that several sects have attempted to force on the native populace. Many tribes have long resisted the destruction of their culture attempted by missionaries and government agents. The attraction of the goods-rich white economy, however, has proven to be a formidable force in disrupting traditional practices.

Insects play an important role in the religion of several southwestern cultures, especially in relation to the origin of these peoples. The abundance of insect designs on Mimbres pottery can perhaps be explained based on such ancient and apparently widespread beliefs. The Mimbrenos' insect artistry is possibly less an attempt to capture or preserve familiar fauna than to relate religious ceremonial. This may explain the curious inaccuracies and inconsistencies in insect morphology and the abundance of mythical creatures—usually hybrids of different animals or of human and animals.

Southwestern artisans are no longer producing art work principally for their own domestic and religious use. There is a lucrative commercial market for their crafts. They produce more of what sells best, not necessarily what is culturally appropriate. As archaeologists have discovered ancient designs on pottery shards and murals, some have been rapidly and successfully incorporated into modern crafts. However, tourists of European heritage seem reluctant to purchase items decorated with insect characters, other than "pretty" butterflies. We cannot expect native artists to produce items that they cannot market. Sadly, an intriguing cultural heritage is being distorted by insect phobias.

Acknowledgments

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Suggested Readings

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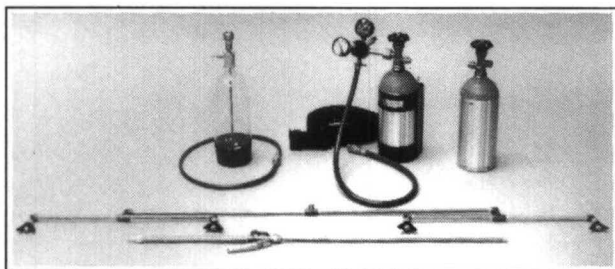
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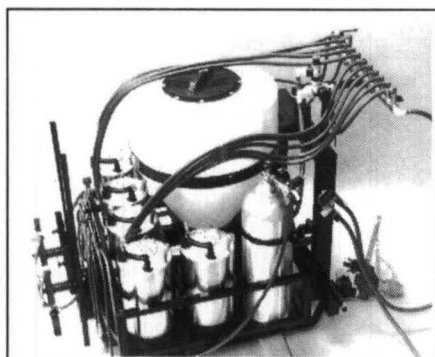
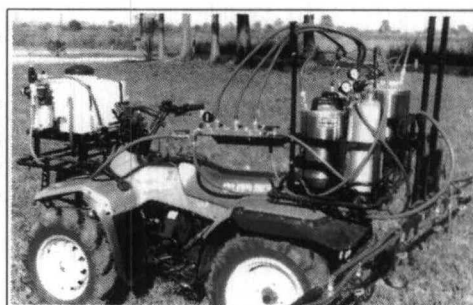


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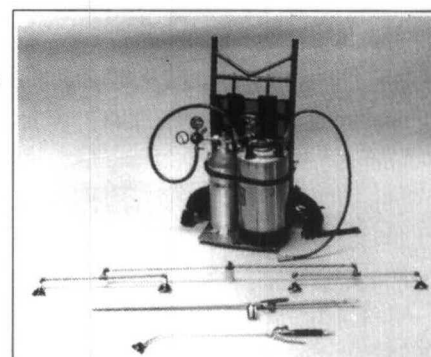


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