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Commentary III: Challenge

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Challenge

Edna Glenn

The realm of ceremonialism has been probed in detail in efforts to define Hopis as contemporary persons and to understand the context of Hopi life today as it exists within the broader framework of contemporary American life. The investigation and the findings are complex in scope and interpretation; meanings derived are comprehensive and abstract. Any analysis of Hopi life acquires justification in contemporary Hopi beliefs that continue to be rooted in Hopi ritual patterns that, to a major extent, continue to be centered in traditional ceremonialism.

The Niman Kuwan Heheya celebration at Walpi provides an exemplary situation to examine historic reality and Native concepts in regard to religion, ritualism, and symbolism; and to observe Hopi sensibilities and aesthetic awareness to environmental forms, whether natural or human-made. That analysis of the Niman ritual proceeds through the visual arts is verifiable, the premise being that the artist, perhaps more than any other individual, possesses sensitivity to the abstract creative realm that characterizes the Hopi "holistic bent of mind." The artist's abilities to perceive complexities in terms of meaningful integrated wholes and to express through skill and media, an equivalent of those concepts, coincides with individual Hopi procedures of conceiving and revealing, in tangible terms, abstract "essences."

The works of Joseph Mora, whose photographed scene of the Walpi village ceremonial is discussed in Commentaries I and II, present one kind of visual challenge, primarily that of objective reality. With paintbrush, pencil, and box-camera, Mora, a non-Hopi, non-Indian artist, recorded visual truths of Hopi life. At one time he commented, "This is very complicated, and I'm glad I am the painter and not the mythologist."¹ Only with his keen eye and disciplined camera skill was he able to produce photographs "considered the best ever created of Hopi ceremonials;"² and with his water colors and brushes, the "most accurate paintings ever created of kachina dancers. Mora possessed a photographic memory . . . [and] he strove for total authenticity."³

A very different kind of visual challenge results from experiences with other original works of art reproduced on these pages. These are contemporary Hopi paintings and craft-works executed by young artists who call themselves the Artist Hopid.⁴ Patricia Broder, Hopi art observer, commented:

The painters of the Artist Hopid are participants in a cohesive society and in their art they express their commitment to the Hopi culture. Theirs is not the work of expatriate Indians nostalgically recalling a once-idyllic existence or angrily protesting social injustice in a world to which they no longer belong, a world with which they have little in common. They recognize that the mid-twentieth century is a transitional period in Hopi history. . . . Modern Hopi art, like modern Hopi life, is distinguished by a sense of history and cultural continuity.⁵



Figure 78. HOPI LIFE
Coochsiwukioma (Delbridge Honanie)
painting, acrylic. 1974 (Courtesy of Artist Hopid, Second Mesa, Arizona)



Mora's originals provide opportunities to examine Hopi people and their life patterns. Coochsiwukioma (Delbridge Honanie), a painter of the Artist Hopid group, also presents a view of "Hopi Life," the title of an extremely complicated work completed in 1974. Examining this painting is indeed valuable in the pursuit of defining the contemporary HOPI.

"Hopi Life," according to its painter, symbolically evolves from the central theme of Hopi migrations.⁶ Ideas of migration, fertility, and growth, structure the centuries-old concept of Hopi life. This painting, a compendious outlay of ideas and symbols, stretching to a painted expanse of some nine feet, is in itself a celebration and a ceremony.

Revelations acquired from observing the artwork are not those of optical fact, as is the case with the Mora works. Revelations here are those of subjective human states, the intensely expressed feelings of the painter as he contemplates Hopi life today. It is a personal statement, one which says that at present there are both order and chaos among the Hopis; and that there persists an undeniable mix of traditional and contemporary alien elements totally unlike any disturbance previously dealt with in the history of the Hopi people. Resultant attitudes are those of grave self-concern and tribal-concern. It is the artist who responds to the situation so emotionally, who feels so compelled to make a major statement, and who is so capable of transmitting the inner concern to the outer actuality of paint and symbols, enabling others to grasp the message and to share the concern.

The iconography of the painting, "Hopi Life," in its entirety allows speculation. Visually, there are two powerful, conflicting forces having a confrontation: at the left there is the steadfast, ongoing Hopi traditionalism; at the right, there is the inescapable, incomprehensible encroachment of twenty-first century complexity. A tension between the two is energized and emphasized by the dynamic thrust of a Hopi prayer stick; an obvious detachment exists, although the two powerful elements coexist in Hopi space. The finite circle-form on the left can be perceived as universal order, and more specifically, as the earth, the Hopi Fourth World. Minute human images, having just emerged from the Third World through the square opening "at the Center," are arranged symbolically in colored sections of circle-space. They appear as embattled people, fighting for Hopi identity and clan affiliation, preparatory to migrations.

Colored spaces designate the five major societies traditionally sacred to the Hopi: Two Horn, One Horn, Wuwuchim, Snake, and Flute.⁷ In the white circle-center is the bear image with a breath-line, identifying the significance of the Bear Clan who first led the Hopi migrations to the sacred mesas, and who continue to guide Hopis in their never-ending spiritual migrations. Painted hand-symbols and bear-paw prints appearing in the picture space also represent the Bear Clan people. Their prominence as icons adjacent to the ambiguously emerging power-figure on the right perhaps indicates the strategic and sacred role of this particular clan today. The painter, Coochsiwukioma, is a member of the Bear Clan; these symbols may serve as a collective artist's signature, and as an expressed belief that his clan will lead the Hopis through modern difficulties, as they did at the time of the chaotic beginnings with emergence into the Fourth World.

In the painting, the metamorphism occurring on the right side is indefinable. Only conjecture is possible. Perhaps the powerful image is a Hopi God-figure or Warrior-deity. Clearly, the image is of the twentieth century, artistically and symbolically. Abstract, fragmented shapes recall theories of Cubism projected by the Spanish artist, Pablo Picasso, in the early part of the century. Space-time concepts

are evident in the painted figure which appears to be changing and moving in a complexity of multi-dimensional compositional elements. Symbolically, the Cubistic figure reminds us that the Hopi people are seriously involved with contemporary changes in tribal patterns.

The title of the painting is "Hopi Life" and the theme is "migrations." Symbolic indications are that the twentieth-century God-figure on the right is Ahula, the great Hopi Sun Chief, all powerful deity of creation, germination and growth, primary helper to the Sun. There are countless spiral motifs significant as migrational symbols. Earth reds, sun yellows, and water blues surrounding Ahula suggest fertility and unending growth. But the symbolic elements depicted here are not stable, not holistically ordered as are the sacred circle, traditional elements on the left. The struggle and transformation taking place seem to portray the Hopi deity as evolving into a space-age, mechanical monster-creature, possessing all of the power, energy, and mystery associated with each of these superhuman beings.

A dichotomy of visual forms emphasizes the transformation: a dominant bear-paw shape projects from the Hopi deity as if controlling the sacred prayer stick, projecting and receiving prayers and blessings. Also projecting from the God-figure is a hand-arm form, curiously robot-like in its mechanical thrust toward the Hopi life sustenance - corn. The God, Ahula, triumphantly directs the sacred planting stick over his head toward flowing water and the warmth of the sun. The blessings of Hopi life continue; but the process of change demands both immediate and ongoing surveillance, as if the appropriate time for a composite Hopi-form to take shape in the modern era has not yet come.

The contemporary challenge is a collective one, a summoning of all people, Hopi and non-Hopi, to share with intelligence and concern the problematic times, to share with joy and vision the times of ceremony and celebration.

Notes

1. Joseph Mora, *The Year of the Hopi: Paintings and Photographs* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1979), p. 21.
2. Tyrone H. Stewart, "The Hopi and Jo Mora," in *ibid.*, p. 4.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Three of the five founding members of the group—Michael Kabotie, Terrance Talaswaima, and Neil David, Sr.—were 1981 symposium participants. Thirty-five of their originals were shown in the galleries of The Museum of Texas Tech University. Collectively, the artworks and the artists present a twentieth-century Hopi viewpoint of distinct value, having experienced at various times both the Hopi and non-Hopi worlds. Presently, they live on the Hopi mesas and have distinguished themselves as community leaders, spiritual leaders, and Hopi spokesmen through their arts.
5. Patricia Janis Broder, *Hopi Painting: The World of the Hopis* (New York: Brandywine Press, 1978), p. 280.
6. Conversation between Delbridge Honanie and Edna Glenn, September 18, 1981.
7. Terrance Talaswaima, "The Hopi Way: Art as Life, Symbol, and Ceremony," *Infra*.