

The World of the North American Yaqui

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The Fourth Museum Exhibition:

Indigenous Peoples and Borders

Indigenous Peoples refer to those who have historically suffered injustice through the colonization of their lands and theft of their resources and have consequently been obstructed in their right to develop according to their best advantage. The Yaqui (or as they refer to themselves, the Yoeme) are one such Indigenous People in North America. Currently, this People reside straddling the border between the Southwestern United States and Northwestern Mexico. The Yaqui speak their own language and have maintained a unique culture centered on their deer and mask dances. Those of the community living on the American side of the border are known by the state as the Pascua Yaqui. There are about 22,000 Yaqui resident in the United States and 14,000 on the Mexican side of the border.

The Yaqui in the United States are able to freely travel across the border to Mexico using identity cards issued by the Pascua Yaqui authorities in place of their passports. However, border issues are still common, such as their misidentification as illegal immigrants or the confiscation of gifts by customs. These problems are not just experienced by the Yaqui but are common to many other Indigenous Peoples.



The Mask dance, known as the 'Pahko'ola', is together with the Maaso, or Deer dance, representative of traditional Yaqui arts. The masks are in a variety of designs such as people, goats or chickens. With black representing darkness and white indicating light, these masks also speak to the Yaqui's world view. A variety of meanings that draw on the spirit world are incorporated, with triangles around the edges meaning the light of the sun, a cross on the forehead indicating god's grace, spots for stars, triangles on the cheeks for sadness, lizards for nature, and so on. Only males are allowed to perform the Mask dances.

When the Mask and Deer dances are performed, they are accompanied by both traditional Yaqui instruments like drums, whistles and maracas, and those adopted from Europeans, like the violin and harp. Shown here is a traditional Yaqui drum, made by cutting a dried gourd in two and played while floating in a tub of water. The drum's surface is decorated with a flower that has a particular importance in Yaqui culture.



The mask carvers today also produce smaller variants to be sold as souvenirs and other ornamental carvings. The decorations range from those of the Masks and the Yaqui's surroundings to things like the flower and the hummingbird that have a particular spiritual significance for the Yaqui. As well as in carving, the Yaqui world can also be seen in a variety of other media like oil paintings, murals, and mosaics.