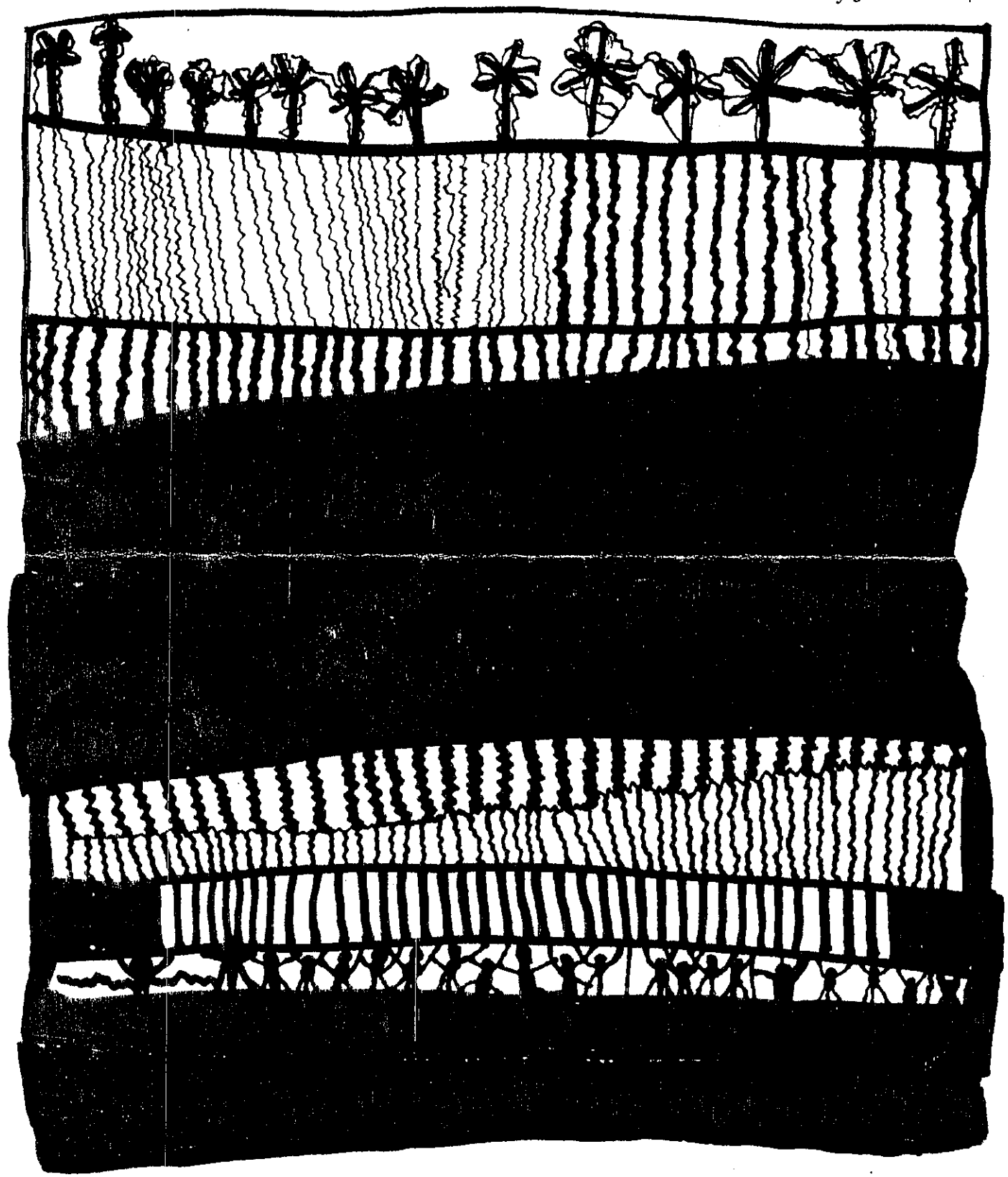


CEDI - P.I.B.  
DATA 26.08.86  
CCO. 74/1863

# Carnegie Magazine

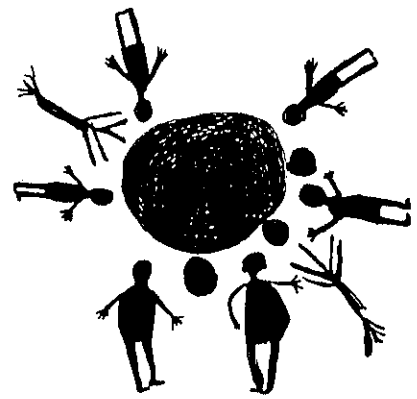
Carnegie Institute/Pittsburgh

May/June 1985/\$2



“A long time ago when the upper sky broke open our ancestors fell to earth . . . .”

# Yanomama Drawings: New Art by an Old People



By Lorraine Couture-Brunette  
and Giovanni Saffirio

In the Amazonian rain forest of northern Brazil and southern Venezuela live the Yanomama, a people largely unknown to Western civilization until the 1950s, but now enduring the rapid cultural change that arrived with Brazilian Highway BR-210. This road, constructed in the 1970s and called the "Perimetral Norte," penetrates deep into Yanomama territory, and brings with it the influences—the Western goods, the beliefs, the diseases—that create rapid and permanent change in the lifestyle of a people.

During this same period one group of the Yanomama, those of the Catrimani River, began to draw and illustrate for the first time. Their tribal myths, personal feelings, everyday occurrences, the world of nature—these subjects found expression in the vivid colors of magic markers. For a brief period, the worldview of the ancient Yanomama has become visible in colorful drawings on paper. Through this artistic window the West now looks, until Western influences arrive in such strength that the traditional Yanomama ways of seeing the world are changed.

*Lorraine Couture-Brunette is the Collection Manager for the Section of Anthropology, Carnegie Museum of Natural History, and Giovanni Saffirio, a Research Associate of the Museum, is a doctoral candidate in Anthropology at the University of Pittsburgh, and a member of the Consolata Society for Foreign Missions.*

The Yanomama Indians are the largest Indian population in the Amazonian rain forest (population estimates range from 10,000 to 15,000). Because of their settlement locations away from major waterways, they remained isolated and unacculturated until the present time. All Yanomama speak four mutually intelligible languages and several dialects—they distinguish themselves from other Amazonian Indians by language, and from other Yanomama groups by dialect.

The nine villages of the Catrimani River Yanomama are in Brazil, in the Federal Territory of Roraima and the State of Amazonas. Each village consists of one communal house, from 60 to 120 feet in diameter, designed to house a total village population of between 18 to 80 people—the average number of villagers is 35. The most common structure is round, with one or two small smoke holes at the top. It is always constructed entirely of forest materials and is located near the gardens and a stream. Within the house may be 5 to 20 families, inter-related by marriage, and occupying a portion of the house assigned to the family by kinship rule.

The Yanomama spend almost as much time gathering and hunting as they do gardening—although the latter is more rewarding in terms of total calories produced. The men clear the land and plant the garden, but harvesting is the domain of the women. Hunting is strictly a male occupation. A ten-



*All the villagers at the Catrimani River site live in a large communal house, which is divided inside according to family groups.*

An artist stands with the shamans in the sky to draw, and sees the world from a different point of view.

mile radius of forest, approximately a three-and-one-half-hour walk from the village, is normally exploited in hunting and gathering.

For the Catrimani River Yanomama, sustained contact with the West began in 1965 when two Catholic missionaries from the Consolata Society for Foreign Missions settled permanently near one of their villages. In 1968 Father Giovanni Saffirio joined the mission at the mid-Catrimani River site, and he brought with him the materials with which to write and draw.

Prior to 1971 the only visual art practiced by the Yanomama was body painting. But in this year Saffirio introduced drawing on paper with magic markers. The initial reason for introducing the technique was to test the Indians for right and left handedness, but as the experiment developed, a long-term project began. Drawing with magic markers became a gauge of individual accuracy in handling writing instruments, and reading and writing were essential for the Yanomama to cope with modern Brazil.

Thirty Indians, men and women, were asked to create ten different drawings each, including various geometric and human shapes. This they did, and although they enjoyed using the drawing implements, nothing further developed with magic markers until 1974. In that year they were asked to illustrate their myths and legends. These drawings were collected and were eventually published in 1978 as a Christmas gift book to publicize the plight of the Yanomama: more and more of the population were succumbing to disease and to the encroachments of the road builders and the settlers. Three Yanomama artists—Koromani, Mamoke Rorowe, and Kretip—were the major artists for this book.

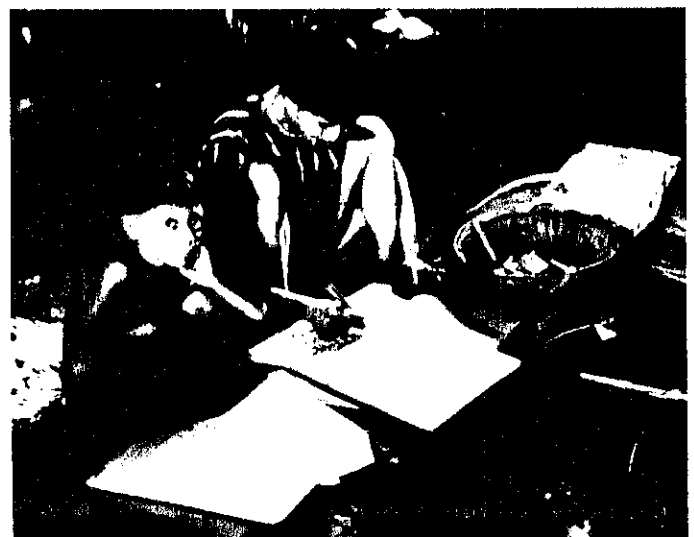
For the next two years there was a lull in artistic work as the construction work for Highway BR-210 created havoc for the village. Then in 1976 the Yanomama returned to the drawing boards, this time depicting people on Christmas cards which were sent to the friends and relatives of the missionaries. In late 1977 Saffirio left for the United States and art production slowed down, since he had been the main conduit for obtaining art supplies. In 1979 Saffirio returned to the mission, and once again the drawing increased. Many people were eager to resume the artwork. All of the drawings in the museum exhibition *Spirits of the Rain Forest* date from after 1979.

Among the Yanomama there is no special training or status accorded to an artist. Anyone who wishes to may draw, and most of the men in the villages closest to the Mission house have done so. Although one woman is represented in the museum exhibition, women are generally occupied with children and household chores and lack the opportunity to draw. The transmission of myths and legends is primarily a concern of men, who recount the oral history of the Yanomama for younger generations.

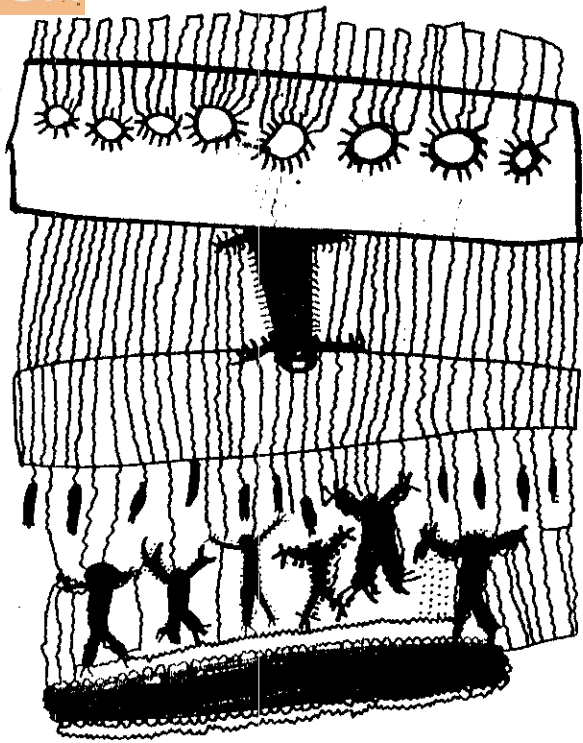
All nine villages in the Catrimani River area have their artists, most of them mature men and shamans in their own villages. However, the enthusiasm and skill of a young shaman named Taniki, from the village of Hewenahipitheri, is second to none. Taniki began to draw in 1979, and after nine drawings in that year, went on to become the most prolific and dedicated of the Yanomama artists. Of the 104 drawings in *Spirits of the Rain Forest*, 82 were made by Taniki.

Taniki came from a village on the Haranariu River, where he had met and married his first wife, Koparim. After they had moved to the Uxiu River, Koparim died "of an evil spell." After this episode Taniki moved again (1972), this time to the Hewenahi

*The artist Taniki and his son. Taniki's own words describe his pictures on the following pages.*

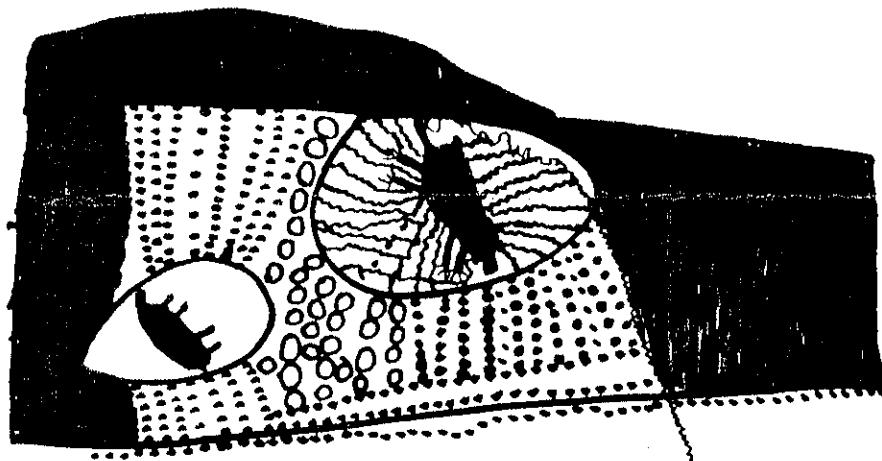


Photos by G. Saffirio



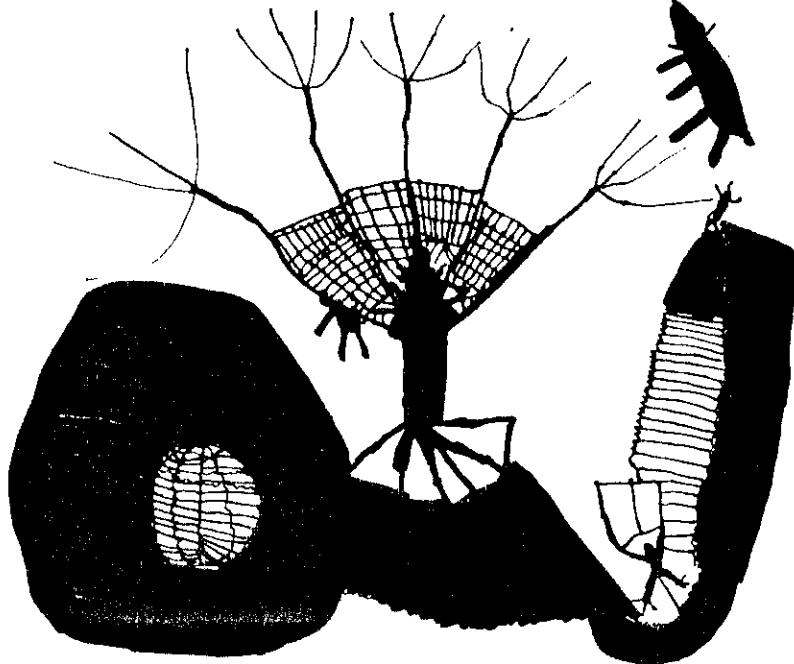
"Mother Teperesik is standing in the middle of a big river. Her mouth is wide open. She lives in deep waters. Around her are fish and rocks all over. Mother and daughters live in big holes at the bottom of the river [top of drawing].

The daughters of Teperesik are painted red with black dots all over their bodies. [bottom of drawing]. Omam, Teperesik's son-in-law, is taking Yoinani—the nicest of Teperesik's daughters—as wife. Yoasi, his brother, is taking another daughter of Teperesik as wife. Krokoo takes a wife for himself."



"Xoapemani was resting in his house when he perceived a tapir passing by. Xoapemani had a powerful smelling sense like a dog. He followed the tapir foot prints inside the forest. He killed the tapir with his bow and arrows. He cut the tapir and barbecued it.

Katusi found a sloth—Yaweresi—hidden in the middle of the branches of a tree. He killed him with a stick. Then he went back to his house inside gigantic leaves."



River, where he found his second wife, Konaim. They now have four children, three of whom live with them. Still a young man, Taniki has established a reputation for shamanistic cures and is well-known among the Yanomama.

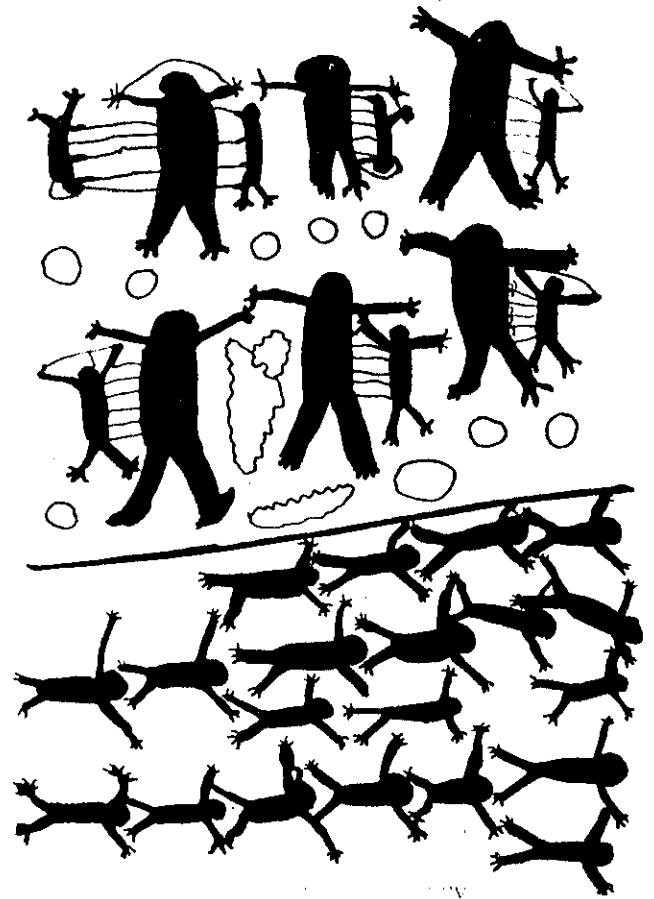
The Yanomama like to draw everyday occurrences and scenes as well as the mythological and spirit worlds. A favorite legend is that of the creation of the world. In this creation myth the ancestors once inhabited the upper layer of the sky, but began fighting among themselves, and fought so hard that they tore a hole in the sky. The people, rocks, and trees fell through this hole to a lower level, which is the world in which the Yanomama live today. The shamans now hold the broken sky. In Taniki's drawing the Yanomama of today (those who fell through the hole) are shown at the *top* of the drawing and the shamans who hold the broken sky are at the *bottom* of the drawing—a reversal of the Western concept of the sky being above, and the world below.

Other popular myths include one that tells how two brothers, the only humans on earth, acquired women. In this legend a mythical anaconda snake named Teperesik lives at the bottom of the river (shown at the *top* of the drawing, however). The brothers Oman and Yoasi fished one of the anaconda's daughters, Yoinani, from the river (shown at the *bottom* of the drawing) and Oman married her. It is from this couple that the Yanomama claim descent.

Drawings such as this show one moment in a legendary occurrence. A different type of drawing, however, depicts an entire myth in a counter-clockwise series around the illustration, beginning in the lower left corner. The legend of the first Yanomama hunters, Xoapemani and Kahusi, has been drawn this way. First (in the lower left corner) Xoapemani is shown resting in his house, then he smells a tapir passing by and follows it into the forest (lower right corner up to right center). He kills the tapir (the small person and the large animal in the right center), and cooks it (the top center of the drawing shows the tapir in the fire). The other hunter, Kahusi, is shown finding a sloth in a tree (left side, above center). He kills it, and returns home (large figure in the center). This myth reflects the great significance of hunting—an important male activity which leads to high esteem for successful hunters.

Actual places and events are also recorded in Yanomama art. There is, for example, a drawing of the Mission truck with the Indians inside, or the drawing of the 1957 Amatheri raid. In that incident the Amatheri villagers raided the Haranariu villagers, killing and wounding many people. Although the Haranariu village has since moved and the occupants have dispersed, the artist Taniki, one of the inhabitants of the Haranariu village, recalls the incident in several drawings.

Abstract concepts related to the natural world—such as wind and animal spirits—are also portrayed in Yanomama art. The artists will sometimes draw totally abstract concepts as an outlet for pain and aggression. "Toothache," as experienced by Taniki, is



*"A long time ago when I was a young boy, the Amatheri raided our village at Haranariu river. They took us by surprise. They were numerous. They were hidden in the forest close to our path [bottom of the drawing]. They killed Mamoku and Uxipirim, great shamans. They killed Mahunatha's son, Noamara's father, and they injured Hiko and a woman" [big figures on the top of the drawing].*

graphically depicted by many tiny teeth, each with its own animal making a painful path through the tooth.

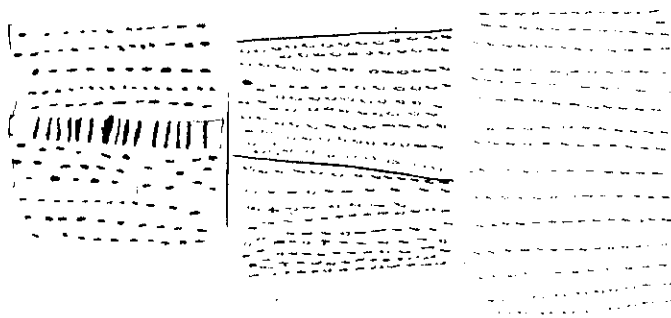
Anger appears in their art through the portrayal of feelings about the accidental death of an Indian named Xokoxina in 1981. He was accidentally shot in the back with an arrow by Makuxi as the men were running through the forest hunting *okap* (enemies) at night. The death, though inadvertent, greatly upset all the Yanomama in the area, since some believed that Makuxi had shot Xokoxina intentionally to get his wife. Taniki deals with his own anger in a series of three drawings made during the two-day funeral ceremony. The drawings depict the level of his anger and its slow abatement: "Very angry for Xokoxina's death"; the next morning—"Still angry for Xokoxina's death"; and later that same afternoon—"The anger is finally gone."

Color in Yanomama art has a variety of functions. Usually the colors selected are not realistic. Trees are not green, for example, and people can be red or

blue, and animals all the colors of the rainbow. There are exceptions: the drawing of the Mission truck shows it to be brown (as it is), but the people inside are still red and blue!

Colors are not randomly chosen, but serve a purpose within a specific drawing. In many pictures colors are used systematically to distinguish males from females, or live people from dead and wounded ones. In the picture of the 1957 Amatheri raid, for example, two large blue figures represent the wounded, and four large red figures represent those killed in the raid.

Strangely, green and yellow are the least popular colors in Yanomama art, yet these are the common colors in their rain forest habitat. This dislike can



*Taniki's anger over the accidental death of his friend diminishes during the two-day funeral in October of 1981. From left to right the drawings show that Taniki is "very angry," then "still angry," and finally "the anger is gone."*

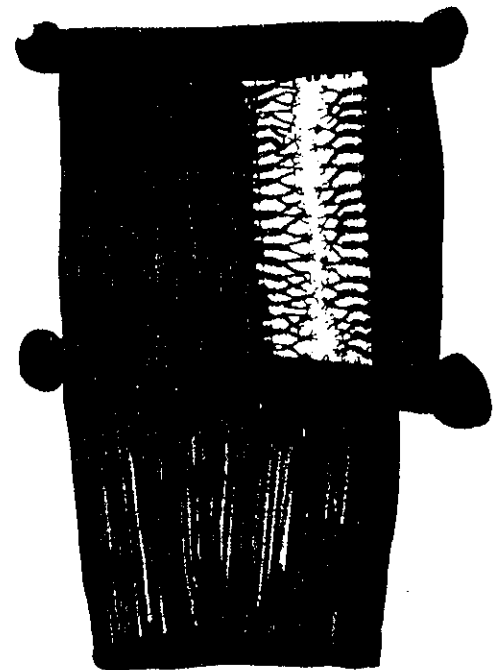
be traced to the absence of natural green and yellow dyes in the Yanomama palette. The familiar dyes used in Yanomama body painting—red, brown, black, and shades of blue or purple—were the colors chosen by the artists when they began to draw on paper. From 1979 to 1981 all the drawings were executed with these four colors. By 1981 a few artists were using green and yellow, but even by 1984 only Taniki was using these new colors (especially yellow) frequently.

Shape is used by the Yanomama to distinguish discrete elements in their art. The Yanomama are realists when it comes to certain aspects of shape: people are recognizably people, with two arms and legs, and heads; animals closely adhere to their actual forms. But other elements in their art do not appear to be realistic to Western eyes. The logic of their shape is apparent from the Yanomama perspective, which shows things from above or below but not from the side. In the drawing "The Hunters: Xoapemani and Kahusi," there is in the lower left corner an illustration of a man's house, consisting of a white circle with criss-crossing black lines. To the Western viewer this does not look like a house. To a Yanomama who lies in a hammock inside the house and looks up at the roof, where the hundreds of support poles criss-cross, the interior of the house looks very much like the black lines criss-crossing the circle. The house is drawn from the inside, from the bottom looking up to the roof.

The drawing of the Mission truck presents a different visual puzzle. From the normal Yanomama view, which would be aerial, or from above, the truck would reveal the mass of the cab and the main body, with the four wheels indicated. This Taniki has done (although the wheels are shown as circular—i.e. a side view of them). But he has also superimposed another element of a side view—the window on the side of the truck—and through the window we can see crammed all of the Yanomama people who are inside the vehicle. The overall composition of Yanomama drawings reflects this special perspective of the world. In the drawings of the mythical anaconda snake Teperesik and her daughters, the snake, which lives in deep holes at the bottom of the river, is shown at the top of the drawing, while Omam marries Yoinani above the river, but is portrayed at the bottom of the picture. In another drawing the shamans who hold up the sky are at the bottom of the picture, while the people who live on the ground are at the top of the drawing. These 180-degree reversals of perspective (the world at the top and the sky at the bottom, the river bottom at the top, and the on-top-of-the-river at the bottom) are a "reversed composition" which may have a plausible explanation.

In drawing theory, the bottom of a picture is closest to the artist and viewer, whereas the top is farther away. Thus in a "normal" view the ground or the bottom of a river is closest and is drawn at the bottom of the picture, and the sky or surface is drawn farther away, at the top. But from an aerial or Yanomama view, standing with the shamans in the sky, the sky is closest (the bottom of the picture) and

continued on page 12



Photos by David Aschkenas

*"Many Wakathautheri Indians squat inside the big truck. In the back of the truck there are oil barrels. The truck's bed is loaded with Yanomama."*

the ground, trees and people are farthest away (the top of the picture). Similarly, an artist standing with Omam and Yoinani on the river bank (closest, bottom of the picture) would be looking at Teperesik on the river bottom (farthest away, the top of the drawing).

The drawings of the Yanomama are a new, evolving form of expression for them. In these drawings we perceive a point of view different from that of Western art. We see their rich mythology, the chronicle of their history, and signs of stress in their culture. Their traditional way of life is beginning to vanish, but for a brief time their art offers a sudden pathway into their world, as they confront the increasing traffic of modern civilization on the Perimetral Norte, the "northern perimeter highway."<sup>11</sup>

*Reading about the Yanomama*

Two helpful discussions of the modern Yanomama are Giovanni Saffirio's 1980 master's thesis at the University of Pittsburgh, "Some Social and Economic Changes Among the Yanomama of Northern Brazil (Roraima): A Comparison of 'Forest' and 'Highway' Villages," and Napoleon A. Chagnon's *Studying the Yanomama*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974. Their language is the subject of Ernest Migliazza's 1972 doctoral dissertation at Indiana University, "Yanomama Grammar and Intelligibility." Specific case studies can be found in an article by Saffirio and Raymond Hames entitled "The Impact of Contact: Two Yanomama Case Studies," in *Working Papers on South American Indians #6*, published by the Bennington College Press in 1983.

A relevant discussion of color theory is Edmund Feldman's *Art as Image and Idea*, Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967.

Books about the Yanomama are available at the museum shop, and the museum has for sale other items of interest, including baskets made by the Yanomama.

*Spirits of the Rain Forest*

Through June 30, 1985, this temporary exhibition at Carnegie Museum of Natural History features Yanomama artifacts from the museum collection, and includes 104 drawings by different Yanomama artists. The artist Tamiki created 82 of these drawings, including all of the illustrations for this article (except page 6, top).

The exhibition was made possible by grants from the Center for Latin American Studies, University Center for International Studies, of the University of Pittsburgh; the Benedum Endowment for Public Programs, Carnegie Museum of Natural History; the Alcoa Foundation; and the Consolata Society for Foreign Missions.

# CEREMONY & STRUCTURE

MAY 4-JUNE 5

NEW WORK BY

PATRICIA BELLAN-GILLEN

GIRTS PURINS

RECEPTION FOR  
THE ARTISTS

SATURDAY, MAY 4  
5:00-8:00 PM

1031 S. Braddock Ave., Pgh., PA 15218 (412) 242-9200

Concept  
Art Gallery

# PORTRAITS PITTSBURGH



Like Springtime a good portrait is always a welcome sight.  
Joan Fulton, P.O. Box 11225, Pittsburgh, PA 15238 412-963-7762