

A journey into the depths of the human soul at the Musée du quai Branly
 Art Basel, December 19, 2023
 (author: Matthieu Jacquet) 1/3



In collaboration with *Numéro art*

In 1990, when asked by a journalist whether he would be able to create without using any substances, the writer William S. Burroughs delivered the eloquent answer: 'I don't think so.' The American novelist's work has been greatly nourished by experiments with alcohol, heroin, morphine, and opium, to the point where these substances became an integral part of his lifestyle and creative process. One moment marked a major turning point in his life: trying ayahuasca for the first time on a trip to South America. This psychoactive brew, made using the vines of the *Banisteriopsis caapi* plant, has the ability to induce a trance-like, mystical experiences. Its users experience hallucinatory visions and presences, while sensory perception is transformed and increased tenfold. According to popular belief, this experience purifies the body.



Left: Jar, Peru, Shipibo-Konibo. Private collection. © Photograph by Pauline Guyon, Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac.
 Right: David Díaz Gonzales / Isá Rono, Shipibo-Konibo women surround a mother with a baby in her arms, 2022. © David Díaz Gonzales.

For centuries, this unique state of consciousness, inviting dreams into reality, has been at the heart of the collective rituals of the Shipibo-Konibo, an indigenous people of the Peruvian Amazon, who use the preparation for ceremonial, spiritual, and therapeutic purposes. Their experiences with ayahuasca have given rise to a fascinating and enigmatic body of artistic work, which is the focus of the exhibition 'Shamanic Visions' at Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac (until May 24, 2024). The show brings about a better understanding of these unprecedented forms of spiritual elevation, which have gradually won over Western artists and writers in the age of globalization.

'The ayahuasca vine helps you connect with the invisible,' a Shipibo-Konibo woman explains in a video, as she prepares a pot to stew the plants that will eventually be ingested during collective rituals. While this first brew causes nausea and vomiting, one has to wait for the second brew to experience the eagerly awaited visions. The invocation of visions is traditionally accompanied by shamanic chanting.

Despite its 'invisible' nature, the world one encounters during this mystical experience generates precise shapes in most minds - regular, thin, curved, or straight lines, forming crosses, squares, triangles, and other small circles which, when joined together, give birth to a kind of labyrinth. The Shipibo-Konibo have called these patterns *kené* and attribute several meanings to their drawings according to their own beliefs; one evokes the wings of birds, while another the spirit of the eye.

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Like other abstract and geometric patterns found across the globe, from Morocco's mashrabiya to Japan's *asanoha*, *kené* is the bearer of an age-old history. The techniques are passed down from one generation to the next, usually from mother to daughter. Painted on textiles or ceramics, the motifs generally represent healing and protection.

Recent work by contemporary indigenous artists featured in the exhibition shows how ayahuasca has given rise to a creative tradition based on an inner, personal experience, constantly opening the doors to new interpretations. In one of her embroideries on cotton fabric, Shipibo-Conibo artist Chonon Bensho has reinterpreted Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* with characters from her community and a landscape decorated with *kené* patterns.

'Shamanic Visions' reminds us that an artistic approach, nourished by ethnographic and anthropological research into the Shipibo-Conibo community, prevails over a scientific approach that would attempt to study how ayahuasca works and the symptoms it induces. When exploring the exhibition, one is drawn into the dense, colorful paintings of Peruvian artist Pablo Amaringo, with their almost Boschian compositions filled with luxuriant vegetation and fantastic animals. One can also witness the astonishing divine creatures sculpted in wood and covered in painted motifs by José Tamani and Jheferson Saldana Valera, and try to decipher the symbols on the canvases of Roldán Pinedo. While recurring elements shed light on the content of the visions – such as trees, birds and, very often, myriad snakes – all these works seem to converge towards the same goal. Pablo Amaringo expressed it clearly in the 1990s: 'to preserve and respect the nature around us.' It is hard not to be reminded of the current critical situation of the Amazon rainforest, the 'green lung' of our planet.

It was only a matter of time before these transcendent experiences found a resonance outside the Amazon. As the exhibition shows, the international diffusion of ayahuasca-derived experiences reflects the history of Western domination in the Americas, from the colonial exploitation of the Amazon in the 19th century to the development of 'shamanic tourism' from the mid-20th century onwards. Writers were openly fascinated by these experiences. While the names of William S. Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, and Aldous Huxley stand out in the exhibition, it is hard not to think of Charles Baudelaire's 1860 collection *Les Paradis artificiels*, in which the poet describes both the creative benefits and dangers of hashish, or Henri Michaux's *Misérable Miracle* (1956), a collection of texts and drawings produced by the artist under the influence of mescaline. All these Western authors have demonstrated in their own way that, while psychotropic and hallucinogenic substances can indeed open the door to another world and nourish the imagination, their qualities are quickly overtaken by the many dangers associated with their use. This is very different from the ancient healing and divination at the core of the Shipibo-Conibo's mythology and philosophy.

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The Western perspective and conception of art is so distinct from that of the indigenous people of the Peruvian Amazon that it will probably never be able to provide a true understanding of the Shipibo-Conibo creations born of ayahuasca. Beyond their undeniable artistic qualities, the artworks displayed in the exhibition barely succeed in accurately transcribing the experience. However, at the end of the exhibition, French filmmaker Jan Kounen sets out to meet this challenge through virtual reality, taking visitors on a 15-minute hallucinatory journey. The 360 degree journey through snake jaws, arachnid baths, cathedral-like rose windows, and other ossuaries is a praiseworthy attempt to have a better understanding of this occult world. Yet, the inevitably individual experience of ayahuasca, here deprived of the direct connection to nature, scent, or human interaction, keeps us a long way from total immersion. And so much the better; in order to retain its exceptional power, ayahuasca cannot give up its secrets so easily.

This article is part of an ongoing editorial collaboration with *Numéro art*. Read the original article [here](#).

'Shamanic visions. Ayahuasca arts in the Peruvian Amazon'
 Until May 26, 2024
 Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, Paris

Published on December 19, 2023.

English translation: Emma Naroumbo Armaing for *Numéro art*.

Captions for full-bleed images: 1. Pablo Amaringo, *Vision of the snakes*, 1987 © Private collection, Helsinki. 2. Sara Flores, *Untitled (Tanan Kené)*, 2021. New York, The Shipibo-Conibo Center and White Cube Gallery. 3. Anderson Debernardi, *Iniciación shamanica*, date unknown. Courtesy of the artist.