



Houses of the Holy

Further Observations at the Painted
Caves of Shalmirane

by Toby Herbst

SPEAK SOFTLY...TREAD LIGHTLY...

It is a place of strong magic, isolated and set off by itself on a rocky point above a shallow arroyo. It is guarded by a minimum of twelve rattlesnakes, at least it was the last time I ventured out that way. All were Western Diamondbacks, three or more of which were over six feet long. I don't know why I didn't photograph them or the shrine that last time but perhaps I was overwhelmed by the snakes and the magic of the place. They were and are to this day the biggest rattlesnakes I have ever seen. Their heads were easily as big as my fist and I am not exaggerating.

Once one carefully makes his way down below the capstone avoiding the guardians at all cost, you slip into an overhang. At first, you feel the coolness of the nether regions and as your eyes adjust to the shadowy world of the open cave, you are confronted by a cacophony of bright colors, an entheogenic experience. You are in the presence of something

are supernatural spirits who act as intermediaries or messengers between the Pueblo people and their gods. As messengers, they take prayers for rain, healing, fertility, and so on from the Puebloans to the appropriate gods who control such phenomenon. Masks represent specific kachinas, and in a sense, are that kachina. When a Pueblo Indian male dons a kachina mask they believe that they transform and become the kachina. As seen at this particular site, and other sites at Shalmirane, masks are often depicted solely as masks with no other human features such as legs, arms, or torsos.

Kachinas have their origins as ancestors who become cloud people when they die. This illustrates the close relationship between kachinas and moisture or rain. Moisture is the over-riding, life-giving force in the arid Southwest. Some kachinas also have their origins in Animism, representing animals and plants.

When not visiting the 4th world, the surface world in which we and the Pueblo People live, the kachinas live in a subterranean world which is often depicted as a watery paradise. Therefore, it is not surprising that we find these images of kachinas in overhangs and caves, places where this world above meets the world below.

These particular kachinas are represented by spade or shield shaped faces. The top of the masks are surmounted by what I believe are feathered diadems or crowns, composed of red and white bands with

vertically placed red feathers at the top. Below the crowns are bands of yellow on the left panel, and bands of blue on the masks on the right panel. On a couple of the masks, possible eyes appear to be denoted by horizontal wedge shaped elements, but most of the masks seem to be blind, possibly indicating that sight is not necessary in the darkness of the subterranean world. This world of darkness is clearly in contrast to the world of light as indicated by the two masks in the left panel with rainbows encircling their mouths and chins. Rainbows are meteorological phenomenon that are caused by the reflection, refraction and dispersion



▲ Left panel masks, two of which have rainbows encircling their mouths and chins.

ancient, something profound. Focus, adjust, look for the meaning and then things start to become clear. You are looking 600 years back in time, you are looking at a belief system/tradition different from your own, yet because we are all human these images are at least partially decipherable, dimly comprehensible.

What is before you are two panels of brightly colored masks. These are Kachina masks. Kachinas



▲ Detail of right panel masks. Note the stepped design on the far right mask denoting mountains or clouds.

◀ Hopi, Polik or Palhik Mana Kachina, Butterfly Maiden Kachina

Early 20th Century
Height: 11"

This early 20th century Palhik Mana has an elaborate tablita headdress carved from wooden boards. In this case, the three, central stacked clouds have a blue element below them, which probably represents water and/or the sky. Black vertical lines below the blue clearly represent falling rain. Like the following kachinas and the masks at Shalmirane, this kachina's mouth is surrounded by rainbows.



▲ Hopi Polik or Palhik Mana Kachina
Butterfly Maiden Kachina

Late 19th to Early 20th Century
Height: 12" Width: 11"

This is an unusual representation because of the disproportionately large tablita, and squat lower torso. This kachina has rainbows emanating from her mouth just like those in the pictographs from the caves of Shalmirane. On top of her head are thistle like carvings which probably represent squash blossoms.



▲ Houses of the Holy.

of light as it passes through water droplets in the atmosphere. Again, there is clear association between kachinas and water. Water issuing from the kachina's mouth creates the mist or droplets which react with the light of the upper world thus creating rainbows.

The right panel also has a mask with a rainbow mustache. The next mask to the right appears fractured due to the superimposing of several masks one upon the other. To the far right, is a mask with a stepped element on its left cheek. In Pueblo imagery, stepped designs usually indicate mountains or clouds, both of which are associated with water. Because of their elevation, mountains catch the clouds and have significantly more moisture than the surrounding lower deserts. Mountains are the source of rivers and streams, the life-givers for the arid lowlands. Clouds

are pretty self explanatory as they disperse moisture more evenly across the landscape, giving life to the parched land.

One other image worth mentioning is the little goggle eyed element, about chin level on the masks and about mid-way between the two mask panels. It has been suggested that the goggle eyes attached to a trapezoid or rectangle represents the Pueblo equivalent of the Mesoamerican deity, Tlaloc. (Schaafsma 1980:198) Tlaloc is the Nahuatl name for the deity meaning, "He who makes things sprout." He is the rain god, a god of fertility, as well as of destructive elements like drought, lightning and thunder.

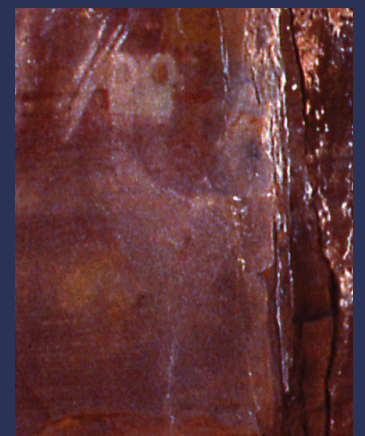
Again, here we see the concept of Mesoamerican duality. Tlaloc predates the Aztec by at least a

thousand years, and can be clearly identified by images of him and his goggle shaped eyes from the Classic period at such sites as Teotihuacan. Tlaloc is also associated with caves, springs and mountains just like the Pueblo kachinas. Here his image, like the kachina masks, is associated with a cave. Coincidence? I think not. At this shrine, this House of the Holies, the kachinas are emerging from the underworld bringing moisture, the gift of life. As they emerge into the light of the upper world, their moisture turns to rainbows. The Pueblo Tlaloc is depicted relatively small in comparison

to the great masks. I believe that is because he is distant, still deep in the shadows of the underworld.

The images in this overhang are powerful, their colors as vivid as the day they were made six hundred years ago. Time is fluid and shifting and what I am experiencing is neither past nor present.

Well, Fellow Seekers that about wraps it up. Just one piece of advice from the Lone Prospector, speak softly and tread lightly in the Houses of the Holy.



▲ Goggle-eyed figure. Possibly the Pueblo equivalent of the Mesoamerican deity, Tlaloc



Hopi Polik or Palhik Mana Kachina,
Butterfly Maiden Kachina

Late 19th to early 20th Century
Height: 18" Width: 10"

This superb and regal Palhik
Mana Kachina was purportedly
collected from the great Indian
trader, Lorenzo Hubbel in the early
20th century. Her elaborate tablita
headdress represents stacks of
clouds with lightning erupting from
the upper corners. She has a greatly
exaggerated chin from which
she drools water and hence the
surrounding rainbows.



Hopi Polik or Palhik Mana
Kachina, Butterfly Maiden
Kachina

Late 19th to Early 20th Century
Height: 14" Width: 10"

This is an extremely beautifully
carved and painted Hopi
Kachina. She differs from the
other Palhik Manas pictured
in that her tablita has an inner
rainbow box surmounted by
six stacked cloud elements
and two vegetal trefoils.
This Polik Mana has a very
distinct and colorful rainbow
around her mouth, similar
to the pictographic masks at
Shalmirane. The Shalmirane
masks unlike their later historic
descendants do not have
tablitas but coronas of vertical
red feathers.



Hopi Polik or Palhik Mana Kachina, Butterfly Maiden Kachina

Late 19th Century

Height: 9 1/2" Width: 10"

A superb late 19th century carving of a Butterfly Maiden Kachina with an extremely elaborate carved and painted tablita.

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