



PABLO AMARINGO is one of the world's greatest visionary artists, renowned for his highly complex, colourful and intricate paintings of his visions from drinking the Ayahuasca brew

HOWARD G CHARING and PETER CLOUDSLEY met with Pablo at the school which he founded, the Usko-Ayar School of Painting, in Pucullpa, where he lives and paints. In this rare interview Pablo talks to them about his life as a shaman and artist and the magical images he creates



THE AYAHUASCA VISIONS OF

Pablo Amaringo

Pablo Amaringo trained as a curandero in the Amazon, healing himself and others from the age of ten. He gave this up in 1977 to become a full-time painter and art teacher at his Usko-Ayar school

His book, 'Ayahuasca Visions: the Religious Iconography of a Peruvian Shaman', co-authored with Luis Eduardo Luna, brought his work and the rich mythology of the Amazon to a wide audience in the West

Pablo Amaringo was born in Puerto Libertad, in the Peruvian Amazon. He was ten years old when he first took ayahuasca, a visionary brew used in shamanism, to help him overcome a severe heart disease

The healing he received led Pablo toward the life of a vegetalismo [plant healer] in which he worked for many years

What drew you to being a shaman?

It was a spiritual matter for me. I had thought that shamans deceived and lied to people, so I didn't believe in them. I thought that ayahuasca healed people because it was medicine, I didn't believe in magic and spirits. No! Then in 1967 I saw a *curandera* miraculously heal my sister who had been in mortal agony with hepatitis, and could not either eat or speak, but with this single healing from the plants, she was cured in just two hours. That motivated me to start learning the science of *vegetalismo*.

She was given Ayahuasca?

No, the senora used the knowledge of Ayahuasca and chanted. That was during the day. That same night I drank and received the powers, but I didn't know what I was being given. I saw many things. I sat like a king and watched! After that I dieted for five days, staying at home, without seeing many people.

After one month I began to feel what everybody else was feeling, it was a very strange thing! And I discovered I could sing the chants without even learning them. They came out beautifully and I wondered how it was possible that I knew them. I realised I had powers in me and I began to be a

curandero when I cured a young man with a terrible headache, firstly I felt it and then he was better.

Is it an important part of the cure, to feel what the patient feels?

That was how the powers were given to me, but others say that when they take the ayahuasca, they can see what the problem is with their patient. I didn't even have to drink, I *felt* exactly where their pains were, and their emotions, everything.

What plant did you take on your diet?

Just Ayahuasca, but afterwards I took other plants at the same time as Ayahuasca, to learn more things.

Then you practiced as a curandero?

Yes, and for many years I travelled to Madre de Dios, Cusco, Lima, Huanuco, Tingo Maria and Alto Ucayali. Wherever I went I cured people. Pucullpa at that time was much smaller. The houses were mostly wooden, with cultivation behind them, there were no high buildings. None of the streets had tarmac, they were of red mud, except for the one central plaza. The road to Lima was terrible and it took a month or more to get there.

How do you communicate with plant spirits after you

take them into you?

When you take any plant other than ayahuasca, you connect through your dreams; ajo sachá, chric sanango, bobinsana etc., you learn while you are asleep. But with Ayahuasca, no. You are conscious and awake. That is why it is the *planta maestra* - the eye through which you see the world, the universe. It is miraculous and sacred and you can learn from your studies far more with ayahuasca than with other plants, but you must obey the 'statutes' of this plant, the rules. If you obey, no knowledge will be withheld from you.

My visions helped me understand the value of human beings, animals, the plants themselves, and many other things. The plants taught me the function they play in life, and the holistic meaning of all life. We all should give special attention and deference to Mother Nature. She deserves our love. And we should also show a healthy respect for her power!

How did you discover your gift of painting?

I used to make portraits and landscapes when I was twenty years old, but mostly using charcoal. But this didn't earn me any money so I dedicated myself to other things, agriculture, raising animals and hairdressing, all kinds of things. I was working as secretary to the chief of customs here in the port of Pucallpa. One day my boss told me to paint two armchairs, and as I had never painted, I just slapped on the paint any old how and it looked awful, with lumps everywhere. But the boss didn't reprimand me, he said "How come you are good at everything except painting?" I was a little hurt because he was always so impressed by everything I did. This made me think that if I was going to learn to paint, I would learn to do it well.

After three years working there I had a heart problem and returned to doing portraits in pencil, beginning with my own portrait.

How did you begin painting visions?

Years passed and I used to say to my mother, "When I am older I will paint several pictures of myself so that after I am dead people will know there has been a painter in

the family!" One day I was asked to accompany a foreign gentleman because I spoke a little English, but I did not know that he was the biologist Denis McKenna. After some years he recommended me for a job in Sepagua, but I was not able to take it up because my mother fell ill. So when he came back in 1985 I asked him if he would show my pictures in an exhibition he was organizing in Switzerland. They were small pictures, but later he returned with Luis Eduardo Luna who said "How beautifully you paint Pablo. I can promote your work, do you want to be a world class painter?"

I said "No, I don't want any of those things. I don't know what a 'world class' painter is. I just want you to help me sell my pictures to make a little money." I was portraying the daily realities of people in the Amazon, how they sow and harvest, how they fish and celebrate their fiestas and so on. Luna said "How is it I haven't met you before now? Every year I have been coming for the last eight years, travelling up the Amazon through Brazil and Peru to Panama!"

I asked him why he came, what was he looking for?

"We are interested in the magical plants of Peru from the coast, sierra and selva."

"I know what you are after" I said. "I used to be a shaman ten years ago, what a shame you didn't know me before, but now I have put all that behind me. I could have told you so much about what I had seen, I said."

Then I started to think that I could paint for him all the things I had seen in my visions and all the things that were explained to me. But I had to do it in secret because even when people saw photos of what I painted, they said I had gone mad, that I was bedevilled, and painting things of the demon!

They worried me with these remarks. I could never have had an exhibition here in Pucallpa. So Luna said "Paint for me then". And I made two pictures of visions for his next visit, and when he saw those pictures - one of which is in the Museum of Washington DC and the other in the University of Stockholm - they took hundreds of pictures of them. But I said he could take them away. And that's what they did, wrapped up in a

huge box. They sold them and sent me the money. After that they said we don't want any more landscapes, only visions!

They studied them and said they found language and biology in the pictures, so later I began to make explanations of them. But I could never show them to people here. That's how it all started.

Are people still prejudiced here?

Yes, many are still. Once some religious people came and said that if the name of Jesus was spoken the paintings would explode. And they asked me to say "Jesus". I said "I can't say that word, what for?" They said to each other, "He has got the devil in him, if he says Jesus, he will explode!"

You have many amazing paintings here in your studio, can you tell us something about them?

The pictures are a means by which people can cross spiritual boundaries. Some people say they can only believe what they see, but there are things which exist which cannot be seen. The pictures are for reminding people what we are, and where we come from, and where we are going. They are for people of any culture in the world, although there is much that is taken from indigenous Amazonian culture. For example: 'A Fines Espirituales' (Spiritual Endeavour)

In this painting there are horses like humans, humans with tiger's heads and a papagayo with a human body and so on. Looking at this painting, it reminds us of many of the Amazonian legends in which animals adopt human forms. Does this painting relate to these stories?



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'AFINES ESPIRITUALES'

That is correct, spirits cannot materialize easily, if they cannot take human form, they take animal form. They are made from the spirits of animals, but if they appear human, then they can reproduce with women in order that they can be incarnate in us. This is what you

'HONDAS DE LA AYAHUASCA'

should all work like scientists, teachers, composers so that we can fully and creatively engage in the world, so in that way the world continues. If we play a part in the functioning of the universe we will not die. When I am old and about to die and cannot see well enough

can discover through the visions of ayahuasca and other plants like toé, chric sanango, ajo sachá etc. assuming you do the diet correctly, then the invisible world can become manifest to us. It is part of our mystic evolution. Everyone has a role to play inspiring, creating, evolving their minds to preserve the world. The spirits are working untiringly to protect Mother Nature - everything from the plants and animals to the circles of the planets.

You touch on an important point about protecting nature. There is an increasing amount of damage that people are causing to the natural world. What is your view why humans do so much damage?

It is our lack of ingenuity, and above all, imagination. We think we are the only ones here on earth, unique! We

to paint, I will be talking other things instead, but I can still paint now and I am sixty-eight.

The plants in the painting are ishanga, maromara, pinon blanco, pinon colorado and pinon negro, lengua de perro, and verbena. The ethnic elements are Shipibo, Conibo, Ssetebo, Amahuaca, and you can see the spells and spaceships.

In the painting 'Hondas de la Ayahuasca' (Ayahuasca Waves) is represented the different grades of shaman. A *suniruma* is the highest expert sitting here, with dominion of the sky, then *banco puma* or *banco sumi* who has dominion of the land, finally the *muraya* who has dominion over the water.

You can see waves just like the effects of Ayahuasca - the *mareacion*. It comes strongly and it seems as if it is passing and then another one comes, like waves from a stone in the water. This is the *sachamama* which comes in different colours in the *mareacion* and protects the vegetation. It is a semi-mythological animal because it actually exists, a huge serpent which lives on the land but doesn't move, so plants grow on top of it. You can be chopping a path with your machete and strike it unknowingly, until blood appears! If it sees you, it draws you into its mouth with its power, you cannot escape. You can see here the seven rays of the rainbow which portray this power.

You can also see angel serpents or *sarafs* who protect the *sachamama*.

In 'Sinchi Pucalpuna' (Red Ceiba Tree), in its round cupola you see an old woman who lives there, and comes down these stairs to a city. The guardian of the city is a cock hen. She administers to all the virgin maidens, teaching them all they should know. You can see Cyclops, black people, red skinned people like monkeys protecting the cupola of the tree.

Ayahuasca was known to the ancient Peruvians, the Waris and Chancas, as also King Solomon. You can also see here the Huayramama (Mother of the Wind), which the rainbow comes out of, and you can see where the great spirits who have learned all the sciences enter, to see all the great old people who are in other dimensions.



And you can see an Ayahuasca session in progress and people's emotions conflicting with the angels. In ancient times, when people were not so corrupt spiritually and emotionally, the angels came out and walked freely on earth. Now people are too astute and wily and they don't want to have anything to do with them. The same has happened with the mermaids, also depicted: before you would see loads of them on the River Ucayali. I've seen them.

In 'Yacaruna Huasi' (The Yacaruna's House.) we see the yacaruna, who are people that live under the river in tunnels which are pictured here, and they lead to another world, as you see. They play musical instruments to enchant people at midnight when all is silent under the moonlight. You can see dolphins, manatee (sea-cow), electric eel and *charapa mama* which are marine turtles. Then there are *muraya* (Shipibo shamans), water dogs, water horses and fish which fly when it rains very hard and fall out of the sky.

Would you like to add anything more about the importance of plants?

For me personally, though, they mean even more than this. Plants -in the great living book of nature - have shown me how to study life as an artist and shaman. They can help all of us to know the art of healing and to discover our own creativity, because the beauty of nature moves people to show reverence, fascination, and respect for the extent to which the forests give shelter to our souls.

The consciousness of plants is a constant source of information for medicine, alimentation, and art, and an example of the intelligence and creative imagination of nature. Much of my education I owe to the intelligence of these great teachers. Thus I consider myself to be the 'representative' of plants, and for this reason I assert that if they cut down the trees and burn what's left of the rainforests, it is the same as burning a whole library of books without ever having read them.

People who are not so dedicated to the study and experience of plants may not think this knowledge is so important to their lives - but even they should be conscious of the nutritional, medicinal, and scientific value of the plants they rely on for life.

My most sublime desire, though, is that every human being should begin to put as much attention as he or she can into the knowledge of plants, because they are the greatest healers of all. And all human beings should also put effort into the preservation and conservation of the rainforest, and care for it and the ecosystem, because damage to these not only prejudices the flora and fauna but humanity itself.

Even in the Amazon these days, many see plants as only a resource for building houses and to finance large families. People who have farms and raise animals also clear the forest to produce foodstuffs. Mestizos and native Indians log the largest trees to sell to industrial sawmills for subsistence. They have never heard of the word ecology!

I, Pablo, say to everybody who lives in the Amazon and the other forests of the world, that they must love the plants of their land, and everything that is there.

This expression of love must be a sincere and altruistic interest in the lasting well-being of others. We are not here simply to exist, but to enjoy life together with plants, animals, and loved ones, and to delight in contemplation of the beauty of nature. A shaman has in his mind and heart the attitude of conserving nature because he knows that life is for enjoying the company of this world's countless delights.

More about PABLO AMARINGO see www.pabloamaringo.com

PETER CLOUDSLEY has built up an extensive archive of traditional Peruvian music and interviews. He teaches courses on music and popular culture in Latin America.

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'SINCHI PUCALPUNA'



'YACARUNA HUASI'