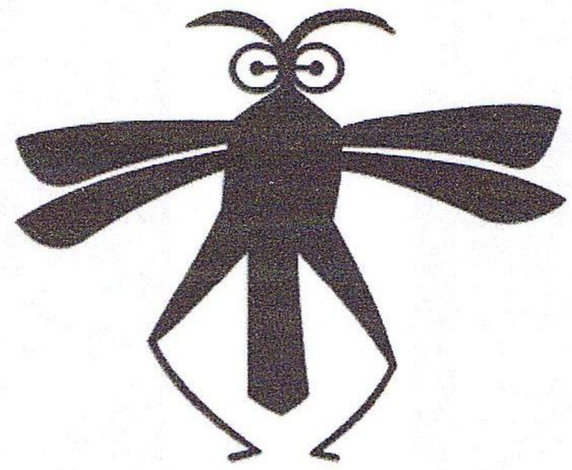
The Sheer Ecstasy of Living:
Celebrating the Humor in Mimbres Figurative Paintings



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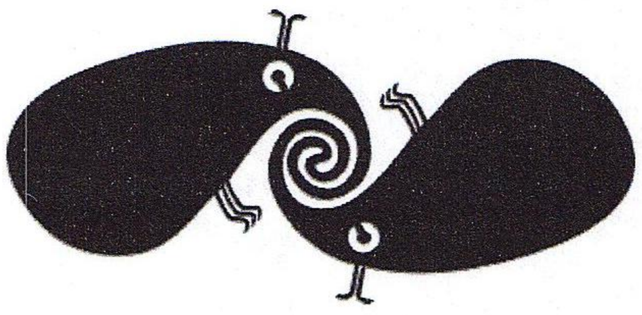

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> "Mimbres Classic pottery demonstrates such originality and such care in draftsmanship that it is in a class all by itself; no prehistoric Southwestern pottery can compare with it as an expression of the sheer ecstasy of living"[1]

Painted ceramics are the strongest material link between the Mimbres world of a thousand years ago, and observers in the twenty-first century. Art is our only real point of contact. Vivid images, figurative and abstract, painted onto the concave inner surfaces of ceramic bowls, communicate with us across a vast stretch of time. How best can we access the inner world of a cultural construct that no longer exists, and has left no written descriptions or records for us? As archaeologists and anthropologists seek insight into this particular geographic and temporal moment, the images created by long-dead artists are examined with every academic and analytical tool available. Pueblo peoples may read Mimbres images as part of a long cultural continuum in the Southwest.

There are inherent problems with both approaches. It is important to remember that the world of the Mimbres simply does not exist today. Assuming a sweeping cultural continuity from Mimbres to modern day Pueblo cultures ignores the uniqueness of the Mimbres and variety of cultural expressions seen across the Southwest, in both the past, and the present. There is not — and there never was —one monumental "Southwestern" culture, and it is suspect to assume that we know what these figures and images meant to the artists who created them. The attempt to nail down concrete explanations of ancient images may be a misguided approach. By attempting to force ancient art into a preconceived framework of meaning, we risk eliminating its ability to speak to us

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[1] - Martin, Paul S., 1979. Prehistory: Mogollon in *Handbook of North American Indians Southwest,* 9:70. Ed William C. Sturtevant. Washington: Smithsonian Institute

today. In essence, we 'bury' the art again — freezing it forever into an imagined "original" meaning, that we can never really be certain of anyway.

Crucial to understanding and appreciating Mimbres art, is the simple recognition that individual human beings created it. This is not difficult to acknowledge when we consider the technical aspects of ceramic production, with its issues of clay, temper, firing method and temperature. Similarly, the technical aspects and challenges of design are knowable even from distant times; pigments must be mixed, design elements and motifs chosen, and overall artistic decisions must be made about the final composition.[2] It is the thorny business of interpretation that can leave us alienated from the art, and the artist behind it. The purpose of art — any art — is to communicate. The artist makes her 'mark' in whatever way, via whatever medium, and her creation awaits a gaze, and ultimately, a response. Academic approaches to ancient art may miss this inherent dialogue. The determination to place the image within a cultural, temporal framework serves culture-historical categorizations, but it may blunt the ability of the piece to speak directly to the observer. While ancient images can provide clues about long-extinguished mythological and religious systems, they can also connect us in a much more immediate way to the artist who created them.

I have chosen to examine two Mimbres paintings, both figurative, to illustrate the value of engaging in a fresh dialogue with ancient art. My visceral response to both is that they convey not only impressive artistic sophistication, but also a rich sense of humor. I sense that the artists involved were enjoying themselves, and their delight shines through a thousand years, and a vast cultural gulf. While each image may have originally possessed a more complex symbolism, allowing for a simpler, more immediate understanding is a valuable way of entering into the world that produced the art.

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[2] For a thorough discussion of the manufacture and design process of Mimbres painted pottery, see Brody 1977, chapters 7-8.

Dragonfly

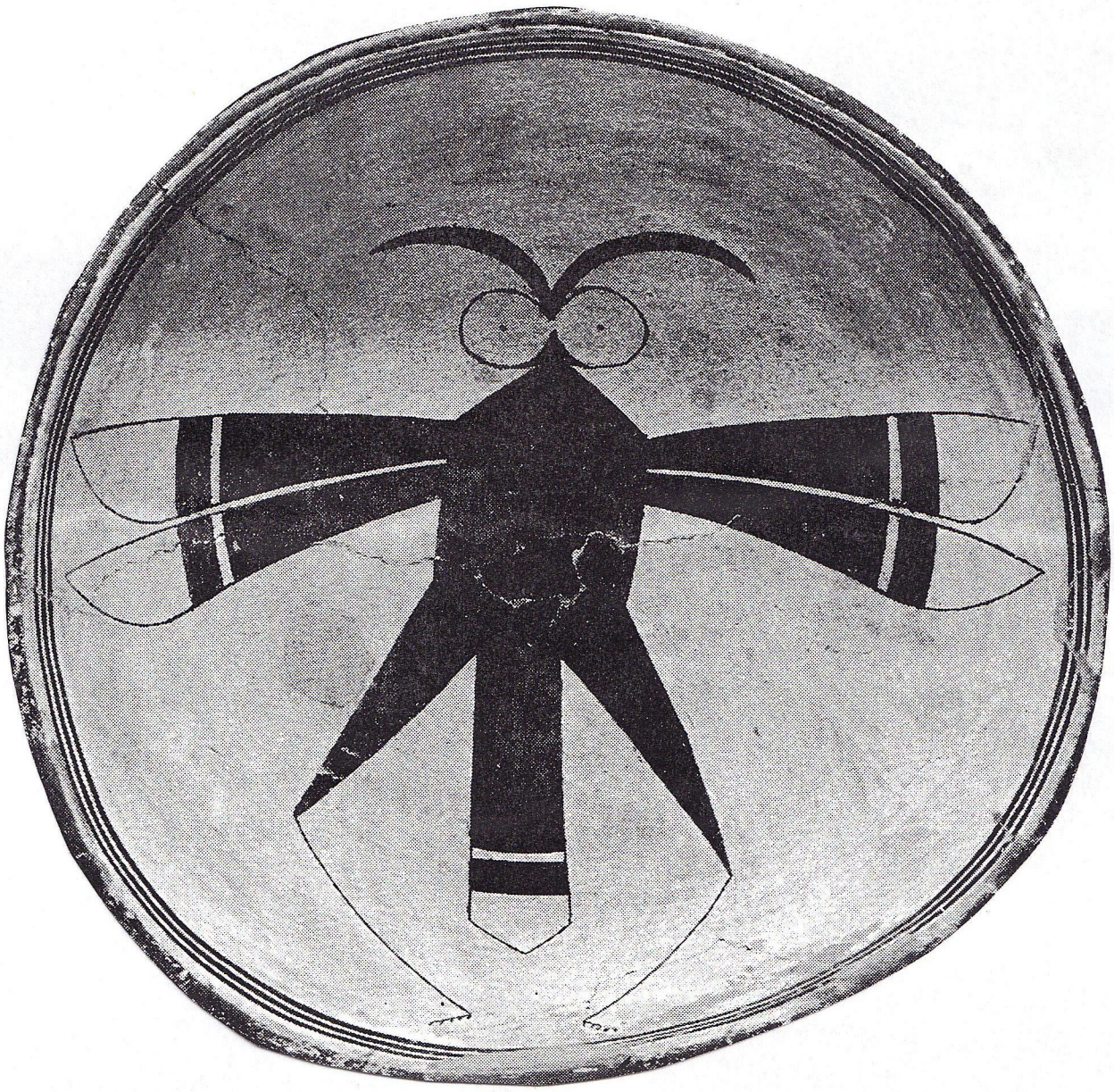

Figure 1
Dragonfly. Style III, Mimbres Classic
Black-on-white
H.5 ½ in. (14 cm), diam. 11 in. (28 cm).
Moderate restoration. Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, New York

The dragonfly figure dominates the painted surface. The image is framed by a series of closely spaced concentric lines around the rim of the bowl. The insect's body is composed of geometric forms — triangles, a rectangle, and a square — joined together. There are two elongated wings on each side of the body. The head of the dragonfly is not shown, rather it is indicated by two massive 'bug eyes'. A pair of antennae sprouts up from the top center of the eyes, and curve out to each side in an arch shape. Decoration and detail are minimal on this image. Familiar elements of the Mimbres canon are evident, with the opposition of black and white, the (bilateral) symmetry of the insect itself, and the framing of the painting's 'landscape' with concentric circles.

Steinbach et al discuss the significance of the dragonfly to modern day Hopi people, describing it as a creature with "great supernatural powers" — a positive symbol of "water, fertility, and abundance" (2002:93). While it may not be stretching credibility to suppose the dragonfly enjoyed similar importance and positive attributes in ancient Mimbres society, it is immediately apparent that the artist who produced this particular piece had a wonderful sense of humor. This is a highly stylized depiction of a dragonfly, very like a modern day cartoon. This bug is angry! His eyes are huge, and have human-like pupils. His gaze is direct and fierce, issuing a challenge to the viewer. The way in which his antennae are drawn, curving out over his eyes, suggest eyebrows, raised in irritation. His legs are divided into upper and lower sections, with a third tiny section for feet. His legs bow outwards and his long tail section hangs down between them. It seems clear to me, that the artist knew very well the anatomy of a dragonfly, but chose to depict it in a funny, stylized way, contrasting its tiny size with a big, angry attitude. Clearly, the artist had a great deal of warmth and affection for his subject matter.

I have included a few contemporary images to serve as comparisons to the Mimbres dragonfly. **Figure 2** is an adaptation of the dragonfly design, included on an ancestral arts website, as an example of Mimbres motifs. The copy is simplified, with details on the wings and tail eliminated. The eyes are somewhat changed, with the copy having much larger pupils, connected by a thick line across the eyes. The copy lacks the subtlety of the original, where the fine lines and details help to convey the bug's 'personality'.

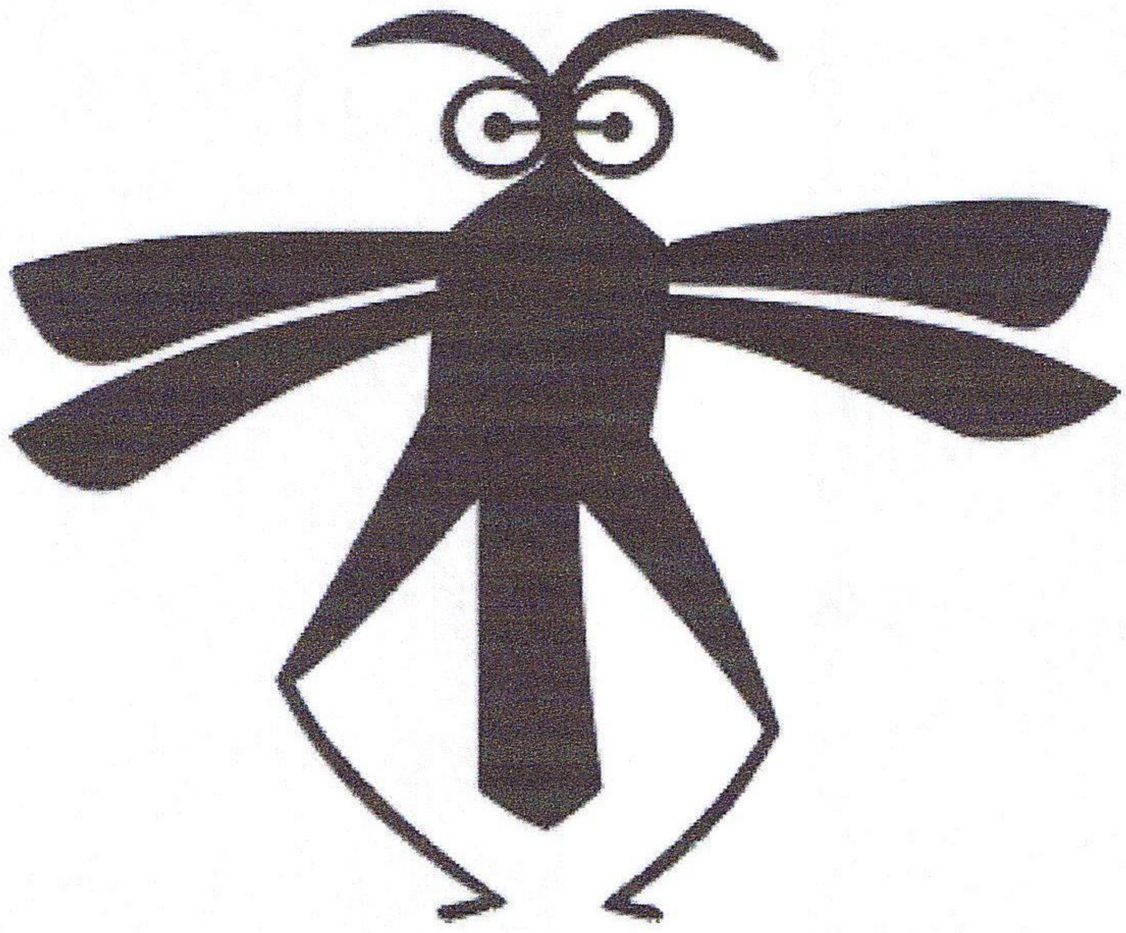

Figure 2

Dragonfly (Modern adaptation of original Mimbres design).

www.ancestral.com/art/north_america/mimbres.html

Figures 3 and 4 are also contemporary works, by two different artists. These whimsical bug paintings are examples of how personality can be conveyed in non-human organisms through caricature. Both artists have worked from a clear knowledge of what the actual insects look like, but

have chosen to add stylized details or exaggerations to convey humor rather than a documentary depiction. "Mantis & Ant" by Kirwin, (figure 3) is particularly interesting to compare with Mimbres figurative art, as the artist has incorporated geometric designs into the body of the mantis much like the geometric decorations incorporated into the bodies of animal figures in many Mimbres pieces. The geometrics in the modern painting are defined with darker and lighter shades of blue, with black lines adding some detail.

Figure 3
Mantis & Ant by Lou Romano.[3]

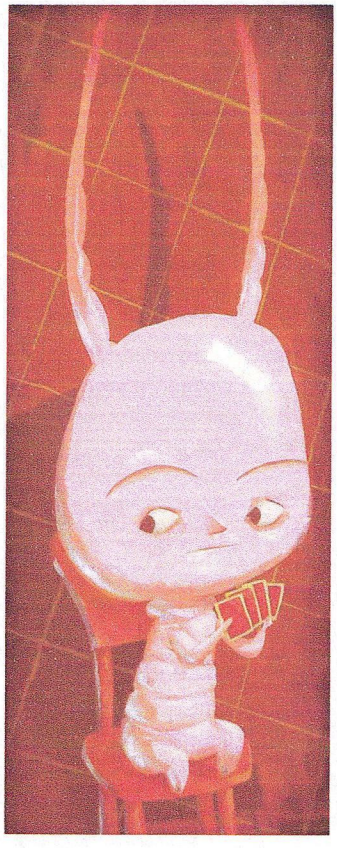

Figure 4
Potato Bug by Alex Kirwin.[4]

Lou Romano's painting "Potato Bug" (figure 4) is exaggerated in its depiction of a 'bug with attitude'. The potato bug has a human–like face, and he sits in a chair, holding a hand of playing cards. He gives a nervous sidelong glance, presumably at his opponent in the card game. Though the

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3 & 4 http://www.mocoloco.com/art/archives/005113.php (retrieved on November 26, 2008).

bug is doing very non-bug-like things, he still comes across as an insect — even with his human face and expression. If this image were dug up a thousand (or several thousand) years from now, what would future anthropologists, archaeologists, or art historians make of it? In the absence of any written documentation, they might assume a complex religious or mythological tradition in which bug-like beings diced for humanity's fate, with the gods… I realize I am stretching the point, but it makes sense that accomplished Mimbres artists sometimes desired levity and fun, just as artists today often do. Another insect theme **(Figure 5)** with a bold graphic design, this painting shows a pair of wingless moths facing one another. The identification of the creatures as moths is confirmed by their long, curling proboscises. The stout-bodied moths circle around the center of the bowl, with their long 'tongues' curled together into a spiral. Each moth has two tiny antennae, and three short legs. The bodies are decorated with stripes of various thickness, and cross-hatching. The moths each have one eye visible, very simply depicted with a black 'pupil' inside a light circle. Around the outer rim of the painting surface (the bowl rim) is the familiar frame of concentric circles, painted in black.

As with the dragonfly image, the moths are inherently comical. They appear to have tangled their proboscises, and one imagines them circling around forever, unable to separate. There are, of course, elements of this painting that suggest deeper symbolic importance. The spiral formed by the bug's tongues likely refers to something beyond a clumsy tangle. Spirals are a celestial or spiritual symbol for peoples across the Americas, from ancient times to the present day. Steinbach et al discuss spirals as a symbol of "fertility and breath" or possibly "a representation of the *sipapu*, a symbol of the Pueblo's place of emergence from the underworld" (2002:105). The orientation of the two insect figures may also be significant. The insects create a bilaterally symmetrical design, very common in Mimbres paintings, where the harmony of the 'whole' is maintained through the balanced tension between opposite forces, represented by the two insects, and by the balance between white and black, dark and light (Brody 1977:216). I must admit though, that my initial

reaction to this painting was simple delight at what appeared to be two dizzy bugs with tangled tongues.

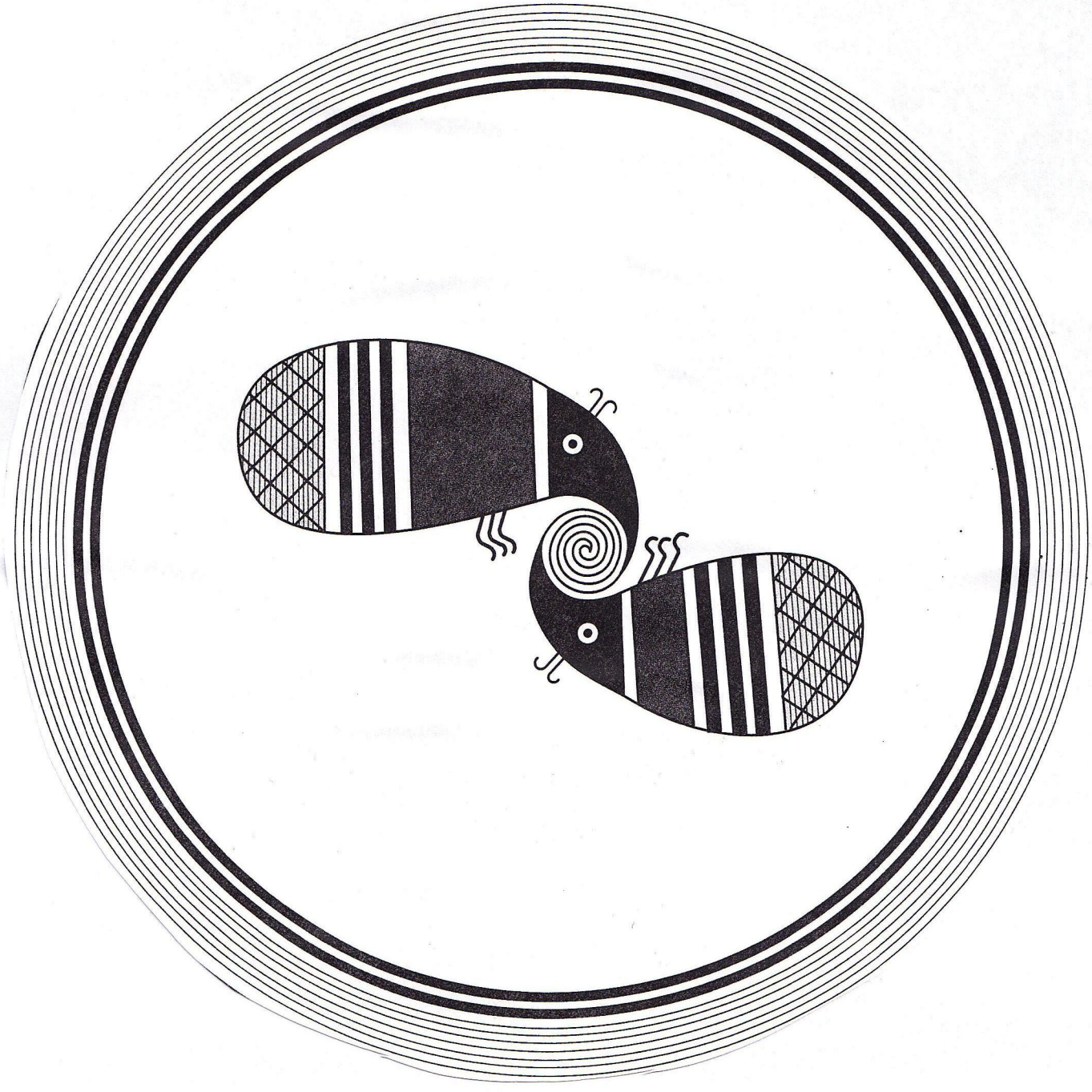

Figure 5
Wingless Moths Or Ant Lions

- From Steinback et al:
"Mimbres classic Mysteries..."

Conclusion: Looking With Fresh Eyes

In an attempt to 'decode' ancient art, we can, —as Shafer plainly states, " speculate on what codes and symbols meant, but we will never know" (2004:215). Faced with ancient images like these, we can open ourselves up to a genuine, immediate response, and, can easily see the joy of the artists and the vibrancy of the natural world in which they lived and produced their art. The humorous treatment of subjects does not mean that the image carries no further meaning however. The moths and the dragonfly image may have been understood by Mimbreños as characters in a mythic story, as supernatural beings, or any number of other possibilities. Perhaps they served as part of some cautionary tale. Searching for these sorts of specific meanings is admirable and, from an academic perspective, necessary. We do well to allow ourselves to respond to ancient art in a more holistic way, though. Brody (1977:220) discusses the way in which ancient art can be revived in a later age, and confirms the fact that "the symbolic and expressive meanings of [the] imaginative product must change as it interacts with new times, places, and people". There is nothing wrong with acknowledging the comic or humorous in ancient art. By doing so, we are engaging in a genuine dialogue, and — aside from academic solutions, — it is this dialogue that keeps a work of art alive and vital.

-Word Count: 1918

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