

# NAVAJO SANDPAINTINGS: SACRED HEALING

*Pensator*

In the Four Corners region of the Southwest United States, where Arizona, Utah, New Mexico, and Colorado meet, is the Navajo Nation, the largest Native American reservation in the country. The Navajo or *Diné* call it *Dinébtah*. It is strikingly beautiful country, and was the home of one of the ancient civilizations of North America.

The Navajo tell stories about Rain Boy, a gambler who lost all of his family's possessions. Fleeing his angry relatives, he arrived at the house of a beautiful woman. Her jealous husband shattered him with hailstones. Some Holy People from the spiritual world took pity on him and restored him. After further adventures, he returned to his own people, bringing with him the healing ceremonies he learned from the Holy People. It is now thought that these ceremonies and the paintings associated with them were originally learned from the Pueblo tribes of the Rio Grande valley, the descendants of the Anasazi civilization. Among the Navajo, who came later to this land, the ceremonies evolved a more complex and important role, emphasizing their innate sense of "oneness."

The Navajo concept of the universe is an ideal one, an all-inclusive unity, delicately balanced, full of enormously powerful forces with potential for both good and

bad, in which all parts are maintained in interrelated harmony. Only humans can upset this balance. Illness, physical and mental, is seen as the result of upsetting this harmony. It is for the preservation or restoration of this harmony, that Navajo religious ceremonies are performed. During the complex series of healing ceremonies or chants, designed to restore harmony

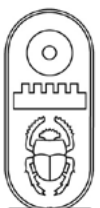
to the patients, the Navajo create pictures on a one- to three-inch bed of sand, some as small as a foot square, while others can be as much as twenty feet across. Most average about six feet. The drypaintings, perhaps a more accurate term than sandpaintings, are made with pigments obtained from pulverized gypsum, yellow ochre, red sand,

charcoal, pollen, cornmeal, and crushed flowers. The colors may vary, but the four principal colors: white, blue, yellow, and black are always present, reflecting the four directions. They are intricate, highly stylized, and beautiful. These sandpainting designs duplicate the images that the Holy People used in their rituals, and are a type of mandala.

The images depict the legendary supernatural heroes and heroines (or deities) known as the Holy People. This vast pantheon includes First Man and First Woman; Spider Woman, who taught women to weave; Big Fly, who conveys



*A Navajo sandpainting.*





*A Navajo sandpainting photographed in 1905 by Edward S. Curtis.*

messages between the Navajo and the Holy People; and others like the Mountain People, the Snake People, and the Corn People. Especially revered is Changing Woman, the mother of the Hero Twins, the sons of the Sun, called Monster Slayer and Born For Water. They made the world a safer place for the Navajo by slaying many threatening creatures.

The Navajo term for sandpainting is *iikaah*, “the place where the deities come and go.” Summoned by a singer or *bataaii*, (a medicine person), the Holy People enter a sandpainting, infusing it with their healing power. By sitting in the middle of the painting, the patient is able to attune with and absorb this healing power. Such sandpaintings are considered gifts from the Holy People and must be started at sunrise and be completed by sunset.

Typically, the sandpaintings are used in night rituals conducted inside an eight-sided log Hogan or Navajo house. The Hogan is a gift of the Holy People, and as such it occupies a place in the sacred world. Its door faces the east, so that the first

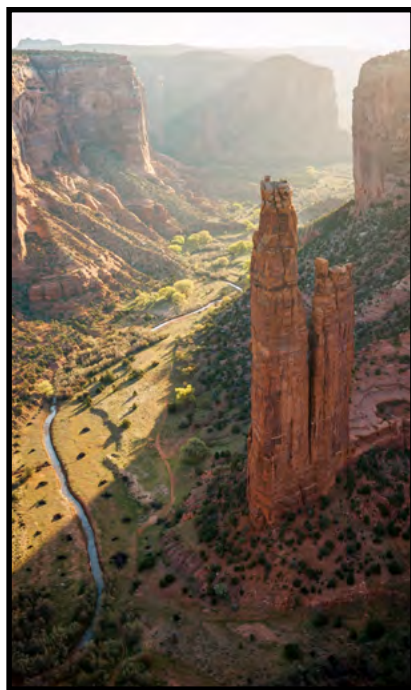
thing a Navajo family sees in the morning is the rising sun. The sandpaintings in the Hogan cannot be made by just anyone. The singer who supervises the construction is a specialist whose apprenticeship to another medicine person, sometimes lasting many years, initiates them as a practitioner of a ceremony known as a “Way.” Each “Way” is named for the forces addressed by its songs, chants, prayers, and sandpaintings, among which are the “Blessingway”, performed for general well-being, and to ensure that one may “walk in beauty”, “Mountainway”, “Nightway,” and “Windway.” The cause of the sickness determines the ceremony needed to effect a cure. Some “Ways” may last as long as nine days and nights.

A “Way” may have as many as a hundred sandpaintings associated with it, and over five hundred different sandpaintings have been recorded. Although the “Ways” may differ in length of ceremonies, number of sandpaintings, and forces toward which prayers are directed, all share a common goal: the restoration of *hózhó*.

The word *hózhó* has no English equivalent. It can be grasped by blending concepts such as “sacred,” “holy,” “blessed,” “balance,” and “harmony.” It has also been referred to as “beauty” and is the equivalent of the ancient Egyptian concept of Ma’at (order). To the Navajo, *hózhó* is fragile and easily disrupted by the forces of chaos.

When life tips out of balance, disorder ensues. Someone in need of, for example, “Mountainway” can suffer from a range of ailments including arthritis, rheumatism, fainting, nerves or stomach disorders. By contacting the elemental forces of the cosmos through chanting ceremonies, the singer tries to alleviate the suffering. Through the sandpaintings and ceremonies, the singer appeals to the Holy People, summoning them to heal the patient by reinstating *hózhó*.

The designs were an integral part of the religious ceremonies of the Holy People themselves, recounting the lessons of life. The construction of each sandpainting follows a prescribed formula. If it is not made correctly, the Holy People will not come. Properly constructed, it functions as a beacon the Holy People cannot ignore. Sandpaintings face east, which is always at the top of the painting, and open to let in the dawn’s light. The east is the direction from which the Holy People enter. It is sacred and one from which no harm can enter. The painting must then be ceremoniously destroyed before dawn.



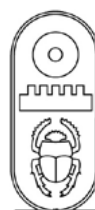
*Canyon de Chelly National Monument  
in Navajo Nation.*

Sandpaintings convey complex and symbolic messages. The principal colors white, blue, yellow, and black link the four sacred mountains rising up at the farthest borders of Dinéhtah, within the boundaries of which they believe the Creator placed them. White, the dominant color in the eastern part of the sandpainting, represents the dawn and *Sisnaajini* or White Shell Mountain, the Sacred Mountain of the

East (Sierra Blanca peak in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains near Alamosa, Colorado). Blue represents *Tsoodzil* or Turquoise Mountain, the Sacred Mountain of the South (Mount Taylor in the San Mateo Range near Grant, New Mexico), and represents the sky. The western part is yellow and represents *Doko’o’osliid*, the Abalone Shell Mountain, the Sacred Mountain of the West, (Humphreys Peak in the San Francisco Mountains north of Flagstaff, Arizona). It

represents the twilight. Black represents the north, associated with *Dibé Nitsaa* or Obsidian Mountain, the Sacred Mountain of the North (Mount Hesperus in the La Plata range near Durango, Colorado), and represents darkness. Within the area encompassed by these four were another three sacred mountains.

The first part of any chant is devoted to purification, achieved through the use of emetics, herbal treatments or sweat baths. After this, during the second part of the ceremony comes the attempt to attract the Holy People to restore balance



or hózhó. This is when the sandpaintings are made.

The singer, patient, friends, and relatives sit around the sandpainting joined in common purpose by the singer's prayers, a melodic recitation of repeated refrains reflecting the universal need for meaningful ritual. The ceremony reaches its climax as the singer escorts the patient into the sandpainting itself, which is a center of transformation. The patient sits facing the east, the direction from which the Holy People will arrive. For a few moments, as the singer rubs pigment from the sandpainting onto the patient's body, one part at a time, the Holy People, sandpainting, and patient merge into one. During this physical contact a pathway between the patient and the deities is established, allowing healing to begin. The patient then rises to "walk in beauty" once again.

At the conclusion of the ceremony, the participants destroy the sandpainting. It is swept on to a blanket and taken outside to be disposed of, to the north of the Hogan. If it was left in place, the Holy People, having no choice but to revisit it, would discover no ceremony under way, no patient, no singer, none of the honor they expect and which is their due. Their displeasure could manifest itself in the patient's loss of hózhó just restored by the ceremony.

If a patient has confidence in a singer, then they can be cured. Exactly what happens during a sandpainting ceremony is a mystery to Western understanding, but the Navajo maintain that the sandpaintings work because they are gifts from the Holy People. Given attention and surrounded by people who care, the patient follows a trusted singer along the healing pathway. The spectators also share in the blessings derived from attending the ceremonies, and in the feast afterwards.



*A Navajo rug done in the style of a sandpainting.*

The previous descriptions are all reminiscent of the symbolism in our own Lodges, Chapters, Pronaoi, and Atrium Groups. Today, it is possible to buy sandpainting designs on textiles, pictures, or miniature "sandpaintings." But precautions are taken. Perhaps different colors are used or figures are omitted or included in a scene, to render the designs harmless.

As Rosicrucians, we learn in our studies that when we are ready, the Master will appear. While the tradition of sandpainting may not have the same connotation as the Rosicrucian axiom, we know that for patients it is necessary to be ready, to prepare themselves with the correct inner mental attitude for the Holy People and the healing to manifest. After all, all forms of healing simply augment the body's own natural healing abilities. Medical staff now acknowledge that for many traditional Navajo patients, successful treatment will be done in conjunction with a hataáalii, a holistic concept long known to the native peoples of the Americas, but only now being rediscovered by Western medicine.