

Navajo Sandpainting Textiles

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Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art

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The Navajo term for sandpainting is *'ikááhb*, “place where the gods come and go.” Since sandpaintings are employed in ceremonies designed to summon supernatural forces, it is important for the viewer to approach the subject with the understanding that sandpaintings represent graphic and sacred renderings of the Navajo’s religious world.

Traditionally, sandpainting is done only as part of a curing, purification or blessing ritual. When people are in good health, they are in harmony with their whole environment. When they become ill or “out of harmony,” they may be treated with one of 60 ceremonies. Sandpaintings thus serve as an integral part of elaborate Navajo healing or blessing ceremonies that are conducted for a patient or petitioner. These ceremonies have a specific spiritual purpose: to summon the presence of the various supernatural powers who figure in the Navajo Creation stories as illustrated by sandpaintings. The intended result is a balanced, harmonious and healthy relationship with the Holy People.

In effect, ceremonial sandpaintings are temporary altars. With the re-creation of their Creation stories by means of the sandpaintings, the Navajo believe that the specific healings associated with each story will bring relief to the patient. A Medicine Man performs the ritual, accompanied by prayers and singing, by touching parts of the sandpainting design and then rubbing the colored sand or powder on the body of the patient. As a result, the altar is destroyed as part of the healing process.



Male and Female Yeí with Corn, from the Nightway Chant, woven by Gladys Manuelito, c. 1930, wool, 68" x 68", collection Jay Barron, Nashville, Tenn.

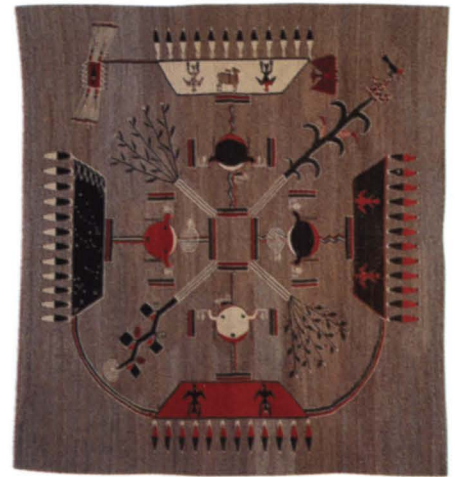
Sandpainting weavings, however, are not, nor have they been, a part of Navajo ceremonies. Although sandpainting textiles are reproductions from the Navajo ceremonial Chantways (also commonly referred to as Chants or Sings), they are not intended to be used for sacred purposes. Although fewer Chantways are performed today, they can be divided into seven major groups, and each of these consists of one or more subgroups. These subgroups contain from four to 96 sandpaintings, thus making specific identification difficult.

One area of investigation is the identification of the accuracy of the ceremonial design from specific Chantways reproduced in a woven sandpainting, that is, the weaver’s source for the sandpainting textile. For the viewer to fully understand a sandpainting tapestry, the source from which the weaver re-created the design should be considered. It is the translation of ceremonial information to the weaver’s loom that embodies the “cultural tension” surrounding the production, sale and exhibition of sandpainting textiles.

Tension is first realized in gender roles. In the Navajo culture, men perform the roles of healer and singer. It is the *batathli*, or singer, who through years of study memorizes the complex iconography associated with actual sandpaintings. Traditionally, however, women – not men – are the weavers. It is unlikely that a female weaver would have sufficient knowledge to reproduce sandpaintings successfully from memory. As these two professions are clearly delineated by gender roles, the question of how the singer’s images are translated to designs on a weaver’s loom is a significant one. The answer to this question for many Navajo has been perceived as a violation against the Holy People.

Reproduction of sandpaintings has always been controversial. Even though the development of sandpainting weaving parallels early instances of sandpainting demonstrations and scholarly documentation of ceremonies, weaving of such items was kept secret.

The first sandpainting rug was woven in Chaco Canyon in 1896 at the request of a gentleman on the Wetherill Expedition (Wheat 1976: 48). In 1897, Richard Wetherill had another rug woven that remained in the family’s possession until at least 1913. The fate



The Skies, from the Shooting Chant, woven by Mrs. Many Goats, c. 1930, wool, 82" x 77½", collection Mr. and Mrs. A. J. Gates, Scottsdale.

of these early rugs is unknown. Two sandpaintings, one in Chaco Canyon and one in Two Grey Hills, were made in 1904, and several rugs were also made at Newcomb’s Trading Post in 1903 and again between 1906 and 1911. No information is available on these rugs, but stories persist regarding the commotion they caused – supposedly resulting in the cessation of production of sandpainting tapestries for a number of years, except for the “great flood of so-called *yei* and *yeibichai* blankets” (Wyman, 1983: 264).

The *yei* and *yeibichai* rugs differ from sandpainting textiles in that they focus on isolated figures, whereas sandpainting weavings are more or less accurate copies of complete ceremonial sandpaintings. The first documented *yei* and *yeibichai* rugs also date to the early 1900s. The *yei* are a particular category of Holy People, as distinguished from the *yeibichai*, masked-god-impersonator dancers who appear in such ceremonies as the Nightway Chant. The *yei* and *yeibichai* rugs do not utilize entire sandpainting images but, like sandpainting textiles, they do depict Holy People. *Yei* rugs were popularized by Will Evans, a trader at Shiprock, following World War I. These rugs continue to be produced, primarily as tourist novelties, and are seldom based on sandpainting designs. However, even the early *yei* rugs caused dissent because they depicted permanent images of Holy People.

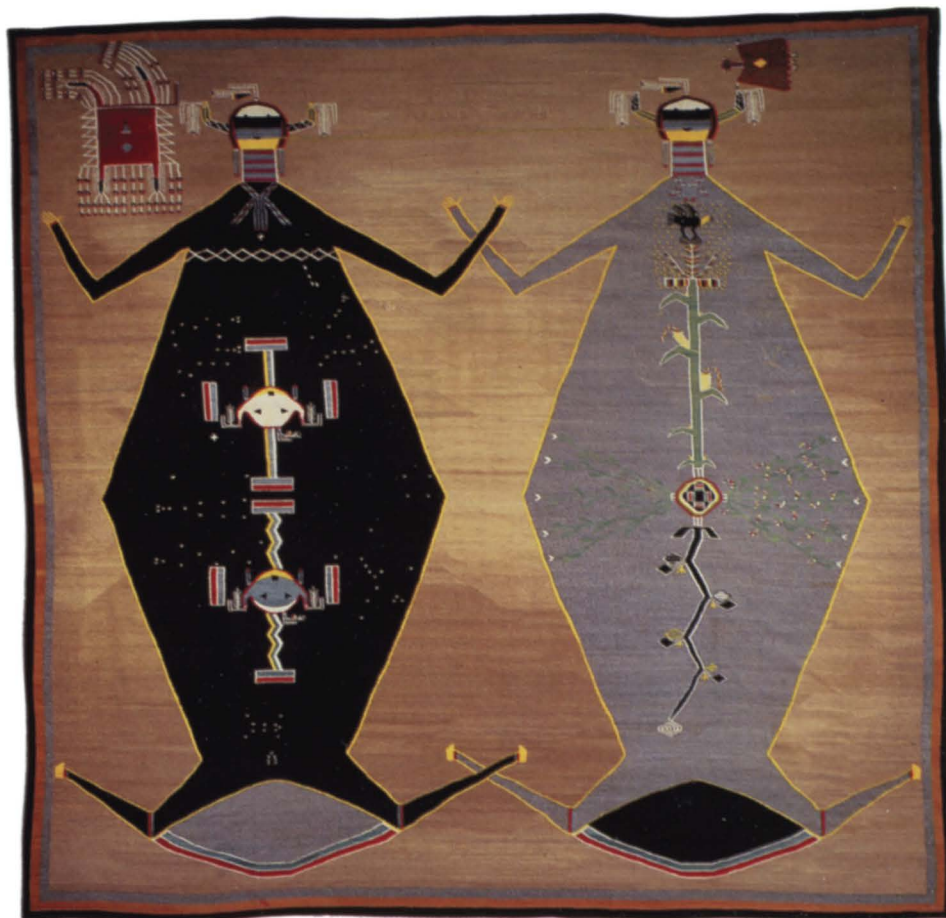
It is important to remember that initially the reproduction of any of these sacred images was looked upon by most Navajo with apprehension and fear. To the Navajo, a ceremonial sandpainting

contains multidimensional power. This power is both visual and conceptual, metaphorical and literal, aesthetic and therapeutic (Witherspoon, 1995: 58). For the Navajo, it would seem strange and inappropriate to view a sandpainting as two-dimensional art because, in its proper place, the sandpainting is the powerful and sacred center of their universe. Many stories have been told of terrible consequences – including blindness and crippling – for offending the Holy People. It is not unusual, therefore, to hear that a particular sandpainting weaver has had a healing ceremony. To avoid curses, weavers frequently omit a detail or otherwise modify a design.

Fear and apprehension of weaving a sandpainting were, for a time, allayed by an extraordinary circumstance when the weaver and the singer were one and the same. Historically, the best-known sandpaintings were not woven by a female, but a male weaver by the name of “Left-handed” or Hosteen Klah. Klah was both a weaver and a Medicine Man. He was known to the Navajos by a term that means *transformed*. His acceptance in both male and female activities was due to the special status and prestige bestowed upon a transformed male. Although it is not certain whether Klah was a transvestite, berdache or hermaphrodite, his orientation placed him in a class of “man-woman” which, in Navajo mythology, is thought to possess special powers in the real world. Klah and his nieces, Gladys and Irene, wove more than 70 sandpainting tapestries between 1919 and 1937.¹

Klah’s long-time friend, Mrs. Franc Johnson Newcomb, recounted the trials of Klah’s first sandpainting weaving:

I asked why he did not weave a rug with a ceremonial design. He said that sacred symbols should not be ... placed on the floor to be walked on all day. I assured him that ... [it] would never be used on the floor, but would be hung on the wall of some museum. ... After talking it over with his family, he decided it would be all right. ... He had logs brought from the mountain and built a loom that would hold a rug 12 feet square. Then came the problem of finding the right wool. A rug of this size would require about 20 pounds of raw wool, and as the proper background tan color was only found on the underside of the brown sheep, it did not seem possible



Mother Earth, Father Sky, possibly from the Mountain Chant or Night Chant, woven by Altnabah, c. 1930, wool, 156" x 156", collection Museum of Northern Arizona, Flagstaff. Photo: Museum of Northern Arizona photo archives, negative number E3716/2565

to collect this much. ... Many of the Navahos in our valley were critical of this project as they thought the making of an accurate sandpainting in permanent form would bring disaster to the entire tribe. But Klah was too powerful in medicine-man status for them to say anything to him. ... He chanted his prayers and said that nothing would happen – nothing did! (Newcomb, 1964: 157)

Sandpaintings of five Chantways are represented in Klah’s and his niece’s weavings, including 49 tapestries from Night Chant, 9 from Hail Chant, 10 from Shooting Chant and 1 each from Mountainway and Eagleway Chant. When the demand for Klah’s sandpainting weavings exceeded what he could produce, he enlisted the aid of his two nieces, supervising their weaving and protecting them by singing over them (Wyman, 1983: 265).

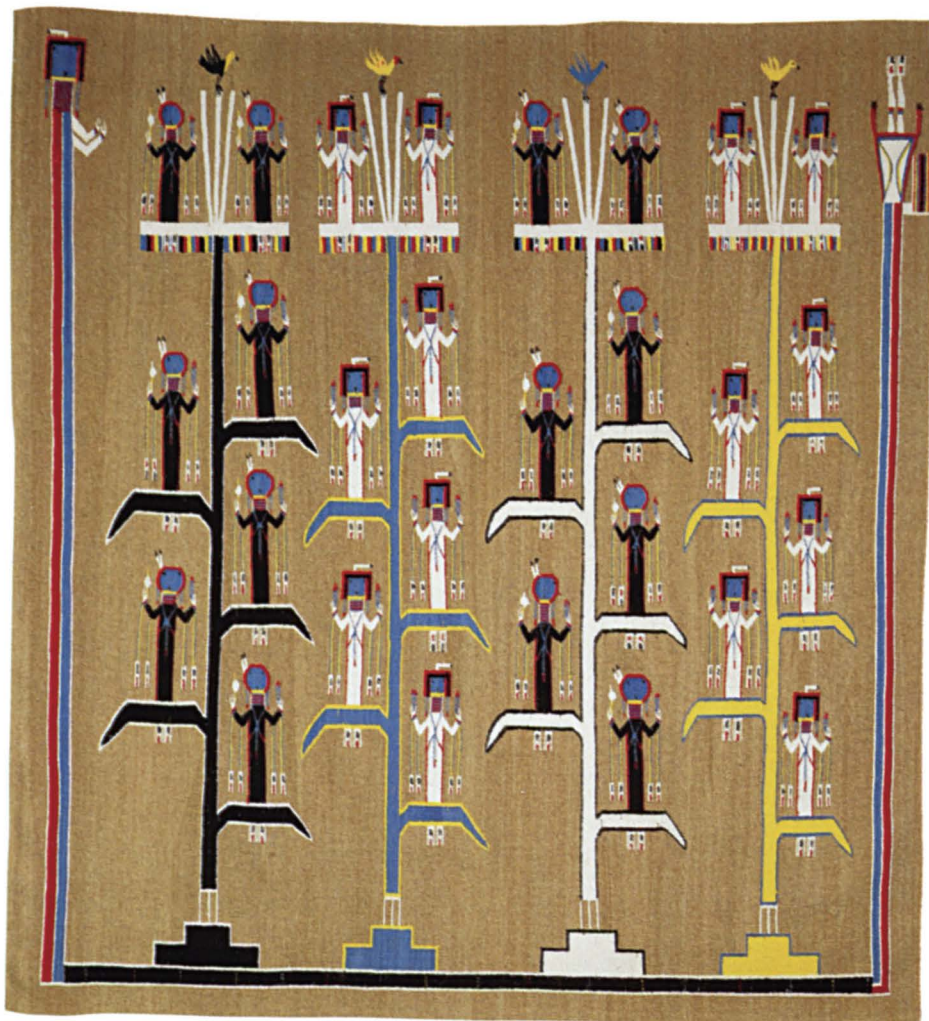
To weave a sandpainting textile requires a strong sense of autonomy, self-confidence and physical endurance. The Navajo’s respect for autonomy is reflected in many facets of Navajo culture, including language structure,

family relationships and particularly religious beliefs. Even though family and friends might disagree with a weaver for producing a sandpainting weaving, they would say nothing. As Ann Hedlund recently noted:

“Throughout the 350-year evolution of Navajo weaving, the individual’s freedom to make decisions – about color, design or any of the myriad aspects of making a textile – has remained central.”

In addition to a strong sense of individualism, a weaver must be confident. An extraordinary level of technical skill and special weaving expertise is required to carry out a sandpainting textile. A weaver must be confident of her ability to weave circles, curves and a wide variety of animals and figures. The ability of sandpainting weavers to solve technical problems and accurately translate intricate designs to their weavings places them in a special category of weaving excellence.

Lastly, the weaver must have the physical endurance to weave a large tapestry. Reichard, for example,



Corn with Holy People, from the Nightway Chant, woven by Gladys Manuelito, c. 1950, wool, 69½" x 67½", collection Dana Molded Products, Arlington Heights, Ill.

observed that the prodigious and prolific weaver Altnabah had a sandpainting on the loom for more than three years, and it was only half completed. Sandpainting weavings are often much larger than other styles, which means the weaver must spend more time and effort constructing an oversize loom and acquiring more wool prior to carding, dyeing, spinning and weaving. Sometimes, the wool needs to be dyed in unusual shades such as pink or light green.

Although the earliest-known ceremonial rug was woven from Germantown yarn, subsequent ones, until the 1950s, were almost invariably of handspun native wool. Today, two- and four-ply aniline-dyed commercial yarn is used for most sandpainting weavings. This has been particularly prevalent since 1960, as demonstrated in the weavings of Despah Nez and her daughters Anna Mae Tanner and Alberta Thomas. Despah Nez and her daughters, much like Klah and his nieces, represent

another outstanding family of sandpainting weavers, but one that used primarily commercially dyed yarn. This allowed them to spend more time on the weaving process itself. Their creation of more than 120 sandpainting textiles exceeded even that of Klah and his nieces.

By the late 1930s and 1940s, published sources by Gladys Reichard and Mary Wheelwright's Navajo Religion series (which included fully illustrated sandpaintings) were available to talented weavers through entrepreneurial traders. No longer was the singer necessary as a design source for the weaver to produce her tapestry.² The necessity of direct translation of the complex iconographic idiom was eliminated through these publications. Troy Kennedy, for example, a trader at the Red Rock Trading Post, successfully convinced Despah and her daughters to weave sandpainting tapestries, and eventually encouraged them to create entire ceremonial cycles including Beautyway, Great Star

Chant, Bead Chant, Hail Chant, Waterway and Coyoteway.

There is no doubt that weaving sandpaintings is a cultural anomaly. In the context of Navajo culture, the reproduction of sandpaintings as woven textiles is at odds with the intent of actual sandpaintings – thus creating a cultural tension. Sandpainting weavings embody this tension through the translation of sanctioned knowledge passed from a Medicine Man to a female weaver.

While economics served as an incentive for many woven sandpainting textiles, the marketing of the sacred for secular reasons resulted in a beautiful and esoteric art form which, when viewed as an educational device, became a way to preserve the Navajo heritage. Klah's contributions, for example, go beyond the beauty of his magnificent weavings: he was responsible for helping open Navajo religion to permanent record.

The sandpaintings in this exhibition possess integrity, power and spirit. Inwardly, they illustrate the Navajo's absolute respect for the individual, while outwardly they provide the viewer an image of the Navajo's cosmic universe.

– John Gerber
curator, Kennedy Museum of American Art,
Ohio University, Athens

¹ Two of Klah's sister's daughters were married to brothers. The older one, Gladys (Hanesbah) married Sam Manuelito, and Irene (Altnabah) married his younger brother Jim Manuelito. Hence, they were known as Mrs. Sam and Mrs. Jim. These men were grandsons of the famous Navajo headman Manuelito (1821-93), who was the son-in-law of Narbona, Klah's great-grandfather.

² This is not to imply the singer is ever eliminated from the process. Some weavers of sandpainting textiles petition for prayers and occasional ceremonies over them. Hosteen Klah's niece Irene had a Plumeway and Gladys a Nightway ceremony in order for them to weave tapestries. Despah and her daughters, Anna Mae Tanner and Alberta Thomas, also regularly received ceremonies for protection and healing as a result of their weaving activities.

References

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Cover: *The Skies*, from the Shooting Chant, unknown weaver, c. 1930, wool, 112½" x 123½", collection Tony Berlant, Santa Monica, Calif.

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