

NAVAJO WEAVINGS

with Ceremonial Themes



A Historical Overview of a Secular Art Form

Rebecca M. Valette | Jean-Paul Valette
Boston College



4880 Lower Valley Road • Ayles, PA 15310

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▶ 1.1. The Navajo People and Their Land

The Navajos refer to themselves as the *Diné*, or the People, a term indicative of their distant Athabascan origins.¹ Today, as members of the Navajo Nation, they constitute the largest Native American tribe with a population of over 300,000, of whom two-

thirds live on the Navajo Reservation.² This extensive reservation which covers about 28,000 square miles is located primarily in northeastern Arizona but also extends into New Mexico and southern Utah.

Into the Dinétah (c. 1500)

According to Navajo tradition, the *Diné* have lived in their southwestern lands since their creation in time immemorial. Anglo-American³ scholars, however, have determined that the Navajos, like the Apaches to whom they are linguistically and ethnically related, are descendants of an Athabascan tribe that left the forests of the Pacific Northwest as early as the twelfth century. They migrated southward in small scattered bands, probably following a route along the Great Plains that bordered the eastern Rocky Mountains. By 1500, or perhaps earlier, they had reached the upper basin of the San Juan River in present day northern New Mexico and settled south of the river in an area known to the Navajos as the *Dinétah*. This region is characterized by an irregular plateau deeply cut by a maze of narrow canyons. Such rugged terrain provided the newcomers with a natural defensive base from which they could later branch out toward the Rio Grande and to which they could retreat in time of conflict or other difficulties.

Traditional Navajos regard the *Dinétah* as their revered ancestral homeland where many episodes of their creation story and other sacred narratives took place. It is on Gobernador Knob that their spiritual mother, Changing Woman, was born. Her sons, the Warrior Twins, departed from there to meet their father, the all-powerful Sun, and to ask him for sacred weapons to defeat their enemies on earth.

The Navajo ancestors who first settled in the Southwest brought with them much of their Athabascan culture and social structure. They were seminomadic hunter-gatherers living in small groups where resources were shared. There was a matrilineal society in which individuals identified themselves as belonging to their mothers' clans. They followed shamanistic ceremonial practices aimed at healing through the invocation of benevolent spirits.



Figure 1.1.1. Pueblito in the Dinétah.
Photo by Curtis Schaafsma.

▶ 2.1 Historical and Geographical Context

Earliest Weavings with Sacred Imagery

In the late 1860s, a talented Navajo weaver inserted a small ceremonial figure in the complex design of a highly decorative blanket. Some hundred years later, the figure was identified by Nancy Blomberg as a Whirlwind Person from the Chiricahua Windway.¹ This poncho-style blanket, shown on the opposite page, was woven at a time of dislocation and great distress for the Navajos as a result of their internment at Bosque Redondo. Formerly part of the William Randolph Hearst collection, it is the earliest known Navajo textile to contain elements suggestive of sacred imagery.

Other pre-1890s examples of weavings with small ceremonial elements in their designs are extremely rare and poorly documented. They depict sacred plants, particularly corn and squash, or symbolized meteorological phenomena. Their geographic origin, the identity of their weavers, and the reasons that motivated their production remain mysteries. These blankets seem to have been spontaneous creations, rather than the result of interaction between their weavers and Anglo-American traders, as will be the case for the fully developed ceremonial-theme blankets which began to appear around 1900.

Ceremonial Imagery in the Hearst Blanket



Figure 2.11a. Detail.

Specific design features found in the upper section of the Hearst blanket have been interpreted as derived from sandpainting iconography.²

Stacks of inverted triangles, similar to these forming the upper and lower borders of the blanket, appear as minor elements in the sandpaintings of several chantways. They symbolize the rain clouds that bring much needed moisture to the semiarid Navajo region.

Whirlwind People are specific to the Chiricahua Windway sandpaintings where they appear together with Cactus People. Like the figure in this weaving, they have bodies in the form of an hourglass. This shape evokes the swirls of dust created by the sudden gusts of wind that frequently sweep across the Navajo landscape. Like the Yeis, Whirlwind

People wear a sash at the waist and extend their arms in a half-raised position. They have stripes on their necks and typically hold cactus plants and stacks of clouds (see Figure 2.2.14).

The Chiricahua Windway originated approximately at the same time that this blanket was woven.³ It is a two-day chant aimed at curing the ill effects caused by powerful wind storms and lightning or by contact with snakes and cacti.

▶ 3.1 Changing Attitudes

In 1919, after much hesitation, Hosteen Klah, the most accomplished Singer of his generation, finally agreed to weave a large copy of a Nightway sandpainting at the suggestion of his friend and neighbor Franc Newcomb.¹ Klah's decision to reproduce a sandpainting design was not at all an act of defiance against tradition. Rather it reflected a shift toward greater Navajo openness with regard to their ceremonial practices and, in particular, a progressive relaxation of the prohibition against the reproduction of sacred iconography. This change of attitude occurred within a context of mutual trust and respect between Navajo medicine men and Anglo-American ethnologists genuinely interested in their religious beliefs.

Navajo medicine men themselves had been giving public demonstrations of their sandpainting techniques, perhaps as early as 1893 during the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago.² In the 1920s, these demonstrations became annual occurrences at such events as the Santa Fe Indian Fair and the Gallup Inter-Tribal Indian Ceremonials. They were also held

occasionally in museums and other public venues.

In May 1923, El Navajo, the newest hotel built by the Fred Harvey Company, was inaugurated in Gallup with great fanfare.³ In order to celebrate Navajo culture and underscore the theme of the hotel, Fred Geary, an Anglo-American artist, had decorated the walls of the public spaces with large exact copies of sandpainting reproductions which had been made many years earlier by medicine men.⁴

On opening day, a Blessingway was conducted by thirty medicine men, including Hash-Kay Yashi, revered chanter of the Shootingway, said to be more than ninety years old, and Little Singer, specialist in the Nightway. This was the first time such a ceremony had been performed for a non-Navajo public building. In attendance was Henry Chee Dodge, chairman of the Navajo Tribal Council, as well as hundreds of Navajos from the region who were apparently not disturbed by the presence of permanent copies of sacred imagery inside the hotel.

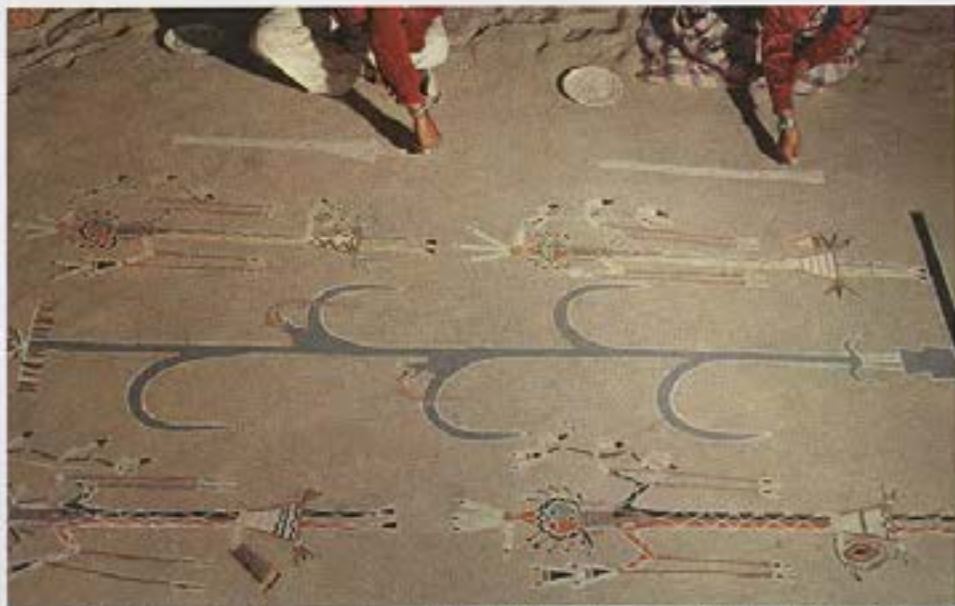


Figure 3.11. Sandpainting demonstration, c. 1950s. Photo postcard by Bob Petley. Valette Collection.

▶ 4.1 Sandpainting Weavings: An Overview

This category of Navajo textiles includes the weavings with designs closely adapted from actual sandpaintings and also their numerous highly transformed variants.¹ From the beginning, these sandpainting weavings were, with few exceptions, commercial artistic creations made in response to a growing desire of Anglo-American collectors to own and exhibit objects they considered as having native "spiritual significance." By the end of the nineteenth century, such collectors were already acquiring Hopi Kachinas and ceremonial paraphernalia from other tribes.

Social scientists had become aware of the existence of sandpaintings and their elaborate designs as early as the mid-1880s with Washington Matthews's report on the Mountainway and James Stevenson's account of the Nightway, both published by the Bureau of American Ethnology.² However, it was not until the publication of Matthews's illustrated books *Navajo Legends* (1897) and *The Night Chant* (1902), that a larger segment of the public became aware of this aspect of Navajo ceremonial tradition.³ Of these publications, it was especially the 1902 folio-size volume with its full-color lithographs of sandpaintings that drew the attention of readers to the Nightway and its ceremonial imagery.

These books were followed in 1907 by the release of the first volume of Edward Curtis's *The North American Indian* with its focus on the Navajos and their spiritual life, amply illustrated with imagery pertaining to the Nightway. The reproduction of Matthews's "Whirling Logs" print in George Wharton James's widely-read 1914 book *Indian Weavers and their Blankets*⁴ further stimulated Anglo interest in Navajo ceremonies, and especially the Nightway.

The creation of a ceremonial sandpainting is a complex process that takes many hours and must be finished and then destroyed before sunset. It requires the participation of several assistants working together under the guidance of the officiating Medicine Man who supervises their progress and helps them correct any mistakes. After the floor of the ceremonial has

been swept and covered by an even layer of clean sand, the sandpainters begin at the center of the design and work outward. They first draw the outlines of the figures and then add the specific details with appropriate colored sands mixed with mineral pigments or charcoal. When the sandpainting is near completion, it is enclosed on three sides by a protective guardian. The sandpainting is oriented so that its open side faces east toward the hogan entrance. This orientation allows the Holy People to come in and bring their blessings to those present. Once the healing power of the sandpainting image has been transferred to the Patient, the sandpainting itself is ritually destroyed.

Given the physical impossibility of owning an actual sandpainting, collectors had to turn to the best alternative, namely the acquisition of a woven replica. For a long time, however, Navajo weavers refused to transgress the prohibition against the reproduction of sacred images. It was enterprising traders who gradually managed to convince their most talented weavers to create sandpainting blankets.

The origin of weavings with full sandpainting designs is unknown. An early prototype is the 1905 Peabody-Hollister Corn People blanket (Figure 2.3.8) which is an artistic interpretation of a sandpainting from the Shootingway. Scholars have reported that a few sandpainting blankets were woven between 1900 and 1915, but there are no known weavings with uncontroversial provenance to support such early dating.⁵

The sandpainting style took hold only in the early 1920s after Hosteen Klah, a reputed Medicine Man from the Toadlena area who was also a weaver, was persuaded by his Anglo friend Franc Newcomb to weave a large reproduction of the Whirling Logs sandpainting (Figure 4.2.3). As Klah and his nieces continued to produce sandpainting blankets without suffering any predicted ailments, several other weavers followed their example, especially in the areas of nearby Two Grey Hills and Lukachukai.

► 5.1 Yei Weavings: An Overview

Yeis are supernatural beings who cannot speak but have a special hooting call. They figure prominently in the narratives of the Nightway and are portrayed in the sandpaintings of the chant. Like most Holy People, Yeis are depicted with slim elongated bodies, half-raised arms, and necks striated by four red crossbars. What distinguishes them from other People is the absence of markings on their bodies and also their blue faces, rounded for the males and rectangular for the females. Male Yeis generally hold a small gourd rattle in the right hand and a spruce twig in the left, while Female Yeis carry only spruce twigs.

Yei textiles are the most common type of ceremonial-theme weavings. This broad category includes textiles featuring the Yeis themselves and, to a much lesser extent, decontextualized supernatural beings from other chants.

The first weavings featuring tall single Yeis appeared



Figure 5.1.2. Yei weaving, c. 1930. Handspun, 36" × 48". Private Collection.

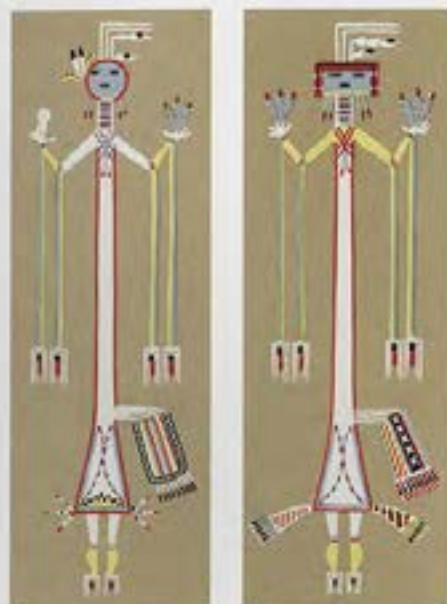


Figure 5.1.1. Male and Female Yei. Matthews, *Night Chant*, plate VII. Details.

around 1905 and were the work of a Navajo woman living in the vicinity of the Gallegos Trading Post (see Figure 2.4.10). The high prices commanded by her blankets prompted weavers from different parts of the Reservation to imitate her designs using a richer palette.

The single Yei design was soon superseded by a more complex pattern featuring multiple Yeis aligned in a row. In the 1920s, Will Evans, the trader at Shiprock, promoted a very colorful version of this basic pattern. The so-called "Shiprock Yei" style became immediately popular with tourists who bought the textiles as souvenirs to decorate their homes. The design was quickly adopted and transformed to varying degrees by many weavers along the Farmington–Shiprock–Red Rock corridor and beyond.

Because of the linearity and relative simplicity of the figures, Yei designs are easier and less time-consuming to weave than the more complex Yeibichai and sandpainting patterns. Since their introduction, Yei textiles have, therefore, been the dominant category of weavings in the ceremonial-theme genre.

► 6.1 The Nightway and the Yeibichai Dance

The Nightway is the most complex of all the Navajo curative ceremonies and one of the oldest. The petroglyphs etched on the walls of the Dinetah canyons suggest that it was already performed in the early eighteenth century and that its origin is perhaps even more ancient.¹ The Nightway has great significance for the Navajos since it symbolizes the permanence of their spiritual traditions and the continuity of the Diné tribe over the centuries.

The Nightway is performed to restore the health of a patient suffering from headaches, blindness, paralysis, or other ailments. It lasts nine days and can be held only in the coldest months of the year when the snakes are hibernating and the danger of lightning has passed. It is unique among all current Navajo ceremonies in that the Yeis and other Holy People it invokes appear at various times during its performance, impersonated by masked and ceremonially attired members of the tribe. These impersonators feed sacred medicine to the patient and administer

rites of succor and purification according to prescribed rituals. On the fifth night, Talking God accompanied by a Female Yei initiates a small group of Navajo boys and girls into the sacred ceremonial practices.² On the ninth and final night, the Yeis appear in a public performance commonly known as the Yeibichai dance.³

The Yeibichai dance attracts hundreds and occasionally thousands of Navajos who travel long distances to attend the spectacular ritual so as to benefit from the presence of the Holy People and receive their blessing.⁴ Throughout the night, teams of masked god-impersonators from various parts of the Reservation relay one another, executing the prescribed dance formations. The ritual dancing continues until just before dawn, when the Nightway ends with the chanting of the “Bluebird Song” in celebration of the peace and happiness that this bird symbolizes. The crowd then disperses and by mid-morning only few traces of the night’s events remain.



Figure 6.11. “Navaho Dancers, Yeibichai ceremony,” 1919. Photo postcard by P. Clinton Bortell. Courtesy Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), # 19045.

Charles Newcomb, manager of the Crystal Trading Post and friend of Chee Dodge, arranged for Gallup photographer Clinton Bortell (1875–1947) to take this rare picture of masked male Yeibichai participants as they stand in the brush enclosure at dusk after rehearsing the dance steps.⁵

► 7.1. Yeibichai Dancers as Secondary Elements

In typical Yeibichai textiles, the line of masked impersonators constitutes the main focus and only theme. On occasion, however, Navajo women have included figures of Yeibichai dancers as decorative elements or secondary themes in weavings with a totally different pattern. In weavings with a primarily geometric design, the dancers often appear as small figures placed at the corners or in the center of the composition. In rugs with a distinctly "regional style," such as Early Crystal, Two Grey Hills, or Storm Patterns, the dancers may be incorporated into the design itself. In much rarer pictorial weavings, they are portrayed together with other figurative elements.

Weavings with Yeibichai dancers as a secondary

theme are unique creations since their weavers did not follow any model and never reproduced the same design. Most of these idiosyncratic textiles were made in the 1920s and 1930s when the Yeibichai category of Navajo weavings reached its peak of creativity.

The weaver of the Moki type blanket on the facing page may be one of the earliest Navajo weavings to feature dancers as secondary elements. The Moki style with its alternating black and indigo bands was revived by John Lorenzo Hubbell in the 1890s. The Spider Woman crosses also belong to that period, but the hooked shapes and lozenges with hourglass borders are later innovations.



Figure 7.11a. Detail.



Figure 7.11b. Detail.

▶ 8.1 A New Environment

The era of ebullient creativity characteristic of the ceremonial-theme Navajo weavings during the 1920s and 1930s was followed by a period of relative artistic stagnation which lasted until the 1960s. The generation of wealthy but demanding collectors who had supported the market before World War II did not reappear after the conflict ended, thus lessening the incentive for the best weavers to create innovative, high quality products. With the notable exception of Klah's nieces, few weavers continued to reproduce the complex sandpainting designs. Rather they concentrated on simplified versions of multiple Yeis and monotonously repetitive Yeibichai dancers. Such textiles with standardized patterns were less time consuming to weave and sold readily in the shops and curio stores along Route 66 to tourists looking for relatively inexpensive souvenirs. However, they failed to attract the attention of more sophisticated collectors since the "Indian Craze" had long disappeared.

The resurgence of weaving activity in the 1960s and early 1970s coincided with the progressive departure of traders from the Reservation and was motivated in part by the increased mobility of the Navajos who could afford pickup trucks allowing them to shop in towns outside the Reservation, such as Flagstaff, Farmington, and Gallup. There weavers could visit galleries and observe new trends in their own specialties, as well as innovations in other Pueblo and Navajo art forms.

Contemporary weavers no longer depend on a local trader's view of what their designs should be.

Instead, they rely on their own artistic instincts and their perceptions of what will sell on the market place. They find inspiration in a variety of sources and create their own patterns combining tradition and innovation. Unlike their anonymous predecessors, weavers today are recognized artists, known by name and anthologized in reference books. Many have established a personal relationship with collectors whom they meet at well-attended shows such as the annual Gallup Inter-Tribal Indian Ceremonial and the Santa Fe Indian Market, or at smaller events organized by museums and galleries. Some have created their own websites to publicize their weavings, while others rely on the websites of galleries featuring their work.

It is perhaps in the ceremonial-theme genre that contemporary weavers have been the most successful in establishing a reputation for originality, artistry, and technical quality. Sandpainting weavers from the Red Valley and other areas have focused their attention on lesser-known Chants, producing finely woven replicas of their rarely reproduced sacred iconography. Yeibichai weavers have depicted the dancers in new modern styles. Other weavers have combined the historical, sacred, and secular aspects of Navajo culture in totally new contexts.

The following pages feature the works of some of these weavers. This selection is necessarily limited and does not reflect the full spectrum of recent contemporary innovations in style and composition.



Figure 8.11. Books featuring the works of modern ceremonial-theme weavers. Ann Lane Hedlund, *Navajo Weaving in the Late Twentieth Century*; Mark Winter, *Dances with Wool*; Jennifer McLerran, ed., *Weaving is Life*.