

Art Built on Sand

Most artists want their work to last forever. Navajo sand painters create works that can take eight hours to finish and yet be gone before sunset. Art for them is not primarily a way to make money, and they care little about a lasting reputation. Sand painting serves a more traditional purpose in Navajo life.

According to Navajo tradition, there is a delicate balance of good and evil in the universe. Humans are responsible for maintaining this balance. When the balance is upset, the medicine man must perform a ceremony to restore it. The long and complex ceremony usually includes the creation of a sand painting.

The medicine man tells the artist exactly what he or she must do. As the tribe's elders sit in a circle and sing sacred songs, the sand painter begins his or her work. The painter sits facing an eastern door, because the Navajo believe that good enters from the east and evil departs toward it. Their word for sand painting, *iikááh*, means "place where the Holy People come and go." Making a sand painting is believed to be very dangerous because it calls into action powerful, sacred forces.

To make the sacred painting, the painter uses naturally colored sand that has been ground from rocks found on Navajo land. Sand artists use their hands as funnels to sprinkle the



sand onto the ground. The designs are all sacred symbols—precise, geometric figures that represent animals, holy people, and natural forces, like the sun and wind. The artist works freehand, without any sketches or guidelines. Yet the lines are straight and the angles are perfect. If the sand painter makes a mistake in a sacred painting, he or she must begin again.

When the sand painting is finished, the medicine man blesses the painted symbols, and the sacred forces enter into them. If the ceremony is being performed for a sick person, that person sits on the painting so that his sickness will leave him and enter the painted symbols. The forces used in the creation of the painting overcome the evil forces of the sickness and restore the balance between good and evil. By sunset, the sand of the painting will be swept up. It is taken outside and thrown to the winds. The art has served its purpose.

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The art of sand painting is less widely practiced by the Navajo today than it once was. Many young Navajo are now attracted to mainstream American culture and have less interest in their own. It is especially difficult to pass on the traditions of an art like sand painting because the work is only temporary.

Some sand painters are now making permanent sand paintings to sell, using artificially colored sand sprinkled onto a board covered with

glue. However, the artist always includes some mistakes when he designs such a painting. The Navajo believe the mistakes will keep the art from having sacred power. The tiny flaws do not mar the surface beauty of the painting, and the tourists will buy it for a high price. Still, it lacks the rich meaning of the traditional artwork. People who treasure the region's culture hope that a new generation of Navajo artists will continue making art out of sand.