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TITLE ITS WHERE YOU PUT YOUR EYES

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Under Black Elk's direction preparations were immediately begun so that the vision could be enacted by the people. Black Elk recalls how he experienced the enactment of his vision: "I looked about me and could see that what we then were doing was like a shadow cast upon the earth from yonder vision in the heavens, so bright it was and clear. I knew the real was yonder and the darkened dream of it was here."³

There is a sense in which the Navajo sand paintings, the Hopi kachina masks, and many other Native American ritual acts share the properties of a shadow of a vision yonder. I have stressed that it is the form more than the substance that is important in manifesting the more profound forces of life. Certainly this is characteristic of shadows. There is a "thinness" to ritual objects and acts; they are meaningful only when cast in the light of the "yonder vision." This fragility is illustrated in the Navajo sand paintings, which are destroyed in the very acts by which they are of service. All of this is a constant reminder that the material vehicles exist and are meaningful only in the degree to which they lead beyond their own obvious limitations.

Were it not for these shadows cast by the vision yonder, Native American religions would be confined to the experience of rarified mystical moments or the internally borne knowledge of tradition. The shadow may appear bright and clear as it did to Black Elk, or dark and foreboding as it does to Hopi kachina cult initiates, but the shadows integrate Native American religions with distinctive ways of living and interpreting life.

NOTES

1. David F. Aberle, "The Navajo Singer's 'Fee': Payment or Prestation?" in *Studies in Southwestern Ethnolinguistics: Meaning and History in the Languages of the American Southwest*, ed. Dell H. Hymes and William E. Bittle, (The Hague: Mouton, 1967), pp. 15-32.
2. The full analysis is presented below in the chapter "Disenchantment: A Religious Abduction."
3. John Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks* (New York: Pocket Books, 1972), p. 142.

"It's Where You Put Your Eyes"

"Attention to the world's art historians!" was the message sent forth in 1885 by the Army physician Washington Matthews upon observing that Navajos routinely destroy their own sand paintings.¹ He was deeply impressed with the beauty and elaboration of these paintings in sand, but that only heightened the shock of the feature he was calling to the attention of the world. A number of people work to make a sand painting; on the same day they willfully destroy it. Matthews declared these paintings to be the most transient works of art in the world. We know that such short-lived works are not unique to the Navajo, but I don't think that Matthews' cry has been seriously considered. Perhaps that is because it would raise grave questions about the way we see and understand the nature of Native American art. Now, over a century later, I would like to consider some of the questions that echo from Matthews' message.

A description of Navajo sand painting will give us a place to begin. It is a ritual procedure in Navajo culture which is part of certain religious ceremonials performed to cure an ailing person. The sand painting is constructed on the floor of a ceremonial hogan and depicts mythic persons who have a connection with the cause of the illness being treated. It must be carefully replicated according to the memory of the officiating singer or medicine man. No visual record is kept by the Navajo people, but hundreds of different patterns are known to exist. The finished picture, like a costume and mask, provides a physical form in which the spiritual beings may manifest their presence. When cornmeal is sprinkled by the singer on the painting and the person for whom the ceremony is being performed, the holy people are present in the sand painting. The rite identifies the ailing person, who walks onto and sits in the middle of

the painting, with each of the holy people present in it. The identification is physically accomplished by a transfer of sands onto the medicine-moistened hands of the singer. The sands are taken from the feet, legs, body, and head of each of the painted figures and then pressed on the corresponding body parts of the person sitting on the painting. When this identification is complete, the sand painting, badly defaced during the rite, is completely destroyed by the singer, who scratches through it with a plumed wand. The mixed sands are removed and returned to nature.

In the study of Navajo religion I have attempted to understand the significance of sand painting from the Navajo perspective. Each pattern is appropriate to only certain ones of the many Navajo ritual ways. Each has its own story of origin, which in turn is framed by the whole Navajo tradition of creation. I have found that no Navajo sand painting can be understood very well without placing it in these contexts. Every ritual performance is uniquely appropriate to the specific motivating circumstances which emphasize certain features of a given painting. While the attempt to understand any sand painting is a highly complex affair, I want to present a generalized interpretation here. A fuller analysis of a single sand painting will be presented in the following chapter, "Whirling Logs and Colored Sands."

In the ceremonials in which sand-painting rites play a major role, the cause of the illness being treated is attributed to impaired relationships with specific life-giving forces in the Navajo cosmos. These life-giving forces are associated with certain holy people whose powers have become directed against the life forces of the ailing person. In the ceremonial cure rites are enacted to appease the holy people and persuade them to remove their life-threatening influence. But this in itself does not constitute a cure, for the person must be placed again in a state of order modeled on the creation of the Navajo world. The sand-painting rite is therefore a rite of re-creation in which the person is remade in a way corresponding to the conditions of his or her ailment. In this rite of re-creation the sand painting is the essential vehicle.

The perspective of the person being re-created is based on his or her position in the center of the sand painting facing east, the direction of the road of life. This visual perspective on the painting

is unique and cannot be shared by anyone. It is a view of the sand painting from within it, being surrounded by it. Only portions of the sand painting may be seen at any one time, and these only from the center outward. To sit upon the sand painting and to be identified with the many holy people and cosmic dimensions which are alive in it is to experience the complexity and diversity, the dynamics and the tensions, represented in the surrounding painting; but it is also to experience the one point common to all, and therefore to see and to feel the diversity and tensions.

The illness suffered is an experience of the world at odds with itself, but this experience is cosmicized when the person finds that this is but an incident in the whole drama of the universe. The illness is overcome when the person realizes (in the largest sense of that term) that in some places these tensions and oppositions can be balanced in a unity that signifies good health and beauty.

But how do we understand the destruction of the painting? We must see that it is not the materials of the sand painting, nor really even the design it takes, that is at the core of its meaning and power. Rather it is the process and use that is made of it that is important. It is a cosmic map. It is a vehicle by which re-creation, health, and beauty in life and the world are achieved. The sufferer finds his or her way to health from within the sand painting and by becoming a part of it; in turn it disappears and becomes a part of him or her. The picture disappears in the process of a person coming to know the fullness and unity of the reality it represents. The destruction of the picture corresponds to the dissolution of the tensions and imbalances that have given rise to the suffering.

We are now quite used to seeing Navajo sand paintings reproduced in books and articles on varying subjects. The circle inscribed by a cross is a widely known design, but its universal significance seems somehow shallow to me once I have considered Navajo sand painting, especially when I find that a fully closed border is rare and has very special significance and that double symmetry divided by a cross is but one of many general patterns.

The concerns I have are deepened as I begin to compare how we, as outsiders, view sand paintings with how Navajos view them, even from a physical perspective. Let me list several points of comparison. We have only representations of sand paintings drawn or

painted on paper or canvas, which we enjoy as objects of art. Navajos strictly forbid making representations of sand paintings and they are never kept as aesthetic objects. Even the use of sand painting figures in the sand-glue craft has not met with the approval of most Navajo singers. Sand paintings must be destroyed by sun-down on the day they are made. They are not aesthetic objects; they are instruments of a ritual process.

In terms of visual perspective we always view sand paintings from a position which would be directly above and at such a distance that the whole painting is immediately graspable, with each side equidistant from our eyes. This is completely impossible for Navajos. I got a laugh when I asked some Navajos if anyone ever climbed on the roof of a hogan to look at a sand painting through the smoke hole. When a painting six feet, or even larger, in diameter is constructed on the floor of a hogan only fifteen or twenty feet in diameter, the perspective from the periphery is always at an acute angle to the surface. A sand painting cannot be easily seen as a whole. The most important point of view is that of the person being cured, and this person sees the painting from the inside out because he or she sits in the middle of it. These differences are basic and cannot be dismissed. The Navajo view is inseparable from the significance which sand painting has for them.

I think we can say that for the Navajo the sand painting is not the intended product of the creative process in which it is constructed. The product is a healthy human being or the re-creation of a well-ordered world. The sand painting is but an instrument for this creative act, and perhaps it is the wisdom of the Navajo that it be destroyed in its use so that the obvious aesthetic value of the instrument does not supplant the human and cosmic concern. The confinement of our attention to the reproductions of sand paintings is somewhat analogous to hanging paint-covered artists' palettes on the wall to admire, not acknowledging that these pigment-covered boards are not paintings but the means to create them. There is a certain aesthetic value in artists' palettes, I suppose, but surely most would think of this action as foolishly missing the point.

While I am delighted at the increased interest in viewing artifacts from Native American cultures as objects of art, I cannot dismiss the implications that arise from this Navajo example. Our view of

Native American artifacts as art objects is a perspective the people themselves may not hold and sometimes explicitly reject. Our usual way of looking at these objects is stripped of the complex cultural views unique to the tribe which frames the significance of the artifacts. We often don't even know the physical perspective from which the object was intended to be seen. As a result the significance these objects have for us surely has little to do with their meaning for the people who created them.

If this were a problem only with Navajo sand painting it might ease my concern, but I think it in a significant measure holds true for any artifact not made for sale outside the culture. Some other examples will illustrate the point further.

Ted Brassler, of the Museum of Man in Ontario, studied the self-directed aspect of many Native American objects in the regions east of the Rocky Mountains.² He found that such things as moccasins, birchbark dishes, wooden bowls, effigy pipes, drums, woven bags, snowshoes, breechclouts, and pipe bags were commonly designed to be viewed from the perspective of the wearer or user. Moccasins, for example, have the design on the toe oriented to be seen by the wearer, not by those looking at moccasins worn by others. Craftspersons confirmed the intentionality of a self-directed orientation for many objects.

Brasser found that effigy pipes were used by the Iroquoian and Algonkian peoples as aides in the concentration of thought; that is, they were instruments of meditation. The pipe bowl bore the effigy of the guardian spirit or the familiar spirit of a shaman. It was so placed on the bowl that only when the smoker put the stem in his mouth did he come face to face with the representation of the spirit. Hence through smoking the pipe, drawing the tobacco smoke through the stem while concentrating on the effigy, the smoker gained power from his guardian spirit. Among the Sioux peoples Brassler found self-directed effigy pipes of a bear facing the smoker, which were used by shamans whose power to cure and benefit war parties was attributed to the spirit of the bear. In their ritual performances these shamans personified bears, wearing fur costumes and moccasins with bear paws attached.

Examples from Brassler's research throughout the whole area east of the Rocky Mountains could be multiplied, but my point is that

there is ample evidence indicating that the meaning of the effigy pipe is inseparable from the act of smoking the pipe, from the relationship the smoker has with the spirit represented on the pipe. It is inseparable from what occurs during the hours of concentrated smoking of strong tobacco. The visual perspective is dictated by the use for which the pipe is intended. When not in use the pipes are not placed on display for aesthetic pleasures but carefully wrapped in their bags.

To cite another example, I have long been dissatisfied with our whole framework for attempting to understand Native American ritual drama. I am uneasy especially with our views of masked performances. Our words mask and impersonate suggest that these ritual processes are somehow artificial, illusions, enactments of something else which is being imitated or represented. I have been little comforted that these performances are described as reenactments of the events of the gods in the primal eras. I feel strongly that, rather than reenactments or dramatic performances, they are the actual creation of reality. I have been concerned with some aspects of this process in terms of rites of initiation. I would like to consider another aspect of this related to masks. In initiation ritual it is fairly common to have initiates look through the eye-holes of masks. I think we usually interpret this as a means of demonstrating to the initiates the unreality of the mask; that is, we consider it as showing that what the uninitiated think is a real being is actually only a personification. But I think we may be wrong here. Again it is a matter of perspective. I would suggest that the perspective from which one gains the fullest meaning of a mask is not finally by looking at it at all, although this is certainly an essential stage in the process. The full meaning is gained by looking through the eye-holes of the mask and seeing the effect it has on the world. That is why it is a privileged view of the initiated.

A couple of Hopi examples give this view some support. The Hopi Don Talayesva tells of a time when he portrayed a giant kachina in the Soyoko ritual proceedings, which are aimed at disciplining uninitiated children. These monstrous-appearing figures come to houses of misbehaving children and demand that the children be given them to eat. This forces the parents to bargain with the kachinas in order to save their children. The children's bad behavior

costs the family a great deal in the physical goods they must provide to temporarily satisfy the awesome visitors, and this, along with the fear aroused by the kachinas, serves to encourage proper behavior in the children. Talayesva describes a time when he wore the mask of the giant kachina and enacted this ritual process. He played his part very well, with great effect on the children. That night Talayesva had a dream, which he describes:

I was tired and restless, and dreamed that I was still a Giant Kachina arguing for the children. I reached out my hand to grab a child and touched him. [Touching a child is strictly warned against for fear of frightening a child to death.] The little one held up his hands to me, crying and begging to be set free. Filled with pity, I urged him to be a good child in order to free himself from the Giant Spirit. I awoke worried, with a lump in my throat, and bells ringing in my ears. Then I spat four times and decided that if I were ever the Giant again I would have a better-looking mask and speak in a softer voice.³

By looking through the mask from the inside out, its reality was reflected in the faces of the children.

The other example is a comment made by Emory Sekaquaptewa regarding the experience of performing as a kachina:

I am certain that the use of the mask in the kachina ceremony has more than just an aesthetic purpose. I feel that what happens to a man when he is a performer is that if he understands the essence of the kachina, when he dons the mask he loses his identity and actually becomes what he is representing. . . . The spiritual fulfillment of a man depends on how he is able to project himself into the spiritual world as he performs. He really doesn't perform for the third parties who form the audience. Rather the audience becomes his personal self. He tries to express to himself his own conceptions about the spiritual ideals that he sees in the kachina. He is able to do so behind the mask because he has lost his personal identity.⁴

In this description of the experience Sekaquaptewa expresses the paradox of how one is at once enacting an impersonation and also transformed into what one is impersonating. It is described in terms of perspective. One best "sees" the reality one is oneself manifesting

by wearing the mask; while looking through its eye-holes one gains a view from the vantage of the audience so as to be able to know the reality it presents.

There is an inevitable conclusion to be drawn from these examples. We can never fully appreciate some Native American objects we consider to be art without also appreciating the contexts in which they are produced. When our understanding of art is so heavily focused on objects, we tend to look in the wrong place for art. We find only the leavings or by-products of a creative process, never even realizing what is transparent to our view. We fail to grasp the inseparability of art and religion. I am reminded here of an essay by Amiri Imamu Baraku, formerly known as LeRoi Jones, entitled "Hunting Is Not Those Heads on the Wall."⁵ In it he criticizes the aspect of Western art which he identifies as a worship of art objects. He feels that the price paid for this is the failure to appreciate the creative processes of art. In his view art objects are what is left over from the art process, and they have no more to do with art than hunting trophies have to do with the hunt.

The Native American examples I have given are related to this idea, but the case is even stronger because the aesthetic values cannot be separated from religious processes. A point of view commonly found in Native American cultures holds that reverence for objects which we might judge as being of artistic or religious value can become a kind of tyranny which stifles the full expression of ideas and the proper performance of religious acts. These acts themselves are creative in a primary sense: they define and shape reality; they literally make life possible. In light of this we should dissociate ourselves from the notion that for Native Americans art is a noun. We might prefer to adopt the term *arting* coined by Baraku, so that we can think of the art of Native Americans as a process of creating and maintaining life-giving relationships.⁶

Each year we are dazzled by the publication of beautiful books on Native American art and by stunning museum exhibits. I read the captions to the plates: "Painted Hide, Sioux, Lent by . . ." "Mask, Tlingit, from the collection of . . ." The more elaborate identifications give a few descriptive notes, but since they are frequently drawn from publications of collectors who have little knowledge of the ethnography, they are often in error or severely inadequate.

When I find a plate depicting an object which is from a cultural context I know something about, I close my eyes and try to picture it in its living setting. Opening my eyes and focusing again on the object propped up with plexiglass or pinned against a completely blank background, I can't help feeling a little sick. While it is true that increasing interest in the aesthetics of what we call "primitive art" has provided an increasing interest in Native American artifacts as objects of art, I think we have done just about everything possible to remove the aesthetic and meaningful elements which they bore in the setting of their creation. And having done this, we find it impossible to appreciate them except in a relatively superficial way.

A few—all too few—publications about the art of Native Americans overcome the sterilization process which strips the cultural contexts from the objects. Outstanding among them is Edmund Carpenter's *Eskimo Realities*. The objects which we consider as art pieces are placed in the milieu of Eskimo world sense not simply through verbal description but through the visual effects achieved by this beautifully crafted book (regrettably no longer in print), which leads to the conclusion:

The concept "art" is alien to the Eskimo, but the thing itself, the act of art, is certainly there, carefully implemented as a dimension of culture. It is not, however, always easy to recognize. The Eskimo don't put art into their environment: they treat the environment itself as art form.

Such art is invisible: it belongs to that all-pervasive environment that eludes perception. It serves as a means of training his perception upon the environment.⁷

Carpenter's book helps demonstrate this lesson of perspective I have been talking about. The shape of our own reality may blind us to the perspectives of others. Dominant objects from our perspective may, to the makers of those objects, be the leavings of a creative process completely invisible from where we look. What appears to us as an uninteresting background may be to others the ground against which reality gains orientation and human meaning. What we must first realize is that there are many ways of looking; then, that understanding is shaped by where you put your eyes.⁸

NOTES

1. Washington Matthews, "Mythic Dry-Paintings of the Navajos," *American Naturalist* 19 (1885):931-39.
2. Ted Brasser, "North American Indian Art for TM," in *The Religious Character of Native American Humanities*, ed. Sam Gill (Tempe: Department of Religious Studies, Arizona State University, 1977), pp. 126-43.
3. Don C. Talayesva, *Sun Chief: An Autobiography of a Hopi Indian*, ed. Leo W. Simmons (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942), p. 184.
4. Emory Sekaquaptewa, "Hopi Ceremonies," in *Seeing with a Native Eye*, ed. Walter H. Capps (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), p. 39.
5. Amiri Baraku [LeRoi Jones], "Hunting Is Not Those Heads on the Wall," in *Home: Social Essays* (New York: Morrow, 1972), pp. 173-78.
6. Robert Thompson, in *African Art in Motion* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), and others have shown how true this is for African art.
7. Edmund Carpenter, *Eskimo Realities* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1973), p. 202. Another sensitive book introduced by Carpenter is Bill Holm and Bill Reid, *Indian Art of the Northwest Coast: A Dialogue on Craftsmanship and Aesthetics* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975).
8. The phrase "It's where you put your eyes," was taken from a Sesame Street song.

Whirling Logs and Colored Sands

This chapter will focus on a single Navajo sand painting done in an actual ceremonial performance—the Whirling Logs sand painting of the Nightway ceremonial.¹ I will view several dimensions of the sand painting rite, considering its construction, the rite performed upon it, elements in the greater ceremonial context, and the associated stories. I am seeking to understand sand painting as much as possible from the perspective of Navajos and to illustrate aspects of Navajo religious thought.

In preparation for the construction of the Whirling Logs sand painting the center of the ceremonial hogan is cleared and the fire is moved to the side. A layer of clean sand is spread upon the floor and smoothed out with weaving battens. The sand painters make a guide for long straight lines by snapping a taut string to make an indentation in the sand base. The sand painting is constructed from the center outward under the direction of the singer, who does not usually participate in the sand painting. For the Whirling Logs sand painting, first the black cross which represents the whirling logs is constructed upon the center, which may be formed by burying a shallow bowl of water so that its surface is even with that of the painting. The center represents the lake upon which the logs float. The logs are outlined in red and white. The crushed colored materials used in making the sand painting are held in bark containers.

As the last arm of the cross is being completed, the roots of the corn plants which appear in each of the four quadrants are drawn, with their beginning in the central representation of the lake. Navajos have said that this is so because the corn needs water in order to live. The corn plants constructed in each quadrant are of