The Navajo word for sandpainting (\"iiikááh\") means "place where the gods come and go." Sandpaintings serve as impermanent altars where ritual actions can take place. But they are much more than that. In their proper setting, if ritual rules are followed, they are the exact pictorial representation of supernaturals. These stylized designs are full of sacred symbols and through consecration are impregnated with supernatural power, thereby becoming the temporary resting place of holiness. They are essential parts of curing ceremonies whose purpose is to attract the Holy People so that they will help with the complex curing process. The supernatural power sandpaintings contain is considered dangerous, and they can be safely used only in the proper controlled context, at the right time, under the direction of highly trained specialists. They are not "art" in the western sense of the term for they are not spontaneous creations; rather, the stylized designs created during the ceremonies are strictly prescribed and they are always destroyed at the end of the ritual.

Commercial sandpaintings by contrast are secular objects made by the Navajo for sale in the international market as luxury items in the form of fine art, decorative art, and souvenirs. The permanent paintings are made of pulverized dry materials which are glued onto a sand-covered wood backing. They are made by laymen and are not bought or used by the Navajo.
The production of sandpaintings is an industry—a way of making a living in a situation where earlier economic pursuits are no longer feasible and few other viable economic alternatives exist. Commercial sandpaintings are a recent development, the result of technological innovations by Anglo-American artists and a Navajo singer in the 1930s and 1940s which began to spread among the Navajo only after 1960. Since then sandpainting as a craft and an art has been sold nationwide, and the market in the 1970s has expanded and diversified quite rapidly due to increasing consumer demands and the marketing efforts of painters and Anglo wholesalers. Sandpainting has become an economic success, a widely appreciated art form, one which has allowed its artisans to rise above the level of extreme poverty.

By a complex but traceable process, Navajo sandpaintings changed from an exclusively ephemeral sacred form to a permanent decorative art. This was a process which involved two basic steps: one, commercialization; and two, secularization. Commercialization is defined here as the process by which art or material culture used primarily for social, political, religious or aesthetic purposes is transformed into objects made intentionally to market as part of an economic transaction. The new art is called commercial art to distinguish it from its traditional form which is the one which has been handed down from generation to generation and recognized widely within the culture. Any commercial art form may serve secondary functions, be it aesthetic or social, but like farming, working in a factory, or teaching school, its production is primarily an occupation. The term commercial art in this book is distinguished, therefore, from its more common usage as art used in advertising, industry, and the like. Commercial art is understood here as art produced in order to make a living; it carries no derogatory connotation of being inferior or mass produced. Commercial is used in the sense of buying and selling goods, regardless of quality. The commercialization of sandpaintings involved solving technical problems such as finding a way to permanently glue colored sands to sands, developing a market, and training artisans.
The second major process was secularization or the shifting of sandpaintings conceptually from the sacred to the secular domain. This process was not one of total displacement of religious sandpaintings by the new secular sandpaintings, but one of a separation and a diversification of forms and functions. Other Navajo crafts which are currently sold to Anglo-Americans, such as weaving and silver jewelry, were always secular items not surrounded by supernatural sanctions against their use in economic contexts. Thus the development of permanent sandpaintings posed problems for the founders of the craft and contemporary sandpainters because there were many Navajo who saw the production and sale of sandpaintings as a sacrilege and threat to the Navajo religious system. Artisans began to develop ways to avoid committing a sacrilege. This involved changing the rules which surrounded the use of sandpaintings.

Of the two processes, secularization began much earlier than commercialization. Sandpaintings were first reproduced outside their ceremonial setting in the 1880s, and at about the same time a few Navajo women began to weave sandpainting designs and isolated sandpainting motifs into rugs. Anthropologists and other scholars made copies of sandpaintings to illustrate books dealing with Navajo religion. Later the paintings themselves became the object of study and were reproduced in order to preserve what was thought to be a dying tradition. By the 1930s, secular and sacred sandpaintings existed, and Navajo singers had developed rationalizations and ways to justify their existence in a manner that separated them from sacred sandpaintings. Yet the process of secularization and religious change generated conflict which is still evident in 1982. The existence of permanent and secular sandpaintings is not tolerated by all Navajos.

Any process of change has implications for the rest of culture, especially if the change throws deeply held beliefs into question and creates conflict. The commercialization of Navajo sandpaintings is a case in point, for by making permanent sandpaintings, Navajos were breaking an important religious taboo. Unless painters no longer believed in their traditional religion, they had to come to grips with their sacrilege and the possible supernatural repercussions of this act. Because of this problem it has been suggested in the literature on arts and crafts that few, if any, sacred artifacts have ever been commercialized and if they were, it was only because traditional religion of the artisans had died out. However, while Navajo religion was changing before the commercialization of Navajo sandpaintings, there is still no indication that it is in danger of extinction, although the idea that Navajo religion was doomed was an important factor convincing Navajo singers to make permanent sandpaintings in the first place. On the contrary, the facts point to the coexistence of a commercial art with its sacred prototype. What can be concluded is that successful commercialization of religious art is more likely to occur in cultures which are pragmatic and receptive to change and whose history has been characterized in other areas by constant attempts at adaptation. This has always been true of Navajo life, but even more so since World War II.

**NAVADO ECONOMIC SYSTEM**

To understand why the Navajos began to more readily accept the secularization of sandpaintings and developed commercial sandpaintings, it is helpful to briefly review Navajo economic history and the role handicrafts have played as an economic option. Navajo economy has changed continually. Navajos have always been receptive to innovations which would enhance their resource base. When the Navajo arrived in the Southwest around A.D. 1500, they were hunters and gatherers, like other Apaches. By borrowing new methods of subsistence from their Pueblo and Spanish neighbors, however, they quickly developed a mixed economy of agriculture and pastoralism. By the early eighteenth century they owned goats, sheep, horses, and cattle. Raids for livestock and "slaves" were a means for the poor to achieve wealth and status. During this period they learned how to make masks, textiles, sandpaintings, prayersticks, and pottery.
According to many myths, sandpaintings were originally made on buckskin, unwounded deerskin, cotton, black or white clouds, sky, or spiderwebs. The Franciscan missionaries (1910:398) found that generally the original paintings were held to be a kind of “sewing” (naskha) composed of five kinds of materials. These were unrolled for the prototype ceremony held in the myth for the protagonist after which they were rolled up and carried home by the deities. But because of the delicacy, value, and sacredness of the sewings, the gods decreed that sandpaintings would be used by Earth People. Other reasons listed in the myths include that the “sewings” might be stolen, soiled, damaged, lost, or quarreled over. Also, paintings might become material possessions that outsiders would be able to steal. Mythological rationales and supernatural proscriptions mandated keeping sandpaintings impermanent. To disobey would bring disaster, blindness, illness, or death to the individual and drought to the tribe.

The Navajo Ceremonial System

Navajo religion integrates all of Navajo culture and encompasses philosophy, medical theory, and psychotherapy. Ritual, the active part of religion, is concerned with healing. Because sickness is an uncontrollable, occasional, and unpredictable event, so are the majority of Navajo curing rituals. There is no organized system of religious services, no fixed ceremonial calendar, and no institutionalized priesthood. However, Navajo ceremonies are conducted by highly trained specialists called hataali, or “singers.” The singer knows all the details of the rituals including chants, prayers, and the myth which justifies these practices, and he supervises the construction of sandpaintings during ceremonies where they are used.

Navajos believe that the universe is an orderly, all-inclusive unity of interrelated elements and that a principle of reciprocity governs man’s relations with these elements (Wyman 1970b:1). This universe contains both good and evil, which are complementary yet embodied in each other in a complicated duality (Reichard 1944a:4). Evil is the absence of
control which depends upon knowledge; good is that which has been brought under control. Evil can be brought under control by investing it with holiness. Holiness is distinct from both good and evil and refers to some power which has been manipulated. Control is ritual, and by ritual, such as the ritual of constructing a sandpainting, one can attain a desired condition summarized by the word hózhó. Hózhó can be inadequately translated as beautiful, harmonious, blessed, pleasant, satisfying, for it summarizes the idea of the controlled integration of all forces, both good and evil, natural and supernatural, into a harmonious world. Reichard (1963:35) states it in similar fashion:

One purpose of ritual is to extend the personality so as to bring it into harmonious relation with the powers of the universe. The opposite of this endeavor, actually another aspect of it, is to keep a man from contact with evil.

Thus ritual is at the same time curative and preventive. All illness is caused by improper contact with inherently dangerous powers, breach of a taboo, excess, or misfortune and results in disharmony and departures from the normal order of the universe. Harmony, balance and order are restored through the use of knowledge and the correct performance of orderly procedures in a controlled ritual environment (Reichard 1963:11). Recovery occurs through sympathetic magic.

Navajo ritual is subsumed in a highly complex, fluid system of various kinds of song ceremonies (including curing chants), of divination rites, prayer ceremonies and other minor rites (see Wyman and Kluckhohn 1938:36 and Reichard 1963). Sandpaintings are used in most Navajo rites, but are best known in song ceremonials which are rituals in which a rattle is used, accompanied by singing (Haile 1938:639). Song ceremonials include Blessingway rites, which are prophylactic rather than curative, and curing ceremonies. Blessingway ceremonies utilize sandpaintings, but those that are made correspond to Puebloan meal paintings consisting of small, simple but colorful designs made in vegetal materials as well as pulverized minerals. Curing ceremonials include Lifeway ceremonies, performed following an accident, Evilway chants that deal with improper contact with ghosts or witches and aims for the expulsion of evil, and Holyway chants that correct problems resulting from improper contact with supernatural forces and excess, while protecting against future misfortune. While Holyway chants all utilize sandpaintings, Lifeway chants do not and Evilway chants only rarely do.

Each Holyway chant is a framework for coordinating the various details of dogma and has a name and an origin legend (Reichard 1963:xxxiv). It is a complex of individual ceremonies or rites, each of which has a separate function. Some are fixed, appearing in every chant, while others are supplementary. Although each chant varies in detail, a basic five-night ritual consists of ten to twelve standard ceremonies (see Wyman 1970a: or Haile, Oakes and Wyman 1957). These are divided into two main sections: purification and dispelling of evil; and attraction of goodness, strength and power. Each section is accompanied by night chanting. It is during the second section that sandpaintings are made.

A curing ceremony is sponsored by the patient and his or her kinsmen. Their help involves securing the services of the singer, paying his "fee," securing gifts for his assistants, and feeding all who attend the ceremony. For large chants this may run to a thousand or more people and expenses are great. Depending on the type of ceremony, expenses vary from twenty-five dollars to several thousand (Kluckhohn 1962:97–122). A ceremony must be held in a hogan, usually in the home of the patient or at that of a close matrilineal kinsman. Because of the time and expense, a ceremony is not undertaken lightly. Variation which occurs in a ceremony is due partly to the economic constraints and the ability of the family, the desires of the patient and sponsors, as well as the nature of the specific illness.

Variation can be expected in the performance of chants, because rituals are not permanently recorded and are sporadically performed; there is no organized priesthood and the distances between settlements on the reservation are great. This variation is enhanced by the Navajo belief that it is dangerous for a practitioner to teach everything he knows to his pupil and by the need to avoid wearing out sandpaintings
and other paraphernalia by constant repetition and use. No
singer ever gives two identical performances (Kluckhohn and
Wyman 1940:11). Even with this caveat, similarity and sta-
bility in ceremonies as well as sandpaintings appear to be
remarkable.

How Curing Ceremonies and Sandpaintings Work

Curing works by ritually attacking evil and forcing it under
control, hence yielding to good. The best summary of Navajo
curing comes from Reichard (1963:112–113):

The ritualistic process may be likened to a spiritual osmosis
in which the evil in man and the good of deity penetrate the
ceremonial membrane [sandpainting] in both directions, the
former being neutralized by the latter, but only if the exact
conditions for the interpenetration are fulfilled. One condi-
tion is cleanliness, the ejection of evil so that the place it
occupied may be attractive to good powers. The chanter’s
ultimate goal is to identify the patient with the supernaturals
being invoked. He must become one with them by absorp-
tion, imitation, transformation, substitution, recapitulation,
repetition, commemoration, and concentration.

The purpose of sandpaintings is to allow the pa-
tient to absorb the powers depicted, first by sitting on them,
next by application of parts of deity to corresponding parts
of the patient—foot to foot, knees to knees, hands to hands,
head to head. In some chants parts of the drypainting may
be slept on to give more time for absorption; sleep seems to
aid the process. The chanter applies the bundle items to the
body parts of the gods, then touches parts of the patient’s
body with his own—foot to foot, hand to hand, shoulder
to shoulder in the ceremonial order—and finally with the
bundle equipment; this is an elaborate rite of identification.
The powers, represented by the sandpainting, are conveyed
indirectly by the chanter through the bundle equipment
and his own body to the patient’s, all because the chanter
has obtained power to do this by his knowledge.

The sandpainting can be viewed as the “ceremonial mem-
brane” that allows this transference to take place. Called
irresistibly by their likenesses, the supernaturals impregnate
the painting with their power and strength, curing in exchange
for the offerings of the patient and singer. The rule of reci-
procity governs this exchange.

While most sandpainting compositions are highly
complex, even the portrayal of a single figure of the main
theme is enough to call the supernaturals to the hogan. This
single figure fulfills the functions of the sandpainting cer-
emony, which are therapeutic, invocatory, commemorative,
and symbolic (Haile, Oakes and Wyman 1957:159).

A sandpainting ceremony is performed once in a
two-night sing and successively on the last four days of a five-
or nine-night sing. One painting is made each day during
Holyway ceremonies in order to receive the sun’s blessing.
(For exorcistic chants the paintings are made at night.) A
different design, representative of a group of numerous paint-
ings (Reichard 1963:xxxvi), is used on each occasion. The
choice of the painting depends partly upon the extent of the
singer’s knowledge and power; success of the painting in the
good past; which paintings have been used recently; etiological
factors; and the sex of the patient.

A sandpainting is made only under the direction of the
singer who may or may not actually produce the painting.
Assistants, male relatives of the patient, and any other men in
the community with the requisite artistic skill are likely to
perform the actual construction. Women, however, seldom
help unless they are curers or apprentices. Although women
are not barred from helping, they are usually not welcome in
the hogan until the painting is completed. Anglo female an-
thropologists, however, have helped make sandpaintings. It is
also said that the construction period is dangerous for a Navajo
who has not been the patient in a sing previously (Kluckhohn

At the beginning of the sandpainting ceremony, a
sandpainting set-up is erected in front of the hogan door, while
the hogan is cleaned and the central fire moved to one side.
Next, the floor is covered with clean, riverbed sand and
smoothed with a weaving batten. Colored pigments, that have
been collected by the family sponsoring the ceremonial and
previously ground with a mortar and pestle on the north-
west side of the hogan, are placed in various containers near
the central area. These colored pigments (which include
sandstones, mudstones, charcoal from hard oak, commeal, powdered flower petals, and plant pollens) are trickled through the thumb and flexed forefinger. No adhesive is used because the painting will be destroyed at the end of the ceremony. Although paintings vary in size from a foot in diameter to more than twelve feet square, most are approximately six-by-six feet, or the floor area of the average hogan.

The average size sandpainting requires the labor of three to six men and takes roughly four hours to complete. The more elaborate the composition, the more time it takes, with the most complex requiring as many as forty painters each working ten hours (Reichard 1963:xxxv). Smaller, simpler paintings work, but because power is increased by repetition, larger ones are more effective and, therefore, more desirable. The factors determining size include the amount sponsoring families can afford to spend, the number of available men to make the painting, and finally, the chant in which the painting is used.

Sandpaintings are made freehand, except for the occasional use of a taut string to make guidelines straight and insure that the main figures will be the same size. Extreme coordination and speed are necessary to make a thin, even line. Mistakes will be covered over with clean background sand and the figure begun again. Anyone may criticize in the quest for an error-free ceremony. Unknown mistakes that could be harmful to the makers or invalidate the ceremony are neutralized by a covering prayer from Blessingway.

Construction, placement of figures, composition, and the use of the ritualized artistic designs are strictly prescribed by the Holy People. These rules must be followed exactly in order for the cure to be effective. The same is true for the construction of each figure: when a picture of a Holy Person is made, the entire torso is made first in one color. Then the figure is clothed in a technique called overpainting. Only then is decoration (i.e., masks, headdresses) added. Also, the picture is begun at the center and constructed outward in a sun-wise direction (east to south to west to north). All workers then proceed together following this pattern. Finally the guardian and the paired guardians at the east (see Figs. 1.1 and 1.2) will be constructed last. The only allowable individual deviations are the kilt designs (see Fig. 1.3) and the decoration of the pouch which hangs from the waist of many figures.

Subject matter consists of symbolic representations of powerful supernaturals who are invoked to cure the patient. These may be the etiological factors (for, like can cure like), human-like portrayals of the protagonist of the myth, figures of Holy People, yeis (a special class of Holy People), or various personified beings whom the protagonist met on his or her mythological travels. Holy People (Figs. 1.1–1.3), the most common forms, are depicted as personified plants, animals, anthropomorphic beings, natural or celestial phenomena, mythological creatures, or natural objects, in addition to identifiable deities. Animais and plants are also painted in a naturalistic or semi-stylized form as subsidiary symbols. Location and other important symbols are also shown. While many paintings are illustrations of events occurring in the origin myths, few are actually narrative or realistic.
1.3 Diagram of a typical person: Holy Man from Wyoming. It shows the major body parts and symbols of the person as found in sacred ceremonial sandpaintings. (From Reichard 1939b.

When the painting is completed, the singer inspects it once more. If satisfied that there are no errors, he places the sandpainting set-up around the painting, intones a protecting prayer, and sprinkles the composition with sacred pollen (which becomes powerful medicine) in the specific order of construction, ending with the guardian. The painting is now used immediately.

The patient, generally not present during the construction of the sandpainting, now enters and reconsiders the painting. (Fig. 1.4) He sits on a specified portion facing east. The singer, while praying and singing, applies sand from the figures depicted in the painting to matching parts of the patient’s body, usually from feet to head, right to left. This procedure is repeated four times along with other ritualistic acts.

These procedures have been said to identify the patient with the deities represented in the paintings (Reichard 1963:xxxvii; Wyman 1970b:7). Their supernatural strength and goodness is transferred from the sand via the singer, to the patient. The patient becomes like the Holy People for he has been able to partake of the nature of divinity. As a result, the patient is dangerous to himself and to anyone who is not similarly immune to so much supernatural power. Violations of ceremonial requirements may reinfect the patient or injure anyone who uses his utensils (Wyman and Kluckhohn 1938:14). For these reasons there are restrictions on the patient’s behavior for the four days following the ceremony.

Upon completion of the sand application, the patient leaves, and friends may hastily apply some of the sand to their own bodies.
Kluckhohn and Wyman (1940:100) found that the practice is rare. As the women leave—for it is dangerous for them to see the erasure—the singer erases the painting in the opposite order in which the figures were laid down. The sand is deposited north of the hogan under a lightning-struck tree (Levy, personal communication). Material from each sandpainting forms a separate pile usually placed just north of that deposited on the previous day. Kluckhohn and Wyman (1940:68) suggest that the disposed sand acts as a barrier to the return of evil spirits which have been driven to their home in the north.

As a sacred object containing extremely dangerous power, a sandpainting, like masks or medicine bundles, should be used with respect. It is feared as well as revered (Reichard 1944b:22). The painting never remains in a pristine form unattended for the longer it remains intact, the greater is the possibility that someone will make a mistake in its presence and cause harm. Therefore, sandpaintings should never be made in a permanent form. A layman who made one, especially outside the controllable environment of the ceremonial, and did not have the necessary knowledge and hence power, would be harmed. The paintings would draw the Holy People who, because of the principle of reciprocity, would have to come, but they would be displeased because their rules had been disobeyed and they would bring sickness and possibly death to the offender.

Given their sacred nature, it is not surprising that making sandpaintings in a permanent form and using them for commercial purposes was unpopular. Use in any secular context was in direct opposition to rules governing Navajo religious practices and was interpreted as an affront to deeply held beliefs. Most Navajos were and still are afraid to disobey the Holy People and will not reproduce sandpaintings in any permanent form, particularly those which strive to be exact replicas of ceremonial designs. But Navajo sandpaintings have been made as permanent, secular items for many years; they have been used for a variety of mundane purposes. Beginning in the late 1880s, sandpaintings were reproduced outside their ceremonial context: anthropologists used them to illustrate books and articles on Navajo religion; Navajo weavers incorporated the design motifs in rugs; designers used them to decorate public buildings, fabric, and dishes; and finally, Navajo artists used them as decorative and fine art. By 1920 some types of sandpaintings had shifted to the realm of everyday life. The function of sandpaintings became multiple. This included education, decorative art, historic documentation, aesthetic pleasure, economics and the prevention of culture loss in addition to their religious functions.

The development of secular sandpaintings, however, from sacred ones was often a painful and arduous process. It involved technological innovations, marketing developments, education of potential consumers, increased contact between Navajo and Anglo-American cultures, and last but by no means least, cultural and ideological changes by Navajo artists and singers. This process is not yet completed; as happens when new norms which test beliefs are developed, conflict ensued among the Navajo and disagreement over the boundaries of the new concept of secular and commercial sandpaintings persists.