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NAVAJO AESTHETICS: BEAUTIFYING THE WORLD THROUGH ART

Gary Witherspoon is an anthropologist who studies Navajo society. His books include Navajo Kinship and Marriage and Language and Art in the Navajo Universe. In the following excerpt, he describes the Navajo perspective on beauty, which is seen as a model for living well.

In the Western world, where mind has been separated from body, where man has been extracted from nature, where affect has been divorced from "fact," where the quest for and focus upon the manipulation and accumulation of things has led man to exploit rather than to respect and admire the earth and her web of life, it is not surprising that art would be divorced from the more practical affairs of business and government and the more serious matters of science, philosophy, and theology. In the Navajo world, however, art is not divorced from everyday life, for the creation of beauty and the incorporation of oneself in beauty represent the highest attainment and ultimate destiny of man. Hózhó expresses the Navajo concept of beauty or beautiful conditions. But beauty is not separated from good, from health, from happiness, or from harmony. Beauty—hózhó—is the combination of all these conditions. It is not an abstractable quality of things or a fragment of experience; it is the normal pattern of nature and the most desirable form of experience.

For the Navajo, beauty is not so much in the eye of the beholder as it is in the mind of its creator and in the creator's relationship to the created (that is, the transformed or the organized). The Navajo does not look for beauty; he generates it within himself and projects it onto the universe. The Navajo says shiší hózhó "with me there is beauty," shiší hózhó "in me there is beauty," and shiší hózhó "from me beauty radiates." Beauty is not "out there" in things to be perceived by the perceptive and appreciative viewer; it is a creation of thought. The Navajo experience beauty primarily through expression and creation, not through perception and preservation. Beauty is not so much a perceptual experience as it is a conceptual one.

In the Western world beauty as a quality of things to be perceived is, in essence, static; that is, it is something to be observed and preserved. To the Navajo, however, beauty is an essential condition of man's life and is dynamic. It is not in things so much as it is in the dynamic relationships among things and between man and things. Man experiences beauty by creating it. For the Anglo observer of Navajo sandpaintings, it has always been a source of some bewilderment and frustration that the Navajo "destroy" these sandpaintings in less time than they take to create them. To avoid this overt destruction of beauty and to preserve its artistic value, the Anglo observer always wants to take a photograph of the sandpainting, but the Navajo sees no sense and some danger in that. To the Navajo the artistic or aesthetic value of the sandpainting is found in its creation, not in its preservation. Its ritual value is in its symbolic or representational power and in its use as a vehicle of conceptual expression. For the Navajo, it no longer has any ritual value.

Navajos take little interest in the display or preservation of their works of art, with the exception of silver and turquoise jewelry. They readily sell them to non-Indians who are looking for beauty in things. Traditionally, they put their works of art to practical use in their daily activities. Now it is more practical to sell them for money and buy stainless steel pots and other more durable but less artistic things. This practice offends the purist's view of aesthetics, but it is, in fact, not a depreciation of aesthetic value at all. It is simply based on the idea that beauty is a dynamic experience in conception and expression, not a static quality of things to be perceived and preserved.

With regard to the two different views of art contrasted above, it is not surprising that Navajo society is one of artists (art creators) while Anglo society consists primarily of nonartists who view art (art consumers). The Navajo find it incomprehensible that we have more art critics than we have artists, and more art collectors than we have art creators. Nearly all Navajos are artists and spend a large part of their time in artistic creation. All Navajos are singers, and most Navajos have composed many songs. Traditionally, over 90 percent of all adult women wove rugs and today, despite limited opportunities to learn this art, a majority of Navajo women over thirty still weave. A large number of Navajo men are skilled at silver work and sandpainting. Some women still make pottery and beautifully designed baskets. Teachers in Navajo schools find that nearly all Navajo students take a special interest in and have an unusual proficiency in the graphic arts. Navajos are also very eloquent and often poetic in their use of language.

In white society it is the exceptional and abnormal person that becomes an artist. The artist is usually associated with marginality and nonconformity with regard to the mainstream of society. From this marginal position the artist dedicates himself almost solely to his artistic creations. The nonartist among the Navajo is a rarity. Moreover, Navajo artists integrate their artistic endeavors into their other activities. Living is not a way of art for them, but art is a way of living. Navajo artistic interests and talents are enhanced by, if not derived from, the emphasis on the creative nature of thought and the compulsive power of speech. Art is a nondiscursive form of expression, but it involves many of the same processes of symbolic transformation that are found in discursive symbolism. Professor A. D. Rice has noted that "the essential act of thought is symbolization," and art is as much symbolization as is speech. Art is a symbolic transformation of experience, and,
Navajo culture is not just a food-gathering strategy; it is an artistic way of life. One is admonished to walk in beauty, speak in beauty, act in beauty, sing in beauty, and live in beauty. All things are to be made beautifully, and all activities are to be completed in beauty. The following daily prayer exemplifies the Navajo emphasis on beauty:

With beauty before me, I walk
With beauty behind me, I walk
With beauty above me, I walk
With beauty below me, I walk
From the East beauty has been restored
From the South beauty has been restored
From the West beauty has been restored
From the North beauty has been restored
From the zenith in the sky beauty has been restored
From the nadir of the earth beauty has been restored
From all around me beauty has been restored.

The separation of mind and body—or, in the popular idiom, mind and heart—in Western metaphysics has led aesthetic analysis and interpretation into confusion as to what it is that the artist expresses in his work. Experience is divided into fragments which relate to the intellectual realm, the emotional realm, and the aesthetic realm. A major question, then, is whether a particular art work expresses an "idea," whether it expresses the emotions and feelings of the artist who created it, or whether it expresses nothing in the way of ideas or emotions, and simply possesses significant and aesthetic form, a pure expression of beauty.

In the Navajo world, where mind and matter, thought and expression are inseparably connected, the aesthetic experience—the creation of beauty—is simultaneously intellectual, emotional, moral, aesthetic, and biological. Navajo life and culture are based on a unity of experience, and the goal of Navajo life—the creation, maintenance, and restoration of hózhó—expresses that unity of experience. Hózhó expresses the intellectual concept of order, the emotional state of happiness, the moral notion of good, the biological condition of health and well-being, and the aesthetic dimensions of balance, harmony, and beauty. In Navajo art we find all these concepts, states, and conditions expressed.

As the essence of the Navajo conception of life is movement or motion, and the experience of beauty is dynamic and flowing, characteristic themes found in Navajo art express this emphasis on movement and activity.

A Navajo often counts his wealth in the songs he knows and especially in the songs he has created. A poor Navajo is one who has no songs, for songs enrich one's experiences and beauty one's activities. Songs accompany and enrich both ceremonial and nonceremonial activities. There are riding songs, walking songs, grinding songs, planting songs, growing songs, and harvesting songs. There are songs to greet the sun in the morning and songs to bid it farewell in the evening. There are songs for horses, for sheep, and for various other animal species. There are songs for blessing a hogan and songs for taking a sweat bath. In the past there were even songs for bidding visitors farewell. And, of course, there are songs of love and romance. But the most powerful songs are those that are essential parts of ceremonial and ritual activities. The former type is a means by which Navajos maintain hózhó in their daily life experiences, while the latter type constitutes a means by which Navajos restore hózhó when it has been disrupted.

Professor David McAlister, who has spent over twenty-five years studying Navajo music, says Navajo music is characterized by its vigor, its power, and its a cappella style. It is intense, at times almost "excessive," compared to Pueblo music which is low, controlled, and rehearsed. Navajo music seems to match the cultural emphasis on energy, activity, and motion. There is hardly ever a "held" note, except at the end of a song.

In analyzing the First Snake Song, Professor McAlister finds that one of its chief characteristics is repetition. Repetition is a motif found all through Navajo life and culture. It is associated with the concepts of renewal, regeneration, rejuvenation, revolution, and restoration. Repetition enhances the compulsive power of the song. The repetitive nature of many Navajo songs is adorned with and enlivened by various modes of variation.

In the First Snake Song there is a significant alternation in the kind of melodic activity. This is found between level sections, is based entirely on the tonic, and active sections characterized by rapid and pulsing movement. McAlister considers this to be the quality in Navajo "chanting" that makes the term a misnomer.

The verses of the First Snake Song also exhibit the principle of alternation. Here are found alternating phrases in colors, in sex, in direction, and in jewel symbols. This is a way of presenting pairs of related objects.

McAlister notes that although the First Snake Song is strophic and framed, it is progressive in that the pitch gradually rises from one song to the next. He relates this progression in pitch to a progression in texture, and even in color. The fundamental ideas of the movement is from the immature male to the immature female, from animate snake to inanimate hoop, from "holding," "dangling," "hugging," and "trundling," which starts from the static "holding" and gets progressively more active.

Where Navajo music, singing, and poetry are artistic endeavors common to both men and women, the other two major domains of Navajo aesthetics, weaving and sandpainting, are sexually bifurcated. Weaving is primarily an activity of women, and sandpainting is primarily an activity of men. Some Navajo men weave, but this associates them with the category of nddleldé, "transvestite." Such a person, however, is usually held in high esteem and is not normally the object of ridicule or unkind behavior. Reichard notes that Left-Handed Singer or Newcomb was a man who wove. She states that he was highly respected, and a person of superior intelligence combined with extreme gentleness and remarkable independence. As an accomplished singer or "medicine man," he wove primarily sandpainting tapestries. Sandpainting is exclusively a male activity. Even female singers do not do sandpaintings, but some women may supervise the creation of a sandpainting.

It is relevant to note that the composition and design of Navajo sandpaintings are static; that is, the designs are rigidly established and must be created without significant change or alteration if they are to be an effective part of the particular ritual for which they are used. In contrast, a weaver seldom if ever repeats a design. Each rug woven is designed anew, so designs are always changing, flowing, and moving. Thus the production of design in sandpainting and weaving seems to be appropriately associated with the generically static nature of male-linked endeavors and the dynamic nature of female-linked endeavors.

Before mass-produced retail goods became available to the Navajo, they had to produce their own blankets, garments, and moccasins. Although buckskin and other skins provided the raw materials to satisfy
many of these needs, wool from sheep provided the major source of material for clothing and blankets. However, instead of just producing clothing and blankets to satisfy the pragmatic needs of warmth and protection from the elements, Navajo women turned the production of clothing and blankets into an artistic endeavor. Today, Navajo women weave rugs primarily for the use of non-Indians. Although they sell these rugs for cash, it has been estimated that the average weaver gets less than a quarter an hour for her work. Obviously, then, the motivation to weave is aesthetic as well as economic—probably even primarily aesthetic. Weaving is an effort in creative transformation. Navajo women transform the wool on the back of sheep into beautifully designed and delicately woven rugs. This is done through the processes of shearing, cleaning, dyeing, carding, spinning, and weaving. Additional color is added through vegetable dyes.

Navajo women develop and create designs in their minds, and then project them onto the world of external reality through the act of weaving. The intricate and often complex patterns created by Navajo weavers are generated in the mind and kept there through the whole process from dyeing through weaving. She must know exactly how much dye to use or exactly what amounts of black and white wool to mix in order to get the very exact color combinations and contrasts she has in her mind. . . .

. . . A woven rug is a product of the mind and the body. The inner form of the rug is in the mind; the outer form of the rug is projected onto the loom. . . .

In the patterns found on Navajo rugs, movement and activity are expressed by diagonal and zigzag lines (also associated with lightning), by the active colors of yellow (brown), blue (green), and red (pink), by appendages to various “static” centers, and by diamond shapes. In contrast, a static condition is expressed by straight lines and horizontal and vertical stripes, by squares and rectangles, and by the static colors of white, black, and grey. Motion goes in one of two directions: linear, continuous, incompletely present, or circular, repeated, complete, cyclical motion. In Navajo weaving the former is found in the important and extensive motifs of triangles, squares, and parallelograms, and in the continuous aspect of Navajo weaves, while the latter is found in the less important and repetitive motifs and in the repetitive aspect of Navajo weaves. In addition linear, continuous, and incomplete motion is expressed by the verbal prefix hi which renders the idea of succession, while circular and repetitive actions and movements are expressed by the verbal prefixes ni and ni which express the idea of repetition, rotation, and restoration.

In the language of Navajo weaving, linear, continuous, and incomplete motion is expressed by the successive alternation of static and active symbols—colors, lines, and designs. Linear movement thus follows the pattern or series of static-active-static-active. Circular and cyclical movement is expressed by the sequence already noted—static-active-active-static-active. This pattern is found in the sequence of color, direction, and growth, and in the daily and annual path of the sun. It is sunwise movement. There is also an opposite sequence, usually associated with witchcraft and its cure, but also associated with protection and faith. This is the static-active-static-active pattern. The former type of cyclical movement is mainly found in Navajo weaving where control and normality are emphasized, whereas the latter type of cyclical movement is often found in Navajo weaving and other art forms where creativity and activity are emphasized.

Navajo sandpainting is a male-linked art form that accompanies most major Navajo ceremonial activities. The designs are established parts of the ritual and must not be significantly altered if the ritual is to be effective. These designs are made on the earthen floor of the hogan. The surface upon which the painting is made is cleaned and smoothed. The designs vary from a few inches to more than twenty feet in diameter, with most paintings averaging from three to six feet in diameter. The painting is done by letting dry pigments trickle through the thumb and index finger. The dry pigments are made primarily from red, yellow, and white sandstone and various mixtures of these colors, but pigments made from colored corn meal, plant pollen, crushed flower petals, and charcoal are also used.

The sandpaintings are made by several men under the direction of the chanter or medicine man. Just as Reichard learned to weave, on many occasions I have enjoyed the opportunity to help create a sandpainting.

The sandpaintings depict the Diny Dinéé and other sacred entities. They reveal significant moments of mythological drama. The mythical dramas revolve around a cultural hero’s unfortunate plight and disastrous condition, and his or her ultimate cure through identification with, and sometimes compulsive control of, a deity or deities. Disease is caused by some sort of disruption in the proper and normal order of things and is cured by a ritual similar to an obligation order. If the patient or his or her plight is identified with the cultural hero who contracted a similar disease or plight in the same way the patient did. In the curing ritual the patient follows in the footsteps of the hero of the myth, sings the songs he or she sang, prays the prayers he or she prayed, and ultimately acquires and exerts the power to restore health and order to his or her self and world that the hero acquired and exerted.

The myth, retold in the songs and prayers of the ritual, places the patient’s illness in a cultural context where it can be understood and eventually cured. From the myth the patient learns that his or her plight and illness is not new, and that both its cause and treatment are known. To be cured, all the patient has to do is to repeat what has been done before. It has to be done sincerely, however, and this sincerity is expressed in concentration and dedication. The sandpainting depicts the destiny of things and places the patient in this beautiful and ordered world. The patient thus becomes completely identified with the powerful and curing agents of the universe. The patient undresses to the extent modesty permits (men to a G-string and women to a skirt) and sits on the painting. Where appropriate and possible the patient’s body parts—feet, knees, legs, etc.—are placed on the corresponding body parts of the deity with whom the patient is identified. In addition, the medicine man applies sand from the body parts of the depicted deity to corresponding body parts of the patient’s body. Spectators and family members may also apply the sand to corresponding parts of their bodies as well. This is done for sanctification, blessing, and protection.

After the sandpainting has fulfilled its aesthetic and ritual purpose, the sand is carefully collected and deposited at some out-of-the-way place on the north. The symbolic representation of various sacred beings and things is considered to be effective in attracting them to the ceremonial hogan and thus enabling the patient to absorb their curative power.

Notwithstanding the important ritual functions of the sandpaintings, they also have great aesthetic appeal to Navajos. The painters have a special interest and pride in the quality of their work, and many men travel from ceremony to ceremony primarily to participate in the art forms—singing, poetry, drama, and painting—of the ritual. The ceremonies are actually a symphony of the arts that have great aesthetic appeal to Navajo participants and spectators. Where else can one go and participate in a symphony of the arts while simultaneously
being physically, morally, and intellectually sanctified and blessed?

The aesthetic appeal of the forms and designs of sandpaintings is also demonstrated in their extensive use in other Navajo art forms. This is particularly true in weaving where many designs and forms are taken from sandpaintings. These designs, however, also appear in Navajo silver work and in the oil paintings and drawings of contemporary Navajo artists. Such replications of these sacred designs and forms are potentially dangerous to their creators, and many purists among the Navajos deplore this secularization and profanation of sacred forms and symbols. Nevertheless, the aesthetic appeal of these designs and forms seems to have, in many cases, overridden the fear of the dangers inherent in the secular use of sacred forms. As elsewhere in Navajo culture, movement, repetition, balance and harmony, and controlled or restrained emotion and force are dominant themes in Navajo sandpaintings...

Navajo art thus expresses Navajo experiences, and Navajo experiences are mediated by the concepts of and orientations to the world found in Navajo language and culture. All experiences are directed toward the ideals of hózhó, and hózhó is the intellectual, moral, biological, emotional, and aesthetic experience of beauty. A Navajo experiences beauty most poignantly in creating it and in expressing it, not in observing it or preserving it. The experience of beauty is dynamic; it flows to one and from one; it is found not in things, but in relationships among things. Beauty is not to be preserved but to be continually renewed in oneself and experienced in one's daily life and activities. To contribute to and be a part of this universal hózhó is both man's special blessing and his ultimate destiny.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do the aesthetic values of any of the cultures considered in this chapter resemble values that are present, but not especially emphasized, in the West? Explain.
2. Are the aesthetic values of any of the cultures considered in this chapter contrary to any of the traditional aesthetic values of the West? Explain.
3. Do any of the non-Western aesthetic values considered in this chapter resemble values that Western critics of their own tradition propose as alternatives? Explain.
4. Do you think that our society's aesthetic values mirror other values of our society? If so, how?
5. Can you think of examples of Western art that make use of motifs and ideas from non-Western art? In each case (if so), how closely do you think the artist reflected the aesthetic values of the culture from which he or she borrowed these non-Western elements? What evidence would you use to justify your judgment?

FURTHER READING


