

ECONOMIC ASPECTS OF NAVAJO SANDPAINTINGS

Nancy J. Parezo

Introduction

Permanent sandpaintings, pictures of pulverized colored sands glued onto particle board, are made by the Navajo Indians of the American Southwest, specifically for sale to non-native consumers. This art form has experienced a widespread growth since 1958. By 1965 its production had become an important source of income for at least one community, Sheep Springs, New Mexico, as well as for many other individuals both on and off the reservation. Today almost 500 makers can be identified and while the industry is not yet comparable in size to weaving or silver-smithing it is by no means negligible. Why has the spread of this craft-art been so rapid and widespread? The following paper will begin to analyze some of the reasons for the craft's success.

Motivating factors for beginning to paint should be especially evident because the development of sandpaintings from their traditional prototype involved a functional transition from the sacred realm to the secular. While little has been written about these specific transitions when native art forms are commercialized, they are by no means unique. Zuni fetishes, Hopi kachina rattles, Northwest Coast masks, Iroquois false-face masks, as well as various ceremonial containers, and parts of ceremonial costumes are manufactured specifically for sale to non-natives. At times this commercialization is opposed by native community members who feel it is a breach of taboo. It is assumed that if such is the case, there must be good reasons for the artist to break taboos and possibly incur supernatural wrath. An analysis of the motivating factors leading to the commercialization of Navajo sandpaintings should give some insight as to why native peoples selectively commercialize forms of their sacred art.

Traditional Use

Most major forms of commercial art made by the Navajo today, such as rugs and jewelry, were originally used for secular purposes. Traditional sandpaintings were, and still are, a form of religious art; they are not made as "art" in the western sense of the word. They are an essential part of Navajo curing ceremonies. As Reichard states,

Paper presented in the symposium on the Commercialization of Indigenous Arts, the 78th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Cincinnati, Ohio, November 30, 1979. I would like to thank Drs. Jerrold Levy, James Neely, and Eric Henderson for critical readings of this paper. Funding for this research was given by the Weatherhead Foundation, School of American Research, Museum of Northern Arizona, and the University of Arizona.

"To the Navaho, it [a sandpainting] has become a useful thing, something beyond the purely ornamental. It represents the presence and assistance of deity, and until the sand has been gathered up in a sack and ritually disposed of, it is feared as well as revered."
(Reichard 1944:22)

Sandpaintings are to be made only in the context of a curing ceremony under the direction of a highly trained religious specialist, a hataathli (or singer). The pictures contain symbolic representations of powerful supernaturals who are invoked to cure. They are a type of "ceremonial membrane" through which 'evil' can be dispelled and 'power' absorbed (Reichard 1950:111-112). When completed and consecrated they are filled with the dangerous but beneficial power of the supernaturals. This power is then transferred into the patient via the singer. The painting is destroyed at the end of the ceremony when its functions have been completed.

Sandpaintings are surrounded by a number of supernaturally sanctioned taboos. These include rules against rendering the paintings in a permanent form or using them outside the ritually controllable context of the ceremonial. To do so is dangerous because the supernaturals will be called by their likeness, angered by the misuse of sacred designs. The result will be illness, blindness, or death for the maker and drought and destruction for the tribe. Thus, the making of permanent sandpaintings for any purpose is considered a sacrilege by many Navajos.

Because the traditional paintings are so powerful, and the supernatural sanctions so dire, Navajos must have had powerful reasons for commercializing sandpaintings. Witherspoon has been the only scholar to address this question. He states "The aesthetic appeal of these designs and forms seem to have, in many cases, overridden the fear of the dangers inherent in the secular use of sacred forms" (Witherspoon 1977:169). Other reasons come readily to mind. One is economic, that is, a need to earn a living when the traditional economic base is no longer feasible. Another is the general nature of social change on the Navajo reservation and the influences of a politically dominant foreign culture, particularly in the area of religion. Few young men are becoming singers so that there is a lower ratio of hataathli to unknowledgeable tribal members. Missionizing activities and education in boarding schools away from the family have also resulted in a general decline in knowledge about the traditional religion. All of these factors could have been primary motives for the commercialization of this form of Navajo sacred art. This paper will discuss the evidence for two of these motives - economics and the desire to preserve traditional Navajo culture.

Early History

Permanent sandpaintings are, in a sense, the culmination of the commercialization of traditional sandpaintings. Decontextualization began years before. Around the turn of the century, singers began to demonstrate

sandpainting techniques, weave sandpainting designs into rugs, and produce copies of sandpaintings in watercolors, ink and crayon on brown wrapping paper for anthropologists, traders, and interested laymen. All were paid for these services, often quite handsomely. Sandpainting rugs commanded hundreds of dollars, double and triple the price of contemporary rugs with non-religious designs. But these payments, while important as a source of income, were (with the exception of some of the rugs) still a minor consideration and were within the context of traditional Navajo culture. A Navajo singer was always paid a "fee" whenever he conducted a ceremony just as the Holy People were given a gift or offering in exchange for their help in curing. Without the fee the ceremony would be ineffective. The same was true whenever a singer taught another his chants. An apprentice had to pay for this transference of knowledge in order for the knowledge to become his own (Aberle 1967). Thus the singers who were demonstrating and making reproductions of sandpaintings were viewing the Anglos as their students (Reichard 1939) and the economic remunerations were well within Navajo tradition.

While not belittling these economic returns, the primary reason men gave for producing sandpainting designs in a permanent form was a concern for their ethnic and religious heritage (Reichard 1936, 1939; Newcomb and Reichard 1937; Newcomb 1964). Singers were the keepers of this religious heritage which was so complex that no one knew the entire system (Reichard 1950). These men felt, or had been convinced by Anglos, that Navajo culture was slowly dying. Many did not have apprentices and it appeared that the ceremonies in which they specialized would die out, as indeed some have (Kluckhohn and Wyman 1940). Therefore, they reproduced sandpaintings, in the media available at the time, in order to preserve their culture and religious beliefs for future generations - to make sure that that which the supernaturals had given man would not be forgotten (Reichard 1936, 1939; Newcomb 1964).

Economic Context of the 1950s

The economic and social context of the reservation in the 1950s had changed from the early 1900s when decontextualization began. In the 1950s the Navajo economy was depressed. Overgrazing and stock reduction from the 1930s onward had rendered the traditional subsistence base unfeasible. Aberle (1966:94-101) found that none of the families interviewed in Mexican Springs had a minimum number of stock units necessary to form a subsistence herd. There was a high ratio of unemployment and the reservation itself was characterized as underdeveloped (Aberle 1969: 236-237). Many individuals went off-reservation to find wage employment.

In response to this situation the Navajo extended family relied on a variety of income sources, which included a minimal number of sheep, seasonal wage labor, and government assistance. The diversity was important. Aberle has made this point succinctly.

"... in a typical extended family -
parents, some of their children (usually
daughters) and their mates, and their

children's children - multiple economic dependencies are the rule: Livestock, farming, weaving, part-time off-reservation work, and welfare are frequently found as income and subsistence sources in the same unit. No one of these can be relinquished - that is, efficient specialization is impossible - because none is certain and none is sufficient."

(Aberle 1969:245)

Arts and crafts sold to non-natives had played an important part in this mixed economic strategy at least since the turn of the century. Silversmithing and weaving were most evident (Adair 1944; Bedinger 1974; Amsden 1949; Kent 1961, 1976) but other crafts have surfaced, flourished and sometimes died. Leatherwork is almost nonexistent today while pottery-making is enjoying a limited revival on the western portion of the reservation. Dolls, baskets, beadwork, god's eyes, and easel art are also made. Each adds necessary supplemental income. A new craft, such as permanent sandpaintings, fits into this existing structure.

Social Context of the 1950s

The eastern portion of the Navajo reservation has had somewhat longer and more intense contact with Anglos than has its western counterpart (Henderson and Levy 1975:114). Off-reservation towns are fairly accessible, and becoming more so with transportation improvements and better roads. Familiarity with Anglo customs and life styles is increasing and formalized education is becoming more widespread and intensified. The number of people who speak English is increasing as well (Young 1961: 473-79). Simultaneously there has been an increase in non-traditional religious movements since the 1930s, the Native American Church and many Christian denominations have gained adherents, not the least of these are revivalist sects (Aberle 1966). Callaway, Levy, and Henderson (1976: Table 9) have presented figures for religious membership in the Lake Powell research area. Varying by region and sex, approximately 25-50% of Navajo respondents have an affiliation to a Christian church. While there are no figures on traditional religious participation, it is generally felt that the number of ceremonies held each year is becoming fewer, and that those which are held are shorter in length (Kluckhohn and Wyman 1940). In short, Navajo communities are becoming religiously heterogeneous so that religious alternatives exist. The stress on Navajo individualism (Reichard 1950) and tolerance for the right to individual choice is evident here, as is the basic difference from Puebloan cultures where dissidents are ejected from the community (Dozier 1970).

Motivations for Making Permanent Sandpaintings: Early Painters

Permanent sandpaintings have been made by Anglos since the 1930s. But the Navajos, for whatever reason did not utilize available technologies until Fred Stevens, Jr., originally from Sheep Springs, New Mexico, and

Luther A. Douglas, an Anglo artist, discovered an adequate adhesive and backing material in the 1950s. Steven's stated reason for developing permanent sandpaintings was similar to that of early demonstrators. As a Nightway and Blessingway singer, he wanted to preserve sandpaintings for future generations and also teach non-Navajos about Navajo religion. A few early painters (those starting before 1970) also expressed similar feelings. For example, one man, who used to be a singer, but who has since converted to a Christian fundamentalist sect, feels that much of what has been written about Navajo religion is incorrect. One of the reasons he makes permanent sandpaintings is to teach buyers about Navajo thought. Another woman, feels that her occupation, making sandpaintings, is also, if one may use the word, a "mission" in life. Meticulous in her work, she depicts the figures as exactly as possible. She prays to the Holy People each day before beginning to paint; and also intones a prayer upon completion of each painting, telling the Holy People that she had made their likeness, not out of disrespect, but in order to bless the homes in which they will hang. Another goal, similar but more general, expresses "Indianness" rather than religious heritage. One painter, tries to depict, through abstract non-traditional designs and symbols, the essence or spirit of his religious beliefs and what it means to be a "Navajo."

For the first innovators and a few later painters, religious motivations and concern for their ethnic heritage are important. But all are also full-time painters. Most of their income depends on this source. While telling one how beneficial these paintings are to tribal heritage they are also quick to point out that the paintings make beautiful wall decorations and that they are inexpensive when compared to other forms of art. Not one would continue to paint if he or she did not make money from the craft.

For Stevens too, economic considerations were important. In 1946 he became a professional sandpainting demonstrator. While working for a craft store in Tucson during the 1950s, people expressed interest in the paintings he was making, wishing they could take copies home. This demand from potential customers, in conjunction with the reasons given above, led Stevens to develop a permanent technique. Stevens taught his brother and sister, who were residing in Sheep Springs, the technique in 1962. One was an oil painter of some fame and the other had a small herd of sheep (under 50 head). Both used sandpaintings to supplement their incomes. Next to learn were a group of men and women who either had small herds of sheep and/or held occasional semi-skilled jobs off-reservation, usually seasonal migrant labor. Only one member of this group had finished high school. These people, now in their mid 40s and 50s, stated that they did not want to live off the reservation for any period of time. Some had tried but had been unable to cope with Anglo-American life styles without the support of their relatives.

To these men and women sandpaintings presented an excellent way to supplement income from traditional sources or occasional wage labor. For some it soon formed the basis of their income as it had for Stevens. They could live at home and still earn a good living. For example, one man earned \$3000 his first year (1964), making sandpaintings while herding

sheep. Another, who moved to Shiprock, began painting in 1963. He was given at least \$10,000 his first year from one trader alone, and has been earning between \$10,000 and \$20,000 per year ever since.

At the same time painters overcame their religious doubts by rationalizing the breaking of religious taboos. By intentionally making the paintings imperfect or incomplete they became secular or neutral items. They could not call the supernaturals to become impregnated with power, and hence dangerous. The commercial paintings were conceptually not the same as the sacred paintings. This rationalization, while not completely eliminating community opposition did allow sandpainters to continue production. Another observation that helped was the fact that earlier demonstrators and weavers did not become ill and die from these practices.

Contemporary Painters and their Motivations

Economic considerations are an important factor in the decision of contemporary sandpainters (those currently drawing) to begin and continue producing sandpaintings. Seventy-seven painters were interviewed of whom sixty-six began after 1967. All of these latter men and women began painting because they saw a relative or neighbor making money from the craft. Only when more lucrative jobs are found or people tire of painting do they quit. Many start and stop, switch from full-time to part-time painting and back again. Some paint only in the winter holding down construction jobs in the summer. Some combine painting with traditional occupations, such as herding. Some see painting as a paying hobby. This type of production is much like that of weaving and jewelry making and is consistent with Aberle's description of Navajo economic adaptation. It is important for individuals who do not want (or are unable) to compete in the Anglo world and those who do not want to reside off-reservation yet who still must earn a living. It is a good choice in an area where there are few economic options.

Commercial sandpainters are able to earn a good deal of money from the craft even though the market is flexible. (Table 1 summarizes income levels for 1976). The mean income derived from sandpaintings for those interviewed was \$6845 before expenses.¹ The range was \$350 to \$60,000, the median roughly being \$2,500. Full-time painters, of course, earned more than part-time painters; the mean income for full-time painters was \$9659 and for part-time, \$3307. Men and women appear in all income groups. There is a good deal of variation among painters since the quantity of paintings produced by individuals varies each year. But even so the production of sandpaintings-on-boards can be a lucrative occupation or a profitable hobby and income supplement.

Sandpaintings also have other economic advantages. Materials are readily available and inexpensive, consisting of dry pigments, glue, and particle board. Sandstones and most other dry pigments can be picked up on the reservation or adjoining parts of Colorado, New Mexico, and Arizona without cost. Most rock hunting trips are combined with selling trips thus cutting down on the cost of gasoline. A few colors such as blue

Table 1. Income Levels for Contemporary Sandpainters for 1976
(those Navajo sandpainters painting in 1977 and 1978)

<u>INCOME LEVEL</u>	<u>FULL-TIME PAINTER</u>		<u>PART-TIME PAINTER</u>		<u>TOTAL</u>
	N	%	N	%	N
less than \$500	-	-	12	33.3	12
\$501 - \$1000	-	-	7	19.4	7
\$1001 - \$5000	12	27.9	10	27.8	22
\$5001 - \$10,000	9	20.9	3	8.3	12
\$10,001 - \$15,000	15	34.9	3	8.3	18
\$15,001 or more	<u>7</u>	16.3	<u>1</u>	2.8	<u>8</u>
Totals	43		36		79

which comes from turquoise have to be traded from Globe, Arizona or Albuquerque, New Mexico. A few painters now buy dyed sands and carborundum grit (black) from hardware stores and hobby shops in adjacent towns. The largest expenses are the adhesive, varnish, and backing material, which costs \$4 for a large bottle of white glue and \$7 for a 48" by 48" sheet of particle board. No expensive equipment is needed. Each painter's expenses vary, but as a typical example, it costs a painter between \$30 and \$40 to produce 100 6" by 12" paintings. These would be sold minimally (amount given to painter - below wholesale) for \$400. Table 2 presents some standardized sizes and a minimum cost to produce sandpaintings. Sandpaintings, like many crafts, require more of an investment of labor than materials or tools. The material investment is certainly much lower than for either weaving or silversmithing.

Finally, sandpainting is easy to learn. It is possible to produce a minimally passable painting without a great deal of effort or practice. All sandpainters stated that every painting produced, even their first crude efforts, have sold. Of course, the finest paintings, which can be considered art by Anglo-American standards, do represent a great deal of work, patience, concentration, and control. Some men and women spend a great deal of time on each composition working on only two to ten paintings in a two or three week period. Great care is taken to produce consistently fine-grained sand particle size, correctly place figures, and draw thin, straight lines. Attention is given to detail and decoration, as well as a pleasing juxtaposition of colors.

Marketing

Permanent sandpaintings exhibit a continuum of time, labor, and skill - from meticulously fine hand-work of high artistic quality to mass-produced souvenir art. The differentiation into various markets had followed the rapid rise in popularity of Indian arts and crafts in the national luxury item market since 1969. As rugs and silver jewelry rose rapidly in price they left a vacuum in terms of medium and low cost goods which the minor crafts strove to fill. Permanent sandpaintings, with the encouragement of storeowners, partially filled this gap, proving especially suited for tourist souvenirs. They were inexpensive, transportable, durable and attractive. While customers did not understand the symbolism they could easily recognize the designs as "Indian:" in short, sandpaintings sold because they looked like "Indian art."

The production of sandpaintings can be differentiated into three basic levels: 1) a fine commercial-art market (using Graburn's terminology 1976); 2) home decoration-gifts market; and 3) souvenirs. The souvenir market consists of small, inexpensive paintings costing \$3.50 to \$12.00. Painters mass produce these paintings and can make up to 50 or 60 3" by 5" or 4" by 6" paintings a day if they choose. Designs are highly stylized and standardized due to the use of stencils for main figures. Decoration is minimal and rapidly drawn. Colors are few. In fact, slight changes in color are the only distinguishing characteristic of these often denuded paintings. Slightly over 100 individuals make simple souvenir paintings almost exclusively.

Table 2. Cost of Producing Sandpaintings

TYPICAL SIZES	PRICE OF CUT BOARD	PRICE PER HUNDRED	MINIMUM PRICE FOR GLUE	COST OF VARNISH	MINIMUM COST TO PRODUCE	COST ADDING 25%	MINIMUM GIVEN TO PAINTERS*	MINIMUM AMOUNT OF "PROFIT"***	MINIMUM AMOUNT OF PROFIT***
3 x 6	\$0.10	\$10.00	\$4.00	\$1.50	\$15.50	\$19.38	\$150.00	\$134.50	\$130.62
4 x 8	.15	15.00	6.00	1.50	22.50	28.13	200.00	177.50	171.87
5 x 9	.20	20.00	6.00	1.50	27.50	34.38	250.00	222.50	215.62
6 x 6	.15	15.00	6.00	1.50	22.50	28.13	250.00	227.50	221.87
6 x 12	.20	20.00	8.00	3.00	31.00	38.75	400.00	369.00	361.25
12 x 12	.35	35.00	10.00	4.50	49.50	61.88	800.00	750.50	738.12
8 x 16	.35	35.00	10.00	4.50	49.50	61.88	800.00	750.50	738.12
13 x 13	.40	40.00	12.00	4.50	56.50	70.63	1000.00	943.50	929.37
16 x 16	.60	60.00	16.00	6.00	82.00	102.50	1500.00	1418.00	1397.50
12 x 24	.65	65.00	16.00	6.00	87.00	108.75	2000.00	1913.00	1891.25
24 x 24	1.20	120.00	32.00	12.00	164.00	205.00	3000.00	2836.00	2795.00

* Minimum which would be given to painters by a jobber. Using the lowest average price structure.

** Profit using the minimum production costs.

*** Profit using the higher production costs. Neither includes overhead, or labor costs.

At the other extreme is the fine commercial art market. This includes large, highly decorated reproductions of ceremonial sandpaintings (including conscious changes), as well as other art designs and motifs, using sand as its medium. These paintings tend to be large (16" by 16" and up) and sell for at least \$150, and often for as much as \$3000. It takes painters from one day to three weeks to make each painting. Approximately 25 individuals in six extended families concentrate on this market. With one or two exceptions these are the earliest painters and their offspring.

The rest, approximately three-fourths of the sandpainters, tend to concentrate on the gift-home decoration market. These paintings are designed to complement a Southwestern decor and emphasize muted colors and traditional designs. Lately non-traditional designs are also being made. Gift paintings are usually 12" by 12" or 8" by 16" in size, with varying degrees of decoration and usually sell for between \$20 and \$125. While designs are still standardized there is more variation than in the souvenir paintings. Many have a great deal of decoration. Five to ten paintings in various medium sizes, usually those mentioned above or 6" by 12" are made a day.

It should be emphasized that while the market tends to divide into these three subgroups, the boundaries are fuzzy. Many people will occasionally produce for all three markets. But most people and family groups tend to concentrate on one market and to sell to the same stores, year after year, reflecting the types of merchandise sold there. Overall, this market for sandpaintings, while it does not yet compete with silver or weaving is still extensive. Even though it is flexible and sporadic, it has been steadily increasing, rising sharply since 1970. Retailers have estimated that the annual retail value of permanent sandpaintings is between \$500,000 and \$750,000, excluding paintings that are commissioned or retailed directly to customers. No one knows the industry's true extent but it is probably close to one million dollars retail value annually since 1975.

Summary

A desire for Anglo produced goods and services, a need to earn a living and a desire to live at home amid relatives and friends were the primary motivating factors for contemporary Navajo commercial sandpainters. If it were not for the money this craft generates these painters would cease production. This includes painters who produce for all three markets delineated above. The production of permanent sandpaintings is an industry, like weaving, silversmithing, house construction or teaching. It is an alternate form of employment, providing full or supplemental income to many Navajo households.

But for a few individuals, primarily the founder of the craft and early painters, making permanent sandpaintings is more than an occupation. While the money earned from sandpaintings is important, their production is also a means of preserving Navajo religious tradition and heritage. It is a means to express ethnic identity, in secular form, in a period when

this identity and heritage is thought to be in peril. Both types of rationale must be recognized in order to understand the development of Navajo sandpaintings-on-boards.

Footnote

¹ Because of the difficulty in estimating expenses it was not attempted to get an income figure closer to reality. All figures on income are before expenses.

Sources Cited

Aberle, David

1966 The Peyote Religion Among the Navajos. Aldine Press, Chicago.

1967 The Navajo Singer's Fee: Payment or Prestation. in Studies in Southwest Ethnolinguistics ed. by Dell Hymes and W.E. Bittle. Mouton, The Hague.

1969 A Plan for Navajo Economic Development. in Toward Economic Development for Native American Communities. A Compendium of Papers submitted to the Subcommittee on Economy in Government 91st Congress, 1st session. (vol. I. Development Prospects and Problems). Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C.

Adair, John

1944 Navaho and Pueblo Silversmiths. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.

Amsden, Charles

1949 Navaho Weaving: its Technic and History. The Fine Arts Press, Santa Ana. (originally 1934).

Bedinger, M.

1974 Indian Silver: Navajo and Pueblo Jewelers. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque.

Callaway, Donald, Jerrold Levy and Eric Henderson

1976 The Effect of Power Production and Strip Mining on Local Navajo Populations. Lake Powell Research Project Bulletin #22. Institute of Geophysics and Planetary Physics, University of California, Los Angeles.

Henderson, Eric and Jerrold Levy

1975 Survey of Navajo Community Studies, 1936-1974. Lake Powell Research Bulletin #6. Institute of Geophysics and Planetary Physics, University of California, Los Angeles.

Kent, Kate Peck

1961 The Story of Navajo Weaving. The Heard Museum of Anthropology and Primitive Art, Phoenix.

1976 Pueblo and Navajo Weaving Traditions and the Western World. in Tourist and Ethnic Arts: Cultural Expressions from the Fourth World ed. by Nelson H.H. Graburn. University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles.

Kluckhohn, Clyde and Leland C. Wyman

1940 An Introduction to Navajo Chant Practice. Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association #53. Menasha, Wisconsin.

Newcomb, Franc J.

1964 Hosteen Klah. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.

and Gladys Reichard

1937 Sandpaintings of the Navaho Shooting Chant. J.J. Augustin, New York.

Reichard, Gladys

1936 Navaho Shepherd and Weaver. J.J. Augustin, New York.

1939 Navaho Medicine Man: Miguelito. J.J. Augustin, New York.

1944 Prayer: the Compulsive Word. Monographs of the American Ethnological Society #7. J.J. Augustin, New York.

1950 Navajo Religion: A Study of Symbolism. Bollingen Series, vol. XVIII. J.J. Augustin, New York.

Witherspoon, Gary

1977 Language and Art in the Navajo Universe. University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor.

Young, Robert W.

1961 The Navajo Yearbook. Navajo Agency, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Window Rock.