

NAVAJO TRADITIONS IN THE WORKS OF DAVID K. JOHN

By

Marinella Lentis

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This thesis has been approved on the date shown below:

Nancy J. Parezo
Professor of American Indian Studies

April 12, 2006
Date

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the role of traditions in the works of contemporary Navajo artist David K. John and demonstrates that art is used as a modern instrument of storytelling, to pass to the next generations, traditions of Navajo culture. John, a commercially successful artist especially known in the Southwest Native art circles, is continuing a tradition of representation of the Holy People that goes back to sandpainting and weaving. Although not 'original' in terms of subject matters, his works differ from all his predecessors because of the human touch present and clearly visible in them. In John's works, the superhuman becomes human and this is what makes his canvases so unique. This research takes into consideration some of his major works and analyzes them in terms of subjects portrayed and modality of the representation in an attempt to understand the cultural meanings they bear and John's art rationale.

INTRODUCTION

As art is not separated from life, it reflects artists' own experiences, feelings, ideas. Consequently many contemporary Native artists paint what comes from their cultural backgrounds, their traditions, their lives. The content of contemporary Native art has changed since the first pictorial easel paintings of the 1920s and 1930s; it has become more embedded into the modern society and its multifaceted aspects. Faithful and descriptive depictions of traditional dances or lifestyles have been replaced by works with spiritual, mythical or symbolic themes as well as critiques and social commentaries of today's world (Archuleta and Strickland 1991). Native artists express different subject matter and use different styles and media, thus not limiting their creativity and desire for experimentation. As in the past, Navajo tell their own stories and stories of their people, past and present.

For many Native peoples, religion and spirituality are important components of their everyday life. Navajos believe that because of all things are part of the same universe, everything is interconnected; there is no separation between sacred and secular. In his online book, *A Time of Vision*, Lawrence Abbot writes that Native "artists continue to interpret ceremony and the symbolism of religious practices, to explore the continuity of community, and to visualize the cohesive myths around which ceremony is ordered" (Abbott 2000). For many artists, art and culture are interconnected and because of this interconnectedness producing art is often seen as a religious act, a sacred and a spiritual endeavor. As Rennard Strickland has written "Native American art is an integrative

social phenomenon, a complex creative collage of song, dance, ceremony, myth, prayer, and vision. The visible ‘art object’ is but a small part of this cultural experience...”

(Rennard quoted in Abbott 2000).

Artists often clearly express sacredness and spirituality through the depiction of elements that belong to the realms of the super-human (i.e., the gods) or use symbols that remind men of their close connections to spiritual beings. The art of David K. John is permeated by this consciousness that the human is constantly connected to the super-human, and thus deities, in Navajo the Holy People (*diyin diné*), are an essential part of people’s daily lives. Through the use of vivid and brilliant colors and of contemporary and personal renditions of Yei (a set of Holy People) and symbols John renders in painting Navajo spirituality and oral traditions and effectively conveys messages about his people. He continues a tradition of visual storytelling started in the 1930s by the first generation of professional Navajo easel painters, Harrison Begay and Beatin Yazzie and reinterpreted by many others in the following decades. In Navajo culture, art is a part of life as much as is spirituality. Navajo and art are inseparable. To create beauty is foundational and expresses the fundamental philosophical principles and values of Navajo culture. Through his canvases John reprises this tradition, personalizes it and renders it in a very personal, traditional, and modern way.

This research examines the role of Navajo traditions, spirituality, and symbolism in the works of contemporary artist David John and demonstrates that John is using painting as a modern instrument of storytelling, to pass along to the next generations those traditions, stories, values, and beliefs that are a fundamental part of Navajo culture,

heritage, and identity. How does he achieve this goal? How does he use his art as an instrument for cultural preservation and perpetuation? What is the meaning of his art? The following chapters are an attempt to answer these questions through a critical and formal analysis of David John's works. In addition, the issues of art rationale, meaning(s), audience, and relationship with the community will be addressed. John's educational background is considered as well because it is an important element in understanding his works, the stories they tell, and the meanings they transmit. Finally, through an in-depth visual and contextual study of his paintings and masks, personal conversations with the artist and additional research on Navajo arts, the spiritual beliefs and the elements of tradition present in his works are discussed.

Originally from Keams Canyon but now living in Kayenta, Arizona, David John is relatively well-known in Southwest Native art world and around Native fairs grounds. A frequent participant of the annual Santa Fe Indian Market for which he was Poster Artist in 2003 and of the Heard Museum Indian Market and Fair, John has won many awards in the last decade at prestigious events all over the country, including the Pulitzer Award for Marketing in 1990 for his poster for the United States Census Bureau. His oeuvre includes acrylic paintings and clay masks which are handmade and decorated with natural elements such as reed, sand, feathers, shells and turquoise. His works are found in private collections and museums throughout the country and are permanently shown at the *Kiva Fine Arts* in Santa Fe, the *James Ratliff Gallery* in Sedona, and the *Toh-Atin Gallery* in Durango, Colorado.

Contrary to many contemporary artists who do not want to be labeled as “Indian” and thus do not overtly reproduce images that can be easily recognized as pertaining to their Native heritage, David John produces works in which the presence of conventional Navajo themes is abundant, though in a modern style. Moreover he uses the venue of Southwestern fine arts galleries, famous for their tourist-oriented Native American art collections¹ as well as fine arts venues, to expose and publicize his works. What is the reason for this and what is the purpose of his art? Are his themes produced merely in response to commercial demands in order to have a better appeal to tourists or is it because the artist really wants to tell stories about his people and thus have a role in the maintenance of his culture? Is the artist reinventing his culture for a prospective non-Native buyer or is he preserving it and thus preventing its loss? This research seeks to answer these questions.

Through in-depth, personal interviews with the artist and gallery owners during the summer of 2005, collection of personal and narrative histories, a content analysis of visual data, and the study of secondary sources on Navajo art, traditions, and spirituality my goal in this Masters thesis is to answer these questions and examine the role of tradition in John’s works. A limited number of paintings that best represents Navajo culture will be selected for a thorough visual analysis.

Much has been written on Navajos and their forms of art, but the literature mainly focuses on sandpainting (Wyman 1959; Reichard 1950; Mills 1959; Witherspoon 1977;

¹ As a clarification, tourist art here is used to define all types of art, from decorative arts and crafts to fine arts that are sold in venues especially targeting tourists, rather than elite culture. Native American fine arts galleries of New York City or San Francisco, for example, would not figure among these, because they are intended for a different audience or buyer, a more sophisticated one. Galleries in the Southwest, on the contrary, are directed at specific types of buyers, collectors, and more broadly at the tourists.

Gill 1979; Hatcher 1974; Parezo 1983) or traditional arts and crafts such as weaving and jewelry (Feder 1972; Hannun 1945; Dockstater 1961; Eaton 1993; Graburn 1976; Holstein 1979). Scholarly works on contemporary Navajo painting are almost nonexistent. Some scholars focus on the earliest painters of the Dorothy Dunn Studio period, such as Harrison Begay, Narciso Abeyta and Andrew Tsinnijinnie (Bernstein and Rushing 1995; Brody 1971; Dockstader 1961; Dunn 1968; Highwater 1976; Tanner 1973) but very few discuss the works made from the 1970s to the present. Contemporary analysis tend to be found in gallery guides, brochures, newspapers (often ephemeral), and popular magazine if at all. Works by ‘experts’ on the Southwest, on the contrary can be found in abundance: normally, they discuss Navajo artistic traditions in general, thus including sections on weaving, jewelry, sandpainting, pottery, basketry and eventually painting (Jacka 1988, 1994; Bassman 1997; Dederá 1975; James 1976).

These volumes are designed for a non-expert reader, most often a tourist visiting the Southwest, and introduce Navajo culture through a very basic, easy-to-understand language and essentializing discourse that is heavy on romanticizing images and metaphors. Poetic descriptions of the beautiful landscapes of the Navajo homeland often accompany the explanations of the crafts, their origins, and their evolution over time, so as to make these volumes more appealing and educative. The majority of these works lacks proper documentation or a critical approach to the arts and the artists and has not been highly referenced by scholars. In addition to books, several magazines regularly publish articles on contemporary painting (*Arizona Highways*, *Southwest Art*, *Native*

Peoples and American Indian Art Magazine)² but again, they are not received as scholarly works by the academia, because of their simplistic approach to art and their frequent orientation toward what is commercial and economically successful, i.e. what people can buy and collect with confidence as authentic and beautiful.

David John has been working for over 20 years, has won many awards and his works are shown in three well-known and established galleries in the Southwest. Notwithstanding this success, little has been written on him or his paintings. Some articles have been published in Southwestern art journals or magazines, but his name and his artistic talents have not been recognized outside regional, Southwest Native arts circles. What recognition has been extended has been under the label of ‘Indian art.’ John is an artist who is producing valuable art, and when it comes to evaluating his artistic works it should not be relevant if he is Native or not, commercial or non commercial, whatever this means since all professional artists sell their works. His cultural background is important in order to *understand* his paintings and what he wants to convey to his audience, but he cannot be simply judged with the terms ‘Indian’ or ‘commercial’ artist, any more than Picasso can be categorized as Spanish/French and commercial because he sold his paintings.

Due to the tendency to label Native artists’ works as ‘Indian’ or ‘ethnic’ art rather than contemporary or simply art, it seems that John’s works are not reaching a national audience but are circulating only at a regional level, because they are not being exposed outside of the Native art circles. Is this a personal choice, a marketing strategy, or a

² *American Indian Art Magazine* is one more scholarly than the other publications, but still very popular.

consequence of the difficulty of selling Native art in non-Native markets? Has John ever tried to expand the circle and bring his works out of the Southwest, so that people who are not regular attendees of Native art events and expositions in the Four Corners area can have the opportunity to appreciate them and the profound messages they carry? These questions have been posed to the artist and are addressed in this research to gain a better understanding of the rationale of John's works.

In the light of the current scholarship on Navajo contemporary art, this research considers an aspect of Navajo artistic traditions, contemporary painting, that has been largely disregarded and dismissed by scholars, often on the basis of the assumed commercialism of the artists which is condemned as inauthentic. I intend to shed more light on the experiences of one artist and his own, particular way of looking at his traditions and preserving them. By doing this, I hope to illuminate broader issues of contemporary Navajo painting.

1. Literature review

Contemporary Native American artists work for different reasons and in different manners. While art and economics cannot be separated and "art is a special type of commodity that has economic value and is sold in markets" (Parezo 1991: 563) it is up to the artists to decide to which specific market and consumers they want to target their works. Some artists might work only for the 'ethnic market' or commissions, others for the economic revenue derived from more commercial tourism. Still others paint as a way to affirm their identity and express their innermost personalities. How artists achieve their

goals may vary from the use of traditional and cultural elements and images to experimentation with the latest global art trends. Creation stories, legends, spirituality, relationships with the land can be explicitly addressed and represented by some artists while not overtly depicted by others. No matter what the final result is, Native artists still have, as Allan Houser once said, “this very deep feeling and they still have traditional backgrounds” (Highwater 1976: 146).

Independent of the subject matter of their art and of their stylistic choices traditions are a vital part of the artists’ personal and professional experiences. Many, however, choose to work with contemporary expressive modes that do not necessarily correspond to the idea of ‘traditional Indian art’ as intended and defined by non-Native society, markets and cultural institutions (Hill 1994; Nahwooksy 1994; Wade and Strickland 1981). This means that distinctive and easily recognizable “Indian” elements are not present. Though an unknown number of artists carry on ‘traditional arts and crafts,’ those learned from their grandparents and passed on generation after generation (baskets and rugs weaving, pottery, masks, beadwork or jewelry, sandpainting), many other artists have detached themselves from these media and culturally identifiable styles, preferring a different, more ‘modern’ or trans cultural way of telling their personal stories and experiences.

Contemporary Native art, however, cannot be disassociated from the cultures it comes from and so the artists’ traditions, worldviews, and values are not estranged from everyday experiences; they are an integral and cardinal part of them. Though the cultural background, traditions, and values of an artist are not always explicit and immediately

recognizable in his or her works, they are a fundamental element even in abstract and more modernist styles of art and pivotal factors in gaining a better understanding of an artist's works. The culture the artist comes from cannot be ignored in the interpretation of any work of art, because the philosophy, the values, and the rules of conduct of a community affect the way an artist perceives himself and the world surrounding him (Wade and Strickland 1981).

Native art has shifted in content and become more embedded in the surrounding world; works traditionally historical, mythical, or spiritual in their themes or motifs are now often replaced by paintings with social commentary, personal expressions and experimentations, which testify to the artists' experiences in a contemporary multicultural society and settings (Archuleta and Strickland 1991). The link with tradition has not been lost however and many artists today, although using different, often non-historic forms, styles, and techniques still represent the culture they belong to and give an insight into their world, past and present. Just as cultures are not static, art is not static or frozen in time and space.

Contemporary Native art can be a modern form of storytelling in which words have been replaced by images and symbols; each generation contributes in keeping old traditions alive but also adds new ones to the collective experiences (Hill 1994). The artist is the interpreter of the past as well as the teller of his people's experiences today; he bridges the gap between past and present by maintaining the cultural integrity of his people. Both Brascoupe and Nahwooksy (1994) stress how contemporary artists make

ancient voices speak and how modernism is integrated with the past without sacrificing basic cultural values.

Native art today is also evaluated by the public that it seeks to satisfy. Many Native artists use specific themes and images because they are aiming at sales in a non-Native market, and thus are limited to a degree in their artistic choices by the market trends, requests, and tastes. Other artists who want to move away from the tourist market tend to use a non-conventional style and experiment to appear *avante garde* and cutting edge. Unfortunately, it is still the Anglo definition of 'real' Native art that dominates the markets and the artistic trends to which painters have to adapt to if they want to sell their works and make a living. It is, however, thanks to non-Native markets that many Native artists have found their opportunities to make a living and not abandon their Native communities, thus retaining some of their cultural values (Wade and Strickland 1981; Brascoupe 1994).

Some scholars stress that many contemporary Native artists are not producing traditional art in traditional media, but are rather incorporating elements of their own traditions into new styles and forms. However, traditionalism (however it is defined), is present in today's Native artistic scene. Many questions in this area remain unanswered: does the presence of conventional Native themes appear simply because of the market appeal or is it because the artist really wants to tell stories about his people and thus have a role in the maintenance of his culture? Is art production just a sometimes lucrative job or is it a way for the artist to reinforce his identity, his community ties, and his culture? Is

the artist reinventing his culture for a potential non-Native buyer or is he maintaining continuity with tradition and thus preventing its loss?

The best way to find some answers to these questions is in the existing scholarly works that directly address the issues to contemporary Native artists (in particular Abbott 1994 and 2000; Berry 2002; Caldwell 1999; Chase 2002; LaPena 1994; Quick-to-See Smith 1990; Ryan 1999; Trimble 1987). Here the voices of the artists are clearly heard and their position on art, creativity, and tradition are unmistakably stated. In the interviews conducted and compiled by these researchers, in fact, known and lesser known artists from different regions and tribal affiliations, age, gender, interests or styles are asked to talk about themselves, their art and the way they define it, their creative processes and the role their heritage and traditions play in it, if applicable. Moreover, in addition to these studies, there are numerous publications by Native and non-Native scholars that critically analyze Native art, its implications and meanings, and the issues it raises and perpetuates (Archuleta and Strickland 1991; Bernstein 1999; McMaster 1992 and 1998; Wade 1981; WalkingStick 1992 and 2001; Rushing 1999 and 2001; Wyckoff 1996).

David K. John has decided to use painting as a tool to express himself and communicate about his people, yesterday, today and tomorrow. In the ongoing discussion on contemporary Native art my study focuses on the experience of this prolific and insightful artist, known to some, unknown to others, so that another Native voice can emerge, be heard and become better understood and appreciated. The dialogue with Native artists will thus be kept open as a process in continuous evolution and expansion.

2. Terminology

The words *Indian, Native, commercial, tourist and traditional art* will be widely used in this work and because the argument proposed fits into the larger critical discourse of contemporary indigenous art, a clarification on my use of these terminologies and their definitions as intended in this field is here necessary.

I prefer using the term *Native* rather than *Indian* when referring to the indigenous peoples of North America and what is connected to them, because I think the second term reflects a perpetuation of colonial mentality and because of its cultural impositions. As Daniel Francis pointed out, “Indians, as we know them, do not exist. The Indian is the invention of the European” (Francis 1992) because the people never called themselves Indians. The term *Indian*, however, is used alongside *Native* when it refers to the imaginary person, the stereotype, that is, what the European or Anglo-American expects. In addition to this, *Indian* has been kept unaltered in established and well accepted phrases such as Indian market, Indian arts and crafts or even Indian artist (as uttered by the participants of this study, David John included), because this is the way what they are denoted, defined and known to the public.

Commercial art needs a more specific definition, because when we think of this type of artistic production we immediately envision advertising materials, flyers, posters, billboards and so on. However, when the term is used in reference to Native American art it means art, normally mass produced or low quality crafts, made for tourist markets, that is, for sale to tourists in trading posts, souvenir stores, national parks, on the internet and so on. Commercial art is intended as an affordable commodity for the masses; it is cheap

and not one-of-a-kind art. Tourist art does not seem too different from commercial art, if not for the fact that in addition to arts and crafts it can include fine arts as well. It is tourist art because the artist is not much concerned with expressing his own individual creativity but rather produces what sells, thus pleasing the tourists, rather than his individual vision.

What does traditional mean? It means related to tradition, that is, the customs, beliefs, practices, origin stories, ways of life and language of a people. When the terms traditional and art are combined, they refer to types of artistic productions that have been passed along from generation to generation, normally unaltered, except for minor changes, in content, media, images and style. When we talk about Native American artistic productions, however, it is hard to apply this definition to their handmade objects because few of the things that we see today have been passed along unchanged for a long period of time, i.e. at least three generations. Like any other culture in the world, Native culture has changed in the course of the centuries, and especially after the arrival of the Europeans; new materials have been introduced and new ways of making arts and crafts have been learned from contact with the colonizers. Thus the culture of parents and grandparents is not passed on intact nor do young people expect to live the lives of their ancestors. The use of the term traditional must recognize that artistic forms have been passed along from one generation to the other, but also accept the fact that materials and styles have changed over time.

Traditional Native American painting refers to a particular type of easel art. Two dimensional painting was practiced among many Native communities, especially in the

Southwest, where some groups used Kiva walls as the surface for their artistic expressions. Such a painting technique has been considered as a very ancient practice of the two dimensional style. It has subsequently been defined as traditional and as a testimony to the use of flat pictorial representations before contact. Easel painting (i.e., on canvas using charcoals and watercolors), however, was unknown to Native peoples prior to the arrival of the Europeans and has never become a generational practice. Passed on through enculturation, the term traditional used in discussions of painting, therefore, refers to that particular type of art that spread in the late 1910s, further developed in the 1920s and 1930s, especially after the establishment of the Studio at the Santa Fe Indian School in 1932, and that used the easel (canvas, paper, fresco) as its surface. Anglo-Americans anthropologists and art instructors encouraged Native artists to depict their ceremonies, dances, clothes, that is, everything that outsiders thought was the traditional (read as original, authentic) way of living. Hence the term traditional applied to their painting has been used since then to indicate this type of representations that focus on the “authentic” (i.e., uncontaminated) lifestyles of the people depicted.

What is important to stress especially in relation to the words commercial, tourist and traditional is that they do not belong to a Native American conception of art. They have all been imported and transplanted by the colonial culture, and thus refer to concepts of art and art exchanges that are not endemic to Native civilizations. Like many other aspects of the colonizing culture, these views on art and commercial exchanges have been appropriated by Native peoples, added to their own and syncretized, adopted into the Native culture and treated as their own. In addition to their own views and concepts,

Native people have created something new and uniquely their own from contact with the colonizer.

3. Methodology

The methodology used for this research constitutes a case study of one Navajo artist through a social cultural approach and is not meant to be generalized. The following procedures of data collection have been used: semi-structured informal interviews about personal history, learning about cultural knowledge of the Navajo peoples and traditions from the published literature and discussions with scholars, gallery visits, original art research including analysis and comparisons of art works, archival research, and analysis of existing literature on art. Art works have been analyzed chronologically and compared with other artists. This allows me to see how John's paintings have changed over time in terms of subject, technique and materials used. Also close attention has been paid to the Navajo symbols and images included in his works as well as to the presence of elements that bear particular meaning in Navajo culture.

The chapters that follow focus respectively on the Navajo, the contemporary art scene and its origins, and David K. John. In the first chapter I present a brief overview of the Navajo, their religious system, their ceremonies and arts tradition in order to better understand where David John comes from and what are the sources from which he draws his materials. I pay particular attention to ceremonial mask making and some of the different types of masks that are used during rituals and dances because they represent a large component in John's art. Also, some of the dances in which masked dancers (i.e.

impersonators as the Navajo call them) make their appearance, i.e. the Yeibichai dance and the Corral dance, are briefly discussed in order to shed more light on some characteristic images and themes of John's paintings. Chapter 1 ends with an historical overview of Navajo easel painting starting from the beginning of the 20th century and up to the 1960s.

Chapter 2 discusses the contemporary art world in which John lives and proposes some of the arguments on the status of 'real' indigenous art in the ongoing scholarly debate: supporters and makers of fine and 'serious' art lament the lack of critical attention from outside Native art circles and at the same time condemn the over exposure of commercial and tourist-oriented productions. I argue that this general conception of Native art as lower quality and class is an overgeneralization that devalues the works of many valuable and good artists. I retrace a history of the system of patronage that developed and grew in the Southwest and I look at the origin of the Santa Fe Indian Market as a concrete example of patronage of Native arts. Finally, I conclude this section with a discussion on the definition of Native art and how and by whom it started.

Chapter 3 presents David John, the man, the artist, and his works. First, I discuss his oeuvre, his subject, meanings and ultimate goals. Second, I compare him to other artists who were influential in his artistic development and finally I proceed in a formal analysis of his paintings and his clay productions.

In conclusion, I reiterate my argument on the quality of John's paintings: although promoted and sold through specific venues in the Southwest, they are not conceived as commodity items for tourists and do not respond to what is popular and in demand. They

deliver messages and personal interpretations of stories pertaining to the cultural heritage of the Navajo people. In his own and unique way, the artist, David John, walks on the footsteps of his predecessors and continues a tradition of visual storytelling. His works are moving, inspiring and educating. This is what art is supposed to do and this is, I believe, what John is accomplishing.

CHAPTER I

THE NAVAJOS

In order to better understand David K. John and the corpus of his works, its meanings, its Navajo imageries, and ultimately the stories contained therein it is necessary first to understand Navajo culture and the elements from which John draws his narrative materials. Numerous volumes and articles have been written on the Navajos and every aspect of their culture has received scholarly attention: from history and philosophy to spirituality, cosmic views, medicine, arts (traditional arts and crafts as well as fine arts), government, cultural preservation, education, language. The Navajos are one of the most studied tribes in the United States and Canada (Bernstein 1988; Chee 1975; Farella 1984; Faris 1990; Frisbie and McCallister 1978; Gill 1979; Griffin-Pierce 1992; Haile 1947; Hatcher 1974; Kluckhohn and Leighton 1946; Matthews 1885; Mills 1959; Newcomb 1956; Parezo 1983, 1996; Reichard 1950; Schwartz 1997, 2001; Waters 1950; Witherspoon 1977; Wyman 1959, 1967).

This study does not pretend to provide an exhaustive and in depth analysis of the Diné culture; rather, it will focus on those issues that are critical and essential for an inclusive understanding of David K. John, the world he comes from and in which he finds his sources of inspiration and storytelling. Thus, spirituality, the religious ceremonial system, sandpainting and oral traditions will be especially considered.

1. The Navajos: Brief Overview

According to Diné oral traditions and stories, ancestors of The People emerged into the current world, the Fifth World, from the underground, at the Place Where the Waters Crossed. Because of the disorder in the Fourth World, generated by the unnatural and disharmonious way in which people were living, the gods decided to look for another place to live. Through a hole in the sky, the Holy People were the first to emerge into the upper world, which they found submerged in water and inhabited by monstrous creatures. When the child of Water Monster, previously stolen by Coyote, was returned, all waters receded. The earth, the sky, the mountains, plants and animals were created and Changing Woman was born and raised by First Man and First Woman. Lately, impregnated by Sun, she gave birth to two twins, Child-Born-of-Water and Monster Slayer, who killed all the monsters living in the Fifth World, thus making it ready for the coming of other beings. For this reason they are called the Hero Twins.

Finally it was the time to let the human beings come into the world. First Man and First Woman built the first hogan in which the Holy People created the Earth People. These were given instructions on how to be humans and proliferate, survive and respect all the other elements of creation, pray and search for *hózhó*, a state of beauty and harmony. The Earth People were then dispersed in the four cardinal directions and guided on a Beautiful Trail toward what became their homeland, Dinétah (Parezo 1996).

According to historians and anthropologists the Navajos were not native of the Southwest but migrated from western Canada between 1000 and 1500 AD, a migration that is reflected in oral traditions. Linguistically related to the Athapaskan family of

Northwestern Canada, Navajo belongs to one of the main linguistic groups of the Greater Southwest, Southern Athapaskan, which also includes Apachean languages. This solid linguistic evidence is the basis for anthropologists' conclusions on the migratory origin of this tribe. The Navajo adapted to the dry climate of their new homeland and soon learned from neighboring tribes, the Pueblos, the practice of agriculture and how to grow crops, especially corn.

Their history of contact, trade and exchange with the nearby tribes and especially some aspects of their lifestyles changed with the arrival of the Spanish. Notwithstanding their rigid rules and their constant attempts at suppressing Native cultures, the Spanish colonizers introduced benefits that altered Navajo lifeways forever: these were the horse and sheep. The horse facilitated commercial exchanges with local tribes as well as with the colonizers, while sheep became a source of food and fleece for weaving. The Navajos had been weavers of garments and blankets for a long time, and with the arrival of the Europeans their craft shifted from the use of cotton to the use of wool (Kluckhohn 1946; Parezo 1996). The relationships between the Navajo and the Spanish fluctuated between phases of peaceful neighboring co-existence and phases of open hostility. The Navajo frequently raided Spanish settlements and livestock as a response to the colonizers' attempts to impose the Catholic religion but also as a reaction to the Spanish's slave trade and the resulting, disturbing theft of Navajo children (Parezo 1996).

Starting in the 1800s with the New Mexican settlers and later, in the 1850s, with the westward expansions of Anglos, the Navajo land base was constantly pressured and undermined, under risk of encroachment. Like the Spanish before them, Anglo-

Americans attempted to force the Navajo abandon their culture and religious practices. Problems and tensions increased in the 1850s and 1860s, especially with the New Mexicans because of their continuous appropriation of Navajo lands and capture of slaves and the consequent Navajo response through raids. The United States government saw the signing of treaties with some bands of Navajos as a solution to these controversies, but unfortunately these measures did not succeed. Relocation of the tribe was finally considered the only way to end their 'rebellious nature' and so, in 1863 some Navajo were forced to move to Bosque Redondo where they were confined until 1868. This forced relocation is known as the infamous Long Walk and is remembered as the saddest event in Navajo history because The People not simply lost their homes and lands, but thousands of lives. In 1868 the Treaty of Bosque Redondo was signed and the Navajo were allowed to go back to part of their homeland (they lost their eastern half) where however they found poverty and lack of sources of sustenance. They had to start all over again with the few provisions granted them by the federal government, i.e. agricultural supplies, maize, sheep, and cattle (Parezo 1996).

Originally a seasonally nomadic people, the Navajo lived on agriculture, hunting and gathering; since the arrival of the Europeans and the introduction of sheep and horses in the 1600s, pastoralism became a fundamental component of their economy and a major source of food. Due to the seasonal nature of pastoral life, the Navajo did not live in permanent houses like the neighboring Pueblos, but in hogans made of wood and mud. Despite their changes and adaptations, their forced relocation, the struggles and confrontations with the federal government and its intermediaries, they managed to

maintain their language, culture and spiritual beliefs. Upon their return from Bosque Redondo, “livestock, rations, subsidies, trade, and wages” (Parezo 1996: 17) from working in the railroad construction, in government and missionary schools and in the towns just outside the reservation constituted the main sources of income and sustenance.

Today the Navajo are the tribe with the largest continuous land base and also one of the most successful and tenacious in the assertion of its sovereignty rights. Their tribal government is looked at as example by other tribes and used as a model and their educational system is considered an effective tool for the maintenance and continued development of Navajo culture and language preservation. Health issues, low income, overgrazing, uranium mining and the scarce job opportunities on the reservation, however, are some of the major problems the Navajo have to face today (Parezo 1996).

As in the majority of Native American tribes, Navajo stories are oral and passed on from generation to generation through storytelling. The creation and clan migration stories are at the center of Navajo storytelling and, in addition to reminding the People of where they come from, they contain information on important values in life, the proper ways of behavior and conduct, as well as their language and philosophy. Listeners are also reminded of the complementary bipolarities, male and female, good and evil, that exist in everything on the universe. Stories and legends of the tribe are also perpetrated and transmitted through the ritual songs of the ceremonies. Chantway stories, in fact, tell the origin of the curing ceremonies that are associated with specific chants and how they were given to the Earth People by the supernatural beings, the Holy People. Their narrative patterns are purposely repetitive and provide descriptions of the ceremonies and

how they are supposed to be performed. In addition, they are hero stories and so they always present the figure of a hero who, thanks to the help of the supernaturals is able to solve the situations in which he finds himself, most of the time misadventures. Through their intervention, the gods confer a ritual knowledge that enables the hero to return to his people and teach them the ceremony (Reichard 1950; Kluckhohn 1946; Parezo 1983). Ceremonies, as discussed later, are a fundamental part of Navajo culture and spirituality because it is through them that harmony is restored and the individual can attain a life of beauty and universal balance, in Navajo, *hózhó*.

2. Holy People

According to the Navajo creation text, all living beings including plants and animals can be classified in two different groups: the Earth Surface People and the Holy People. While the first group includes human beings, the second comprises the superhuman, whose great powers can be used to help the human beings. If called and propitiated, they can help the people restore the harmony and balance that have been somehow disrupted, but if they are erroneously disturbed or invoked incorrectly they can also harm humans. The Holy People were not originally from the present world, but arrived here on sunbeams, rainbow and lightning, after moving up from lower worlds. After some time, the Holy People decided to leave the place where they established themselves; before departing they delivered a speech to the Earth People. The Holy People said that “they are not to be seen or heard again on the earth surface by ordinary human senses, yet they promise to remain present and active in all things by which the

Navajo people maintain their life” (Gill 1979: 6). This happens in the Blessingway, a ritual for the Earth People which reminds them of the ceremonial meeting of the Holy People from which they were created and given knowledge (Kluckhohn and Leighton 1946).

As Gladys Reichard documented, there are three words for deity in Navajo language: *yé’i*, *xa ctécé* and *diyini*. *Yé’i* “is used both for those who help man and those who harm man” (Reichard 1950: 50); these deities are the ones that can be seen in masked impersonations during ceremonial dances that are part of the Nightway, the Mountainway and Enemyway, but more in general are those whose powers are greater than man. *Xa ctécé* can be found in most Navajo names of Holy People as “a part of a noun compound that seems to mean ‘god’ or ‘favorable power’”; Reichard referred to them as ‘persuadable deities’ in the sense that they are “easy to invoke and have no primordial meanness or evil intentions” (Reichard 1950: 50). Lastly, *diyini* means “‘the-particular-ones-who-are-holy’” and *diyini dine’é* refers to a ‘holy group’ of Holy people “by no means always well disposed toward man” (Reichard 1950: 51).

Changing Woman, Sun, Monster Slayer, Talking God, and Thunder are some of the deities normally identified as Holy People. Other important figures who are called *Yei* are First Man and First Woman, who were created from a white and a yellow corn plant, and a special class of *diyini*, Holy People, such as Water Sprinkler, Fringed Mouth, Hunchback, the so called Failed-To-Speak People. These figures are the *Yei*, that is, “a group of deities who came into existence during the era of creation as helpers to the Navajo people.” Gill writes that “the story of their origin indicated that after they were

created they tried to speak but failed to do so. Consequently, they are characterized by this failure to speak, an inability compensated for by their making distinctive vocal calls when present in masked forms. The masks which are used to represent these ye'ii are normally skin bags decorated with the features distinctive of the ye'ii they represent” (Gill 1979: 18).

During some ceremonies such as Nightway and Mountainway, as it will be explained in a later section of this chapter, these deities are portrayed by masked Earth Surface People, who have the roles of intermediaries between the Holy People and the Navajo. They are not the Holy People, but their personification. In the course of song ceremonials of the Blessingway rite and the Holyway chants, after the sandpainting is completed and the person for whom the ceremony is performed has sat in its center, a masked Yei can momentarily replace the singer and apply the sand from the painting onto the body of the person. The masked individual, therefore, is not using his own powers and abilities in the healing process; like the singer, he acts as mediator between the Holy People and the patient, by passing to him/her the inner life forms and forces that come from the supernatural beings. It is this conception of Yei as intermediary between humans and superhumans that David John uses in his paintings to relate to the special connection and relationship between the Navajo and the Holy People.

3. Religious System

Navajo culture is centered on a religious system that comprises philosophy, medicine, and psychotherapy (Parezo 1983) and a belief that the universe is an ordered

unit of interrelated elements which comprise both good and evil. Each element has an ascribed place in the universe and this orderly system has to be maintained through harmony with all beings, animate and inanimate, in order to avoid disruption. Jeopardy to the cosmic balance may cause malfunction of its constituent parts and will bring illness to those who have not respected the universal harmony. Illness can be caused by misuse of sacred objects, animals, natural phenomena or ghosts (Griffin-Pierce 1992) as well as by “breaking one of the many taboos; by dreaming of death, snakebite, lightning; by over-indulging in any way; by coming in touch with the dead or the unburied remains of mythical monsters, enemies of man; by having the errors of parents or the malevolence of witches visited upon” (Mills 1959: 119). It can also come through unknowingly being near such chaotic activity. Harmony can be restored through ritualistic procedures and ceremonies that expel the evil and attract the good and beautiful.

Man’s ultimate goal, therefore, is the attainment of a life of beauty and of universal balance with all the creatures of the surrounding world, a condition that the Diné call *hóžó*. *Hóžó* is reached through the ritual, which is, as explained by Nancy Parezo in her book *Navajo Sandpainting. From Religious Act to Commercial Art*, “a system of various kinds of song ceremonies (including curing chants), of divination rites, prayer ceremonies and other minor rites” (Parezo 1983: 12). Through the rituals a patient is identified with the supernatural beings that are prayed to and attracted by their likeness in a sandpainting, and is infused with their powers and strength. While many ceremonies

are small and only the family or friends of the patient are present, some chants can be performed publicly to non patients and even non-Navajos.¹

Ceremonies use particular curing chants and prayers to help the healing process and are performed in very controlled environments; the choice of chant, phase, branch or activities is not determined by the illness symptoms but by its ultimate cause. Kluckhohn describes a chant as “a framework into which are fitted more or less discrete units (“ceremonies” and “acts and procedures”) either as dictated by fixed associations or in accord with the practice of individual Singers.” According to him, “the same units are used over and over again in different chants, sometimes with slight modifications. Similarly, while each chant has some distinctive items of equipment, much of the inventory is common to all, or most, chants” (Kluckhohn 1946: 153). Some rites are “fixed, appearing in every chant,” while others are chant specific, discretionary or additional (Parezo 1983: 13). Each rite can vary, but “a basic five-night ritual consists of ten to twelve standards ceremonies. 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” (Parezo 1983: 13).

The core of Navajo religious practices is the Blessingway ceremony which is based on the story of creation; it reminds the Diné of their relationship to the land and of the need to maintain order and balance. According to Wyman and Kluckhohn (1959; 1946), who surveyed Navajo ceremonials in the 1930s, these complex ritual processes

¹ These are Nightway and the Mountain Top Way, with their well know Yeibichai Dance and Corral or Fire Dance, but also the Enemyway.

can be grouped into six major categories, some of which can be further subdivided as will be explained later: these categories are Blessingway, Holyway, Lifeway, Uglyway, War Ceremonials, and Gameway. These rituals have the purpose of establishing and maintaining the spiritual “life-giving relationships” (Gill 1979: 11) between the individual and the other living entities. Chants, like ceremonies, can be divided into groups according to “mythological association, common rituals, direction against the same or related etiological factor” (Kluckhohn 1946: 155).

The Blessingway is a protective ceremony used for numerous situations such as childbirth, marriage, the blessing of a new hogan, initiations, hunting, protection of livestock or possessions, health, and other occasions in which a blessing is desired; it establishes a condition of *hóžó* on the person for whom it is performed by preparing the inner life form to take its proper outer form. This ceremony of creation is divided into four ceremonies: “the consecration of the ceremonial hogan, the intoning of a litany prayer, the administration of a bath, and an all-night singing ceremony” (Gill 1979: 12). Normally it lasts for two nights, starting at sunset and it includes Chief Hogan or Talking God Hogan songs, the Earth’s Prayer, the application of the mountain soil bundle, sandpainting, pollen offerings and prayers, the ceremonial bath, and finally Blessingway songs and prayers. For the realization of the sandpainting, the singer uses “small, simple but colorful designs made in vegetal materials as well as pulverized minerals” (Parezo 1983: 13).

After the Blessingway, the Holyway is the second most important ceremony in the Navajo ritual system. Parezo describes the Holyway as “a complex of individual

ceremonies or rites” to “correct problems resulting from improper contact with supernatural forces and excess, while protecting against future misfortune” (Parezo 1983: 13). These ceremonies are performed, in fact, when the relationship between an individual and another living thing is broken or endangered; the evil that causes the suffering and this unbalanced relationship are removed and beauty is restored. Some of the occasions requiring a Holyway chant can include: illness generated by natural elements (for which a Shootingway is performed), or by certain animals such as the snake (Beautyway) and the Holy People themselves; diseases derived by association with bears (Mountainway), or following contact with Navajo ghosts (Red Antway).

The Uglyway or Evilway ceremonies are performed in case of “improper contact with ghosts or witches and aims for the expulsion of evil” (Parezo 1983: 13) by re-establishing the proper relationship between the inner life forms and the individual. Like Holyway ceremonies, they are composed of two main parts, the removal of malevolent spirits and the restoration of *hózhó*. They start at sunset, for a total length of five nights and include “unraveling, overshooting, and garment or cincture ceremonies...during the first four evenings” and “the great hoop and the sweat and emetic ceremonies...at dawn on the first four mornings;” the bath ceremony happens during the last morning, while during the fifth evening the all-night singing is preceded by sandpainting, blackening, and token-tying ceremonies” (Gill 1979: 18). The ceremonies performed during the first four days aim at freeing the individual from the malevolence presence which is symbolically killed, while the great hoop is used to replace a person’s improper outer form with his real inner and physical one. The blackening and token-tying ceremonies are performed

with the purpose of identifying the person requesting the ceremony with the Holy People in order, again, to free him from the evil influences and purify him.

Two other types of ritual are the Lifeway and Enemyway ceremonies. Lifeways are curing ceremonies performed after an accident, an injury or sufferings that are a natural part of life such as childbirth. Enemyway ceremonies, also erroneously referred to as Squaw Dance by non-Navajos, were originally performed to respond to the “impropriety of contact with the death of non-Navajos in the context of war” but now have been changed and adapted to aid the purification and the restoration of balance for “veterans and others who have contact with non-Navajos”. As Gill writes, however, “in all cases the suffering is attributed to the ghost of a non-Navajo” (Gill 1979: 21).

The Holyway Chants consist of seven subdivisions or chant groups and can be performed for numerous occasions and different illnesses. In addition to this, it can be carried out in two, five or nine nights, starting at sunset on the first night. Gill reports that for the nine-night version,

on the mornings of the first four days, the sweat and emetic and the prayerstick and offering ceremonies are performed...Beginning with the fifth night and repeated through the eighth night is the short singing ceremony. Before Dawn on the fifth through the eighth days the setting-out ceremony is performed. And on each of these last four days, usually in the afternoon, the sandpainting ceremony is done. The last, or ninth night, is occupied with the all-night singing, as in Blessingway, and the ceremonial concludes at dawn (Gill 1979: 15).

The sweat and emetic ceremonies are for the purification of the person and for the removal of the evil spirits that prevent the relationship with the Holy People, while the prayerstick and offering ceremonies “establish the appropriate relationships with the help of the intermediary talking gods, represented by the prayersticks, who carry forth the obligating gifts to the holy people” (Gill 1979: 16). These practices are a preparation for the re-establishment of harmony and of the proper relationship with the Holy People which will happen at the end of the ceremony, after the chanting. Among the several variations that can occur in the Holyway Chants can be the involvement of masked men portraying the Holy People, the Yei, and public performances during the ninth night such as the “fire, corral, and ye’ibichai dances” (Gill 1979: 18).

The chant groups forming the Holyway are the following, each reported with the ceremonies it includes: Shooting Chant Group (Shootingway, Hailway, Waterway, Red Antway, Big Starway, Flintway, Lifeway, Windway); Mountain Chant Group (Mountainway, Beautyway, Excessway, Mothway); God-Impersonator Chant Group (Nightway, Big Godway, Plumeway, Coyoyeway, Dogway, Ravenway); Wind Chant Group (Navajo Windway, Chiricahua Windway); Hand-trembling Chant Group (Hand-tremblingway); Eagle-trapping Chant Group (Eagleway, Beadway); and a group that includes ceremonies of uncertain affiliation (Awlway, Earthway, Readed-in-Earthway). Since David John uses masked impersonators in his paintings, the God-Impersonator Group will be further discussed.

4. The Nightway: A God-Impersonator Chant

Ceremonial dancing is one phase of complex rituals that revolve around the curing of a patient in a small number of ceremonies. It is of minor importance compared to the other rites. It is mainly used in three series of dances: the Yeibichai Dance, the Corral or Fire Dance. Another well-known dance is the Squaw dance, typical of the Enemyway, which however is social and not ceremonial. It is performed for three nights in three different locations. Here, women drag men into a central area especially reserved and 'force' them to dance with them; men have to dance or compensate their refusal with a payment. The Yebichai and the Corral or Fire Dance both conclude their respective chants, Nightway and Mountainway, and are held on the ninth night. In the Corral Dance, the audience can enter into a large corral spruce opened toward the east and with a great fire lit in the center. Singers, dancers, and other performers entertain the audience all night long, finally leaving the area to a group of dancers who 'play' very close to the fire (Faris 1990; Reichard 1950; Kluckhohn 1946).

The Yebichai dance is the only one that involves portrayal of the gods. Its chantway, the Nightway, is probably the most widely known ceremony since, as mentioned earlier, it can be open to the public. It is a nine-night winter curing ceremony in which numerous masked Yei impersonated by men of the tribe appear during the last two nights to initiate young boys and girls to their secrets. The days of the ceremony are counted starting from the first night; the first four see the preparation of the male and female prayersticks (cutting, decorating and planting) while the last four are devoted to

the making of the four sandpaintings. Each aspect of the ceremonial needs to be done at the proper time and following the proper order (Faris 1990).

The ninth night is when the public ceremony (i.e. held outside the ceremonial hogan) and dance takes place. People gathered around an octagonal hogan with the door facing to the east. The patient is brought outside and placed on a stool in front of the hogan, near the central fire. The *hataali* (singer) sprinkles a path of corn meal over which the dancers walk to reach the fire. The dancers come from the east, led by Talking God recognizable by his white buckskin mask with a painted cornstalk in the middle. He is followed by a line of four dancers with Calling God at the end. When the dancers reach the singer and the patient, they are sprinkled with sacred meal and all turn to the east; then the singer begins to chant his invocation which the patient repeats word by word.

At the end of the chant, the Yeibichai voices his loud whoop and all the dancers turn around, now facing west. Water Sprinkler, who has come outside from a shelter, imitates Talking God with his shrieks and, as soon as they are over, the rattling of the dancers is heard. Then their dance starts and the lifting of their right feet is followed by a stomp, then lifting of the left feet and again a stomp. This stamping soon rhythmical and is accompanied by the Yeibichai chant, the characteristic and piercing “Hu-hu-hu-hu” cry. Because of the appearance of Talking God, the Yeibichai, and his peculiar call repeated by the dancers, the ceremony on the last night of the Nightway is normally referred to as the Yeibichai dance. The first four dancers dance for about twenty minutes, then leave the ceremonial area to a group of six portrayers of the Holy People, who after the same amount of dancing time are replaced by another group, this time with eight

dancers. When the eight are done, the four come out again and the cycle is repeated, sometimes in a single line, other times in a double one (Faris 1990; Kluckhohn 1946).

The verses of the chant and the dancing are repeated over and over throughout the entire winter night, with alterations only in the positions of the dancers. Talking God, Water Sprinkler and the singer are the only ones who never alternate or change their positions. As soon as the sky starts to brighten with daylight, the chant ceases and silence prevails: the singer faces east and takes off his blanket, while the patient offers him a new basket filled with meal. The silence is soon broken by the jingling bells of another group of dancers who will sing the last dawn morning song. As the sun rises on the horizon, people go back to their hogans to start a new day.

5. Ceremonial Masks

Masks are the most important part of the ceremonial paraphernalia wore by dancers because they are the element that directly connects them as human beings to the gods that are being impersonated. According to oral traditions, masks come directly from the Holy People; in fact, as Father Haile reports, before they left for the homes to which they were assigned after the emergence into the present world, the Yei “took face prints of themselves in white bead, turquoise, abalone and jet, but directed that humans should reproduce them in buckskin” (Haile 1947: 16). For this reason the masks that were and are still used today, are made of buckskins and represent the real faces of the Yei; the jewels have been substituted by their corresponding colors, and so white, blue, yellow,

and black are the dominant dyes which replicate the original face prints. A fundamental characteristic of the Yei is that they tried to speak, but failed; accordingly, portrayers, as their earthly embodiments, are forbidden to talk while wearing a mask. It is believed that if they “would venture to speak ‘in the mask’” (Haile 1947: 5) they become blind, sick or even risk death. The impersonators, therefore, must bear the outmost respect to the gods they are embodying and refrain from speech.

Masks used in ceremonial dances can be head or face masks and the ones used by Holy People portrayers can also be male and female. Yei are male with duality. In this case, all male masks are head, while female are face. The prohibition to speak while wearing a mask is valid for both male and female masks. Depending on the ceremony or branch that is performed they can represent different Holy People or Yei. In the Nightway, for example there are 12 different masks representing: talking god, calling god, 6 male hashch-e,² 6 female hashch-e, black god, monster slayer, born-for-water, water carrier (who is also mentioned as gray god and the hashch-e), hump back, fringed mouth, red hashch-e, destroyer, whistling hashch-e, and shooting hashch-e. Except from Talking God, Water Sprinkler and Calling Godhey they are one independent from the other in the sense that do not have an assigned ‘order of appearance’ during the ceremonial dance but can simply show up whenever they want. Furthermore, as Gladys Reichard noted during her onsite observations, these variations in the position occupied by the Yei at different times of the dance demonstrate “the absence of hierarchy and the capacity of one deity to be in different places at the same time” (Reichard 1950: 56).

² It is the name given to the Yei who cannot speak; it means ‘they tried but failed to speak.’

As previously mentioned, masks are made of “unwounded buckskins,” are “marked off with rock crystal, and pollen is strewn over this mark for the eyes and the mouth, then cut out in imitation of what was done originally” (Haile 1947: 4-5). Since each mask represents a particular god and thus is different from the others, I will consider only the ones David John is using or referring to in his paintings, and I will simply provide a list of their main characteristic features.³ The masks considered here belong to Talking God, Calling God, Male and Female God.

Talking God, as already mentioned is referred to as the Grandfather of the gods. He is the “leading masquerader” (Haile 1947: 92), since he leads the dancers into the ceremonial dance, but does not perform in it. The face of the mask is made of buckskin or male deer hide, while the back of doeskin; the two parts are sewn together with sinews of both animals. The eyes and the mouth, marked with a rock crystal and perforated with a knife, are two open squares, one inside the other, marked in black on a white painted face. They represent the clouds “the storm clouds hanging above and the mist rising from below” (Waters 1950: 234). Additionally, a cylindrical butt end of a gourd is placed on the mouth piece and is adorned with kit fox hair, representing a beard or mustache. The white face displays a black corn plant that from the mouthpiece goes up to the forehead; this has three leaves to the left of the stalk, two to the right, and two ears of corn. The head is surrounded by hair made of horse’s mane (to symbolize the dropping rain) and is decorated on top with twelve eagle feathers placed on owl downs. Sitting on the tips of the downs are two bluebirds facing each other, a female on the left and a male on the

³ For a more detailed analysis of all ceremonial masks see Father Berard Haile, *Head and Face Masks in Navaho Ceremonials*. St. Michaels, Arizona: St. Michaels Press, 1947.

right. Talking God wears a spruce collar around his neck and carries a dark bag on his left hand and a gourd on his right. He wears a buckskin robe and moccasins secured with silver buttons.

The mask wore by Calling God is made of the same materials and realized with the same procedure, that is first sprinkled with pollen, then marked with rock crystal and perforated with a knife to create the eyes and mouth openings. Apart from the color of the face, blue, the shape of the eyes, triangular rather than square, and the absence of the corn plant, this mask has the same adornments as the Talking God's mask. Like Talking God, Calling God wears a spruce collar, but contrary to him, he also has "a buckskin, beads, nice moccasins and pants" (Haile 1947: 18).

Male God and Female God present some similarities, although they have their own peculiar and distinct traits. Both masks are blue, with horsehair, triangular eyes and headplumes; however while Male God's masks are head masks, Female God's are face masks, that is the mask does not cover the impersonator's neck. Male Gods wear two eagle feathers with white down extending to the right of the mask, which are placed on owl feathers. A mouthpiece adorned with kit hair fox is placed on the mouth and a spruce collar is around the neck. Female Gods have a plain mouth without the fox hair but with a ladder-like pattern extending from it and representing the nose. A band of horsehair is on the forehead and the headplume consists of "a turkey down and an eagle down, at the base of which rests a yellow bird or canary." Moreover, "at the joint where these downs are inserted a lump of white ocher medicine, is placed for future use" (Haile 1947: 19).

Another distinctive element of Female God's mask is 'the white ear flaps on both side of its face' and the turquoise, triangular pendants hanging from them.

Both men and women can participate in the Night Chant as dancers, although women rarely do and only if past menopause; they cannot be pregnant or having their period. According to Haile, "men usually dress as females, but women too do not hesitate to act as female-god impersonators, especially in public exhibitions" (Haile 1947: 19). Since women are not considered inferior to men, they share their same level of respect and consideration, but also their same level of responsibility. Thus, the rules and criteria that men have to follow when handling masks, apply also to women, especially when it comes to the taboo of speaking in the mask. In addition to the ceremonial mask, the outfit of the impersonators during the Nightway dance includes a hand woven wool kirtle and a banner colored cloth on their naked back. The chests, bare, are coated with grey ashes.

6. Sandpainting

Sandpaintings (or drypaintings) are used in many Navajo religious ceremonies and, therefore, are a fundamental aspect of Navajo life and spirituality; as the Navajo word *'iikaah* tells us they are the "place where the gods come and go" (Parezo 1983: 1). Sandpaintings are pictorial and stylized representation of designs and sacred symbols that, when properly used in a ritual setting, assume supernatural powers, being the place where the supernaturals, the Holy People, come to rest. They are used in healing ceremonies to call upon the curing power of the supernatural beings and are not considered by the Navajo people a form of 'art'. Testimony of this is the fact that each

sandpainting has to be destroyed after the ritual, because if handled improperly it can attract powers greater than what human beings can manage. On this matter, Parezo explains:

the longer it remains intact, the greater is the possibility that someone will make a mistake in its presence and cause harm. . . . A layman who made one, especially outside of 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 (Parezo 1983: 20).

A sandpainting has to be made and used in the proper way, at the proper time, and only by trained religious specialists called, in Navajo language *hataali*, singers; if the ritual is not executed in the correct way, the supernatural power contained in the painting can be dangerous for the healed person as well as for singer, the patient's family and the entire tribe.

Scholars believe that Navajo sandpainting is a derivation from the drypainting of the Pueblos, in particular from the mural paintings of kiva and altars. The migratory lifestyle of the Navajo along with the continuous land raiding of other Indian tribes and European colonizers did not favor the production of paintings on permanent surfaces or walls; thus a temporary medium, such as ground or earth, were preferred. Contrary to this interpretation, the Navajo believe that "sandpaintings were given by the super-naturals to

the protagonist of each Chant origin myth, who in turn taught it to the Earth People...Sandpaintings are then a gift of the Holy People. The materials come from evil beings that have been brought under supernatural control” (Parezo 1983: 10). They were originally made on different medium, such as “buckskin, unwounded deerskin, cotton, black or white clouds, sky, or spiderwebs” (Parezo 1983: 11). Because of their sacred contents and the fear that these might be stolen or damaged by outsiders the gods commanded the sandpainting to be transitory. According to Parezo, “to disobey would bring disaster, blindness, illness, or death to the individual and drought to the tribe” (Parezo 1983: 11).

Starting in the 1870s, especially with the development of the railroad system that connected the East to the ‘wild’ West, the ‘discovery’ of the Southwest as *the* place to find America’s historical past, the increase of tourism and consequently the rise in popularity and the marketing of Indians and Indian-made objects and curios, Navajo sandpaintings began to change. Due to commercialization, that is the production of objects for a market, and secularization, that is “the shifting [...] from the sacred to the secular domain,” they turned from transient spiritual rituals to “permanent decorative art” (Parezo 1983: 4). The process of commercialization of sandpainting started in the 1930s and 1940s as a “result of the technological innovations by Anglo-American artists and a Navajo singer” but “began to spread among the Navajo only after 1960. Since then sandpainting as as a craft and an art has been sold nationwide” (Parezo 1983: 2). Sandpainting, Parezo continues, “has become an economic success, and a widely

appreciated art form, one which has allowed its artisans to rise above the level of extreme poverty” (Parezo 1983: 2).

Navajo people, however, had to solve many problems that rose from the commercialization of sandpainting because they did not want to make an improper and sacrilege use of these ritualistic drawings. The commercial sandpaintings, in fact, could not have been the same as the ones used in ceremonies; some aspects and the way they were made needed to be changed. Parezo explains that “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 sandpainting” (Parezo 1983: 4). This did not imply an extinction of the native religious systems, but an adaptation to the changing times and the ever growing economic needs of the native population.

As mentioned earlier, sandpaintings are mainly used in song ceremonials, which are rituals, accompanied by singing and the use of a rattle. While sandpaintings are utilized in the Blessingway rite and in the Holyway chants, they are rarely or never used for the Evilway chants and the Lifeway ceremony. Sandpaintings are made during the section of the ceremony that aims at dispelling the evil and are accompanied by the performance of chants and rites. The singer varies his performance so as not to repeat the same chants or the same painting during the ceremonial. This, in fact, is considered dangerous and he always place great care during the rite in order to “avoid wearing out sandpaintings and other paraphernalia by constant repetition and use. No singer ever gives two identical performances” (Parezo 1983: 13-14).

Through the chant, the healer invokes the supernatural so that the patient can be identified with it, and by “absorption, imitation, transformation, substitution, recapitulation, repetition, commemoration, and concentration” (Reichard quoted in Parezo 1983: 14) be healed. The curing ceremony, therefore, is an exchange between the chanter, who presents the offerings of the patient and his/her family through his singing and prayers, and the supernatural who imparts power and strength to the patient. As Parezo reports, “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. A different design, representative of a group of numerous paintings is used on each occasion” (Parezo 1983: 15). Men, relatives of the patients or members of the community with the necessary artistic skills, can be assistants to the chanter, while young women are not allowed into the hogan during the painting, unless they are curers or apprentices, because of the danger of such concentrated power if they are pregnant and might not yet realize it.

Sandpaintings are made freehand on the clean floor of a hogan covered with riverbed sand, and with colored pigments collected by the sponsoring family. Normally, the patient is not present during the realization of a painting, and is allowed into the hogan only after the chanter has inspected the sacred design and declared it correct. The size of a painting varies according to the economic capability of the family, the number of men available for the painting (normally it takes three to six men), and “the chant in which the painting is used” (Parezo 1983: 16). The larger the size, however, the more effective and powerful is the painting. In order to achieve effectiveness and healing for

the patient, rules must be carefully and exactly followed during the making of the painting. For example, when constructing figures of the Holy People, “the entire torso is made first in one color. Then the figure is clothed in a technique called overpainting. Only then is decoration added. Also, the picture is begun at the center and constructed outward in a sun-wise direction (east to south to west to north)” (Parezo 1983: 16). The composition is ended with the construction of a guardian and two paired guardians which are placed at the east. Each sandpainting construction follows this pattern and these steps; the only deviations allowed to individual singers are “the kilt designs and the decoration of the pouch which hangs from the waist of many figures” (Parezo 1983: 16-17).

The subjects of the sandpaintings are many and all of them are drawn from creation stories, emergences stories, myths or narratives and oral traditions. Among them are Mother Earth and Father Sky, personification of mythological figures, supernatural beings, Holy People, Rainbow People (because of their protection), Yei or other deities, animals and plants, natural objects of the earth and the sky, and elements such as lightning, thunder, and wind. Sometimes geographical elements and characteristic features of Dinétah are included too. The representations of these images are for the majority symbolic and stylized, though easily identifiable by Navajos and today even by knowledgeable non-Navajo. Holy People are the most recurrent forms and are represented in various ways such as “personified plants, animals, anthropomorphic beings, natural or celestial phenomena, mythological creatures, or natural objects” (Parezo 1983: 17).

Sacred pollen is sprinkled on the sandpainting at the end of the work, if the singer is satisfied it is perfect. The pollen becomes powerful medicine and is strewn in the same order as the construction was made, thus starting with main figures in the eastern position, moving sunwise. Then, the patient is allowed into the hogan: he sits on a specific area of the painting, and is sprinkled by the singer with sand from the figures in the painting. The sand is taken from parts of the figures' bodies that match the patient's body, normally from the bottom to the top and from right to left. The powers of the supernatural figures are thus transferred into the patient who "becomes like the Holy People for he has been able to partake of the nature of divinity" (Parezo 1983: 19). At the very end of the ceremony, the sandpainting is erased in the opposite order in which it was created, thus starting from the guardian figures.

Because of their sacred nature and the harms they could cause if improperly used or left unattended, Navajos were not eager to transfer sandpaintings into a permanent form. However, starting from the 1920s they have assumed multiple functions and from the strict realm of the sacred "some types of sandpaintings have shifted to the realm of everyday life" (Parezo 1983: 21). This shift, as already mentioned, did not occur without problems and still, nowadays, is not accepted by every Navajo. Native artists and singers, in fact, had and have to face not only the "technological innovations, marketing developments, education for potential consumers, increased contact between Navajo and Anglo-American cultures" (Parezo 1983: 21), but also their own people, their culture and their taboo.

To tell the Holy People they were making something different from the ceremonial sandpaintings, painters alter the original designs and make changes or intentionally make mistakes, thus what they are producing is not sacred and will not bring any danger onto them or their families. Parezo identifies changes in the making of commercial sandpaintings that can also be applied to the works of David John. Among them are: substitution of elements; elimination of figures or simplification of the forms; enclosure of images within borders, so that there is no opening; addition of elements that are not present in sacred sandpaintings or swapping of elements from one chant to another; use of new colors; selections of beings that bring blessings and avoiding the evil, and finally inclusion of imagery that does not exist in sandpainting, thus created for the commercial ones.

Following a period of ‘silence’ commercial sandpainting flourished again after 1975 and, as it happened in weaving, images of the Yeibichai dancers started to become popular design. As Parezo writes, they “became standardized in two forms placed in a limited number of poses, usually with one leg raised to indicate movement and an arm bent at the elbow and extended forward” (Parezo 1983: 94). An example of this typical Yeibichai body posture can be found in the non-traditional sandpainting “Yeibichai dancer” by Wilson Price, in which the impersonators from the Nightway and Big Godway ceremonies are portrayed dancing in front of a natural setting familiar to many people, Monument Valley.

7. Yei and Yeibichai Dancers in Navajo Arts

As mentioned earlier, the Yei are a special class of Holy People, the *diyini*, also called Failed-To-Speak People, while the Yeibichai is a common name for the human dancers who impersonate the masked gods during the Nightway, Coyoteway, and Big Godway ceremonies as well as is the name for Talking God. Because the dancers are always led by one person, Talking God, the Grandfather-of-the-gods, in Navajo *Yé'i bitcei*, the dance in which they perform during the Nightway has come to be known as the Yeibichai dance. Yei and Yeibichai have often been represented in sandpainting and rug weaving and in the last three decades they have appeared in other artistic forms such as jewelry and pottery. Despite the type of art used to display the figures, these have frequently been depicted with the same distinctive features and body postures. It is important to remember this fact, because as it will be shown later, these established looks and depictions expressed in sandpaintings and rugs have been used by Navajo easel painters since the 1920s. Today, David K. John, like other Navajo artists, continues the tradition started by many of his predecessors and incorporates the Yei figures into his paintings.

Woven rugs with Yei figures started to appear at the end of the 19th century near Farmington, New Mexico, thanks to a Navajo woman who wove for the first time large single and double figures at the suggestion of a trader. While initially it was considered dangerous to put a Yei figure into a rug, it began to be accepted by local community members, since the rugs did not have religious meaning or purpose and were not used during ceremonials or rituals (Dedera 1975). From rugs with single and double Yei

figures, weavers evolved and started to include multiple figures that appeared in sandpaintings; a rainbow goddess was always included as guardian of the composition and to ensure its protection. According to McManis and Jeffries the Yeibichai rugs started to appear “in the Shiprock area near the turn of the century to depict the Nightway ceremony in which Navajo dancers portray Yei’ii Bicheii and other Ye’ii” (McManis and Jeffries 1997: 27). The Yeibichai rug is similar to the Yei rug in size, colors and fiber and is different from it in subject, since it depicts “Navajo dancers, usually in profile, impersonating the Yei figures” (James 1977: 33), not the portraits of the Holy People themselves.

In the early years of the twentieth century, rugs depicting Yei figures also appeared in two other locations in northwestern New Mexico, Shiprock and Lukachukai. The rugs coming from these areas, however, were very distinguishable due to their recognizable traits and styles. The Shiprock rugs, for example, are usually “of small to moderate size carrying bright colored, slender, front facing figures surrounded by, in most cases, a red and blue figured rainbow goddess that serves as a border down the sides and across the bottom. Additional designs usually include interspacings of cornstalks and arrows” (James 1977: 33). The Luckachukai rugs, on the other hand, are larger, with backgrounds “usually grey, red, black, or brown colored. In some examples the rug may be bordered outside of the rainbow goddess, usually in a dark color. In many pieces, the rainbow goddess is completely eliminated, with a solitary heavy border enclosing the

figures. Also, the Yei tend to take on a more human appearance, similar to the front-facing Yeibichais” (James 1977: 38).⁴

Both in sandpaintings and rugs the Yeibichai dancers are often represented standing next to each other, in a row, as they are seen during their performances in the ceremonial dances. What is interesting, however, is that they are all portrayed “with one leg slightly raised, arms bent at the elbow, and hands holding rattles and spruce boughs positions at the waist. The figures gives the impression of being slightly turned to the side (although the face is in frontal position) and of having been stopped in mid-action” (Parezo 1983: 42). This is a stylistic motif to symbolize movement and dancing, but it is also employed to show directionality. This same body posture can be found in the works of many easel artists, such as Harrison Begay, Tony Begay, Beatin Yazzie, Harold Davidson, Tony Abeyta, only with some little personal variations and refinements; the substance, however, is the same. David John draws upon these ‘traditional’ and standard representations, but, contrary to the works other artists, his depictions are not as faithful and detail oriented. They show more personal involvement and a less static approach to the dancing figures.

8. Navajo Easel Painting Traditions

Easel painting was foreign to Navajo artistic culture before the 20th century or 1885. Navajos did paint, but it was mainly done on flat horizontal surfaces or on rock and

⁴ For illustrations see, James, H.L. *Posts and Rugs. The Story of Navajo Rugs and Their Homes*. Globe, AZ: Southwest Parks and Monuments Association, 1976, p. 33 (Shiprock Yei rug) and p. 38 (Luckachukai).

canyon walls and not for individual accomplishments or fame. The first well-known Navajo artists who used easel painting as a way of telling traditional stories and customs were students of Dorothy Dunn at the Santa Fe Indian School. Among them were Narciso Abeyta (Ha-So-De), Harrison Begay, Andrew Tsihnahjinnie, Gerald Nailor, R.C. Gorman and many others. Dunn, a former teacher at Santo Domingo Pueblo, studied at the Art Institute of Chicago where she became familiar with the major artistic and stylistic trends of contemporary European and American Art.

After the completion of her training she returned to the Southwest with the intention of teaching studio art at the Santa Fe Indian School. “The Studio” started in 1932 with the goal of bringing Native American painting to be “one of the fine arts of the world” (Brody 1971: 129); the ways through which Dunn to attain this were: “(1) foster appreciation of Indian painting among her students and the public, (2) produce new paintings in keeping with the high standards already attained by Indian painters,⁵ (3) explore traditional Indian art methods in order to continue established painting forms, and (4) evolve new motifs, styles, and techniques keeping in character with the old, and maintain tribal and individual distinction in the paintings” (Eldridge 2001: 6).

For these reasons, her teachings strongly encouraged students to produce works that would portray genre scenes and images of their traditional lives, their ceremonies, and the natural landscapes surrounding their ancestral homes. Ceremonies and genre scenes were to be produced in an ‘authentic’ Native American style that she pronounced to be

⁵ In particular the Pueblo painters of the San Idelfonso Watercolor Movement and the Kiowa Five.

narrative, naturalistic, flat, two-dimensional, linear, and with use of soft colors. This style soon came to be known as ‘Traditional Indian Painting.’

Sandpaintings were good source of traditional design students could look at in order to achieve these authentic forms and paint in the Studio style. Students were encouraged to include them as well and therefore, by 1933, many young artists, “were adding sandpainting elements to these themes” (Parezo 1983: 54-55). Gerald Nailor and Stanley Mitchell, for example, “produced a landscape of horses and men with three partial whirling rainbow figures in the sky (1934), [...] while Andrew Tsihnahjinnie added formalized plants rooted in the rainbows to his early painting of horses” (Parezo 1983: 54). The whirling rainbow, the figures in the sky, the formalized plants are typical and very recurrent elements of sandpainting that Studio students transferred onto their new pictorial productions.

In the 1930s, however, a few students, in particular Ruth Watchman and Mary Ellen, began to paint “more complete, but still modified versions of sandpaintings in watercolor.” These paintings “were not accurate versions of sandpainting as Dunn assumed, but still derived from traditional subject matter” (Parezo 1983: 55). Since faithful or complete designs and representations of the sandpainting motifs were not always allowed because had a religious nature, “the artists just used them as the basis motifs upon which they then developed other Navajo subjects or abstract designs” (Parezo 1983: 56). Many other Navajo artists used sandpaintings and traditional designs as sources of inspiration for their own works. Among the most well-known are R.C.

Gorman, Carl N. Gorman, Robert Chee, James Wayne Jazzie, and Boyd Warner, Jr just to name a few.⁶

Due to struggles and problems with the school administration, Dunn left the Santa Fe Indian School in 1937 and the directorship of Studio was continued by her student Geronima Cruz Montoya, who shared the same philosophy and goals of her predecessor. The Studio, however, did not last forever and in 1962 it was replaced by the Institute of American Indian Art which proposed a totally different approach to Native American art. New faculty members of the IAIA strongly criticized her methods and her approaches to Indian art and arts education and openly departed from them, encouraging students to find more personal ways of expressing themselves, their heritage and their ideas. Notwithstanding the criticisms Dunn received after the IAIA was started, she and her students “created a legacy of art and an approach to art education that contributed more to Indian painting in the modern era than any other force then or since” (Bernstein 1995: 14).

⁶ Gary Cohoe, Richard Taliwood, Harry Walters, Stanley Battese, and Ed Lee Nataly were others (Parezo 1983).

CHAPTER II

THE CONTEMPORARY ART SCENE: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

1. The Contemporary Art Worlds in Which John Works

In 2002 the curators of the exhibit *Changing Hands: Art Without Reservation. Contemporary Native American Art from the Southwest* and editors of the homonymous publication that followed wrote that Native American art today has become “an increasingly powerful tributary feeding the mainstream of American art” (McFadden and Taubam 2002: 15).¹ Many Native American artists today have come to national attention and their works are recognized and celebrated by cultural institutions and critics as contemporary art; they are given centrality of place and a dynamic driving force rather than marginality. Institutions like the Institute of American Indian Arts and the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art are playing key roles in bridging the gap between Native and mainstream art worlds: the first institution, in fact, provides educational foundations and exposure to all types of art, while the second offers opportunities for visibility and display at the national level.²

¹ The exhibition *Changing Hands* was curated by David Revere McFadden and Ellen Napiura Taubam of the American Crafts Museum in New York City and run from May 9 to September 15, 2002. As the curators stated, the exhibition presented objects, weaving, jewelry, and ceramics, that are “unreservedly defined as art, and it is art that does not fall within the stereotypes of ‘Indian craft from the Reservation’” (p.15).

² The Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art was inaugurated in 1999 in Indianapolis. Its primary mission is to create “an alliance of scholars, curators, artists, teachers, collectors, and contributors who have come together to encourage and support Native American contemporary fine art and bring it the visibility it deserves” (Rushing 2001: xi).

While it is true that many Native artists have become known outside ‘Indian art circles’ and some established names are now well recognized, (for example Allan Houser, George Morrison, Bob Hazous, James Luna, Shelley Niro, Nora Naranjo-Morse, and Gerald McMaster), the majority are still not breaking through the limiting confines of Indian markets, shows and fairs, an art world marked and defined by ethnicity. Few Native artists achieve national recognition, are featured in exhibitions of contemporary art (since they are still looked upon as “other” artists), and considered for theoretical and formal discussions on American art today. This means most are still forced to promote their works within particular regional venues, especially in the Southwest. Here the label “Indian” gives them an economic advantage in a niche market but means that they face barriers trying to enter and thrive in a national, non-marked market. Why is it so? Why does the label of a Native American heritage almost automatically place an artist within certain established categories and stereotyped labels which influence how their art is conceptualized and received?

According to Chiricahua Apache art historian and anthropologist Nancy Mithlo, one of the reasons can be found in the widespread confusion that still exists about “the purpose and intent of Indian contemporary art” (Mithlo in McMaster 1998: 56). While some people consider Native-made objects to be simply articles of trade found in southwestern gift shops and trading posts (i.e., souvenirs) or itinerant crafts directly sold on the side of the streets, others expect them to be permeated by spirituality and special powers. The audience and buyers of Native art, therefore, “vacillate between the extremes of debasing Indian art as a tourist commodity and elevating it to holy status”

(Mithlo 1998: 56). The reasons behind this dichotomy depend mainly on the fact that Native-produced works are not accepted as “real” art. Who then establishes the criteria to judge Native American art? And above all, if an artist’s work is construed within the confines of a category, art for commercial venues such as Indian markets and fairs, for example, why is it dismissed by critics and scholars, non-Native and Native alike? Why is it not looked upon as art but best as craft or at worse as an economic corruption? Are these works less artistically refined, original and thus less valuable? Are they impure?

Some of the answers to these questions were given by Kay WalkingStick, a renowned Native artist and critic, back in 1992, in a special issue of *Art Journal* in which she lamented “the lack of serious discussion of Native American art outside of its relationship to ethnographic or tribal art and artifacts” (WalkingStick 1992: 15). At the same time, however, she affirmed that this lack of critical debate is due to the fact that many artists, in the attempt to make a living out of their art, paint according to the tastes and trends of the market and thus do not make “original” works. As a consequence, the supposed value of their work is diminished. This is especially if one uses an elitist definition of art as a one-of-a kind creation, which it never is, since artists often produce series such as lithographs, etc. The works of attendees of Indian markets or of those artists exhibited in the galleries of the Southwest, therefore, cannot be considered authentic, that is original, out of the artists’ own personal experiences, feelings and ideas, but rather as the products of a capitalistic market. Like every item of consumption they answer the demands of the clients and are altered to meet their expectations (WalkingStick 1992).

WalkingStick, along with other artists like Gerald McMaster and James Luna and art critics like Jackson Rushing, is not criticizing traditional Indian painting (i.e. painting in the Studio style) per se (WalkingStick 1992; Rushing 1992, 1995, 1999; McMaster 1992, 1998; Houser in Highwater 1976); on the contrary, they all recognize the value of this earlier style, the impact it had on many generations of Native artists and acknowledge its importance in the recovering and maintenance of many traditions and tribal identities. Their disapproval is addressed in particular those young artists, who, today, mainly paint in a traditional manner because of market demands, rather than experimenting with the current techniques, trends and media and expressing *their* ideas and identities. This is the same criticism that is leveled against artists who sell in motel rooms at discounted prices.

The first easel painters of the 1930s and 1940s, those who were taught at the Santa Fe Studio under Dorothy Dunn, were not familiar with other types of art or techniques due to a lack of exposure, so they kept working in the same style and using the same imagery. But young artists of today live in a different world and are presented with many diverse opportunities to experiment, test and find their own original and individual style. By limiting themselves to market demands they produce artifacts for the masses and not art or so the reasoning goes. According to WalkingStick, this mass production of art kills creativity and self-expression and enslaves the making of artwork to the wishes of outsiders, and not the artists themselves.

Native artists who are overtly using Indian images and designs in a traditional manner, therefore, are not regarded as serious by critics, because their works, in the end,

are “mass-culture art” and “wish fulfillment for a white culture,” that is, simple derivative products. (WalkingStick 1992: 15). Serious art is seen as the “good, risky, original,” one that has been presented by “individuals educated in the traditions of the twentieth-century modernism, but also in touch with their Indian heritage, their cultural differences, and their spiritual concerns.” The works of these artists are not about sharing “an aesthetic sensibility” but about “a strong self-identity as Indian people and as artists” (WalkingStick 1992: 16). They do not sell what is recognized as Indian but promote the individuality of their being Native. WalkingStick is being very elitist and her arguments presents some problems since she ignores the economic aspect of all arts and thus the fact that artists have to make their living out of it.

The concerns expressed by WalkingStick fourteen years ago, lack of analytical interest, mass-culture art, are still true today to some degree: Native art still lacks critical attention, and although things have changed and there is more of a national, indigenous and academic dialogue, art is still marginalized and categorized as ethnic. At the same time, however, what WalkingStick articulated was an over-generalization about “mass-culture art.” It is true that artists have to make a living through their paintings, but this does not necessarily mean that all of them achieve this goal by making their art more marketable. There are many artists today, who, though exhibiting their works at Indian markets and fairs and though using recognizable Native images and subject matters, do not paint what sells but what they feel is right, that is, their Indianness, their personal and family histories, their views of the world and what surrounds them. To say that artists today “paint strictly for the market” (WalkingStick 1992: 15) and thus accommodate its

demands is a simplification that does not pay justice to all those valuable individuals who really believe in art as a powerful means of self-expression, story telling, and visual communication. Being categorized as 'commercial' is one of the problems that many artists have to face today and this devaluing of their works on the basis of subject matter and the selling venue in which the works are promoted is the situation Native painters constantly face in their attempts to be simply recognized as artists.

David John is such artist who has had to overcome this simplistic, bifurcating categorization. He is a contemporary Navajo artist who, like many others, works with specific images and subject matters easily recognized as overtly 'Indian,' and markets in specific venues, Indian markets and shows. This, however, does not make his art spurious or simply a commodity and does not make him a lesser artist. John uses symbols of the Navajo tradition which are not generalized, stereotyped, or easily recognizable by a non-Native audience, to tell stories about his people and pass them along to the next generation. The works of David John are serious but like those of many artists of the Southwest, dismissed by critics because they are shown primarily at Indian markets and are therefore not considered worthy of review. John's paintings do not aim to simply please the white buyer or perpetuate images of the 'Vanishing Indian.' They are embedded in Navajo traditions, society and lifestyles and reflect the awareness and the desire to tell people, Native and non-Native, about the Navajo people, here, today.

Allan Houser once said: "If I'm going to do something in the contemporary style or if I want to stick to the old way, I think that's nobody business but my own" (Highwater 1976: 146). It should not matter whether one targets the galleries and markets

of the Southwest rather than the ones in New York City, San Francisco or Chicago, as it should not matter if one makes ‘traditional’ or ‘contemporary’ works. What should qualify a work as “art” is its originality and especially its artistic quality.

Where do we position David John in terms of current art trends? How can his art be defined and what are his ties with the past? In order to answer these questions and gain a better understanding of John’s works within the broader spectrum of Native American art, we have to look at the contemporary art scene, whence it originates and which past contexts constitutes its foundations and especially who defines it.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, although Navajos have had their own pictographic traditions for a long time before the arrival of the Europeans, they were introduced to easel painting only in the twentieth century, often in boarding schools. While federal institutions like Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania and Hampton Institute in Virginia experimented a little with painting in the early 1900s, it was not until the early 1930s that art instruction became an official and integral part of the curriculum in boarding schools and universities nationwide. In Santa Fe in particular, it was included in the educational curriculum of the Indian School thanks to the efforts and insistence of Dorothy Dunn. As discussed earlier, Dunn encouraged her students to reproduce scenes of home life and ceremonies in what she believed was the real and “only authentic painting style for Indian artists” (Bernstein 1995: 5), that is, a flat and two-dimensional representation, characterized by the use of pale colors, strong and even contour lines, and lack of shadowing. This type of ‘modern’ painting first appeared in the late 1910s at San Ildefonso where Pueblo men, encouraged by anthropologists, began to draw their

traditional dances and ceremonies on paper.³ Their works were very pictorial and often highly detailed depictions of religious dances, the postures and the garments; they closely documented what the anthropologists were trying to study, record, and ultimately authenticate as real ‘Indian.’

Since these works departed from the customary artistic productions of Native peoples such as baskets, weaving, pottery and jewelry, the works came to be defined as ‘modern’ paintings. The artists, as a consequence came to be known as ‘modernist’ because they distinguished themselves from those who made ‘traditional’ arts and crafts and used a new medium, easel painting, to express their collective and individual experiences and their Native American heritage. These kinds of painting began to be sought after by anthropologists because they were authentic, didactic and faithful representations of the Pueblo lifestyles, and according to some, an example of the natural, “evolutionary progression through stages of art making” (Penney and Roberts 1999: 27). Although they were considered artistically representative of the primitive culture of the makers and of their assimilation to middle class American culture, the main reason for the growing interest in Pueblo watercolors was their ethnographic character.

Penney and Roberts, however, better define this type of representations as ‘autoethnography,’ a concept they borrow from Mary Louise Pratt and which describes “those instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage the colonizer’s own terms” (Penney and Roberts 1999: 23). According to the

³ Among the first Pueblo artists was Crescencio Martinez who around 1907 was working for Edgar J. Hewett at the excavations of Frijoles Canyon. Hewett saw Crescencio’s crayon drawings of Pueblo dancers on pieces of cardboard and encouraged him to paint more. In 1917, the artist began a set of paintings representing traditional dances of the winter and summer ceremonies, commissioned by Hewitt for the Museum of New Mexico (David Penney and Lisa Roberts 1999).

authors, in fact, the colonizers' parameters of expectation were "determined by tourist demand for authentic experiences during their travels and "authentic" commodities as material representations of experiences to take home with them" (Penney and Roberts 1999: 23). By the end of the nineteenth century, however, many Native groups, especially in the Plains, started to record their traditions, ceremonies, and dances on ledgers in the form of drawings and for their own purposes, not simply as sale items for tourists. With the advent of easel painting and the interests of Anglo-Americans in the preservation of Native traditions, artists simply transferred their representations from one medium to another, maintaining intact the original content. Painting, therefore, was often initially used by Native artists like at San Ildefonso as a means of cultural preservation and education of non-Native.

By the time Dunn started the Studio at the Santa Fe Indian School, the San Ildefonso style had already been labeled as 'authentic Indian' due to its content and its exclusive Indian production. Dunn encouraged her students to develop the 'authentic' style of Indian painting (flat, two dimensional, descriptive, and focusing on ceremonial and village life) and helped them sell their works in particular venues and events. In so doing, she continued the promotion of a style already accepted as truly Indian and further contributed to the establishment of the concept of 'authenticity' in regards to Native painting. In the 1950s, however, many artists decided to depart from this modern but traditionalistic style and eventually abandoned it in favor new ones that were more in line with the contemporary art scene (Bernstein 1995). Native artists, in fact, began to look for approaches that allowed more artistic freedom, self-expression and opportunities for

experimentation with different media, techniques and modes of representation. These new styles of painting looked to cubism and expressionism, at three-dimensionality and abstraction, and incorporated non-traditional 'Indian' themes, subjects, and images to depart from the precedent. This diverse and modern approach to painting became known as the New Indian Painting and it was particularly promoted by the Institute of American Indian Arts (hence as IAIA).

Founded in 1962 by Lloyd Kiva New and sponsored by the federal government, the institute was the first school for Native American students entirely dedicated to art and expressive media. Lloyd Kiva New, as mastermind and director, took the responsibility of promoting contemporary Native art and assuring that the Institute was a place in which art could evolve, adjust, and adapt "to the demands of the present, and not on the ability to manipulate the past" (Penney 2004: 205). He encouraged greater freedom of expression and personal experimentation, thus opening up Native art to the contemporary surrounding art world. Fritz Scholder, a faculty member at IAIA and his students T.C. Cannon and Bill Soza were the first who tried to "deconstruct generations of 'Indian painting'" (Penney 2004: 205) and depart from the nostalgic representations of previous decades.

The next generations of artists began to leave behind the traditional, decorative style of the Studio, in favor of more surrealistic, impressionistic or abstract modes. Themes and images shifted, and as a result, communal practices began to be replaced by more personal experiences as well as political and social satire. Media and techniques evolved and simple charcoal, pencil, and watercolor gave way to the use of acrylic,

pastels, photography, collage and installation works. Joanna Bigfeather observed that the contemporary Native American art movement started with the opening of this unique institution which simultaneously “provided students the opportunity to explore their tribal backgrounds,” and allowed them “to experiment in a new artistic language” (Bigfeather in McFadden 2002: 220) that had been discouraged before. The new generations of artists coming out of the IAIA revolutionized the Native American approach to art and radically changed many non-Native, predetermined notions of what characterized Indian art. Young artists created works that were both traditional and contemporary but did not limit their expressive possibilities: experimentation and exploration were the key words of the Institute’s curriculum and art teaching methodology.

Like many other Native American artists since 1962, David John attended the Institute of American Indian Arts and received an associate degree in 1986 in painting. Living in Santa Fe allowed him to learn more about the Native American artists who preceded him and to see their works on display in one of the many galleries of the city. At the same time, he could see what other artists were doing in terms of style and subject matters as well as marketing of their works. Because Santa Fe and the Indian Market have always been the main centers for the marketability of Native artworks and are fundamental in the professional life of David John, it is important to consider their significance for the larger Native art world and how they have impacted or shaped the meaning of Native art.

2. The Patronage of Native Arts and the Santa Fe Indian Market

The Southwest has been a place for exchange and trade long before any Indian market was founded, and even before the Europeans arrived in the region in the 1600s. In fact, Taos and Pecos in particular were famous gathering centers in which ritual, economic and cultural exchanges took place. Many tribes from the neighboring Plains traveled to the pueblos to bring buffalo hides and other valuables to trade. As Penney points out, “within this great cultural mix, the production and circulation of art has long played an important role” (Penney 2004: 80). With the settlement of the first Europeans, economic exchanges and interaction began also with the newcomers and every day goods and artifacts passed from Native to non-Native hands and vice versa. In her article *A Multitude of Markets* Parezo points out that economic dealing generates value for the items that are traded, art included, and this “crystallizes and enhances preconceived images of all actors involved in the art world. It conveys messages about life, place, ourselves and others. If the art is from the Southwest, it must look “Southwestern,” and if made by a Native American, it must look “Indian”” (Parezo 1991: 563-4). It was through these initial exchanges of goods between Native and non-Natives that the first definitions of what Native art was supposed to be began to stand on solid ground.

With the construction of the railroad, the establishment of Harvey hotels, restaurants and trading posts and the nationwide publicity campaigns for travels in the Southwest, Arizona and New Mexico in particular became very popular tourist destinations. These were the places where ‘savage’ Indians could still be seen in their natural environment, still living their traditional lifeways, and still performing their

ceremonies and rituals (Dilworth 1996; Howard and Purdue 1996; Penney and Roberts 1999; Weigle and Babcock 1996). The cultural mix already existing in this area became even greater when Anglo intellectuals, artists, and writers moved to New Mexico and established themselves in Taos and Santa Fe, which became La Mecca of the Southwest. If we add to these changes the effects of boarding school education, the Christianization efforts of missionaries, the constant governmental attempts to Americanize indigenous peoples and turn them into farmers and subordinate workers, it can be easily understood why many indigenous traditions rapidly began to be lost.

Language, spirituality and artistic expressions were the most targeted aspects of Native cultures, because the most dangerous; according to the federal government, in fact, they continued and perpetuated Native cultures and beliefs and thus represented a threat to the assimilationist policy (Lomawaima and McCarthy 2004). Only arts and crafts and watercolor paintings as expressed by the Pueblo artists of San Ildefonso were considered worthy of being salvaged by Americans because they were claimed as part of America's cultural heritage and romantic past. Pueblo watercolors in particular, were not just an inestimable source of ethnographic information, as previously mentioned, but could also be considered as "an autochthonous foundation for a uniquely American aesthetic" in a world that "was dominated by Europe" (Penney and Roberts 1999: 31). Starting in the 1910s, the future of indigenous arts and crafts became a serious concern for many non-Native peoples who realized that the risk of losing this invaluable and truly American patrimony was fast approaching. Artists and intellectuals from the Santa Fe and Taos colonies, in particular, decided that the loss of this authentic Native American

art needed to be avoided and thus their intervention was the necessary solution. In order to assure the continual existence of these art forms, Native production had to be encouraged, sustained, advocated and ultimately marketed. Native artists theoretically had to go back to their original craft traditions and produce art as it was before or at contact.

This is how a system of patronage began to emerge in the 1910s around Pueblo artists and continued to grow side by side with the national renewed interest in Native handicrafts as a counter to industrialization and mass production. Its ultimate goal, as already mentioned, was to revive Native arts and salvage them from disappearance; in addition, its supporters intended to make “a powerful argument about the value of preserving American Indian culture by revealing the beauty of its cultural practices” (Penney 2004: 197). As a consequence of this resurgence of interest in southwestern Native art forms, particularly pottery, starting at the beginning of the twentieth century, but more massively after World War I, Native artists began to turn the objects traditionally made within and for the benefit of their communities into articles for sale to tourists. By changing some of the focus of their craftsmanship from cultural and religious to decorative and secular, they began to be cognizant of market trends and dicta, and consequently concentrated on producing what was requested by outsiders, as we have seen in the previous chapter with regards to sandpainting.

As far as painting was concerned, it was a particular style, two styles of the San Ildefonso and later of the Kiowa artists that was encouraged and promoted by Anglo patrons as the real and authentic Native American art. Every art form that imitated non-

Native expression was defined as impure and therefore not 'Indian.' It could be inferred from these assumptions that an Indian art as intended by white patrons, did not exist; it was their 'invention.' Moreover, as J.J. Brody stresses, "there was never a single Indian art tradition" because for each Native community artistic production had its own form, content and purpose and this changed from tribe to tribes (Brody 1971: 59). The kind of art that Native artists should have pursued and mastered was not ingrained in their cultures and societies but was imposed and thus defined by non-Natives: *Anglos* decided what was authentic Indian art, what the most appropriate, representative style should be, and especially what it should depict. Brody points out that

Both form and content [of modern Native painting] have been molded by a variety of extrapictorial factors: the change to a money economy, the impact of White patrons and their expectations, the institutionalization of Native art instruction in White-operated Indian schools (there again, White expectations affecting Native paintings). Native painting can be understood in terms of its utility; it functioned in specific social ways, and its forms and content can be directly related to the nonpictorial activities that it served (Brody 1971: 56).

The art of the San Ildefonso and the Kiowa Five painters was labeled traditional, because it faithfully depicted the lifestyles of the peoples and, according to non-Natives, was a continuation of the indigenous pictorial practices of the previous centuries as found in petroglyphs, pictographs, kiva and murals. At the same time, however, it was modern, because it was made through expressive means that were new to many indigenous artists. Their works, began to respond to the demands for 'products' and commodity goods; in

this manner, Native artists began their involvement “in a kind of dialogue with the outsider consumers, educating them, on the one hand, to the values of their craft, and adapting themselves, on the other hand, to the demands of the marketplace” (Penney 2004: 189).

Patronage of Native arts started as early as the 1880s, with the first traders, but became a larger ‘business’ with the establishment of the first Indian Market in the 1920s. It was thanks to the insistence and the efforts of patrons such as Hewett, Margretta Dietrich, Martha and Elizabeth White, Dorothy Dunn and others that some Native arts were revived and resuscitated and artists were able to find venues and markets for their works. Although the type of art promoted did not spontaneously come out of the artists’ minds, without external interferences, but was guided and targeted toward Anglo expectations of Indian authenticity, the efforts of Anglo patrons in rescuing cultural traditions that were on the verge of disappearance and discontinuation cannot but be recognized. Surely their ways were not without bias but ultimately they highly contributed to the preservation of precious and culturally relevant art forms. As a matter of fact, it would be impossible to talk about most of today’s art if it was not for the systems of patronage that help generate it. As Jackson Rushing pointed out, art worldwide, especially post Renaissance, has always involved an exchange of capital and collecting, commissioning art works, conferring awards and fellowships. Patronage has always been “essential to the social context of art” (Rushing 2001: xii).

The most famous marketplace for the display and sale of Native American arts has been, since 1922, the Santa Fe Indian Market. Originally designed for the

Southwestern tribes, it now hosts artists from all over the country, Canada, and Mexico, usually representing more than 200 tribes. The first Indian fair, actually called “First Southwest Indian Fair and Industrial Arts and Crafts Exhibition” was held in 1922 in the National Guard Armory building in Santa Fe (Tryk 1993). Participant artists competed in different categories and winners were awarded with monetary prizes and small trophies conferred by a jury of mainly non-Native members.⁴ The idea behind the Indian Fair, however, was not simply to reward the best works; the tangible prizeserved as an incentive and encouraging factor that pushed artists to return to their traditional crafts. The main objective of the Fair was to underline the “importance of fostering and preserving the crafts of the Indian” (Edgard Lee Hewett quoted in SWAIA 2005).

In 1919 Edgard Lee Hewett, director of the Museum of New Mexico, and Kenneth Chapman, assistant director, and later museum curator of the Laboratory of Anthropology and expert on Pueblo pottery, started thinking of ways to encourage local indigenous artists, potters in particular, to revitalize their arts and crafts. According to these two men, a fair would offer a good occasion for both Native artists and non-Native buyers to appreciate and revive the Native artworks had been made before the impact of tourism, commercialization and the production of souvenirs and curios. They wanted to see a return to past artistic traditions and were eager to support the artists in these noble efforts. For this reason, they designed an exhibition that aimed at promoting “Native arts and crafts among the Indians; revive old arts; keep the arts of each tribe and pueblo as

⁴ Categories and members of jury have changed over time, the first to adapt to the changing artistic trends, the second to include native artists and tribesmen. The majority of today’s Indian Markets include the following categories: jewelry, pottery, painting/drawings/graphics, sculpture, wooden carvings, weaving/textiles, basketry, kachina dolls, fetishes, and other diverse art forms such as beadwork, quillwork, functional objects or ceremonial objects, and juvenile entries.

distinct as possible; establish and locat[e] markets for all Indian products; secure[e] reasonable prices: authenticity of all handicrafts offered for sale” (Tryk 1993: 41).

This is how the fair came into existence and opened its door on September 4, 1922. Francis LaFlesche addressed the crowd present at the Armory after Hewett. He stressed “the need for systematic production, steady markets, and the maintenance of adequate prices if the movement to revive Indian crafts was to be a success” (SWAIA 2005). The fair was continued in later years, on Saturdays, in concomitance with the already established Fiesta Days⁵ and maintained the same objectives: “to preserve and revive old arts, to keep the arts of each tribe as distinctive as possible, to help to authenticate, to locate markets, and to obtain fair prices” (SWAIA 2000). In addition to these, the education of a public who would be willing to buy was another important goal of the market.

The committee responsible for the organization of this new event included Chapman, Martha and Elizabeth White, and Margretta Dietrich.⁶ The Indian Market that we still see today originated from the fusion of the Fiesta Days and the Saturday Markets in 1936. The Fair Committee joined the New Mexico Association on Indian Affairs in 1936 and in 1959 became the Southwestern Association on Indian Affairs, the same

⁵ The Fiesta days were an annual celebration proclaimed in 1712 to commemorate the peaceful resettlement of the Spanish in the city of Santa Fe, after they had been driven out by the Pueblos in the revolt of 1680.

⁶ The White sisters and Margretta Dietrich were three of the many Anglo powerful patrons of Southwestern art. Martha and Elizabeth White were the daughters of New York newspaper magnate Horace White; fascinated by native cultures, they chose Santa Fe as their home upon completing their service as nurse assistants for the Red Cross during World War I. Margretta Dietrich was married to a Nebraska governor and moved to Santa Fe after her husband’s death. She became a member of the New Mexico Association on Indian Affairs and of the Independent Indian Fair Committee, which sponsored the Indian Fair from 1927 to 1931, when Dietrich served as a member. She collected many works realized by Dorothy Dunn’s students and became the most important patron of the Studio.

organization that is responsible for Indian Market today. Finally in 1962, the Sunday Market was separated from the Santa Fe Fiesta and became an event on its own.

Another crucial patron of Native American art was Dorothy Dunn, who, with the support of Kenneth Chapman and Margretta Dietrich organized exhibitions of her students' works in museums, art leagues and events all over the United States. Most of all, however, she strongly encouraged her students to participate and compete in sales shows. She believed that exhibiting and selling works in these venues was far more dignifying and respectable than working for Indian traders who only looked for economic revenue (cheap deals) and thus did not promote artistic quality and self-expression. Patronage, therefore, was a way to promote Native arts and artists, while the influence and the involvement of traders "compromised Indian art by making it a strictly monetary venture" (Dunn quoted in Bernstein 1995: 12).

Native artists showcasing their works at the first Fair were judged by non-indigenous artists, anthropologists and "art enthusiasts" in the categories of pottery, weaving and jewelry. Only after the Studio was established and Dorothy Dunn began to promote the Traditional Style was painting also included among the other categories.⁷ In this way, Dunn could use an established and by then well known and respected venue to promote her students' works and could participate in what has been recently defined as the "modernist primitivism" of the Taos and Santa Fe art colonies, that is, the desire to "revive, preserve, and/or salvage authentic aboriginal culture by teaching, collecting, and

⁷ Other categories especially of painting were added much later in order to keep up with the changing times and the always expanding horizons of Native Americans' artistic productions. Today fine arts are judged in the following main categories: traditional, which comprises flat and two-dimensional paintings; realistic, which considers three dimensional works; new directions, under which the modern mainstream are categorized and finally drawing and graphics.

institutionalizing traditional (read “pure”) art forms” (Rushing 1995: 36). The Santa Fe Indian Market, since its inception, was for the majority based on the establishment of Euro-American standards of art imposed on indigenous works. Pieces, in fact, were evaluated and given awards on the basis of “subjects and quality in traditional forms” (Rushing 1995: 36), not on the basis of their innovative artistic significance and value.

The belief that Native American art had to be pure and not corrupted or altered by external influences, that is “without the debasing, intrusive and unattractive elements of what Indian art forms had become through hundreds of years of contact with the West” (Bernstein 2002: 104), was one of the main fundamentals of Indian Market and consequently one of the main judging criteria for most categories. The attendees of the first annual event, for the majority non-Natives, walked around the National Guard Armory in Washington Avenue already knowing what to expect, because they were aware of what Native art was and how it looked. This attitude unfortunately can still be seen even today. It is still the foundations upon which Native American artworks are judged in shows and Indian art fairs all over the country. This scenario only changed when Native artists became part of the jury themselves. Under this framework, a work that does not correspond to this (idealized and constructed) definition and cannot be described accordingly, it is not ‘real’ Native art.

This Eurocentric approach and attitude toward Native American art saw one of its apical and most significant (in a negative way) moments in 1959 when the works of Yanktonai artist Oscar Howe were rejected by the Philbrook Annual Indian painting show, because they were thought to be too abstract and thus not traditionally ‘Indian’. In

response to the criticisms he received, Howe affirmed that his works were deeply grounded in his own traditional heritage, because they expressed Sioux culture and spirituality. His mode of representation was very personal and ostensibly not overtly 'Indian.' This made his works original, just not what people expected them to be. If Indianness is what non-Natives 'pretended' to see or expect from Native artists, Howe's art could definitely not be classified as traditional art, if Native art at all (Penney 2004). Joanna Bigfeather in her essays "Art Education" written for the catalogue of the exhibition *Changing Hands*, stressed that "it is not necessary the art that decides "what Indian art is"; it is the collector. When the artist moves away from what the collector says is Indian art, the work no longer sells. Generally, the work that is most sought after is not the political, the conceptual, or the work that is challenging. Instead, it is the work that follows more traditional concepts" (Bigfeather 2002: 221). This is what people are comfortable with and want to see daily. This was true back then in the 1960s and is still very true today. Collectors, either as private individuals or institutions have, unfortunately, a strong influence on what sells as Native art, because they are the ones who will buy art works and thus legitimize them as authentic.

As already discussed, a consequence of Anglo patronage was, and still is, that artists accommodate their works to varying degrees to some demands of the markets because they must earn a living. As is true for all artists worldwide, most (ca. 90%) can not make a living exclusively on art. But along with other occupations, their talents could bear some fruits. The American Indian fine arts movements that grew out of the Santa Fe Indian School "fitted within a narrow pocket of the American art scene for artists and

patrons alike” (Penney 2004: 201). This economic reality of a niche market contributed to the establishment of a traditional style of Native painting, in subject matter as well as in mode of representation, which perpetuated a romanticized view of Native peoples. Isolated and regionalized from the larger national contemporary art world centered in New York City, Native artists were actually participating in a niche market that has been extremely tenacious in its attempts of preserving the authentic and original flavor of Native art, and very difficult for artists to overcome its ethnically marked boundaries as they seek to move into the national or international markets.

To the Anglo patrons who started to promote these works on a national level especially in the 1930s, the ‘Traditional Paintings’ acquired a new dimensional meaning: they were not ethnographic objects or curios, but works of universally recognized fine art. The *Exposition of Indian Tribal Arts* organized in New York City in 1931 by anthropologist Oliver LaFarge and artist John Sloan aimed at presenting, for the first time, Native American Art as art and at informing the American public of its value. The main goal of this exhibition was to show that “the Indian artist deserves to be classed as a Modernist” (LaFarge and Sloan quoted in Bernstein 1995: 5). The Native-made objects exhibited on this occasion, marked the beginning of a new era for Native American art, a transition from ethnographic specimen or collectibles to artistic expressions of modernism. Notwithstanding this effort, Native arts did not gain public acknowledgement and recognition as art and continued to remain in a limbo of their own; not considered modernist art at the level of mainstream works but no longer seen as a commodity.

In 1941 Rene d'Harnoncourt and Frederic H. Douglas attempted to reduce this isolation of Native American artists from the broader panorama of American art by organizing the exhibition *Indian Art of the United States* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. By displaying contemporary art alongside the traditional arts and crafts, d'Harnoncourt and Douglas wanted to demonstrate to the entire nation that the works of Native artists were not primitive, ethnographic materials, but aesthetically and artistically perfect, "truly American in style and concept" (Berlo 1992: 207). They deserved the same artistic consideration as other American fine arts. During a time of economic depression, governmental new deal policy, economic development program, and international political instability, d'Harnoncourt promoted Native American art as "quintessentially American," embedded with the values that had always characterized America: "basic soundness, vigor, strength of tradition, unexplored wealth, and close relationship to the land" (Berlo 1992: 217). It is important to stress that the definition of Native art as art, was coming from a mainstream American society and was embedded in western perceptions of art and thus western criteria of judgment.

The art presented at the Museum of Modern Art, although still seen as the product of a primitive and uncivilized society, fitted into the established western 'definitions' of fine art. This clearly emerges if we compare the public reception that this exhibit had to the reception of the exhibit *Exposition of Indian Tribal Arts* organized ten years earlier by Sloan and LaFarge. According to Jackson Rushing, the 1931 exposition "had been a critical success" but "had lacked the authoritative force and persuasive power that the MOMA's institutional credibility was able to provide in 1941" (Rushing 1995: 106).

Most important, however, was the fact that “unlike African art, Indian art in 1931 had not yet been endorsed by Paris” (Rushing 1995: 115) as LaFarge himself later realized.

The favorable reception of Native art as *art* came because of the “authoritative validation of the objects” (Berlo 1992: 220) according to western parameters and criteria. Critics, collectors, art experts and the public finally recognized and appreciated the artistic qualities and the formal values of the works which were thus demonstrated to be “worthy of modern consideration” (Berlo 1992: 220). Thanks to d’Harnoncourt and Douglas Native American art started to be seen under a different light: as modernist rather than traditional.⁸ They recognized that its value was not utilitarian as it had previously been as crafts or decorative art, but as aesthetic beauty. Native artists, like their Anglo and European contemporaries, were concerned with forms and not with practicality; they wanted to express their individual personalities. They still made pieces for the community and financially helped it by giving part of the money earned from sales, but in general self-expression was their main concern. Although d’Harnoncourt’s and Douglas’ efforts to expand public awareness of Native American arts were sincere, their consideration of these arts was still based on their own cultural backgrounds and on standards foreign to the cultures of the artists.

In the 1960s a group of Native artists rebelled against the dicta established by non-Native peoples and pronounced that outsiders who were not knowledgeable about

⁸ D’Harnoncourt’s and Douglas’ exhibition and the Exposition of Indian Tribal Arts of 1931, however, were not the first attempts to help Native American art in gaining the credibility of the public and the critics. In 1920 John Sloan arranged the inclusion of some Pueblo watercolors at the Fourth Annual Exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. This event “represented the first time that art by living Native American artists was exhibited in the eastern United States as *art* and not curio, craft, or ethnographic material” (Rushing 1995: 15).

Native realities could not be the judges and authorities on Native art; they did not have the right to impose their views and beliefs on what Native art was supposed to be like on Native artists. The rejection of the works of Oscar Howe at the Philbrook show on the basis of lack of 'Indianness' greatly disturbed Native artists who felt violated in terms of their right of self-expression and self-determination. It was time for action in the artistic sphere. The uneasiness of many contemporaries of Oscar Howe toward the rules imposed by non-Native judges and patrons was discussed during the Southwestern Indian Art Project held at the University of Arizona from 1960 to 1962. A result of this conference was the development of new arts, educational curricula and the reorganization of the Santa Fe Indian School, which resulted in the establishment of the Institute of American Indian Arts.

Starting in the 1960s and up to today Native artists have expanded their artistic horizons and worked in a broader variety of techniques and styles. According to Jeanne Snodgrass, this was particularly due to Oscar Howe and the innovations he felt were needed in contemporary painting, innovations that stressed individual expression and creativity. She stated in fact that "without Oscar Howe and his introduction of a new approach, Native American painters would quite probably still be trying to overcome restrictive rules imposed by the non-Indian world" (quoted in Day and Quintal 1984: 52). Artists in the 1960s, however, were still not satisfied with the restricted and stereotypical approaches to their arts, and so, as another step forward in their artistic freedom they have "seized the apparatus of larger cultural discourse, the studio, the university, the gallery, the museum, and the verbal and written media that support them" (Penney 2004:

212). Sadly enough, notwithstanding all these efforts, their works are still presented mainly in galleries and museums specializing in Native American art and are excluded from the broader contexts of contemporary mainstream art worlds (Penney 2004: 212). More Native voices, however, are emerging.

3. Who Defines Native Art?

Do Native American artists still need the Anglo validation of the ‘authentic’ and ‘real’ Indian in order to have their works recognized as art? Are definitions constituted on Euro-American criteria rather than Native American and if not which cultural criteria are used? What then is Native American art? It is not my intention here to look for satisfactory answers to this last question, because it is an argument that cannot be covered in a couple of paragraphs, if it can be covered at all. However, I need to pose it because it automatically brings us to consider another important issue, which is implicit in the question: who is the Native American artist? Again, this is not an easy question to answer, but it is important here to mention because those who define Native art consequently base their definition on the ethnic and racial identity of the producer. Unfortunately these definers are the same people who control the markets, the galleries and the Indian fair circuits and now the federal government.

The main definition of Native artist comes from legislation, the Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990. Originally passed in 1935, it was crafted with the intention of protecting artists and their works against mass production and counterfeiting but was in reality a consumer protection law. Its purpose was to “prohibit[s] misrepresentation in

marketing of Indian arts and crafts products within the United States” (U.S. Department of Interior, Indian Arts and Crafts Board), thus guaranteeing buyers that what they purchased at Indian fairs, markets or souvenir stores were artifacts made by Native artists and not by underpaid Chinese, Taiwanese or Mexican laborers. The act ensured the seller the rewards of his or her work, and at the same time ensured the consumer that the product was made by a ‘real Indian’ and that the art was an original, not an imitation or reproduction made in a sweat shop.

A major problem with both the 1935 and 1990 legislation, however, is the definition of Indian and this becomes relevant to our discourse because this same definition is used by museums and associations as the major admission criterion to their juried competitions. According to the 1990 Act an ‘Indian’ artist is an enrolled member of one of the 557 federally recognized tribes in the United States but also “any individual who for the purposes of this section is certified as an Indian artisan by an Indian tribe” (Indian Arts and Crafts Act, sec. 104. b1). An Indian tribe is defined as:

(A) any Indian tribe, band, nation, Alaska Native village, or other organized group or community which is recognized as eligible for the special programs and services provided by the United States to Indians because of their status as Indians; or (B) any Indian group that has been formally recognized as an Indian tribe by a State legislature or by a State commission or similar organization legislatively vested with State tribal recognition authority (Indian Arts and Crafts Act, sec. 104. b3).

In compliance with this law, many institutions now require proof of enrollment, either the BIA's "Certificate of Indian Blood" or a tribal enrollment card, before admitting artists to their shows and fairs; among these are the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian in Santa Fe, the Eiteljorg Museum and the Indian Fair and Market at the Heard Museum in Phoenix. While these measures ensure the original provenience of the art work, they automatically exclude many artists who, for various reasons, decide not to enroll or cannot enroll either because their tribe is not federally or state recognized or because they do not meet the tribal criteria to become members (i.e. however this is defined by the tribe). The government and other institutions are required by law to use this definition, independently of what the artists or the tribes have to say in this regard. Jaune Quick-to-See Smith commented on this legislation saying that "defining someone's cultural authenticity by degrees of race is not only a lunatic idea, but it is cultural hegemony right out of our colonial past" (Grant 2002: 17). Several well-known Native artists suddenly became non-Natives because of the 1990 law and its implementation.

If we consider non-indigenous standards as the driving force, it could be easily said then that 'Native American art' is a construction of Euro-American colonialism and consumerism and is the result of an imposition of world views and beliefs that affects behaviors that do not correspond to the ones belonging to the indigenous population. The concept of art for art's sake as promoted by Euro-Americans and the definition of artist and artwork that derives from this view are not endemic to indigenous societies, but have

been transplanted over time by a colonial culture as a result of mercantilism, colonialism and capitalism.

Definitions of Native art as it occurs in trans-cultural situations involving Native artists and non-Native consumers, therefore, have primarily come from the outside. Traders, patrons and collectors were among the first who contributed to take care not to disfranchise Native consumers and established criteria for judging Native art; the 1935 legislation resulted from their criteria on Native art and artists. Before patrons and traders, however, was another category of experts: anthropologists. In order to locate the origins of the definition of Native art, we must go back to the turn of the century, between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, when museums started amassing huge collection and the increased interest in Native handicrafts was at the basis for a shift from communal to commodity art, that is, art for tourist sales, and a variety of commercial markets.

Since the second half of the nineteenth century museums and other institutions gathered indigenous-made objects for their collections (Parezo 1989). This behavior was at first dictated by widespread interests in documenting the different Native cultures living within the American territorial boundaries; later, however, with the advancement on the frontier and the conquest of the west, it was considered a necessity. The American people felt it was their duty to preserve what was thought to be vanishing cultures: the Native was doomed to disappear and thus museums and institutions needed to collect their artifacts and samples of their traditional lifeways before it was too late. According to Janet Berlo, the concept of Indian art was “largely molded by these institutions and

their collecting policies” (Berlo 1992: 2); indigenous peoples themselves did not categorize their material productions as ‘art’ and these were not conceived in the same manner as art objects were intended in a Euro-American world.

The objects Native artists made served different purposes and carried multiple meanings, from religious, spiritual, and ceremonial to simply mundane, practical, or decorative. All the objects collected in the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have been located, described, catalogued and eventually exhibited to the general public as Native American material culture, given value as ethnologic, natural, history or folklore specimen. They were associated with and seen as representations entire tribe rather than an individual artist, and were instrumental for documenting the way of life of the people who made them. Native-made objects could not be defined as art, because as conceptualized by western canons art was the product of an individual, expressing his or her self through the medium of painting or sculpture. Art was not collective and did not have a functional purpose; it was simply art for art’s sake.

Native American art as it was defined by anthropologists was, as Berlo stresses, “an image we claim represents Native American art and culture” (Berlo 1992: 3). Making art was a daily activity for indigenous people; it was not an exceptional activity although in each culture individuals were recognized as especially good potters, weavers, and basket makers. Individuals learned from the elder members in their families and many were trained to be artists because it was their assigned role within the family or the societal group. Trade and crafts specialization were common before contact and occurred before any ‘foreign’ settlement in the region. It was not until the 1800s, however, when

Anglo-Americans began to travel intensively to the Southwest for tourism, archaeological and anthropological research or the simple curiosity of seeing the ‘uncivilized’ Indians, the making of handicrafts began to shift: from familial and communal activity, that is, serving the purposes and the needs of the family, the clan and the larger Native community, it transitioned into a commercial activity that still centered on trade.

As a consequence of the birth of anthropology, the nineteenth century was also a time for scholarly research and data collection. Tribal arts were among the aspects of culture that were studied in order to better understand the societies from which they derived. Anthropologists’ conceptualizations of art were generally not based on meanings, but rather focused on the classification and description of objects, techniques and attributes. The goal of anthropological research on tribal material culture was to increase scientific knowledge and museum collections for cross-cultural comparisons during the unilinear, evolutionary period and to describe individual cultures, not to appraise or evaluate the objects. Other types of research focused more on the evolutionary development of tribal arts, their ornamental forms, and their techniques and these studies were well integrated into the wider, ongoing discussions on the theories of human and social evolution that placed indigenous societies at the lower stages of civilization.⁹ Among the few scholarly works that went against this standardized research agenda was Franz Boas’s article “The Decorative Art of the Indians of the Pacific

⁹ Among the most prominent and significant works on the evolutionary history of tribal arts are: William Henry Holmes, 1890, “On the Evolution of Ornament: An American Lesson,” *American Anthropologist*, (1890), 3:137-46; A. C. Haddon, *Evolution in Art* (1895); Ernst Grosse, *The Beginnings of Art* (1897).

Northwest Coast,” published in 1897, because it analyzed “issues of iconography, representation, meaning, and abstraction in art” (Berlo 1992: 7).

Only 20th century definitions of Native American art partially originated as part of anthropological research and collecting of “primitive” cultures. Art museums, by selecting the artifacts to display in their collections, were judging and validating “the most successful objects” and thus raising these ethnological materials to higher status (Rushing 1995: 12). Since then, the anthropological definitions combined with the traders, Natives and collectors definitions conferred on these objects have crystallized in people’s minds and perceptions, along with the belief that Native art mainly consisted of works that “replicated styles, materials, and methods that have been passed down, largely unchanged, from generation to generation, from time immemorial” (Monroe et al. 1997: 13). As Dan Monroe further stresses in the catalogue of the exhibit *Gifts of the Spirit* it is this type of art, unchanging, static, and historical, that has been referred to as “traditional” Native American art, because “it is often assumed to represent Native American cultures in some pure and ancient forms” (Monroe 1997: 13), uncorrupted by contact with the white man and his society.¹⁰ The concept of ‘authentic’ naturally followed that of traditional, being authentically Native only an object that did not reflect the influence of the white man’s world.

As a consequence, one of the misconceptions about Native art that emerged during the late nineteenth century and early 20th century was it was timeless and static; its

¹⁰ *Gift of the Spirits. Works by Nineteenth Century & Contemporary Native American Artists* was an exhibit organized by Dan Monroe, Richard Conn, Richard W. Hill Sr., Susan Shown Harjo, and John R. Grimes for the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts. It run from November 4, 1996 to May 18 1997.

unchangeable quality resulted from the reproduction of what had been done and taught by previous generations. The massive collecting activities and the consequent exhibitions using only the label of ethnographic items reinforced and solidified people's beliefs that "traditional" objects were frozen in time and were replicas of the past. This misconception has carried on well into the 20th century, when the collectors of Native art became the white, wealthy, individual patrons rather than institutions like anthropology and natural history museums. Non-Native collectors encouraged artists, men and women to "pursue traditional forms and techniques" (Rushing 1995: 17) of their own heritage, without borrowing from other cultures in order to keep their works as distinct as possible from those of Native artists from different tribes.

Unfortunately this misreading of the nature of Native art is still very palpable today, especially when it comes to pigeonholing contemporary Native artists into categories. These are established first on the basis of race, Native American artists juxtaposed to American ones who are not classified as "White American contemporary artists" (Monroe 1997: 16); secondly on the basis of "traditional" or "nontraditional" and finally on the basis of sex. For example, the categorization of "traditional" for potters does not have the same meaning as "traditional" for painters: the first are traditional because they use the same raw materials, production methods, and technology that were available to their ancestors in the nineteenth century or much earlier, while the second are defined as such because they use certain motives that have become known as *the* authentic, thus traditional style. These categorization of "traditional" and "nontraditional" form distinctive cultural styles, like Acoma versus San Juan in ceramic styles.

Art forms such as “textile, ceramics, wood carving, beadwork and basketry” were considered traditional because they were an ‘original’ product of the culture, something that had been made by people since the beginning of time and was an established part of the culture, religion and practices of that people (Rushing 1992: 6). These decorative arts tended to be gender-based in many Native societies and normally they were made by women (Parezo 1987). In the Anglo-American paradigm too, women were supposed to be more traditional than men, since they were assumed to be the ones responsible for education and the perpetration of culture, which was of course not true. Today, even if some materials and methods have changed, purposes and functions have been influenced by white society and the increasing demands of the tourist and collectors’ markets. Crafts such as weaving, pottery, basket making are still considered “traditional” and “authentic” in comparison to most innovative and contemporary art forms such as graphics, printing, installation, or medium like glass, marble, and digital.

Do [or can] these terms, “traditional” and “authentic,” have the same meaning when applied to contemporary art objects, crafts or fine arts? How are they reshaped considering the often impermeable boundaries that surround them and the constant interchanges and reciprocal influences between the Native and the non-Native worlds? It appears obvious that these definitions, today, are too narrow and restrictive to describe the evolving nature of contemporary artworks and especially of the constantly changing realities of those who make them. However, it seems that these are the paradigms according to, or against which, Native art is still judged today; this is the kind of art that is expected from Native artists and these are the labels that outsiders want to attach to

their works. These attitudes of the still dominant authorities in public viewing as well as in art criticism do not pay justice to either those artists who work within more modernist and abstract contexts or to those who take a more ‘traditional’ and overtly Native artistic path.

Native artistic forms have often been defined by others, outsiders and self-proclaimed experts. Notwithstanding this, Native voices were never suppressed and erased and Native artists were able to emerge, express or share their ideas. Times have changed and Native art has begun to be defined by Native artists, according to their own values and criteria; now it is not only up to the outsider to judge the ‘authenticity’ (read as Indianness) of their work. In the course of the last two decades more and more Native critics, museum curators, art historians, and artists have raised their voices and started to challenge the established categorizations assigned to Native American artists and their works (among them are Gerald McMaster, Kay WalkingStick, Allan J. Ryan, James Luna, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, Rick Hill, just to name a few).

Today, a century after the first collecting activities by such museums as the Smithsonian Institution, the Field Museum of Natural History, the American Museum of Natural History and the Peabody Museum at Harvard University, the way in which Native art is judged and the standards by which ‘traditional’ is defined still heavily depends on these collections and the characterization they provided (Berlo 1992). As Parezo has written, museums, along with galleries, are the main institutions that today “educate the buying public and validate authenticity. They produce messages. They say

“this is ‘traditional’”; “this is ‘nontraditional and innovative but definitely Indian’”; “this is ‘handmade’”; “this is ‘quality’” (Parezo 1991: 570).

Where does David John stand in all these? How do we categorize his art?

Commercial? Traditional? Tourist-oriented? Contemporary? Modernist? As the owner of Ratcliff Fine Art in Sedona pointed out, John’s works are definitely contemporary since he is alive and working today. But where do we place him as an artist? I personally like a definition that Rick Hill provided in 1990 in the catalogue of an exhibition curated by Jaune Quick-to-See Smith and titled *Our Land/Ourselves*. He wrote: “If we need to call Indian art anything, it is Neo-Native Expressionism. It is the expression of what it means to be Indian. To some it is strong ties to the glorious past. To others it is a strong sense of an ongoing tribal identity. To others, it is the complex thoughts of the individual who is an Indian. It is many views, many realities, many voices” (Hill in Quick-to-See Smith 1990: 2). John’s art expresses what it means to be Navajo as well as his personal ties to his community and its history; in a contemporary, personal and communicative language, it expresses the artist’s ties to both present and past, and projects them into the future for the next generations.

As Hill said in concluding his essay in the exhibit catalogue, “there can be a deep regard for the past, but people “live and create” in the present, and do it for the sake of the future” (Hill 1990: 4). John highly regards the past as the place where he and his people come from, but talks about the present as the place in which he is currently living and from which he is getting his inspiration. This is what makes his works valuable: the ever-present connection with the past does not make his works frozen in time, static or

immutable, but rather alive and in motion, a testimony to the present and the future generations of the continued existence and resilience of Native peoples. By honoring the past and providing a bridge to the future, John creates beauty in harmony, a *hózhó*, the core value of Navajo culture.

CHAPTER III

THE ART OF DAVID K. JOHN

Born near Keams Canyon, Arizona, John is a proud member of the Navajo Nation, the Diné. He grew up on the reservation where he was raised in the Navajo traditions by his mother and his grandparents. Through his maternal grandfather, a medicine man, he learned the stories, the prayers, and the songs of his people, which he loved, and respected. Although he grew up surrounded by relatives who were involved with the production of arts or crafts (his mother was a rug weaver, his grandmother a jeweler, while some of his cousins were painters), he did not have any first-hand experience with art and creativity until high school. Like many Navajo boys he spent his childhood herding sheep on the reservation and playing.

John attended Richfield High School in Richfield, Utah and during his sophomore year took a course in commercial art and illustrating. Previously, he had not shown a particular interest in art or drawing; he knew many students who were good at it, but he did not think he was. During this class, however, John realized that he had some talent and enjoyed being exposed to this form of expression. His art teacher encouraged him to continue and he followed his advice; however, what really pushed him to practice art was the inspiration he found in other artists, especially Navajo painters. Clifford Beck was one of these and his abundant production of portraits in pastel colors strongly influenced John and his early works, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

John graduated from high school in 1982 and the following year received a certificate as a commercial artist from Sevier Valley Tech, in Richmond, Utah. I do not have much information on what John did between 1983 and 1985, but I can speculate that probably around this time he started submitting his works to the Red Cloud Indian School Art Show¹ and to other events and galleries. In 1986 he attended the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe from which he received an associate degree and then moved back to Utah, first to Provo, where he spent a semester at Brigham Young University in 1987 and then to Cedar City, where he completed his Bachelor Degree in Arts from Southern Utah University in 1991. Here one of his professors helped him learn the basics of paintings and start the first steps toward developing his own distinctive style.

Throughout his college years John took part in various student competitions and shows, winning awards and prizes for his paintings at events like the Red Cloud Indian Art Show in Pine Ridge, South Dakota and the Annual Navajo Show in Flagstaff. 1991 was a very productive year for John, as he presented his works in some of the major Native American art shows of the Southwest. His paintings in fact competed at the Annual Navajo Show in Flagstaff, Arizona, the University of Utah Art Festival in Salt Lake City, Utah, the Student Art Show at Southern Utah University in Cedar City, Utah,

¹ According to the 1982 Red Cloud Indian School listing of all the participant artists and winners for that year, David John was placed first in the category drawing. However, I do not know how reliable this information is, nor the one for the previous and following years, since there seems to be confusion between David John and David Johns, who is another Navajo painter, a little older than John. According to a 1993 listing of all the previous winners, in fact, David John appears second in the category of drawing in the year 1972, when John was only 9 years old. Although this could be possible, the 1972 listing, however, reports the name of David Johns as winner in the category of drawing. For this reason, the 1982 listing cannot be considered as a trustworthy source but at the same time it cannot be excluded a priori that John started submitting his works that year.

and especially the Inter-Tribal Indian Ceremonial in Gallup, New Mexico, where he placed first in the painting category, and the annual Navajo Nation Fair in Window Rock, Arizona, where he won first place for etching and second place for graphics.

By 1991 John had also found two stable venues of contemporary fine arts to sell his works: the *James Ratliff Gallery* in Sedona and *Kiva Fine Arts* in Santa Fe. When promoting his works, John did not specifically look for galleries of ‘Indian art’ because he did not want to be classified as an Indian artist. He just wanted to be known as a contemporary artist. The two galleries he selected to promote his works both specialize in contemporary art, though *Kiva Fine Arts* has a major interest in native artists.

The *James Ratliff Gallery*, which sells, according to the owner, “eclectic fine art, one of a kind,”² has had John’s works since 1985. The first gallery he visited, John went accompanied by his wife Kathleen and showed his portfolio to Mr. Ratliff who immediately liked his works. Ratliff liked the “very unique way” John was approaching his Native American heritage, liked his personal history of learning with his grandfather and saw in him a very stable and dedicated artist. Mr. Ratliff has always looked for leaders for his gallery and in David John he saw one, because “he’s not copying from others. He has his own style.”³

In 1986, while a student at IAIA, John walked into a one wall, 100 square feet gallery near downtown Santa Fe that had just opened and was selling only some jewelry. The owner, Paula McDonald, recounts that it was a winter day and John and his wife walked in; he had two paintings and his wife had two masks. He looked at the wall and

² Personal communication, July 18, 2005.

³ Ibid.

with a pointing gesture of his mouth said to McDonald “these would look good there!”⁴ That snowy day they sold all his works. Since then, John has been the major artist featured at Kiva Fine Arts, loved by the owner and by her clientele because “he has a beautiful art and soul.” The gallery has had a room dedicated solely to his works for the last 10 years.

John’s ‘big time’ however, started in the 1990s when he achieved three major artistic and personal accomplishments: the first was in 1990 when he was commissioned to make a poster for the United States Census Bureau which won the Pulitzer Prize for Marketing; the second came in 2000 when his painting *The Blessing* was selected to represent the Eitlejorg Indian Market. The third major recognition came in 2003 when he was chosen as poster artist for the 82nd Santa Fe Indian Market and his painting *Rain Chant* became the emblem of that year’s event. Since then his name, already known in the native art circles thanks to his previous achievements and to his gallery displays, reached a wider audience and public and gained more popularity. This popularity, however, does not go beyond the line that seems to enclose Native artists and limit the appraisal of their arts outside of the established Indian markets and fairs.

According to the owners of Kiva Fine Arts and James Ratliff Gallery, John’s art is a major attraction for the visitors of their galleries because it is visually very powerful and captivating. The deep, warm colors, and the images, as well as the symbolism used in the canvases, make them intriguing for the viewers and inspire a curiosity about the culture from which they spring. These tend to be the main reasons behind purchases of

⁴ Personal communication, July 16, 2005.

John's art. Both McDonald and Ratliff said that buyers come from different backgrounds and their acquisitions are motivated by various reasons: some do not know anything about the Navajo, but are struck by the colors; others look for meanings, while still others look at the artistic quality. In general, however, they agreed that the works have a very emotional effect on people, who feel there is something special in the canvases and can sense a healing process. Although John's intention is not to heal but rather to educate and tell stories, his choice of subject matter, Navajo deities, induces non-Native people to think of his works as spiritual, and thus associate him and his art with mysticism and supernatural powers.

This strong appeal John's works have to non-experts, that is on the buying public, is part of what makes experts look at him as a commercial artist, as a person who is selling his heritage to make not art, but money. But what does his community think about this? Navajo elders and religious leaders have always been concerned about the public display and especially commercial sale of their religion and spirituality. One of the first major issues of commercialization of the sacred was raised in regards to sandpaintings, especially when, after 1977, the Navajo Medicine Men Association wanted to pass laws prohibiting paintings realized for profit. Since not all members of the Navajo community were opposed to the practice of painting sandpainting symbols outside the sacred context and because Navajo belief in individual responsibility in the production and use of sacred knowledge, the association wanted to make sure that economic reasons did not prevail over spiritual values (Parezo 1983).

This response to secularization of sandpainting, however, was not the first incident of community disapproval and opposition to artists' works and behavior. There had been previous cases. In another instance, one protagonist was Tom Yazzie, an artist who decided to create carvings of Yeibichai dancers and present them at the Navajo Arts and Crafts Guild. When medicine men saw his works they commented that "they were 'no good'" and "predicted that Yazzie would go blind and die" (Parezo 1983: 74). These reactions became less frequent with time as people became used to seeing this type of work in souvenir shops. As a matter of fact, "the carvings were accepted, no disaster befell the community, and Yazzie did not go blind" (Parezo 1983: 74).

As this passage testifies, Navajo community members feel the need to intervene and express their judgments when the security of Navajo culture and the well being of the People are at stake, especially in matters of inappropriateness of information or dangerous use of power. However, there is not a consensus on how to intervene, which symbols should be protected or disclosed, which meanings can be used outside of the ceremonial context, or what changes should be made in order to avoid sacrilege, disrespect, and ultimate the Holy People's anger. Within the community some artists are traditionalists⁵ while others are more secular and market-oriented. Because the works of the first aim at preserving Navajo culture, they faithfully reproduce its aspects, consult with elders and singers, have prayers and make sure that they are properly including details. Their concerns about how to proceed with their depictions are regarded as "as a sign of respect for the Holy People" (Parezo 1983: 97).

⁵ In sandpainting they are "those who paint in order to preserve Navajo religion" (Parezo 1983: 97).

On the other hand, those artists who are aiming at market sales and who do not know the stories and symbols they are pointing, that is, they have not been taught the nuances to understand what they are painting, are seen as disrespectful and blasphemous. Their works are not widely approved by the community either because they are not making faithful representations or because they dangerously reveal information that should not be made public or accessible to those individuals who are not ready or knowledgeable enough to receive them. In the end, however, it is up to the individual artist to decide what elements are appropriate for use or not and his/her relationship and role within the community as well as his/her personal relationship with the Holy People will have an important role in this decision. David John, who is very close to his people, without being a traditionalist, has decided to approach his Navajo background and make it public by first asking which symbols are suitable for his purposes.⁶ Use of elements not found in sandpaintings, alteration of the figures or concealment of their paraphernalia is what he uses to show his deference.⁷

⁶ In the course of our interview John told me: "I asked the medicine men before I paint." This fact by itself, however, is not a guarantee of the appropriateness of John's images and choices since we do not know who these medicine men are and how they are considered within the Navajo community, if they are respected or not. Moreover, the fact that John has the permission of medicine men in regard to what he can paint, does not necessarily mean that all Navajo medicine men and religious leaders think the same and approve of his work. John's statement is a generalization that can suffice to a non-Native buyer (who would probably think that because a medicine man is involved, John's paintings are really "Indian") but that cannot satisfy a scholar or Native critic. Unfortunately, at the moment, there are no ways for me to know who are the people John consults regarding the appropriateness of the content of his works, since he did not give names or identity ceremonies.

⁷ By altering the figures John is not doing something new; the device of alternation, in fact, has been used for non-ceremonial sandpainting for the last 120 years in order to avoid the repetition and the over use of particular patterns or images. Moreover, following the secularization of sandpainting, this device has also been implemented in order to evade the representation of symbols outside of their sacred context without being disrespectful or making improper use of them (Parezo 1983).

How does the community see John's works and his public display of the Yei? I am not able to speak for the entire Navajo Nation, but according to what John told me, some people accept his works, others do not.⁸ He thinks there will always be community members who do not approve of what he does, because they are very conservative and would not like to see any type of sacred being or image openly displayed or revealed to outsiders. However, what matters and is most important to John is the fact that he consults with elders and medicine men about the content of his paintings and waits for their approval before displaying sacred images on the canvas. His works also have to obtain the approval of his wife Katherine, a very traditional Navajo, and medicine men in his family before going off to the gallery owners. In this way, John is reassured that the subject matters he paints are monitored by members of the community who are more knowledgeable about what is taboo and what is permitted to be shown.

1. Oeuvre: Content and Meaning

Figures representing personifications of the Holy People have always been present in Navajo art, especially in sandpaintings, because these were used to impart healing to the patients through a connection with the supernatural power of the Holy People during a ceremony, as illustrated in chapter 1. Since the early 20th century, Yei figures have appeared in commercial items such as "clothing, draperies, bedspreads, towels, sheets, napkins, tablecloths, dishes, mugs, salt and pepper shakers, teapots, coffeepots, lampshades, pillows, cushions, and sundry items" (Parezo 1983: 60) which

⁸ Personal communication, July 15, 2005.

were highly marketed by Indian traders by 1930. Even jewelry, weaving, and pottery began to display artists' interpretation of the Yei and other sacred symbols characteristic of sandpaintings. After World War II these representations became especially fashionable.

In contemporary fine arts as well, these figures have become 'very popular' and are often used by artists. Redwing T. Nez (*Yei'ii and Coyote Dances*), Tony Abeyta (*Red Mesa Variant*), Wayne Beyale (*Knights of Fire*, 1993), Peter Ray James (*Grandmother to the Basketmakers*), Harold Davidson (*Talking God*), and Larry Yazzie (*Yei Impersonator*) are just some of the many contemporary Navajo artists using Yei in their artworks. But they are not the first. We just need to look back at some of the works of Harrison Begay (*Stories Our Grandfather Told Us*), Beatin Yazzie (*Clowning at the Ceremonial*, 1967), Mary Morez (*Home of the Yeis*, 1970), and Tony Begay (*Yei Bei Chai Dance*, 1970), or as early as the 1900s, in the paintings of Apie Begay (1901) and Big Lefthanded (between 1905 and 1912) to find this subject matter.⁹ According to Parezo the use of Yei figures outside of sandpaintings could actually date as back as 1884 (Parezo 2005).

Apie Begay and Big Lefthanded were the first to introduce the representation of the Yei in easel art.¹⁰ Their works were not reproductions of sandpainting, but, according to Parezo, examples of "the early use of Navajo religion as a subject for easel art"

⁹ See Jacka, Lois, E. *Enduring Traditions: Art of the Navajo*. Flagstaff, AZ: Northland Press, 1994, for illustrations of the following artists: Redwing T. Nez, p. 18; Wayne Beyale, p. 151; Peter Ray James, p. 36; Harold Davidson, p. 159; Harrison Begaye, p. vi. For an illustration of the painting by Larry Yazzie, see Hill Richard, ed. *Creativity is Our Tradition: Three Decades of Contemporary Indian Art*. Santa Fe: Institute of American Indian Arts, 1992, p. 155.

¹⁰ For an illustration, see Tanner, Clara L. *Southwest Indian Painting: A Changing Art*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1973, fig. 4.4.

(Parezo 1983: 55). Begay in particular introduced changes in the depiction of the figures that are “not seen in traditional sandpaintings” (Parezo 1983: 54); in his painting of the Yei from the Nightway, in fact, “arm placement is modified, decoration on the torsos has been changed, figures are less rigid, and there is a feeling of movement not found in sacred sandpaintings” (Parezo 1983: 54). The same sense of movement can be found in the five paintings of Yeibichai dancers from the Nightway and in the scenes from the Evilway realized by Big Lefthanded.

Yei, therefore, are not something unique to John’s art; he is following a well established tradition. The same characteristic features used in the visual representation of these dancers, which usually replicate the ceremonial Yei and Yebichai, are exhibited by John as well as earlier and recent artists: some of these common traits are, for example, the shape of the masks decorated with a corn plant in its center, a circular mouth and very small eye openings; the colors of the mask and the garments; loose, long hair; eagle feathers on the head of the dancer; a juniper wreath around his neck and rattles in his hands. Notwithstanding these common features, each artist depicts the deities in his or her own personal way, reinterpreting or adapting the classical figure to fit his/her artistic style and taste.

The works of David K. John, therefore, present similarities to those of other Navajo artists and some of the images he uses are not the fruit of his imagination but of his adherence to Navajo traditions. Moreover, because of his choice to paint traditional subjects, it is a natural consequence that the first artists John looked at for inspiration were Navajo. The works of pastels master Clifford Beck and of fellow IAIA graduate,

Tony Abeyta, are two who greatly influenced John's artistic development as it will be discussed later. They are not the only ones, however. Other artists whose influence can be found in John's paintings include Allan Houser and R.C. Gorman, whose works he often saw in Santa Fe or at Indian art shows in the Southwest. It is important to remember that as a college student at both the IAIA and Southern Utah University John was exposed to mainstream European and American art, and this also influenced his style, especially the use of color and of brush strokes which can be retraceable to outside Native American Art as well.

Yei representations in sandpainting have always been ephemeral since the paintings have to be destroyed after a ceremony if people do not want the drawing to acquire powers that cannot be handled.¹¹ However, while sandpaintings can be easily erased after a ceremony, drawings and paintings are permanent and for this reason an alteration becomes necessary if one does not want to attract great powers. This is what John does in his paintings. Because he does not want to reproduce the Yei exactly as they are depicted inside the sacred context and because he lacks the proper knowledge to handle the powerful symbols, he alters their designs to make them different from the real images. His art therefore is not a faithful depiction of Navajo symbols because this would be disrespectful of Navajo culture and possibly harmful for himself and his family. He knows what elements of Navajo culture can be revealed to the public, Navajo or non-Navajo, and his art reflects this awareness and thus the very intimate connection between him and the Holy People as well as his community and traditions.

¹¹ For reasons behind the necessity of erasing sandpainting see chapter 1.

In the course of our personal communication John said “I pick up certain pieces [of the Navajo traditions] like the exact colors. There are certain things I can use, like the twelve eagle feathers; I put only six or five. I don’t put everything on my paintings, but you still can see what [the] symbols are. As long as you don’t put all sacred elements, that’s fine. I asked the medicine men before I paint them.”¹² The same is true for the clay masks that he makes and decorates: because they represent real objects used during ceremonies and dances, he asks permission before putting himself to work. As he told me, “as long as you use clay [it] is like a toy, they’re not like the real ones. They are symbols to dancers. The reed represents the basket weavers, represent the women. I always think about male and female, because they are part of our creation stories and they are part of us. You have to respect both sides. Everything has a balance, positive and negative.”¹³

For his canvases and clay masks John uses images that always imply a meaning, either in the Navajo and sandpainting symbolism or in his own personal life, like in the case of petroglyphs (he used to see as a child on the canyon walls). What he depicts and represents, therefore, is not just placed in his art to decorate a piece. For his canvases John uses a lot of bright and vivid colors, especially blue, red, yellow and green, traditional symbolism, and references to Navajo culture as well as his own interpretations of them; for the masks he utilizes feathers, shells, reed, sand texture, turquoise and other natural elements.

¹² Personal communication, July 15, 2005.

¹³ Ibidem.

Colors are very important in Navajo culture and their use reflects views of the universe and conception; moreover they do not have a fixed order of appearance since their sequence varies by chant. As Reichard points out, “no color or sequence runs through a single chant consistently; none has the same meaning in every setting, nor does chance account for apparent exceptions to the rules; every detail is calculated” (Reichard 1950: 187). Some general statements about colors, however, can be made. In the Shootingway, sunwise sequence (which is what people know as general knowledge) white is the color of the East and represents, purity, hope, and newness; it is what naturally distinguishes the sacred from the profane. Whiteness is associated with “well being, supernatural favor and wealth” and with ceremonial control. Blue signifies “the bright blue sky of the day and belongs to the South” (Reichard 1950: 190); it also represents the fructifying power of the earth, celestial and earthy attainment, peace and happiness. Yellow is associated with the West as it represents the color of the sunset and with corn and pollen, thus fructification and generation. Black, the color of night and of the North is “a sinister color” that threatens but at the same time protects, since “it confers invisibility” (Reichard 1950: 195). It is the color of confusion, doubt, indefiniteness, but also of origin, rest, and finality.

Other colors widely used in sandpainting are red, pink, grey, brown, and the so called variegated. Red, a color largely evident in John’s works, is the color of danger, war and sorcery but also of flesh and blood, thus representing the maternal womb of the Earth. Pink “indicates the glint of copper and stands for a reddish shimmering quality of light” (Reichard 1950: 201); it can also indicate the deep sky or deep water motion. Grey is

generally the designated color of evil and of unpersuadable deities; the monsters of creation stories, for example, are always referred to as grey. As the color black means threat and danger but also protection from them, so does grey: it can be used for defense from the primordial evils. Brown is used in each chant for the actual, unmasked faces of the deities since “it is considered the ‘natural’ color of ‘persons’ and of the earth” (Reichard 1950: 203). Finally, variegated is used as a summary of all the colors and it means “protecting-in-every-direction” (Reichard 1950: 203).

Many of the figures recurrent in John’s works are symbols widely used in sandpaintings, or come from rock art and oral traditions. They constitute common knowledge on one level. Among the symbols derived from sandpainting the ones listed below are the most recurrent. Sources for this compilation include: Haile 1947; Kluckhohn 1946; Parezo 1983; Reichard 1950; Witherspoon 1977; Wyman 1959; James Ratliff

Gallery:

- *Clouds*: drawn as wavy lines, they are desirable because they bring rain, but must be ritualistically controlled. In sandpaintings, black wavy lines placed between the main theme symbols are a direct plea to the Holy People for rain.
- *Dragonfly*: a double-barred shape figure it is an ancient symbol of fertility and an adornment of sacred medicine bowls. Moreover, according to Navajo oral traditions dragonflies were supernatural beings harmful to the earth people until subdued by Holy Man; they “hover over the water which represents the mountain home of the Buffalo and clear water” (Reichard 1950: 450).

- *Corn*: is the symbol of fertility, life and spiritual growth. Seen as more than human, it has a divine nature, since life sprang from it. It is the main source of food and sustenance. In the design from the Blessingway ceremony the stalk has three leaves to the left and two to the right, pollen-filled tassels at the top, two birds resting on the leaves, one on each side of the stalk, and a rainbow around the stalk. In the ceremonial masks ears of corn are placed on the leaves rather than the birds and the rainbow is not present.
- *Crosses*: can have different meanings, as stars representing day and night, fire if red; moki crosses found in rug weavings, or can be the symbol of a chief.
- *Eagle feathers*: a required element of paraphernalia, they should come from a live bird. Symbols of strength, speed, motion, and deliverance they are messengers to and from the spirit world.
- *Horns*: not frequently used by John (they appear in only a few of his paintings, like *Creation to Future*) are evidence of power, often an attribute of Sun. In sandpainting they are used when the Holy People are going to battle evil.
- *Hummingbird* (or blue bird): messenger for birds and other animals, it brings peace and happiness. It is the manifestation of Talking God.
- *Rainbow*: always encircling a sandpainting to guard it, it symbolizes lightness and ease in moving if painted at the ankles or wrists of a supernatural being. It is used for protection from evil spirits and as a prayer in the sandpainting. It has five colors, red, yellow, green, blue, and white, each representing a goddess or Rainbow Person. Some rainbows are short or stubby, others are arched and bent;

they can be folded and carried in a pouch or in a blanket. They also show the way in which the spirits travel to the earth.

- *Rainbow Person*: has a red and blue body separated by a white line, with red in the outside as a protection against evil.
- *Sacred Mountains*: they are of four different colors, white, blue, yellow and black and each indicated a cardinal point. The white peak is Sisaajini, Blanca Peak, representing the East; the blue peak is Tsoodzil, Mount Taylor, representing the South; the black peak is Dibé Nitsaa, Mt. Hesperus, in the North and the yellow peak is Dook'o'ooliid, San Francisco Peaks in the West.
- *Zigzag*: sometimes used by John, it symbolizes lightning and active and passive powers. It is a male lightning if it is crooked, a female if it is straight.

Common non-sandpainting images: John generally uses the following:

- *Handprints*: used to show what humans can leave behind as a kind of signature. Not found in sandpaintings which on the contrary may show footprints, they are more easily visible in rock art where they were thought to be prayers.
- *Mouthpiece*: essential part of the masks wore by the dancers, in John's works is always accompanied by a puff of air coming out; it shows life and the existence of a real person behind the mask. It is John's signature item. Wind and air are powerful beings, are diyin. According to Farella "the act of breathing is in itself a very "sacred" and "holy" thing [...] On inhaling, the powerful ones enter one's lungs and are both a part of the breather as well as his being a part of and linked to all other beings" (Farella 1984: 67). Moreover, the "breath of life" is not

merely a human trait; it is an “entity’s inner being,” its spirit (Schwarz 1997: 51). A representation of the breath of life can be found in traditional attire as well as in baskets.

- *Petroglyphs*: they are ancient rock art and can be found on the walls of canyons and caves at Canyon de Chelly and Monument Valley (the two locations most familiar to John), among many others. Recognizable among them are the humped back flute player Kokopelli; a spiral, symbol of eternity; bighorn sheep and gila monsters.
- *Spiral*: mostly found in rock art, it symbolizes escape from the circle of frustration or preventing from entering it; John also uses it as symbol of eternity, very likely a Christian derivation.
- *Wreaths*: juniper or pine to protect the chanter as well as part of the sacred attire.

John, raised in the Navajo traditions, is aware of Navajo symbolism and of the multiple and multilayered meanings of certain natural elements for his people although he, like many other members of the community does not have access to all the existing sacred information.¹⁴ This consciousness, and therefore John’s connection to his culture and its spiritual beliefs, is a constant presence in his works and a reminder for the Navajo as well as the non-Navajo of the importance of maintaining one’s own traditions.

¹⁴ However, there are many things that are not common knowledge but are available only to singers and chanters or their apprentices.

2. John and His Sources of Inspiration

As already mentioned, the protagonist figures of John's are the Yei, the Holy People (Diné diyini), and the Yeibichai Nightway, Big Godway and the Corral branch of Mountainway dancers, the human beings who represent the Holy People during certain ceremonies. Due to their significance and their prominence in Navajo art, they are not 'original' inventions of David John. They come from a Navajo heritage he shares with many other artists, contemporary and past. Why does he paint them? In his own words "I paint masks because they're Holy People, they protect, they protect me and everybody else...Deities, the Holy People, the connection between them and the Diné is one...They look over us, that's where we've come from. It's finding our roots. Ceremonies are a lifetime learning."¹⁵ Despite the similarities between John and other artists John's paintings are unique in terms of rendition of the subjects because of the visible human component that is a constant and fundamental part of his works. It is the presence of living peoples behind the masks, noticeable through the eyes and the puff of breath, which reveals a very personal and individual style.¹⁶

John therefore is not copying or adapting from the past and does not paint what is commercially marketable or highly in demand. His art is about originality along with the maintenance of tradition. According to him an artist has to be himself and has to "paint from the heart: don't just go along with the latest fad" because "your art will last longer then."¹⁷ His paintings are his own visions and he believes it is the role of the artist to

¹⁵ Personal communication, July 15, 2005.

¹⁶ This is John's own explanation of these unique elements of his art, breath and eyes.

¹⁷ Personal communication, July 15, 2005.

communicate and teach the next generation because “if you don’t express, put things on canvas, all will be lost. Nobody then will remember.”¹⁸ This is what he wants to accomplish as an artist: influence young generations and help those who do not understand the traditional ways. For those who are not Native, he wants them to get a better understanding of Navajo culture and especially to know that Navajos, and all Native peoples, are here today; they have been here for a long time, and they are still practicing their traditions, their spiritual beliefs, and their lifestyles. The use of painting and of conventional images of his people are the instruments John uses to carry on a tradition of visual storytelling started with sandpainting and continued in fine arts through the works of many great artists, well known and lesser known.

The artists John looked at are in particular Clifford Beck, Tony Abeyta, R.C. Gorman, and Allan Houser.¹⁹ Clifford Beck (1946-1995) was very famous for his pastel drawings of Native peoples, Navajo as well as from other tribes, focused on the anatomies of the bodies and portraiture. He attended the California Arts and Crafts College in Oakland, California and then returned to his homeland where he had the opportunity of teaching fine arts at Navajo Community College from 1971 to 1974. A very productive painter during the course of his life, he was strongly influenced by the works of nineteenth century French impressionists, in particular Edgar Degas and his brilliant use of pastels. Beck developed that same immediacy and spontaneity typical of the French painters and applied it to his subject matter and style. Although his works

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ While John explicitly told me that the works of Allan Houser and R.C. Gorman influenced his own art, he never mentioned Beck or Abeyta in the course of our conversation. My argument here is based on information I received from art historians and scholars of contemporary Native American art.

depict Navajo people or traditional dancers from other tribes, he believed that “there’s nothing “Indian” about the way he paints except for his subjects” (Loy 1980: 20).

Beck’s early works are drawings of relatives and members of his Navajo community to whom he had emotional ties. According to Sally Hyer, the way they are portrayed “captures the individuality of his models and goes to the heart of their human character” (Hyer 1996: 5). His later works, especially from the decade before his death focused “on transforming oral tradition into visual form” (Hyer 1996: 4) and aimed at connecting “past and present by incorporating not only human forms but also motifs from ancient petroglyphs and cave paintings... The line between sacred and secular is blurred when he combines ceremonial impersonators with Ye’ii Bicheii and Holy People inspired by sandpainting” (Hyer 1996: 5). These, as well as the portraits of elders and warriors, are without any doubt the elements John looked at for inspiration in the early stages of his career and the ones from which he would then develop his own personal repertoire of subjects.

Diné’s Warrior’s Protection (fig. 1) is a clear example of this initial phase of John’s artistic career, even if the medium used is acrylic. The source of inspiration and the role model for this and other early works, however, is evidently Clifford Beck as it can be seen by comparing John’s warrior with Beck’s *Generations*.²⁰ Both men are represented from the profile, looking far away in the distance and not directly at the audience; the features of their faces are gentle, softly depicted, but very realistic and detailed. Only the face is represented, because the rest of the body does not matter: it is

²⁰ For an illustration see Jacka, Lois E. *Enduring Traditions: Art of the Navajo*. Flagstaff, AZ: Northland Press, 1994, p. 112



Figure 1. *Diné's Warrior's Protection*, oil on canvas, 36" x 36"
(reprinted with permission of the artist; Courtesy of *New Mexico Magazine*)

through their gaze that the artists, first Beck and following his footsteps John, transmit their humanity and the strength of their character. But while in Beck's drawings the surroundings are not very important, and so, most of the times, the head of the person is the only thing that emerges from a cloudy mass of colors, in John's works everything has a meaning. Differently from Beck's figures, in fact, John's warrior is spiritually connected to his Navajo traditions and world.

As a matter of fact, this warrior, adorned with turquoise earrings and necklace and the typical two eagle feathers on his hat, is not simply surrounded by a mass of color; these, in fact, represent an alteration of the sequence of the sacred winds (traditionally white, blue, yellow, black) with red replacing white, and are accompanied, each of them, by a symbol representing one of the four sacred mountains of the Navajo as they are found in sandpainting. Indeed, by closely looking at the canvas we can see the small designs in every one of the four colored areas; each peak has its top pointing toward the center of the painting. Starting from the top right corner and clockwise the symbols correspond to the following mountains: the white peak is Sisaajini, Blanca Peak (East); the blue peak is Tsoodzil, Mount Taylor (South); the black peak is Dibé Nitsaa, Mt. Hesperus (North) and the yellow peak is Dook'o'osliid, San Francisco Peaks (West).

Interesting is the fact that, for the winds, the sequence of the four directions (normally east, south, west, north) and thus of the colors (white, blue, yellow, and black) is changed: after the South John places the North rather than the West. This is a device called alternation also used in sandpainting: here, since the chanters are not supposed to repeat a chant exactly or the way a sandpainting is created more than two or three times,

one right after each other, they slightly change the rite, thus making it different to avoiding overdoing and over using. John is doing the same in his canvases: out of respect for his traditions he deliberately alters the sequence of colors and cardinal directions thus preventing an excessive use of the sacred symbols and meanings.

The resemblance between the works of the two artists, Beck and John, is evident even though John did not continue with portraiture but preferred walking ahead on the road of experimentation in order to try something different. It cannot be denied that Beck was one of John's first sources of inspiration, and continued to be such even in later years.

John has also been strongly influenced by the works of Allan Houser. The medium and the style are very different, but there are some features of Houser's art, in particular the representation of people wrapped in blankets, that appear also in the works of David John, unlike the majority of Navajo artists portraying the Yei or Yeibichai dancers. The elegant and fluid forms of Houser's sculptures, the intimacy of the individuals whose bodies are hidden under the blankets is clearly visible in many of John's canvases. For example if we look at *Mountain Echoes* and *Three Yei Spirits of the Diné* (fig. 2) we can see the similarities in the composition of the figures and in the presentation of their bodies.²¹ Masses are contained and shaped by the blankets; Houser's singers, and normally all his figures, are covered from the neck to their feet, while John leaves both of these parts uncovered and with a juniper wreath around the chanter's neck. John's media of course facilitates the addition of designs, details, colors,

²¹ An illustration of *Mountain Echoes* can be found at the Allan Houser website at the following URL address: <http://www.allanhouser.com/inventory/inv_detail.php?getid=30>.



Figure 2. *Three Yei Spirits of the Diné*, acrylic on canvas, 36" x 48"
(reprinted with permission of the artist; Courtesy of Kiva Fine Art)

darks and lights, and an effect of movement. Moreover, while Houser's men and women seem to come out of their blankets, and emerge, John's chanters want to protect themselves, in order to cover the important sacred outfits they wear. The traditions of Navajo rug weaving and indirectly his mother's rugs are celebrated with designs that might be found in the old chief blanket, that John particularly likes, but also in more contemporary style blankets.

The works of R.C. Gorman also had a lasting impact on the works and the artistic growth of David John. Rudolph Carl Gorman (1932-2005) from Chinle excelled in drawing and painting; a graduate of Northern Arizona University, he later studied art at Mexico City College where he came to know the works of Mexican artists Diego Rivera, David Siquieros and Rufino Tamayi. Gorman's early paintings and drawings focused on the depiction of Navajo rugs, Yeibichai masks, pottery designs and Navajo women in their daily chores, but after his Mexican experience, he abandoned his "Indian way of painting" (Monthan 1975: 48) and began to use a new medium: lithographs.²² His delicate, soft and curved images of women, often inserted in the Navajo homeland, very likely were an additional source of inspiration for David John, especially in regard to the representation of human bodies wrapped in comfortable and cozy blankets.

It is evident that John looked closely at the works of these two artists, Houser and Gorman, in order to get inspiration and develop some characteristics of his own style. In the course of my interview, John told me that as a student at the IAIA in Santa Fe, he had

²² For illustrations, please refer to Monthan, Guy and Doris Monthan. *Art and the Indian Individualist*. Flagstaff, Arizona: Northland Press, 1975, pp. 51-55.

numerous opportunities to familiarize himself with the works of these two masters of fine arts, thanks to the abundant availability of their works in the art galleries of the city.

3. Comparisons to His Contemporaries

Among the contemporary artists John looked at is Tony Abeyta, a Navajo of his same generation (born in 1965, the same year as John) and fellow graduate of the IAIA (1986, AFA). Tony Abeyta, son of Dorothy Dunn's student Narciso Abeyta, studied at various institutions in the United States and Europe, including the Maryland Institute College of Arts, the Santa Fe Institute of Fine Arts, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Ecole Des Beaux Arts in Lacoste, France and the Studio Arts Center International in Florence, Italy. He produces a very diverse range of paintings in media such as oil, monotype, charcoal, copper, encaustic wax and printmaking.

Abeyta's early works, like those of many young Navajo artists, focused on visual representations of the Navajo people and oral traditions, thus Yei and other Holy People were frequent subjects of his art. The animal world, nature and the Navajo homeland, however, were very prominent too, frequently reminiscent of R.C. Gorman's lithographs, thus making Abeyta's canvases very diverse in terms of images and also style. His works are permanently shown at Blue Rain Gallery in Taos and Santa Fe and at the Tony Abeyta Gallery, among others. By the time John started painting Yei and had left individual portraits behind, Abeyta too had changed the subject matter of his paintings and had turned his interests to more abstract renditions and mixed media works, always with some obvious or less obvious references to his heritage and upbringing.

The similarities between John (fig. 3, 4) and Abeyta, especially when we look at Abeyta's first works, are quite remarkable (see, for example, *Red Mesa Variant*), with regard to subject matter and modality of the representations.²³ Many of Tony Abeyta's works, in fact, are "colorful and very powerful interpretive paintings of the sacred yei" (Jacka 1994: 65) and their rendition is characterized by an emphasis on shades, linearity and body shapes. Both artists utilize colors in a similar manner, preferring in particular blues and reds, which have important meanings in Navajo culture. However Abeyta opts for the powerful impact of reds and similar tints, while John blends them with a more consistent use of blues and greens, due to the fact that he is including natural elements, which are not present in Abeyta's canvases, not even the ones of the Yeibichai dancers. Moreover, while Abeyta's works are mainly figurative and pictorial, inanimate representations of the dancers, John's paintings are alive: we can see the peoples behind the masks and feel their breath of life.

Charlotte Brailsford, curator of the exhibit *6 from Santa Fe*, which featured the works of Tony Abeyta, wrote in the exhibit catalogue: "By abstracting tribal figures complete with headdress and religious symbols, he is representing archetypal forms that appear more meaningful in their ghost-like depictions than if realistically defined. It is not only an Indian that is depicted, but the mystical nature of his actions, whether in dance or prayer. Abeyta's figures have a powerful, haunting presence as they comfort the viewer with a suggestion of ancient beings."²⁴ Notwithstanding their very detailed

²³ For *Red Mesa Variant* and other images of Abeyta's works, see <http://www.tonyabeyta.com/die03.htm>

²⁴ Brailsford, Charlotte, *6 from Santa Fe. Contemporary Native American Art from Santa Fe*. Charleston, SC: Gibbes Museum of Art, 1989.



Figure 3. *Summer Chant*, acrylic on canvas, 36" x 48"
(reprinted with permission of the artist; Courtesy of Kiva Fine Art)



Figure 4. *November Moon Chant*, acrylic, 48" x 36"
 (reprinted with permission of the artist; Courtesy of Kiva Fine Art)

representation, Abeyta's Yei are, according to Brailsford, ethereal figures from the past that simply populate the canvas; they are put on display for the viewer as a reminder of bygone times with which one cannot be connected anymore, except through the canvas. John's Yei, on the contrary, are distinctly living in the present, in contemporary times, and are 'talking' to the viewers standing on the other side of the canvas as if to remind them that the spiritual connections between the deities and the humans continue to live

and flourish. As John told me in the course of our conversation “they are not just standing, but singing, chanting.”²⁵

Tony Abeyta portrays his figures in a very detailed and meticulous manner, from the shape of their well built and athletic bodies to the pleats of their headdress and so much so that every single one of them can be distinguished in terms of design and patterns orientation. John, while defining well the masks and heads of the singers, prefers using more vague shapes for the remaining parts of the bodies and the other elements appearing in the representation, including the natural environment. Body shapes, therefore, are not precise or scrupulously drawn, with contour lines that are fading and not delineating the entire perimeter of the figures; the elements of their attire are rarely shown and reproduced, while often hidden under a blanket. The upper parts of the bodies, as just mentioned, are more distinct and detailed and thus neck, mask and head present the minutiae that can be seen in Abeyta as well, though of course, in a clearly different style. Typical and unique of John’s works are the eyes behind the mask and the puffs of breath coming out of the chanters’ mouths, telling that there is a person there: these have become a sort of signature for David John and his own personal way of communicating that what is on the canvas is constantly connected to him and to those who look at his works.

Contrary to Tony Abeyta’s paintings, John’s works very often feature natural elements, symbols or petroglyphs, so that the Yei or Yeibichai dancers are not placed on the canvas by themselves but are inserted into a natural environment or symbolic world

²⁵ Personal communication, July 15, 2005.

which is familiar to the Navajo people: sacred mountains, corn fields, walls of canyons or cliffs or simply the earth and the sky thus frequently appear in the paintings. The Yei are a part of their surrounding world as much as this is part of their existence. This is another testimony of the message John wants to pass along to other generations: the transcendent becomes, is part of people's everyday life and not separated from it.

To conclude this comparison, Abeyta's works are apparently more earthly, warmer and more human due to his particular style and way of representing the Yeibichai dancers; John's approach, on the other hand, makes his Yei appear ghostly, distant and estranged from the present world. However, the result is exactly the opposite: because Abeyta's figures are so earthly and imposing in their presence on the canvas, they do not reveal any human trait and, therefore, simply become objects displayed almost for an ethnographic study. On the contrary, John's people are distant from the viewers but not detached from them; they are establishing a connection with the surrounding world by living, chanting and dancing in it. It is thanks to this outlook that the viewer can be part of the composition and not a simple spectator and outsider commentator.

Another contemporary artist I want to mention is Yellowman because his works could have been influenced by those of John. Featured like John at *Kiva Fine Arts*, Yellowman, whose real name is Ben Nelson, is a Navajo artist who has been painting subjects from outside his own traditions: Cheyenne people, warriors, men, and horses are the main subjects of his art.²⁶ Recently, however, hands, stars and other symbols of the Navajo tradition, that are widely used by John, have started to appear in Yellowman's

²⁶ See Kiva Fine Art Gallery website, <http://www.kivaindianart.com/>

canvases as can be seen in the paintings “*Evidence*,” “*He Leaves His Mark*” or “*The Spear Thrower*.” I have not had the chance to meet Yellowman or read about these new works, since there is nothing published on them, so I am not able to tell if he is inspired by John or if he is just re-appropriating the imagery of his own Navajo culture. What is interesting, however, is to see the recent similarities between the two artists in terms of subjects portrayed and the fact that John might have influenced his fellow artist.

As mentioned earlier, some similarities in terms of subject matter can also be seen in the works of other contemporary Navajo artists such as Larry Yazzie, Wallace N. Begay, Harold Davidson, Virgil Nez and even with the masks of Peter Ray James or Carol Chiago Lujan (featured artist of the 76th Southwest Indian Art Fair at the Arizona State Museum, February, 2006), but again, this is because they all draw their materials from the same traditions, the same dances and ceremonies, the same Navajo cultural background. Each artist has his and her own individual style, a different story to tell, and a different reason to paint the subject matters he or she paints. John is continuing a strong tradition of Navajo storytelling, preferring the visual rather than the verbal language and expressing himself with figures and colors rather than words and phrases.

4. A Formal Analysis: Paintings

Like all artists, David John’s style has evolved and matured through time. What follows is an attempt to retrace the steps of his artistic maturation. However, because very few of his works are dated, my attempt to create this timeline will not be 100% accurate. When known, a date will be included along with the description of the painting;

otherwise I will advance approximations that are based or derived from the following sources of information: publication date of the magazines featuring his works or featuring advertisements of the galleries that display them; date reported in the promotional materials printed by art galleries; records of art shows and fairs he attended; galleries' websites; and personal conversations.

Notwithstanding this lack of definitive information and the very limited number of publications analyzing or simply considering John's works, it is possible to recognize the steps of his artistic growth and identify some 'phases.' From the paintings I have analyzed and that are available to the public, that is, those in fine arts galleries, publications or posted on the internet, three phases can be recognized: a first phase includes the works done during the 1990s which I will call it 'early stage;' a second one, the 'pre-Indian Market stage,' comprises the paintings created before the 2003 Indian Market (ca. 1998 to 2002), and the most recent one, includes the works from 2003 to the present time which I will refer to as the 'post-Indian Market.' Unfortunately I have no examples of works predating 1990 and the only information available is the nature of John's medium, drawing. More difficult is the attempt to retrace his artistic evolutions in the clay masks due again to the lack of sources, of date on the masks, and the limited amount of painted material on the masks. The fact that masks are simply decorated with paint and not actually entirely painted makes it difficult to recognize a style or associate it with a particular period of John's artistic career. For this reason masks will be considered separately. What can be deduced with certainty is that they have been part of John's

artistic repertoire since 1986, when he was a student at the IAIA, as they were part of the portfolio he presented to Kiva Fine Arts gallery when he first approached its owner.²⁷

The works of the early stage mainly represent still lifes and portraits, especially of old people, like medicine men, warriors, or elders with traditional jewels and clothes (like for example, *Diné's Warrior's Protection*, fig. 1). As mentioned earlier, John was strongly influenced by the pastel drawings of Clifford Beck, not only for what concerns the choice of subject matter but also for the modality of the representation. As the Red Indian Cloud Art Show records show John's early works were drawings of Navajo people, men and women, just like Beck's creations. Moreover, the use of this technique in the early stages of his artistic career is also confirmed by the fact that his initial training was in illustration and he did not learn painting until he started college. For these reasons, it is natural to think that as a novice in the art world John experimented with the drawing media with which he was familiar and looked at those artists who, like Beck, were using it to express their ideas and their heritage.

Little by little John's style developed and his subject matter changed: from portraits he turned to more personal interpretations of his heritage and culture, focusing in particular on the figures of the Yei. It is important to remember that starting from the late 1980s John was exposed to different art trends and artists, both Native and non-Native, in Northern New Mexico and the Four Corners area. Especially as a student at the IAIA in Santa Fe, he had the opportunity to know many other Native artists and become familiar with their works, either personally at the Institute or through visiting art galleries and

²⁷ Paula McDonald, personal communication, July 16, 2005.

museum collections. Every time, it was a new learning experience and the more he observed things around him, the more he received inspiration from the works of others.²⁸ John had the occasion of being surrounded by various types of art and by artists of different backgrounds, styles and artistic abilities; it is thanks to this exposure that he was able to develop ideas for his own, a personal and original approach. At the basis of this evolution, not just of images but especially of approach, was a constant desire to learn and experiment.

During this stage, the images of the Yei are very realistic, detailed, more like portraits than personal interpretations and visions. The focus of each representation is the head of the chanters, which is completely isolated from the rest of the body and almost surrounded by a halo. Colors are pale and are distributed with gentle brush strokes so that notwithstanding the realism of their portraiture, the masked faces appear ethereal, distant, and unreachable, as can be seen in *Winter Night Chant* (fig. 5) and *Yei*.²⁹ Their figures are static on the canvas as if the Holy People whom they impersonate were far away, detached from humans. Compositions focus on the representation of one figure, a single Yei who is at the center of the canvas, filling it in its entirety. There is little space for natural elements as would happen in successive works, but the canvas is already permeated by Navajo symbolism and meaning. Various colors are used, with a majority of reds, greens and blues, but they are mainly pastels, thus creating soft tonalities, paleness and lack of intensity.

²⁸ Personal communication, July 15, 2005.

²⁹ For *Yei*, see the following website: http://www.ceremonialart.biz/new_page_3.htm



Figure 6, *Winter Night Chant*
(reprinted with permission of the artist; Courtesy of Kiva Fine Art)

Winter Night Chant (fig. 5) presents, as the title suggests, a deity of a winter ceremony, the Nightway: he dominates the space of the canvas leaving little space for additional elements. The masked face is at the center of the composition, creating a circle around which everything else rotates. It is not separated from the neck, or what is covering it. The head and the spruce collar, in fact, are not separated but constitute one entity, with the dark hair merging into the collar as this, in turn, fades until disappearing among the hair. The dancer is wearing a blue mask typical of House God, a turquoise necklace and seven eagle feathers, which are all traditional elements of the impersonator's regalia, although not exactly represented here.

The palettes of color behind his head and Rainbow People below his chin are distributed in a circular way in order to confer a sense of movement and to give the impression that the Yei breath, coming out of the typical circular mouth, is spreading around the House God and beyond in a vortex. Flakes of snow, represented by the numerous white dots distributed around the central figure are part of this circular vortex and, like everything else, they seem carried around by the breath or prayer. Finally, included again are the symbols for the four sacred mountains within which perimeter the face of the Yei is enclosed. Like in the painting *Diné's Warrior's Protection* (fig. 1) previously described, their order is once again altered into black, blue, yellow and white: this is because for the Nightway chant the sequence of black and white is shifted.

Yei is similar to the *Winter Night Chant* except for the fact that it includes more Navajo symbolism and makes stronger use of colors, especially reds, thus reducing that feeling of vagueness and paleness that pervaded the previous work. Again the canvas is

dominated by the head of the Yei, this time not in a frontal position, but slightly turned toward the left. The dancer, however, is still looking directly into the eyes of the viewer even if from a different angle. The breath, evident in *Winter Chant* is very feeble here, almost inexistent, but the feeling of movement around the head of the dancer and beyond is still very strong: this is obtained through the use of the stylized symbols of the whirling Rainbow Person, whose curved shapes convey a sense of movement. They are encircling the Yei and assuring his protection. Along with them at the bottom of the painting are sunbeams, clouds recognizable because of their wavy-like tops, and the symbols of the four sacred mountains.

The mask, blue with a horizontal red band on the right eye, is now more elaborated and presents the characteristic corn plant visible in the real buckskin masks used by Talking God in the Blessingway ceremonies. The blue mask, normally worn by House God, presents in this case the characteristic features of Talking God so that the result is a combination of elements taken from different Yei and chants. The dancer that the artist represents is thus a generic one, unspecified, without a name, though some his features link him to specific deities. Considering, however, that Talking God is the only one that has a corn plant on his mask, we could presume that this Yei is Talking God, although we cannot state this with certainty, since, as already mentioned, John alters the masks in order to avoid an exact and faithful representation of the ceremonial dancers.

Like the real ceremonial masks, however, this presents three leaves to the left of the corn stalk and two to the right, although no ears of corn are included. The eyes and mouth openings are small and circular, and the eagle feathers decorating the head are

eight in number.³⁰ There is no spruce collar around the neck of this figure, and although this is typically a characteristic of female gods, Haile's statement "Talking God should wear a spruce collar" (Haile 1947: 17) makes us suppose that this prominent Yei may appear without it as result of alternation, like in this case.

More vivid and powerful colors replaced the soft tonalities of the early works and the focus of the representations shifted and opened up to include Yei not in isolation but inserted in natural environments (pre-Indian Market phase). The depiction of the Yei themselves thus changed to emphasize not just their masked faces, but also their entire bodies. Full figures, therefore, are now appearing on display for the viewer. The heads, like in the previous works are carefully illustrated, while the bodies are hidden under blankets which are less defined at the bottom: their contours, in fact, are fading and the chanters become one with the vegetation, so that it becomes impossible to distinguish where they end and the other starts. The Yei, normally two or three, are standing in the middle of the composition, surrounded by vegetation, like corn fields in *Harvest Chant* (fig. 6) and a source of water like in *Home of the Holy People* (fig. 7). The background against which they stand is clearly divided into strata marked by the use of different colors: light blue and white for the upper stratum representing the sky and the clouds; green for the following layer which contains spruce trees; red, yellow and blue for the remaining stratum which could stand for other types of plants, among which could be the three varieties of corn, or for water, represented by the blue.

³⁰ Contrary to this one, in the real mask of Talking God the eyes and the mouth are "two open squares [...] fitted into each other" and they are "drawn on the mask in black" (Haile 1947: 17).



Figure 6. *Harvest Chant*, acrylic on canvas, 36'' x 24''
(reprinted with permission of the artist; Courtesy of Kiva Fine Art)

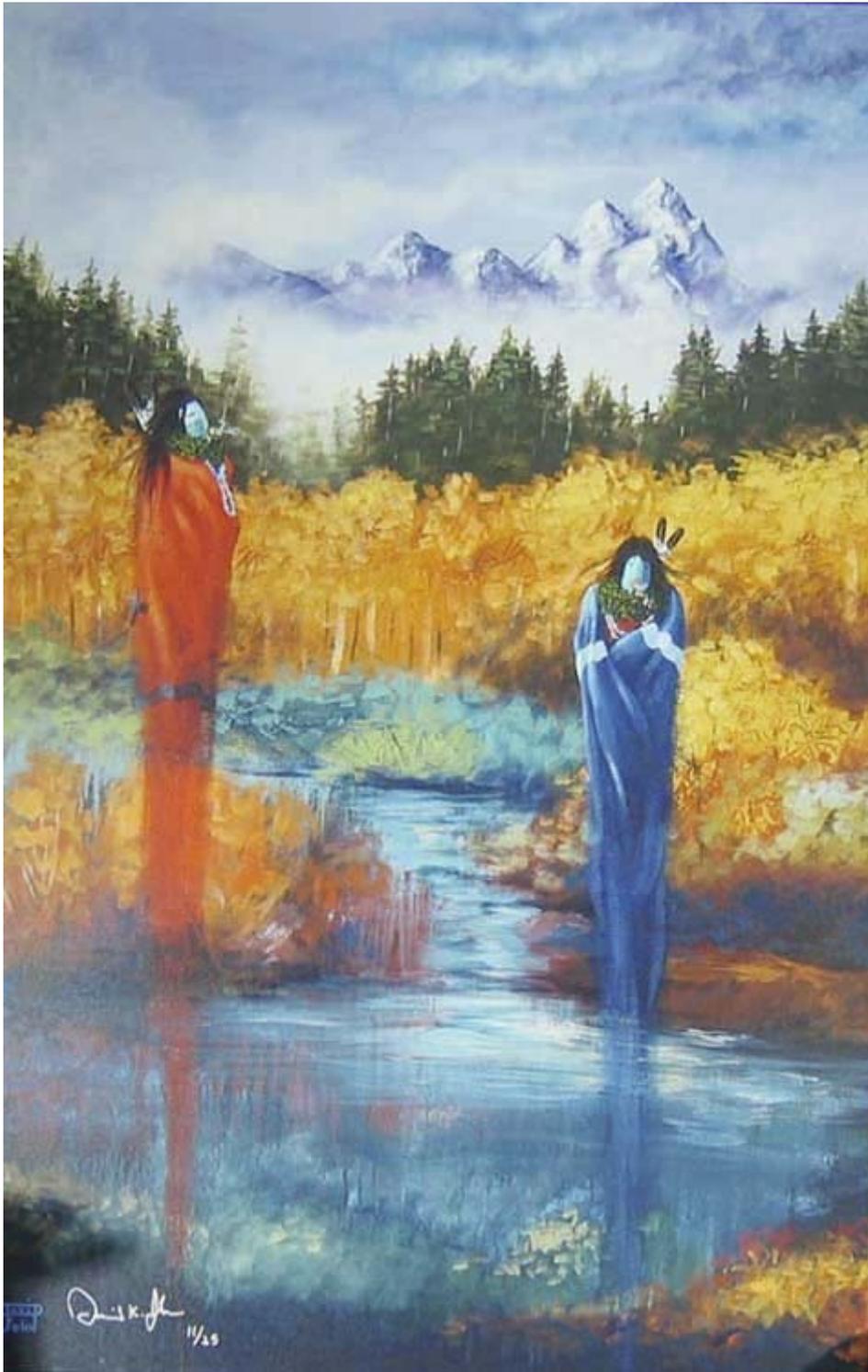


Figure 7. *Home of the Holy People*, acrylic on canvas, 30" x 46"
(reprinted with permission of the artist; Courtesy of Toh-Atin Gallery)

In *Harvest Chant* two Yei are standing in front of the viewers but without looking at them, since their heads are turned toward opposite directions, one to the right and the other to the left. Two eagle feathers are placed at the back of their masks, which are blue/green and white; their bodies are wrapped in blankets, a yellow and a blue one, decorated with unspecified red designs. A turquoise necklace is visible under the spruce collar, which, as customary, is part of male gods' masks and surrounds the dancer's neck. Two plants of corn, the same color as the blankets, yellow and blue, emerge from the vegetation (or the water) below the dancers' feet as they intone their song to favor a good harvest. Reichard points out that "in the sandpainting of the Nightway Chant the legs of the dancing figures are yellow to signify that they are knee-deep in corn pollen." Here the legs of the chanters are the corn stalks thus reminding the people of where they come from. The chant can thus assume the meaning of a thanksgiving prayer for the gift of life in addition to being a prayer for a good harvest (Reichard 1963: 193).

Corn is very important for the people not just because it is one of the main forms of sustenance, but also because it is the source of life. In some stories yellow and blue corn is closely associated with the creation of First Man and First Woman, since they were transformed into humans from two primordial ears of corn. According to Reichard, yellow "often symbolizes the power of wild vegetation" while blue "represents the fructifying power of earth, especially domesticated plants" (Reichard 1963: 192-193). In other creation stories, this plant is related to the Yei and the gift of sound they received. As is well known, the Yei were given the opportunity to speak but failed; however, thanks to corn beetle they received a 'voice', which consisted of the ability to utter their

characteristic Hu-hu-hu- call. The constant association of the Yei with the corn plant, therefore, is to remind humans of the importance of this natural element for the survival of the people.

Home of the Holy People has the same representational structure of *Harvest Chant*: the two Yei are shown in their entirety, standing almost in the center of a composition that is divided into strata by the different types of vegetation. Here, however, the natural elements present in each stratum can be more easily identified. In the previous painting, in fact, color was distributed with quick and indistinctive brushes, without much interest to details, thus creating an evanescent and fleeting atmosphere resembling an impressionist canvas. Here, on the contrary, there is more attention and consideration for the individual elements of nature. Thus the green stratum clearly appears as pine trees and the blue at the bottom of the painting as water in which the images of the Yei are reflected.

Emerging from the mass of clouds are the sacred mountains, which are, as the title announces, the home of the Holy People. Talking God and Calling God are the spirits that are within these sacred mountains and thus the two figures here, one in profile wrapped in a red blanket and one in frontal position wrapped in blue could represent them. However, these Yei have only two feathers (showing that they have been sung over), while Talking God normally has twelve, although sometimes they can even be seven. The interplay of bright colors and their reflections on the water creates a luminosity that is not present in *Harvest Chant* and that makes this painting more

ethereal; moreover, since the house of the Holy People is in the East, this is the place from which light spreads around the entire creation.

There are other works realized around this time that differ substantially from *Harvest Chant* and *Home of the Holy People*. They focus on the representation of one deity. Among these paintings are *Summer Chant* (fig. 3), *Twin Deities*, *Yei Diné* (fig. 8), *Rain Chant* (fig. 9) and others.³¹ Their entire canvas is occupied by a large figure with both head and 'body,' standing in the center, against a dark and apparently empty background. A squared mask with black horsehair and triangular turquoise pendants covers the face; below the head is a rectangular chest with no arms or even human semblance. The omnipresent spruce collar around the neck, which is, as always, decorated with a turquoise necklace, separates the two parts of the body. The colors of the masks are usually blue, green and yellow while the chest is red; both present patterns realized with traditional Navajo symbols and designs, which are also included in the colored backgrounds. The feathers worn by these deities are two, either pointing to the right, normally for a female deity, or to the left if it is a male and have white downs at their lower extremities, serving as a nest. But while male masks are decorated with two white eagle tail feathers at the basis of which are owl feathers, female masks simply have one turkey and one eagle feather (Haile 1947).

These masks present many of the characteristic features of Female God and Male God masks used during ceremonies but because of the division in halves of two different colors could also be the ones wore by Fringed Mouth in various branches of the

³¹ For an illustration of Twin Deities, see http://www.swaia.org/live_auction_d2.php?id=61.



Figure 8. *Yei Diné*, acrylic on canvas, 28" x 24"
(reprinted with permission of the artist; Courtesy of Kiva Fine Art)



Figure 9. *Rain Chant*, acrylic on canvas, 60" x 48"
(reprinted with permission of the artist; Courtesy of SWAIA)

Nightway chants. However, since John's intent is not to exactly reproduce ceremonial masks, the ones he paints indistinctively contain elements of both female and male Holy People. Due to their hybrid quality, it is difficult to associate them with specific Yei, although some elements that normally belong to male masks versus ones that are more appropriate for females can be recognized. The triangular turquoise earrings, for example, are essential feature of female gods and never appear in the masks of male gods. Other typical features of female gods are "a ladder-like figure extending over the mouth to represent its nose," "a lump of white ocher medicine" placed at the jointure of the feather and the absence of the spruce collar (Haile 1947: 19). Male masks usually have a fuzz of kit fox hair around their mouth, while Fringed Mouth usually has one half of the mask in red or yellow and the other half in blue and the turquoise pendants. Traditionally, both male and female masks have triangular eyes, while John here prefers using thin, rectangular ones (he uses circular or oval openings for the dancers).

With this in mind, we can closely look at two of these paintings, *Summer Chant* and *Rain Chant*. The square mask, the pendants, the ladder-like pattern on the mask, the lack of fox hair would make us think that these are female gods, but the presence of the spruce collar and the owl feathers suggest the opposite, since these are male attributes. The complementary dichotomy between female and male, and thus their different qualities, are constantly present. In *Summer Chant*, the mask is divided in four parts of different colors: the left side has tonalities tending toward the reds, while the right side

tends toward the blue/greens.³² The bust is the earth, the mother's womb, and shows different variations of yellows and reds which grow in intensity and strength from the center of the body outward.

Ladder-like (or wavy-like) patterns as seen in the mask can be found below the necklace as well as in the colored areas in the background, on the top right and the top left. These patterns symbolize thunderclouds, and thus the rain that is invoked through the chant, but could also denote the sacred mountains, which are still connected to the clouds and the rain since they are the place from which they both come. With the exception of Mt. Taylor, the blue mountain of the South which is depicted in the mask, the other three mountains are depicted in the bust. This design is commonly used in sandpaintings and "is also a frequent motif in Navajo rug weaving;" John uses it because it is a traditional symbol and according to Berkenfield also because "it honors his mother and grandmother, who are weavers" (Berkenfield 2003: IM-064).

The body of the deity also represents ancient Navajo symbols found in caves and canyon walls: these petroglyphs, a circular and a square spiral, represent eternity and continuity and call attention to the ever existent bond between the people and their past, their traditions and their perpetuation into the future. The colors of the background are tonalities of reds in the upper part of the painting and tonalities of blue in the lower, thus underlining again sky and earth as well as the dualistic aspect of nature and its elements, female and male. The more the brush strokes reach the center of the painting, the darker

³² Interesting to note is the fact that Navajo language does not have a word for green although it exists as a color, namely as a variant of blue. According to Reichard, "Navajo blue, green, and yellow different from ours in value" and green is described as "the color of certain mature plants – corn leaves, for instance" in opposition to "immature succulent plants" which are shades of yellow (Reichard 1950: 190).

they become; sky reaches down to the earth and their confluence generates the rain symbolized by the dripping rivulets of colors on the side of the deity. Summer chants contain farm songs that belong to the entire tribe; those are sung for “planting and maturation events rather than for a particular ceremony” (Reichard 1963: 294). They are propitiatory for rain and for abundant crops. By depicting an empty corn stalk in the center of the earth (the bust), John shows the beginning of growth that comes with the new season.

Rain Chant (fig. 9) is probably one of John’s most famous paintings, since it was selected to be the symbol of the 82nd Annual Indian Market in Santa Fe in 2003. For this reason, it is also one of his few works that has received some attention, even if not from academics or art scholars, and on which something has been written. It was inspired by the events in John’s life as well as in the world after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and it was realized between 2001 and 2003. Filled with Navajo symbolism, the painting “was done during the bad times” and represents “cleansing and healing” (Indian Market 2003: 232) through the coming of a new rain. *Rain Chant* speaks of hope, serenity, and well being; it speaks of a new beginning in the aftermath of bad events and is a reassurance to the audience that beauty in life still exists.

The figure is again a large deity significantly painted with the colors of Mother Earth, red in the body of the figure, and Father Sky, blue in the background. As in the previous paintings, John uses both female and male attributes such as the pendants, the spruce collar, the owl feathers, the ladder-like pattern on the mask, and the circular mouth without the fox hair. Curiously, and according to John coincidentally, the owl feathers

are in the colors of the American flag: white and red stripes with blue tips. Even if the painting was done in a time of patriotism and strong national feelings, it was not his intention to put the flag on the head of his deity; only later, when he stepped back from his work did he realize that the colors looked like the stars and stripes.

The mask is divided in parts of different colors, though the division here is slightly different from *Summer Chant*: there is an upper and a lower part rather than a left and a right division, with red and blue at the top and yellow at the bottom. The ladder-like pattern is displayed to represent the nose and thunderclouds, while in the bust or in the background simply the thunderclouds. The right side of the mask, the blue one, is also decorated with three vertical white lines. The body is dominated by a large corn plant with four leaves; it is situated in the center of the deity and signifies the growth from the earth's womb through the nourishment of rain. The background is a deep blue sky dominated by crosses; they are the stars that symbolize the good coming with every new day (Berkenfield 2003: IM-064). As in *Summer Chant*, the falling rain is dripping down in little rivulets originating from the middle of the painting, where thunderclouds are concentrated and coming together. To render the idea of falling water, John used "a translucent wash that allows the white of the canvas to show through" (Indian Market 2003: 232). The juxtaposition of darks and lights, contrasting the dark blue of the cloudy conglomerates to the bright tones of the rain more strongly conveys the feeling of cleansing and rebirth after the storm and makes this painting expressively very powerful.

In John's more recent works, painted after his award winning poster of 2003, we can see changes in style especially in regard to the representations of the dancers and the

Yei impersonators. Similar stylistic qualities and attributes are maintained in their masks and faces, but their bodies are much different from previous works. Body shapes and forms now tend to be more geometrical, expressionistic, more dramatically drawn; at the same time, however they appear to be more dynamic and energetic, conveying a sense of movement and strength that were assumed before but not evidently given. There seems to be no distinction between humans and their surroundings and thus elements of the natural world form an integral part of the representation: sky, moon, clouds, mountains, vegetation, even animals are now more present and amalgamated with the bodily forms of the Yei. There is no graphic separation between them as they are all part of a continuum. This can be clearly seen in paintings such as *Guardians* and *Horse Song*, both made in 2005 (fig. 10 and 11).

The layout of *Guardians* (fig. 10) is often used by John and reminds us of his other paintings like *November Moon Chant* (fig. 4) or *Season Chant*³³ for example: three Yei are facing to their right and are lined up as they do during the ceremonial chants, one following the other. Their eyes cannot be seen but the puffs of breath coming out of their mouths are visible. They are wearing blue or blue and white masks and the usual eagle feathers (two), spruce collar, turquoise necklace and wrapping blanket. The blanket, in particular, does not appear as the gentle, body-shaping cover of the previous paintings, but rather is a very geometrical one with curved form. The strong brush strokes very well render this idea and although the blanket's arched lines still convey the shapes of the bodies they are enfolding, the bodies are not as noticeable as before. For the most, they

³³ See <http://www.kivaindianart.com>



Figure 10. *Guardians*, acrylic on canvas, 50" x 60"
 (reprinted with permission of the artist; Courtesy of Kiva Fine Art)

are left to our imagination. Notwithstanding this reduced visibility, more is revealed in this painting: we can actually see that the impersonators on the two extremities are holding rattles in their hand, a detail that John never disclosed before. While the Yei on the right is enwrapped in dark colors that are veiling his rattle, the Yei on the left is clearly displaying it in his left hand, thus allowing us to see a part of his body that normally is hidden under the blanket. Rattles, used only in specific chants and not in rites as an accompaniment to the dancing and singing, are used for keeping away illness and

diseases. Red, yellow and some touches of blue are the colors of the blankets, as they are traditionally found in Navajo rugs.

Another detail that John includes in this painting, like in others before (*November Moon Chant, Creation to Future, Dawn People*),³⁴ is the essence of the dancers, that is, the Yei himself and not an impersonator. If we carefully look in front of the first dancer, in fact, we can see a very vague and almost transparent head; from the band of hair in the forehead it can be recognized as a female Holy Person. The halo around this ethereal figure continues around the head of the first chanter, thus passing the power of the Yei onto the impersonators who in turn, through their guarding and singing can protect the entire people. The procession of the guardians is set against a natural environment of green woods and mountains, the Navajo mesas, and clear blue sky: earth and sky converge again and become one.

Contrary to all the dancers and masked Yei he has painted and contrary to his goal of showing the presence of the man behind the mask, John does not show the eyes of these guardians. An explanation for this unusual decision can be found in the creation story in which the guardians appear; according to it these Holy People, responsible for the safety of the Sun's house, Changing Woman's house and the home of other Holy People, the White House, were blinded by Wind who blew dust into their eyes. Their visual depiction mirrors the verbal one that exists in the Navajo oral traditions. Again this is a sign of John's commitment to use painting as a modern way of storytelling, by transposing stories into a visual form on canvas.

³⁴ For *Creation to Future* and *Dawn People*, see <http://www.kivaindianart.com>



Figure 11. *Horse Song*, acrylic on canvas, 50" x 60"
(reprinted with permission of the artist; Courtesy of Kiva Fine Art)

Horse Song (fig. 11) is another recent painting and shows the same geometrical and curving form style of *Guardians*. Also, as in the previous painting, John introduces something that has never appeared before in his canvases: animal figures (other than birds). Here, in fact, the subjects are the chanter and the essence of the four horses he is invoking through his song. Horses are not particularly related to Navajo ceremonial and spiritual life, since they never appear in chants or sandpaintings, although according to

John there is a story about their origin.³⁵ They have an important role in Navajo society because they are the standard against which wealth is measured and for this reason they are respected as a type of property; they can bring wealth. According to Wyman the horse is a “symbol of the Navajo’s man prestige” and “besides contributing to the value of conspicuous consumption [...] is identified with motion, that constant theme in Navaho life and language. No wonder the Navajo paints it with affection” (Wyman 1959: 25-26).

For David John horses also have a personal and professional significance because of his involvement with the project called The Trail of Painted Ponies, for which he realized a ‘Navajo’ pony. It could be very likely that after this experience, he decided to put part of it also on canvas. While his pony was titled *Horse from the Four Directions* and displayed four Yei, each in one of the four colors of the directions, in the painting *Horse Song* we see the opposite: one Yei and four horses of different colors, with the only exception that instead of blue, one horse is red.³⁶

The Yei is represented with the usual well-detailed head and its fundamental accessories, feathers, collar, and necklace, while the body is not visible, covered by a mantel made of sky and stars; curved brushes of color, especially where the arms of the dancers should be, vaguely render the idea of the body shape and seem to synchronize its movements with the horses. The dark mantel is covered with stars representing the main constellations, the Milky Way and the Pleiades, but also with the symbols for the four sacred mountains, thus connecting again the two spheres, earthly and celestial. Recurrent

³⁵ “The horse came from there [the Four Directions], there’s a story about it” (Personal communication, July 15, 2005).

³⁶ For an image of John’s pony, see <http://gopaintedponies.com/ponies/archive/john-4directions.htm>

designs such as the spiral, symbols of eternity, the crosses, symbol of the stars as well as makers of a place, and the cloud patterns appear in this painting like in many others before. The horses are at the center of the composition but only their heads are represented; their curved snouts confer a sense of movement and give the impression that the animals are racing fast. Their hair (red, blue, black and white) is blown backward by the wind and seem to continue on the Yei.

In front of the horse is the essence of a Yei, a little more visible than in other paintings but still limited to the drawing of the mask and the breath. Mist and clouds are around this spirit and in the lower part of the painting in order to better render the idea of its vanishing and temporary essence. In the background, again surrounded by haze and clouds, are the mesas of Dinetah and barely visible, high on them is the sun on a yellow horizon, which according to the Navajo signifies the coming of health and prosperity, this last one maybe brought by the horses. The Yei is singing his horse song while the night is turning into day and although he can perform also in daylight, he, like all the other Yei, prefers to appear after sunset and until dawn.

5. Clay Masks

John's works with clay include three types of masks; he distinguishes between clay masks, gourd masks and single or double figure plaques.³⁷ Clay masks are John's personal renditions and interpretations of the buckskin masks used in ceremonial dances; as such, they are decorated with some of the elements used in the real ones. Being made

³⁷ This is how he titles them and this is the name with which they appear on the galleries' website or catalogues. For example, we can find Clay Mask 18, Gourd Mask 5, and Single Figure Plaque 5.

of clay, these masks are not a copy of the ceremonial ones and do not have a sacred value. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, John said that they are almost like toys and thus not disrespectful or sacrilegious.³⁸ He makes them because they have an important value in Navajo culture and especially because they remind him of ceremonies.

Clay masks (fig. 12) are not flat and leveled but present a curved or bent surface, as buckskin masks would when worn on the face. Their shapes vary so that one mask is never identical to the other; in general, however, they have a rectangular outline, at times with rounded edges, at other times more angular. A circular mouthpiece, horsehair and feathers are always present, while other elements, such as reed, are sporadically added. Clay masks are painted with acrylic and no specific pattern or color is used; John uses a variety of designs and does not limit his brush to the blues, reds, yellows and greens that we mainly see on ceremonial masks. In some masks thick lines clearly divide the surface into parts, while in others there is not division of any sort. Apparently John does not follow any specific criteria in the making his masks; he just paints what he feels like at the moment. However, he uses some of the designs that are recurrent also in his paintings, such as dragonflies, spirals, lightings, corn stalks, cloud patterns. To these, he adds figures typically found in petroglyphs and canyon walls such as the bighorn sheep, Kokopelli (or the Hunchback God), gila monsters, and human figures. Many of his masks also incorporate sand in their texture.

³⁸ See John's comment on clay masks on page 106.



Figure 12. *Mask 59*, mixed media on micaceous clay, 13" x 5"
(reprinted with permission of the artist; Courtesy of Kiva Fine Art)

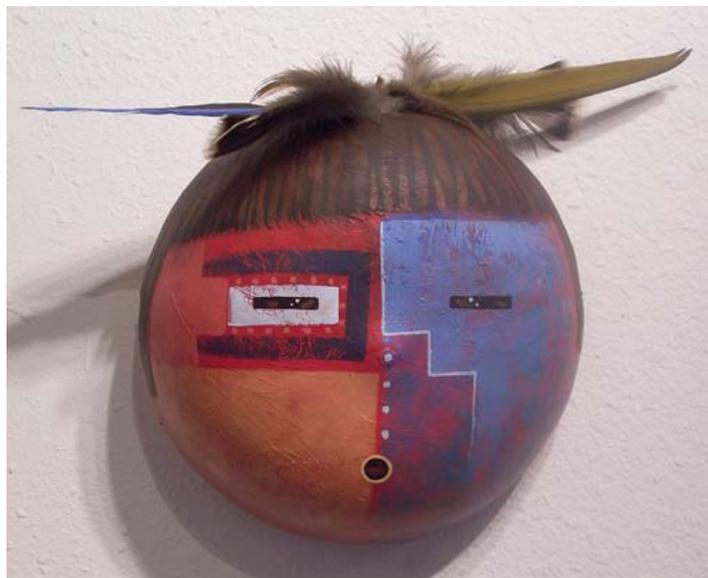


Figure 13. *Gourd Mask 3*, acrylic on gourd, 14" x 13"
(reprinted with permission of the artist; Courtesy of Kiva Fine Art)

Gourd masks (fig. 13) are different in shape and are entirely painted, except for the bird feathers attached to their top. The circular mouth and the hair are rendered through the use of colors, thus making the surface of the mask smooth and even. The masks can be decorated in parts, divided once more by thick color lines, or simply painted in various colors and with some of the recurrent symbols above mentioned. The most interesting features of these masks are the painted eyes, again to remind the people that there is a person behind it.

The third type of clay work John makes is the plaques which can be single, double or even triple figures (fig. 14). They are long, rectangular bodies, sometimes curved, sometimes straight, and remind of the Yei figures in paintings such as *Summer Chant* and *Rain Chant*. The bottom of the plaque is always carved in a ladder-like pattern, either in the middle or at the angles, thus giving the impression that John wanted to leave an opening. The decorative elements are the same as in the clay masks (feathers, reed, horsehair, mouth piece) but with the addition of small turquoise stones in the necklace. The designs and the images are the same as in the previous masks with only one difference: here, the designs of the face are normally different than the ones in the body. This is because John wants to stress that these plaques represent an entire figure comprising of head and body and not simply the mask worn by the dancers.

Whether paintings or clay masks, David John's works are filled with Navajo symbolism, and religious and cultural traditions. His art speaks of his personal experiences and connection with the Holy People and thus of his own Navajo heritage,



Figure 14. *Double Figure Plaque 2*, mixed media on clay, 21" x 9"
(reprinted with permission of the artist; Courtesy of Kiva Fine Art)

his; he wants to honor its past and safeguarding it for the future by passing it on to the younger generations.

CONCLUSIONS

David John makes art that surely appeals to a certain audience, tourists and collectors, but that to some critics might appear ‘too commercial:’ incorporation of conventional indigenous themes, use of spiritual and ‘religious’ images, and depiction of recognizable symbols are some of the characteristic features of his works. According to those who criticize him, however, these are the elements that make his works openly ‘Indian’ and thus not ‘proper’ for the contemporary indigenous art scene, since this explicit type of art targets tourist markets or collectors of Indian art. David John’s choice of subject matter and marketing venues does not exclude the fact that he is a valuable and unique artist, whose works are worthy of consideration, both artistically and conceptually. They come from the painter’s heart, life, and heritage, not from the desires of buyers and collectors, and reflect his commitment to continue a tradition of visual storytelling started as far back as the 1920s.

Was not Howe, one of the greatest Native American artists, father of the “New Indian painting” doing this after all? His works “ranked between stylized abstractions and non objective interpretations, both equally focused upon his heritage” and his inspiration “came primarily from direct participation in the oral tradition. The stories told to him in his youth by his grandmother filled his work” (Day 1984: 55). I am not trying to diminish the value of Howe’s works or even to postulate that John’s style and artistry are like Howe’s because they are not. I simply want to show that the labeling of ‘commercial’ on the basis of Native content/subject matter and references to the Native heritage is not a

viable justification for dismissing him as derivative or commercial. If we use this as a criterion, then every artist who has or is producing ‘openly Indian’ works, including “big names” like Houser and Howe, should be labeled as commercial and not granted any critical attention. This logical extension, though, does not happen. The market and art circles in which an artist works inconsistently come to define his artistic value and critical acceptance and appraisal. Some other criteria enter into the subjective evaluation. For John and many other artists, however, the choice of market is limited since for a number of reasons (mainly their heritage and the subject matter of their works) they cannot break out of the confines of ‘Indian’ or ‘ethnic,’ because this is the nature of the niche –regional and ethnic market. It is how it is labeled, and even Howe never broke out of its constraining boundaries.

Native artists, though some have achieved national recognition, have been ignored by critics, museums and galleries who prefer to spend their time and their publications on non-native artists. According to Highwater, “the potential for true international success of Indian art is very limited and problematical...most of the artists of Indian heritage who have been accepted in the international world of art (Leon Polk Smith, James Harvard, George Morrison, and others) pursue their careers with little or no public emphasis upon their ethnicity” (Highwater quoted in Wade 1981: 240). Although he has tried, John has not been able to access this international market because he could not separate himself from his Dineh tradition, from who he is and the place where he comes from. He told me,

in fact, that “you have to paint from your heart, be yourself” and “I paint myself, my traditional ways, my lifestyle.”¹

Even if things have changed since 1986, indigenous artists still struggle to achieve national recognition as artists. The label ‘Indian’ always accompanies them, thus relegating their works to specific galleries or markets. This is very likely one of the reasons why David John is mainly known locally, in the Southwest or in indigenous art markets and fairs. Unfortunately, as Wade, Strickland and Brascoupe pointed out, who defines indigenous art is not the indigenous artists, but the other players in this art world: the white patrons, the Anglo buyers who influence the market and ultimately dictate what the artistic trends should be. For many indigenous artists, struggling to make a living through their art, there are not many options but to adapt to the market’s demands (Wade and Strickland 1981; Brascoupe 1994). This does not exclude a priori, however, that artists cannot express themselves in their own unique and original way.

David John, like many other artists, has to face the challenge of making a living in an art world that tells what indigenous art should look like. Although he is not painting what is on demand on the market, his works are an incorporation of traditional elements of Navajo culture into a new and distinctive style. His art speaks of his traditions, his family, their teachings and stories, and the way people lived, not to follow the audience demands, but to pass Navajo culture along to younger generations. The continuous relationship and indissoluble connections between the Holy People and the Diné are

¹ Personal communication, July 16, 2005.

clearly manifested and expressed in his canvases through the visible humans behind the masks. This is what John's art is about.

How do we classify it? Can we fit it into a certain category of indigenous art? According to the gallery owners who are selling his works, John's art is "expressionistic" ("it has some traditional elements but the way he represents them is expressionistic")² and complicated ("old and traditional, but also cutting edge and new").³ I think the title of the 2003 Indian Market "Tradition and Innovation" well expresses the nature of his work: a combination of old and new forms. When I met him in Santa Fe last summer I asked him where he places himself as an artist, if he is more traditional or innovative. His answer was that "in the beginning everything was traditional, then it changed, adapting...I'm right in the middle between tradition and contemporary. I want to be contemporary, put both together. Even if I wanted to abstract, there still would be something of my traditions...If I was doing a traditional, everything would be exact. But I don't do that, because we're not supposed to."⁴

Bruce Bernstein wrote that "tradition is constantly changing and it needs creativity in order to remain alive because creativity breaks apart old thoughts in order to reassemble the parts into new thoughts" (Bernstein in Rushing 1999: 68). This is what the works of David K. John are about: the incorporation of traditions in their changing forms and through changing styles and perspectives. This does not mean reproducing stereotypical images of Indian people to please a non-Indian audience and market; it is a

² James Ratliff, personal communication, July 18, 2005.

³ Paula McDonalds, Kiva Fine Arts, personal communication, July 17, 2005.

⁴ Personal communication, July 16, 2005.

form of self-expression and cultural preservation. It is only through a reinstatement of the importance of traditions in his life, today, that the artist can communicate with the audience and pass along his message made of personal as well as communal and universal stories. By living and participating in the contemporary world artists are experiencing a continual change and growth, an artistic maturity; by looking at the past and at their traditions, they maintain alive the memory of generations before them and preserve it for the generations to come. For David John, as in the case of many other lesser known contemporary artists, identity and cultural background cannot be separated from art and what is expressed in the canvas is who the artist is.

“I expect great art to move me, to touch me, to express something meaningful. I want art to affect my life. I want to laugh, cry, be mystified or enlightened. I want to be profoundly educated. Great art is often about the mythic, if we understand the mythic to mean the great unknowable-Birth, Life, Death, Creation, God. Art can convey these ideas, whether it is naturalistic, abstract, or something in between” (Walkingstick 2001: 21). This is what Kay Walkingstick, a strong opponent of consumer’s art, wrote in 1992 in the special edition of the Art Journal. If this is what we should expect from art, than this is what David John’s works are transmitting. Call them traditional, call them commercial or whatever other label you might think of, they *are* art, because they move, they touch, they express something meaningful to the artist and his people and they affect the lives of those who see them. This is what art is supposed to create on the viewer and this is what John’s art creates. The categorization of commercial, touristy, traditional, ‘too Indian’ does not define the quality of the work, only its unjustly assigned nature.

APPENDIX A

SHOWS, FAIRS AND MARKETS ATTENDED BY DAVID K. JOHN AND EXHIBITIONS THAT INCLUDED HIS WORKS

Year	Show/Exhibition	Classification	Media
2006	Annual Heard Indian Market and Fair		
2005	Annual Heard Indian Market and Fair		
	Eight Northern Pueblos Art Show-San Juan, NM		
	Santa Fe Indian Market		
2004	Annual Heard Indian Market and Fair		
	Eight Northern Pueblos Art Show-San Juan, NM		
	Santa Fe Indian Market		
2003	Santa Fe Indian Market	3 rd place Poster artist	Acrylic
2001	Annual Heard Indian Market and Fair		
2000	Museum of Northern Arizona-Navajo Show	1 st and 2 nd 3 rd	Painting Mask
	Eitlejorg Museum of American Indian and Western Art-Indianapolis, IN	Selected	Poster artist
1999	Annual Heard Indian Market and Fair		
1998	Annual Heard Indian Market and Fair		
1997	Annual Heard Indian Market and Fair		
	Eight Northern Pueblos Art Show-San Ildefonso, NM	Best of Show 1 st place	Painting Mask
	West Valley Native American Arts Festival-Litchfield Park, AZ		
	Santa Fe Indian Market		

1996	West Valley Native American Arts Festival-Litchfield Park, AZ	2 nd place	Painting
	“Honoring the Legacy”-Invitational Indian Art Show-MNA, Flagstaff		
	Annual Indian Market Show-Santa Fe, NM		
	Eight Northern Pueblos Art Show-San Ildefonso, NM		
1995	Intertribal Ceremonial-Gallup, NM	1 st and 2 nd place	Painting Mask
	Navajo Nation Fair-Window Rock, AZ	2 nd place	Painting
	Santa Fe Indian Market	3 rd place	Mask
	Eight Northern Pueblos Art Show-San Ildefonso, NM		
	West Valley Native American Arts Festival-Litchfield Park, AZ		
1994	Intertribal Ceremonial-Gallup, NM	1 st place	Painting
	Eight Northern Pueblos Art Show-San Juan, NM	1 st place	Mask
	Navajo Nation Fair-Window Rock, AZ	1 st place	Painting
	West Valley Native American Arts Festival-Litchfield Park, AZ		
1993	Annual Navajo Show-MNA, Flagstaff	1 st place honor. mention	Mask Painting
		3 rd place	
	Intertribal Ceremonial-Gallup, NM	3 rd place	Painting
	Santa Fe Indian Market	3 rd place	Painting
	West Valley Native American Arts Festival-Litchfield Park, AZ		
	Eight Northern Pueblos Art Show-San Juan, NM		
1992	Annual Navajo Show-MNA, Flagstaff	2 nd place	Painting
	Eight Northern Pueblos Indian Market-San Juan, NM	1 st place	Painting
	Annual One Man Show, Gallup, NM		

	Intertribal Ceremonial-Gallup, NM	3 rd place	Painting
	Indian Market, Savage Gallery, Santa Fe, NM		
	Annual Navajo Nation Fair, Window Rock, AZ		
1991	Annual Navajo Nation Fair, Window Rock, AZ	1 st place 2 nd place	Etching Graphics
	Intertribal Ceremonial-Gallup, NM	2 nd place 2 nd place 1 st place	Painting Mixed media Engravings and etchings
	Spring Salon Show, Springville, UT		
	University of Utah Art Festival, Salt Lake City, UT		
	Student Art Show, Southern Utah State University, Cedar City, UT		
	Red Cloud Indian Art Show, Pine Ridge, SD		
	Festival of Native American Indian Arts, Coconino Center for the Arts, Flagstaff, AZ		
1989	Inter-tribal Indian Ceremonial, Gallup, NM	Best of cat.	Painting, engraving and etchings
1988	Inter-tribal Indian Ceremonial, Gallup, NM	1 st place	Mixed on any media

APPENDIX B**PERMISSIONS**

Permissions to use images of David K. John's artworks have been obtained by the artist and by the following:

Kiva Fine Arts

Toh-Atin Gallery

Southwestern Association for Indian Arts (SWAIA)

New Mexico Magazine

Included in this appendix are the emails I received granting me permissions.

Date: Fri, 5 May 2006 15:41:33 -0700 [Friday May 05, 2006 03:41:33 PM MST]
From: mlentis
To: David John
Subject: Re: permission for use of images

Hi,

Thank you for your calling me yesterday and for granting me permission to use some images of your works. These are your works at Kiva that I am planning to use:

- Yei Spirits of the Diné
- Summer Chant
- November Moon Chant
- Winter Night Chant
- Harvest Chant
- Yei Diné
- Guardians
- Horse Song
- Mask 59
- Gourd Mask 3
- Double Figure Plaque 2

I also would like to use the following, not at Kiva, but for which I also asked permission to Jackson Clark of Toh-Atin, New Mexico Magazine and SWAIA, since this is where I found them. They all agreed if I had permission from you first. The works are:

- Diné's Warrior's Protection (published in New Mexico Magazine, august 2001)
- Home of the Holy People (at Toh-Atin)
- Rain Chant (SWAIA)

Thank you again for your help and I will surely send you copies as soon as my work is done.

regards,

Marinella

Date: Mon, 8 May 2006 15:23:42 -0700 (PDT) [Monday May 08, 2006 03:23:42 PM MST]
From: David John
To: Mlentis
Subject: Re: permission for use of images

Hello,

Thanks for letting me know which images your going to use. Good luck and if you need anything else you can always email me.

Take care, David K. John

Date: Tue, 02 May 2006 13:42:32 -0600 [Tuesday May 02, 2006 12:42:32 PM MST]

From: Jackson Clarke

To: mlentis

Subject: Re: permission for use of images

It's fine with me and I'm sure it's ok with David. Good luck.

Jackson Clark

--

Jackson Clark II, President
Toh-Atin Gallery
P.O. Box 2329
Durango, CO 81302

800 525-0384
Fax 970 247-8230
www.toh-atin.com

Shipping address:
145 W. Ninth St.
Durango, Colorado 81301

Date: Tue, 02 May 2006 13:55:08 -0600 [Tuesday May 02, 2006 12:55:08 PM MST]

From: "photos.nmmag" <photos@nmmagazine.com>

To: mlentis

Subject: David John painting

That's fine with us if you'd like to use the image of John's painting, but I think technically you'd need to get permission from the artist as that's his work. I doubt he'd mind at all.

Good Luck,

--

Sincerely,

Steve Larese
New Mexico Magazine
495 Old Santa Fe Trail
Santa Fe, NM 87501

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