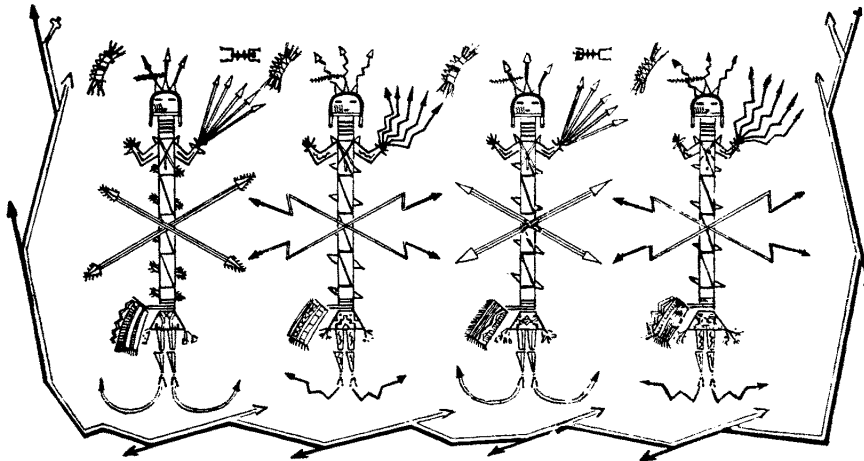


A NOTE ON THE USE OF DESIGN *by the* HANDICRAFTSMAN

By Pauline G. Schindler



Nayenzgani, the Man-Who-Slew-Fear, a sand painting of the Navajos. He is the son of Ttsanatilebi, the omnipotent mother and supreme deity of the Navajo pantheon, who is immortally young. Nayenzgani commands the sun and the lightning. The sand painting shows him in four forms. The males ride on thunderbolts, the females upon barbed rainbows. A boomerang in the form of a stone knife guards each figure at the left. A barbed lightning bolt ties in the picture and guards it from intrusion of evil forces

IN THE decoration of a textile or a surface, there are two possible motives to be discerned. Either the designer has had a general idea transcending words to utter, or he wishes to communicate a specific idea, perhaps mystically, in terms of symbol.

Contemporary design has departed from the symbol, and deals primarily with abstractions. In a great work of architecture, the forms and their relationships are as much an utterance as is a Partita of Bach or a quartet by Mozart. The architectural forms of the ancient Greeks, or of great contemporaries such, for example, as Frank Lloyd Wright in America, Mies van der Rohe in Europe, make a statement whose elements include nobility and a profound sense of dignity in life, as unmistakably as many bad modern works make an utterance of triviality, futility, and emptiness, if they can be said to utter anything at all in the clatter of forms which have not been potent enough to "come alive."

The artist of our time, finding himself urgently moving toward a more and more abstract use of form, has by the same token deserted symbolism in design. We come almost to the point at which we see all design, whether of our period or another, thus abstractly. The original meaning of the ancient patterns fails to register with us, first because we are looking at form and color abstractly; second because we lack knowledge of the traditions and folkways which have given to the decorative work

of ancient and primitive peoples its richness and meaning.

This Oriental rug, for example, is a seething of symbols. We walk blindly over it, deriving only a pleasant blur of soft colors, plus a flattering sense of enhancing our own personal value by stepping upon its costly pile. All that the maker of the rug hoped to communicate to posterity through this sign-language, with its rich vocabulary, — whether his forms had religious, historical, or erotic significance, — falls on deaf ears, or blind eyes, when it reaches us.

The movements of a Chinese dancer, likewise, are almost altogether in terms of a known vocabulary. When the Occidental who has not prepared himself for this intricate spectacle by a study of Chinese dance symbolism, watches such a performance, he receives perhaps as much of it as he would if listening to any foreign language unfamiliar to him, of which only the pleasing and unpleasing combinations of sound and pitch, registered upon his consciousness, and he remained quite unaware of its organization into meaningful words.

All of the design used by the American Indian is to be read as language. The aesthetics of form and color are merely incidental. The marginal design upon basket or bowl is a prayer, a song, an emotional shout, or a message.

And of all design by the Indian, the sand painting of the Navajos is most poignant. Very reluctant have the Navajos been to betray any of its sacred

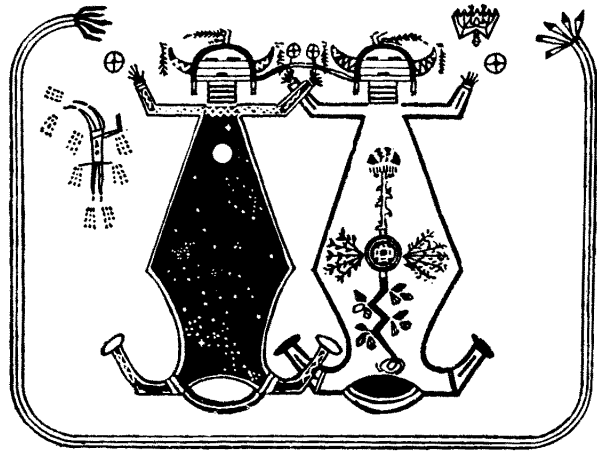
secret to the world. Its knowledge passes from generation to generation only by way of one medicine man to another.

The sand painting is a prayer. It is used in critical times of evil, or death, or to avert catastrophe, and is a part of a ritual taking from one to nine days. At such times there is a separate sand painting for each day; the painting must be completed, with all its intricate technical requirements, between sunrise and sunset, and must then be completely obliterated. The individual for whom the prayer is made is seated upon the sand painting, and the act of obliteration includes a beneficent transferring of the sacred colored sands to his person.

The painting is made upon the ground, and is drawn with the utmost delicacy and accuracy in sands of many colors, finely ground. It is usually "tied in" with a surrounding line, or frame, to keep out evil. Since less evil comes from the east, the open top of a sand painting faces that way. The surrounding line is frequently a protective thunderbolt.

An intense seriousness marks the whole ceremony of the painting. A small technical error may mean death instead of life and well-being for the individual for whose sake it is made. Critical questions in the matter of symbolism and its technique are disputed at length by medicine men brought from long distances to clarify difficult points.

In the painting of *Yadilil Hastgin the Sky Man*, and *Nihosdzan Esdza the Earth Mother*, the rainbow which symbolizes beneficent earth-moisture, ties in the picture. The medicine men place the constellations with great accuracy in the picture of the Sky Man, whose upper figure shows the stars before dawn, while the lower figure shows the stars just after midnight. His outstretched arms carry the Milky Way, his hands tell the white dawn, his feet the afterglow.



Sacred Navajo painting in sand. Yadilil Hastgin the Sky Man, and Nibostzan Esdza the Earth Mother

A thread of pollen binds the Earth Mother and the Sky Father to each other. Four sacred plants, — the Bean, Corn, Squash, and Tobacco, — spring fruitful from her body. There is not in all of the design one line or figure which has not its special intent.

The legends by which the Navajos have interpreted their universe serve as dramatic background from which these pictures derive their meaning. The feeling which calls them forth is comparable to that which produced the Madonnas of the early Italian primitives.

For it is out of intense feeling that significant symbolic pattern is made. And it should be only out of intensity that any design is created.

Indian sand painting, courtesy of the Museum of Spanish Arts, Santa Fe, New Mexico

