

Sandpaintings

The sandpaintings [ˈiikááh] with which you are familiar are only small, incomplete renditions of the sandpaintings [ˈiikááh] used by the [Navajo](#) in their [ceremonials](#). [One atypical sandpainting](#) [ˈiikááh] was seen on Day 1. These small (< 2' × 2') sand paintings [ˈiikááh] are made as trade items, for sale to tourists and collectors.

Sandpaintings (or better, drypaintings) [ˈiikááh] are an essential part of [Navajo ceremonials](#) [Diné binahagha'], and, as such, are sacred. They are created to aid in the restoration of health and harmony [[hózhǫ́](#)] in the life of the patient, the one sung over. While in most ceremonials, the images are created on the [hooghan](#) floor of mineral [nahasdzáán bii' biɫ haz'ánígíí] materials on a base of sand [[séí](#)], the paintings in the [Blessingway ceremony](#) [Hózhóǫ́jǫ́] are created on buckskin [ˈabani] using a variety of vegetal materials (pollen [tádííin], meal [naadʰakʰʰin] and crushed flower petals) as the medium. The image is formed of charcoal [t'eesh] and crushed minerals [nahasdzáán bii' biɫ haz'ánígíí] placed on a bed of sand [[séí](#)] in the other ceremonies.

A large number (> 500) of different designs have been recorded by observers and anthropologists over time, and more probably exist. A few are small, but many are so large (20 feet in diameter) that they are made only in [hooghans](#) constructed especially for them. The smaller sandpaintings [ˈiikááh] can be made by two [naaki] or three [táá] people working for less than an hour [ˈahée'ilkid], but the largest may require 10 [neeznáá] - 15 [ˈashdla'áadah] people to work for most of a day [jǫ́]. The ceremonial sandpaintings [ˈiikááh] are made by assistants to the chanter [Hataááii] (or singer), perhaps family members of either the chanter [Hataááii] or the patient, in a [hooghan](#) that has been blessed, or made sacred, for the ceremony. The [hooghan](#) may even have been built especially for the ceremony.

Each image is linked with a particular ceremony, which may last from one [t'ááɫ á'í] to 9 [náhást'éí] days [jǫ́]. The stories associated with the ceremony dictate which designs are used and the manner of executing these designs. If a shorter version of a ceremony is being conducted, the designs to be used are decided upon by the singer [Hataááii] in consultation with the patient and his family in order to choose the one(s) most appropriate to the particular situation.

Most sandpaintings [ˈiikááh] are made during the daytime, but a few are created after dark. Most are made upon a base of fine sand [[séí](#)] that is carried into the [hooghan](#) and laid down on a layer one [t'ááɫ á'í] to three [táá] inches deep upon the floor. While the colors [ˈaɫah'áát'eetgo nidaashch'ǫ́ǫ́'ígíí] can vary, [the four principal colors](#) [ˈaɫah'áát'eetgo nidaashch'ǫ́ǫ́'ígíí], white [ɫigai], blue [doot'ɫizh], yellow [[ɫitso](#)] and black [[ɫizhin](#)], are always present. These colors [ˈaɫah'áát'eetgo

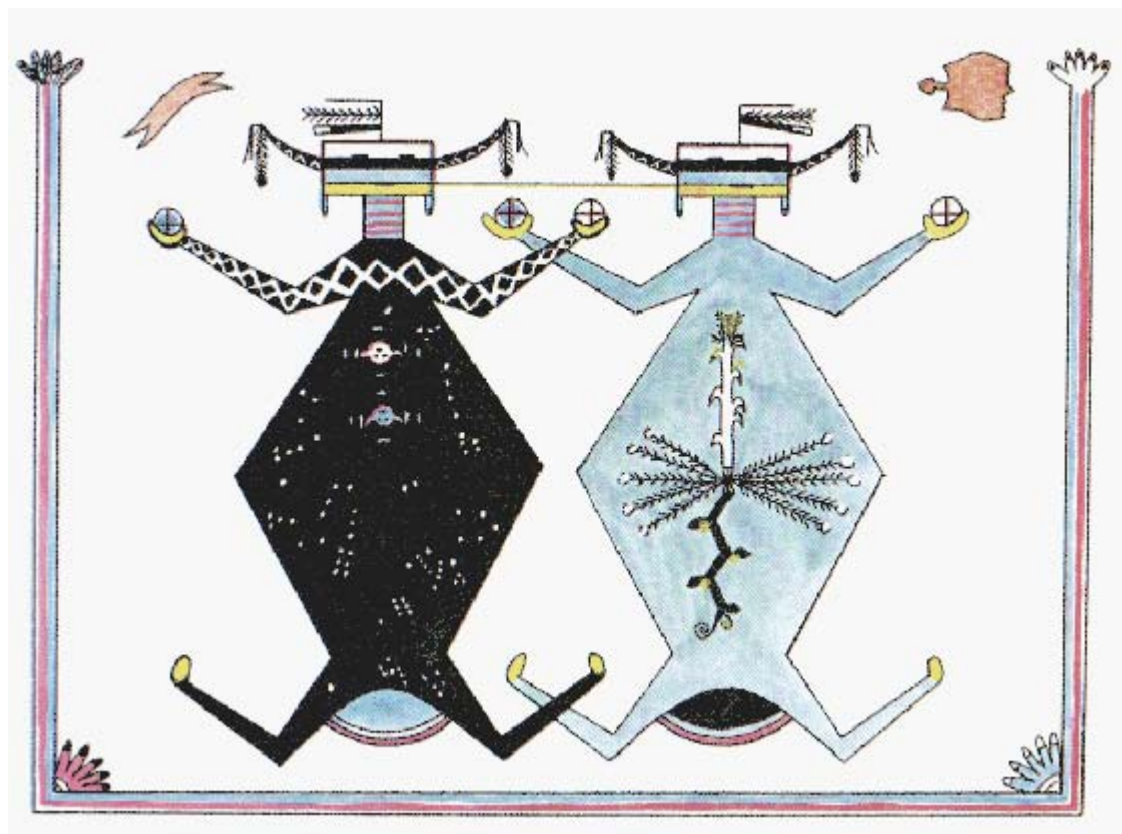
nidaashch'ígíí] are symbolically associated with the directions [da'níts'góó]: white [ígai] with the dawn [Hayíík] and the east [[ha'a'aah](#)], blue [doot'izh] with the midday sky [yáh] and the south [shádi'ááh], yellow [[itso](#)] with evening twilight [nahootsoii] and the west [['e'e'aah](#)], and black [[izhin](#)] with the night [t'ée'] sky [yáh] and the north [náhook's]. The colors [a'at'ah'áát'e'igo nidaashch'ígíí] are laid on by the chanter [Hataááii] and his assistants using the right [nishnááji] hand ['ala'] and allowing the material to trickle out between the thumb ['álátsoh] and forefinger. Some dimensions and the balance between certain figures must be very exact in order for the sandpainting ['iikááh] to be effective, for the proper balance to be achieved. Therefore careful measurements are made using tape measures and pieces of string which are then stretched tight at the proper location and snapped to make an accurate straight line [k'éhézdón ídzoh] in the base sand [[séi](#)] as a guide line. In this way, figures are kept in proper alignment and proper proportion. In order to make the image three-dimensional, the figure painting ['ak'ina'adzoh] on the backs of the figures is laid down first and, when completed, the proper colored sand [[séi](#)] is laid on representing the body ['ats'íís]. Then the figure painting ['ak'ina'adzoh] on the front side of the bodies is constructed on top of these, assuring that the complete representation of the [Holy People](#) [[dighin diné](#)] is made. This will more surely insure their presence and aid in the ceremony. To not to disturb the parts of the sandpainting ['iikááh] that have been completed, the chanter [Hataááii] and his assistants work outward from the center. If an error is made, that part of the image is covered with fresh sand [[séi](#)] and is begun again.

The sandpainting ['iikááh] is oriented so that the top is at the east [[ha'a'aah](#)] and is surrounded by a guardian on the other three [táá'] sides. This protects the sandpainting ['iikááh] from evil on those sides and allows strength and all good things (which come from the east [[ha'a'aah](#)] with the dawn [Hayíík]) to enter. The sandpainting ['iikááh] derives its power to heal from the coexistence within the image of multiple layers of time, space, and meaning. The layers of time derive from the presence of the [Holy People](#) [[dighin diné](#)] (in their images and their presence which is presumed); the layers of space derive from the careful construction of the back and front images of the [Holy People](#) [[dighin diné](#)]; the layers of meaning come from the myths and stories associated with these sandpaintings ['iikááh] especially chosen for the situation at hand ['ala'] in the same way that the parables of the Bible are used. The patient sits on the sandpainting ['iikááh], in direct contact with the images of the [Holy People](#) [[dighin diné](#)] during the ceremony. They enter his body ['ats'íís] and thus help to heal him in this way.

It is important to note that the process itself of creating a sandpainting ['iikááh] contributes to the healing because the act of drawing such symmetrical, orderly images focuses the thoughts of everyone present on the principles of balance and order. The patient can begin to believe in the possibility of his healing based on

his belief in the ability of the perfectly executed sandpainting ['iikááh] to bring the [Holy People](#) [[dighin diné](#)] and the power that they can bring to bear on his behalf.

The images become almost unrecognizable during the ceremony. After the ceremony the sand [[séí](#)] is all swept up and removed from the [hooghan](#). It is taken far away and ceremonially disposed of. It is still holy and possesses great power. If it is not properly treated, great harm may come.



In order to take a closer look at one of the central sandpaintings ['iikááh] in many of the ceremonies, I have shown here a watercolor [[bee na'ach'ííhí tóhígíí](#)] painting of the Mother Earth - Father Sky image from the Male Shootingway chant [[Na'at'oii bika' bihóchó'íjii](#)] made by Trudy Griffin-Pierce. You can immediately find in this painting many of the characteristics that have already been mentioned: the presence of the [four](#) [[dǫ́](#)] [principal colors](#) [['aítah'áát'eeigo nidaashch'íí'ígíí](#)] and the [rainbow](#) [[nááts'íilid](#)] guardian surrounding the image on three [[táá'](#)] sides. The arms [['agaan](#)] and legs [['ajáád](#)] of Father Sky lie over those of Mother Earth [[Nahasdzáán Shimá](#)] just as the sky [[Yáh](#)] lies above the earth [[Nahasdzáán](#)]. The faces [['aníí'](#)] of both Mother Earth [[Nahasdzáán Shimá](#)] and Father Sky are covered with the Sun's [[Jóhonaa'éí](#)] house stripes, the yellow [[íitso](#)] of evening twilight [[nahootsoii](#)] in a band across the chin [['ayaats'iin](#)], the blue [[doot'ish](#)] of the midday sky [[yáh](#)] above the mouth [['azéé'](#)], the black []

[izhin](#)] of the night sky [yáh] across the eyes ['anáá'], and the white [[igai](#)] of dawn [Hayíí'kǫ] across the forehead [á'táá]. On the body ['ats'íís] of Mother Earth [Nahasdzáán Shimá] are seen the four [[dǫ](#)] sacred plants [nanise'], corn [naadǫ], rising toward the head ['atsii'] of Mother Earth [Nahasdzáán Shimá], five [ashdla'] bean [naa'oi] plants [nanise'] rising toward the south [shádi'ááh], the black [[izhin](#)] squash [naayízi] plant with yellow [[itso](#)] squash [naayízi] toward the west [[e'e'aaah](#)], and five [ashdla'] blue [doot'izh] stems of tobacco to the north [náhookǫs], all radiating from the central lake, representing the place of emergence of the [Navajo](#) into this the Fourth World. The plant [nanise'] images are made solely by female assistants. This is important as they represent the regeneration and renewal of the earth [Nahasdzáán]. The gray-blue color of the body ['ats'íís] of Mother Earth [Nahasdzáán Shimá] represents the turquoise [doot'izhii] dress of the summer [[shǫ](#)] sky [yáh]. The body ['ats'íís] of Father Sky is covered by the constellations [sǫ'rání], the sun [Jóhonaa'éi], the moon [T'réhonaa'éi] and the Milky Way [Yikáisdáhi]. [The Milky Way](#) [Yikáisdáhi] is represented by the crossing zig-zag lines [noolt'iizhgo na'asdzoh] running across the shoulders ['awos] of Father Sky from hand ['ala'] to hand ['ala']; as it is associated with the east [[ha'a'aaah](#)], it should be placed high up on the body ['ats'íís] near the head ['atsíi'], which is at the east [[ha'a'aaah](#)]. The blue [doot'izh] [disk of the Sun](#) [Jóhonaa'éi] is centrally placed. The white [[igai](#)] [disk of the Moon](#) [T'réhonaa'éi] is placed above the Sun [Jóhonaa'éi]. The top of each disk is oriented toward the west [[e'eaah](#)], indicating their paths across the sky [yáh]. Horns of power are placed on each disk and they are painted with eyes ['anáá'] and mouths ['azéé']. Feathers are drawn at the tops of each disk to symbolize their ability to float through the air and the powers of clear thought and good judgement. The constellations

[sǫ'rání] represented are Náhookǫs bika'ii ([the Big Dipper](#)), a male figure, Náhookǫs ba'áadii (Cassiopeia), a female figure, Dilyéhé ([the Pleiades](#)), 'Atsé'ets'ózi ([Orion](#)), Hastiin Sik'ai'i (Corvus), 'Atsé'etsoh (composed of the front part of Scorpius), Gah heet'e'ii (the tail of Scorpius). The hands ['ala'] and feet ['akee'] of both Mother Earth [Nahasdzáán Shimá] and Father Sky are painted with yellow [[itso](#)] pollen [tádííin] to represent fertility. The Sun's [Jóhonaa'éi] tobacco pouch is placed just above Father Sky's right hand ['ala']; the Bat [jaa'abaní] goes above Mother Earth's [Nahasdzáán Shimá] left hand ['ala']. These guardians will protect the eastern opening. Pollen [tádííin] balls are placed in the mouths ['azéé'] of both Mother Earth [Nahasdzáán Shimá] and Father Sky and a line of pollen [tádííin] stretched between these two balls.

Both figures sit on clouds [k'os] of mist, blue [doot'izh] and black [[izhin](#)], held together by rainbows [nááts'íilid]. The last act of the creation of the sandpainting ['iikááh] is to place the constellations [sǫ'rání] in their proper symbolic location. This is done by the chanter [Hataá'rii] himself while recounting the story of the creation. In this story, Coyote [Mǫ'ii], "the patron of disorder", disrupts the orderly placement of the stars [sǫ'] by the [Holy People](#) [[dighin diné](#)] by flinging the as yet unplaced stars [sǫ'] up into the sky [yáh]. The chanter [Hataá'rii] draws

only the constellations [sʰíání] that were placed in the sky [yáh] in an orderly manner, thus restoring order to the "disordered" spiritual and physical world of the patient.

The scanned image of the watercolor of the Mother Earth - Father Sky sandpainting is used with the permission of the artist, Trudy Griffin-Pierce.

A selection of reasonably priced sandpaintings, both traditional and contemporary/pictorial, can be found at the [Penfield Gallery of Indian Arts](#), Albuquerque, NM.

This discussion is taken from the short description of sandpainting found in *The Navajo* by Clyde Kluckhohn and Dorothea Leighton and the extensive work of Trudy Griffin-Pierce in *Earth is My Mother, Sky is my Father, Space, Time, and Astronomy in Navajo Sandpainting*. For a more detailed discussion of this sandpainting and a recounting of a ceremony using the Mother Earth - Father Sky sandpainting in which she was a participant, see Trudy Griffin-Pierce. [An alternate version of the placement of the sun, moon and stars](#) is given in *Navaho Folk Tales* by Newcomb. A [painting by Navajo artist Clifford Brycelea](#) shows the Holy People placing the stars.



Griffin-Pierce, Trudy, [Earth is my Mother, Sky is my Father, Space, Time, and Astronomy in Navajo Sandpainting](#), University of New Mexico Press.

Newcomb, Franc & Paul Zolbrod, [Navajo Folk Tales](#), University of New Mexico Press.

Farella, John R., [The Main Stalk: A Synthesis of Navajo Philosophy](#), University of Arizona Press.

McNeley, James Kale, [Holy Wind in Navajo Philosophy](#), University of Arizona Press.

Zolbrod, Paul, [*Dine Bahane : The Navajo Creation Story*](#), University of New Mexico Press.

[Return to Ceremonials](#)

[Back to Day 5](#)

