

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART  
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

NAVAHO MEDICINE MEN MAKE SACRED SAND PAINTINGS

AT MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

The sacred and mysterious rite of sand painting will be practiced at the Museum of Modern Art, beginning tomorrow (Thursday, March 27), by two Navaho medicine men from Window Rock, Arizona. Sand paintings are religious pictures of intricate design in colored rock powder on a floor of sand. In the same gallery where the sand painters will work, a Navaho silversmith will demonstrate his craft and a Navaho woman will weave a rug on her loom.

These native activities are being shown as a supplement to the Museum's exhibition of Indian Art of the United States and will continue until it closes on April 27. Except on Mondays these demonstrations will be given every day including Saturdays and Sundays from 12:30 to 5:30 P.M., and from 7:30 to 9:30 P.M. Wednesdays when the Museum is open until 10 P.M.

The two medicine men are Charley Turquoise, who is seventy-three years old, and Dinay Chilli Bitsoey, which in English means Short Man's Grandson. The name of the Navaho weaver is Mary Peshlakai. Tom Katenay, the silversmith, whose Indian name of Etsiddy Yazzie Nay Bitsoey means Little Silversmith's Grandson, sometimes acts as a helper to the sand painters when they are working on a very intricate design.

The making of a sand painting climaxes the Navaho religious ceremony or observance known as a Chant, which is a primitive festival of healing lasting four, five or nine days. Each Chant has its own series of sand paintings, songs and prayers. The sand painting is composed of highly stylized or abstract pictures representing gods, goddesses, mythological beings, natural phenomena, such as clouds, mountains and plants. Male figures have round heads and female figures angular heads. The designs and colors are highly symbolic, all standing for ideas and beliefs in the very active

Navaho religion.

On Navaho reservations the sand painting is made by the medicine man and his assistants in a hogahn, or House of Song, built of cedar logs and earth. Clean sand is sprinkled on the floor over a space about fifteen feet in diameter. On this background the medicine man and his assistants start work in the center and move toward the four sides, pouring between thumb and forefinger a fine trickle of colored rock finely powdered. There is no pattern for the picture except in the mind of the medicine man, who gives directions to his assistants whenever needed. Four colors are used each representing a direction of the compass. The color for the east is white; for the south blue; for the west yellow and for the north black. The colors are ground rock. For black, charcoal is mixed with the rock powder.

The sand paintings to be made at the Museum will be selected by the medicine men from the Thunder Chant and the Wind Chant. Some of the traditional restrictions imposed for the actual healing ceremony will not apply. For example, it will not be necessary to finish the sand painting and destroy it within a single day. The making of one painting will continue several days, at the end of which it will be destroyed. The following day a new painting will be begun.

As sand painting is a religious ceremony for the Indian, the public will not be permitted to photograph the medicine men at work. The Indians consider sand painting a mysterious force capable of harm when not properly controlled. Photographs, the Indians believe, would make this force permanent and cause the medicine men to stop work on the painting immediately. The Museum will therefore request that all cameras be checked at the entrance.