

Sandpaintings have ceremonial, healing ties

BY PAM PHILLIPS
Times Correspondent

"Dine" is the Navajo word for "the people." It is how the Navajo people refer to themselves.

For centuries, the Medicine Clans have used sandpaintings in ceremonies and for healing rituals. Every ceremony has specific images that are incorporated into the sandpainting. As each aspect of the image is formed, it calls for particular songs and prayers.

The images may be of the Yei-bei-chai (male or female), the spiritual messengers that carry prayers, or they may be of the four staple plants that have always fed the people. Figures representing the moon, sun, stars and Earth as well as some animals also are commonly portrayed.

These paintings are done on the ground within or just outside of the hogan, which is a traditional octagonal structure. Hogans were used as the main dwelling until more recent times and often today sit beside a modern house and are maintained for ceremonial purposes.

The ground is swept clean and tamped down and smoothed before the painting begins. Earth pigments are made by grinding various stones and minerals into fine grains and placed in separate containers.

As the ceremony commences, the person conducting the ritual sits on the ground and makes a large circle several feet across by dropping grains of sand from his fingers. Depending on the focus of the ceremony various figures emerge in the painting as the songs and prayers are presented. Some ceremonies take four days or more and the painting is completed as the ceremony is finished. These sandpaintings are beautiful works of art, detailed and intricate in structure and were wiped out at the completion of the ceremony.

Many people seeing the beauty looked for a way to make these paintings permanent so that others could enjoy them and preserve them and so a new artform was created. Today, sandpaintings still are done in the traditional way for ceremonies but also are done on fiberboard using glue or a yucca paste, making a permanent display.

These images also were a way of preserving the culture as a Navajo alphabet was not created until the 1960s. Songs and prayers were preserved using visual images in the absence of a written language and still are remembered and passed down in this fashion today.

