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BENJAMIN WILLIAMSON'S MAINE ATTRACTIONS

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DANCERS OF THE NIGHTWAY

NAVAJO ARTISTS WEAVE MAGIC

Gallery view of *Dancers of the Nightway: Ceremonial Imagery in Navajo Weaving* exhibition (Photography by Laura Shea).

There's a Navajo/Diné story in which Spider Woman, the ancient goddess who mapped out the universe and invented the weaving loom, rubbed spider webs on newly born baby girls to ensure they'd mature into great weavers.

Although weaving is the core feature in the Navajo/Diné creation story, sacred spiritual imagery and symbolism weren't traditionally included as design elements in Navajo/Diné rugs and blankets. These objects were primarily utilitarian and decorated with geometric patterns that may or may not implicitly refer to cultural history or identity. The permanent and explicit depiction of a divinity on these objects was taboo.

The prohibition against depicting the sacred was challenged shortly after the turn of the 20th century by an artisan named Gle-nup-pah and her younger sister, Yah-nah-pah. These women caused a revolution in weaving at a time when the craft was in transition. They began to weave a distinctive identifiable figure – the Yeibichai dancer, personifying the ancient Yei divinity known as The Talking God. The act of weaving and making visible the sacred and protective figure from the "Nightway" or "Night Chant" ceremony was controversial because of the private nature of the ceremony and the fact that the design was made for financial reward.

Gle-nup-pah's Yeibichai dancer is depicted – in "Single Ceremonial Dancer," 1910, a hand spun wool blanket – as a tall, single, costumed figure with three feathers on his geometric head. The hard-edge simplification of the face, which is masked, contrasts with the more rounded and accurate depiction of the naked upper torso and outstretched arms. Gle-nup-pah's inventive figurative design changed forever how gods would be imagined and depicted in textiles.

The exhibition features a select collection of 14 beautiful wall-hangings/rug weavings from 1910s-1940s, depicting various configurations of the "Nightway" ceremony, in various sizes (the smallest is 41" x 26" and the largest is 41" x 26");

MOUNT HOLYOKE COLLEGE ART MUSEUM
LOWER LAKE ROAD
SOUTH HADLEY, MASSACHUSETTS

THROUGH MAY 29

weavers did not have a choice. What kind of weaver would decide to weave sacred ceremonial dancers, animals and icons for the market? A weaver that needs to feed, clothe and care for her family."

"WHAT KIND OF WEAVER WOULD DECIDE TO WEAVE SACRED CEREMONIAL DANCERS, ANIMALS AND ICONS FOR THE MARKET? A WEAVER THAT NEEDS TO FEED, CLOTHE AND CARE FOR HER FAMILY."

litso Dedman (Diné Navajo), Yeibichai dancers, ca. 1945, cottonwood, paint, dyed ;athers and pipe cleaner, from the collection of Rebecca and Jean-Paul Valette ?hotography by Laura Shea).

ıere is also one contemporary example, "Yeibichai Scene," 2000. It pens with "Rug with Yei Figures," ca. 1935-1940, wool with aniline yes, a work that does not reference the "Nightway." In this scene, ıe imagery is a stylized imagining of actual Yeis (Diyin Dine'é, Holy 'eople), not dancers in costume personifying the gods. There are six gures who appear to be female Yeis, three to each side, with the acred corn, or maize, at center position.

Because of the taboo associated with this image, an explanation by ontemporary Native American textile artist Lynda Teller Pete, a fifth-eneration weaver, is included to offer an updated perspective. Teller 'ete, whose grandmother was a weaver and Yeibichai dancer, explains, She never wove Yei rugs, and because of her economic situation, she ad a choice about what she wove and for whom. A great many Navajo

Teller goes on to point out that the making of a Yei rug may have been transformative for the maker who may have asked for protective prayers from the medicine man before and after the weaving was completed. She also reminds viewers that weaving is female power, "Spider Woman taught some weavers to be fearless, to take on challenges, to weave rugs to provide for their families, but also to pass on knowledge of sacred beings, and animals – even if disruptions occur."

Traditional Navajo/Diné stories about the ancient ancestors, which included Spider Grandmother, are typically told during the dark winter months and are private to the family. One of the most sacred of Navajo/Diné curative ceremonies, the "Nightway," takes a full night to perform and ends at dawn, and was traditionally shrouded in mystery. That

Recursive Threads

ANN CONRAD & ELIZABETH GOURLAY

CURATED BY ANTHONY KIRK

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changed with the arrival of Europeans who began documenting, then objectifying, and eventually commodifying indigenous culture.

With this perspective we have a clue or understanding as to why Gle-nup-pah took the risk in depicting a taboo subject. Other weavings in the exhibition relate how Navajo/Diné weavers compromised with Anglo collectors. In a vertical weaving labeled "Two female dancers," ca. 1910-1915, six swastikas, symbols of earth balance for some cultures, are included, three on each side of the composition. The curatorial label explains, "Anglo traders began strongly encouraging their weavers to add multiple swastikas to their compositions, promoting these to clients as symbols of American Indian spirituality."

The problematic cultural shift that occurred when the sacred became a product is the uncomfortable story behind the depictions of the "Nightway" in weaving format. The reality of what happened is handled with great sensitivity by collector/curators Rebecca M. and Jean-Paul Valette and Aaron F. Miller, assistant curator of visual and material culture. The Valettes are best known for having written and published a series of French and Spanish textbooks for American secondary and college students. Their passion for and deep scholarly interest in Navajo/Diné weaving has led them to obtain an extensive collection depicting the sacred and ceremonial aspects of indigenous culture and heritage.

The exhibition, therefore, is organized to teach viewers about the "Nightway" specifically through the textiles. As a type of cultural history and anthropological presentation, it also includes seven photogravures on paper, from 1904 negatives, by Edward Curtis (1868-1952). The Curtis photographs are themselves problematic because the "Nightway" depictions, although accurate in posture and accoutrements, were staged by Curtis because he'd arrived after "Nightway" season had already ended.

The "Nightway" weavings are marvelous intriguing cultural objects. Of those in the exhibition, my personal favorites are "Yeibichai Dancers with Decorative Border," ca. 1920, featuring a series of ravens or crows around the border area in symbolic colors; and "Yeibichai dance team," ca. 1920s, a group of male and female dancers wearing beautiful rich red and orange tops against a dark background with only a thin red elegant border framing the horizontal picture. Other superb arrangements are those including families with children as dancers, perhaps relating a coming-of-age rite or initiation ceremony.

The exhibition ends with a wonderful colorfully painted figurative carving of Yeibichai dancers by Clitso Dedman, which provides a three-dimensional and realistic portrayal of the "Nightway" as he would have witnessed it in his youth (at approximately the turn of the 20th century). The sculpture features two Navajo Medicine Men, standing next to each other, facing and offering bowls to The Talking God, the first figure in line wearing a multi-feathered headdress. Behind him in alternating sequence are male (with two feathers) and female (masked, no feathers) dancers. At the end of the line is Water Sprinkler (sometimes depicted as a trickster or clown), legs bent, holding a gray fox to his side, and ready for action.

Diné (Navajo), Yeibichai dancers with decorative border, ca. 1920s, handspun wool, from the collection of Rebecca and Jean-Paul Valette (Photograph by Christopher Soldt).

The "Nightway" weavings and Clitso sculpture can be read and viewed from a few different perspectives, all of which coalesce into one definition. These are sacred as well as historical cultural objects from a transitional, pivotal time for the Navajo/Diné. They are also instructional manuals in the teaching of a particular spiritual activity, and they are incredible individual examples of artistic expression.

| J. Fatima Martins