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Remembering Ed Vadas

As he was: the wild and generous
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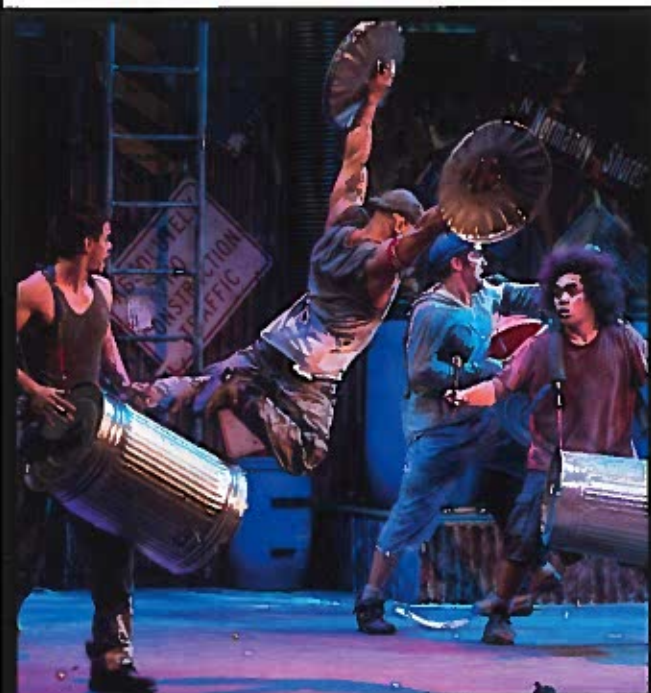
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TELLING STORIES, KEEPING SECRETS

Ceremonial figures in Navajo weavings

BY LAURA HOLLAND

Gle-nup-pah,
1878-1935, Single
ceremonial dancer,
ca. 1910, handspun
wool, Collection of
Rebecca and Jean-
Paul Valette

CHRISTOPHER
SOLDT PHOTO



LAURA SHEA PHOTO

DANCERS OF THE NIGHTWAY

Ceremonial Imagery in Navajo Weaving

By Laura Shea
The Navajo people have a long history of weaving, and their textiles are a central part of their culture. This exhibition features a selection of Navajo weavings, including ceremonial blankets and everyday items. The weavings are displayed in a gallery setting, with informational text panels providing context for each piece.



A mythic process, sacred ceremonial imagery, and a commercial product — interweaving such disparate strands poses a daunting challenge, even for skilled artisans. How the Navajo met this challenge is seen in *Dancers of the Nightway: Ceremonial Imagery in Navajo Weaving*, a selection of weavings collected and curated by Rebecca and Jean-Paul Valette, at the Mount Holyoke College Museum of Art. These beautiful textiles tell intriguing stories, but keep essential secrets.

According to Diné (the name preferred by the Navajo tribe, which means “the People”) legend, a deity named Spider Woman (Na’ashjéii Asdzáa) first taught the People to weave. Her loom joined sky and earth, and she used spindles fashioned from lightning. Historical records may be more prosaic — Pueblo Indians probably taught the Navajo to weave — but the art of weaving plays a central role in Navajo myth and culture. Diné women excelled in weaving geometric-patterned blankets, so highly valued that each blanket was worth several horses in the intertribal barter economy. Later, Anglo traders exerted an influence. They encouraged Navajo women to make their weavings even more marketable by using brilliantly colored aniline dyes that complemented Victorian decor, and by introducing new figural designs that depicted scenes from sacred ceremonies, including The Nightway.

The Nightway (Klējê Hatál) is a major religious and medicinal ceremony, supervised down to every detail by trained medicine

According
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men, and structured to restore balance and harmony among the many elements of the universe. The nine-day ceremony is performed only during the winter and, through sand paintings and a culmination of other ritual practices, calls upon the Yei, supernatural beings who help and protect the Diné. On the final night, teams of dancers impersonate gods to perform the Yeibichai Dance, which lasts until first light, when bluebirds sing. Reproducing the ritual imagery is not allowed.

But, by portraying the human dancers, and not the holy figures those dancers invoke in the Nightway, Diné weavers created figural designs that satisfied their Anglo clients and honored the traditional prohibition against publicly revealing a deeply spiritual, private ceremony. Gle-nup-pah (1878-1935) and her sister Yah-nah-pah, who married an Anglo trader, are believed to be the first to depict stylized, single figures identified as Yeibichai dancers. Skilled weavers displaying a decorative flair,

the two sisters abstracted forms and deliberately altered crucial details in ceremonial garb and gear. Still, these early Yeibichai weavings were controversial, and such imagery remains controversial even today in more conservative Diné communities.

While Gle-nup-pah characteristically depicted single figures, other weavers portray dance teams, and convey the energy of the dance through an economy of warp and weft. By staggering the height of the dancers in each row, one weaver skillfully suggests rhythm and movement. Another sets dancers at varied angles so they seem to snake in and out along a line. Dark backgrounds evoke a dramatic nocturnal atmosphere for colorfully clad dancers, and in another piece, children nestle among adult dancers to suggest the Nightway was also an initiation rite.

Outside commercial pressure to provide a narrative pushed against the desire to protect the sacred ceremony, and inspired some diversionary tactics. Around 1900, Anglo traders induced Navajo weav-

Left: Unknown artist (Navajo), "Yeibichai dancers with children," ca. 1925, handspun wool and commercial yarn, from the collection of Rebecca and Jean-Paul Valette.

Bottom: Unknown artist (Navajo), "Rug with Yei figures," ca. 1935-1940, wool with aniline dyes, Joseph Allen Skinner Museum, Mount Holyoke College, SK K.104

CHRISTOPHER SOLDT PHOTOS

ers to add swastika designs to their weavings, and then disingenuously claimed that swastikas symbolized Native American spirituality. Not so. The design was a purely decorative element in ancient Puebloan pottery, and it carried no special meaning for the Diné. Still, it helped tell a story, albeit a false one. By the 1930s, when the swastika received the burden of Nazi baggage, the symbol totally disappeared from Navajo weavings.

The exhibition also includes a weaving that depicts four Nightway participants in an afternoon ritual preceding the nocturnal dancing — Talking God (Haschélti), Female Yei (Haschébaád), Fringe Mouth (Zahadolzhá), and Water Sprinkler (Tóneníí) — and relates to a similar scene (but without Water Sprinkler) in a photograph by Edward Curtis shown in the adjacent gallery.

In the summer of 1904, Edward Curtis (1868-1952) visited Canyon de Chelly, eager to photograph the Nightway. But he faced three major obstacles. First of all, photographing the ceremony was prohibited, and even the presence of an outsider could undermine the effectiveness of the entire ritual. Second, his camera required daylight, and the Nightway was performed in the dark of night. And third, it was summer, and the ceremony occurred only in winter, when bears and snakes hibernate. Undeterred, Curtis recruited Navajo men willing to stage ceremonial scenes — that is, re-enact ritual poses, but out of context and without all the appropriate accoutrements. Curtis's photogravures, printed from 1904 negatives, are fascinating in what they reveal, as well as what they do not.

Making important details inaccurate or omitting them weren't the only ways Yeibichai weavers guarded the secrets of the Nightway — and themselves. Special ceremonies performed by medicine men protected a weaver before she started weaving. And after she completed the piece and sent it into the market, another ceremony could help restore her harmony with the universe.

Even more protection was woven into the work itself in some families' weaving traditions, with the inclusion of spirit lines (ch'ihóní'í). Appearing in diagonal and diamond-pat-

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Unknown artist (Navajo), "Four Nightway participants," 1930s, hand-spun wool, from the collection of Rebecca and Jean-Paul Valette

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terned textiles as well as those showing Yeibichai dancers, the spirit line is an unobtrusive line running from the center section through the border to the outer edge, which allows the weaver to achieve spiritual distance from the piece after it is completed. Various matriarchal weaving traditions use different names: some call it the "weaver's path"; others call it "the doorway"; and still others weave in a single, fine strand of red wool and call it "the bloodline."

One myth claims that without a spirit line allowing symbolic distance and disentanglement, Spider Woman will continue spinning the pattern, over and over, in the weaver's mind — and there are many other layers of meaning of the spirit line as well. But while the spirit line is a symbolic escape hatch, a way out for the Diné, it is also, for others, an entry point, a way into additional appreciation of the complexity of Navajo Yeibichai weavings. **P**

Dancers of the Nightway: Ceremonial Imagery in Navajo Weaving, Mount Holyoke College Museum of Art, South Hadley, through May 29.



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Unknown artist (Navajo), "Two female dancers," ca. 1910-1915, handspun wool, collection of Rebecca and Jean-Paul Valette

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