

COLOR SYMMETRY IN NAVAJO
AND CONTEMPORARY WESTERN ART

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Upon first viewing, there is an obvious symmetry in Navajo and contemporary Western art. Navajo sandpainting, weaving, and silverwork designs are geometrically centered; Color Field painting of the 1960's and 1970's stresses all over configurations which read as single, symmetrical formats. Both art forms emphasize color in combination with symmetry as an important expressive force.

In a recently published book, *Dynamic Symmetry and Holistic Asymmetry in Navajo and Western Art and Cosmology*, Gary Witherspoon and this writer propose color symmetry as a major aesthetic style of the Navajo which, according to documented research, strongly influences certain styles of contemporary Western art.

This paper/presentation develops and demonstrates (through the aid of computer-generated visuals) specific principles of color symmetry as a highly sophisticated visual order, one which requires a "whole to part" rather than "part to whole" conception of the world. The Navajo (Diné) possess such a world view. It is expressed through the concept of hózhó which refers generally to one's sense of balance, beauty, and centeredness of spirit. Hózhó is poetically revealed in this Navajo prayer:

In beauty I live (walk on into the future).
 With beauty before me, I live.
 With beauty behind me, I live.
 With beauty below me, I live.
 With beauty above me, I live.
 With beauty all around me, I live.

Beauty has been restored!
 Beauty has been restored!
 Beauty has been restored!
 Beauty has been restored!

(Wyman 1970:118)

Visually, this concept is manifest in Navajo art as bilateral and quadrilateral symmetrical compositions whose main force or focus emanates from or lies at the center, and whose all-over pattern is perceived as a visual field. Visual fields in both Navajo art (especially sandpainting and weaving) and Color Field painting are characterized by color planes, repetitious pattern and a grand sense of cosmic, open, and centered space.

Study of these principles of color symmetry as they exist in both Navajo and contemporary Western art has given this author a unique cross-cultural, interdisciplinary basis from which to explore his own painting, particularly the past two decades. During this time, he has exposed his college art students to these principles through specific color assignments as well as critical analysis and theoretical discussion. As a result, students created astounding works of art which emphasize both the formal organization and the expressive potential of color. This research conducted among the Navajo, in the classroom, and in his own studio, led the writer/artist to this conclusion: studying the art and the

world view produced by differing cultures, can lead one to discover common or universal concepts which provide new and expansive paradigms for creative learning in an emerging global society.

In other words, similar universal concepts of symmetry are more easily and vividly "seen" and understood when observed in distinctively divergent contexts, such as Navajo and Western culture and art.

Witherspoon, Gary and Glen Peterson

1995 *Dynamic Symmetry and Holistic Asymmetry in Navajo and Western Art and Cosmology*.
New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.

Wyman, Leland

1970: *Blessingway*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.