# Part One:
# Introduction

The Navajo are famous world-wide for their beautifully and delicately woven rugs, their finely sculptured jewelry, and their ceremonial painting in the sand. Their woven compositions are especially in great demand in the non-Navajo world and are almost universally appreciated. One 19th-century chief blanket recently sold at Sotheby's in New York for a record price of $522,500.00 (NY Times 10/7/1990:42). The non-Navajo who own and admire these rugs and who may get a chance to see a sandpainting are not aware of all the cultural and aesthetic significance these works of art possess, but these works of art do, nevertheless, speak to and have meaning for these owners and admirers. To one extent or another art --like music -- is a universal language. Art speaks both to the heart and to the intellect; it speaks both to the senses and to the imagination; it speaks both to the conscious and to the unconscious mind; it speaks out of the past and into the future. Art is polysemous; its meanings have few bounds. The power of art is limited only by the capacity of human beings to create, to imagine, and to interpret.

Art is subjective expression conveyed in objective forms. Many scholars and social scientists turn away from art because its subjective nature is difficult to measure, to grasp, or to define precisely. Yet the subjective dimension of *Homo sapiens* may be humanity's greatest and most distinctive asset. The complex capacity to imagine, to create, and to convey meaning sets *Homo sapiens* apart in the animal world. These subjective and creative capacities are the very source of human cultures, and it is culture that makes *Homo sapiens* what they are. A social science or a scholarly discipline that ignores art cannot provide us with a complete understanding of humankind.

N. Scott Momaday, in "Man Made of Words," says that "We are what we imagine. Our very existence consists in our imagination of ourselves. Our best destiny is to imagine, at last, completely, who and what and that we are" (1970:200). Regardless of whether one knows anything about Navajo culture, one can get a glimpse of the imaginative power and style of the Navajo from their works of art. These works of art partially bring the insights and imaginations of

the Navajo into our realm of discourse and provide for us an objective representation, though obtuse, of what other people guarding other sheep in other valleys have said about the world and the human condition within it (Geertz 1973:30).

Art captures, expresses, and accentuates the enormous symbolic, creative, and aesthetic impulses and capacities found in *Homo sapiens*. In art, particularly in the best of it, human beings reach levels of symbolic, creative, and aesthetic expression that they themselves cannot fully comprehend. This inscrutability and allusiveness are part of the fascination of works of art, both on the creation side and on the side of analysis and interpretation.

We all know that art is very difficult to understand and even more difficult to discuss. A dancer once was asked to explain what her dance meant. She replied, "If I could tell you what it meant, I would not have to dance it." When social scientists are confronted with works of art, they usually either attempt to ignore them, depreciate their value or import, or try to catalogue them like so many other material artifacts. As long as scholars, museum curators, and traders can, for example, catalogue Navajo weavings into historical periods and/or regional styles, they have the comfortable feeling they know something about these rugs. This relieves the anxiety of not knowing how to understand or interpret the rugs.

Those who attempt to deal with art usually take one of two approaches. One approach is to date and catalogue the productions, to detail the means and the techniques of production, and to detail the uses to which the artifacts are put. The second approach is to create an abstract and opaque jargon that is designed to impress the neophyte, but which really informs hardly anyone. This is not to deny the importance of aesthetic form; it is simply to argue that aesthetic form emerges from and conveys its greatest meanings within cultural contexts. We cannot fully appreciate and understand another people's art without placing it within the cultural contexts from which it emerges.

To discover the culturally specific meanings of Navajo works of art, the reader here is led into the depths and details of Navajo oral history, religion, ceremonialism, social structure, military alliance, linguistic labels and classifications, and so on, not to lose sight of Navajo art, but to find its roots, its links, and, most of all, its semiotic and aesthetic contexts. These works of art are part of the collective

life of the Navajo. They are part of the history of the Navajo. Moreover, probably as much as anything else, they express the essence of being Navajo.

Navajo art is not any less difficult to understand than art found elsewhere. We do not propose that we can provide a complete understanding of Navajo art. It means more, says more, conveys more, represents more, and contains more than can be said here, and expresses more than we alone are able to understand. We only hope to illuminate these works of art, not to render them transparent. We wish only to contextualize these works of art, not to transcend them. We seek to interpret and to inform, but not to transform.

In Navajo society, the emphasis with of art is placed on creation rather than consumption, production rather than preservation, and design rather than display. Correspondingly, nearly everyone in Navajo society is an artist of one sort or of many sorts, but very few Navajo buy or display works of art. They use them in ritual, sell them to non-Navajo, or destroy them. This attitude and practice are not unusual among Native Americans. The Eskimo, for example, act in a similar manner:

> When spring comes and igloos melt, the old habitation sites are littered with waste, including beautifully-designed tools and tiny ivory carvings, not deliberately thrown away, but, with even greater indifference, just lost. Eskimo are interested in the artistic act, not in the product of the activity. A carving, like a song, is not a thing, it is an action. When you feel a song within you, you sing it; when you sense a form emerging from ivory, you release it. It's senseless to assume that when we collect these silent, static carvings we have collected Eskimo art, even if we record date and provenience. Measurements of size, diagrams of diffusion, and seriation studies of chronology do nothing to correct the initial error. (Carpenter 1961:362)

In Native American societies, art is not viewed as marginal, unessential, or extracurricular. Instead, art is viewed as a way of seeing the world, and a way of being in the world. Art is an essential act of living and an act essential to living:

> Nowhere is life more difficult than in the Artic, yet when life there is reduced to its barest essentials, art and poetry turn out to be among those essentials. Art to the Eskimo is far more than just an object: it is an act of seeing and expressing life's values: it is a ritual of discovery by which patterns of nature; and of human nature, are revealed by man. (Carpenter 1961: 361)

To begin a study of Navajo art, we must explore Navajo artistic expressions in the context of Navajo culture and from the perspective of the Navajo philosophy of art. Much of Navajo art -- song, poetry, dance, and sandpainting -- occurs in ritual performances. The relationship of these healing ceremonies to sandpainting imagery is unmistakable. However, the relationship between these ancient ritual performances to more recent Navajo art forms, such as weaving and silverwork, may not be so apparent. This relationship and the cultural roots of Navajo aesthetic forms and styles are explored and elaborated in the following three chapters.

Our understandings of Navajo philosophy and our interpretations of Navajo art are grounded in extensive research, both in the field and in the literature. Glen Peterson and I have been working and living with Navajo people since 1962. My residence on the Reservation covers a total of more than ten years. Glen's residence and work on the Reservation covers a period of five years. We have both conversed with the Navajo in their own language and have acquired different levels of proficiency in the Navajo language. We both taught at the Navajo Community College in the early 1970s. I taught in the Navajo Studies Department, while Glen taught in the art program.

We have not learned about Navajo art and philosophy as isolated phenomena, but instead have learned about them in the context of the whole culture. The Navajo artists we have known have been our friends, our colleagues and our relatives, and we have learned from them how art forms such as weaving and silverwork fit into the larger contexts of their individual lives. Some of the Navajo art-

ists and philosophers with whom we have lived and worked are Rita Wheeler, Alice Begay, Joe B. Begay, Clifford Beck, Jr., Red Moustache, Juanita Nabahe, Flora Nabahe, Jack Nabahe, Kenneth Nabahe, George P. Lee, Pauline Mose, Milton Bluehouse, Andrew Becenti, Louis Montoya, Mike Mitchell, Stanley Mitchell, Louise Begay, Bernita Nez, Billy Sam, Andy Smith, John Honie, Kinlicheenee Nez, Ambrose Roanhorse, Wesley Thomas and Asdzaan Yazzie.

> The claim to attention of an ethnographic account does not rest on its author's ability to capture primitive facts in faraway places and carry them home like a mask or a carving, but on the degree to which he is able to clarify what goes on in such places, to reduce the puzzlement - what manner of men are these? --- to which unfamiliar acts emerging out of unknown backgrounds naturally give rise . . .  If ethnography is thick description and ethnographers those who are doing the describing, then the determining question for any example of it . . . is whether it sorts winks from twitches and real winks from mimicked ones. (Geertz 1973:16).

Although the Navajo are among the most studied groups in the world, much of their art, history, and culture is not well understood. In the last three centuries, the Navajo have increased a hundredfold in population, their land base has been expanded, their economy has been developed, their tribal unity and organization have been codified and strengthened, and their technological skills and power have increased and expanded. Certainly they have experienced and continue to experience many individual and group tragedies and trauma, but as a group they have endured and prospered. They have made their way through several powerful cultural and technological onslaughts, through various bureaucratic and legislative forms of corruption, insensitivity, and paternalism, and through the activities of romantics and missionaries, do-gooders and racists, corporate officials and unscrupulous lawyers. Through it all, they have continued to flourish, growing stronger, wiser and richer, while maintaining many of the core beliefs, values, and orientations of their culture. In fact, it is the imaginative power and the synthetic patterns of Navajo culture that have guided and inspired their amazing transformations.

Normally when a society with less technology and fewer numbers comes into contact with societies of greater technology and numbers, the weaker society is overrun and greatly diminished or even extinguished. When the Navajo moved into the Southwest, they were materially poor hunters and gatherers, probably numbering no more than a few hundred to at most a few thousand people. First, they met the Pueblos, who were superior in technology and numbers, with advanced patterns of social structure, architecture, and agriculture. Then they met the Spaniards, who wanted to conquer and enslave them. The Spaniards had horses, livestock, swords, guns, precious metals, and the written word. Next came the Anglo-Americans with wagons, trains, and airplanes, with schools, hospitals, and factories, with paper money, ballots, and titles, and with political doctrines of manifest destiny and assimilation. Yet through it all, the Navajo have endured. But more than just enduring, they have, in fact, flourished.

Many scholars and observers have noted the events of Navajo history, but few have offered any real insights into why this group was not diminished or destroyed by more numerous, more powerful, and technologically superior societies. Certainly, the Navajo have been subjected to as much brutality and inhumanity as have other native peoples of the New World, but the results in this case were very different.

From an exploration of Navajo art and philosophy, we can learn much that will aid us in understanding the recent history of the Navajo people. In Navajo weaving, for example, we see a technology developed and improved to a degree that none of their neighbors can now match. In weaving we see an art form used in the 18th Century to make blankets, clothing, and saddle blankets for their own use, transformed in the 19th Century into a barter item by which the Navajo were able to acquire tools and other technology, and then transformed again into a cash-producing art form in the 20th Century. Through all these times and conditions, weaving was used to serve not only the aesthetic and cultural needs and purposes of the Navajo, but also their economic ones. This ability to synthesize aesthetics with pragmatics, internal cultural expression with external market influence, individual creativity with universal cultural theme, is at the very heart of their vigor, vitality, and adaptability as a human society.