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Manly P. Hall, President and Founder

Dr. John W. Ervin, Vice President

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MEMORIES OF HASTEEN KLAH

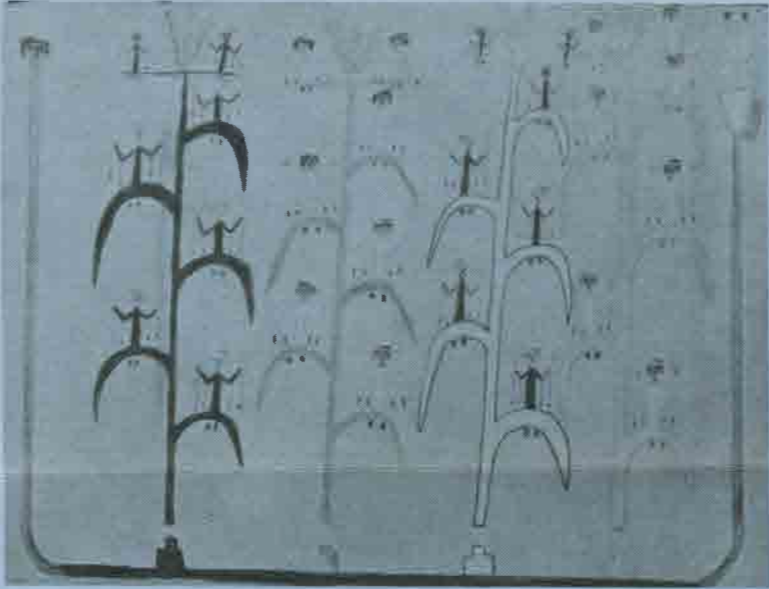
DEAR FRIENDS:



itual sand paintings occur in the rites of the Navaho Indians of the American Southwest and the Lamaists of Tibet and Mongolia. The old Indian sand painters are fading away but younger men are laboring earnestly to perpetuate and interpret the old designs. What is most important is that these pictures are being produced in permanent form and some interesting books are being written about them. Things were different, however, in the old days and it occurred to me that our library collection should include authentic material concerned with the ritual practices of the Navaho people. Through the cooperation of the American Indian agent, I was able to bring a venerated Navaho priest to my home in California and he remained with me for several weeks. It was necessary to bring the Indian agent with him because if anything happened while this celebrated Indian was away from the reservation serious trouble might result.

My Indian guest was Hasteen Klah and he was a noble person in every sense of the word. He was over six feet tall and wore a magenta-colored velvet shirt held together by a massive silver belt. Though elderly, he was a physically powerful man with a kindly smile and a forehead furrowed with the years. Klah had never slept in a bed and could not accustom himself to the idea. We finally compromised the situation and he rolled up comfortably under the bed. We had a neighbor who had a pleasant room for rent and although she was obviously apprehensive she finally allowed him to live there, and before his departure they were bosom friends. The Hasteen spoke no English but I was fortunate enough to find a young Navaho who was proud to act as an interpreter. It was decided that Klah would make a series of permanent sand paintings with crayons on heavy gray pasteboard. His attitude was uncommon but he felt personal responsibility for perpetuating the ancient lore of his people. While making his pictures he made numerous comments upon them, declaring that never before had these explanations been given to a non-Indian.

Hasteen Klah enjoyed himself immensely, learned to eat with a knife and fork, and was especially delighted by a view of the Pacific Ocean. This vast body of water had been known to him only by legend and some reports that were almost unbelievable. When he commented upon the amount of water, I explained to him through the inter-



Variant of sand painting of the Tradadeen summer form of the Yehbechai.

Realistic corn in colors designating North--black, South--blue, East--white, and West--yellow. The Rainbow Goddess surrounds and protects the painting.

preter that it was much bigger because you could only see the top of it. When he finally found out the meaning of my remark he was as delighted as a small child. Along the beaches at that time there were small shops that sold abalone shells and other curiosities from the sea. Klah explained to me that abalone shells were very great medicine and were powerful talismans against sickness and disaster. We let him select as many as he wanted and assured him that he could reorder whenever he wished. When he returned to the reservation he took with him nearly a hundred abalone shells. The Hasteen did not enjoy fruits or salads and regarded vegetables rather dubiously. He would simply order a large steak, sometimes two, and give them his full attention.

During the period of Klah's visit, we had among our close friends a handsome young Yakima Indian. He had a fine baritone voice and appeared on a number of musical programs for us. He arranged for the Hasteen to meet a number of Indians in the motion picture colony. They all sat around on the floor, broke bread together, and passed around the ceremonial peace pipe. I remember that one discussion involved "water Indians." It appears that the Yakima nation had interesting legends about diminutive Indians who lived in the ocean, but came out of the sea at night and left their tiny footprints in the sand along the shore. One seldom sees a picture of a smiling Indian but Klah was delighted by such anecdotes. While he was here I showed him a copy of my large book on symbolical philosophy. Any symbol relating to death displeased him, but he paused and gave close attention to the large colored plate representing the Emerald Tablet of Hermes. Through the interpreter he remarked quietly, "In ancient times our ancestors could read those characters but we no longer can discern their meaning."

The House of Navajo
Religion. Santa
Fe, New Mexico

Interior of Hogahn with
sand paintings.

Photograph by Ernest Knee



When the time came for Hasteen Klah to return to the reservation I asked the Indian agent how we could show appreciation for his many kindnesses. The agent then explained that the venerable medicine priest was a shepherd and made a very modest livelihood by selling the wool to the local weavers. The most precious possession of a medicine priest is a buffalo hide, but he had never been able to afford one. I arranged with the Indian agent to purchase a buffalo hide and present it to Klah with my compliments. The transaction could not be concluded until they returned to the reservation, but in due time Klah received the gift and acknowledged his gratitude which was conveyed to me by the Indian agent.

Klah greatly desired that the ancient wisdom of his tribe should be preserved for the use of non-Indians. The Navaho Museum of Ceremonial Art was established and devoted largely to the wisdom of Hasteen Klah. It has a magnificent collection of permanent sand paintings designed by him and recordings of songs, chants, and narrations bearing upon the religion, philosophy, and culture of the Navaho people. This museum is located in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and is open to the public.

Always with kindest regards I am most sincerely yours,

Marly R. Hall

PICTURES SUITABLE FOR FRAMING



No. 1 Taima Mandara



No. 2 Kokuzo Mandara.



No. 3 Eye of Buddha Mandara.



No. 4. Manjusri Mandala.

- No. 1. THE TAIMA MANDARA—An idealistic representation of the Western Paradise of the Buddha Amida.
- No. 2. THE KOKUZO MANDARA—This picture depicts the etheric matrix within which the material world exists. The five-fold manifestation of Kokuzo Bosatsu is associated with five vows to be vitalized by meditation.
- No. 3. THE EYE OF BUDDHA MANDARA—The supreme meditation Buddha Mahavairocana is represented in the feminine form of Locani, enthroned upon a red lotus flower accompanied by numerous deities.
- No. 4. THE MANJUSRI MANDALA—A Tibetan contemplative picture representing the universe in the form of a square with sanctuary gates at the center of each side.

The pictures differ slightly in shape but are approximately 8¼" x 12¼". They are printed on a heavy-weight paper with a wide white margin.