The Swastika — A Native American Symbol

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The swastika and variations of this Native American symbol were widely used among the tribes of the Southwest. Although they were widely used, they were widely misunderstood by many non-Indians who associated all swastikas with Hitler and Nazi Germany. I chose this symbol for my research to help build understanding of Native American symbolism, and as a vehicle to teach aesthetics to elementary school children.

Swastikas have been symbols for good fortune and prosperity from ancient to modern times. They appeared on Mesopotamian coins and ancient ruins of the Mayans. They were also favorable symbols among Hindus, Jains, and Buddhists (Holborn 1985) (see Figure 1).

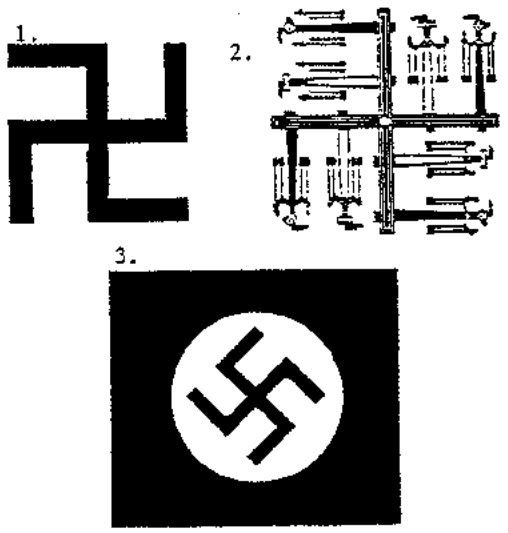

Figure 1. Swastikas in Three Forms: 1, Ancient Sun Symbol. 2, Navajo Sand Painting. 3, German Nazi party Emblem.

The word swastika is derived from Sanskrit, *su* meaning "well" and *asti* meaning "it is". The right-hand swastika moves clockwise (tails bend backwards), and is considered a solar symbol. It imitates the rotation of the sun. The left-hand swastika rotates counter-clockwise, and is considered to be a black symbol of the night. This became the Nazi symbol of Hitler's party.

One of the earliest known swastikas was found on a Samarian pottery bowl dating to about 4000 B.C. (Freed and Freed 1980). The earliest known swastikas in North America are found in the petroglyphs of the Southwest. The drawings in Figure 2 illustrate a few examples.

There are a variety of solar symbols found among the petroglyphs in southern Utah. In the Four Corners region, some panels with solar symbols across the top are thought to be solar observatories. At least five examples of solar panels may be found in the San Rafael area of Utah (Morris 1988). At the solstice, equinox, and at 45 day intervals, the first light of day casts a shadow across the solar symbol, dividing it in half.

The illustrations in Figure 3 represent variations of the swastika found on petroglyph panels south of Oraibi, Arizona. These are known to the Hopis as the "Mother Earth Symbols" (Waters 1963:23). They represent the story of "emergence" or "birthing". The cross is the "Father Sky" symbol, or an unborn child shown within the womb of Mother Earth. The maze of lines represents the wandering path each individual must follow during his lifetime, traveling all four directions.

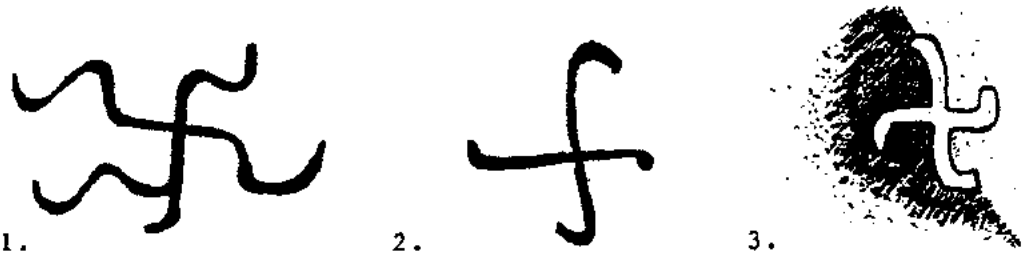

Figure 2, Number 1,"Waterflow" found in Southern Colorado. Number 2, Petrified Forest National Park, Arizona. Number 3, A possible solar symbol where the first shadow cast at equinox bisects the glyph.

In a Hopi legend, the Creator told each clan to travel in all four directions before they reached their permanent home. As they turned at each extremity, the path formed a swastika. The "migration pattern" is a basic motif found on Hopi pottery, basket ware, and kachinas (Waters 1963:35).

Paul Enciso Shodowah, an Apache-Pueblo Indian scholar and educator, explained that the swastika illustrated in Figure 4, found in Petrified Forest National Park, in Apache Pueblo history is a *quadamandala* representing the four stages of life: childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age (Shodowah 1989). Apache legends also include stories of migration. The Creator told the Apache clan that they must travel the land in all directions. When intruders came, the Creator would look down and see the footprints of those that traveled first. The footprints were a claim to the land (Waters 1963:35).

The drawing shown in Figure 5 is a Navajo rug that was purchased by my father in Kanab, Utah about 1928. The design is a form of swastika called *tsiloini* or the "whirling log" design. This was a common symbol in Navajo weaving before World War II. According to the legends, it was given to an ancient hero, along with seeds and the knowledge of farming. The whirling log has come to be understood among the Navajos as a symbol of immortality (Bahti, et al 1978). This motif appeared in at least two forms of Navajo art: weaving and sand painting. It is still used in Navajo sand painting, but it has disappeared as a woven design. Since World War II, this symbol was confused with the Nazi em-

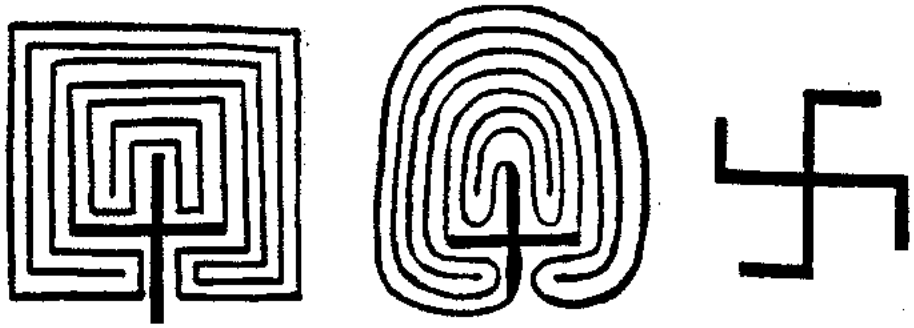

Figure 3 Two on left are Mother Earth Symbols (Waters 1963: 35). Symbol on the right is Migration Pattern (Waters 1963:113).

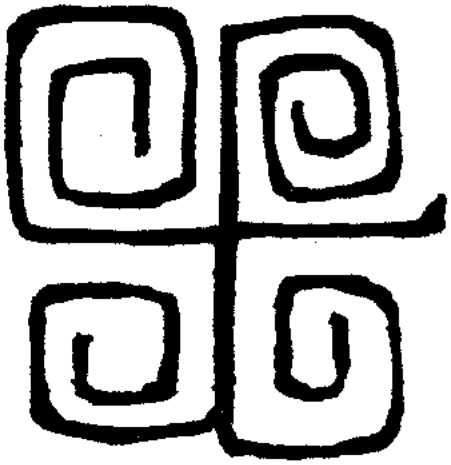

Figure 4 A *Quadamandia* in Apache Pueblo history.

blem and brought the Navajos negative attention.

Woven designs were traditionally passed on from generation to generation. Some designs were only meant to be decorative and others had religious meaning. The symbols that are representative of gods or have special power are called *yeis*; these serve as guardians protecting and giving power to the user. Navajo designs have gender. Round shapes are usually male, while squares or rectangles are female.

Since the earth is referred to as "Mother Earth", all earth tones: red, brown, or tan are feminine colors. Father Sky claims all their sky colors: blue, black, and gray. Hermaphrodite guardian symbols, having both genders, are considered the most powerful. The whirling log design, with masculine black and feminine red, would have been considered a powerful design.

The most sacred and powerful designs were reserved for the sand painting ceremonies. The majority of these designs remain a secret within the membership of the tribe. Only recently have the tribal elders given permission to record some of the chants and designs in an effort to preserve their heritage (Bahti, et al 1978). The shaman memorizes each design and the corresponding chant. Most of the chants are used to restore health, secure food, or insure survival (Dutton 1975). At the end of the ceremony, the shaman gathers up the colored sand used in the design, says a prayer to each of the four directions, and tosses the sand into the wind.

The modern era played its part in affecting the symbols of the Southwest. The non-Indian population provided a market insuring the survival of weaving and many other arts. The price tag, however, was that some of the traditional symbols, such as the whirling log, disappeared because of the assigned value the non-Indian brought. Other designs were replaced by the emergence of ones that fit the market. It can be argued that this market helped the Indians of the Southwest move into the 20th century with less poverty and trauma than some of the Indians in other parts of the United States. The market also helped to keep the arts alive. Losing the focus between what is traditional and what is the current marketable trend is simply one of the costs.

Trading post stories, invented to help make sales, have also had an impact. Since the history of the Southwest Indian people is mainly oral, it is difficult to separate fact from fiction, and to understand the symbolism of Native American art.

Several individuals within the different tribes of the southwest are now working to record and preserve the ancient histories and arts. Hopefully the prejudices are breaking down, and the horrors of the Nazi Party are fading. The swastika may return as an important symbol of Native American art.

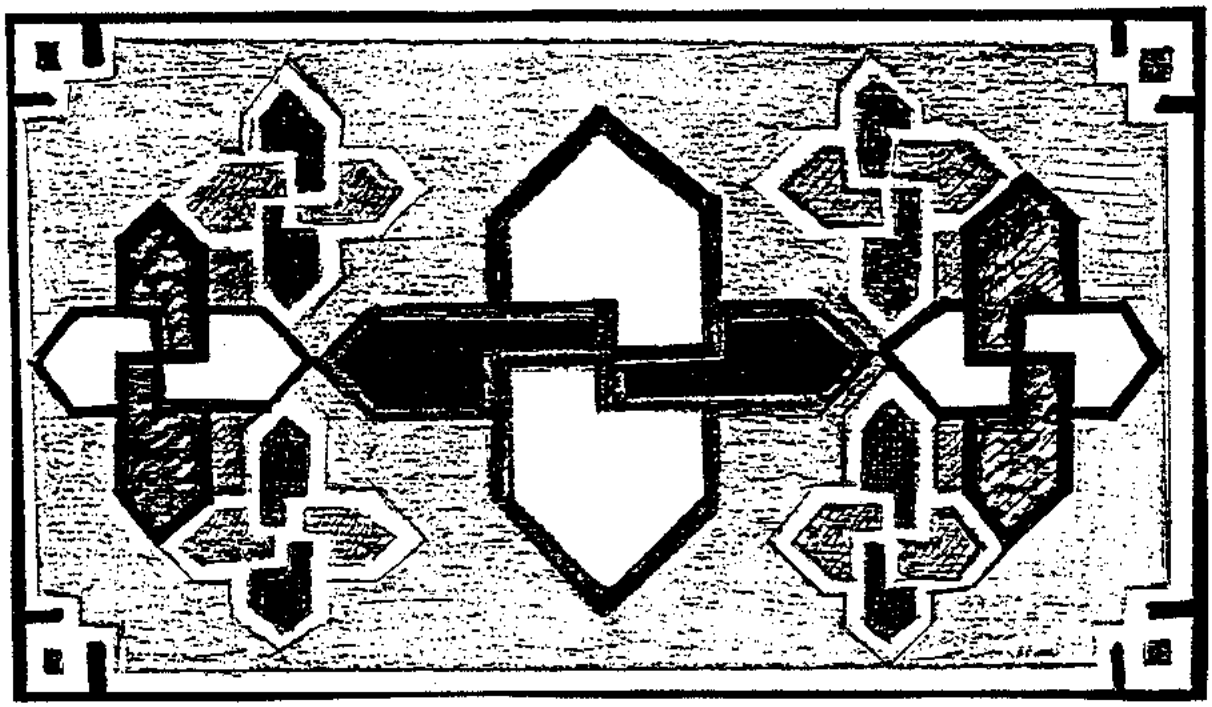

Figure 5 Drawing showing Navajo rug that was purchased in Kanab, Utah about 1928.

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