



THE NAVAJOS

AT A GLANCE: COLOR IN NAVAJO LIFE AND BELIEFS

Color has many symbolic meanings in Navajo culture; in fact, a single color can mean several different things depending on the context in which it is used. Four colors in particular—black, white, blue, and yellow—have important connections to Navajo cultural and spiritual beliefs. These colors represent the four cardinal directions. The Navajos define their homeland as the area between four sacred mountains in each direction, so each color represents a sacred mountain as well. Thus, among their myriad other meanings, the colors black, white, blue, and yellow link the Navajos to their ancestral homeland and the story of its creation.

Black, which associated with north, also symbolizes Dibé Ntsaa (Hesperus Peak), in what is now southwestern Colorado. White, which represents east, is connected to Sisnaajini (Blanca Peak), in what is now south-central Colorado. Blue is connected with south and Tsoodzil (Mount Taylor), northeast of Grants, New Mexico. Yellow is associated with west and Dook’o’oosliid (the San Francisco Peaks), near Flagstaff, Arizona (for a map of these mountains, see the Navajo Interactive Map available at www.UtahIndians.org).

In the Emergence, the Navajo creation story, First Man took four stones—jet, which represents black; white shell, which symbolizes white; turquoise, which is tied to blue; and abalone, which represents yellow—and placed them at the four directions. He blew on the stones four times and they grew into a hogan. For the Navajos, the hogan is more than simply their traditional form of shelter; it has sacred meanings and still plays a vital role in Navajo spiritual and community life. In the story of the Emergence, First Man’s hogan became the world. First Man also created the four sacred mountains in this world.

These are just two examples of the four colors in the Navajo creation story; myriad other references to color appear throughout this and other Navajo traditions.

Given their many connections to Navajo tradition, these four colors are an important part of the way culture and spirituality is passed from one generation to the next. One venue for the transmission of culture is art, and the four colors appear frequently in Navajo spiritual objects and works of art. Navajo silversmiths, for example, can use the four precious stones and shells to connect their work to Navajo beliefs. Navajo sand paintings are both an art form and a means of a spiritual communication that makes use of the sacred colors to transmit information about culture. For example, in sand paintings depicting the Place of Whirling Logs, the white guard watches over the corn, the blue guard watches over the beans, the yellow guard watches over the squash, and the black guard watches over the tobacco. Weaving is another important Navajo art form, and Navajo weavers choose colors based on both aesthetic appeal and cultural symbolism. (For information on the history of Navajo weaving, see “The Art and Technology of Utah’s Five Unique Indian Cultures” lesson plan.)

The Navajos use the four colors in ways too numerous to list, and their meanings are frequently subtle and complex. The colors’ symbolism connects the past, present, and the future of the Navajo people. It interweaves geography, spirituality, and art and encodes deep meanings into the material culture of the Navajo people. Using these colors and teaching their meanings to younger generations is one important way the Navajos are preserving their traditional culture.