



Navajo Sand Painting

Ages 5 to 12

Explore a traditional Navajo art form.

What You Need

- Sand
- Powdered tempera paints in various colors or food coloring
- Construction paper, pencil, craft glue
- Clean, empty containers such as styrofoam bowls or glass jars
- Plastic spoons and Popsicle sticks
- Plastic or styrofoam tray



What to Do

The Navajo refer to themselves as Dine (Dee-Nay), which means "the people." They are the largest tribe in the United States. Their land, which is called Dinetah, encompasses parts of Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Utah.

In Navajo mythology, each of the four cardinal directions is represented by a different color: white for the east, blue for the south, yellow for the west, and black for the north. Navajo artists use these four colors in the creation of sand paintings, which were traditionally made by shamans as a part of healing ceremonies. When the ceremony was finished, the painting was destroyed.

For Navaho artists, the technique of making sand paintings involves trickling powdered minerals such as ocher and gypsum into symmetrical patterns on clean sand. For this home activity, tempera paints or food coloring will provide all the color you need.

1. Mix up several batches of colored sand. To do this, pour about a handful of sand in each of your containers. Then add a different color tempera to each container. For a richer color, add more tempera. (Note: if you are using food coloring instead of tempera, you will need to spread the sand out to dry before you begin your painting.)
2. Draw a simple picture on construction paper. Landscapes or seascapes work especially well.
3. When you have finished, use a Popsicle stick to spread a thin layer of

watered-down glue over your drawing. Then decide where you want to put each different color.

4. Working on one part of your drawing at a time, use a spoon to sprinkle the colored sand on the paper. After each color has been added, lift the paper up and gently shake the excess sand onto a plastic or styrofoam tray to use again. Keep doing this until the picture is complete.
5. After your sand painting has dried, you can seal it by spraying it with a mixture of glue (80%) and water (20%).

What Else You Can Do

- Create a Japanese Zen garden. These gardens are traditionally intended for contemplation or meditation. To create them, artists use stones and sands. The stones represent mountains; the sand is raked into a pattern of flowing water. Children can make their own Zen garden using a large, shallow pan with stones for mountains and sand for water.

What You Need

- Large, shallow baking pan or cookie sheet
- Moist sand
- Stones of various sizes
- Cardboard rectangle about the size of a comb
- Scissors
- Spray water bottle (optional)

What to Do

1. Fill pan or cookie sheet with sand. Moisten sand using the spray water bottle.
2. Pat the sand into the pan. Place several stones in the sand to symbolize mountains surrounded by water.
3. Cut spaces in the edge of the cardboard so it resembles a comb with widely spaced teeth.
4. Comb the sand to give the effect of flowing or rippling water.
5. Experiment by rearranging the stones or combing the sand in a different way to create a new design.
6. Place your Japanese-style Zen garden on a table or window ledge and enjoy contemplating its beauty.