

Style and Symbolism in the Awatobi Kiva Mural Paintings

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Awatobi, a Hopi pueblo on Antelope Mesa in Arizona, was a prosperous and populous town from the thirteenth century until the massacre of its population by other Hopi in 1700. During the Pueblo IV period, approximately A.D. 1300-1600, the art of mural painting in kivas and other ceremonial chambers was developed at Awatobi as well as in contemporary pueblos in northern New Mexico. These mural paintings, recovered in excavation, provide a unique insight into the continuity of prehistoric and modern Hopi worship and religious symbolism.

The Awatobi Kivas¹ which were 4-6 meters long and 2½-4 meters wide, were entered through a roof hatchway and had a raised platform at one end. The excavations show that these chambers were constantly repainted. They may have been whitewashed after the conclusion of a ceremony, and then at a yearly rite of renewal a new mural painting would be applied. Mineral pigments, with the addition of

carbon black, were mixed with saliva and painted on dry plaster, probably by male ritualists. The colors were applied flatly, with no shading, and a black outline was added last. Due to the consistently poor preservation of these chambers, mural painting fragments usually survive only from the lower and middle sections of the walls.

In 1952, Watson Smith published his analysis of the murals from Awatobi and from the neighboring and contemporary site of Kawaika-a. The major interpretive sections of Smith's analysis concern a division of the excavated fragments into four types which Smith calls "layout groups."² These layout groups are defined according to the relationships between figure, field, and frame. For example, in layout group IV, figures are dispersed on the field and there is no frames. ³ By contrast, layout group III consists of paintings with integrated, all-over designs, on a solid color field and with a thin framing line. Often the

designs are executed in the style of the contemporary Sikyatki ceramics (fig. 1).

Layout groups I and II boast the most complex and sophisticated paintings. According to Smith's analysis, group II is distinguished by dynamic figures dispersed through the field, either with no frame or a thin framing line.⁴ In group I, the usually static figures are symmetrically placed, and a wide band decorated with blossom designs forms the bottom of the frame (fig. 2). This paper will be

concerned primarily with the superior murals of groups I and II.

Smith employs these four mural types, or layout groups, along with ceramic remains in the painted rooms, to suggest a chronology for Awatobi mural painting. He suggests a three-phase chronology for the murals from Awatobi and Kawaika-a.⁵ The early phase consists of the group IV murals, which are found in association with the earliest ceramic assemblage of the mural painting period. The second or middle phase is much more important,

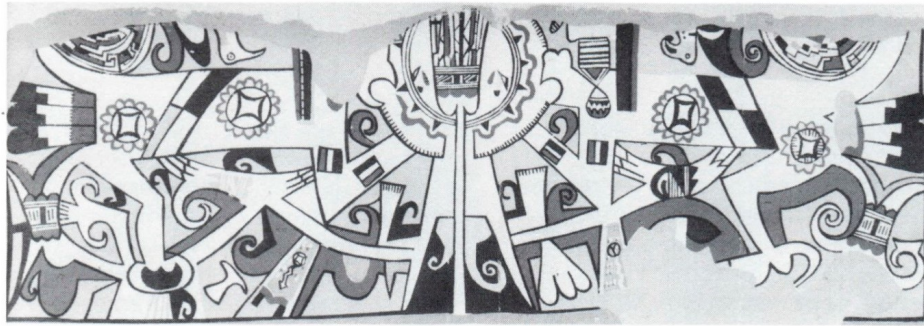


Fig. 1. Awatobi, Test 14, Room 3, Design 11. Antelope Mesa, Arizona. Photo: Hillel Burger; Courtesy of Peabody Museum, Harvard University.



Fig. 2. Awatobi, Room 788. Antelope Mesa, Arizona. Photo: Hillel Burger; Courtesy of Peabody Museum, Harvard University.

as it sees the contemporaneity of murals of layout groups I, II, and III. These murals are found in kivas and rooms with an intermediary ceramic assemblage. The final or late phase consists of murals associated with the latest pre-contact ceramics. According to Smith, only murals of layout group I were painted in this phase. This three-phase chronology thus suggests a plausible development of Awatobi paintings from the crude and scattered forms of group IV in the early phase, to the highly organized and complex murals of group I in the late phase.

While Smith's sequence is certainly correct in its outline form, it may be possible to suggest some more detailed aspects of the development and to clarify its course. Since the murals of group IV appear unrelated to the more consistent development that occurs in the middle and late phases, they will not be discussed further. The following discussion will thus emphasize the changes in style and form between the middle and late phases of Awatobi mural painting.

It may be suggested that the murals of the middle phase (which consists primarily of Awatobi Test 14, Rooms 2 and 3, and of Kawaika-a Test 4, Room 4, and Kawaika-a Test 5, Rooms 2 and 6) all share a simplicity and monumentality of form, and a lack of extraneous detail (fig. 3). There is no consistent spacial environment suggested and figures are not related in a natural way to the ground line. Compositions are limited to three anthropomorphic figures or a repetition of animals and inanimate objects. Within this general style phase, three basic types of format may be distinguished. The first is an asymmetric format which corresponds to Smith's layout group II (fig. 3). The

second format employs bilateral symmetry in a framework that emphasizes central and flanking forms. This format occurs both in the typical mural style of group I and in the Sikyatki-ceramic style of group III (fig. 1), as well as in a combination of the two.⁶ The third format employs serial repetition and alternation in an equally symmetric effect.⁷ Compositions employing this format often emphasize a band inhabited with water creatures and an unidentifiable quadruped. Both the bilateral and serial formats are considered by Smith to belong to group I although the distinctive blossom band has not yet appeared. To summarize, the middle period of prehistoric Hopi mural painting is distinguished by monumentality, simplicity, and an unspecified environment, with formats employing asymmetry, bilateral symmetry, and serial repetition.

The murals which belong to the late phase of Awatobi painting (Awatobi Rooms 528, 529, 788, and probably Kawaika-a Test 5, Room 4) seem to be more consistent among themselves than those of the middle period. The blossom band (fig. 2) which forms a bottom frame or panel division, is nearly ubiquitous, so Smith suggests that all late murals are of layout group I. The compositions of the late phase are more complex, employing larger numbers of figures and inanimate objects with much more precise, miniaturist detail. The environment is more clearly specified by the relationship of figures and objects to the ground line. The use of more rigidly defined formats, detailed and pictorial compositions, thus differentiates the late phase murals from the monumental and simpler murals of the middle phase. Although most

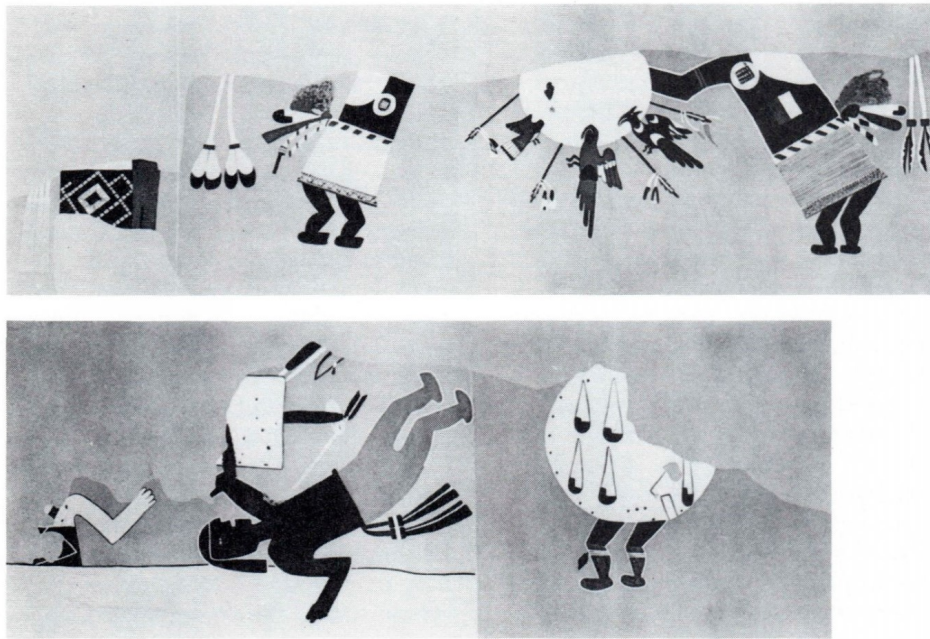


Fig. 3. Top: Awatobi, Test 14, Room 3, Front Wall B Design 2; Antelope Mesa, Arizona. Bottom: Kawaika-a, Test 4, Room 4, Right and Back Walls Design 2; Antelope Mesa, Arizona. Photo: Hillel Burger; Courtesy of Peabody Museum, Harvard University.

murals are arranged in bilateral symmetry (fig. 2), some asymmetric compositions remain (fig. 4). The Sikyatki style, or layout group III, and the serial formats of the middle period no longer occur. It may be noted that both the symmetric and asymmetric compositions occur with the group I blossom band, so that the distinction between these two formats is not as well defined as in the middle period. To summarize, the late period of Awatobi painting is defined by complex and rigidly organized paintings with a suggestion of pictorial space, large numbers of figures, animals and objects, and with an attention to miniaturistic detail.

While the middle and late phases of Awatobi mural painting may be differentiated according to style, they may be compared in terms of similar contrasts in compositional formats. The asymmetric and dynamic compositions, which are typed as group II in the middle period, actually continue into the late phase (fig. 4). In both phases, these asymmetric compositions contrast with paintings that are more symmetric and static, and which Smith types as group I (fig. 2). Since both the asymmetric and symmetric formats occur contemporaneously in the stylistically differentiated middle and late painting phases, it would appear that this contrast in format exists

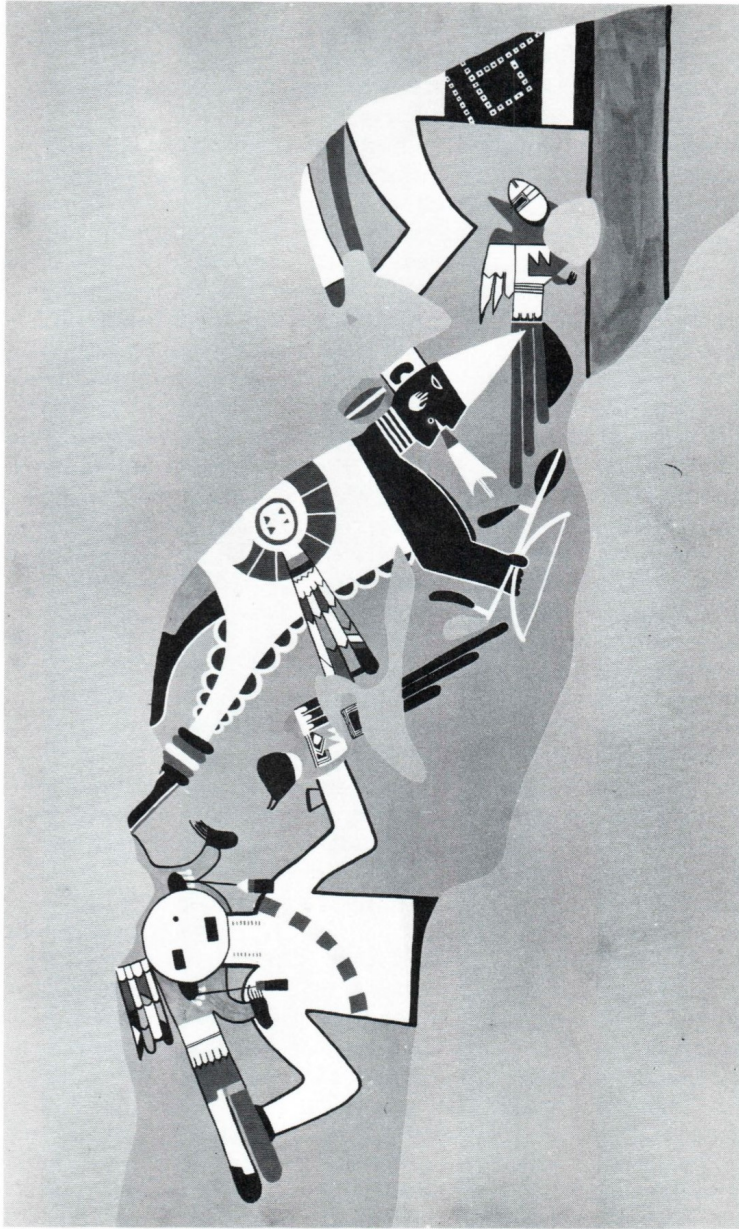


Fig. 4. Awatobi, Test 14, Room 2, Right Wall
Design 6. Antelope Mesa, Arizona. Photo:
Hillel Burger; Courtesy of Peabody Museum,
Harvard University.

independently of the stylistic development.

In the following analysis, it will be suggested that these contrasting types of composition, the asymmetric and symmetric, are expressions of opposing symbolic themes in the Awatobi murals. For the purposes of this discussion, the asymmetric compositions will be referred to as group II, even though later examples include the blossom band; and the symmetric compositions will be referred to as group I. It will be shown that these two groups of mural paintings illustrate opposing symbolic themes in contrasting types of composition.

The murals of group II (figs. 3 and 4) are distinguished not only by dynamic and asymmetric compositions with undeveloped frames, but also by some consistent symbolic images. Almost all fragments of group II murals appear to be parts of a consistently repeated scene. This scene comprises the battle between two warriors. One of the warriors holds a large shield from which eagle feathers, birds, or prayer sticks radiate like a sunburst. The second warrior may be shown during the attack, or afterward, vanquished and supine. Watching this scene from the sidelines is a female who is only shown above the waist. This female, surely a deity, has yellow painted skin and wears a black skirt with a design of negative dotted squares exactly like older Hopi ceramic designs from the thirteenth century. A Hopi informant identified these scenes as the mock battle which accompanies the Soyal ceremonies of the winter solstice, and which Stephens interprets as the battle to turn the sun back on its path to the north.⁸ In addition, one of the vanquished warriors (fig. 4) was identified as a Hopi war god.⁹ On the

basis of the visual images and the informants' interpretations, it would appear that the Group II murals represent battles associated with solar imagery.

The murals of group I (fig. 2) may be distinguished by many features other than the blossom band which forms the lower frame in late examples. In fact, these murals, in composition and motifs, represent a complete contrast to the group II murals. Whereas the group II murals are dynamic and asymmetric, those of group I are static and symmetric. Whereas the group II murals emphasize battle, weapons, and solar symbolism, the murals of group I emphasize plants, water animals, and rain symbols. Finally, the female deity who is relegated to the sidelines in the group II battle scenes becomes the central focus in many murals of group I. This deity holds a netted gourd in the group I murals which is still associated with rain-bringing rituals in modern Hopi worship. The murals of group I thus emphasize themes of fertility, represented by water, vegetation, and the earth, as opposed to the martial themes and solar symbolism of the group II murals.

To summarize, two groups of prehistoric mural paintings at Awatobi are distinguished by Smith according to the relationships between the figures and the frame. Further analysis shows that these two groups of murals may be contrasted in other ways. The murals of group II emphasize the theme of battle, associated with the sun, using feathered shields and warriors as the primary motifs, and associated with the compositional qualities of asymmetry and dynamism. The murals of group I emphasize the theme of fertility associated with the female deity, using priests and symbols of rain

and vegetation as the primary motifs, and stressing the compositional qualities of stasis and symmetry. The clarity of the thematic opposition between these two groups of paintings appears to suggest that the compositional qualities are not related to stylistic differences on a chronological scale, but that they are employed to express the differences in symbolic intent between the murals of groups I and II. In the following sections, several aspects of modern Hopi ritual will be analyzed in terms of a similar thematic opposition, in order to explain the nature and meaning of the contrasts of both composition and symbolism in the Awatobi murals.

Modern Hopi ritual centers around a season of Kachina dances, running from the winter solstice until shortly after the summer solstice. This period may be divided into two phases: the winter and the spring. These two phases will be related respectively to the symbolism of battle and death in the Awatobi murals of group II, and the symbolism of fertility and growth in the murals of group I.

During the winter season, Hopi kachina dances are held primarily in the kivas, at night. The kiva was a subterranean chamber in prehistoric pueblos, and it still retains this underworld association through the symbolic underworld entrance, the *sipapu* hole in its floor. The dances of this winter period emphasize warriors: the mock battles of the winter solstice ceremony have been mentioned above in reference to the battle scenes of the group II murals. Animals and hunting themes are also emphasized, and the dances are controlled by the clan of the badger, a hunting animal. The kachinas which dominate the winter or night dances (fig. 5) are violent and



Fig. 5. Cliff Bahnimptewa, *Wuyak Kuita* ("Angry Kachina"). Courtesy of Northland Press, Flagstaff, Arizona.

aggressive kachinas: they have beards, toothy grins, horns, and snouts; they are associated with animals and war; they carry weapons or yucca whips; and they often wear skins or anglo clothing. The night dances are aggressive and disordered, and are enacted by motley assemblages of these spirit beings. The best example of such a kachina performance is the Soyoko ceremony in February, in which a group of monstrous devouring demons terrorize the children.¹⁰ To summarize, the winter season in the Hopi ceremonial calendar is dominated by

aggressive, violent, and disordered kachinas who dance primarily at night and in the kivas. The winter season in Hopi ritual is related to the group II murals at Awatobi through the emphasis on action, warriors, and mock battles.

The second season of kachina dances occurs in the spring and is associated with the renewal of fertility. With the melting of the snow, kachina dances may be performed out in the plazas, in the daytime. These plaza dances still include some winter-type kachinas, but they emphasize a completely different type of kachina and performance. The dominant kachinas in the spring plaza

Fig. 6. Cliff Bahnimptewa, *Nuyak'china* ("Snow Kachina"). Courtesy of Northland Press, Flagstaff, Arizona.



dances are beneficent rain-bringing kachinas (fig. 6). In place of the snouts and bearded grins, they wear cylindrical masks with tubular mouths. They wear ceremonial kilts, sashes, and belts rather than skin kilts or anglo clothing. They hold rattles and branches of fir trees rather than whips or weapons. In addition, the graphic designs which are painted on their masks, body, and costume symbolize rain, fertility, and vegetation.

These beneficent, rain-bringing kachinas most often appear in line dances. In these dances, a large number of identically costumed kachinas sing verses of songs to a stately step, as they line up on each side of the plaza in turn. These kachinas are never violent or aggressive. They act, sing, and move in a stately unison, and they arrange themselves symmetrically.¹¹ The spring season in Hopi ritual is thus distinguished by daytime plaza dances which emphasize line dances of identically costumed, passive and beneficent kachinas. These spring dances would relate to the murals of group I at Awatobi because of the symbols of fertility and the qualities of quasi-stasis and symmetry in ritual movement. It would appear that the prehistoric Awatobi murals and modern Hopi ritual share an opposition of death or martial themes with fertility themes, and express this opposition through the contrasts of dynamism with stasis and asymmetry with symmetry.

The same opposition may be expressed, in part, in the appearances of two major Hopi deities in the form of kachina dancers. These deities, a sun god and a fertility goddess, may be shown to express the opposition of death and fertility in Hopi ritual.

The sun deity appears as a kachina

under various names, depending upon the clan that sponsors his appearance. The most important of these, Ahul (fig. 7), may serve as an example. Ahul and the other sun gods are distinguished by a round basketry mask with a bird beak and a crest of eagle feathers, suggesting that they are related to the eagle. The stars, represented by crosses, which are painted on Ahul's face, suggest nighttime. The upper face is divided into fields of yellow and blue, both colors associated with the west in Hopi direction symbolism. The black in the area beneath is the symbolic color of the nadir, and by extension of the underworld.¹² Ahul appears to be associated with the eagle, the west, and the underworld and night. Ahul appears in the winter season, primarily at Soyal when he opens the kivas, and in the warrior ceremony when he mimes the nightly journey of the sun. Ahul appears to represent the sun descending into and in the underworld, and to be related to the nighttime kiva dances of the winter season. Finally, Ahul is the kachina with the clearest precedent in the Awatobi mural paintings.¹³

The Hopi fertility goddess is most often represented as the Butterfly Maiden, or Pahlik Mana (fig. 8). The Butterfly Maiden appears regularly in the Plaza dances grinding corn. Corn-grinding is a specifically female task, and so this deity is set off from all other Hopi kachinas, male or female, by being the only one actually performed by a woman.¹⁴ The Butterfly Maiden is clearly associated with fertility, the growth and harvesting of corn, and with female activity.

The costume of the Butterfly Maiden suggests a clear contrast with the costume of the sun deities such as Ahul. While the sun deities wear a

round basket-mask, the Butterfly Maiden wears a naturally-shaped face mask. While Ahul wears a crest of eagle feathers, the Butterfly Maiden wears a headdress of wooden slats called a *tableta*. This *tableta*, which must be associated with fertility since it is also worn in the women's harvest dances in summer, appears to represent a butterfly. Color symbolism provides further contrast: Ahul's colors, yellow and blue, are related to the west, while

Fig. 7. Cliff Bahnimptewa, *Ahul or Ahöla Kachina*. Courtesy of Northland Press, Flagstaff, Arizona.





Fig. 8. Cliff Bahnimptewa, *Pahlik Mana*
("Butterfly Maiden"). Courtesy of Northland
Press, Flagstaff, Arizona.

the Butterfly Maiden's colors red and white are related to the east. Black, the underworld color on Ahul's mask, is contrasted to all-colors, the upperworld or zenith color which appears on the Butterfly Maiden's mask and *tableta*.¹⁵ The graphic symbols on Ahul's mask represent stars, associated with night, while rain, blossoms, and corn, associated with fertility, appear on the Butterfly Maiden's *tableta*.¹⁶ The Butterfly Maiden, who appears only in the spring season, appears to symbolize the renewal of fertility associated with this season in North America.

To summarize, Ahul is a male sun god who is associated with death and martial themes, night, the underworld, the west, the eagle, and the winter season. By contrast, the Butterfly Maiden is a female fertility goddess who is associated with growth and fertility themes, daytime, the upperworld, the east, the butterfly, and the spring season. Like Ahul, the Butterfly Maiden appears to have a precedent in the prehistoric Hopi murals¹⁷ as well as in contemporary murals from northern New Mexico.¹⁸ The representation of these deity-kachinas in the prehistoric murals provides the most direct evidence for a continuity between the ancient and modern Hopi. Further conclusions on the nature of the Awatobi murals will be based on this evidence of continuity through time.

The reason for the opposition of themes of death and fertility may be explained with reference to the Hopi ceremonial calendar. The theme of death and war is expressed by dances in winter, when the earth's vegetation dies and is covered by a blanket of snow. Hunting dances are also prominent, since hunting is an im-

portant enterprise in winter months when farming is impossible. Fertility themes are associated with the spring season when rain-bringing and corn-grinding ceremonies accompany the growth of new vegetation and the resumption of agricultural activity. This new growth is not merely a birth of vegetation and fertility, but it is a rebirth which follows death as immutably as spring follows winter. Hopi rituals express the seasonal cycle of death and rebirth in the change from the ritual dances of war and hunting to those of benevolence and fertility. This change is also represented by the change from an emphasis on male activities of war and hunting, with a male sun god, to female activities of harvesting and food preparation with a female fertility goddess. The same contrast may be seen in the Awatobi murals, where the female deity who is a subordinate figure in the battle scenes of group II moves to the central position in the murals of group I. It would appear that the Awatobi murals parallel modern Hopi ritual in the expression of the cycle of death and rebirth through the contrast of martial with fertility themes, and of male with female qualities.

The change from the winter season and death to the spring season and rebirth is also expressed in Hopi ritual by the change from the underground kiva dances at night, to the daytime plaza dances. This upward movement into the light parallels and reenacts the major event in the origin myth of the Hopi and other pueblo peoples. In this myth, the first people lived in the underworld, which was totally dark and therefore a place of utter confusion, disharmony, and discontent. The emergence of these people onto the surface of the earth through the *sipapu*,

and their acceptance of agriculture and settled community life, marks the establishment of the present order. In the Hopi myth, the emergence of man from the underworld also appears to parallel the growth of vegetation in the earth's yearly rebirth of fertility. This cycle of death and rebirth is thus expressed in Hopi myth through a movement from lower to upper, from darkness to light, and from chaos to order. Exactly the same transformation occurs in the Hopi kachina season, in the change from the winter dances, which occur at night and in the kivas, and which feature violent and aggressive kachinas, to the spring dances which occur in daylight, in the plaza, and which emphasize stately line dances. It appears that the death of vegetation in the winter is associated with the entrance of the sun into the underworld through violent battle, plunging the cosmos into a chaotic state. This condition is reversed when life is reborn from the earth goddess and order is restored.

With this information, a last comparison may be attempted between Hopi ritual and the Awatobi murals. It has been shown that both represent the yearly cycle and renewal of fertility through the opposing themes of death and rebirth, as expressed through the contrast of martial and fertility symbolism. In addition, it would appear that types of movement are employed in both cases for their symbolic value. The ritual motion of masked dancers in Hopi dances, and the visual motion of compositional arrangement in the Awatobi murals, both contrast dynamism and stasis, asymmetry and symmetry, to emphasize the change from **chaos to order** which underlies the death and rebirth cycle.

It has been shown that the most important of the prehistoric Awatobi mural paintings may be divided into two groups, which emphasize the contrast of martial and fertility themes. Through a comparison of these mural paintings with modern Hopi ritual, it has been possible to suggest that the murals depict the opposition of death in the winter, to rebirth in the spring. It is further suggested that the contrast in qualities of composition between the two groups of mural paintings may be interpreted as an expression of symbolic intent rather than as a chronological difference.

NOTES

¹Watson Smith, "Kiva Mural Decorations at Awatovi and Kawaika-a," *Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University*, XXXVII (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1952), 13-32.

²*Ibid.*, pp. 107-112.

³*Ibid.*, fig. 43.

⁴*Ibid.*, fig. 59.

⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 315-317.

⁶*Ibid.*, fig. 59.

⁷*Ibid.*, fig. 60.

⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 312-313.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 302.

¹⁰Barton Wright, *Kachinas: A Hopi Artist's Documentary* (Flagstaff, 1973), p. 73.

¹¹Harold S. Colton, *Hopi Kachina Dolls, with a Key to Their Identification* (Albuquerque, 1959), pp. 3-4.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹³Smith, p. 303.

¹⁴Wright, p. 106.

¹⁵Colton, p. 13.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁷Smith, p. 308.

¹⁸Frank C. Hibben, *Kiva Art of the Anasazi* (Las Vegas, 1975), figs. 64-65.