

SANDPLAY AS A SACRED SPACE FOR THE INITIATORY EXPERIENCE

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In contemporary society, initiatory rites are almost nonexistent and life transitions are often not properly chronicled or celebrated. Thus, these changes are more difficult to move through and experience in a positive way. Erich Neumann (1973) has asserted:

In modern man [where] collective rites no longer exist, and the problems relating to these transitions devolve upon the individual, his responsibility and understanding are so overburdened that psychic disorders are frequent. This is the case not only in childhood but also in puberty, in marriage and mid-life, at the climacteric, and in the hour of death. All these stages in life were formerly numinous points at which the collective intervened with its rites; today, they are points of psychic illness and anxiety for the individual, whose awareness does not suffice to enable him to live his life. (p. 186)

The initiatory experience not only makes transition easier, but also deserves special attention as a constructive "building block" for change or possible transformation and initiation to another level of consciousness. Through initiation, it is possible for a person to become able to assume his or her next mode of being in its fullest expression. Obtaining one's own mode of being is equivalent to being born a second time—it is similar to becoming another person through rebirth and the breaking of the psychic umbilical cord to the stage being shed.

Girls' puberty rites are less widespread than boys' initiation rites. Also, they are more subtle and less dramatic than rites for boys. At the girls' rites, there is usually an older woman present, who has been through the initiation and can,

therefore, offer empathic support (Stein, 1990). Primitive societies seem better able to help girls move into their feminine development than does our culture.

Anthropologist Victor Turner (1987) refers to Richards' (1956) study when he writes that the Bemba Tribe refers to "growing a girl" when they mean initiating her. This "growing a girl" means not only marking a stage and helping her to acquire knowledge, but also bringing about her transformation—a profound change in being.

In this modern-day world, Sandplay can act as a vessel for the initiatory experience. For my ten-year-old client, whom I shall refer to as Jasmine (at her request), Sandplay provided such an experience. Her series of 26 Sandplays (15 of which are presented here), created over a period of ten and one-half months, resulted in an authentic initiation process which I felt privileged to witness.

Several authors have discussed this time of passage—the stage prior to puberty. Erik Erikson, in his seminal work, "Eight Stages of Man," (1950) designates this period before puberty as the fifth psycho-social stage: specifically, identity vs. role diffusion. According to Erikson, this stage can be a time of increased ego identity. He asserts that "puberty rites and confirmations help to integrate and to affirm the new identity" (p.229); thus, helping the prepubescent youth to transverse this stage successfully and become ready to meet the challenges of the next stage.

Victor Turner (1987) has also written about this stage; he calls it the Liminal Period. Using his terminology, Jasmine could be referred to as a transitional being or "liminal persona" at this early stage of her development as she was moving toward womanhood.

The Greeks recognized such a period and called it the Arretophoria period for girls between the ages of seven and eleven, who had not yet menstruated — as was the case with my client. In this rite, girls enacted the ritual drama of the Thesmophoria; however, the mystery was carefully hidden from the pre-menstrual

girls. The ritual was this: four girls of noble birth stayed in the temple of the goddess. On one of the nights, these girls carried sacred objects that could not be named and could not be seen. Older initiated women placed the objects in the basket that the four girls carried on their heads. The girls walked down a natural underground passage. At the bottom of the descent, they exchanged the sacred objects for something else which was wrapped and hidden. They then brought these baskets with the secret objects back to the temple. With this ritual completed, the young girls *had begun* their preparation for the central mystery of their lives. When they began to menstruate, they then completed the later stages of initiation, celebrated in the festival of the Thesmophoria (Meador, 1990).

Characteristics of the Liminal Period

The liminal stage, prior to menstruation, was a "getting ready" stage for the fuller initiatory experience. It was defined by particular symbols and elements. One particularly important characteristic of many initiatory ceremonies for pre-menstruation girls involved a symbolic death, return to the womb and a rebirth (after menstruation had begun). Death was symbolized through segregation and darkness. For example, girls were often isolated in a dark corner of a hut or the night darkness of the temple (as exemplified in the Greek ritual described above) and forbidden or prevented from seeing the sun (symbolizing solar or masculine power). During this period, the moon (connected with feminine energy) was emphasized.

There were other symbols and elements that occurred during this liminal period prior to adolescence. Many of these characteristics were exhibited in Jasmine's sandplays:

- (1) Seclusion or segregation.

In Jasmine's first tray, she places a baby secluded in a tepee. Throughout her other trays, there are other symbols of seclusion as well. Perhaps, she was secluding herself from the outer world in order to prepare for entry into her inner world.

(2) Activation of the feminine.

The feminine becomes the focal point in Jasmine's second tray when she places a female Buddha near the center of the tray. The feminine also appears in queenly form in her eighth tray and in several subsequent trays, culminating in the natural form of an Indian woman plowing a field astride a white horse in her 14th tray.

(3) A guarding or fencing off of a new element that needs protection.

Jasmine often uses guards or fences to encompass or protect a specific scene. For example, military honor guards line the path of a wedding party in her fourth tray. Fences are seen in nearly half of her trays. According to Bowyer (1970), fencing is used extensively by children in Jasmine's age group. Bowyer's developmental research on the sand tray found that ten is the peak age for fencing.

(4) A more reflective view.

A girl in the third tray, representing Jasmine herself, is standing on a bridge overlooking her world. In her seventh tray, Jasmine portrays adults and children observing wax figures at a museum. Piaget and Inhelder (1969) suggest that cognitive change from concrete operations to formal operations around this age engenders a more objective, observing view. Therefore, Jasmine's depiction of an objective ego is not surprising, given her age. When this cognitive shift occurs, a young person is better able to generate ideas and evaluate choices from her/his own unique standpoint. I felt that Jasmine was beginning to move toward formal operations.

(5) Going to a sacred space and waiting.

Tranquil sacred spaces, where time seems to stand still, are depicted in Jasmine's second and ninth trays. In tray ten, infants are waiting in tepees alongside a scene portraying a sacred ceremony.

(6) Symbols of transformation.

Jasmine's trays contain snakes, fire, themes of birth, death and rebirth, ceremonies depicting marriage and graduation, and cooking vessels and pots (representing the womb as well as other enclosed vessels in which transformation can occur).

(7) Symbols of emergence and new development.

In Jasmine's trays, images are depicted of eggs, babies, tilling and planting the soil, plants and flowering trees. These indicate a psychological fertility.

(8) Integrating these emerging aspects and learning new ways about how to be in the world.

Jasmine is able to explore the depths of her world and then find new ways to image it. For example, in her last tray, Jasmine finds a new vehicle (the ricksha) to carry her toward the nude woman (her budding sexuality).

In my experience, the use of these eight elements is typical for girls of this age, not just for Jasmine. Certainly, Jasmine's Sandplays are special and vividly portray some of the ancient elements, but they are not unique. Sandplays of many girls this age appear to manifest these same aspects, suggesting a centuries-old movement that is still alive today in the unconscious.

The expression of these elements in her Sandplays culminated for Jasmine in a reorientation of her world view, which was a masculine one where she overridealized her father and acted as a protector of her mother, whom she experienced as fragile. She moved to a more appropriate pre-adolescent stance, ready to be initiated into womanhood. It was Sandplay that provided the vessel for

this girl to experience, in a creative and grounded way, the beginning stirrings of her own initiatory process.

As with a great many of us today, and certainly for Jasmine, there were no older women in her life, who could help her make the descent and find the sacred objects she needed in order to be initiated into the sacred rites of womanhood. Her Sandplays felt like a genuine initiation that was coming from her own psyche. The experience felt alive and necessary, not an obscure or outmoded ceremony belonging to a primitive group in some far-away place. In her Sandplays, a modern day puberty rite was set in motion.

Jasmine's Initiation Process

In her first Sandplay, Jasmine is holding the masculine solar energy of the sun over her tray (Figure 1). Her new energies (as represented by the baby) will need to be sheltered within the protection of the tepee from the assault of the sun in order to grow and develop in a healthy manner. Two Indian women (a mother and daughter) are standing closely together, holding umbrellas to protect themselves from the sun's heat. At their feet are vessels for holding food and water; however, these are empty.

Jasmine's feminine energies have been activated: the totem and Kachinas evoke ancient ancestral energies. The trees suggest a potential for growth and development. The snakes indicate activation of a primordial level in her psyche. According to Bradway (1982) in *Villa of Mysteries: Pompeii Initiation Rites of Women*:

The symbolic meaning of snakes is multiple and varied. They express the theme of death and rebirth that is found in the myths about both Dionysus and Ariadne and that is characteristic of many initiation

ceremonies. The snake, like the laurel, is a bridge to the "beyond."
(p.9)

The close proximity of the two Indian women supports the observations of Jasmine's mother. Before I met with Jasmine, her mother told me she was worried because Jasmine appeared too attached to her. She said, for example, that it seemed Jasmine often intuited and then expressed her (the mother's) feelings and ideas, instead of her own. Her mother also felt uncomfortable because Jasmine

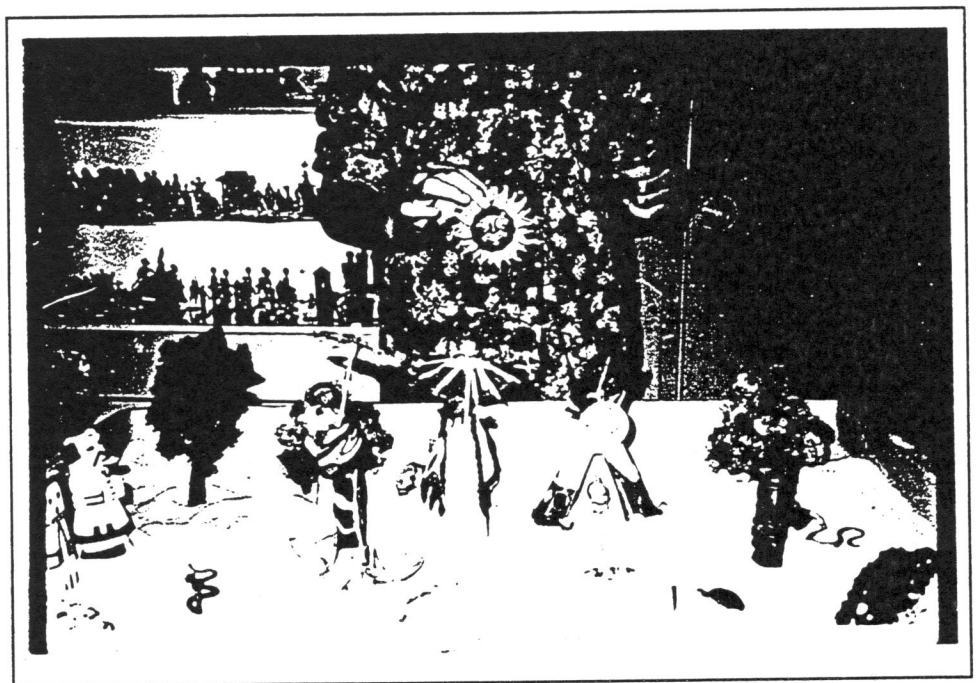


Figure 1

never expressed any anger towards her. Instead, Jasmine tried to protect her and appeared to feel responsible for her mother's feelings.

Jasmine denied that she worries and is protective of her mother. However, just as therapy began, she had a dream in which a shark was hunting. In the dream, Jasmine jumped into the water to tell her mother that the shark was coming.

Jasmine's relationship with her father was one of distance. Her father was a busy, powerful, and acclaimed man, who was often away from home. Still, he

was a warm and captivating individual; Jasmine wished that she could spend more time with him. His passion was sailing, and Jasmine enjoyed doing that with him.

This is a girl who needs to get into her own life and begin the preparation for her own later initiatory experience. She is burdened with the care-taking of her mother, which prevents her own individual development and forward movement. At the same time, she idealizes her father but he is too unavailable (and perhaps too solar) to help. She needs to move into her own mode of being and to cut the psychic umbilical cord.

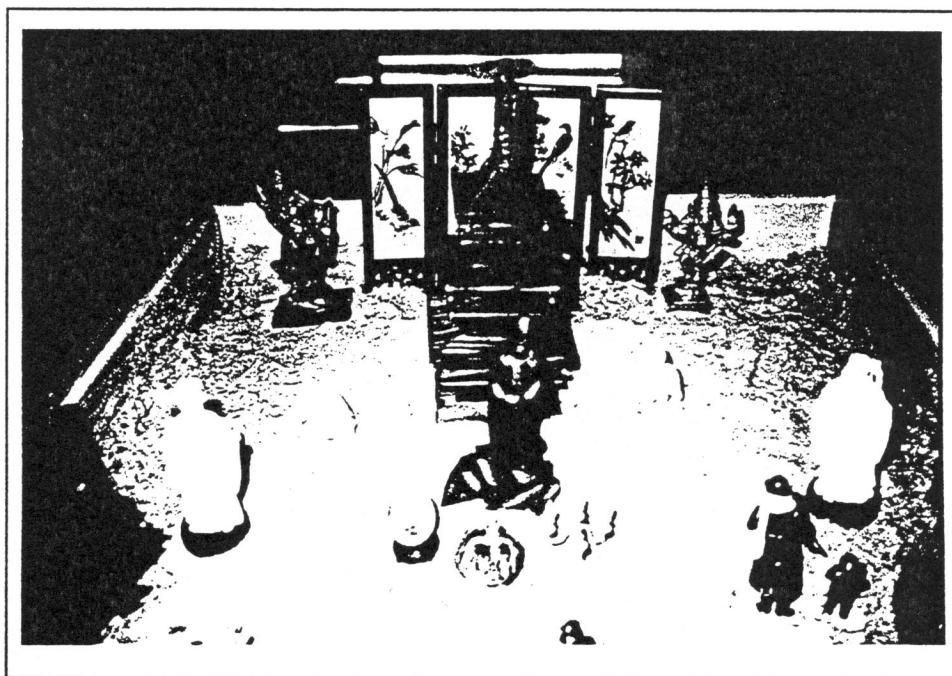


Figure 2

One month later in her second sand tray (Figure 2, close up), a sacred atmosphere appears to have been activated with the feminine taking center stage. According to Jasmine, the feminine Buddha in this Japanese museum is guarding the treasure — the egg, the crown, and the candelabra. These three elements are necessary for Jasmine's growth. Like the baby sheltered within the tepee in her first tray, Jasmine's egg needs shelter and protection in order to grow. Certainly, to

develop, the human egg needs the sanctuary and darkness of the womb. With care and protection, the egg signals the possibility of birth from a new point of view. The crown may herald Jasmine's ability to rise above her present situation. It is often a symbol of spiritual evolution, i.e., victory of the higher principle over the base principle of the instincts. C.G. Jung (1960) considered the crown to be a symbol *par excellence*, for it suggests the possibility of reaching the highest goal in evolution — spiritual evolution. Jung said, "those who have conquered (themselves) win the crown of eternal life" (CW 5, par. 397). The candelabra is a symbol of spiritual light, understanding, and salvation. In observing these three symbols placed in front of the protecting feminine goddess, I felt excited about Jasmine's potential to move forward onto her own individual path.

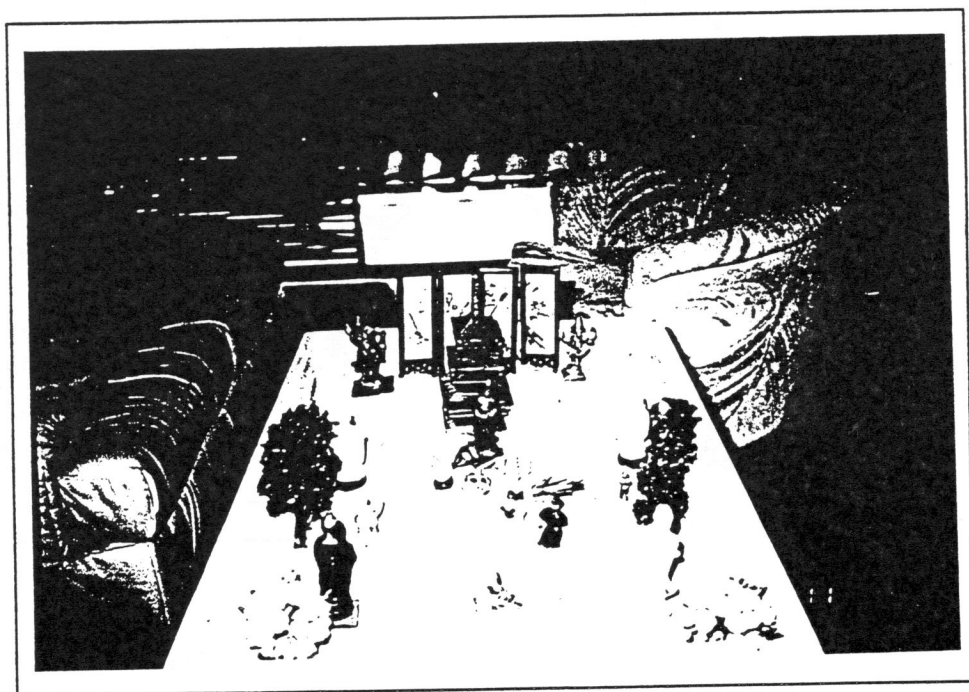


Figure 3

Three couples are viewing the museum Buddha (Figure 3): a mother and child, a Japanese man and woman, and another mother and child. According to Jasmine, the golden Buddha collects tickets at the door and guards the entrance to the museum near the flowering trees at the bottom of the tray. I felt Jasmine

needed to demonstrate to the world around her (i.e., to her mother in different forms, her father, sister, and herself) that she was in a process of change. The Buddha ticket taker would protect her so that only those who belonged could observe her process.

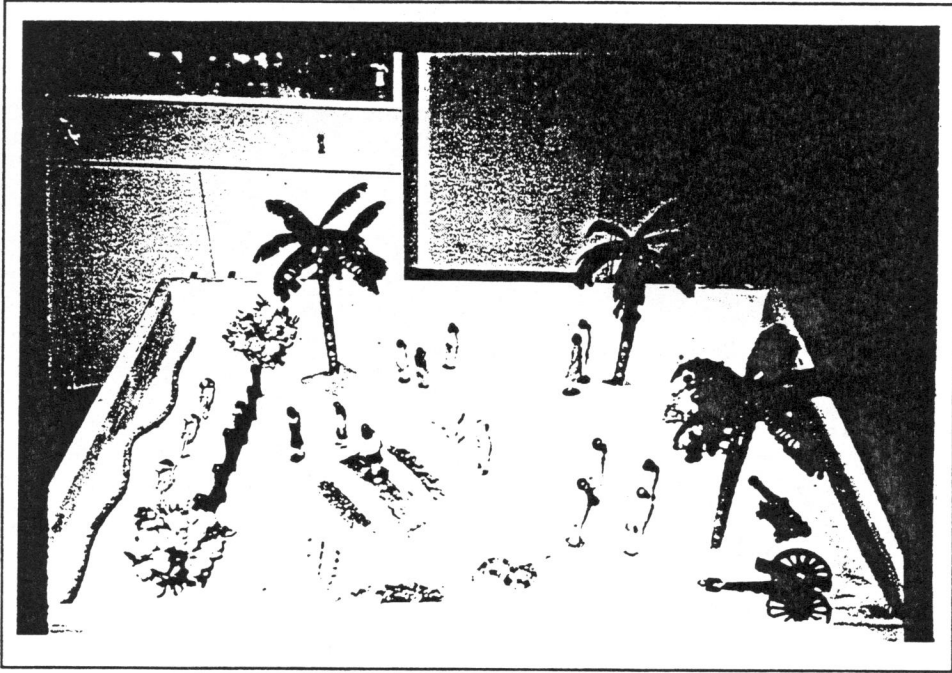


Figure 4

In her third tray (Figure 4) two weeks later, Jasmine creates an age-appropriate scene where she can survey the landscape of her own child-life, in contrast to the adult, stylized rendition in the last tray. She places herself on a bridge objectively overlooking the area. I saw here evidence of the development of a more reflective or objective view or, in other words, an observing ego.

Jasmine was a high achieving, adult-like child. Her mother described her as an "old soul." Seldom had she let herself be a child, freely playing and enjoying a park. However, this park is not entirely carefree; a threat is evident in the background, symbolized by the masculine cannons. A fence is placed between the park and the outer world. Is this for secrecy, privacy, protection, or something else?

After the emergence of the feminine goddess in the previous tray, there is now more room for Jasmine to look at her child-like self. However, room for movement (where the bicycles are moving) remains limited. Yet, a snake from the first tray and the flowering trees from the second tray hint at transformation and new developments.



Figure 5

In conjunction with the previous tray, Jasmine's fourth tray two weeks later (Figure 5, close up) is an excellent demonstration of the developmental process with its movement back and forward. After exploring her more child-like world in the last tray, Jasmine's psyche now moves in a more expansive direction. Here the crown appears again — on the ground, waiting for the feminine to claim it.

The crown is part of a procession (Figure 6). The king, princess, and queen are walking toward the crown and the prince consort. Now there is more room for movement. Jasmine states that she needs many guards (lining the path). She shows me where "the normal people" are standing (behind the gate/fence) and watching. Her psyche is heralding the possibility of her newly developing feminine

uniting with the masculine on an equal basis. The golden coach is ready and waiting.

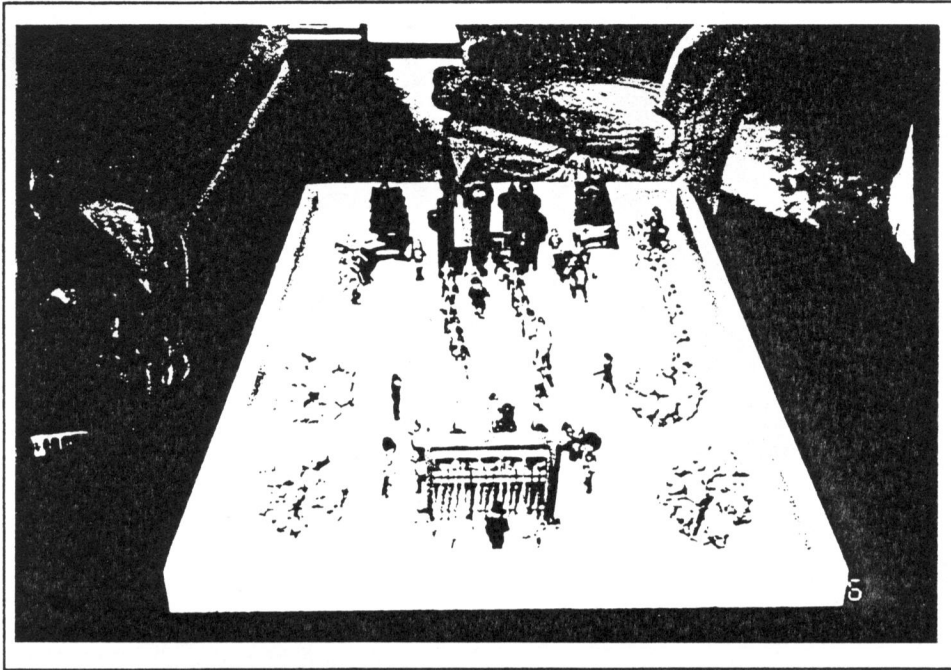


Figure 6

Two weeks later Jasmine creates the tray she calls "Boston 1774: the Boston Tea Party" (Figure 7). In getting ready to create the scene, she changes her standing position so that we are face-to-face. She wants me to view the whole tray as she makes it. Clearly, she wants me to witness her act of emancipation — quite an achievement for this heretofore obedient girl to show anger or aggression in her tray — in the form of the rebellious Americans throwing tea into the harbor. Her natural adolescent rebellion is beginning to surface. She needs an observer, an older woman, to witness her adolescent rebellion.

After showing her age-appropriate rebellion in the last tray, on the same day she makes room for even more age-appropriate play (baseball)

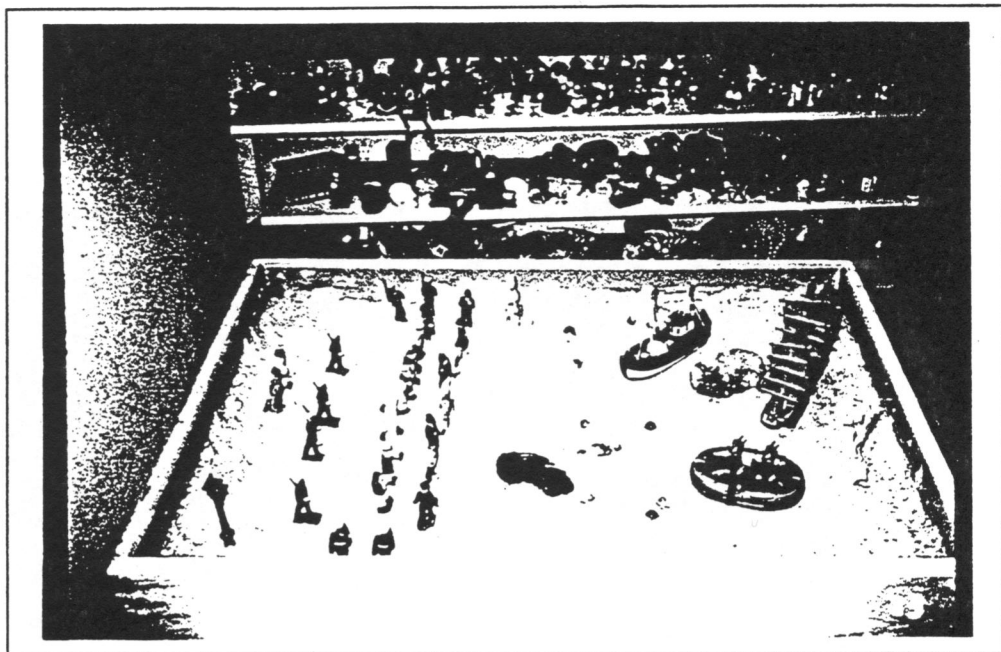


Figure 7

and for nurturing from the age-appropriate food—hamburgers, fries, and sodas (Figure 8). In the other side of the tray, she portrays a graduation ceremony, suggesting readiness to move into the next phase of her new development.

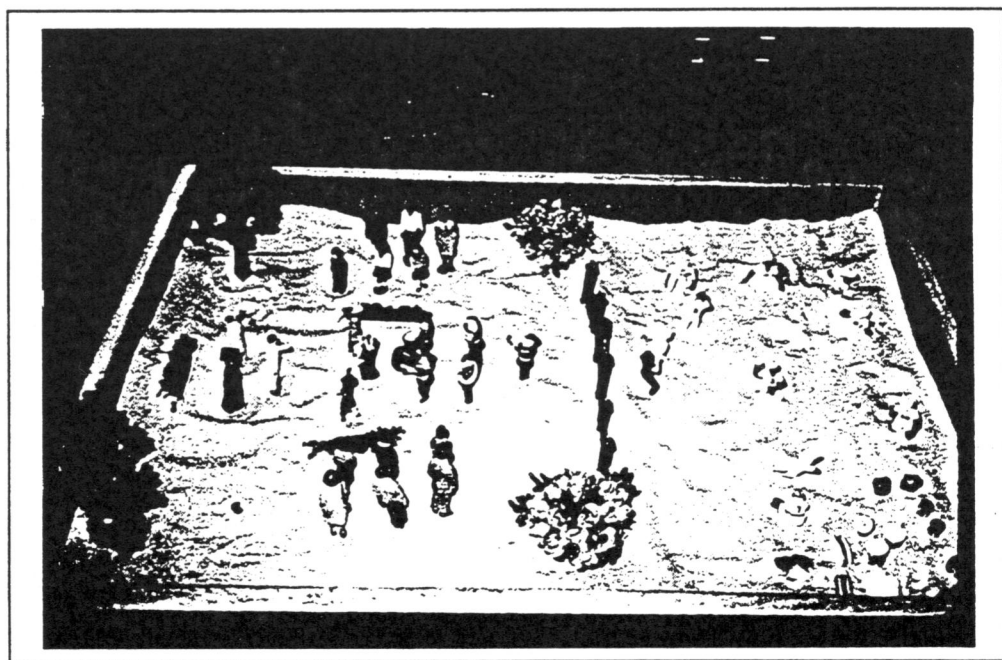


Figure 8

Now, two weeks later, there is even more room for an expansive child experience in what Jasmine calls the Wax Museum for Children (Figure 9). No

parts of her self are fenced off. Now, as she lives her fuller childlike self, there is even more room for her to expand into the next stage.

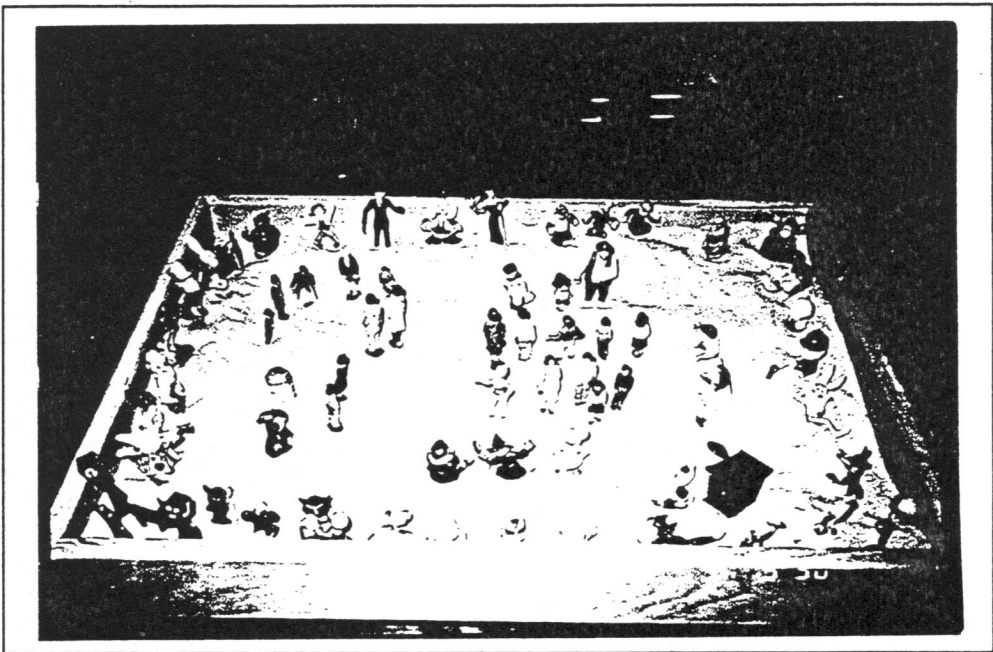


Figure 9

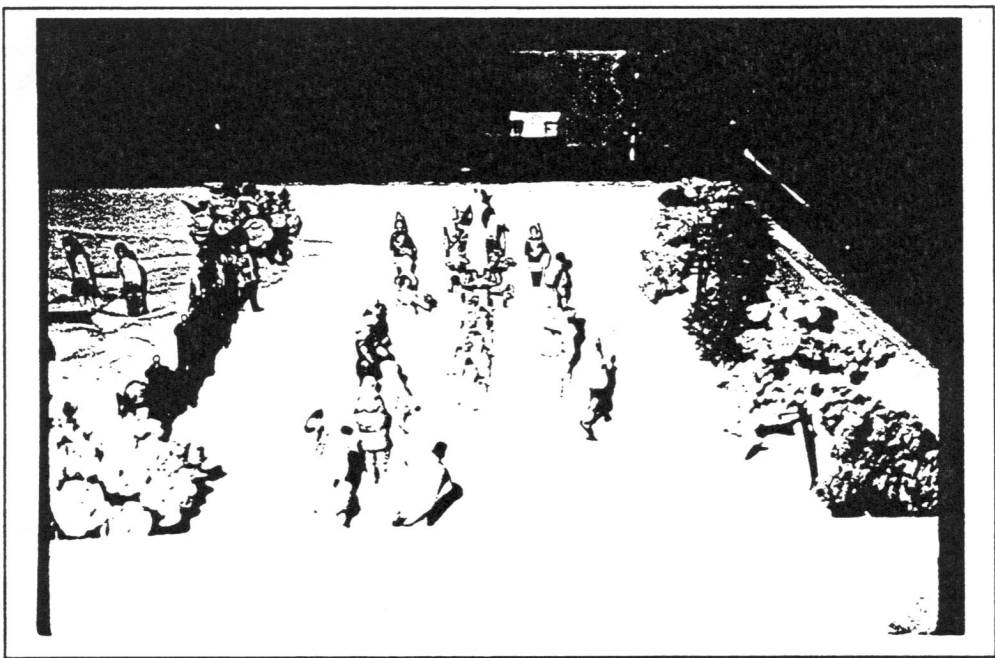


Figure 10

In the eighth tray, created nearly three weeks later (Figure 10), the feminine becomes a central figure again. This time, she is a more evolved feminine, not a princess but a queen, and appears in a form close to her own identity (rather than in an Asian goddess form). Jasmine says that this is the Queen of England coming to California with her carriage and private guards. I thought, "something new is arriving and announcing itself."

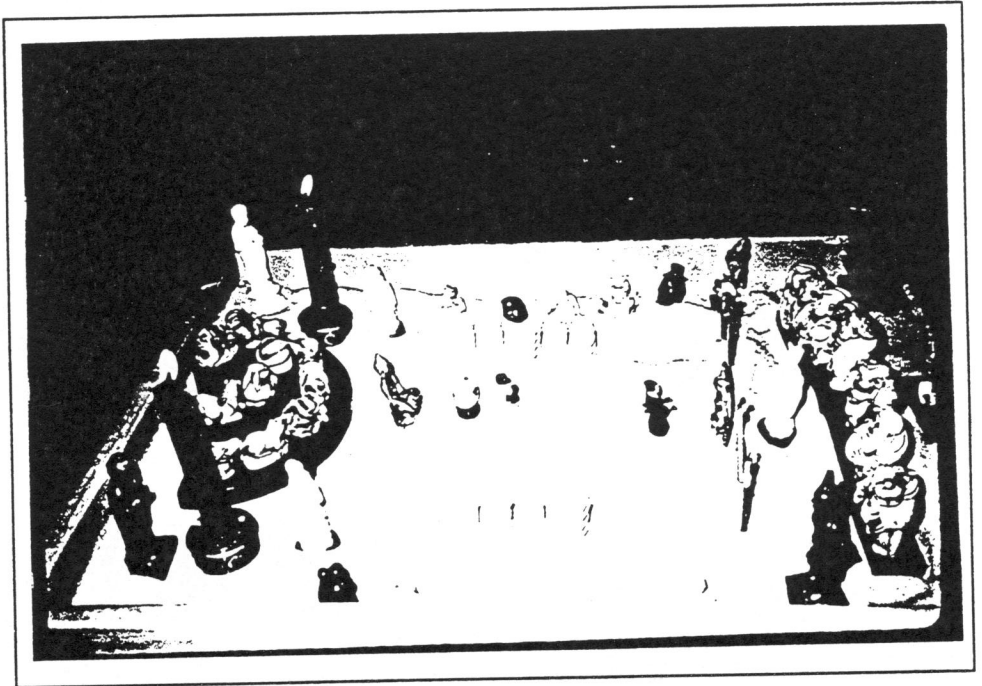


Figure 11

One month after the arrival of the feminine in the previous tray, a celebration takes place in a sacred and separate place (Figure 11). In this tray a new element is introduced — fire — denoting that a new level has been touched. I could feel Jasmine's excitement as she lit the red candles. The guards are present again, protecting her sacred place and secret egg (as she called it). I wondered if the secret egg and red candles heralded her future menstruation.

In Jasmine's tenth tray two months later (Figure 12), the egg has developed and a baby is born. She places other babies in the surrounding tents — suggesting more potential is yet to emerge. The initiatory bridging energy in the

snake follows and helps her. The two women from her first tray appear here again, but now they are more separate. This time, the open containers hold something she calls "precious." The Kachinas are prominent, along with the red candles.

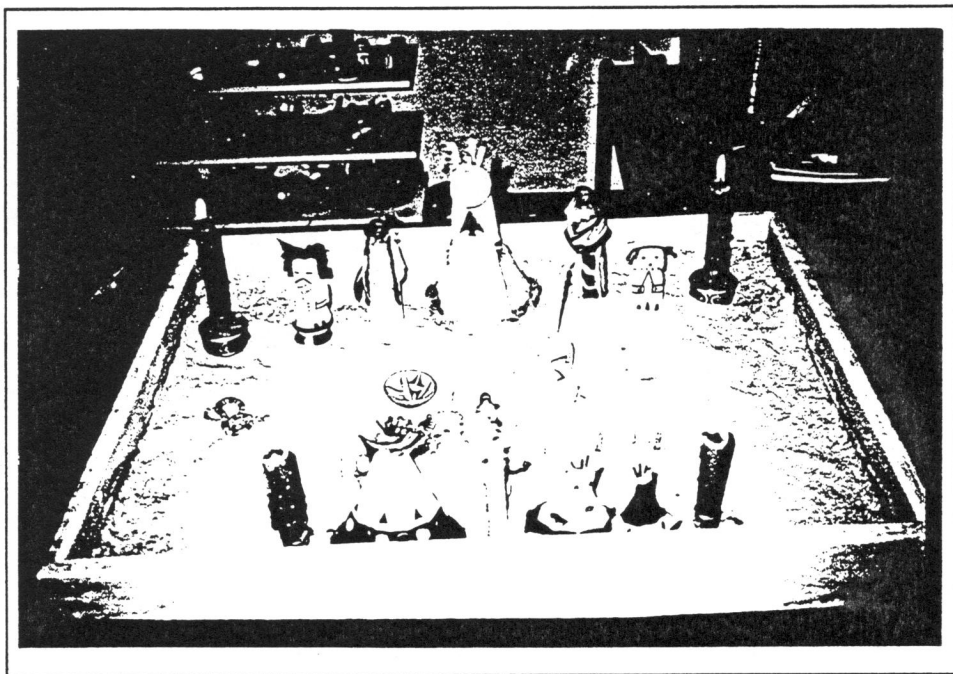


Figure 12

In her eleventh tray one month later (Figure 13), the new birth and theme of separation continue to evolve and be celebrated. The new baby king is given many gifts of jewels and money and then is placed in the large tepee. Male and female babies of all races have now moved out of their tepees, as depicted in the previous scene, and are watching the ceremony. Now the potential is visible. Jasmine identifies the new baby king as a boy.

This time it appears that she is separating from her father. This new masculine element, the birth of the baby boy king with his own separate tepee, suggests that she is beginning to access her own inner masculine energy. No longer is the masculine idealized outside of herself and contained only in her father. Now it is being birthed within her in a new, more differentiated way.

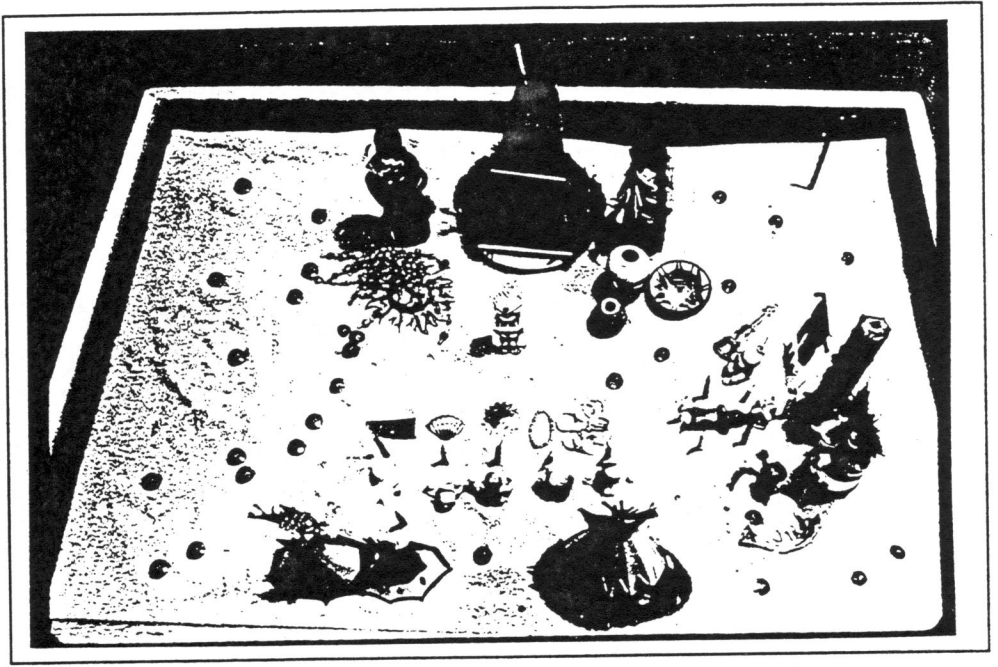


Figure 13

By this time, her mother reported to me that Jasmine was more independent in her outer life and had even gotten angry with her. Jasmine now is letting go of protecting her mother. In our sessions, too, she seemed to be owning more of her own experience. During the creation of her last seven trays, Jasmine would almost always situate herself and the tray so that her Sandplay picture would be laid out in front of me. Now with this tray, she could allow me to sit behind her. At this point, she is not only the creator, but also the primary witness.

One week after the birth of the masculine comes a marriage between the masculine and feminine in her twelfth tray (Figure 14). The queen, king, and princess (who, according to Jasmine, will become a queen after she marries) walk down the aisle with an honor guard on each side. The princess rejects several suitors and decides to marry the man she wants. The rejected suitors also marry, and the princess (now a queen) eventually rides away in the golden coach with her prince (now a king). The gold coach is not present in the photograph because she literally had the new queen and king ride away in it, out of the sand tray! The earlier graduation tray indicated that something was evolving, and I was pleased to

find that what had evolved was a maturing of both her feminine and masculine facets — the princess becoming a queen and the prince becoming a king.



Figure 14

The story continues with her thirteenth tray the same day (Figure 15). In retrospect, as I looked at this tray and remembered the previous two trays, I saw that they followed a pattern: first, birth of the baby king, then marriage in the previous tray, and now death and rebirth. The profound mysteries of the life cycle are given form in these trays. She is connected to something beyond herself.

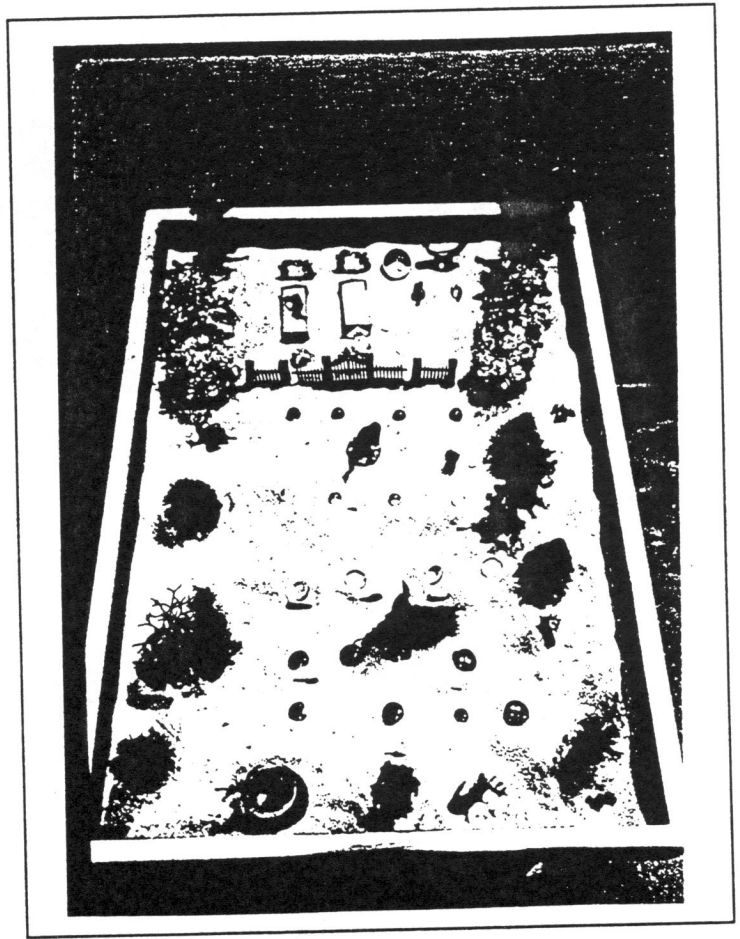
In this tray, Jasmine states that the old queen and king die and are buried in a special place within the cemetery (behind the fence): "Other people also die and are buried; their graves are marked with colored glass orbs. Trees are planted and the cemetery becomes a beautiful and sacred space. One hundred years later, the graves are dug up and they live again."

Jasmine's fourteenth tray (Figure 16) continues the theme of anticipation and getting ready for the future. Here, a month later, a developed,

reactivated feminine energy emerges in the center of the tray riding on a white horse. She is plowing the ground for future harvest, getting ready for a feast.

About this time I reread some of my earlier notes. I was struck by one of the comments I made in the margin of a note. I said that I believed that she would, like her mother, marry a famous and powerful man. That has yet to be seen, but now, with this new energy of her own activated, she no longer needs to ride on anyone else's energy. Her earlier stated desire to become a physician will need this kind of powerful energy.

Figure 15



Her mother related to me that Jasmine was applying to five highly-rated private schools for seventh grade. She, the mother, was feeling very worried and overcome by all the application work, even though Jasmine was doing most of it. When she asked Jasmine if she were feeling anxious, Jasmine responded nonchalantly, "No, I'll get into four of the five schools." She was unworried. Her mother felt proud that Jasmine could express such self-confident feelings that were so different from her own. What a change this was from ten months before when our work began. Jasmine was now identifying her own unique feelings separately from her mother's.

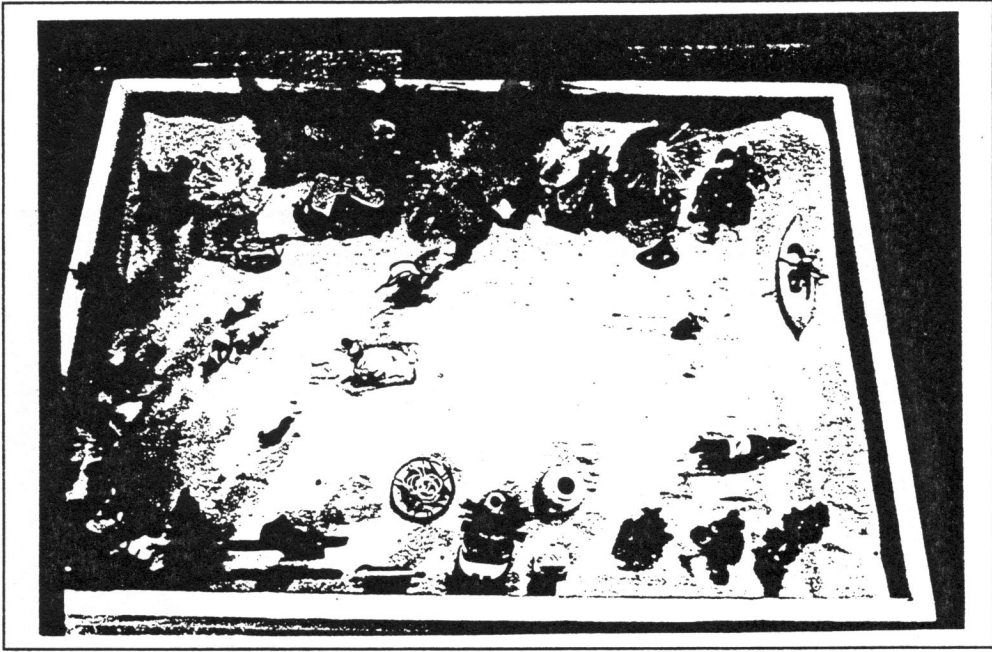


Figure 16

Jasmine's prediction proved to be correct. Three months later after the following tray, I learned that she had been easily accepted into the school of her choice.

In this last tray (Figure 17) created a month later, Jasmine has made room for all of the pieces of herself (the egg, two gold Buddhas, and a beautiful orb given to me that same day by Jasmine and her mother). These pieces have a connection to a source beyond her that can replenish and feed her, symbolized by the three wells (located at the top of the tray) and Japanese restaurant (located near the tree at the bottom left of the tray). The masculine and feminine have now joined, represented by the Japanese couple placed in the gazebo located in the bottom middle of the tray. She is now able to move on (in the ricksha near the center of the tray) toward her future initiation into adolescence (symbolized by the nude woman lying protected beneath the palm tree in the right front corner). Her sexual development is still a distance away, as is appropriate for this now eleven-year old girl.

I feel very fortunate to have been able to witness and experience the essence and sacredness of this exceptional girl's early life journey. Clearly, her

Sandplays anticipate her future readiness for a deep and meaningful initiatory experience as she enters womanhood.

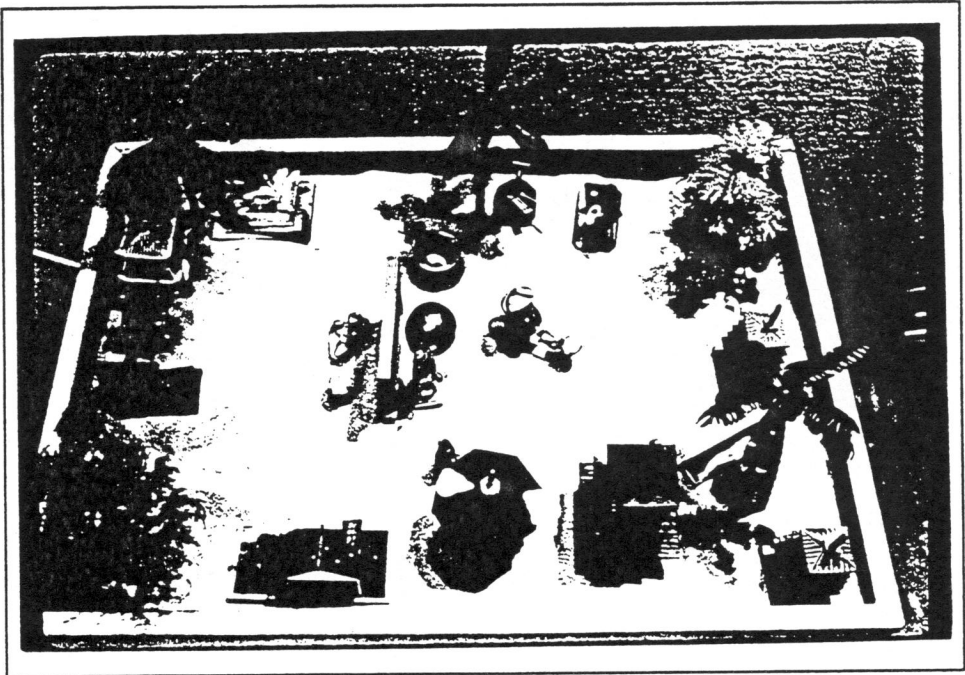


Figure 17