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NAVAJO WEAVING: THE ART AND TRADITION OF WOOL TEXTILES

Contemporary Navajo weavers combine the advantages of modern technology with over 300 years of inherited weaving and native culture to produce wool rugs valued for their unique designs and unsurpassed craftsmanship.

Since the Navajo people are now so closely associated with woven blankets and rugs, many people are surprised to learn that, among Native American peoples, the Navajos were not the first weavers in the American Southwest. They learned this skill from the Rio Grande Pueblo Indians who sought shelter with their Navajo neighbors after fleeing from the Spanish in 1680. The Spanish explorers also introduced the Navajos to the Churro-type sheep that still populate most Navajo herds.

After about 150 years, the Navajos surpassed their Pueblo teachers and became the primary suppliers of blankets to the Spanish, other Indians, and later, for trading with the American settlers.

Like all aspects of Navajo life, weaving is closely linked to a religious belief that their ancestors, and therefore life itself, emerged from the earth. The wool that is shorn from Navajo sheep, the looms that were originally made from tree trunks and the rocks that held the looms in place, each owe their existence to nurturing Mother Earth. Even the weaving process, which grows up from the bottom of the vertical loom, evokes an image of designs sprouting from the ground.

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WEAVING HISTORY 2-2-2

Navajo religion credits Spider Woman, one of the Holy People, with teaching Navajo women to weave, which is why weaving was more than just a craft, but also represented a link between material and spiritual worlds. Legend says that Spider Woman, working through the weaver, directs the growth of the blanket which is woven on a loom that Spider Man told her how to make.

A Navajo girl learned to weave by watching her mother and aunts, until she was given the opportunity to weave a few rows. Baby girls were prepared to become weavers in a special ritual which involved rubbing their hands and arms with a spider web. It was believed that this would keep her arms and fingers from tiring during weaving.

Navajo blankets and rugs are woven on a vertical loom, which first made its appearance in the Southwest during the 10th century. The loom consists of: two upright posts, originally anchored in the ground with large stones; two horizontal cross beams, lashed or connected to the upright posts at right angles, with a heavy lower crosspiece to anchor the loom; and a second pair of horizontal beams that hold the weaving. Traditionally, special prayers were said and offerings were made to the weaving tools, which were often passed on to succeeding generations.

Among the Navajos, blanket weaving is and was woman's work, just one of her many family and tribal responsibilities. To ensure that other duties were not neglected, prohibitions were in place that prevented women from spending too much time at the loom. Still today, the overwhelming majority of Navajo weavers are women. A few rebellious male weavers do exist, but they will rarely admit to their interest.

Navajo rugs and blankets are woven using the tapestry technique, which means that yarns are woven in areas determined by the reach of the weaver rather than carried from selvage to selvage by a shuttle. The weaver completes one section before moving over to work on a neighboring area. The slanted inner edges of the finished areas are connected by small amounts of yarn wound together to make an invisible join called a "lazy line."

WEAVING HISTORY 3-3-3

Early Navajo blankets were made of yarns spun from their own sheep. They used only three colors --- natural browns and white, and indigo-dyed blue --- and consisted of simple band and stripe patterns. Later, red yarns that were obtained by unraveling Spanish bayeta cloth were incorporated into the weavings.

A turning point for Navajo designs came in the late 1880's when aniline, or synthetic dyes were introduced. A wide range of commercially prepared colored yarns became available, offering weavers a bright, new palette of colors which inspired more complicated designs, the ones that were the forerunners of present-day rugs.

Two traders, Juan Lorenzo Hubbell of Ganado, Arizona, and John B. Moore of Crystal, New Mexico, played important roles in perpetuating and expanding Navajo weaving. They also influenced the evolution of their designs. Both commissioned artists to paint rug patterns with the express purpose of showing them to weavers for copying. These original paintings can still be seen in the rug room at the Hubbell Trading Post.

At the very end of the 19th century, regional styles of weaving developed (Wide Ruins, Ganado, Two Grey Hills, etc.), as did the transition from weaving blankets to weaving rugs. The Navajos stopped weaving blankets for themselves when they adopted machine-made Pendleton blankets. They then switched to weaving rugs for trading, a practice which continues today.

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