



Spider
Woman's
Gift

Nineteenth-Century Diné Textiles

Edited by Shelby J. Tisdale

Spider Woman's Gift

Nineteenth-Century Diné Textiles at
the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture



Edited by Shelby J. Tisdale

Essays by Joyce Begay-Foss and Marian E. Rodee

Studio Photography by Blair Clark

Museum of New Mexico Press, Santa Fe

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With beauty before me, it is woven
With beauty behind me, it is woven
With beauty above me, it is woven
With beauty below me, it is woven
And in beauty, it is finished.

Navajo weavers' song—



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Acknowledgments

This project would not have been possible if, over the years, generous collectors had not considered the Laboratory of Anthropology, and later the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture, a worthy home for their beautiful Diné (Navajo) basket and textile collections. I would like to take this opportunity to recognize the generous patrons and collectors whose pieces were in the exhibition and are now in this catalog: Florence Dibell Bartlett, Minnie Clay, Michael Harrison, Edgar L. Hewett, William C. Ilfeld, the Jennings family, Harry Kelly, Catherine Rayne, and Mrs. Philip B. Stewart. I also thank John and Linda Comstock and the Abigail Van Vleck Charitable Trust for generously providing the funding to purchase additional Diné textiles to fill in gaps in the collection. It is through these efforts that we are able to provide a more complete picture of nineteenth-century textiles.

I would like to thank Joyce Begay-Foss, director of the Living Traditions Education Program at the museum, for sharing her idea for an exhibition of nineteenth-century textiles in the museum collection. She and I cocurated the Spider Woman's Gift exhibition in 2006. The exhibition was installed in the Masterpieces Gallery, which had opened in 2004 after a major museum renovation. I would also like to thank Valerie Verzuh, the museum's curator of individually cataloged collections, who assisted Joyce and I by pulling textiles from this time period, and the associated documentation, so that we could make informed choices based on historic information and the aesthetic qualities of each piece.

Many people were involved in the exhibition design, fabrication, and installation. Carolin Lajoie did a fabulous job of designing the exhibition, so that the textiles seemed to float inside the cases. Susan Hyde Holmes applied her magic touch to the graphic design on the text panels and object labels. Our wonderful fabrications and installation team took on the challenge of making this textile exhibit out of the ordinary. Visitors and other museum professionals were intrigued by the design and often said, “How did you do that?”

After the exhibition closed, we received several requests for a catalog of the textiles on exhibit. I am grateful to Joyce Begay-Foss for agreeing to write a chapter on the importance of Spider Woman to Diné weavers such as herself, thus providing us with a Diné perspective on the history of weaving during this period. For the anthropological perspective on Diné weaving, I am thankful that textile expert Marian E. Rodee, retired curator at the Maxwell Museum at the University of New Mexico, agreed to contribute her knowledge and expertise to this publication.

A very special thank you goes to Louise Stiver, former curator at the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture and the Laboratory of Anthropology, who is not only familiar with the textiles in this catalog but also curated an exhibition on the Stewart Collection in the 1990s. She assisted with the editing of earlier versions of this catalog and provided her expertise in the placing of images within the text. It was with Louise’s help that this catalog finally got moving toward publication.

I am deeply indebted to Anna Gallegos, director of the Museum of New Mexico Press, for her support and enthusiasm for this project. I am grateful for the sound advice and great judgment of Mary Wachs, who guided this book through the editing and design process. Many thanks go to Blair Clark and Ricardo Martinez for their splendid photography and to Daniel Kosharek for his assistance in obtaining the historic photos from the Palace of the Governors/New Mexico History Museum Photo Archives. And I would also like to thank David Skolkin and Jason Valdez for the artistic design of this catalog.

I would be remiss if I did not express my deepest appreciation for the weavers who followed Spider Woman’s advice and teachings to create a legacy of such beauty.

Shelby J. Tisdale—



Spider Woman's Gift: Introduction

Shelby J. Tisdale

The stunning desert landscape of mesas, buttes, and canyons of the Southwest (fig. 1) has always had a profound influence on the magnificent weavings created by the Diné (which means “the people” in Navajo). Valued for their incredible beauty and fine craftsmanship, Diné weavings were one of the first Native American arts to be widely traded—a practice that continues today. Diné textiles, which are strongly symmetrical in design and execution, reflect the Diné concept of *hózhóó*, or balance and harmony, which brings with it beauty as well as a sense of well-being.

The significance of Diné textiles transcends simple artistic expression. Through the spiritual activity of weaving, weavers beautify their world and integrate their art into the web of everyday life. The Diné believe that Na ashje'ii'Asdzáá (Spider Woman) taught them to create their weavings with patience, understanding, and sensitivity. Over the centuries, Diné weaving has also developed in a way that reflects the Diné's unique historical and cultural experiences.

The Plains Indian tribes lying east of the Diné coveted the tightly woven and elegantly patterned textiles, which were objects of admiration and trade. Chief blankets, in particular, became symbols of prestige, proclaiming the wealth and status of anyone wearing one. Increased Euro-American contact during the nineteenth century introduced a whole new set of admirers, including “soldiers seeking souvenirs from their western campaigns, reservation traders eager to expand their businesses, eastern buyers desiring the unusual for their homes, anthropologists studying tribal peoples,