

NAVAJO TEXTILES

The William Randolph Hearst Collection



NANCY J. BLOMBERG

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Collection*

Nancy J. Blomberg

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NAVAJO TEXTILES





To my parents Art and Helen Bastian

for the opportunity to learn

and to my husband Art

for the inspiration to persevere

Preface

The colorful product of the Navajo loom has long been an object of admiration. Tribes living adjacent to the Navajo in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries coveted the tightly woven and elegantly patterned textiles as clothing. Increased Anglo contact in the nineteenth century brought 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, museum curators collecting the material culture produced by these peoples, and avid collectors eager to own a beautiful and increasingly scarce commodity.

William Randolph Hearst, newspaperman and consummate collector, also appreciated the Navajo weaver's art. During the first portion of this century he assembled a remarkably complete collection of all of the major types of Navajo textiles woven between 1800 and 1920. Now housed at the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History (LACMNH), the Hearst textiles are only one portion of a larger and mostly unpublished collection.

The study of Navajo weaving has progressed steadily since the scattered descriptive reports of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries up to Amsden's (1934) thorough treatment. Many notable scholars have taken up where Amsden left off to advance our knowledge considerably in this area. The serious student should refer to the bibliography for a full treatment of the history of Navajo weaving. The Hearst textiles are presented here in the context of this well-established framework of Navajo textile studies.

Chapter 1, which outlines Navajo weaving history, is intended to provide the layman with a background against which to view the economic and analytical chapters that follow. Chapter 2 documents Hearst's role as an important collector and patron of this art and places his efforts in a larger historical context. An investigation of his interaction with the famous Fred Harvey Company Indian Department and his relationship with its manager, Herman Schweizer, provides new insights about Hearst himself and also important economic information about the role of the consumer in the development and marketing of Navajo textiles. Chapter 3, the heart of the book, provides a detailed scholarly analysis of each textile.

A primary aim of this publication is to bring to the attention of both researchers and the general public this heretofore largely unknown resource. It is an inaugural effort to make the anthropological collections at LACMNH more accessible to scholars and more meaningful to the public at large.

Acknowledgments



Credit and thanks must be given to dozens of people who have helped me in one way or another to complete this book. No work on Navajo textiles is written without the mark of the fine hand of Joe Ben Wheat. He is intimately familiar with this particular collection as well as being the foremost Navajo textile scholar. His critical comments, combined with David Wenger's dye analyses, have greatly enhanced this publication.

The final draft of this manuscript benefited enormously from the advice of Louis Hieb. His constructive criticism enabled me to rethink crucial sections to provide for a sharper economic and historical context.

Thanks also to Kathleen Whitaker, who spent many hours with me discussing Navajo weaving in general and numerous problem pieces in particular.

Byron Harvey III, great-grandson of the founder of the Fred Harvey Company, cracked the price codes established by Herman Schweizer and very graciously assisted me in the tedious process of unravelling the initial codes designating the collectors. His help was invaluable also in locating much primary source material about the company.

Barney H. Sievert, who worked for the Harvey Company Indian Department at Albuquerque in the 1920s and 1930s (and who was located with the help of Don Bennett), provided insight into the operations of the Harvey Company, their Indian Department, and Schweizer's relationship with Hearst.

I also owe thanks to Rick Smith, manager of Ortega's Indian Shop at La Fonda Hotel in Santa Fe, for allowing me access to boxes and boxes of Harvey Company business correspondence, especially those materials dealing with W. R. Hearst.

To all my colleagues in museums, special archives, and trading posts who answered my pleas for help, a very big thank you, especially to the following: Cindy Davies and Ann Marshall at the Heard Museum, Phoenix; Roberta Erickson, Corporate Historian for the Harvey Company/Amfac, Brisbane, California; Nora Fisher and Christine Mather, Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe; Denise Fourie, Nancy Loe, and Mary Weaver at the Special Collections Library of California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo; Louis Hieb, head of Special Collections, University of Arizona Library, Tucson; Leif Johnson, Grand Canyon National Park Lodge; Jere Krakow, Southwest Missouri State University, Springfield; Ann Miller,

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Within LACMNH I would like to acknowledge Charles Rozaire for expertise in weaving technology and for his patient and careful translations of many scribbled notes in Spanish found among the papers of Lorenzo Hubbell from his earliest textile suppliers.

A grateful thank you to my hardworking cadre of volunteers, who organized a small army of workers to assist in the unrolling, photographing, and rerolling of nearly two hundred weighty textiles. Thanks are also due Rita Lear and Renee Levin for tediously computing each and every price from the codes.

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1. From Blanket to Rug

The Historical Development of Navajo Textiles

According to Navajo mythology, Spider Woman taught Navajo women to weave (Reichard 1934). Although scholars have not been able to put a precise date on the beginnings of Navajo loom weaving, evidence points to a time after the group's migration into the Southwest from the north, and most likely the second half of the seventeenth century. Similarities in looms and early designs, as well as historical evidence, suggest a Pueblo source.

Puebloan peoples had been raising cotton and weaving it into clothing on upright looms since A.D. 1100. When the Spaniards arrived in the Southwest in the sixteenth century, they brought churro sheep and introduced the concept of weaving their wool into cloth. After increasingly oppressive Spanish rule caused the Puebloan peoples to revolt, many Pueblo men and women left their villages to escape retaliation and found refuge among the Navajos. This close contact would have afforded the Navajos an excellent opportunity to learn weaving. Among the Pueblo groups it was traditionally the men who practiced weaving. If the two groups intermarried during the seventeenth century, Navajo women would have been able to observe closely and master the techniques of the Pueblo loom.

Speculation aside, Spanish documents (Hill 1940) describing the Navajos from 1706 to 1743 mention their weaving skills and the production of wool blankets. Furthermore, the documents tell of trade in these blankets to the Pueblos. The concept of trade infers a sufficient surplus to sustain the activity and a certain degree of weaving excellence to rank the blankets as a valuable commodity.

Scholars have divided the more than three centuries of Navajo weaving into many time periods for ease of analysis and description. For purposes of this book, I have used the broadest and most generally accepted outline:

Classic Period (1650–1868)

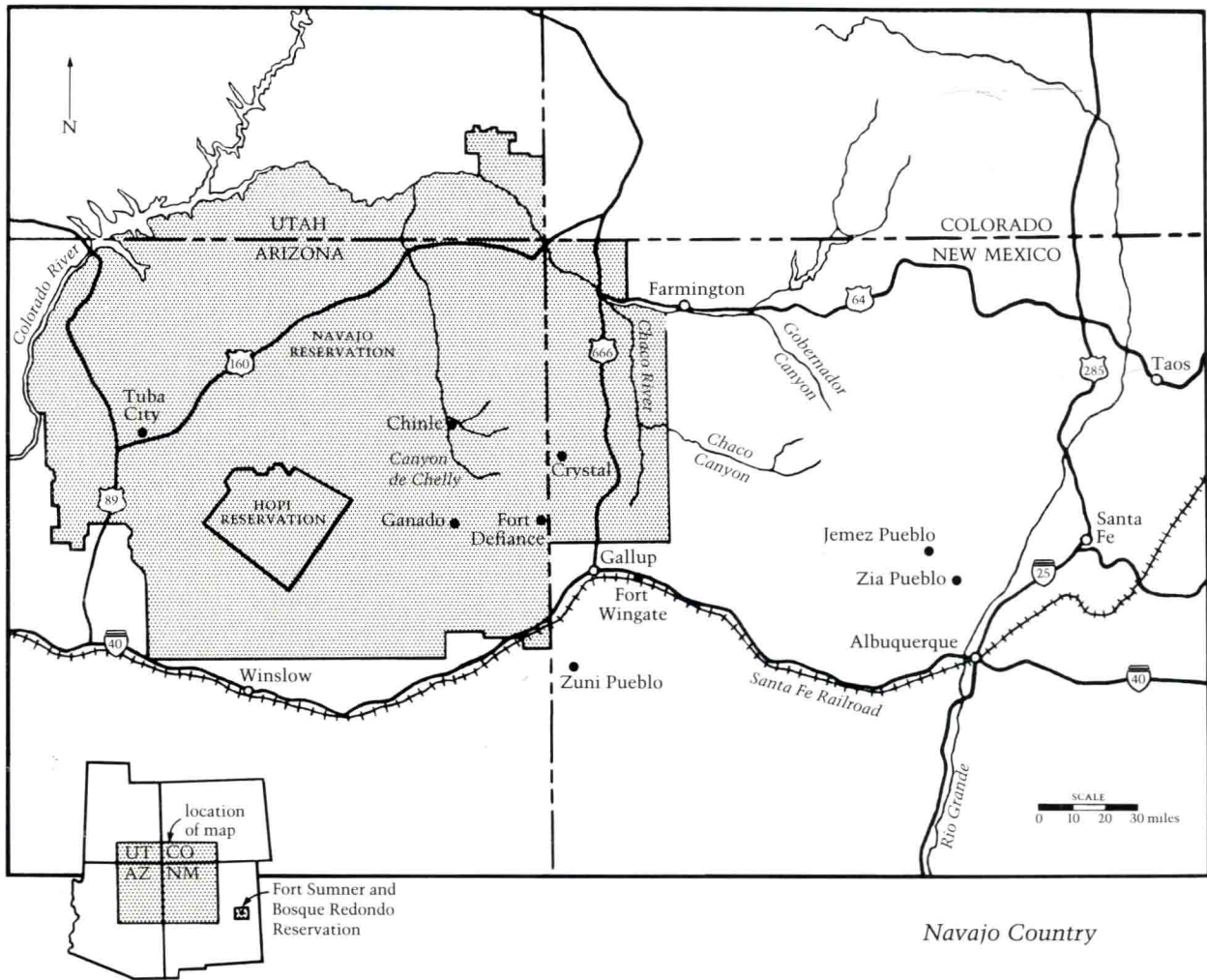
Transitional Period (1868–1890)

Rug Period (1890–1920)

The reader should bear in mind that these dates are not absolute but rather represent a rough chronology with many instances of overlap between them.

The Classic Period (1650–1868)

During the Classic Period the Navajos wove utilitarian items of clothing such as blankets, shirts, dresses, and belts for their own use and for trade to



Navajo Country

other Indian groups. Early Navajo blankets were used as outer garments for protection from the elements. Tightly woven of wool, they provided warmth and shed water. This function was primary until exposure to western culture and clothing brought major changes. Although generally woven on the loom in a longer-than-wide rectangular shape, Navajo blankets were worn in exactly the opposite orientation, with the width across the shoulders and the ends joined in front.

The earliest Navajo textiles are known only from archaeological fragments excavated in the Gobernador Valley of northern New Mexico and date to the middle of the eighteenth century. These fragments, others found in Canyon de Chelly from the early nineteenth century, and references in miscellaneous Spanish documents all indicate that the material used was wool, the design was primarily stripes, and the weaving techniques included sophisticated diamond and diagonal twill as well as some plain tapestry (Kent 1985). Whole textiles that survive from the Classic Period are best represented by elegant serapes, the so-called chief's blankets, women's dresses, and some smaller, child's blankets.

Although the earliest Navajo textile fragments bear primarily a striped design, by the early nineteenth century the spectacular serape style was emerging. Inspired by the brightly colored and boldly patterned Saltillo serapes of Mexico, early Navajo serapes departed in shape and design from Pueblo-style wearing blankets. The Classic Period Navajo serape was characterized by designs of elaborately terraced zigzags and diamond motifs, a plain tap-

estry weave, and a red, blue, and white color scheme. Further, the weaving technique was highly refined.

During this period weavers augmented the natural white and brown colors of the wool with navy blue and vivid reds brought by the Spanish. The blue was obtained from indigo plant dye, and the red was available from commercially woven bolts of cloth, or *bayeta*. Unable to obtain bright red colors from local plants, the Navajos avidly sought to procure this bayeta and then tediously ravelled it, thread by solitary thread! Once apart, the thread was plied to produce a thickness equal to the weight of the other yarns to be used in the blanket, and then rewoven into the new textile. (Contrary to popular stories, this ravelled yarn was not obtained from the jackets of dead soldiers.) Reds with a blue or purple tinge generally were obtained from imported cloth. Later, orange-red shades were often ravelled from bolts of American flannel.

Dye studies conducted by Joe Ben Wheat and David Wenger have sought to determine the sources of dyestuffs used to produce the blue and purple reds. Preliminary results indicate the use of lac (obtained from resin deposited on trees by certain scale insects) prior to 1860. After that date, cochineal (obtained from the dried and pulverized bodies of small insects that feed on the opuntia cactus in Mexico) was the source. American flannel cloth of the late 1860s and 1870s was aniline-dyed.

Another type of yarn occasionally found in Classic Period textiles dating from 1840 to 1860 is referred to as *Saxony*. This commercially spun, three-ply yarn was manufactured in Europe and derives its name from the silky fleece of the Saxony-Merino sheep. Most often it appears in soft-colored vegetal dye shades of yellow and green.

One of the most widely recognized blanket types to emerge during the Classic Period was the so-called chief style, a very specific type of man's wearing blanket. The word *chief* is misleading, however, for the Navajos did not have tribal chiefs. Rather, these blankets were rare and valuable trade goods carried to adjacent and distant tribes over lengthy trade routes (Bennett 1981). Their purchase and use would have been restricted to persons of some wealth and achievement, hence the misnomer. Chief-style blankets were especially popular with the Ute Indians of the Great Basin and Plains. Historical records, which include the drawings of early artists and explorers such as Karl Bodmer, as well as documentation by later photographers, show Plains Indians proudly wearing these distinctly striped blankets.

Like the Pueblo wearing blanket, from which it no doubt evolved, the Navajo chief blanket was woven broader than long with wide horizontal stripe elements dominating the design. Over the course of the nineteenth century the design of this type of blanket evolved in very rigid and easily identifiable patterning phases. Navajo textile scholars have named and numbered these phases sequentially as first, second, third, and (sometimes) fourth.

The first phase is categorized by a simple combination of broad white, brown, red, and blue horizontal stripes and was woven during the first half of the nineteenth century. By 1850 innovations in this style were being seen as the weaver interrupted and expanded the center and end stripes by adding elongated rectangles in a twelve-position layout across the blanket. The broad white and brown bands then served as a background for the pattern bands of this second phase.

Within a decade the third phase in the development of the chief-style blanket was signaled by a shift from squares and rectangles to a nine-position

Piegan Blackfeet Indian wearing a Navajo first-phase, chief-style blanket. Watercolor by Karl Bodmer, 1833. Courtesy of the Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska.



layout of a central diamond, half diamonds along the four edges, and quarter diamonds in the corners. The same broad white and brown stripes were retained. Some scholars (Kent 1985) add a fourth phase toward the end of the nineteenth century, when the diamonds were made so large that they eventually completely overshadowed the horizontal stripes.

Another, even less-agreed-upon, category of chief-style blankets comprises those referred to in the catalogue as *variants*. Many blankets produced in a wider-than-long shape have the basic layout of groupings of broad white and brown/black horizontal stripes with associated patterning but do not fit a strict definition of the style.

Child's blankets, another category of Classic Period textiles, are distinguished from serapes largely on the basis of size. Often bearing the same terraced line and diamond patterning, they appear as miniature serapes from as early as the 1840s until well into the 1870s and 1880s. The design motifs, yarns, and dyes used in the child's blankets, as well as their degree of technical refinement, often rival those of later serapes.

In general, men's and women's shoulder blankets and dresses dominate Classic Period textiles. Pueblo and Spanish influences are evident in design format and textile shape, and new yarns and dyes begin to provide the basis for a more colorful textile. Technically, the Navajo weaver achieved a level of excellence seldom reached since, producing a functional blanket as well as a premier work of art.

The closing five years of the Classic Period, 1863 to 1868, were to change Navajo textiles and Navajo life forever. The United States government, weary of constant skirmishes with the so-called uncivilized Indians—meaning the Navajos—decided that the final solution to this problem was to remove them from their homes and land. To this end army troops led by Colonel Kit

Carson were ordered to round up members of the Navajo tribe and march them to Fort Sumner, New Mexico, near Bosque Redondo. Hundreds of miles from Navajo country, men, women, and children were forced to walk the entire distance with only what they could carry on their backs. During their devastating confinement and separation from their large herds, the army issued them American-style clothing and Mackinaw Indian blankets from the Hudson Bay Company. These five years of confinement were to prove watershed years for the Navajos.

The Transitional Period (1868–1890)

Technically, many of the textiles woven in this twenty-two-year period seem to be neither blankets nor rugs, thus giving rise to the name *transitional*. As the market began to shift from native to tourist consumption, the textiles also changed.

Exposure to new ideas and materials at Bosque Redondo permanently altered Navajo life. When finally allowed to return to their homes in 1868, the Navajos discovered the land overrun and their large herds destroyed. Government attempts at assistance proved inadequate to the needs of the Indians.

Shoulder blankets and dresses were no longer as indispensable to the Navajos as before Bosque Redondo, where they had become accustomed to American clothing. With sheep in short supply, the raw material available for weaving was limited, and the textiles woven in the years immediately following confinement reflect these shortages. Many small bits of yarn had to be gathered to complete a textile. The natural grey wool of the sheep was extensively used during the years immediately following Bosque Redondo. Another trait typical of the 1870s was the carding of natural white fleece with small amounts of ravelled yarn to produce a pink color. Overall, however, less native handspun yarn was being used, because commercial yarns were readily available, required no tedious processing, and came in a riot of colors.

Chemical or aniline dyes were invented in England in 1856 and quickly imported into America. Eastern yarn manufacturers switched to this new, cheaper dyestuff, which provided a wider and more vivid color palette. By 1865 three-ply yarns with these new dyes had reached the Navajos and by 1875 had been largely replaced by four-ply yarns of a slightly heavier weight. Textiles that were woven primarily from the new three- and four-ply commercial yarns are referred to as *Germantowns*, a name that reflects the Pennsylvania town where much of the yarn originated.

Designs were also changing, primarily in response to two factors: the Navajos' exposure to new design elements at Bosque Redondo and the beginning of a shift in function from blanket to rug. The serrate-edged motifs from Mexican serapes heavily influenced Navajo textiles, and a reorientation of the design layout from a horizontal to a vertical format began to occur.

Two new types of textiles developed during this period: the pictorial blanket, with design elements such as plants and animals, and the brightly colored and visually stunning eyedazzlers, which used commercial yarns in dizzying patterns. In addition, the Navajos began to be influenced by another factor—the reservation trader. Licensed by the United States government to provide services and supplies to the Indians, these traders became inextricably linked with the lives of the Navajos on several levels. When it came to textiles, traders provided new weaving materials and design ideas, as well as

helping to establish a new market. McNitt (1962) provides a fuller discussion of specific traders and their wide-ranging influence.

Economic life on the reservation was also changing. Prior to Bosque Redondo, the Navajo economy included hunting, gathering, herding, and farming. After 1868 and the gradual reestablishment of the flocks, herding became the primary occupation. Finally, the coming of the railroad in the 1880s and the opening of the West ended the relative isolation of the Navajos once and for all, and a new Navajo textile emerged.

The Rug Period (1890–1920)

Firmly entrenched on the reservation by this time, the traders played a crucial role in the development of the Navajo rug. At the urging of these traders, weavers gradually transformed the thin, tightly woven blankets into much heavier and thicker rugs suitable for use on the floors of Victorian homes. To accommodate the tastes of eastern buyers, the rugs were embellished with new patterns contained within borders for a more pleasing effect under furniture.

Many of these new designs were actually created by the traders, and others were inspired by motifs used in Oriental carpets and were a far cry from Classic Period blankets. One person who attempted to remedy this situation was J. L. (Lorenzo) Hubbell, the famous trader at Ganado, Arizona. He went to some lengths to urge his weavers to return to earlier traditions by selecting Classic Period designs that he wished the weavers to emulate and placing drawings of them conspicuously throughout his trading post. Hubbell's advertising to the general public touted his offerings of modern blankets woven with old patterns:

I have been at the greatest pains to perpetuate the old patterns, colors and weaves, now so rapidly passing out of existence even in the memory of the best weavers.

I have even at times unraveled some of the old genuine Navajo blankets to show these modern weavers how the pattern was made. I can guarantee the reproduction of these antique patterns. The next thing to possessing a genuine old blanket is owning one made exactly on the pattern of such blankets.

The old blankets are passing away, in the nature of things. I can supply genuine reproductions of the old weaves.

The arrival of the railroad was also a key factor in changing the lives and textiles of the Navajos. The railroad brought traders and merchants, new materials and design inspiration, as well as new purchasers for the textiles. It also brought the Fred Harvey Company and its Indian Department, whose role in developing and enhancing this new market will be seen in the following chapter, and William Randolph Hearst, whose enthusiasm for Navajo textiles is the basis of this volume.

The railroad brought one segment of the market to the reservation. However, in order to reach that much larger portion of the population that could not travel west, key traders such as J. B. Moore at Crystal, New Mexico, published mail-order catalogues. Complete with photographs of weavers and rugs, price lists, and anecdotal stories about the designs, these catalogues added yet another dimension to the rug market.

Throughout this period weavers continued to experiment with new ma-