



WEAVING A WORLD
TEXTILES AND THE NAVAJO
WAY OF SEEING

ROSEANN S. WILLINK

PAUL G. ZOLBROD

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN VAVRUSKA
STUDIO PHOTOGRAPHY BY BLAIR CLARK

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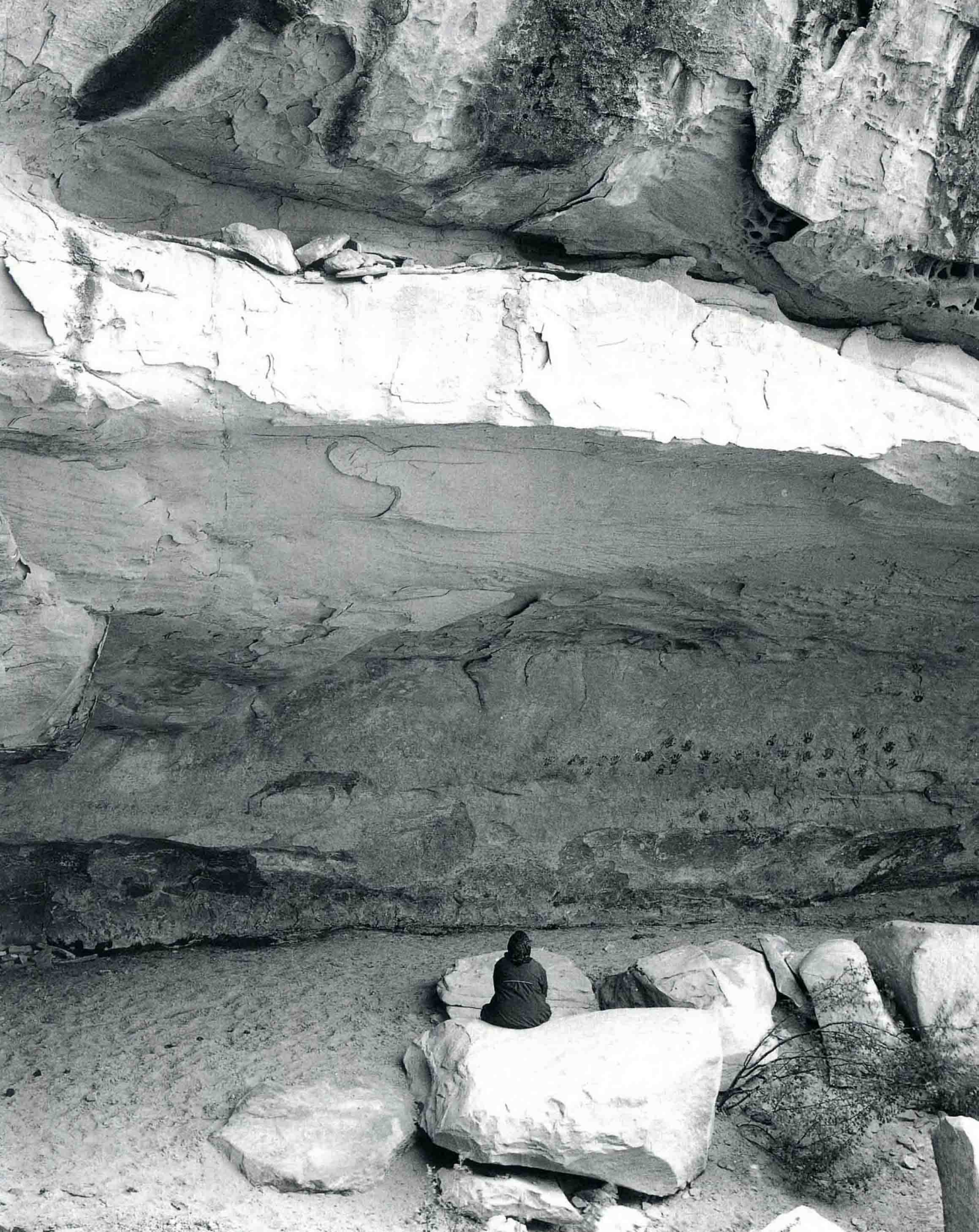
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WE WEAVE WHAT WE SEE











Nellie Becenti, White Rock, New Mexico

WEAVING A WORLD

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P R E F A C E

In this volume we wish to demonstrate that Navajo weaving is more than technique and craftsmanship. Rather, it is a conceptual art with much to say about the people who produce it, both individually and collectively. For help with the preparation of this work, our thanks go to a beleaguered federal agency, two fine institutions, and many generous, hardworking people. Indeed, it could not have materialized otherwise.

The National Endowment for the Humanities provided funding that enabled us to examine more than two hundred textiles in the collections of the Museum of New Mexico

and to talk at length with more than sixty Navajo elders—many of them experienced weavers. We duly register our gratitude not only to the Endowment but to its sustaining public. That agency's open-minded receptivity to an unorthodox project confirms the need for government support in sharing important discoveries with wide audiences.

The supporting institutions include Allegheny College, Meadville, Pennsylvania, where Zolbrod served on the faculty for more than thirty years, and where early planning occurred; and the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture/Laboratory of Anthropology, a unit of the Museum of New Mexico, which graciously

hosted all research activities. Institutions are, however, no more effective than the people who staff them.

Marianne Jordan, Director of Foundation and Corporate Relations at Allegheny College, heads the list. People who do her kind of work go unrecognized for their invaluable help in defining research goals, clarifying objectives, and developing methodology. We extend appreciation as well to Dr. Daniel Sullivan, former president of Allegheny College, for an early enthusiasm that fueled our own and for helping to provide additional financial assistance at a crucial time. His warm backing was matched by that of former Museum of Indian Arts and Culture director Steve Becker.

Present staff members at the Laboratory of Anthropology likewise deserve grateful acknowledgment, beginning with current director Dr. Bruce Bernstein, who was instrumental in our formulating the idea that Navajo textiles are more by far than the proficient technique of adding warp to weft to produce a design and who remained available as an ongoing consultant and as a knowledgeable, creative interpreter. Curator of Collections Louise Stiver also occupies a special place among those we must thank. To our great advantage, her superb mastery of the museum's textile collection matched her assistance when needed and her patience as we learned from her the importance of handling

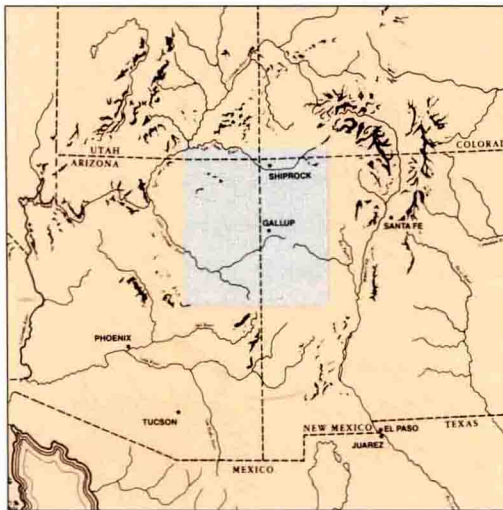
and caring for individual items. In addition we praise Laura Morley, laboratory and museum office manager, whose title does no full justice to the range of her helpfulness and the depth of her commitment to our success.

We hasten as well to pay tribute to other museum staff members for their assistance and committed goodwill. They include Carol Cooper, Director of Education; Laura Holt, Reference Librarian; Edmund Ladd, Curator of Ethnology; Tammy Rahr Nilsen, Curator of Living Arts; Paula Rivera, Assistant Curator of Collections; Curtis Schaafsma, Curator of Anthropology; Sarah Schlanger, Curator of Archaeology; and Jane Sinclair, Museum Educator. Together they provided a stimulating environment for inquiry and interpretation crucial to our progress. We would be badly amiss if we failed to recognize Museum of New Mexico Press Editorial Director Mary Wachs, Art Director David Skolkin, and copy editor Jenifer Blakemore for so effectively transforming our materials into a polished book. No writer is any better than those whose efforts bridge that inevitable gap. The praise we give them also goes to photographers John Vavruska and Blair Clark for seeing so clearly what the elders and the textiles combine to say.

Separately, each of us offers an acknowledgment of a more private kind as well. Roseann Willink takes pleasure in citing her

husband George for the encouragement and support that only a longtime marriage partner can provide, while Paul Zolbrod issues fond gratitude to Dr. Joanne McCloskey for strengthening all the more a close personal bond with crucial professional assistance. To her go particular thanks for initiating contact with key members of the Crownpoint, New Mexico, community who ultimately showed us how to find meaning in Navajo rugs, as well as for her guidance in developing a research procedure and for her own special kind of encouragement.

We save for last our tribute to the Navajos listed below, whose generosity anchored our piece-by-piece examination of more than two hundred textiles in an understanding not otherwise obtainable; and to Bonnie Benally, our field interpreter, who secured the conversion of supple, complex ideas to effective written English. Over a two-year period, individuals met with us in homes, chapter houses, hogans, and corrals to share knowledge that they might justifiably have kept to themselves. A number of them also came to the museum to help examine and interpret textiles collected there. It was their conscious choice to speak of things sacred and personal in an effort to preserve the essence of being Navajo for future generations. We appreciate their trust and hope to have done it justice in our representations.



With uncanny bilingual expertise, meanwhile, Bonnie Benally helped their words and ideas find a second life in written English.

Finally, we must single out among the elders a core group that became a de facto board of trustees as our enterprise progressed, guiding us and securing structure in what could otherwise easily have become a sprawling, unfocused effort. Included are June Kalleco, Sarah Johnson, Annie James, Harry and Annie Burnside, and Willie and Nellie Becenti. Learning from them as they tempered our efforts with the wisdom of their years, we discovered why the term “elder” takes on a special dimension in Navajo life difficult to summarize elsewhere.

Presiding over them and us was Loretta Benally, a powerful, prolific weaver in her time and a stalwart community leader today. It was her initiative that stirred others to work with us. She saw immediately the importance of what we hoped to accomplish for Navajos and non-Navajos alike. We owe her more than