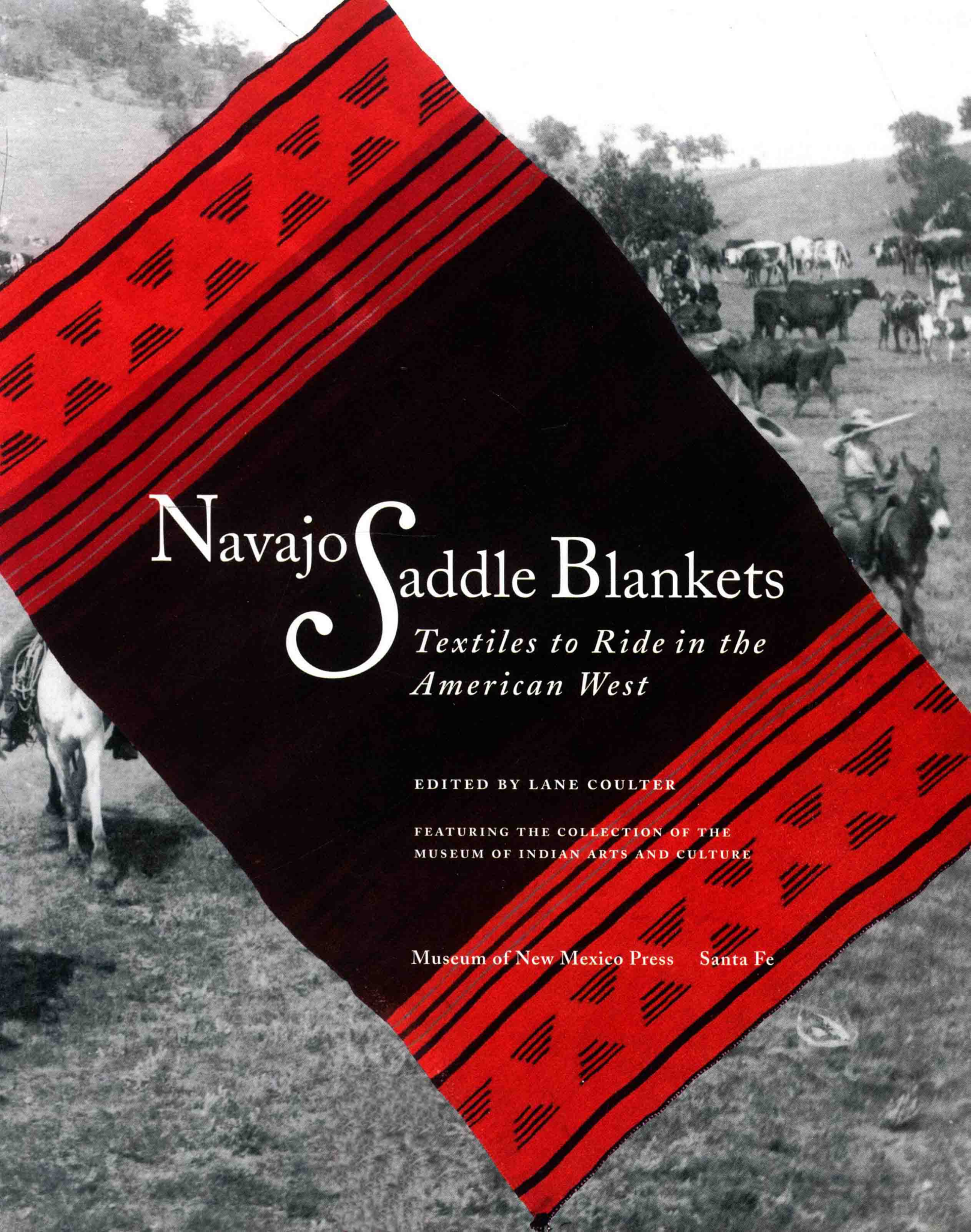
A photograph of a Navajo saddle blanket, which is a large, rectangular piece of woven wool with a pattern of horizontal stripes in white, cream, and brown. The blanket is draped over a dark brown leather saddle. The saddle has a high, rounded cantle and is decorated with rows of brass conchos along its edges. Two leather stirrups are attached to the saddle. The entire scene is set against a dark background, framed by a wide red border at the top and bottom.

# Navajo Saddle Blankets

TEXTILES TO RIDE IN THE AMERICAN WEST

EDITED BY LANE COULTER





# Navajo Saddle Blankets

*Textiles to Ride in the  
American West*

EDITED BY LANE COULTER

FEATURING THE COLLECTION OF THE  
MUSEUM OF INDIAN ARTS AND CULTURE

Museum of New Mexico Press    Santa Fe



Frontis: "Cowboys Going to Dinner," a staged photograph showing hands working a herd in Mora Valley, New Mexico, ca. 1897. MNM 5324.

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# Contents

## Foreword

*Duane Anderson* 7

## Preface

*Pearl Sunrise* 9

## Acknowledgments 13

## Introduction

*Lane Coulter* 15

### 1. First Contact

*Bruce Shackleford* 25

### 2. Early Navajo Weaving: 1650-1868 and Beyond

*Lane Coulter* 31

### 3. Looking Backward, Looking Forward: The Transitional Fulcrum, 1868-1910

*Susan Brown McGreevy* 41

### 4. Twentieth-Century Saddle Blankets

*Marian E. Rodee* 63

### 5. Saddle Blanket Analysis

*Casey Reed* 93

### 6. The Cowboy Market for Navajo Saddle Blankets

*B. Byron Price* 103

### 7. Weaving Processes and Techniques

*Joyce Begay-Foss* 119

## Epilogue

*Lane Coulter* 136

## Index 137

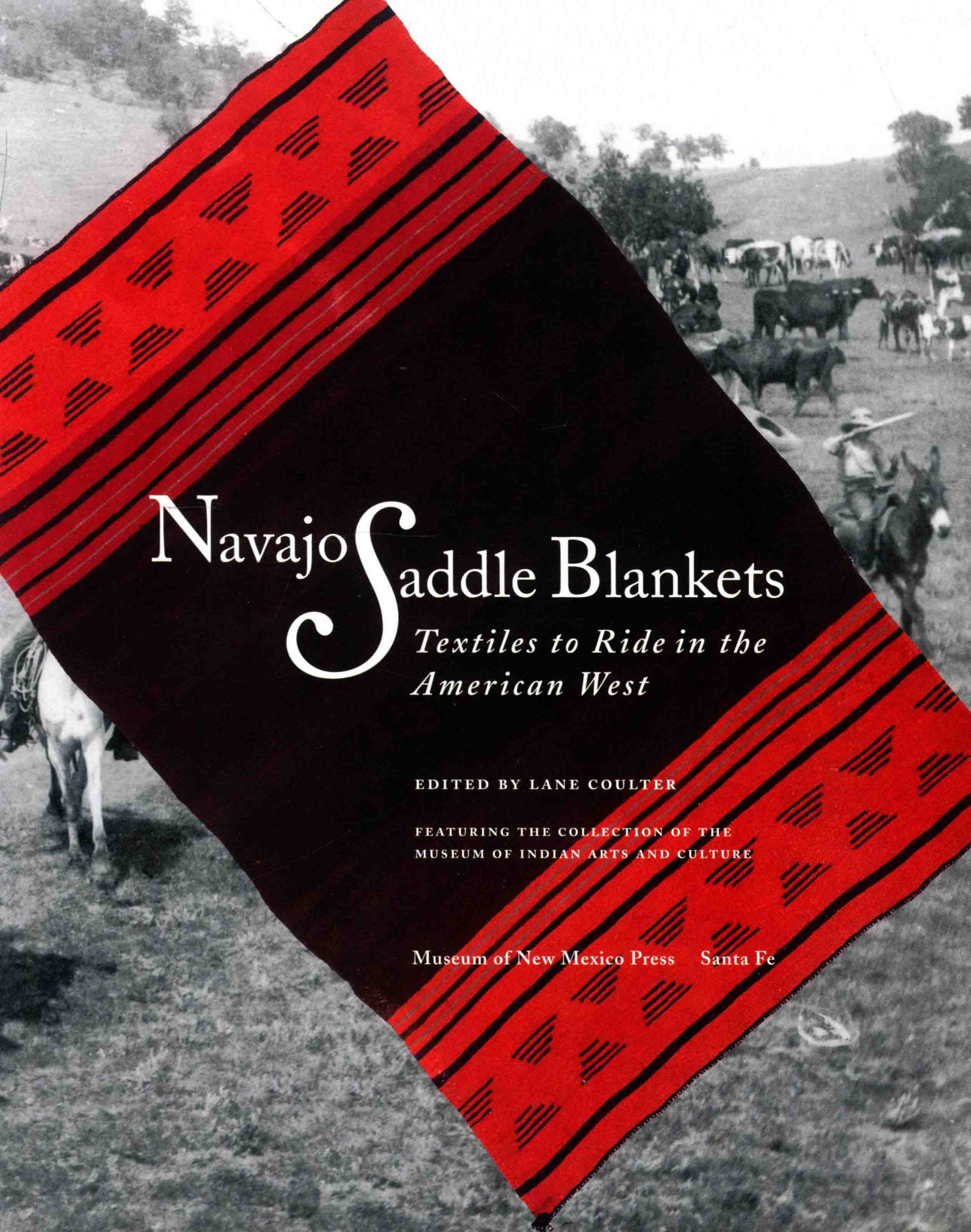
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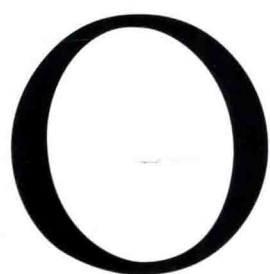
## Index 137



Figure 1. Santiago Moquino bedroom, 1941. Santa Domingo Pueblo interior showing Navajo saddle blankets. Photograph by John S. Candelario, courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Museum of New Mexico.



## Foreword



BJECTS PRODUCED by Native artists in the American Southwest tend to fall along a continuum from the most spectacular and most celebrated art forms to the more mundane utilitarian or household items that are often overlooked or taken for granted.

In pottery, for example, elegant polychrome bowls and jars and polished red and black wares win prizes and receive the most attention from collectors, art historians, and museum personnel. Historically, this has meant the near total exclusion of utility wares; indeed, cooking pots have been all but neglected by researchers for many years. Western observers and scholars have failed to recognize that utility wares have their own aesthetic, which must be understood and factored into an overall appreciation of a group's ceramic industry.

The same is true of Navajo weaving. There are over two dozen books currently in print dealing with such topics as Classic-period wearing blankets, the transition from blankets to rugs, and the various styles of rugs that emanated from different trading posts across Navajoland. There are also books about

particular weavers and weaving styles, and the Navajo worldview as reflected in their textiles.

Saddle blankets are mentioned in the literature but usually in passing. Often, dealers and collectors refer to the better-woven early blankets as children's wearing blankets. This makes them sound more important and consequently makes them more valuable. In the past, the use of the term *saddle blanket* almost always meant that a given textile was less expensive and not so well made as a counterpart woven as a wearing blanket or, in later times, a rug.

Saddle blankets have generally been seen by both maker and user as utilitarian objects to be worn out and discarded. As a result, we do not adequately appreciate them as an art form in the overall context of the Navajo weaving tradition. By the same token, we tend to ignore designs and weaving techniques that are particular to saddle blankets. This is where the double weaves, the two-faced, the twills, and the tufted angoras come into their own.

Saddle blanket origins pertain to Spanish history and the use of sheepskin saddle pads on donkeys. Navajo weaving has its origin in Pueblo textiles, and

its transition to saddle blankets occurred with the availability of Spanish-introduced horses. Soon, saddle blankets spread across the Southwest and into surrounding regions, where they were used by Natives, cavalry, and settlers alike.

While the great majority were woven by Navajo weavers, it is important to point out that weavers from the Pueblos, particularly from Hopi and Zuni, also wove saddle blankets. It is difficult to identify Pueblo-woven saddle blankets in historic collections even when the collection history is known. Some of the blankets that we identify as Navajo may be Pueblo examples.

Markets changed with the advent of new technologies such as the railroad and then the automobile. While the market for saddle blankets among the Native population began to shrink, demands from the cowboy and rodeo culture began to expand it. Today, the arts are still being practiced, and beautiful Sunday saddles, herringbone twills, and other fine examples are being produced, but the number of skilled weavers is dwindling, and markets are depressed because Navajos cannot compete with the high volume and low price of Zapotec textiles from Oaxaca, Mexico. One group of Navajos from the Keams Canyon area of Arizona is plowing new ground by making saddle blankets with felting techniques that are much faster than traditional weaving methods.

The inspiration for this book was a request from

the Museum of New Mexico Traveling Exhibits Department to create a traveling exhibition on Navajo saddle blankets, with Lane Coulter serving as curator. It provided a perfect opportunity to organize a group of experts under the research associates program at the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture/Laboratory of Anthropology to prepare a book on the many facets of saddle blankets. Our intention was to create a book that would serve not only as a catalog of blankets in the museum's collection to accompany the exhibition but also as a general, freestanding volume—the first and only one specifically dedicated to saddle blankets.

It is my intention that the book will be broadly circulated and widely read and that it will prompt readers to look anew at one of the most underappreciated art forms in the American Southwest. I hope it will inspire Navajo weavers to keep the old traditions alive even as they explore new designs, materials, and techniques. I also hope it will inspire collectors to reflect on their holdings and acquire worthy examples from various time periods and will encourage researchers to explore other nooks and crannies in the Native arts that need to be further explicated and explained.

DUANE ANDERSON, *Director*  
*Museum of Indian Arts and Culture /*  
*Laboratory of Anthropology*



## Preface

By Pearl Sunrise

**E**VER SINCE I CAN REMEMBER, I have been surrounded by the interlacing and intertwining of fibers. My mother tells me I was only six months old when I began watching her weave from my cradleboard. She tightly bound me in the cradleboard and stood me against an inside wall or outside under the piñon tree, where she always wove during the summer season, so I could be near her as she worked. When she realized my deep spiritual interests, she began to reminiscence that during the time she carried me in her womb, she frequently wove. My mother and grandmother also said that their mother clan To'aheedlini (streams flowing together) had created skillful weavers in the past. When I was able to grasp with my tiny hand the small weaving tools my father created, I began to experiment with mother's looms.

My parents and siblings were usually out watering livestock when I would sneak around and explore mother's enormous looms. Whatever I attempted by myself, I would unweave before Shima and Shi'zhe'e (mother and daughter) returned home. When I was eight years old, I realized the beautiful process of

weaving fibers. I was thrilled and overwhelmed when I realized I could turn plain weaving into mother's beautiful, intricate, and sometimes twill designs. These were too difficult to unweave before my parents came back, so my brothers helped me cover the enormous looms and hide my work, but not for long. After my mother discovered I had been weaving or playing on her loom, to my surprise I overheard my parents say that I should have a loom of my own. My father happily created a small loom and tools especially for me, and he said, "Now you can imitate your mother, and *nizhonigo anileeh, shiyaazhi* (make it beautiful, my little one)." As I explored and experimented with my weaving, my parents and grandparents told stories of how in the beginning of the Diné world, a mystical, spiritual being named Grandmother Spider Woman instructed our first mother, Changing Woman, in the processes of weaving and that it was Changing Woman's responsibility to instruct her female descendants as they journeyed through life.

My mother always said that to be born into a family of weavers was a true wealthy inheritance. A

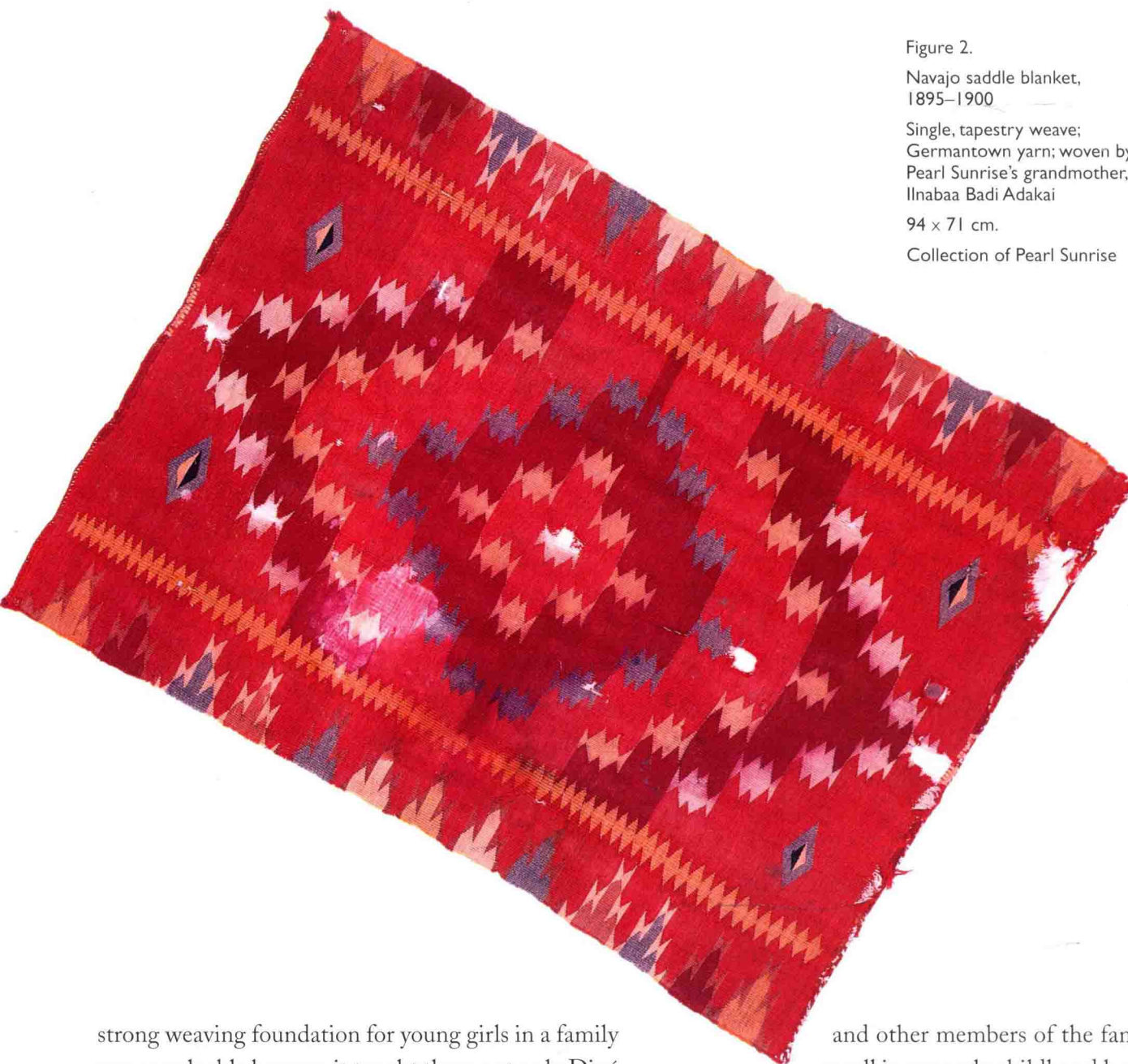


Figure 2.

Navajo saddle blanket,  
1895–1900

Single, tapestry weave;  
Germantown yarn; woven by  
Pearl Sunrise's grandmother,  
Il nabaa Badi Adakai

94 × 71 cm.

Collection of Pearl Sunrise

strong weaving foundation for young girls in a family was so valuable because it taught them not only Diné traditional values but also creativity, ingenuity, and life skills. And the absorption of these life skills was up to the young girl as my parents and grandparents uttered, “*T’aa whe ajit’eo e’eehya*,” during the trials of learning about weaving.

My mother delighted in creating designs and patterns from the middle and latter part of the eighteenth century, the so-called eye-dazzler and zigzag designs, using her own colors. For some of these, she incorporated my grandmother Il nabaa’s eye-dazzler designs into saddle blankets. She had learned her weaving skills and designs by watching her mother

and other members of the family. I recall in my early childhood how my mother created saddle blankets, rugs, and wearing apparel, not only for the family and extended family members but also for neighboring tribes such as the Zunis, Apaches, and Utes; she traded these pieces for food, jewelry, agricultural products, and/or animal hides. My mother’s paternal relatives, the Adakais, were excellent horsemen and trainers, so the first priority was to keep them supplied with the necessary blankets.

My mother, grandmother, older sister, and I all created many saddle blankets with simple twills and complex patterns over a period of more than one





Figure 3.

Navajo saddle blanket,  
ca. 1910

Single, twill weave; hand-  
spun wool yarn; weaver:  
Inabaa Badi Adakai

72.5 × 56 cm.

Collection of Pearl  
Sunrise

hundred years. At times we helped each other in counting the warps, which created various patterns.

Today, I weave various regional-style patterns in plain weaves, diamond-twill, and two-faced weaves; for example, the saddle blankets are sometimes in plain weave but most often in diamond-twill weaves. Recently, I was approached to weave three hundred saddle blankets within a limited time frame for a company that requested they all be the same design and size—in other words, mass production. I refused the project first of all because it spelled too much monotony. There was no room for creativity. The spiritual connection would be absent in mass production, and I would be like a machine. The ultimate reason I refused to do it, however, was the monetary

compensation offered, which was insulting, to say the least. My clients appreciate my creative endeavors, so I produce textile projects on that basis.

I'm proud to be a link in the great tradition I'm passing on to my daughters and all those to whom I teach weaving skills today. When my mother passed on a few years ago, I was fortunate to be given all the weaving tools and equipment that came from her grandmothers. I'm happy all three of my daughters are learning to weave from me, as my mother constantly reminded me that I was the sole transmitter of the spirit of weaving. When the time comes, I may have to divide my weaving tools for transmission, but I will definitely pass them on.





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