

Fashion

TRIBAL TEXTURES

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## INTRODUCTION

"Tribal Textiles" the subject I choose to discuss for my thesis is a broad and varied subject both from the craftsmanship, cultural and geographical aspect.

My research findings developed around the work of the Navaho Indian, a tribe numbering 80,000 in the South West of the United States.

On reading an article by Sabrina and Roland Michaud, both French writers and photographers, who spent six months among some 400,000 Turkoman tribe in Afghanistan learning their language and living the life of the Turkoman tribe, one sees and reads that their journey was worthwhile.

When speaking on the subject of Navaho weaving, this would be my idea of research - to travel to the reservation and experience the life of the Navaho tribe and study the weaving techniques and natural dyes used by the Navaho weaver, but as this is not presently possible, I will have to put my trust in the books published on this subject.



### Background of the Indians

Navaho weaving was under way by 1700 following the introduction of sheep by the Spaniards.

It is clear that the Navaho learned to weave from the Pueblo. The Pueblo Indians were weavers of cotton. They used the "belt loom" for narrow fabrics, but they also had a wide vertical loom for larger garments which was later adopted by the Navaho. After 1600 when the Spanish became permanent settlers of the Rio Grande Valley, sheep wool became as important as the meat as the Pueblos began to spin and weave wool as they previously had woven cotton.

This introduction of wool as a new material led to further development and exploration of weaving. Although the Pueblo weavers were mostly men the art of weaving was taken over by the Navaho women, they also took over the vertical loom and according to the Spanish documents it is clear that during the early 1700 the Navaho were weaving and wearing garments of the Pueblo fashion. By 1800 the Navaho were masters of their craft. Their loom work was superior to any other in the South West.

One could suggest that the Navahos were a nomadic tribe of borrowers and hunters on reading some of the historical accounts given, well yes, it is true, they were inspired by their neighbouring Pueblo but they later developed individual styles of their own which permits one to identify Navaho rugs and blankets readily.



The Navaho was also as dynamic and adoptable as he was a stealer of ideas, and when the settlements of America put out the raiders way of life the Navaho had little trouble turning to a new way of life that of a pastoral nomad. For the Navaho the production of textiles meant the production of a commodity that could be traded or sold.

The earliest pieces of Navaho weaving which can be definitely dated and that are still in existence today come to us from Massack Cave in Conon del Muerto Arisjche.

#### The Chief Blanket

The Chief Blanket, I find a most interesting piece of Navaho weaving and is worthy of a special note. The Chief Blanket was woven by the Navaho for trade or sale to other Indians throughout their trading area. These blankets were not worn by the Navaho chiefs but by chiefs of other tribes as they were the only ones who could afford such luxuries. These fine blankets expertly woven and relatively costly were prestige symbols for Indians and non-Indians, so commercial trading was well on its way and no doubt their popularity had a great deal to do with the development and growing recognition of Navaho weaving and we have still in existence the highly organised commercial trading post on the reservation today.



The first Chief Blanket featured a simple plain black and white stripe design. Later the Chief Blanket styles featured corner and centre designs as well as the broad stripes. Another point worth mentioning is that the woman's weaving blanket differed from the man's in that it had a narrow grey and black stripes instead of the broad black and white bands usually the top and bottom and centre bands were striped with indigo and had rectangles of bayetta in these stripes.

The Chief's Blanket was the beginning and for years later part of the Classic period. In this period the Navaho used natural vegetable dyes mostly obtained from desert plants in Arizona, but they failed to produce bright red dye with a native material, but they were inspired by the opportunities which bayetta offered. Bayetta, a wool cloth was originally made in Manchester, and shipped to Mexico via Spain, then moved north over old trade routes into what is now New Mexico and Arizona. The cloth came in bolts and it was easy to unravel the threads and spin them into yarn usually three-ply and weave them into their blankets.

#### The Captivity of the Navaho

In 1863 the Navaho were captured and sent to Fort Summer, New Mexico. After five years the U.S. Government acknowledged the failure of this attempt to confine and remake the Navaho, these years brought about many changes into the life of the Navaho. The discovery of aniline dyes and the evenly twisted yarns which machinery was producing was to have a tremendous effect on the craft of weaving. These were new tools in the hands of the Navaho and later led to the decline in quality and design of Navaho weaving.



Also following the civil war Americans were pouring into the south west bringing strong ideas regarding the patterns they liked in woven articles. At this time traders were licensed by the Government to live on the reservations and barter with the Indians. It was at this stage the Navaho saw the opportunity for commercialization which also led to a sharp decline in Navaho weaving.

Yes it was with this inflow of commercial traffic which led to the immediate decline in the craft of weaving; but remember also due to this demand helped to keep this craft alive; remember that up to this all Navaho weaving centered exclusively around the making of blankets to wear.

It now became a trend with the American buyer to toss their Navaho blanket on the floor and use them for rugs, Navaho weaving might indeed have become extinct had it not been for this saving factor. The trader immediately caught on quickly so they insisted that the Navaho weaving style change to a more attractive sales item such as rugs. This led to a development of a heavier type of weaving with borders instead of striped and a more durable rug.

With the discovery of machine tools replacing the hand craftsmen, Navaho rugs are now becoming an investment.



### Preparations for making a rug

As a weaver myself I would like to capture briefly on the preliminary preparations which are necessary before a weaver may start to make a rug as the casual visitor sometimes fails to appreciate the labour which is involved in both preparing the wool and then weaving it.

The raising and caring for the sheep, as different breeds of sheep give different quality wool. I believe this deep understanding of material "Wool", using the simplest of tools, and the knowledge of the potentialities and limitations of their materials the Navaho became masters of their craft.

After the sheep is shorn the wool must be thoroughly washed before it is in condition to be carded and spun into yarn by means of a simple wooden spindle. The familiar spinning wheel was never used for semi-nomadic Indians like the Navaho. They had to travel light as spinning was sometimes done while minding the sheep. The yarn must be spun several times. When the yarn is prepared it must be carded and spun in the native colours or dyed in desired shades. The soft colours are derived from the vegetable sources e.g. plant roots and shrubs in the desert. The work of gathering the dye stuffs and making the dyes and dyeing the yarns is a slow and tedious. It can be done only as seasonal conditions allow. Commercial dyes are usually employed for the brighter colours.



Then the loom must be set up. It is important that the warp be of a uniform length and spaced carefully if the blanket is to be regular in shape when completed.

The weaver has no pattern to guide her only the one she conceives in her mind. She begins strand by strand to work her design and each day adds but a few inches of woven fabric. Weavers dwelling in localities subject to more than one influence may display their preference for a certain style. Due to the white man's insistence on certain pattern for the commercial market there is little symbolism in Navaho design today. There are a few motifs which have true symbolism in Navaho culture - geometric and realistic the bow and arrow, "thunder bird" corn feathers when used in proper context. Absolute perfection will not be found in a Navaho rug, as there is a taboo against making anything perfect. Sometimes a line of colour will be found broken or a small bit of colour will appear in a place where it seems not to belong to the design. I must say I found it difficult to discover this flaw in the rug I handled.

Navaho rugs are not only famous for their beauty but also for their durability. It is the hand spun yarn that gives these rugs their strength, 100% pure new wool. It is not uncommon for a rug to last 30 - 40 years.

A three-foot by five-foot rug of average quality requires about 350 hours work. The time naturally increases with the fineness of the yarn and complexity of pattern. The preparation of natural dyes also adds hours to a rug.



When a young girl learns to weave, she must first get straight selvages before she weaves patterns. These are examined by the master weaver and if found unsatisfactory are immediately cut and removed and she must start all over again. A sad thought when one considers the time involved in the actual preparation, spinning and weaving.

Navaho weaving districts cover a wide area. I have selected a few districts which rouse my interest either in the technique or colour of design used.

#### Wide Ruin

This is the main vegetable dye area. It is the site of a natural spring and an ancient Indian ruin on an old trail which led between the Hopi and Zuni Pueblos tribe.

From this area some of the best examples of vegetable dye techniques are in use, for example yellow from Rabbit brush, black from sumac pinon pitch and ochre reds from the root of mountain mahogany. Cliff rose which gives wool a golden hue. These are only a few of the many pastel shades which have been discovered. Certain emphasis was placed on the old striped patterns and to the elimination of rugs with borders which is a noted characteristic of Navaho weaving.

Well cleaned, carded and finely spun yarns rather than course or machine-produced and the use of vegetable dyes rather than aniline colours and good design was fostered. Slowly this desired improvement became evident and the soft pastel shades of green, grey and yellow and simple motifs were achieved.



### Teec Nos Pos

The most complex design and the least Navaho. It appears to me to be more oriental in design. I personally find it somewhat over-powering with its complexity of design and abundance and variety of colour. The main theme is usually a serrated zig zag. The rug features an outline design, every back diamond stripe square or slash is outlined in one or more different colours and the design areas are filled with colour.

I quote Mrs. Maxwell on her account for this source of inspiration of the Teec Nos Pos rug: "My guess is a forgotten but resourceful trader showed his best Navaho weaver sketches of the type of rug design then (early 1900) in vogue with Eastern U.S. homemakers these designs could have come from sketches of rugs originating in Northern Persia".

An interesting feature of this rug was the weavers name woven into the centre.

### Two Grey Hills

Is the finest rug that has come from the loom of the Navaho. The improvement and upgrading of weaving in this region may be credited to Edward Devew and George Bloomfield, operators of the trading post who insisted on good results. They furthered the use of handspun wool in natural black, white and brown and their combinations into grey and tan shades. They excluded aniline dyes and the use of Germantown yarns.



A standard size rug 48" x 12" was established with an outside black border two inches wide. Later they introduced the "spirit" trail or line such as often appeared in Southwestern pottery and basketry, with the thought of allowing for the escape of any malevolent spirit that some figure might possess.

Rarely are other than natural colours used. If they do occur the quantity is small. The yarn is evenly and finely spun and firmly woven.

The design starts with a black border and often borders within borders. The compositions are effectively worked out. Design patterns are varied, but they are characterised by geometric compositions made up of many small elements, the arrangement of the design units is balanced and symmetrical. There is usually a large central motif with little space left unfilled about it, decorative units include the rhombus with toothed edges, frequently employing small triangles, diagonal bands formed by serrations which are "outlined" comb patterns modified stars, swastikas, interlocking stepped or recurved frets and diamonds.

An outstanding weaver is Daisey Taugelchee. Her handspun weft threads are so fine that they rarely count less than 90 to an inch, and her superior productions count 110 threads to an inch. They are as soft as cashmere. The two Grey Hills rugs are the most expensive of all Navaho weaving. Even the small pieces which are now woven along with larger sizes carry high prices.



The cost of a two Grey Hill rug is commonly greater than that of a Persian rug. Of all the Navaho rugs its the one I most enjoy for its simplicity of design and softness of colour.

#### Sandpainting Rugs

The first is said to have been woven in 1919 by a Navaho medicine man who made use of the whirling logs pattern of the Yeibichei or night chant. It is only when a faithful depiction of a complete sand painting is rendered that such a rug can be considered a copy of sandpainting. The Navaho people do not like such rugs as they believe weaving of this nature to be a 'mis-use of power' and therefore danderous. It is interesting to note that the majority of "sandpainting" rugs are actually curiously made for the non-Indian trade and they have no cultural significance in Navaho life.



### Conclusion

The nomadic way of life of the Navaho is disappearing and with it is going the traditional style of rug, but thanks to George Bloomfield and others who are interested in the work of the Navaho and are doing what they can to preserve the techniques and designs.

I believe as long as the Navaho produce finely woven and attractively designed rugs and blankets in well chosen colours they will have a ready market.







Contemporary Wide Ruin vegetable dye rug woven by Lottie Thompson. An interesting piece because it contains certain characteristic techniques and designs found in old Navaho blankets. The black and white vertically 'stripped' lines are made by alternating white and black weft picks. The 'twisted' stripes of white and gray and pink and gray, which simulate twill, are found in many old blankets, sometimes actually being worked in twill technique. The comb-like edges of white and brown diamond figures appear first in blankets woven around 1890. The design probably originated with pictorial blankets which contained representations of the wooden comb used by weavers to force wefts down between warps. SIZE 50 by 82 inches. THREAD COUNT. 44 wefts; 8 warps per inch. MATERIALS. All handspun. Gray - natural black and white carded together; other colours - vegetable dyes.





A contemporary Tees nos pas rug combining a complex geometric design of Two Gray Hills type with the use of bright colours and the idea of outlining characteristic of the 1890's.

SIZE. 54 by 103 inches. THREAD COUNT. 26-30 wefts; 9 warps per inch. MATERIALS. All handspun wool except for bright green wefts, which are 4-ply commercial yarn. Aniline dyes.





Technically superior in quality, a contemporary Two Gray Hills rug woven by Anna Nez. Size 48 by 68 inches. THREAD COUNT. 52 wefts; 17 warps per inch. MATERIALS. All handspun wool. Black and brown darkened by dye, probably aniline. Gray-black carded with white; beige-brown carded with white.





Somewhat less complex in design than contemporary examples, a handspun Two Gray Hills rug probably woven around 1930. The eight-pointed star may be derived from a type of New Mexican blanket called a "Vallero" and woven around 1890 in certain valleys of northern New Mexico (Mera, 1949.)  
DATE. Circa 1930. SIZE. 55 by 83½ inches.  
THREAD COUNT. 38 wefts; 9 warps per inch.  
MATERIALS. All handspun, natural colour wools. Light tan background may be aniline dyed.



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