



## Navajo Textiles: 1840 - 1910

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Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art

## Navajo Weaving

By the time the Spanish explorers discovered the American Southwest in 1540, the Pueblo Indians had been weavers of cloth for well over a thousand years. The Navajo Indians, who had arrived only a hundred years or so before the Spanish, were not yet weavers, but before the advent of the 18th century, they too were destined to become renowned for the productivity of their looms. The Spanish, who brought their own tradition of weaving to the Southwest in 1598, forever altered the course of Pueblo weaving and were instrumental in shaping the development of that of the Navajo. Through time, Pueblo, Spanish and Navajo each influenced the other in materials and dyes, in techniques and in design; and all achieved the summit of their art during the 19th century.

The earliest weaving of the Pueblo was done with the fingers alone, but by A.D. 800 they had developed a true loom upon which they wove a wide variety of cloths from cotton. When



*Serape Style Poncho*, circa 1840, 79" x 52", hand-spun native wool; the white is natural, the blue is dyed with indigo, the green is a vegetable dye, the red is Bayeta.

the Spanish settled in the Rio Grande Valley in 1598, they brought with them the long, silky-fleeced churro sheep, native to southern Spain, to provide food and wool for weaving on their own version of the European treadle loom. It was not long before yarns spun from Spanish sheep's wool were woven into Pueblo cloth on their wide, vertical loom and dyed blue with indigo dye, which the Spanish also introduced.

Pueblo weaving was forever changed. Brazilwood, logwood and cochineal dyes came later, but threads raveled from fine English and Spanish commercial cloth provided rich, cochineal-dyed crimson yarns that the Pueblos used to decorate their cloth in weave, embroidery and brocade. No more beautiful cloths have ever been cut from Southwestern looms than the Pueblo-embroidered manta-dresses or shawls of the mid-19th century.

The coming of the Spanish had another effect on Southwestern weaving. Many Pueblo Indians, fearful of repression by the Spaniards, fled to the Navajo homeland in the mountainous area north and west of Santa Fe and, through the 1600s, were incorporated into the burgeoning Navajo tribe.

When the Navajo first appeared in history, they were hunters, farmers and raiders, not weavers of cloth. But sometime, probably about the middle of the 17th century, the Navajos learned to weave from the Pueblos, and by the beginning of the 18th century, the Navajo had adopted the Pueblo loom and were weaving enough cloth and garments for their own use and trading their surplus to Spanish and Pueblos alike.

Among the Pueblos, except possibly Zuni, the weavers were men, but, among the Navajo, women became the weavers. The Pueblo weaver passed the weft completely from edge to edge, leaving the cloth



*Moki Serape*, 1860-1870, 71" x 51", hand-spun native wool; the blue is dyed with indigo, the black is of undetermined dye, the red is Bayeta.

with an unbroken surface, but the Navajo woman knelt in front of her loom and wove her cloth in segments, leaving diagonal joints called "lazy lines" in the web. Where the Pueblos used three cords of two-ply each for their selvages, the Navajo began to use two cords of three plies, and where the Pueblos tended to tie off the corners loosely, if at all, the Navajo came to tie the corners tightly and sew on an extra tassel to protect the corner. More and more, probably influenced by Spanish weaving, the Navajo wove in tapestry technique, in which the warps were hidden by the weft. It was the tapestry weave that made possible the development and efflorescence of Navajo pattern and design, for they seemingly never adopted the brocade weave or the embroidery that the Pueblo used for their most effective decoration.

Stripes were the most common form of decoration in early Southwestern weaving – Pueblo, Spanish and Navajo alike. Stripes might be narrow or wide, simple or compound, evenly spaced over the

fabric or clustered into zones, but they formed a simple and pleasing decoration. Early colors were largely confined to the natural creamy white and golden to dark brown of the churro sheep's wool, enriched by the various shades of blue derived from indigo. Later, native vegetal yellows, green and black were added, and reds from raveled cloth or commercial yarns widened the color palette. About 1870, lavender, red and orange aniline dyes were introduced. Complex stripes containing various figures were added to make more elaborate patterns, but stripes have never been completely replaced.

The Navajo wove many fabrics in the Pueblo wider-than-long tradition. Paramount among these were the striped shoulder blankets or "chief's blankets." During the 18th century, these were decorated only with alternating brown-black and white stripes of various widths. By 1800, the style known as the First Phase Chief Blanket had made its appearance. The brown end stripes had been widened and were embellished by a pair of dark blue stripes, while the black center was made much wider and had two pairs of blue stripes. In between ends and center, the man's blanket had wide alternating stripes of black and white, while the smaller woman's blanket had narrower stripes of black and gray. Somewhat later, the blue stripes were occasionally bordered by very narrow red stripes. By mid-century, small red rectangles had been introduced into the ends and centers of each of the blue stripes to produce the so-called Second Phase Chief Blanket. Ten years later, the Navajo began to use terraced triangles in place of the red rectangles, and by 1865 the classic Third Phase Chief Blanket had emerged. These were marked by a central terraced diamond of red, which expanded into the field of black and white stripes, as did half



*Chief Pattern Blanket, Second Phase, 1865-1875, 57" x 76", hand-spun native wool; the red is aniline dyed, the white and brown are undyed, the blue is indigo dyed.*

diamonds in the center of each side and end and quarter diamonds in each corner. The beauty of the Chief Blankets lies in the subtle and harmonious relation of the simple figures and the simple but dignified use of color. They were made to be worn, and the fineness of weave caused them to drape around the human form and move as the figure moved. In this they achieved their elegance.

It was on the serape, woven in the Spanish longer-than-wide tradition, that the Navajos lavished their creative genius. Stripes were always a part of the serape decorative scheme. One striped pattern that consists of panels of narrow alternating brown and blue stripes separated by wider bands of white came to be known as the "Moki" pattern. The soft, glowing quality of the indigo blue contrasted with the silky natural brown wool to produce a fabric of subdued richness and simple beauty.

Sometime about the middle of the 18th century, the Navajo began to break away from stripes for their serapes. According to the Spanish, by 1778 they "made the best and finest

serapes that are known," and by 1880 they had fully developed the style that marked the Classic period of weaving. The terraced, or stepped-edge triangle, is the hallmark of Classic design, a style that appears to have been adapted from the designs on their basketry. Regardless of how complex a Classic blanket design may seem, it is always composed of rows or stripes of terraced triangles arranged in various ways, solid or hollow, emphasized by a rich contrast of colors. A row of triangles arranged base-to-base forms series of diamonds; arranged point-to-point, they result in rows of negative diamonds. Offset and opposed, the triangles create a negative zigzag stripe. Sometimes, hollow diamonds in white against a crimson ground are expanded into a diamond net with or without smaller diamonds inside. Occasionally, the ground consists of fine stripes instead of solid color. Usually, the designs are arranged in a three-panel layout with large, bold figures in the center and smaller, more ordered, complex stripes across the ends. Large terraced triangles were often superimposed over the corners

of the blanket and frequently in the center of the ends as well. Most Classic serapes were woven in crimson from raveled cloth, indigo blue and white, with rarely a touch of black or native yellow or green. A few of these superb Classic blankets were woven as ponchos, with a slit left in the center for the head. No weaving in the Southwest has ever surpassed these fine serapes.

The 1860s marked a turning point in Navajo weaving when the Navajos were defeated by the American army and interned at Bosque Redondo on the Pecos River in eastern New Mexico. Here they were subjected to a variety of influences they had not experienced before. New aniline-dyed "bayeta" was introduced, as was aniline-dyed, three-ply "early Germantown" yarn. These new materials, combined with their handspun wool yarns, mark the blankets of the 1870s.

At Bosque Redondo, the Navajo also came into contact with the serrate diamond design system that the Spanish weavers of the Rio Grande Valley had adopted from the Saltillo weavers of Mexico. These serapes usually had a large, serrate, concentric diamond motif in the center, complex borders and a vertically oriented layout. At first, the Navajo continued to use a



*Transitional Style Rug*, 1895-1905, 83" x 79", four-ply Germantown yarn; the red and black are synthetic dyed.



*Rug*, 1885-1895, 138½" x 139", four-ply Germantown yarn.

side-to-side layout, but the stepped or terraced zigzags and figures increasingly gave way to serrate zigzags and figures. Borders, which had always been rare in Navajo textiles, began to enclose central dominant serrate diamond motifs. Vertical layouts increased. The new aniline-dyed commercial yarns added many previously unknown colors.

By 1875 the wedge weave was invented, and in many ways its large, serrate figures mark an apex of the serrate design style. Vertical zigzags, or bands of horizontal zigzags or diamonds, make it a highly distinctive textile.

From 1870 on, an increasing portion of Navajo weaving was done not for themselves, but for others – the military, the new settlers and, finally, the tourists who began to visit the Southwest.

Navajo blankets began to be used as floor covering. The transition that began about 1870, from blanket to rug, was virtually complete by 1900. The old weaving tradition ended as the new tradition of colorful Navajo rugs began.

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(Essay excerpted from *Enduring Visions: 1,000 Years of Southwestern Indian Art*, courtesy Aspen Art Museum, Aspen, Colo.)

All illustrated works are from the collection of Tony Berlant, Santa Monica, Calif.

Cover: *Eye Dazzler*, 1880-1895, 75" x 51", four-ply Germantown yarn

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