

## Navajo Rugs: An Overview

Records of Navajo weaving go back as far as the 1700s. It is believed that the Navajo learned to weave from their Pueblo neighbors who preceded them in the Southwest. Pueblo men had been weaving with cotton on upright looms for centuries when they were invaded and subjugated by Spaniards. The Spanish brought large flocks of sheep with them and insisted that their Pueblo subjects begin weaving with wool.

When the Pueblos rose up against their Spanish oppressors in 1680 and drove them back into Mexico, the Navajos joined the fight. It was probably during this time of the mingling of Pueblo and Navajo cultures that the Navajo learned to weave. This mixing of peoples continued after the Spaniards returned in 1692 to re-conquer their former subjects. Many Pueblo people took shelter with the Navajos both before and after the rebellion. However, whereas Pueblo weaving had been a male occupation, it was Navajo women who were in charge of keeping the flocks of sheep the tribe had acquired. Weaving then became the province of Navajo women. Before long, these ladies had far surpassed their Pueblo teachers in quality and complexity of weaving design.

As was the case in Pueblo weaving, early Navajo pieces were intended primarily for wearing. The so-called "Chief's Blankets" (the Navajo have no chiefs) became a trade item popular with Plains tribes, whose leaders considered wearing one a status symbol. These were relatively simple banded textiles using primarily natural whites, browns and blacks. Indigo dye from Europe allowed the addition of deep blue colors and English baize (or bayeta) provided beautiful reds that Navajo weavers found appealing. (For more about the world's obsession with the color red, read "A Perfect

Red”, the fascinating story of cochineal.) Natural vegetal dyes from indigenous plants added yet more colors.

The Navajo tribe’s years of captivity at Bosque Redondo under the U.S. government (1864-68) were devastating for them. They had lost their possessions, including the flocks of sheep that had fed them and provided wool for weaving. Had they not been supplied with commercial yarns by their captors, which allowed them to continue weaving, the art might have died out.

Gradually, design elements from Mexican textiles such as the serrated diamonds common to Mexican serapes found their way into Navajo weaving. The arrival of trading posts in the 1870s and the railroad in the 1880s with its influx of tourists added more changes in designs. Trading post owners, aware of what Eastern visitors expected to see in an Indian rug – bright colors and “symbolic” design elements – began to encourage the weavers they dealt with to oblige the tourists. Easterners were used to Persian and other Oriental rugs. Traders showed pictures of these rugs to their weavers, and the weavers began to experiment with variations on these Oriental designs. (The Teec Nos Pos design is the most obvious example of this.) Commercial dyes and pre-dyed yarns became available which made it easy to create the bright colors non-Indian buyers seemed to want. By 1890, some weavers had gone a little crazy with color, producing textiles bordering on garish. Germantown (after a Pennsylvania textile center) and Eyedazzler weavings often exemplify this phase. Gradually, however, both the traders and the weavers began to realize that the art of Navajo weaving was going against its roots and that quality was declining. Traders Lorenzo Hubbell of Ganado and J.B. Moore of Crystal began to urge their weavers to return to vegetal dyes and to develop patterns unique to their particular area of the Reservation. The beautiful designs that resulted from this phase of Navajo weaving may have saved the art form.

Today, a weaver can travel easily not only within the Reservation, but also to fairs and festivals all over the country and all over the world. Consequently, a weaver at Two Grey Hills may produce a traditional Two Grey Hills one month while the next piece off her loom may be a Ganado! Weavers continue to experiment with patterns, often creating their own unique designs that defy traditional classifications. There is renewed interest in vegetal dyes and in the raising of Churro sheep. Churro wool has longer, silkier fibers than that of the Merino and Rambouillet sheep that were given to the Navajo after their incarceration at Bosque Redondo and produces a superior yarn. These days there are several very talented male weavers vying for attention with the textile-buying public. Innovation and creativity are alive and well in Navajo weaving!

What is your role in furthering the appreciation of Navajo weaving? Many people have no idea what a complex process Navajo weaving is. Before weaving even begins, the weaver must set up the loom, which is a multi-step process in itself. Then, if the weaver is one of those who shears her own sheep and cards, dyes and spins her own wool, these tasks require additional hours of work before she can start her rug. In addition, the weaver is not working from a set pattern. Her design is all in her imagination. She must remember where she went with her design elements to repeat them later in the piece. This is especially difficult in a large piece, when the bottom of the rug must be lowered to a point at which she can no longer see the pattern so that she can reach the area yet to be completed! A finished rug can take months to complete. Even a weaver using yarn that's already been spun has a long task ahead. Books & More has several good books that will help the customer appreciate the weaving process.

You'll be asked what to look for in buying a Navajo rug. While no piece of handmade art is perfect, there are some simple guidelines.

The edges should be straight and the rug of even width from top to bottom. The corners should not curl. Color and thickness of the piece should be uniform throughout. Warp threads should not be visible. When folded lengthwise or widthwise, the two sides of the piece should match well. Buyers should purchase the best quality rug they can afford. They should also, however, strongly consider their personal reaction to the piece. Do they find the design and the colors pleasing? Is this a piece they can “live with” for a long time? If so, and the rug fits their budget, minor flaws should not deter them.

A common misconception among novice buyers is that every rug MUST have a “spirit line” – a thin line woven into a corner of the rug out to the edge of the piece to allow “evil influences” to exit. Many weavers do not include this detail. Those who do view it more as an outlet for their creative energy, so that they may continue to produce beautiful weavings.

Hanging a Navajo rug need not be complicated. In almost all cases, a strip of Velcro tacked to the wall will do the trick. The Shop stocks Velcro to give to the customer with the purchase of a rug.

For further education on Navajo rugs, here are some suggested readings:

Guide to Navajo Rugs

Navajo Rugs: The Essential Guide

Navajo Weaving Way

Rugs and Posts

These and several other titles on Navajo weaving are all available at Books & More.