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# NAVAJO RUG DESIGNS TODAY

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If you look closely at the pattern in a modern Navajo rug, you can see the impact of indigenous Navajo traditions, of 300 years' evolution, and of myriad influences from outside the Navajo world. Designs tell many stories and, in the process, they relate what is important to the Navajo woman herself. Although few weavers work specific symbols or icons into their rugs (except those that are outright pictorial, that is), the significance of their weaving may still be interpreted on many levels. In a broad sense, rug patterns today indicate how the weaver responds to her native world and to the world beyond the reservation, how she balances the indigenous and external elements of her life.

In the following paragraphs, the discussion revolves around several current trends that can be seen in the patterns woven by modern weavers. There is no presumption at covering *all* of the trends that characterize today's weaving; rather, a sample is presented.

### *Moving Away from Regional Styles*

In the earlier part of this century, many rug designs were closely associated with the geographic areas in which they were woven. Particular styles developed around specific reservation trading centers and became known from those areas. Because weaving has usually been taught within the

family, and families often have lived in the same general area for long periods of time, certain patterns were maintained as "regional styles." Reservation traders like J.B. Moore at Ganado and J.L. Hubbell at Crystal promoted "their" weavers' designs and encouraged their further development. Two Grey Hills, Wide Ruins, Teec Nos Pos, Ganado and Crystal are just a few of the communities that lent their names to rug styles.

Today, with increased communication and transportation on the reservation, weavers are familiar with more than just their own area. They are exposed to many woven styles and design ideas. They are aware of buyers' preferences through contacts with trading posts and galleries, through travels to off-reservation towns, and through books and magazines. They are experimenting with designs that appeal to them personally and, very importantly, that might sell more readily to outside buyers.

One can still see rugs with identifiable regional styles — a subtly patterned Pine Springs, an intensely banded Crystal, a Two Grey Hills with carefully balanced motifs in black, white and grey, or a bold Teec Nos Pos with fancy outlining around each element. But, the point is that it is increasingly difficult to tell from the style alone where the piece was actually woven. A Two Grey Hills rug, particularly favored by some collectors, may be woven at Navajo Mountain, far from its namesake community. A Ganado Red tapestry might have been created by a Tuba City or a Shiprock weaver.

### *Setting a Scene*

Beyond geometrics, Navajo weaving can exhibit a wide range of pictorial imagery. Some of it is realistic and painterly; much is primitive *a la* Grandma Moses. And humor is not lacking, witness one rug that shows a family of skunks boldly marching down the road in a line; or another with the fluffy clouds of a tapestry sky cryptically woven into the shape of the weaver's initials.

Traditional camp life may be illustrated realistically or in a stylized manner. A religious ceremony depicted, complete with costumed and masked dancers and a flickering fire. Static rows of *yei*, the Navajo holy people, may be woven into a small rug, or into a large and elaborate piece.

Several weavers have experimented with making multiple patterns in one rug — sort of a sampler of different designs with a patchwork effect. One family specializes in making "rug-within-rug" patterns, usually showing two people holding out a Navajo rug against the landscape in which they stand.

### *Challenging the Mind and Hand*

Although many designs are created with the traditional tapestry weave (weft-faced plain weave with discontinuous wefts), the Navajos also use a variety of other weaving techniques. In many of these, a pattern is created through control of the loom, rather than by manually changing the colors of the tapestry yarns.

Sometimes known as the "saddle blanket weaves," twill weaves are employed in floor rugs as well as in saddle blankets. Requiring at least four heddle and shed rods to accomplish (tapestry weave needs only two), these take more



*Sadie Curtis, weaving a Chief blanket-style rug with design ideas drawn from the book on the floor*

technical expertise than "regular" weaves, but many women still know how to make them. Twill variations include diagonal, zigzag, herringbone, and diamond patterns. Often woven with three colors in sequence (black-grey-white, for instance, is common), weft-faced twill rugs are thick and durable as well as attractive.

Rugs woven with different designs on each side have been known since before the turn of the century, yet have always attracted special attention when they occur. The two-faced technique involves only four heddle and shed rods, like many twill weaves, and requires that a weaver interlace her yarns over-one, under-three for one face of the fabric, and over-three, under-one for the reverse face. The weaver simultaneously creates both faces of the rug, and may choose to do simple tapestry weave patterns on one or both faces.

The raised outline technique produces a visually distinct effect. It is woven with two yarns of different colors, alternating every other pass throughout the fabric. Where the weaver changes the pattern, two-span floats of these yarns (over two warps instead of over-one, under-one as in the rest of the fabric) are created, making a slightly raised border around the design. Earlier raised outline rugs have fairly simple designs. Recently weavers have experimented with more elaborate designs, incorporating *yei* figures and intricate geometric motifs.

Belt weaves with warp-float patterns are yet another technique employed by contemporary weavers. The traditional Navajo belt is woven of red, green and white yarns, but today belts of many different colors may be seen. Designs are created by manipulating individual warp threads by hand, allowing them to float over the ground fabric for a distance before incorporating them back into the weave.

#### *Pleasing the Eye*

Weavers are experimenting with a broader palette of colors than ever before. During the classic and late classic periods of the 19th century, natural white, grey and black, and indigo-dyed blue were punctuated simply with a variety of reds from raveled yarns and limited vegetal shades of yellow and green. As commercial yarns and package dyes were introduced, color sources became more varied. Today, many subtle pastel shades, some bold and bright colors, and a wide range of natural tones are available through a combination of home-dyeing and commercial buying.

Some Navajo women have begun to specialize in dyeing yarns for others to weave. Often they apply their own recipes to ready-spun yarn. Their ingredients may include plants, natural minerals, other chemicals, and packaged aniline dyes. Several traders on or near the reservation commission experienced dyers to produce such dyed yarns, and then supply them to accomplished weavers.

Some weavers continue to use brightly colored, synthetically dyed yarns for their rugs — *yei* and *yeibichai* patterns often call for small patches of intense turquoise and orange; Ganado rugs are known for their strong, deep reds; Tee Nos Pos and Red Mesa styles often combine a number of contrasting colors — blue, green, orange, yellow and red. The actual yarns may be spun by hand or on commercial machines, but in either case they might be home-dyed. Many yarns, of course, are commercially spun and dyed before the weaver buys them. It is also common for a weaver to *top-dye* a yarn that has been commercially colored; if the store-bought color is not what she wants, into the dye pot it goes to acquire a new, often more intense shade.

Only a few weavers have experimented with dyeing their wool before it is spun but their results are notable. Raw wool that is colored can be blended with other wool fibers in the carding process, and then spun into heathered or specially streaked yarns.

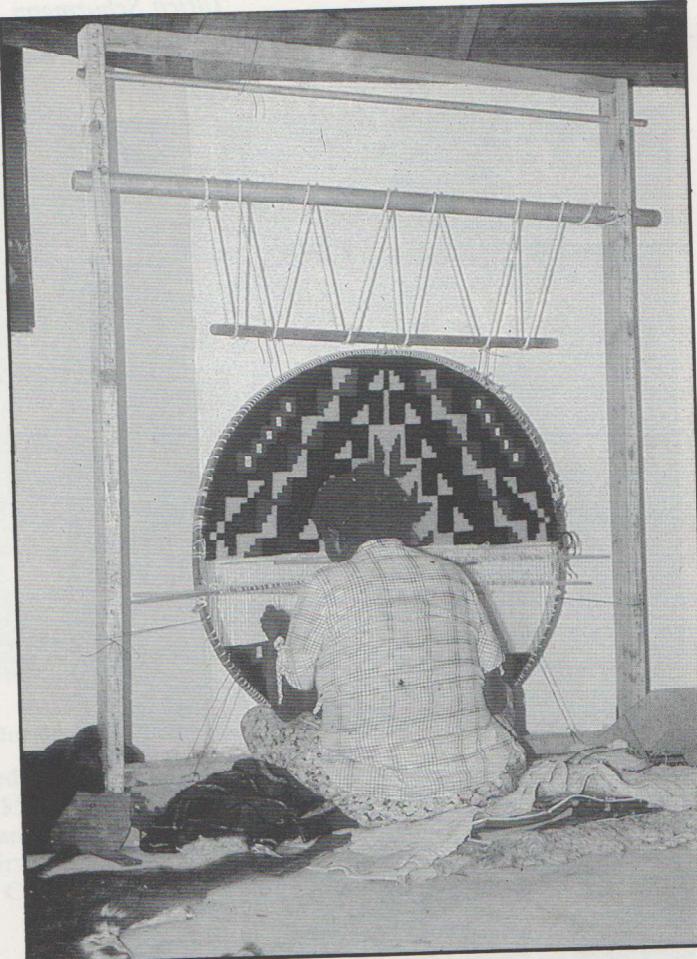
#### *Weaving from the Past*

Although most Navajo textiles are no longer made to be worn, it is not uncommon to see modern rugs with patterns that hark back to the Chief blankets, manta dresses and other woven garments of the 19th century. Traders at the turn of the century encouraged such a revival of old patterns, and today the intrigue with classic designs continues for both weavers and buyers.

Some weavers find older designs in books and exhibit catalogs. More and more weavers are consulting southwestern museum collections for inspiration. The early garment designs are rarely copied *verbatim*. In many cases the weaver adopts only portions of a design or adapts older motifs to fit her current ideas.

#### *...and for the Future*

The diversity of design sources used by Navajo weavers — old and new, abstract and pictorial, subtle and bold — suggests a resourceful and pragmatic, yet all the while creative perseverance to the craftspeople. Through all, Navajo style remains unmistakable in both technical and visual qualities, and is played out in the very balance of contrasting elements. There is a vitality in this craft that will likely take it well into the 21st century.



Rose Owens with a round rug on the loom