

# CURRENT TRENDS IN NAVAJO WEAVING

*“...The weaver’s diverse resources and capacity to absorb influences while still retaining a strong native core give the craft its enduring character today.”*

By Ann Lane Hedlund



Ruth Teller working on a Two Grey Hills tapestry, photo by Mark Nohl, courtesy Cristof's Gallery, Santa Fe

*EDITOR’S NOTE: The following article is reprinted with the author’s permission from **Terra**, Vol. 26, No. 5, courtesy Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County.*

A Navajo rug is the unique product of many people, ideas, materials, and processes. The picture today is far from that of the stereotyped Indian weaver in native costume herding her own sheep, shearing, carding, spinning, washing, and dyeing her own sheep’s wool, handweaving a rug with a recognizably “Navajo” pattern in a regional style named after the local trading post, and exchanging that rug at the post for groceries and household items. There is much more to it than that. In fact, the weaver’s diverse resources and capacity to absorb influences while still retaining a strong native core give the craft its enduring character today.

Weaving is practiced for different reasons and in varied formats. Many women weave in part because their mothers and grandmothers wove before them, they believe it is what a Navajo woman should know how to do. Weaving is recognized as an integral part of a traditional woman’s role. It is a culturally acceptable means of making a living, that is, making an entire way of life. Income is contributed to the household while a variety of other traditional tasks are performed—watching children, herding sheep, tending to household chores, visiting with neighbors.

Other Navajo women perceive of weaving as an appealing alternative to jobs outside the home in which they retain some degree of personal freedom while earning a living. Some use weaving as a means of creative expression, challenging themselves with new designs or finer textures. Increased commitments to high quality and successful marketing indicate an incipient profession-



*Teeec nos pos* by Cecila George, courtesy Cristof's Gallery, Santa Fe

alism in the craft. The recording of weavers' names with their work—in trading posts, stores, and museum collections—is a notable trend toward acknowledging the importance of individual artisans. In a remarkable departure from Navajo custom, which shies away from singling out the individual, some weavers have even begun working their initials and a date into a corner of their rugs, signaling the further recognition of individuals' importance.

Not all weavers work consistently through their lives. Some give up weaving when they get married and begin raising a family or when they find a job. Others only begin to weave after they become adults, perhaps after losing a job or after their children begin school. They may be motivated by income or by more esoteric concerns such as fascination with their own heritage. The important issue, however, is that they understand how to weave and, with that understanding, are affiliated with the larger community of craftspeople.

Only a few women make rugs and tapestries without economic incentives, placing personal expression and cultural revival above monetary rewards. Some emphasize weaving as a special marker of Navajo ethnicity. A small number save their handwoven goods for their family as heirlooms repre-

senting their cultural and personal heritage. Others, but once again only a few, approach weaving as a hobby, a recreational activity that is relaxing and rewarding in and of itself.

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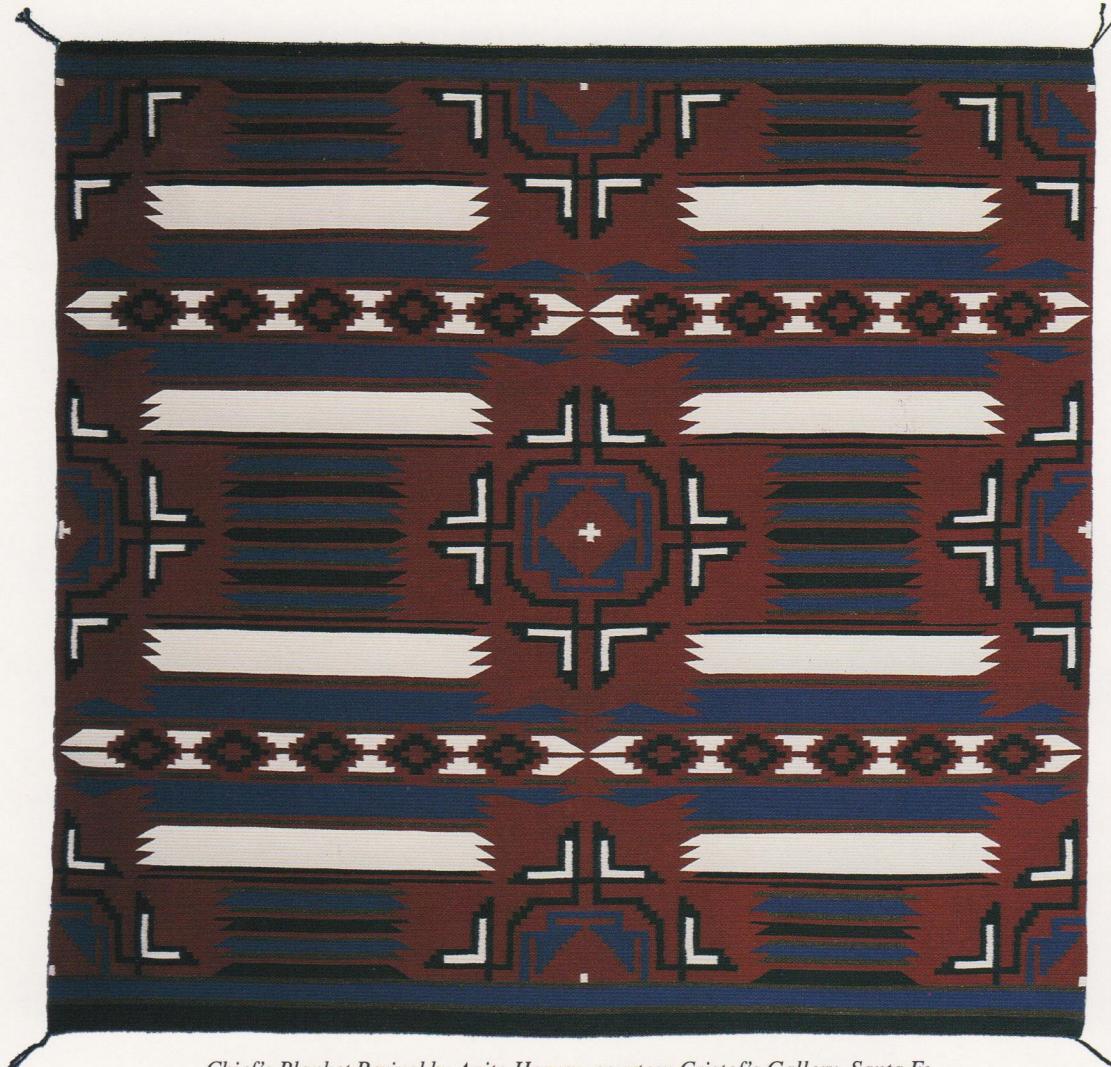
Weaving is hard work and involves many skills that must be controlled carefully and artfully. Today, weavers continue to work at the same upright loom that was adopted by the Navajo from Pueblo Indian sources in the seventeenth century. The relatively simple frame loom and home-made tools are major elements that have in fact *not* changed to any great extent over the past centuries.

Beyond the basic tools and processes, weavers have many choices in raw materials, designs, and marketplaces. There are also choices concerning where, with whom, and how they practice the craft. Their decisions chart the course for major trends and changes in current weaving.

And the Navajo Indian Reservation itself

is changing. Where once mechanized transportation was virtually impossible, paved roads now pass. Navajos today drive not only the proverbial pickup truck but compact cars, motorcycles, and all kinds of vehicles. Rather than in traditional hogans, many people live in frame or block houses in organized developments where electricity and other utilities are available. Shopping centers, restaurants, and movie theaters are being built in many larger communities. Trading posts are converted into convenience stores and gas stations. Schooling and vocational training, in ironic contrast to the dangerously high unemployment levels, are more accessible than ever. Health care, both through traditional ritual and modern medicine, is an important issue. Single-parent families are increasingly common as divorce rates parallel those of the general U.S. population. Weavers share and grapple with all the daily and long-range concerns of the Navajo people at large, balanced between their changing native milieu and the surrounding Anglo world. This balancing act is constantly reflected in their craft, through materials and designs, and in the ways they work.

**A Maze of Materials.** One of the most basic trends in contemporary rug produc-



*Chief's Blanket Revival* by Anita Harvey, courtesy Cristof's Gallery, Santa Fe

tions is actually a continuation of a much older tradition—the use of imported materials to cut short the time-consuming processes of collecting and brewing plants for dyeing and carding and spinning raw wool into yarn. The nineteenth-century practices of using commercial cloth as a source for bright raveled yarns, coloring wools with packaged aniline dyes, and incorporating three- and four-ply commercial yarns into handwoven fabrics set the precedent for today's eclecticism regarding raw materials.

Each year less hand-carded and hand-spun wool is seen in Navajo rugs and tapestries. Today, a weaver may choose between a variety of ready-made materials. Pre-cleaned, carded, and dyed wool (*tops*) supplied on large spools or in loose hanks is ready to spin. Four-ply knitting worsted may be used as is or retwisted on a hand spindle to tighten and firm up the texture or split into separate strands for a very fine weaving yarn. Single yarns (made of one strand, not plied) are available in a variety of weights, textures, and colors, ready to use or to be top-dyed. They can mimic hand-spun yarns quite closely and sometimes take expert examination to identify in a completed rug.

A wide array of higher-quality processed materials has been available since the early 1980s, while a narrower selection of similar materials has been around for decades.

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Weavers buy these materials at local trading posts or in department stores of larger reservation and border communities and may even order them by mail from weaving specialty shops around the country. A few traders actively seek improved yarns for rug weaving and work closely with both suppliers and weavers. A tribally sponsored program established in 1971, the Navajo Wool Grower's Marketing Industry, promotes native wool that is commercially processed and sold in several forms to reservation weavers.

The use of ready-made materials has sustained many weavers who might have given up the craft and has given impetus to others who might not otherwise have begun. The large quantity of processed wool and other

materials that mimic hand-spun yarns have unquestionably increased production rates. While certain commercial materials—shiny synthetic fibers and fluorescent chemical dyes, for example—have perhaps lowered the aesthetic quality of some weaving, good and bad results can be produced with both commercial and hand-processed materials.

Dye sources in today's textiles are a difficult issue and constitute a second trend in materials use. Home-dyed, home-spun yarns are becoming more rare although they have not altogether disappeared. In competition, there are commercial yarns that are vegetal colored but that were, in fact, dyed at the factory with commercial aniline (synthetic) substances. Also, both hand-spun and commercial yarns may have colors applied by Navajo women who specialize in dyeing rather than weaving. They may use only native plant dyes or packaged aniline dyes or their own unique combination of plants and inorganic chemicals. At least one trader supplies such women with large quantities of yarn, pays them to dye the yarns in lovely vegetal tones, and then resells the yarns to other weavers. The weavers often do not know precisely what was used for

dyes although they find the pastel palette quite appealing. Dye designation by traders, collectors, and even museums are often made after the fact on the basis of visible color, an extremely imprecise diagnostic.

A third major trend in current materials is the revival of the *churro* sheep's wool. The *churro* sheep, an Andalusian breed well-adapted to the American Southwest, was brought to this country from Spain in the late sixteenth century. *Churro* fleeces are relatively clean and low in grease: the fibers are long, smooth, and shiny. Much of the best weaving of the Pueblo and Navajo Indians in museum collections today contains *churro* wool yarns. During the nineteenth century, however, other breeds of sheep were introduced to Navajo country in an effort to improve both wool and mutton production. Although fleeces increased in overall weight, the wool became intractable for smooth, fine spinning on a Navajo hand spindle. Despite efforts beginning in the 1930s to isolate the *churro* gene pool and regain its prized qualities, Navajo herds became a thorough mixture of sheep breeds. A more recent project sponsored by Utah State University has tried to reverse this trend and is having significant impact in certain areas. Some of the resulting fleece has been hand-spun, while there are also experiments to have some of it commercially processed for handweavers. Rugs woven with the *churro* wool can be identified by the yarn's silky texture, bright sheen, and ability to absorb dyes intensely and uniformly.

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**Design Diversification.** Navajo weavers have always been eclectic in their use of designs—drawing upon indigenous motifs and personal vision while borrowing from Pueblo, Spanish, Oriental, and other traditions. In the early twentieth century regional rug styles developed around specific trade centers on the reservation. Certain color schemes and design formats became the leitmotif for weaving areas such as Two Grey Hills and Crystal in New Mexico and Wide Ruins and Chinle in Arizona. In recent times, design ideas have been readily shared through direct contacts between weavers; through a weaver's travels to trading posts, art galleries, and museums; and through media exposure in the forms of photographs, magazines, books, television, and videotapes. As communication across the reser-

vation has improved and weavers are more carefully examining their market strategies, rug styles are less dependent on earlier regional affiliations. In fact, one weaver's repertoire may include a variety of styles. Recognizable "regional" styles may be produced many miles from their namesake area. A Two Grey Hills rug (originally from the eastern reservation) can be woven at Navajo Mountain (in the northwest) or at Indian Wells (at the southernmost end of the reservation). Rugs in the Ganado Red style are woven at Piñon to the west and in many

other districts.

Styles have been consciously developed and cultivated in a few areas of the reservation over the past several decades. The most outstanding new style is the Burntwater, named for a community south of Wide Ruins and Pine Springs. This pattern combines the muted vegetal dyes known from the Wide Ruins area with the multibordered, elaborate centralized designs of the Ganado and Two Grey Hills styles. It has a strong appeal to trendy interior decorators and other contemporary buyers and has become widely



Rose Owens Cross Canyon, 1986, making a round rug  
Photo by Ann Lane Hedlund

popular among weavers. Not incidentally, the rise of this style coincides with the increased availability of ready-made yarns in soft vegetal colors.

The Coal Mine Mesa style woven with a raised outline technique is another increasingly visible although not entirely new type. The style is noted by the regular alternation of two yarn colors that visually breaks up the solid areas of a pattern; in order to keep the yarns properly alternating, the boundaries between pattern areas are outlined with two-span weft floats, making the outlines appear raised. Apparently first produced in the Coal Mine Mesa area of the western reservation earlier in this century, this style has gained wider popularity. Several well-known raised outline weavers currently live in Blanding, Utah, and a trader there has attempted to promote the style as a Blanding regional trademark. A Blanding designation has yet to replace the original Coal Mine Mesa affiliation.

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**Who Are The Weavers?** Middle-aged women are the predominant weavers in the Navajo tribe, but they are not the only ones. There are younger people who weave, and their numbers have increased markedly during just the past decade. While girls and teenagers frequently have other priorities including school and sports, it is especially women in their twenties and early thirties who are beginning to consider weaving as an appealing career option.

There are also notable cases of male weavers. In 1884 Washington Matthews reported that one of the best weavers among the Navajo was in fact a man. During the first half of this century, Hosteen Klah was an acknowledged weaver as well as medicine man. Today it appears that at least one male weaver can be found in any given community, and in some places they are more numerous.

Collaboration between weavers is common today. Many contemporary rugs are actually the product of several people's concerted efforts. Women can be seen weaving side by side at the loom, simultaneously interlacing the wefts. Sometimes one weaver will take charge of the design while the second person becomes the helper. In other instances, the work is more equally discharged.

Specialization in certain areas of production is evident. Women working by them-



While the scene in this photograph is traditional in appearance, Bessie Sellers is not spinning her own sheep's wool, but is tightening the twist of a commercial four-ply knitted worsted yarn in order to give it a firmer texture in her weaving. Germantown yarns have been treated in a similar fashion since the 1870's. Photo by Ann Lane Hedlund



*Storm Pattern by Lillie Touchin,  
courtesy Cristof's Gallery, Santa Fe*

selves to produce and sell rugs is only one of many options. Some weavers pay others to hand spin their wool for them. As mentioned earlier, specialized dyers are coloring wool for others, often via a trader as intermediary. Men in the family contribute to the construction of looms and other tools, children to the gathering and basic processing of raw materials. Rather than finishing a newly completed rug in the traditional manner by burying it in moist sand, many weavers rely on professional dry cleaning establishments.

There are formal associations of weavers on the reservation that provide craftspeople the opportunity to meet together, compare their work, and discuss their strategies. Hubbell Trading Post, a designated national monument, other National Park Service sites, and regional museums regularly hire weavers as demonstrators and teachers. The Crownpoint Rug Weavers Association formed in 1968 as a nonprofit cooperative to aid women from across the reservation in selling their woven products. The group holds rug auctions every six weeks in Crownpoint, New Mexico. The rugmakers establish their minimum asking price and receive 90 percent of the selling price. The Ramah Navajo Weavers Association was established in 1984 for similar purposes focused on a single community. The Ramah weavers have been active in reintroducing churro sheep into their flocks and experimenting with pillow covers and other marketable formats for Navajo weaving. Originated as federally funded Comprehensive Employment Training Act (CETA) projects, Chapter House craft programs have also been sponsored by the Navajo Tribe through community vocational training and work

projects. For the past two decades expert weavers have been hired to demonstrate and train others; the rugs produced are sold to benefit the community coffers. In fall 1987 the Navajo Tribe's Division of Labor and the Office of Navajo Women, in cooperation with the Save the Children Navajo Indian Nations program, sponsored a survey of reservation weavers and began a series of workshops on marketing skills for weavers. Although results are yet to be reported, the very fact that the tribe is investing in training sessions is an important trend.

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### Weavers today may elect to sell their rugs far from the local trading post.

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Marketing practices are indeed changing with the times. Weavers today may elect to sell their rugs far from the local trading post, traveling many miles to get the best price for their work at a craftshop or art gallery. A number of weavers deal directly with private collectors and museum buyers. Only a few now have printed business cards, but that too may be an incipient trend.

Modern Navajo weaving shows many signs of being a strong and vital craft. Through three centuries it has retained important connections with the past and yet continues to move in new directions. Textile production has persisted through low periods such as the 1860s when the Navajo people were removed from their homes and incarcerated at Bosque Redondo, at the turn of the century when the quality of sheep's wool was low due to poor range management and

interbreeding, and during the 1960s arts and crafts boom when native handcrafts were accepted uncritically and many non-Navajo copies appeared. Weavers working today demonstrate the same resilience and resourcefulness as their predecessors.

While changes are occurring in weavers' lives and woven products, it should be emphasized that the craft is still couched in native context. A young woman may speak English, drive a Volkswagen, or wear the latest fashions, but she often goes home to mother on the weekend to work on the loom and help with the fields, flocks, and household chores. Another weaver may sell her rugs to an urban art gallery, but she still includes traditional prayers in setting up and taking down the loom. Designs may include modern pictorial scenes or Cubist abstractions, yet the work is still technically and culturally linked with blanket-weaving of the nineteenth century and with the traditional Navajo worldview.

A resurgence of the craft is clearly evident. Trends today encompass changing materials and designs, attitudes, and roles. Yet weaving has not changed so much that it is in danger of losing its Navajo character. This capacity of the native craftworkers to embrace their heritage while responding to change gives modern weaving its vitality and purpose.

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*Native*<sup>TM</sup>

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