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THREADS OF TRADITION
Contemporary Navajo Weaving



Contemporary Navajo Weavers

Selections from the Gloria F. Ross Collection

By Ann Lane Hedlund

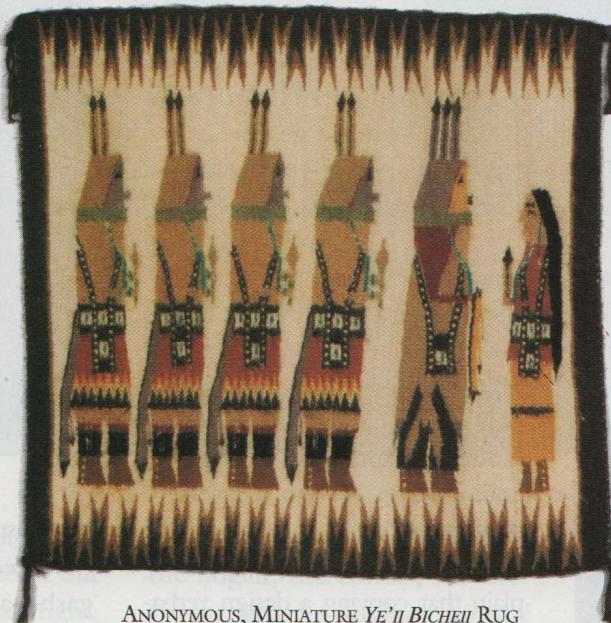
With the total Navajo population edging toward a quarter of a million people, there may be as many as 28,000 Navajo weavers today. Traders, who watch the annual rug production closely, judge that there are as many as 8,000 to 10,000 weavers of excellent quality, with the rest producing rugs that range from very good to mediocre. No matter how they are counted, it is clear that there are many, many Navajo weavers. And because Navajo culture is built largely on personal freedom rather than explicit rules, a person can find many ways to be a weaver.

What sets weavers apart from non-weaving relatives, friends and neighbors is the knowledge and skills they command and the prestige and security these provide. This means not simply

knowing how to spin a thread, but actually making something useful, something that earns a living and brings psychological and social rewards as well. In common with other craftspeople, ceremonial singers and farmers, weavers earn their livelihood from special knowledge coupled with hands-on doing. Those who are successful work hard and are committed to making a living while preserving a chosen lifestyle.

In real life, there is no "typical" Navajo weaver and no special class status that sets weavers apart. In their families and com-

munities, weavers play the same roles as non-weaving women of similar age and experience. Their lifestyles vary widely—in family size and composition, educational background, religious beliefs and practices, economic concerns and all



ANONYMOUS, MINIATURE YE'II BICHEII RUG
[1984], 10 1/4 x 10 1/2.

This article has been excerpted from Reflections of the Weaver's World by Ann Lane Hedlund. Published by the Denver Art Museum, CO, the book is distributed by University of Washington Press, Seattle [\$29.95, paperback]. It contains essays by Hedlund on the history of Navajo weaving and the formation of the Gloria F. Ross Collection at the DAM. Also included are biographies of 32 weavers, a comprehensive glossary and bibliography, accompanied by 91 color reproductions.

the subtle differences that result from unique intersections of personal, historical and cultural circumstances. Some weavers live comfortably within the confines of tradition, while others grapple with new roles as artists acclaimed by the *bilagáana* world.

New York-based tapestry editor Gloria F. Ross first discovered the world of the Navajo weaver in 1979, when she asked me to put her in touch with weavers willing to help her translate a series of designs by painter Kenneth Noland into tapestries. Our continuing collaboration led to the establishment of a collection of contemporary Navajo textiles at the Denver Art Museum where they would be shown within their unique cultural context and within a broader aesthetic framework.

As an anthropologist, I have often worked alongside Navajo weavers, with less need to talk than

to contribute through my own experiences as a *bilagáana* hand-spinner and weaver. Listening carefully and trying to represent the diverse viewpoints of Navajo craftspeople have posed the most challenging opportunities in the Ross Collection.

MARY LEE BEGAY

BELOW LEFT: HUBBELL REVIVAL RUG [1981], 71 x 47.

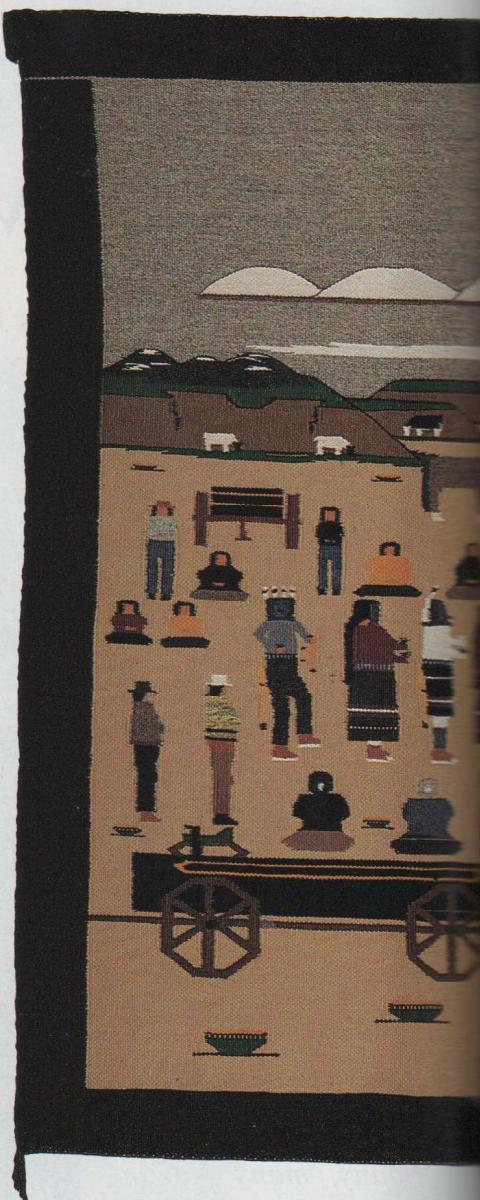
Gloria Ross commissioned Mary Lee Begay [b1941-LIVING AZ], a weaver employed by Hubbell Trading Post since 1971, to weave

a rug with this particular design for the Denver Art Museum. The pattern comes directly from a small oil painting of a rug done about 1905 by Bertha Little, a teacher at the Presbyterian College in Ganado, AZ. Trader J.L. Hubbell invited

her and Chicago artists E.A. Burbank and H.G. Maratta, who also frequented the post between 1897 and 1909, to depict old-style Navajo textiles and his own modern adaptations in hopes of encouraging Navajo weavers to replicate them.

Although many weavers complain that copying a design verbatim is "boring" and not a productive use of one's mind, there is no known Navajo taboo against making duplicates. In this case, Begay copied the design exactly as Little painted it, but she and other weavers often change motifs or colors to personalize the weaving.

Mary Lee Begay's life seems full of contrasts. Although she speaks little English, she is confronted daily by inquisitive tourists at Hubbell Trading Post, where she



demonstrates weaving. For her job she dresses in old-style Navajo garb—a multitiered broomstick skirt of satin or calico, a long-sleeved velveteen or satin blouse, and silver and turquoise jewelry—but she wears modern slacks and knit tops for her household and farmyard chores.

A deeply spiritual person, Begay nevertheless approaches weaving pragmatically. Summing up her work, she explains in Navajo, "Weaving takes a lot of hard thinking ... careful measuring too.... And you must measure





over and over again as you put in the patterns so that they come out even. If it doesn't come out right, you take it out and measure again. And the sides, you have to count the side cords carefully too. I don't make my rugs cheaply—a lot of hard work is involved."

ISABELL JOHN

ABOVE: YE' II BICHEII PICTORIAL RUG [1982], 47½ x 83½.

Isabell John [b1933-LIVING AZ] often weaves scenes setting forth her vision of traditional Navajo life.

Her rugs show "the way I live—the hogan, the corrals, the livestock. *Dine' é baghan, dine' é be'iina'*—the Navajo philosophy of life, the way of life." These scenes, however, do not represent actual places. As her son Dennison explains, "She 'picturizes' the scene, sees it in her mind the way she wants to."

This rug depicts a *ye'ii bicheii* ceremony,

the traditional Night Chant, encircled by spectators' wagons. She says of it, "This is a traditional

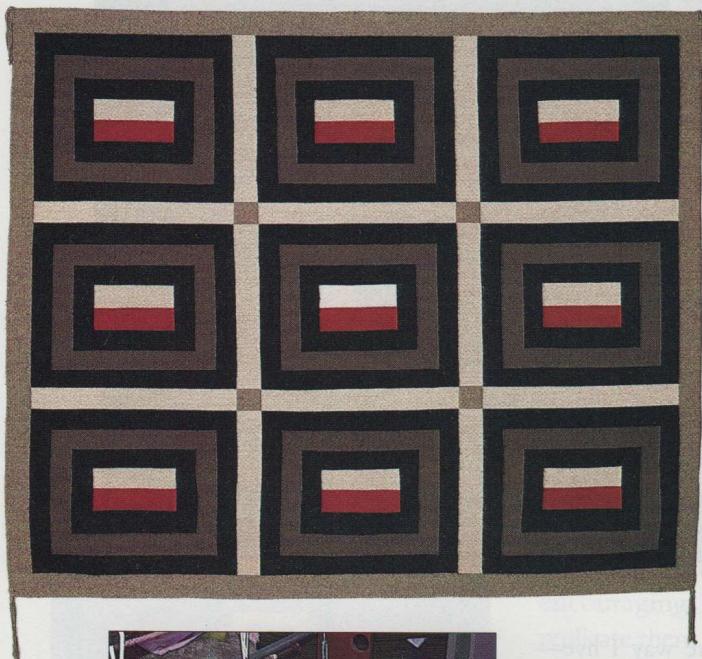
... nine-day ceremony for the healing of a person." Two women bearing baskets greet a procession of male and female holy people, the sacred *ye' ii* of Navajo religion. Talking God, the *ye' ii bicheii* (grandfather of the *ye' ii*), is wrapped in a



ISABELL JOHN

deer-skin and leads the procession while a blue-shirted Water Sprinkler brings up the rear. John describes Water Sprinkler as "a funny man, always running around, acting like a clown." The scene shows the final night of the ceremony, the only night on which masked female dancers appear, according to John. Two bonfires burn as animals graze peacefully in the distance. The snowcapped peaks tell us it is winter, the only season when such ceremonies are held.

John has a particular mission in



SADIE CURTIS

choosing these images. "Today," she explains through Dennison, who acts as her interpreter, "our younger generation doesn't know what our traditional ways are.... Every day on the Navajo Nation radio network, I hear them talk

about traditional ways, saying we might lose our identity and our clan ways. Maybe these rugs will bring back the heritage of the *dine'ē*. Throughout the nation we might identify with these rugs and these ceremonies."

SADIE CURTIS

BELOW: REFLECTION [1983], 49 x 59.

This weaving is truly a meld of different worlds. Woven by Curtis [b1930-LIVING AZ], it was designed by contemporary painter Kenneth Noland at the request of Gloria

Ross. Titled REFLECTION, it is one of a series of such works that now hang in corporate offices, private homes and public galleries throughout the United States, Europe and Japan.

Gloria Ross arranged with the Ganado-area weaver to make REFLECTION in July 1983; the weaving process

took about three months. Curtis is one of the most masterful weavers around. For years she worked as a craft demonstrator at Hubbell Trading Post. That was the time, she says, when she really learned to speak English, for she never completed grade school. Now retired from Hubbell, she works steadily on her looms at home and occasionally collaborates with her aunt, Alice Belone, also an accomplished weaver. Curtis performed professionally for several years with a traditional singing

group, "Kinlichee Maiden Singers," and often plays their tape while weaving in the hogan she and her husband share. Her sisters, expert weavers Elsie Wilson and Mae Jim, live nearby.

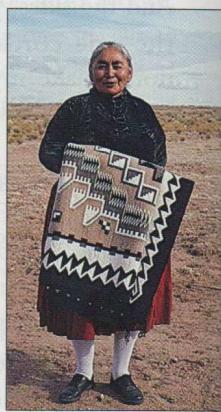
Curtis' favorites are chief blankets and revivals of early styles, into which she integrates ideas from many sources—magazines, books, other textiles and Hubbell's "little paintings" of 19th-century wearing blankets. She is especially proud of her American flag rug that appeared on the cover of *Arizona Highways* in July 1976. Often laughing and joking while working at her loom, Curtis comments on REFLECTION in her typically laconic style: "It's pretty but I don't know why. It wasn't hard to weave. In fact, it was easy. I hate making such big ones, though; they take a long time. A little one takes five days—easy money!"

AUDREY SPENCER WILSON

RIGHT: TWO GREY HILLS RUG [1981], 70 x 47½.

Though it was made hundreds of miles from Two Grey Hills, this rug by Audrey Spencer Wilson [b1920-LIVING AZ] was clearly inspired by that region's style. It may be called Two Grey Hills because of its gray, brown, black and white colors and fancy central diamond with reciprocating border. Traditional Two Grey Hills rugs contain a natural brown wool sometimes carded with white to

AUDREY SPENCER WILSON





create lighter shades. But this rug gets its light brown color from white wool that has soaked in a dilute bath of walnut-hull dye.

Wilson began the rug in February 1980; in August it was nearly half completed, and by January it was finished. At one point, she made one of the black motifs too large and had to reweave the entire area. While the rug was on the loom, Wilson also made baskets, sash belts, god's eye medallions and doilies in a local arts and crafts program.

A small, tar paper-covered shed houses Wilson's weaving operation—a large, adjustable lumber loom, abundant bags of raw sheep fleece and yarn and, hanging from the rafters, dried plants and barks for dyes. She and her elderly brother use a commercial, Penguin-brand spinning wheel to tighten the twist on 4-ply commercial knitting worsted used on sash belts. Rather than using expedient lazy lines, Wilson prefers to pass her yarn across the full width of a design area to create an unmarred surface. Her attention to detail pays off in the prices she commands.

Asked what she thinks about when she's weaving, the pragmatic Wilson responds in heavily accented English, "I think about weaving the design; that is what I usually do. I just think about it—how I'm going to do it, what it will look like, how I'm going to put it up." She never sketches her designs before weaving: "I just had it in my mind, like I always say. I just used my mind with these patterns."

ASON YELLOWHAIR

RIGHT: BIRD-AND-FLOWER
PICTORIAL RUG [1983], 131 x 94.

"The land was filled with deer and covered with beautiful flowers. The air had the odor of pollen and fragrant blossoms. Birds of the most beautiful plumage were flying in the air, or perching on the flowers and building nests in the deer's antlers." So 19th-century scholar Washington Matthews describes the setting for a Navajo legend in which a hero travels through enchanted lands [Gladys Reichard, *Navaho Religion: A Study of Symbolism*, 1950 Pantheon Books]. He might well have been traveling through the scenery of one of Ason Yellowhair's rugs.

Although Yellowhair [b1930-LIVING AZ] knows that birds play a significant role in traditional religion, she says the birds in her rugs carry no specific sacred meaning, tell no particular story, but simply express a positive and happy outlook on life. Her original inspiration for bird and flower imagery came from her love of the outdoors, and according to her daughter, Elsie T. Tom, she based the stylized plant forms on Wrigley's Spearmint Chewing Gum wrappers.

Large rugs are the Yellowhair family speciality. "If I want to work very hard, then I make a very large rug." Tom remembers helping her mother finish the final 2 inches of the Ross collection rug,

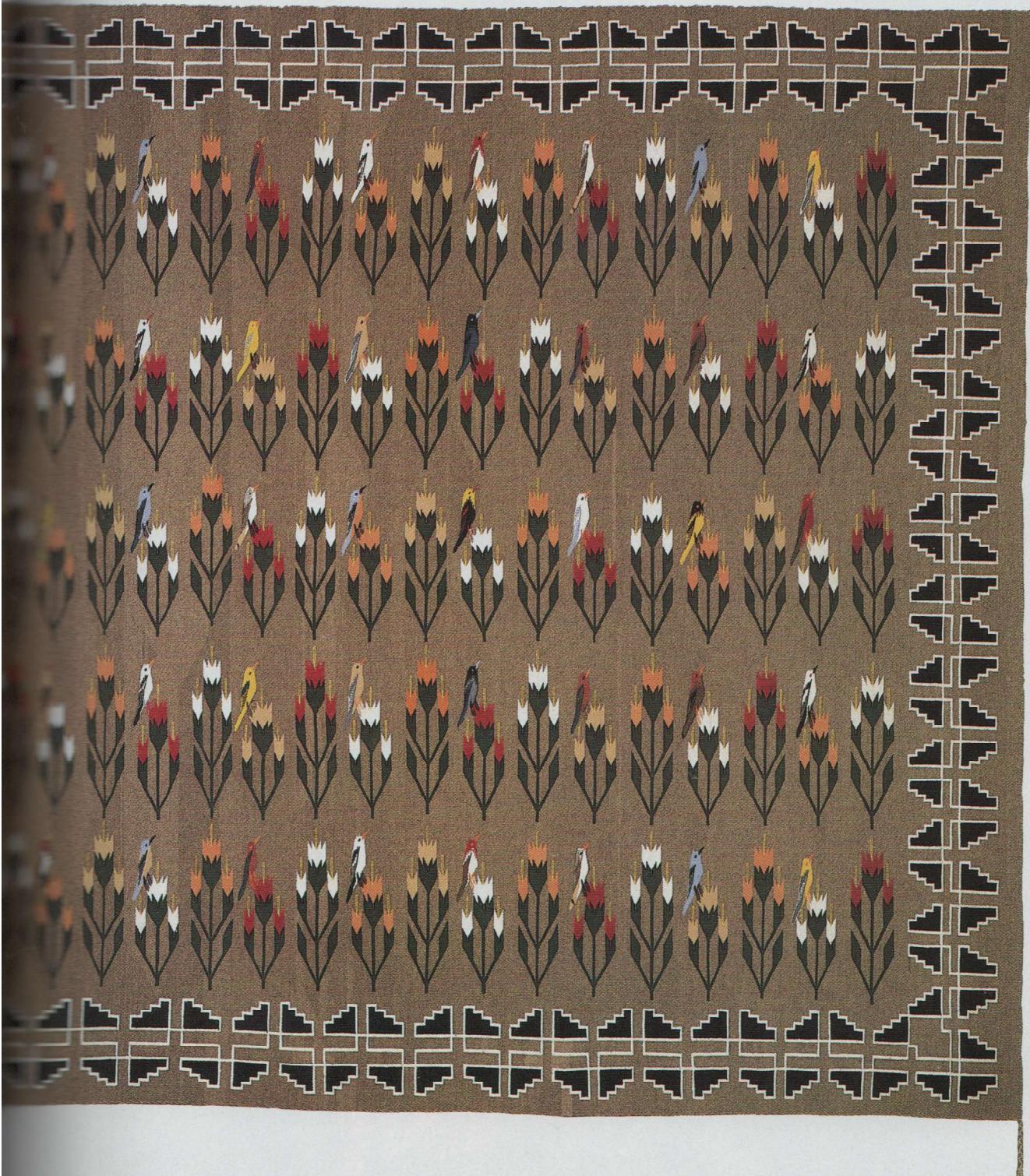


ASON YELLOWHAIR



a prodigious task because of its size, almost 11 by 8 feet. The task took several days and, since a darning needle had to be pressed between the highly tensioned warps in order to insert the last wefts, was very hard on the fingers.

Yellowhair insists that women's



work is equal to men's in its demands and contributions to a household. As she explains in Navajo, "See, a man might be making a house, and he gets very tired. It's like that [with] weaving too—your back and your arms and your legs hurt. A man might

work very hard on the railroad, and weaving is like doing the same kind of hard work. You perspire a lot. A man might work hard chopping wood, his shirt hanging out or maybe no shirt at all. It's the same with weaving—very hard work."

THE EXHIBITION *REFLECTIONS OF THE WEAVER'S WORLD* TRAVELS TO THE HEARD MUSEUM, FEBRUARY 5-APRIL 10, 1994. FROM THERE IT TRAVELS TO: RENWICK GALLERY OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, WASHINGTON, DC; JOSLYN ART MUSEUM, OMAHA, NE; AND THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN, NEW YORK, NY.