



Hot Trends in Southwestern Navajo Weaving

Ann Lane Hedlund

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For centuries, Navajo weavers have used *tapestry weave* to create their innovative handwoven work.¹ This versatile weaving technique is also used in European wall hangings of the Medieval and Renaissance periods and in vintage Chinese silk *k’ossu* garments. For these and other decorative fabrics worldwide, tapestry was independently invented because of its beauty, flexibility, and utility. More than any other textile technique, tapestry weave is associated with fine art and expressive imagery. It was and continues to be an ideal medium for Navajo and other Native American weavers.

Today, a revival in contemporary tapestry weaving is evident among European and American hand-weavers and is also recurring among Pueblo, Navajo and Hispanic weavers in the American Southwest. These artists are combining traditional techniques and materials with updated modern imagery. The rising popularity of tapestry among collectors opens up new directions for all weavers.

Navajo spiritual teachings emphasize weaving and all other creative activities as dynamic and ever-evolving. Being “traditional” to Navajos doesn’t necessarily mean staying in one place. Among Navajo philosophers and weavers, tradition includes acts of improvisation and options to follow paths of personal inclination. Many aesthetic decisions are left to each individual person.

Native American artists, however, must often counteract the general and recurring assumption that to be traditional is to be unchanging in one’s artistic approach. Unlike contemporary artists in mainstream Euro-American society, where artists are known for breaking molds and innovation is considered quintessential, Pueblo and Navajo Indian weavers tend to be viewed as conservative. Dealers and collectors often encourage them to replicate the ways of their past.

Navajo weavers have indeed been producing handwoven garments, blankets and rugs in new patterns since at least the 1600s. Through the study of historic Navajo textiles, we know that Navajo weavers of the past were resourceful in their material and design choices. They were easily influenced by outsiders, yet firm in honoring an eclectic heritage. They acquired weaving tools from neighboring Pueblo Indians (who had been weaving since prehistoric times), sheep’s wool from the Spaniards, indigo dyes from the Mexicans, and design ideas from all these plus incoming American settlers. Throughout, Navajo weavers maintained their own identity and “kept their backbones straight.” They imbued their woven work with a unique sense of symmetry and strong

color contrasts. They incorporated their own humor and vitality, often with clever visual puns and allusions. From their beginnings, Navajo blankets were widely appreciated—and they were traded with other Indian tribes well before nineteenth century commerce arrived.

Today there are weavers who come from a long line of talented artisans. Weaving runs through the woman’s lineage in Navajo families—passed from grandmothers to mothers to daughters to grand-daughters. In addition, male weavers have been active since at least the 1880s, and presently their numbers appear to be increasing. Ruth Teller’s and Margeret Yazzie’s family from Two Grey Hills, New Mexico, counts at least seven generations of weavers in their maternal bloodline, including at least one man. In many families, if someone wants to learn and doesn’t have a close relative, help is usually found from sisters, aunts, clan relations, in-laws, and even community classes.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Navajo weavers had shifted from making utilitarian blankets to floor rugs for an outside market. Beginning in the early twentieth century, regional rug styles with community names like Ganado, Two Grey Hills, and Wide Ruins developed around trading posts where weavers often sold their rugs for cash and or exchanged them for household goods. By the 1960s, a huge arts and crafts boom brought worldwide attention to Southwest weavers. These artisans continued to improve their techniques, to incorporate new materials, and to elaborate their patterns. They excelled in using tapestry weave for expressive designs—both geometric and representational. They also found new markets in art galleries, craft stores, and museum shops beyond the Navajo Nation’s boundaries.



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A.
D.Y. Begay
Nightway (detail), 2009
collection of the artist

B.
Larry Yazzie
Blue Canyon, 1994
62 x 36
private collection

All photos by Ann Lane Hedlund except where noted; all textiles are wool tapestry weave unless otherwise noted.



C.
TahNiBaa Naat'aanii with *Twin Warriors' Journey to the Sun*, 2009
Heard Museum Indian Market, Phoenix

D.
Roy Kady, with suite of handspun, woven and felted horsegear, 2008
Heard Museum Indian Market, Phoenix

E.
Melissa Cody with untitled tapestry, 2009
Heard Museum Indian Market, Phoenix

F.
Marilou Schultz with prizewinning tapestry, 2008, Heard Museum Indian Market, Phoenix

G.
D.Y. Begay with prizewinning tapestry, 2008, Heard Museum Indian Market, Phoenix

H.
Marilou Schultz with custom dyed yarn and photos of Silicon Chip, 2008, Heard Museum Indian Market, Phoenix



C.

D.

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The twenty-first century now reflects new trends in Native woven designs

1. A rising emphasis on individual styles and artistic identity is visible.

Modern Navajo and Pueblo weavers draw from personal inspiration and experiences, not just from family-, community-, and trader-based sources. Local landscapes, faraway travel, up-to-the-minute movies and music, and contemporary artworks in non-woven media all spur on new weaving. For example, Scottsdale weaver D.Y. Begay, originally from Salina Springs, Arizona, has developed a highly individual style. Using her strong sense of place in the Southwest, broad banded mesas with asymmetrical interruptions and subtle color gradations emerge in her tapestries. Another weaver, Michael Teller Ornelas from Tucson, now studies computer science at University of Arizona. He incorporates broad concepts from Japanese animé and computer-driven imagery into his precisely woven, stair-stepped tapestries. Mary Duwyenie, a Hopi weaver and painter from a family of distinctive artists (including Preston Duwyenie, the glass artist), trained in the arts program at Arizona State University in Tempe. She has created large woven wall hangings with patterns abstracted from traditional Hopi pottery and textile designs.

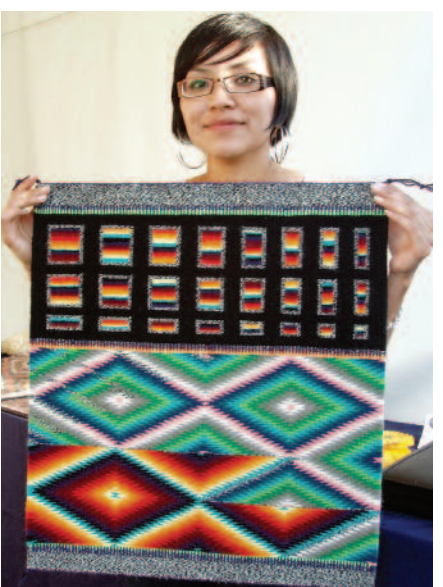
Some weavers give formal titles to their rugs and wall hangings, where previously even the weaver's name would have remained anonymous. Titles like

Blue Canyon by Larry Yazzie and *Made in Maine* by Kalley Keams Lucero invoke their travels near and far. Other titles such as *The Navajo Universe* by Sarah Paul Begay, *In the Path of the Four Seasons* by Lillie Taylor, and *Dawn Meets Dusk* by Gloria Jean Begay contain esoteric or idiosyncratic messages. Navajo artist and civil engineer Morris Muskett's *Ravenstail Weaving* and D.Y. Begay's *Cheyenne Style* and *Dakota Style* each reflect inspirations from tribal communities outside of the Southwest.

2. The distinctive use of earlier classic blanket designs serves as stimulus for new imagery.

Native weavers look back at older textiles but, like improvisational jazz musicians, they riff on these designs—creating new from old, finding impulsive rhythms where no ancestor ever rocked. Motifs from banded chief's blankets appear as enlarged abstractions in the modern work of D.Y. Begay. Sarape and poncho designs shrink into precious miniature tapestries when painstakingly woven by Tucson master weaver Barbara Teller Ornelas. Original motifs based on early basketry now pixillate with computer game nuances in a recent handwoven diptych by Sierra Ornelas, now living in Washington, DC. Weaver Marilou Schultz of Mesa, Arizona, has custom-dyed and woven a commissioned work using a collector's abstract computer chip diagram. Eye dazzlers from the nineteenth century reappear on the looms of Santa Fe weaver Melissa Cody and her mother Lola Cody, with serrate diamonds enclosed in

Mondrian-like boxes or with the improbable colors of an Arizona sunset or a Coney Island Ferris wheel. Looking back at the earlier tradition of handmade horse gear, weaver Roy Cady of Teec Nos Pos, New Mexico, made a set of items with his family's homegrown Churro sheep's wool. He created a handwoven twill saddle blanket, a hand-felted plaid-patterned saddle pad, a hand-woven saddle cinch on metal d-rings, and a handbraided halter and lead. In 2008 he showed this prize-winning suite at the Heard Museum's annual Indian Market & Fair.



E.

3. More weavers articulate the stories and narratives behind their work.

In 2001 the School of American Research in Santa Fe hosted a week-long convocation of Navajo weavers. Titled *Gifts of Spiderwoman: Myth and Reality Regarding Spirituality in Navajo Weaving*, the seminar addressed the roles of power and religious meaning in Navajo historic and contemporary weaving. Organized by the Indian Arts Research Center and facilitated by Navajo weaver Kalley Keams Lucero, participants included Irene Clark, Mae Clark, Glenabah Hardy, TahNibaa Naat'aanii, Barbara Teller Ornelas, Marilou Schultz, Clara Sherman, Angie Silentman, Brenda Spencer, Janet Tsinnie, and Anthony Tallboy. Integral to the participants' discussions was the strong contention that meaning and symbolism in Navajo weaving is highly personal. Although guided by traditional spiritual teachings, the significance depends on individual artists' intentions and interpretations. Another important message concerns the depth and purposefulness of *process* (as opposed to design or product) in the spirituality of weaving.

Where earlier geometric patterns were accorded minimal verbal or visual expression descriptions by twentieth century weavers, now some are integrating charged tribal symbols into their rugs

and developing highly personal accounts of their tapestry patterns. TahNiBaa Naataanii of Table Mesa, New Mexico, records the stories that she has embedded into her woven tapestries and preserves them in notebooks that stay with each purchased artwork. Both *Twin Warriors' Journey to the Sun* and *Spider Woman's Stories* relate to traditional Navajo origin legends, but each is TahNiBaa's unique expression requiring her individual translation.

Weavers today seek out their own families' stories, read published accounts of Navajo origins, and visit museum exhibitions to learn more. Some weavers document the processes and meaning of their work through poetry as well as prose. Sarah Paul Begay of Indian Wells, Arizona, is one who writes in verse. She also has dedicated one large wall hanging to her father, a traditional healer who is depicted looking out of her pictorial panels.

Dog-eared and homely family photo albums are transformed into polished portfolios that chronicle career paths as well as interpret the visual artworks. In her 20s, Melissa Cody has a lengthy resume and uses a professional format from her art school training. The Teller family has self-published a multi-generational account of their extended family's woven work.

New approaches emerge from weaver's lifestyles and their modern arts careers

4. Weavers are marketing their own work or seeking professional representation

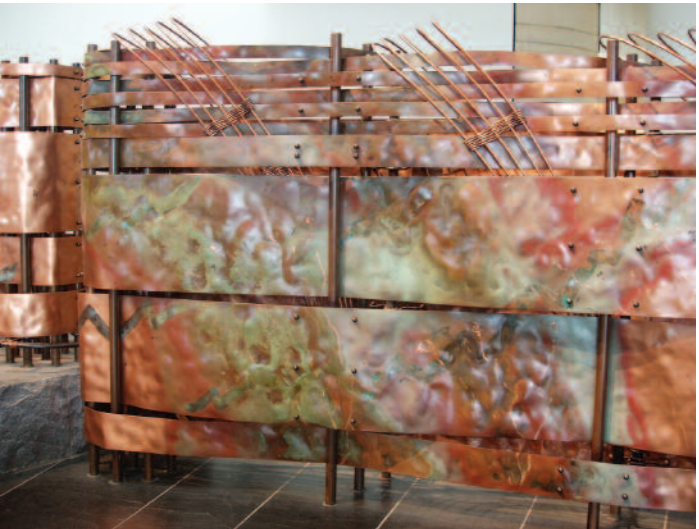
Marketing practices among weavers have changed dramatically since the 1960s. Weavers today may elect to sell their rugs and tapestries far from the local trading post, traveling many miles to get the best price for their work at a museum shop or art gallery. Some weavers establish strong relationships with a single gallery or dealer, rather than "shopping around" their rugs. Increasing numbers work directly with private collectors, either through regional arts fairs (Santa Fe Indian Market and other museum-sponsored events in the Southwest and beyond) or through their own websites and mailing lists.

These approaches reflect not only design trends or technical changes in weaving, but also represent a shift in approaches to living (and to *making* a living) as this and the next sections demonstrate. Such emerging and influential developments don't affect everyone. It should be emphasized that there are still many Navajo weavers living on the Navajo Nation who produce regional style rugs at home much as previous generations did. These weavers rely on modest income from their more quotidian products, and may indeed struggle to support families with their weaving. Market expansion is very important for these individuals, as for any proficient artist.

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J.



I.
Ramona Sakiestewa
Copper Screen, 2004
fabricated metals
National Museum of the American
Indian, Washington, DC

J.
Ramona Sakiestewa
Copper Screen, 2004
fabricated metals
National Museum of the American
Indian, Washington, DC
Detail

5. More Native American weavers could benefit from professional art training

Most Navajo and Pueblo weavers remain self-trained or educated within their family and community circles. Formal art and weaving programs at the university level have only just begun to influence emerging Native American artists. Those who have taken coursework, degrees or internships now show at local and national levels. The Institute of American Indian Art in Santa Fe offers studio art courses and Museum Studies classes that have influenced several young weavers. A few others have enrolled in programs in fine arts, media arts, computer science, and related fields at universities in Arizona, New Mexico and Colorado. Seldom have southwestern Native weavers trained at other well-known arts schools, but hopefully that is to come.

Formal internships for Native American students and artists are offered at major museums. These have included the National Museum of the American Indian and other branches of the Smithsonian, the Eiteljorg Museum in Indianapolis, and many museums in the Southwest (including Arizona State Museum, Heard Museum, Museum of Northern Arizona, School of American Research, and Museum of Indian Arts & Culture and other branches of the Museums of New Mexico). These intensive and practical experiences can help to launch professional arts careers. Continuing support for these programs is much needed.

6. Museum consultations & exhibition curation provide perspective

Increasingly, museums have asked Native weavers to curate or co-curate exhibitions, using their own perspectives as cultural specialists and artists. Few museums, however, have permanently hired staff members from the ranks of native weavers. One exception is the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture in Santa Fe, where Navajo weaver and fiber artist Joyce Begay-Foss is Director of Education. For her institution, she has organized numerous exhibitions, symposia and public programs about Navajo weaving.

A few noteworthy exhibitions have included Navajo weavers as content specialists and guest curators. In 1990 the National Museum of the American Indian began hoding lengthy in-house and on-site meetings with weavers and scholars, resulting in the 1996 exhibition and publication,

Woven by the Grandmothers. In 1994, the Museum of Northern Arizona in Flagstaff hosted *Hanoolchaadi: Historic Textiles Selected by Four Navajo Weavers*, with Grace Henderson Nez plus her daughter and two granddaughters. In 2004-2005, Barbara, Sierra and Michael Ornelas served as co-curators at Arizona State Museum in Tucson to create *19th Century Blankets/20th Century Rugs/21st Century Views*. And in 2006, D.Y. Begay held the position of “community curator” for the Kennedy Museum of Art in Athens, Ohio, in a project called *Weaving is Life*. The last two exhibits have online presentations continuing after the physical displays were completed. Other intriguing exhibitions and programs are sure to expand upon these collaborative approaches.

7. Architectural commissions and new media—trends of the future?

A final noteworthy trend is that of entire installations in new media, which are designed and directed by Native American weavers.

Ramona Sakiestewa is a well-known weaver and design specialist of Hopi Indian heritage. In her well-established Santa Fe studio, she has produced several series of handwoven tapestries that alternate between reflections of her Native American ancestry and an abiding interest in modernism, ultimately addressing “the dynamics of time and space.” For more than a decade now, she has also worked with nationally known architects to create significant features in glass, metal and stone. Her work includes installations at the Tempe Center for the Performing Arts in Arizona, the American West Heritage Center in Utah, the Chickasaw Cultural Center in Oklahoma, Marriott Hotels in California and Washington, DC, and the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) on the Smithsonian’s Mall in Washington, DC. At NMAI where she consulted extensively from 1994 to 2005, she provided designs for a dramatic theater curtain, a pair of imposing entry doors, and an elevator interior. Perhaps most importantly, her monumental *Copper Screen* is a brilliant fabricated metal sculpture surrounding the Museum’s main entry plaza.

In spring 2007, Navajo artist D.Y. Begay was commissioned by the Heard Museum to create an external wall piece for its building in downtown Phoenix, Arizona. The result—Begay’s first public installation—is *Floating Weft Mosaic*, modeled after an original Navajo textile that was vegetally-dyed and handwoven by D.Y. Begay. As principal artist, Begay selected Nina Solomon, a Phoenix mosaic artist to produce hundreds of ceramic tiles that compose her design. Involving almost 3,000 hours of labor by thirty-five people, including members of the Museum’s volunteer Guild, the entire piece was completed in nine months. Its final installation was celebrated in February 2008. As Begay observed, the very earth colors and pigments that inspire her weaving are also those used in the glazes of this piece, “capturing,” she says, “the beauty and palette of the landscape.”

While all of these major trends have roots during the previous century, they’ve become full-blown in today’s globalized and interconnected world. Native American weavers are increasingly plugged into the Internet, in contact with each other and other artists through professional workshops and symposia, and seeking new forms of representation and sales through urban galleries and art expos. Since 1992, far-flung art museums—the Smithsonian’s Renwick Gallery in Washington, DC, Denver Art Museum in Colorado, Joslyn Art Museum in Nebraska, Kennedy Museum of Art in Ohio, Wheelwright Museum in Santa Fe, and Mesa Art Center in Arizona—have featured creative new work by Navajo weavers.

In 1995 Irene Clark of Crystal, New Mexico, was honored by the national Women’s Caucus for the Arts: “as a master weaver, innovator, designer, teacher, for using time-honored traditional techniques to create visual and technical tours de force in tapestry. Her work is a testament to her commitment to long-held Navajo beliefs, as well as her approach to artistic exploration that reveals a melding of traditional and contemporary.”

In 2005 the National Endowment for the Arts bestowed its highest award of a National Heritage Fellowship on a Navajo weaver for the first time: Grace Henderson Nez (1913-2006) of Ganado received this award at the Library of Congress, with her daughter Mary Lee Henderson Begay, granddaughter Gloria Jean Begay, and great-granddaughter Aaliyah by her side. And it was about time, given the centuries of innovation already reflected in Navajo weaving!

For active Native weavers in the American Southwest, the future holds a wealth of opportunity for individual artworks and for creative collaborations. If their warp (the foundation strings on the loom) represents tradition, then surely the weft (those colorful yarns that interlace with the warps) must be innovation, and clearly the two are inextricably interwoven. The possibilities, indeed, are as endless as art itself.

¹ Tapestry is technically defined as a plain weave fabric in which the *weft yarns* cover and entirely hide the foundation *warp yarns*, and in which imagery (abstract or representational) is created by differently colored wefts appearing only where patterning is needed.

² In southwestern gallery parlance, “tapestry” has taken on new meaning to refer to super-finely spun and woven work. “Tapestry,” in this sense, now refers to handwoven fabrics in tapestry weave with more than 90 wefts per inch.

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K.



K.
D.Y. Begay and Nina Solomon
Weft Float Mosaic, 2008
ceramic tile
Heard Museum, Phoenix, AZ

L.
D.Y. Begay and Nina Solomon
Weft Float Mosaic, 2008
ceramic tile
Heard Museum, Phoenix, AZ
Detail