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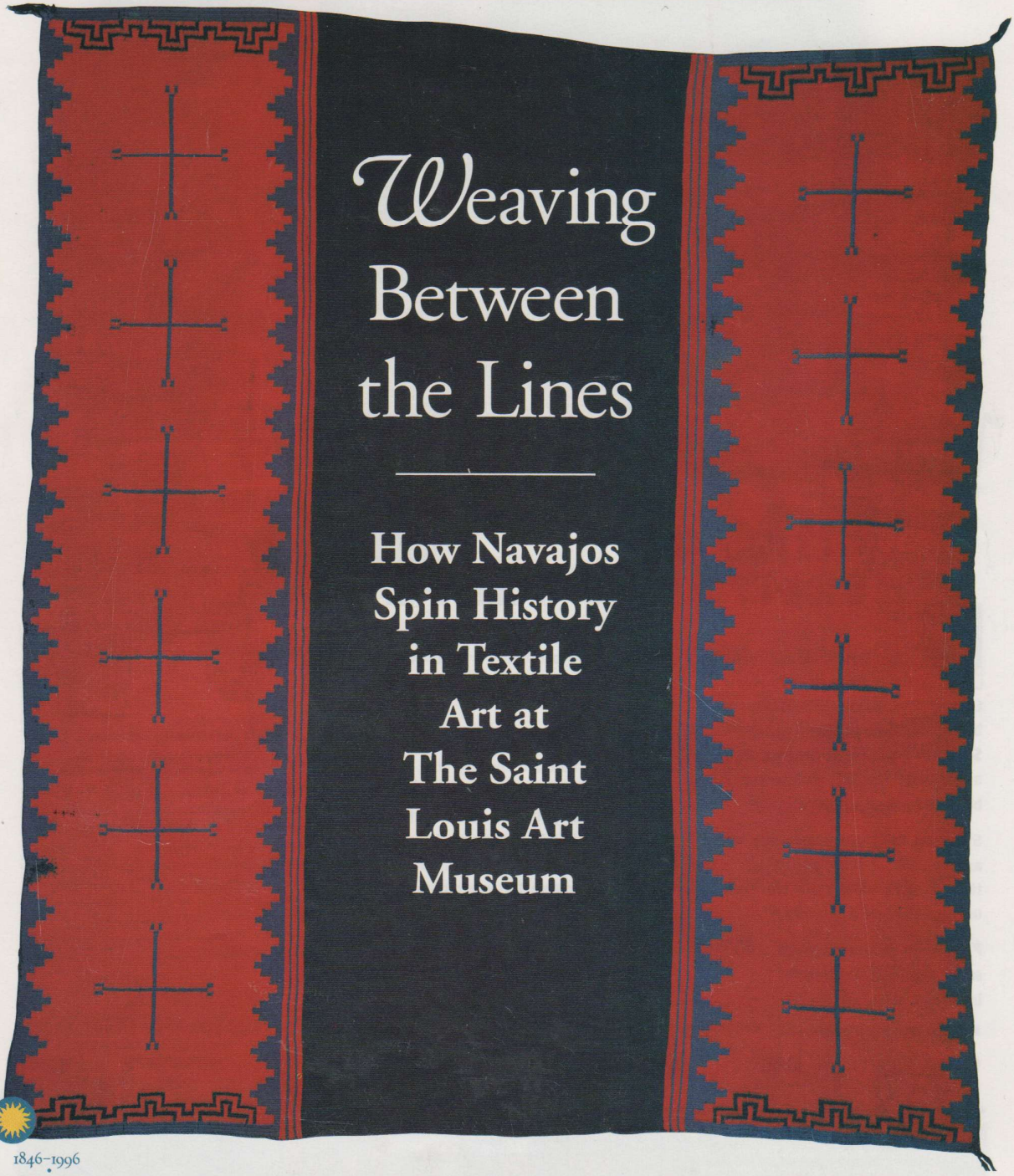

Weaving Between the Lines

How Navajos Spin History in Textile Art at The Saint Louis Art Museum

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Fruits of the Loom

Simple and elegant, Navajo textiles compose a vibrant art form that depicts the evolution of Native-American culture.

A European woman visiting America for the first time stood among a group of tourists near Kayenta, Ariz., observing a Navajo woman weaving a rug. The visitor moved forward, touched the article with reverence, turned to her companions and said, "This is the handiwork of gods." Certainly the rich colors and hand-spun elegance evoke such feelings, but they also reflect three centuries of earthly struggle for cultural survival.

Terraced zig-zags and geometric shapes in this blanket/rug from the 1890s suggest the Mexican Saltillo influence. The cross motif dates from the tribe's early basketry patterns. Right, a chief's blanket (1865-75) is woven with yarns both spun by the tribe (natural white and indigo blue) and recycled (red). By the mid-19th century, the chief's blanket had developed into a distinctive trade item for the Navajos to trade or sell to other Indian tribes.

A rug from the 1890s, left, employs both handspun and commercial yarns, natural and synthetic dyes. At the end of the 19th century, Navajo weavers were becoming more market-oriented, increasingly relying on materials brought to the reservation by the railroad. A wearing blanket from the 1860-70s, right, reflects the simple striped pattern the Navajos borrowed from the Pueblo Indians, their first neighbors in New Mexico.

From the time that small nomadic bands of Navajos migrated from Canada to northern New Mexico in the 14th century, the tribe felt exiled within its new homeland, subjected to tribal raids, unfriendly governments, warfare and captivity. Some cultures resist outside influences at enormous cost; others yield but surrender their identity. The Navajos turned the imposition of foreign culture into a dynamic, artistic voice expressed for centuries through their textiles.

Navajo weaving began to emerge in the 1600s, thanks to a (sometimes) adversarial relationship with the neighboring Pueblo Indians, from whom they learned the skill. Navajo slave raids on Pueblo settlements often were motivated by a desire to capture the best weavers. The Navajos adopted the Pueblos' materials and techniques—the upright loom, indigenous cotton, basic weaving methods—then, according to Ann Hedlund, guest curator of a Navajo textile exhibit opening at The Saint Louis Art Museum this month, "quickly surpassed their teachers."

Having mastered the basics, the Navajos began to broaden their horizons. To the simple banded designs of the Pueblo they added their own basketry patterns of crosses, diamonds and triangles. To the subtle, dark blue Mexican indigo dye they added explosively bold blocks of color. They developed the potential of

Navajo Textiles Show
The Saint Louis Art Museum
Oct. 26-Jan. 4.

Experience how art reflects history at "Navajo Weavings from the Andy Williams Collection," on exhibit at The Saint Louis Art Museum from Oct. 26 to Jan. 4. The pop singer's collection, considered among the finest in the world, spans six decades of Navajo weaving, from 1860-1920.

One of the first major collectors of Navajo weavings in the United States, Williams began purchasing the textiles 40 years ago while touring in concert. Williams, who will be in St. Louis for the opening of the first public exhibition of his collection, selected each textile personally. The weavings previously adorned his home in Los Angeles and his theater in Branson, Mo.

The 50 textiles at the museum reflect not only the social history of America, but also the dynamics of acculturation and the promise of change.

Left: Created during the 1880s, a blanket/rug is spun from wool produced by "churros," the sheep brought to the Southwest by Spanish settlers. Churros produced only 1½ pounds of wool per shearing, so each article demanded stockpiling resources. A double saddle blanket from the 1880s, right, features the twill tapestry weave, a technique perfected by the Navajos and in use today in fabrics throughout the world.

a technique called the tapestry weave that the Pueblos found minimally useful—today its application can be found in articles as diverse as Chinese silk robes and contemporary Scandinavian carpets.

The Spanish, dominant in the American Southwest in the late 17th century, exploited the Navajo talent for textiles, routinely taking prisoner the tribe's master weavers. With Spanish rule, however, also came goats and "churro," the common sheep of Spain, affording the Navajos additional materials to expand their oeuvre from plain white cotton to the natural churro colors of ivory, gray, brown and black.

At peace with the Spanish by 1720, the Navajos engaged in increasingly fractious raids with the Utes and Comanches that pushed them farther west into northern New Mexico. In 1821, control of the Southwest passed from Spain to the newly autonomous Mexican government, and again political disruption wrought artistic rewards. Bolts of "bayeta," loosely woven red cloth, originally made in England and shipped to Mexico via Spain, became available to Navajo weavers, and the enterprising artists unraveled bayeta yarns and rewove them into their blankets —a pioneering concept that enabled the Navajos to indulge their enchantment with the brilliant red hues.

Where: Special Exhibition Gallerie, The Saint Louis Art Museum, 1 Fine Arts Drive in Forest Park, St. Louis, Mo.

Admission : $5, adults; $4 students and seniors; $3, children 6-12, free to children under 6. Free to all on Tuesdays.
Special Activities: Indian & Western Art Show, Oct. 25-26 (at the Holiday Inn Westport); a Navajo Festival for Families (Nov. 1-2), a gourmet dinner of Native-American food (Nov. 4), sand-painting demonstrations (Nov. 8-9), all at The Saint Louis Art Museum.
Information: (314) 721-0072

A contemporary exhibit of Navajo textiles, "Navajo Weaving from the Santa Fe Collection, 1971-1996," continues at the National Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City through January 1998.

The divided pattern in a late 19th-century saddle blanket, left, suggests it was meant to be folded in half. Such thick twill-weave articles made excellent small rugs and were bought by Anglo-Americans for this purpose after 1900. Right, a chief's blanket from the 1870s incorporates both handspun wool and commercial yarns supplied to the Navajos by the U.S. government after their internment at Bosque Redondo. The geometric design and optical illusion are fundamental Navajo conceits. The "nine-spot" pattern of diamonds and triangles expands almost to fill the foreground of the blanket, visually minimizing the black and white stripes.

Mexican influences drove Navajo weavers from the simple stripes of the Pueblo Indians and the crosses and triangles of their own basketry patterns to the serrated zigzags and geometric shapes reminiscent of Saltillo serapes, named for the northern weaving center of Mexico where they were made.

In 1846 when Mexico ceded much of the Southwest to the United States, the Navajos encountered a new cultural challenge: the federal government's land grab. The U.S. Army staged repeated forays into Navajo country and in 1863 destroyed their fields and livestock, imprisoning most of the population (some 8,000 people) on a reservation at Bosque Redondo in east central New Mexico.

The miserable conditions did not curtail the tribe's artistic achievement. To substitute for the wool of their lost sheep, the Army provided new materials for weav-ing —commercial yarns in bright, synthetic hues and bolts of fabric from European, Mexican and later northeastern American mills that were unraveled and recycled into Navajo designs.

In 1868 the Navajos were released, assigned a reservation in Arizona, northern New Mexico and southern Utah, and given 14,000 churros. Under authority of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Navajos settled into a more commercial way of life that, in terms of textile development, fortuitously exposed them to a broader segment of Anglo-America. With the expansion of the railroad (by 1882, it reached Gallup, N. M., on its push to the West Coast), and the growth of a market economy, the Navajos emerged from a primitive to a commercial existence. Previously, the weavers' yield met basic needs—clothing and blankets for home use and tribal trade. But in response to the growing demand from an off-reservation market, particularly wealthy Americans from the East, artists followed traders' suggestions and began to use heavier materials, to experiment with the wide range of synthetic dyes that reached the Southwest through trading posts. By 1900, Navajo weaving was primarily market-oriented, offering almost exclusively the floor rugs that were so prized.

Cultural upheaval may have threatened the health and livelihood of the Navajo tribe, but never their artistic spirit. Today, the enduring characteristic of Navajo textiles is the resonance of evolution—art that truly is the sum of its experience.

—Cheryl Jarvis