



HANOOLCHAADÍ:

Historic Textiles Selected by Four Navajo Weavers

STORY BY DAVINA R. TWO BEARS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANN HEDLUND

“**N**izhóníyee’,” my grandmother would breathe, as she witnessed a beautiful creation. That simple word, uttered from her lips, conveyed love, admiration, and pride to her granddaughter, whenever I showed her my drawing, beading, or sewing projects. When words are exchanged in Navajo, it means more to us, has more feeling and significance attached to it, than if you say it in English.

“Nizhóníyee’,” this is what I say to the exhibition that was curated by four Navajo weavers and an anthropologist. The translation to me is not just that the final exhibit is beautiful, admirable, and a source of pride, but, so are the initial concept, the total process, and the people involved. In this explosive time of repatriation and reburial issues, of museum consultation and collaborations with Native Americans, another wall has come tumbling down. This time it was at

the Museum of Northern Arizona (MNA) with the exhibition, *“Hanoolchaadí: Historic Textiles Selected by Four Navajo Weavers.”*

Opening night of Hanoolchaadí—which means in English, both hand-carded (combed) sheep’s wool and the nineteenth century blanket style known as the “chief blanket”—was a lively occasion at the museum. The air was crisp autumn cold outside, but it was warm inside. The entrance to the museum was already crowded, as the Navajo weaving family, who served as co-curators to the exhibit, made their way in. They were immediately met with hand shakes

ABOVE *Three generations of Navajo weavers, (l to r) Grace H. Nez, and Lena, Mary, and Gloria Begay.*
 OPPOSITE PAGE *Dzool Halí Biyázhi, or “the children of the moving-fast design.” Blanket/Rug, circa 1885.*



and greetings. The younger daughter weavers, Gloria Begay (b. 1970) and Lena Begay (b. 1969), both *Ma'ii deeshgiizhnii* (Coyote Pass People) born for *Tó dích'í'ni* (Bitter Water People), were dressed in contemporary style with a touch of southwestern flair. Mother weaver Mary Lee Begay (b. 1941), *Ma'ii deeshgiizhnii* born for *Kiyaa'áani* (Towering House Peoples), and grandmother weaver Grace Henderson Nez



Discussing their choices of Navajo rugs, the weavers spent hours in a storage room at the Museum of Northern Arizona. Photo by Davina R. Two Bears.

(b. 1913), *Ma'ii deeshgiizhnii* born for *Deeshchii'ni* (Start of the Red Streak People), looked resplendent in their traditional Navajo full skirts, glimmering turquoise jewelry, and silverwork.

The crowd was eventually herded into the Navajo rug exhibition room. I listened to Michael Fox, the Director of MNA, introduce the weavers and announce that Gloria would say a prayer in Navajo. One immediately picked up on the strength and confidence flowing through her words. In the stillness, she thanked all of the Holy People and asked for their blessings. At the end of her prayer, she translated it briefly into English, and stressed that "We do not pray to gods and goddesses," but to "Holy People of the Navajo." To hear a young *Diné* woman confidently address Navajo Holy People in our ancient language, is a slap in the face of Navajo stereotypes: Gloria is a computer science

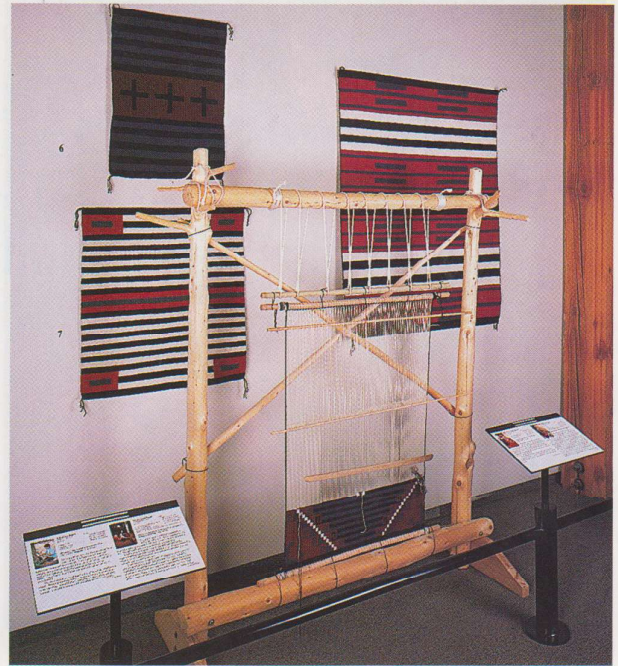
engineer major at the University of Oklahoma, as well as an accomplished traditional Navajo weaver.

Native people, and their accomplishments and work are often portrayed as dead, static, and incapable of life, change, and vitality. However, today many museums are collaborating with native people to enrich their institutions by displaying and offering more culturally-appropriate, educational, contemporary, and respectful exhibitions and museum programs. It is with exhibitions like *Hanoolchaadí* that *Diné* matrilineal wisdom is being passed on and shared. Knowledge gained from the teachings of *Na'ashjé'ii Asdzáán*, Spider Woman, is being shared by her pupils, *Diné* weavers, to the public in its purest form—directly from the weavers' words. Their strength, humor, wisdom, and sincerity are conveyed to the audience through *Hanoolchaadí*.

The challenge to do such an exhibition was headed by Arizona State University anthropologist Dr. Ann Hedlund, who agreed to do the exhibition, but only if she could work with Navajo weavers on the selection and curation of the rugs. Christine Gishey and I were Native American interns at MNA during the summer of 1994, and we were invited by Dr. Hedlund to write an article on the weavers, the curation process, and the actual exhibition.

The weavers approached for this project are quite an impressive family: grandmother, mother, two daughters, and a great-grandson, together at one time supporting and teaching each other. My grandmother passed on in 1982, and I wish that I learned more from her, because she was a wonderful, energetic, and wise woman. So when I glimpsed this family of four generations, the sight of their togetherness burned into my memory and touched my heart. I hope they realize how lucky they are to have one another, to speak their language, to weave, and do projects such as this one—together as a Navajo family.

The museum's Navajo rug collection is quite extensive, and this exhibition required grueling effort to select rarely seen examples of Navajo weaving. The weavers' choices all date from the 1860s to the early 1900s. "The co-curators' decisions were guided by visual and technical appeal, but also by what they felt best represented Navajo heritage and lifeways, historically and today,"



LEFT Grace Henderson Nez explains her concept of weaving when she stated: "Weaving is important to me. It is based on our religious beliefs and values." RIGHT Each weaver wove a rug for the Hanoolchaadi exhibit, and the above loom displays a rug in process by Mary Lee Begay. Photo by Gene Balzer.

noted Dr. Hedlund. "I'm trying to question myself," stated Gloria. "What would stand out in this rug? The dye, the yarn, the lazy line, the wool, the mending? If people are going to be at the exhibit and looking at these rugs, what is going to be different about each rug?" she asked. It was Gloria's idea to show a rug on the loom. "I just think it's interesting for the visitors and the people who are going to be observing to see the warp, the tools that are used, how it is woven, and how the yarns come out from the weaving."

The museum's storage area was well lit, but close in the summer heat. The smell of mothballs permeated the air as the old rugs were rolled out onto the large white viewing table. Some of the rugs showed signs of aging and deterioration. The weavers expressed their thoughts about repairing a rug. "A long time ago, they prepared their minds with it [weaving]," stated Mary. "If I made a rug, and sometime in the future it wore out in one place, and someone repaired it, and they didn't do it right, then they will not be well. It is that way, it is said." Gloria added, "A lot of emotional, mental, physical contributions go into weaving. It's kind of like the spirit of the

original weaver is still woven within the weaves of the rugs. The effect is 'Leave my rug alone. Leave my work alone. This is mine. These are my designs. So back off! If it's going to deteriorate, let it wear and tear.'"

The weavers' intensity could be felt as they conversed both in Navajo and English; it was truly a dynamic process. Excited "ooohhs" and "ahhs" were continuously heard as they sat, paced, and gestured with their hands to emphasize their points. It was an occasion filled with teasing, laughter, and intense concentration, as well as exhaustion.

Dr. Hedlund had to ask either Lena or Gloria for translations every time Mary or Grace spoke in Navajo, which of course was quite often. This added to the fervor and intensity of the choosing process, as did Dr. Hedlund's constant questioning, all of which was recorded for future transcription. At every opportunity, she would ask "Why this one? Why not this one? What does your grandmother think? What does mother think?" Sometimes the answer would be a lengthy one, other times it was only "Shil yá'á'tééh" or "It is beautiful/good/right with me."



ABOVE *Mary L. Begay stated: "Rug weaving is my life and brings me happiness."* OPPOSITE PAGE *Ak'idah'nilt, or "object placed on top." Saddle blanket, circa 1985-1895. Photo by Gene Balzer.*

The older designs appealed to Grace. "The designs are very bold and simple. There were not that many designs back in the old days. Now they are doing it [weaving] differently [not following the normal way]," she said. "They place *ye'ii* [*Yé'ii bicheii* dancers] on the rugs. We could probably use those as our designs, but it is our religion. It is holy to us. It is through our Holy People that we've come into being, and that is the reason I don't use *ye'ii* as part of my designs. To some people, they are not sacred, so they use them as their design. The old type of designs are good. They did not do it that way. It is good with me to weave the old designs. This is the way my grandmother used to weave. I'm thinking maybe she's the one that wove this rug, that is why I chose this one."

When Gloria asked her mother why she weaves the old styles, Mary replied: "Well, it's just good to me. That's how our maternal grandmothers began weaving. *Na'ashjé'ii Asdzáán*, her clothes were not designed/created/drawn that way [fancy—like with birds, sand paintings, dinosaurs, coyote, etc.]. In the weaving from long time ago, the designs were kept simple.

66 That's why it's pretty with me. Before the

bilagáana, white people, moved out among the Navajos, and before the trading posts were made, weaving was used for clothing/garments."

The weavers were asked why they decided to be a part of this project and what they liked best about the rugs chosen by them. Grace responded that despite the pain in her knee and responsibilities at home, she wanted to help because she and Dr. Hedlund have a good relationship. She continued, that "*Hanoolchaadí*—to see the carded wool or chief blankets—that was the most beautiful to me." Mary said, "The ones we separated—I like all of them. There's not one I think less of...not one I think more of. I think of all of them as the same."

"I chose to do this exhibit for Navajo weaving to be recognized so I can meet powerful people and get them interested in my talent and progress," explained Gloria. "I honor weaving, and my mom, grandmother, and other Navajo weavers, especially the elderly. The third reason is to teach other Navajos and to preserve Navajo culture. What I liked best about picking out rugs was the history. We found out about the dates, colors—the different types of dyes and types of red variation, and the designs, of course. Back then, they [Navajo weavers] had unusual designs. They had swastikas, arrows, but today you don't see that. I say the history was the best part in picking out these rugs. It was a really tough decision-making process, but we got through it," she noted.

"Well, I like to participate, and learn from it [the exhibit process], to benefit me," said Lena. "Maybe one of these days I'll have a little girl and she'll learn from it. A lot of young girls and boys would like to learn how to weave, silversmith, and sand paint. I would like to show them and keep the tradition alive; that is probably one of the main reasons. I am still learning. I'll probably never stop. From my mother I learned a lot, and I thank her for that. Just like my sister said, if it wasn't for them [her mother and grandmother], I wouldn't be doing this and I wouldn't be in here right now. What I like most about the rugs that we picked are the colors. There are a lot of different color combinations."

Gloria, whose goal in life is to develop a Navajo computer programming language, said, "It inspired me to do more engineering and physics, working with mathematical equations,



converting that into a computer language and having a big old Navajo rug design come out. I tried it. Me and a Navajo physicist got together... we came out with a bunch of equations and put them together. His worked, but mine didn't. He entered in a bunch of equations into the computer, and here comes this print out, right?—of a TWO GREY HILLS!"

Lena was inspired to weave new rugs, incorporating the designs she came across in the museum. "I'll probably put the ideas I've seen on my loom, not just the ideas, but also the colors. That is what I would like to work with."

I asked the weavers if they have any advice for a beginner like me. "Set up a loom, and that's

where you'll learn," advised Grace. "It doesn't take long to learn. "The ideas are clear, even though the designs may be complicated. You have to think. When you really concentrate hard, you will learn the designs."

Gloria's answer to me came after she and her grandmother conversed in Navajo for a few minutes. "I think she [Grace] answered like that because that's how she taught my mom. With us [Gloria and Lena], it was almost the same way. It wasn't our choice. It was like, 'Here's a rug. Sit down and weave!' But my mother stepped us through the process with close observation, supervision, and a lot of guidance. Of course, we had tons of questions like, 'I don't wanna



LEFT Gloria J. Begay stated: "Navajo rug weaving isn't just visual art, but rather the feelings and wisdom that go into it." RIGHT Lena L. Begay, pictured with her son, stated: "If it weren't for my mother and grandmother, I wouldn't be doing this. I thank them."

do this! Why do I have to do this?' I would just say that if you find it within you, within your heart, to really find out about your Navajo culture—the foundation, and to learn how to read and write, speak Navajo—I say, go for it."

"It has to come from within you," explained Mary. "If you are lazy to do it, and if you say the words are hard for me, it won't do. And, also the loom, and setting up the rug, is the same way. If you are lazy, and if you think, 'This is not for me,' then also it will not do. You have to start with it on your own. That's the only way one will learn. A long time ago, when I was a child, when my mother was out herding the sheep, I would start weaving on her loom. When she returned, she would tell me, 'You didn't string this one right.' Then she would pull the yarn back out," Mary laughs. "Pretty soon, my mother said, 'I will set up a separate loom for you,' and she did. At that time, I used to be lazy to do it, and I'd only do two rows. She'd tell me, 'Look at how you did this part, you didn't do it right, your weaving started to go in.' She was fast when she taught me. She would show me just once really fast. I would think to myself how I was told to weave, and that's how I started to weave. She would tell me about the designs, and I'd combine what she told me with my own designs to weave rugs."

"Have a lot of patience," said Lena. "Don't give up once you start. It takes a lot of time, and you have to make time for it. Those are probably

the two main priorities when weaving. When I started weaving, and my mom put up a loom, I didn't know what kind of design I was going to put in my rug. So I built my way up from entry level weaving—from making plain or striped rugs—to crosses. So now I make a lot of old style rugs with stripes and crosses, but I'm still learning."

I felt self conscious, as I wondered what they thought of me. For I am clearly a Navajo woman, but an enigma, as I don't speak fluent Navajo and could not communicate with them directly in my own language. However, I enjoyed my time spent with all four of the weavers. They were very kind to me, and I sympathized with them and the challenging curating process. They had to take time out from their busy lives and schedules to come to Flagstaff from Ganado, Santa Fe, and Phoenix to make this happen. They were committed to see it through, and they did. I admire them as a family and as curators. I hope to be a curator and a weaver some day, and I know I'll look back at this experience for guidance and inspiration in the future. I will also remember this experience because I learned more about myself as a Navajo woman, as well as an important aspect of my heritage and culture—weaving. *Ahéhee,* thank you, Grace, Mary, Gloria, and Lena for sharing so much of yourselves with me, the public, and the Museum of Northern Arizona. —