

Open Sesame Museum Reveals Woven Treasures

BOULDER, CO—Diamonds and zigzags of black, white, and grey wool move across a Navajo rug woven in 1905. Twined black and yellow tassels hang from the white-on-white diamonds and zigzags Navajo artist Morris Muskett wove a century later. Though generations separate these two magnificent weavings, an evolving tradition links them. Both pieces now wait in Henderson Hall.

“They’re waiting for their chance,” says noted textile expert Ann Hedlund (PhD ’83).

She’s speaking of the hundreds of historic and contemporary Navajo weavings preserved in the University of Colorado’s renowned Joe Ben Wheat collection of Southwestern textiles. This spring, some 90 richly varied pieces from the collection begun by former University of Colorado curator and professor Joe Ben Wheat will have their special time of prominence.

That time begins on May 29, 2009, with the opening of *Navajo Weaving: Diamonds, Dreams, Landscapes*, a new exhibition of textiles, talks by experts, demonstrations, and special activities at the University of Colorado Museum of Natural History that will close next June.

“Our goal is to showcase the breadth and depth of the collection, spotlighting pieces that have not been exhibited before,” says Jim Hakala, assistant director of the museum. The

result will be unparalleled public access to the treasures of a collection regarded as one of the five best in the world.

“The growth of the collection came from Joe Ben Wheat’s intense interest in the subject of the collection,” says Hedlund. Currently director of the Gloria F. Ross Center for Tapestry Studies, a curator, and a professor, Hedlund speaks with first-hand knowledge of Wheat, who chaired her doctoral committee. “Joe Ben [Wheat] was always interested in sharing the collection,” says Hedlund. “I think he’d be pleased to see the exhibits made public.”

Wheat arrived in Boulder in 1953, fresh from a PhD in anthropology at the University of Arizona. Hired as the first curator of anthropology at the University of Colorado Museum of Natural History, he held that position until he retired in 1986; he died in 1997 at age 81. When he arrived, the anthropology collection housed fewer than 9,000 objects. When he retired, collections had grown to more than 37,000 objects, including 700 Southwestern textiles.

It was during a 1972 sabbatical that Wheat set out to learn how to build a representative collection of these textiles. From the outset, according to Stephen Lekson, curator of anthropology, Wheat’s archaeological interests and training inclined him to see weaving as part of cultural history and so to study where textiles originated and how they were woven. This focus on provenance and technique has made Wheat’s book *Blanket*

Weaving in the Southwest, edited by Hedlund from Wheat's drafts and notes and published posthumously in 2003, a leading reference work.

"He never told students what to do," says Hedlund. "He always raised questions and allowed us to explore. As he shared his enthusiasm for the subject he was following, he drew us in naturally."

Wheat grew the textile collection in much the same manner. Seeking sources in the field, he built friendships with traders and collectors who shared his fascination and welcomed his research. He often traveled the Navajo reservation with gallery owner Jackson Clark, for example. Clark's son (also Jackson) now runs the family's gallery, which supports the museum with an annual rug auction. Wheat was also, says Hedlund, "extremely generous. He purchased many pieces for himself and his wife that he ultimately donated to the museum, knowing they'd find their purpose there."

As exhibit designer and weaver Judy Newland (MS '00) was choosing diamonds, dreams, and landscapes to present, she gave not just history but also evolution and experiment their special time of prominence. If visitors to a remarkable collection draw only one conclusion, Newland wants it to be this: "Navajo weaving is not a dying art but a vibrant art form."

Joslyn Green is a textile enthusiast and freelance writer based in Denver, Colorado.

If You Go

“Navajo Weaving: Diamonds, Dreams, Landscapes”
May 2009 – June 2010

A series of three textile exhibits showcasing the Joe Ben Wheat collection.

Opening May 29, 2009, “Diamonds and Beyond.” Featured: Ann Hedlund, Director of the Gloria F. Ross Center for Tapestry Studies at University of Arizona.

Opening October 2, 2009. “Dreams, Schemes and Stories.” Featured: Navajo printmaker and University of Colorado faculty member Melanie Yazzie.

Opening February 5, 2010, “Landscapes.” Featured: Navajo weaver and silversmith Morris Muskett.

Location:

Changing Exhibits Gallery, University of Colorado Museum of Natural History,
Henderson Building, 1035 Broadway, Boulder, CO.

Hours:

Monday-Friday 9am–5pm

Saturday 9am–4 pm

Sunday 10am–4pm

Admission: FREE

<http://cumuseum.colorado.edu/Exhibits/NavajoWeaving/>