

Reading a Southwestern Textile

Like a detective collecting clues, the analyst observes the yarns and dyes, the weaving techniques, and the designs used in a textile. Historical documents and photographs also give information about the textile or its owners. The history of Southwestern weaving can be understood through the analysis of individual textiles.

Since 1972, Dr. Joe Ben Wheat has examined over 3000 Southwestern textiles with known origins. His objectives have been to:

1. Distinguish Pueblo, Navajo, and Spanish textiles woven in the Southwest;
2. Identify shared ideas among the three cultures as seen in the woven textiles;
3. Date these textiles.

Dr. Wheat's systematic approach uses three major sources of data: physical descriptions, chemical tests, and archival information. The conclusions drawn from their research have revolutionized our understanding of Southwestern textiles.

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

The physical description of textiles begins with careful observation and recording of the overall dimensions, style, and materials of the piece. Then the fibers used in the textile are identified: Are they wool, cotton, silk, or some other material? Tightness of the weave and corner treatments are described. Researchers can infer the use of either synthetic or natural dyes from examining the colors and yarns. However, chemical testing is often required for verification.

Materials have changed dramatically over time. The prehistoric Pueblo peoples used yucca fiber, cotton and natural dyes. The Spanish introduced churro wool, but by the late 19th century, merino wool was used. Commercial yarns and synthetic dyes have been prevalent since the mid-1800's

Stylistic Analyses: The study of blankets with known origins has helped to define periods during which certain design elements were used. However, designs can be shared between culture groups and can reoccur at different times. For this reason, stylistic analyses must be combined with other types of evidence to help understand a textile.

An example of a style that changed over time is the Navajo "chief blanket." The chief blanket style was valued for its finely-spun wool and tight weave, which often made the blanket waterproof. The term "chief blanket" was introduced by European traders. Chief blankets were widely traded to the Pueblos and tribes of the Great Plains.

The development of this style is roughly divided into four phases, defined by the design layout.

1. First Phase (1800-1850): Featured simple horizontal striped of varying widths.

2. Second Phase (1850-1865): Stripes were still prominent, with 12 rectangles added. At first small, the rectangles became larger over time, creating a grid-like effect.
3. Third Phase (1865-1880): Rectangles evolved into 9 small diamonds, which gave way to explosive diamond shapes that dominated the pattern.
4. Fourth Phase (1870-1885): Sometimes the diamond figures in this phase were so large that stripes became background. Serrate (zigzag) patterns replaced classic terraced designs.

Today chief blanket patterns are reproduced as rugs and home decorations. The phases of chief blanket development are roughly sequential. However, a great deal of overlap exists in design styles, so analysis of structure, fibers, and dyes is necessary for accurate dating.

CHEMICAL TESTING

Chemical testing can aid in identifying the dyestuffs used in historic textiles. When combined with the results of physical analysis and documentary research of a textile itself, dye analysis can assist in defining time periods associated with the use of particular dyes.

ARCHIVAL INFORMATION

Documentation helps the researcher to place a textile in space and time. That textile then serves as an example of materials, techniques, uses, and designs of that time. With enough documented objects, a framework can be established for dating and identifying undocumented objects.

Collection histories: Histories of a textile may be obtained from diaries or letters written by an early owner, trading post bills of sale, or photographs of a collection in an historic home. Written documents indicate the types of weaving materials imported to the Southwest, the kinds of native blankets traded to the East, or the work or military records of people who acquired blankets.