

## **Three Southwest Weaving Cultures**

Weaving traditions of the American Southwest include the work of Pueblo Indians, Navajo Indians, and Spanish colonists of the Rio Grande Valley in New Mexico. Each group had its own weaving traditions, and each influenced the others. What the groups adopted or retained depended upon a number of aspects including their unique lifestyles, histories, and tastes.

### **PUEBLO WEAVING**

The Pueblo people were weaving cloth long before the arrival of Europeans in the New World. Two types of looms were used by the Pueblo people: the back strap loom, used to make sashes and belts, and the vertical loom. The vertical loom was useful for producing larger fabrics, such as blankets, shirts, dresses, and ponchos. The vertical loom is still used by Pueblo and Navajo weavers today.

Prehistoric Pueblo weavers used plant fibers, such as cotton or yucca, and a variety of natural dyes. When the Spanish colonized the Southwest, they brought with them churro sheep and indigo dye. The Pueblo people incorporated these new materials into their weaving, although cotton remained in use for traditional garments.

The Spanish imposed a tax on the Pueblos which was paid in the form of textiles. As a result, Pueblo weaving changed, and simpler, looser weaves were used to save time. In some cases woven designs were replaced by embroidery to simplify production further. While weaving was generally done by men, embroidery was the craft of women. Geometric embroidery designs are reminiscent of designs seen on prehistoric baskets and blankets.

### **CONTEMPORARY PUEBLO WEAVING**

When the Southwest became U.S. territory, government schools were established, and children were required to speak English and wear Anglo-style clothing. Clothing and dress cloth were distributed to families, and men were encouraged to leave traditional pursuits and seek wage labor. As a result, hand-woven fabrics declined in favor of commercial clothing. Hand-woven cotton garments were still used for ceremonial purposes.

By the early 20th century, weaving had nearly ceased in the New Mexico pueblos. Most hand-woven ceremonial fabrics were produced by Hopis and traded to the other pueblos. In some cases, hand-woven fabric was very difficult to obtain, and commercial cloth was used instead. At Government schools, girls were encouraged to embroider decorations on placemats, wallets, and other items for tourist trade.

Today Pueblo weavers produce a small number of items for sale, but the majority of Pueblo weaving continues to be for traditional use.

## **NAVAJO WEAVING**

The Navajo people came to the Southwest from western Canada between A.D. 1300 and 1500. Anthropologists think that they learned weaving from the Pueblo Indians in the mid-17th century, adopting the Pueblo woven clothing styles. Navajo weavers experimented with style, technique, and design. Designs in Navajo textiles from the Classic Period (1700-1860) are similar to designs found in their basketry. Navajo textiles were often made with yarn from raveled cloth.

Unlike Pueblo and Spanish Colonial people in the Southwest, the Navajos were nomadic. Sheep from the Spanish, and the vertical loom from the Pueblos, fit in well with the mobile lifestyle. Saddle blankets, harnesses, and cinches were woven for the horses, which were also important for mobility.

Navajo weavers borrowed a number of design elements from the Spanish and then elaborated on them in their weaving.

In 1863 the Navajo were incarcerated at the Bosque Redondo Reservation in eastern New Mexico. Their herds of churro sheep were destroyed, and the Navajo were issued commercial yarns and dyes. These new materials significantly changed Navajo weaving. The use of commercial materials in weaving continued even after the Navajo were allowed to return to their land.

By the late 1800's, many Navajo were wearing Anglo-style clothing, and textiles were woven for sale rather than for personal use. The tastes of traders and buyers influenced designs and materials. Rugs, rather than blankets or garments, became the focus of Navajo weaving.

## **CONTEMPORARY NAVAJO WEAVING**

In the first half of the 20th century, local traders were the main outlet through which weavers sold their fabrics. The traders worked closely with the weavers to produce items they could sell. Different regions of the reservation became known for their distinctive styles. Crystal, Two Gray Hills, Wide Ruins, and Ganado are distinctive regional styles that developed at this time.

In the latter half of the 20th century, weavers have been able to travel greater distances to sell their products or to purchase materials of their choice. In addition, an increasing pride among the Navajo people in their Native American heritage has renewed interest in weaving. Growing numbers of Navajo weavers today are becoming recognized as artists, free to innovate or express themselves through the traditional medium of weaving. The long history of blending tradition with innovation in Navajo weaving clearly is to continue into the future.

## **SPANISH COLONIAL WEAVING**

The Spanish colonized the southwest from Mexico, settling along the Rio Grande Valley in New Mexico beginning around 15948. They brought with them Andalusian churro sheep, indigo dye, and a familiarity with the horizontal-bed treadle loom, used throughout Europe. The presence of Pueblo weavers in the Rio Grande Valley made the new Spanish colony an ideal center for textile production. Workshops were set up using the horizontal treadle loom which could produce textiles of nearly unlimited length. By 1840, 20,000 blankets were exported to Mexico annually over the Santa Fe-Chihuahua Trail.

The most significant items introduced to southwest weaving by the Spanish were wool, indigo-blue dye, and bayeta, a machine-woven cloth which was unraveled and used as yarn by Native American weavers. Spanish colonial designs were mainly stripes and center-dominant motifs borrowed from the weavings of Saltillo, a weaving center in Mexico. As Anglo-Americans began to enter the Southwest via the Santa Fe Trail, American quilt designs also had an influence on Spanish colonial weaving.

When the Southwest became part of the United States in 1846, trade routes shifted. Trade with Mexico declined in favor of trade centers in the eastern U.S. via the Santa Fe Trail and, later, the railroads. The demand for the Hispanic blankets produce in the Rio Grande Valley decreased as machine-woven fabrics from the ever-industrializing U.S. became more available. By 1900, Hispanic weaving traditions in the Southwest had all but died out.

## **CONTEMPORARY HISPANIC WEAVING**

In the early 20th century, Hispanic weaving shifted from production of utilitarian good to souvenirs for tourists. This meant a change form blankets to items such as throw rugs, couch throws, and pillow covers. To increase production, weavers began to use commercial yarn and standardized sizes. Designs were done in a "pan-Southwestern" style to satisfy the expectations of tourists.

During the Great Depression, weaving gained impetus in some communities as many other means of income were lost. World War II also changed Hispanic weaving traditions as women replaced men in the weaving industry.

Since the 1930s, revivals of traditional Hispanic arts have played an important role in the continuation of Hispanic weaving. Today, many weavers in New Mexico and southern Colorado produce high quality textiles which reflect the richness of a long Spanish heritage in the Southwest.