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Navajo Weaving Looks Ahead

By DAVID L. NEUMANN

IT is still customary to refer to the woven articles produced by the Navajo Indians as blankets. Actually, however, they are rugs. With exceptions, notably the saddle blanket, the Navajos have woven no blankets for many years. Rugs, intended for floor use, form all but a small per cent of the product of Navajo looms. This is a fundamental difference between archaic and modern Navajo weaving.

Many things are true of the blanket, intended to wear on the person by day or to use as bedding by night, that are not true of rugs, intended for floor coverings. Because a substantial market for Navajo rugs exists the Indian weaver produces an article intended to meet this demand. Barring sheep and wool, the Navajo rug is the chief item these Indians have to sell. With it they can obtain money to purchase such goods as their way of living requires, goods which they can not produce themselves. The latter includes blankets for personal wear and for bedding. Today the Navajo buys and uses commercially made all-wool blankets, often of Indian design, and prefers them to his own. The excellent grade of wool blanket he prefers is better suited to the employment to which it is put than modern Navajo weaving. I hold no brief for the design of these blankets, though often they are colorful and striking when worn. I do consider the Navajo right to prefer them, however. They are far softer and warmer than Navajo weaving of equal weight. They are more comfortable to wear or to sleep in. The colors are fast, and the wearing quality, while not equal to that of the Navajo-woven blanket of old, is good.

When the Navajo weaver was interested in producing an article of apparel, she strove for lightness, waterproof quality, and decorative effect. The more warp threads to the inch, and the harder the twist of the yarn, the finer the

weaving. Energetic battening added to the firmness. The two chief products were the squaw dress and the blanket. Well woven pieces were tight enough to hold water. But the last true squaw dress was woven years ago, and today the Navajo wears a huge skirt of cotton goods and a velveteen blouse. The only squaw dress ever woven today is not woven for wear. The modern pieces are woven in the old pattern for the traders who find a market for a few through the curio trade. They are squaw dresses in design and color and shape, but not in purpose and workmanship. Beside the old squaw dresses they are coarse and hasty.

While a large part of Navajo weaving is still today in the traditional sizes, such as double saddle blankets of say 3x5 feet or singles of 3x3 feet, or rugs of 4x6, a very substantial number of larger pieces are woven. Rugs have been made during recent years as large as 16x14 feet, 10x22 feet, and 13x13 feet. Such sizes were never woven in the old days, as the Indian himself had no use for them. The very fact of the weaving of rugs in these large sizes indicates how different are the problems which the weaver of today encounters from those of fifty or more years ago. It is easily understood that a type of design and color scheme suitable for a 4x6 blanket for personal wear might be admirable, but wholly unsuited to a 16x14 floor covering. Not only are rugs of the above substantial dimensions woven, but also special pieces of odd proportions such as 4x16 feet, representing a floor covering intended for a long hallway. Then too, there is an active demand for quite small pieces known as "pillow tops," commonly used as such, and "runners," respectively about 18x18 and 18x36 inches. These two grades represent today the most hasty, cheap, and hence poorly made pieces of Navajo weaving.

The high skill and fine aesthetic sense of the Navajo weaver merits preservation. The weaving of these Indian women has won them respect, admiration and profit. It is the duty and the interest of those responsible for their wel-

fare to preserve and stimulate their talent and their pride of workmanship. Thirty years ago the Navajo weavers' art touched bottom. Since that time the art has revived appreciably with an active demand and an intelligent and salubrious insistence on good work. Not every trader has a cultivated appreciation of design and color, but all know good workmanship, and good rugs always command a premium price. Every trader knows a clean rug when he sees it, and as cleanliness is prerequisite to fast dyes, insistence on well scoured wool has aided the fastness of colors. Colors must be fast in any textile before it warrants high skill in design and weaving.

The Navajo weavers' art should be preserved, encouraged and stimulated, not because we need have the Navajos' welfare next to our hearts, or for any reason whatever save that it is art. It is unfortunate that many organizations, philanthropic, eleemosynary, and unofficial are today concerning themselves with the affairs of the Navajos. These organizations strive to provide nurses and medical aid to the Indians. This is an unmitigated good. But they also strive to direct his arts and crafts, and, though their motives are above reproach, their understanding of the problem is perverse.

One of the primary tenets of the associations on Indian affairs which interest themselves in Navajo weaving is that the Navajo should return to "Indian" design. What is southwestern Indian design? Or more specifically, what is Navajo design? The answer is clear and carries with it the axiomatic and lucid self-contradiction of any effort to "fix" any system of design. Like every art form, Navajo weaving is a growth, a becoming. Its admirable period is, possibly, past. But if it is to have a new birth it must be along new lines: ". . . notwithstanding all the aesthetics ever penned; there is no timeless and solely-true way of art, but only a *history* of art, marked like everything else that lives with the sign of irreversibility."*

* Oswald Spengler, *Decline of the West*, trans. of C. F. Atkinson, Knopf, 1926. V. I, p. 128

Navajo blanket designs had, in their heyday, no borders. But then they were blankets, not rugs. The Navajo color schemes once employed many vegetable dyes of local origin, but then there were no aniline colors. Some people prefer the old vegetable colors, on the ground, apparently, that they are more "Indian." But, paradoxically, the same people admire the bayeta red, a red taken from a ravelled and rewoven commercial cloth from Europe, dyed with the presumably "unIndian" cochineal Spider!

But to assume that old Navajo design and color were more "Indian" than a rug, such as one in the possession of Mr. G. N. Cotton of Gallup, New Mexico, woven from a color plate (in an issue of the National Geographic Magazine) of a Persian prayer rug, is to confuse a matter of degrees with a matter of essence.

Navajo weaving, design, and color have, from the first day a Navajo wove, been eclectic. The assumption that the Navajos learned to weave from their pueblo neighbors, seems sound enough. Consider what this in itself means when thinking of "Navajo" weaving, design and color! Was a Navajo design ever influenced by an Old Mexico serape? It is probable. Was Navajo weaving influenced by the use to which the textile was to be put? It is certain. Sophisticated tapestry weavers use unlocked joints to strengthen the line between blocks of similar color. This joint the Navajos do not use. The reason is clear. Unlocked joints badly impair the usability of a blanket, while they increase the artistic range of tapestry weaving for wall hangings.

Why decry a new influence on Navajo weaving? A new market for Navajo textiles exists. The product should realize the full artistic possibilities of the new market—a market for rugs. To believe that blankets or wall hangings offer greater stimuli to creative design or color arrangement than do rugs, is to deny the artistic worth of, for example, oriental rugs.

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All arts should, and of necessity must, look forward. This is true of Indian as well as other arts. This truth seems to have been sometimes recognized by the very folk who want the Navajo to go back to "good old Indian design." As examples of what can and has been done in the right and only possible direction, consider San Ildefonso dull black on polished black pottery. This ware finds a ready modern American market at the best prices. It is a ware "unIndian" in that it is a departure. Yet it revived the potter's art at San Ildefonso and gave us several potters whose work compares favorably with the best archaic pottery. Consider modern Indian water-color painting. This art is scarcely thirty years old, yet we have in the southwest a half dozen artists of real merit working in this alien (to archaic pueblo techniques) medium.

What Navajo rug weaving needs is encouragement to go on. It cannot go back.

