

Collecting Navajo Rugs

PART 2: EVOLUTION

Are you attracted to the exquisite beauty and craftsmanship of Navajo rugs but confused by all the terminology being thrown around in the galleries?

We asked expert Dr. Mark Sublette, owner of Medicine Man Gallery in Tucson and Santa Fe, to provide a brief history of Navajo weaving that will help you sort out the most common terms and give you a head start in how to collect these fascinating examples of Native American art.

By Dr. Mark Sublette

Beginning in the 1920s, weavers and traders developed several new regional styles based on a revival of early banded patterns and the predominant use of vegetal dyes. The impetus behind this trend came primarily from Anglo collectors, traders, and government agencies that had a sincere desire to upgrade the

quality of Navajo weaving and return to traditional, pre-rug patterns. The resulting rugs were not literal copies of older pieces, but were creative variations on banded designs using a wide palette of newly developed vegetal dye colors made from indigenous plants, as well as new, subtly colored chemical dyes.

Vegetal Revival

Mary Cabot Wheelwright, founder of the Wheelwright Museum in Santa Fe, probably started the “vegetal revival” by providing weavers around Chinle, Arizona with the new dyes and sketches of old weavings. *Chinle Revival* rugs typically feature bands of repeating geometric motifs alternated with plain



Navajo Crystal Rug,
c.1900, 82 x 47" **\$4,800**



Navajo Chinle textile,
c.1930, 73 x 49" **\$2,500**



Navajo Double Saddle Blanket,
c.1910, 48 x 33½" **\$4,800**



Dr. Mark Sublette, owner of Medicine Man Gallery.

PHOTO BY MEGHANN EPPSTEIN

or striped bands of contrasting colors. Common colors for Chinle rugs include yellow, gold, brown, tan, terra cotta, soft pink and other earth tones, as well as natural wool colors ranging from white to black.

Modern Crystal Rugs

About the time of World War II, Crystal-area weavers developed their own banded revival rugs bearing no resemblance to Moore's early designs. Generally known as *Modern Crystal* rugs, these borderless patterns often combine vegetal and aniline colors in

shades of brown, yellow, and terra cotta with natural greys and whites. One of the characteristics commonly associated with *Modern Crystals* is the "wavy line" pattern. This is accomplished by alternating weft threads of two contrasting colors and tightly "battening" or packing them together, giving the effect of a thin, undulating line.

Wide Ruins

Starting in the 1940s, Sally and William Lippincott, owners of the trading post at Wide Ruins, Arizona worked with the weavers in their area to develop highly

detailed banded patterns rendered in vegetal dyes. Most *Wide Ruins* rugs are characterized by very fine, tightly-spun yarns and a flat, even weave. They feature the full range of new vegetal colors including soft green, mauve, terra cotta, and pale purple, pink and blue as well as the more common yellow, gold, brown, and tan.

Burntwater Rugs

Burntwater, another center of vegetal dye weaving near Wide Ruins, has given its name to a distinctive rug type which combines the bordered, central geometric



Navajo Wide Ruins textile, c.1920, 64 x 35",
\$485



Navajo Shiprock Pictorial, c.1920-40, 34 x 44",
\$2,400



Navajo Yeibeichei Pictorial, c.1925, 42 x 72", \$6,800



Navajo Cornstalk Yei textile,
c.1910, 55 x 38", \$5,800



Navajo Corn / Tree of Life Pictorial Rug,
c. 1915-20, 73" x 42", \$3,800



Navajo Yeibeichei textile, c.1920, 69 x 42", \$5,500

*Pictorials made before the 1940s
are relatively uncommon and usually command
a premium price from collectors.*



Navajo Crystal Textile with the Modern bent,
c.1900, 88 x 49", \$4,850



Navajo Burntwater Textile,
c.1980, 56 x 39", \$2,050



Navajo Single Saddle Blanket (Fancy),
c.1930, 27 x 33", **\$2,450**



Navajo Double Saddle Blanket,
c.1900, 54 x 37", **\$4,500**

designs of modern Ganado and Two Grey Hills rugs with bright pastel, vegetal colors.

Pictorial Rugs

Weavings that incorporate images of objects and people in their designs have slowly gained in popularity since the early days of rug-making. Such *Pictorial Rugs* may include small representational images within a larger geometric design, or may consist primarily—even solely—of a picture. Small pictorial motifs such as feathers, arrows, animals and other common objects may have held some personal significance for the individual weaver. As the modern trappings of Anglo culture filtered onto the Reservation, strange new objects such as cattle, trains, American flags, and letters of the alphabet caught the fancy of some weavers.

Pictorials made before the 1940s are relatively uncommon and usually command a premium price from collectors. After World War II, however, more weavers began making pictorial weavings, frequently filling a small rug with a single scene. Types that have been especially popular since the 1970s include landscape scenes which usually feature red cliffs or mountains, blue sky and clouds, juniper and pine trees, hogans, farm animals, trucks, and people.

Another common format is called the *Tree of Life* pattern, consisting of a corn stalk rising from a Navajo wedding basket, with birds adorning the leaves of the cornstalk.

Despite the obvious symbolism of patterns such as the *Tree of Life*, most pictorial motifs had no specific religious meaning; they simply were objects common in the culture or of special interest to the weaver. The major exceptions to this rule, however, were weavings that portrayed Yeis, or Navajo Holy People, and weavings that recreated sacred ceremonial sand paintings.

Sand Painting Rugs

A small number of weavers made *Sand Painting Rugs* as early as the 1890s in the area around Two Grey Hills. Most

famously, the medicine man Hosteen Klah made a series of sand painting rugs with the help of his mother and nieces between 1919 and 1936. Nevertheless, sand painting rugs were very rare before the 1960s when weavers in the Ganado area began producing them in larger numbers. Although they are not sacred objects in themselves, rugs showing sacred sand painting images have always been somewhat controversial within the Navajo community, and many weavers still decline to make such representations.

Yei and Yeibechai Rugs

Yei pattern rugs feature images of the Holy People drawn from ceremonial sand

paintings but do not recreate an entire painting. The closely related *Yeibechai* rugs show Navajo dancers in the act of portraying Yeis in ceremonies. Typically, the Yeis are highly stylized figures with elongated bodies, short straight legs, and heads facing the viewer. Yeibechais have more human proportions, usually face sideways, and have legs bent in a dancing motion.

The most common types of Yei and Yeibechai rugs feature multiple figures oriented parallel with the weft threads so that the rug appears wider than long when the figures are upright. Two distinct styles emerged in the 1920s. Those made in the area of Shiprock, New Mexico tend

to have light colored backgrounds with no border, and often use brightly colored commercial yarns. Yeis and Yeibechais made in the central part of the reservation (northeastern Arizona) tend to have dark backgrounds with simple borders. They are more likely to incorporate natural wool colors and more subdued chemical shades. Yeis continue to be very popular with collectors and are now being made in nearly all parts of the reservation.

Additional Weavings

Although rugs have been the predominant product of Navajo looms over past century, weavers have continued to make other types of products, if on a smaller scale.

THE EVOLUTION OF NAVAJO WEAVINGS



Navajo First Phase Chief's Blanket
Central Fragment, c.1800, 16 x 54"

1800s

(1800-1850) First Phase Chief Blankets
(1840-1870) Second Phase Chief Blankets

Navajo women begin using wool exclusively and creating finely woven blankets that became popular trade items with Indian and Spanish neighbors.



Navajo Classic Second Phase Chief's Blanket,
c.1860, 56 x 73" \$125,000

(1860-1880) Third Phase Chief Blankets
(1870-1900s) Fourth Phase Chief Blankets

1850s



Navajo Third Phase Chief's Blanket
Variant, c.1870-80, 59 x 65"
\$42,000

Navajo cultural thoroughly embraced the horse in the late 19th century, and saddle blankets were commonly produced until the 1950s.

Single Saddle Blankets were roughly 30" square. *Double Saddle Blankets* were of similar width, but about twice as long and were doubled over when in use to provide extra padding. Early saddle blankets often were woven in simple striped patterns, and double saddle blankets now are sometimes difficult to distinguish from Transitional wearing blankets. By the end of the period, saddle blankets frequently had patterns only at the corners or edges since only those parts

of the blanket were visible when in use. Double saddle blankets sometimes had a different pattern on each half.

Fancy Saddle Blankets, often featuring bright colors, elaborate patterns and fringes, were probably more for show than function. Evidence suggests they often were tied to the saddle skirt behind the cantle rather than being placed under the saddle.

Gallup Throws

During the first several decades of the twentieth century, weavers near railroad stops and tourist centers made small, loosely woven, pictorial mats. Now known as *Gallup Throws*, these inexpensive

items were a favorite, easy to transport souvenir among visitors to the southwest. Pictorial and geometric "rugs", too small for use on the floor and typically made with commercially spun and dyed yarns, remain a staple of the souvenir trade to this day.

Weaving techniques in the Rug Period have primarily been limited to the standard tapestry weave which is identical on both sides. (This term should not be confused with "tapestry rugs" from Two Grey Hills.) Nevertheless, some weavers still practice the more difficult twill weaves, including rare two-faced weavings which have a different twill pattern on each side. In the 1960s, weavers in the area of Coal Mine



Navajo Germantown Eyedazzler, c.1890, 71 x 57"
\$32,000



Navajo Klagetoh textile, c. 1920, 79 x 48"
\$10,500



Navajo Crystal Storm Pattern with Whirling Logs, Waterbug, and Arrow motifs, c.1920, 86 x 56"
\$9,500

1900s

(1880-1900) Banded Blankets
Germantown

(1900s) Ganado Rugs
Klagetoh Rugs
Crystal Rugs

Storm Pattern Rugs
Two Grey Hill Rugs



Ganado Blanket, c. 1920, 70 x 46"
\$6,800



Daisy Tauglechee, Two Grey Hills Storm Pattern, c. late 1940, 78 x 48"
\$48,000

Resulting rugs were not literal copies of older pieces, but were creative variations on banded designs using a wide palette of newly developed vegetal dye colors made from indigenous plants, as well as new, subtly colored chemical dyes.



Navajo Crystal Rug with Valero Stars,
c. 1915, 79" x 50", **\$2,500**

THE EVOLUTION OF NAVAJO WEAVINGS



Navajo Double Saddle Blanket,
c.1900, 54 x 37", **\$4,500**



Navajo Wide Ruins textile,
c.1920, 64 x 35", **\$485**

1920s

(1920s) Chinle Textiles

Modern Crystal Weavings
Wide Ruins Rugs

Burntwater Rugs
Pictorial Rugs,



Navajo Yeibeichei textile,
c.1920, 69 x 42", **\$5,500**

Mesa in Arizona popularized an unusual technique called *Raised Outline* in which the joints between color areas are thicker and appear to rise above the surface of the weaving. Most raised outline rugs also use the technique of alternating single weft threads of two contrasting colors. When tightly battened, they give the appearance of very thin stripes running parallel to each warp thread.

As with any collecting specialty, there is so much to learn about Navajo weaving that it can seem overwhelming for the beginner. The best way to learn is to look at as many weavings as you can in galleries and museums, and don't

be afraid to ask questions! Soon you'll be matching the terminology to the weavings and you'll begin to feel a surge of confidence. When you decide to buy, focus on a reputable dealer who will take time to answer all your questions simply and directly, and make sure they are willing to give you a written guarantee of authenticity. 🙏

For Navajo textile questions and inquiries, please visit www.medicinemangallery.com call (800)422-9382 or email art@medicinemangallery.com.



To view Part 1 of *Collecting Navajo Rugs* by Dr. Mark Sublette, please call **1-877-947-0792** to order the December 2007 issue of *Western Art Collector*.



Navajo Shiprock Pictorial,
c.1920-40, 34 x 44",
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Navajo Chinle textile,
c.1930, 73 x 49", **\$2,500**

Yei and Yeibechai Rugs

Saddle Blankets
(Single, Double, Fancy)

Gallup Throws
Raised Outline

Present



Navajo Burntwater Textile,
c.1980, 56 x 39", **\$2,050**



Navajo Raised Outline - Burntwater Textile,
c.1980, 61 x 42", **\$850**