

NAVAJO BLANKETS

From the collection of  
The Laboratory of Anthropology

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Santa Fe  
New Mexico

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## NAVAJO INDIAN BLANKETS

The Navajo Indians of northern New Mexico and Arizona are best known for their superb craft of weaving. Since the early 1600's when they are first mentioned in the accounts of the Spanish colonists, the Navajo have grown from a comparatively small group until they now number over 50,000, thus gaining the distinction of being the largest tribe, and living on the largest reservation in the United States.

From the early Spanish colonists the Navajo acquired sheep, as well as horses, which enabled them to lead the life of herdsmen. Thus supplied with an abundance of wool, they learned the fine points of weaving from the neighboring Pueblo Indians who for many centuries before Columbus had been expert weavers of native cotton. Weaving among the Pueblos had been a craft of the men, but in taking it over the Navajo were content to leave the new activity in the hands of their women, who were already skilled in basketry. So well did they ply their craft that by the early 1700's Navajo blankets not only supplied the needs of the tribe but had also become an important article of trade.

On crude, upright looms the earliest blankets were coarsely woven of native hand-spun wool, the prevailing patterns apparently being of white with wide transverse stripes of black. For the latter they had an abundance of wool from brown-black sheep common in every flock. Later the natural black was strengthened by a dye composed of ocher burned with pinyon gum and boiled in a

decoction of alder bark. Experiments with color led to the use of a dull red dye from the roots of native shrubs. Later came colors obtained in trade from the Spanish colonists, namely indigo blue and the more brilliant red of cochineal. In time the combination was varied further by the use of native yellow dyes, one from flowering plants, another from the canaigre root. To these was added, sparingly, a dye of green made by combining the yellow with the indigo blue.

The greatest impetus of fine craftsmanship came with the use of fine threads of cochineal red, already spun. These were obtained by raveling a woolen cloth largely of English manufacture known as baize, but called "bayeta" by the Spanish traders. The use of this material led to a marked refinement in the Navajo weavers' craft, for it made necessary the finer spinning of their own yarn to match the fineness of the bayeta. In addition to these fine materials, both native and borrowed, the Navajo weavers in later years made use of woolen yarns of European manufacture, usually called Saxony, which were available in various hues. Thus the weavers came to use a variety of harmonious colors with increasing ingenuity and skill as they developed their own system of design. The blankets of this period, extending through the middle decades of the 1800's, represent the classic period of Navajo weaving. But of the many thousands of such fine specimens that must have come from the looms, comparatively few have survived.

The greatest change in Navajo weaving came with the building of the railroads in the 1880's. Trading stores sprang up on the

reservation where the Navajo were supplied with the newly invented aniline dyes in many gaudy hues. Unused to such violent color combinations, the weavers all but wrecked their trade in blankets before they were led to exercise judgment in their use. Another innovation was the introduction of American yarns called Germantown, which also came in a startling array of colors. While the weavers were adjusting their craft to these changes, there came still another novelty, the manufactured "store blanket" which the dealers traded in great quantities for Navajo wool and sheep. This marked the end of the Navajo blanket as such, for with no further need of laborious weaving for their own use, the Navajo were finally induced to turn their skill to the production of a coarser, heavier type which the traders could market as rugs.

Though fine old blankets are to be found in museums and private collections throughout our country, the largest and most varied collection is that of the Laboratory of Anthropology in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where it is maintained for the appreciation of visitors and for study by the Indians and all who can in any way aid in perpetuating and improving the craft. Increasing in importance year by year, the collection now includes over 400 specimens of Navajo weaving of every period and type, many of which, for craftsmanship and design, are regarded as the finest examples extant. The Laboratory also maintains a registration service through which it has already recorded by means of photographs and minute descriptions, over 800 typical specimens of all periods sent in from other museums and private collections for

this service. Thus through its own collection and its registration records the Laboratory now makes available over 1200 specimens for study, many of which are of the best period between 1840 and 1880.

The fifteen color plates in this portfolio are from specimens in the permanent collection ranging in period from 1850 to 1910. Selected to represent as wide a range of types as possible, they include only a few of the blankets of the classic period for which the Laboratory's textile department is famous. The specimens arranged in order from early to late, are briefly described in the following list.

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Numbers - 909 1/2 etc. - refer to the number of the blanket in the Laboratory Collection.  
PLATES

1. Period, 1850 to 1875. Size, 54 by 72 inches. Typical design of the classic period, with fine hand-spun white and indigo blue, and raveled bayeta for the red. (No. ~~L.A. 10/407.~~) 909 1/2
2. Period, 1850 to 1875. Size, 54 by 70 inches. Design of the classic period, with fine hand-spun white and indigo blue, raveled material for light green, and both raveled bayeta and Saxony yarn for the reds. (No. ~~L.A. 10/424.~~) 910 3/12
3. Period, about 1875. Size, 29 by 48 inches. Zoned design of the classic period. Medium hand-spun white and blues, Saxony yarn for the yellow, and red raveled from bayeta and carded with white to produce the pink. (No. ~~L.A. 10/2538.~~) 9502/12
4. Period, about 1880. Size, 52 by 71 inches. Stepped zigzag design of medium hand-spun wool for white, indigo blue, and part of red. Commercial wool yarns for green and the red at the ends. (No. ~~L.A. 10/454.~~) 9138/12

5. Period, about 1875. Size, 49 by 75 inches. Fine hand-spun wool for white, blue, light red, and green. Raveled bayeta for red and gold. (~~No. L.A. 10/401.~~) 9085/12
6. Period, about 1875. Size, 52 by 70 inches. Antique "Chief" — ? type of fine hand-spun wool for the white, natural brown-black and indigo blue, with raveled bayeta for the red. (~~No. L.A. 10/478.~~) 9160/12
7. Period, about 1875. Size, 60 by 76 inches. "Chief" type of medium hand-spun wool for white, native dyed black, indigo blue, and aniline red. (~~No. L.A. 10/437.~~) 9121/12
8. Period, 1875 to 1885. Size, 52 by 72 inches. Banded back-ground type with medium hand-spun wool for white, native dyed black, and indigo blue. Raveled material used for red, and four-ply manufactured yarn for green. (~~No. L.A. 10/430.~~) 9114/12
9. Period, 1880 to 1890. Size, 50 by 66 inches. Banded back-ground type of medium hand-spun wool in white, natural brown-black, indigo blue, native green, and faded aniline red. (~~No. L.A. 10/2185.~~) 9410/12
10. Period, about 1880. Size, 53 by 77 inches. Serrate edged zigzag and diamond design of fine hand-spun wool for the white, indigo blue, native yellow and green, and aniline red. (~~No. L.A. 10/1940.~~) 9310/12
11. Period, 1875 to 1885. Size 54 by 72 inches. Typical example of stepped zigzags running lengthwise. Medium hand-spun wool for white, indigo blue, red and dark green. The light grey-green is three-ply manufactured yarn. (~~No. L.A. 10/2177.~~) 9408/12
12. Period, about 1890. Size, 53 by 70 inches. Zoned design of medium hand-spun wool for white, native dyed black, and aniline dyes for red and purple, the latter much faded. (~~No. L.A. 10/429.~~) 9113/12
13. Period, about 1890. Size, 46 by 79 inches. Stepped zigzag design of coarse hand-spun wool, with indigo blue, native yellow and green, and aniline reds. (~~No. I.A.F., T. 31.~~) 7112/12
14. Period, about 1900. Size 51 by 78 inches. Serrate edged zigzags and diamonds of medium hand-spun wool, in white, native dyed black, and aniline red. (~~No. I.A.F., T. 192.~~) 7209/12
15. Period, about 1880. Size, 50 by 75 inches. Unusual design with zones of vari-colored zigzags, produced by the "wedge-weave" technique, in which the colored weft threads follow the direction of the zigzags. Coarse soft hand-spun wool throughout. In the zigzags are native brown-black, aniline reds and orange. (~~No. I.A.F., T. 6.~~) 4642/12