NAVAJO BLANKET WEAVING

DESIGN • CULTURE • FUNCTION

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ABSTRACT

People find interest in the way Navajo culture is visually seen but do not understand the social, cultural, and symbolic meanings of a piece of art holds within that native culture. I want to explore how the Navajo culture and beliefs played into the creation of these important and beautiful woven blankets. The blankets were not just about the physical act of creating, they held specific meanings within that tribe. The symbols and designs are artistic elements that contribute to the meaning of each blanket. Two dimensional design & symbols help portray the cultural and social significance of Navajo blanket weaving. The physical act of blanket weaving is intertwined with Navajo culture and beliefs.

INTRODUCTION

The Navajo tribe has a long tradition of weaving. Historically the Navajo used plants as the fibers for their weaving. When sheep were brought over by the Spanish the Navajo began using wool instead of plants. It is said the Navajo learned loom weaving from the Pueblo’s. However, the Navajo relay the story of the Spider Woman coming down and showing them how to weave. Weaving has become a tradition synonymous with the Navajo people. Their intricate blankets are a prized reflection of their history and present day culture. Weaving continues to be a source of livelihood for the Navajo people and a way for ancestors to pass down their traditions.

THESIS

The importance of blanket weaving in Navajo culture is visually seen in the intricacy of their two dimensional design. However, Navajo blanket weaving is not only about the act of creating. The blankets play a significant social and cultural role within the Navajo tribe. Their importance is reflected in the symbols and patterns woven into the blankets.

CHIEF BLANKET

First Phase Chief Blanket

SPIDER WOMAN

In a traditional legend, the Navajo tell how the craft of weaving was given to them by Spider Woman, one of the Holy People. Spider Woman instructed Navajo women how to weave on a loom. It is said that Spider Woman’s home is on top of the Spider Rock in Arizona’s Canyon de Chelly.

FUNCTION

Navajo blankets were originally designed for both practical use and beauty. They were used in everyday life for warmth, bedding, dresses and carrying objects. Men and women used these woven creations as shoulder blankets. Navajo blankets became prized possessions and were used as art blanketing on horses. “Simpson recalled Navajo homes ‘gorgeously decked in red, blue, and white, with rifle erect in hand, and remarked that the spectacle was very imposing.” Today many Navajo blankets are considered highly prized works of art. In modern culture some Navajo blankets are used for function and warmth while others hang on walls for display.

THROUGH NAVAJO EYES

“In the past weavers made blankets to be worn as clothing, for sleeping… Today, when I finish a rug, I sell or trade it to provide for my family. My rugs pay for food, college tuition... and the mortgage.”

Kalley Kears

“A long time ago, everyone would help one another. If someone comes to visit, they would help you with whatever you are doing— even weaving. Now if someone comes, they just say ‘that’s pretty’ and watch. She laughed. But on the day you sell a rug, people are related to you come to ask for a loan!”

Beverly Allen

NAVATO WEAVING TIMELINE

1640 - 1700
Beginning of Navajo Wool Weaving

Early 1700's Increase in Textile Trade

1800 - 1840
First Phase Chief Blankets

Pictorial Weaving & Second Phase Chief Blankets

1860 - 1900
Third Phase Chief Blankets

& Saddle Blankets

1900 - TODAY
Chilly Weaving Revival (Wickle Runs, Crystal, & Pine Springs Patterns) Weaving is Commercialized & a Major Source of Income

REFERENCES

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