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.

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.

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

NAVAJO WEAVING TIMELINE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1640</td>
<td>Beginning of Navajo Wool Weaving</td>
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<tr>
<td>1700</td>
<td>Early 1700's Increase in Textile Trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1800</td>
<td>First Phase Chief Blankets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1840</td>
<td>Pictorial Weaving &amp; Second Phase Chief Blankets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>Third Phase Chief Blankets &amp; Saddle Blankets</td>
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<tr>
<td>1900 - Today</td>
<td>Cherokee Weaving Revival (Wickie Run, Crystal, &amp; Pine Springs Patterns)</td>
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NAVAJO WEAVING

photo by William M. Pennington

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 of Native Chiefs and were also used as saddle blankets on horses. “Simpson recalled Navajo horses ‘gorgeously decorated 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.

REFERENCES

Redfield, Ralph. (1958). Weaving: studies in Navajo and Thunder, Lookout Periodicals, 1957

This research project was inspired by artists in the Navajo Weaving Collection of the 2000 Museum of Anthropology, specifically the artists of the America's Native Compilation. ART1526 NORTH AMERICAN ART 4. Instructor: Sandra Chablon.