Large Print Labels

Southwest Weavings:
800 Years of Artistic Exchange
December 14, 2018—May 5, 2019
Gallery 100, Main Building
Over 800 years ago, each Ancestral Puebloan person likely had a rectangular manta, or wider-than-long wearing blanket, similar to this textile. Ancient mantas served as shoulder robes and, perhaps, as wrap-around dresses. These garments generally consist of cotton fibers in a plain weave, such as this one. In plain weaves, each horizontal weft strand crosses over and then under each other vertical warp element (see detail below).

Domesticated cotton plants arrived in the Southwest sometime around AD 500, moving north from Mesoamerica. The Hohokam peoples of the Gila River Valley (in present-day southern Arizona) first cultivated cotton in the Southwest and supplied its fibers to neighboring Ancestral Puebloan and Mogollon groups. By 1100, Ancestral Puebloan and Mogollon farmers began to grow their own cotton crops. Southwestern weavers simultaneously acquired loom technology, likely from Mesoamerica as well, which enabled production of fabric in large swaths.
*Manta*, 1200–1315; Ancestral Puebloan; cotton; 57 x 49 inches; Saint Louis Art Museum, Gift of Elissa and Paul Cahn 218:2017
unattributed Hopi artist

**Manta**, c.1920
cotton, wool, and dye

This 20th-century *Manta* resembles the 800-year-old example nearby. Men on the Hopi mesas (in present-day northern Arizona) have continued the ancient Puebloan practice of weaving. Here, patterned sections in wool run across the top and bottom edges to create borders. These colorful areas appear to be embroidered on the finished cotton fabric, however the artist incorporated supplemental wool yarns while weaving the cotton, using the brocade process.

Medallions on the lower section of this textile feature butterflies or rainclouds—imagery central to the annual cycle of Pueblo ritual dramas. A dancer in one of these performances likely wore this garment as a shoulder covering or a kilt. In a drawing (see image below), dancers wear similar garments. Kilts are visible on three crouching figures, portraying deer, at bottom and center, and on the female dancer at top in the center.

Saint Louis Art Museum, Gift of Elissa and Paul Cahn 259:2017
Ma Pe Wi (Velino Shije Herrera), 1902–1973; *Winter Dance*, early 20th century; watercolor on illustration board; 17 7/8 x 25 1/2 inches; Saint Louis Art Museum, Museum Purchase 91:1932 © Ma Pe Wi
unattributed Mexican artist

**Serape**, c.1800

wool and dye

This longer-than-wide wearing blanket, or serape, achieves a striking sense of tension between the diamond figure and patterned background. Featuring one of the most complex designs of its era, this textile was likely created at a small workshop north of Mexico City where weavers specialized in elaborate wool serapes.

Often called Saltillo serapes, these textiles circulated widely across northern New Spain—a vast region which at its greatest extent encompassed present-day northern Mexico and parts of the present-day midwestern, southern, and western United States to the Pacific coast. One of the major venues for trade in the colonial era was the annual fair in Saltillo, today’s capital of the Mexican state, Coahuila. Merchants traveled there from across northern New Spain, including the province of New Mexico, and then returned home with fine serapes and other far-flung goods. In colonial New Mexico, Diné weavers adapted diamond designs from Saltillo serapes.

Saint Louis Art Museum, Gift of Elissa and Paul Cahn

262:2017
unattributed Diné (Navajo) artist

**Chief-Style Blanket, Third Phase, c.1875**
wool and dye

This wearing blanket reflects the range of artistic sources Diné weavers incorporated in their works. The wider-than-long proportions mimic outer garments made by Pueblo weavers, who likely taught Diné artists to weave on upright looms. The umber, chocolate, and creamy white stripes reflect colors of the wool from sheep Spanish colonists introduced to the province of New Mexico in the late 16th century.

The centrally placed diamond recalls textiles from other provinces of northern New Spain, known as Saltillo serapes, such as the one displayed on the backboard in this case. In the 18th and early 19th centuries, traders brought these Saltillo serapes to Santa Fe and Taos. By the 1860s, Diné weavers in New Mexico incorporated diamonds and sections of diamonds, appearing here as triangles, in their wider-than-long wearing blankets.

Saint Louis Art Museum, Gift of Elissa and Paul Cahn
220:2017
unattributed Diné (Navajo) artist

**Small Blanket**, c.1870
wool and dye

In the central band on this blanket, individual undyed fibers interrupt the red stripes and diamonds. The crimson hue and dappled effect suggest the weaver herself did not create the red yarns from raw wool, as with the white and blue elements, but rather repurposed the red yarns from another source. Diné weavers first acquired red yarns by deconstructing whole cloth red flannel known as *bayeta*.

Mills in Spain and Mexico largely supplied bayeta, coloring it with dyes made from insects such as lac from southern Asia and cochineal from Mexico. Mills typically dyed this flannel in the woven cloth phase rather than dyeing individual yarns before weaving. When dyeing the woven cloth, some individual yarns do not fully absorb the dye. Thus, when the flannel is unraveled and then woven into a new textile such as this, these unevenly colored yarns appear.

Saint Louis Art Museum, Gift of Elissa and Paul Cahn
230:2017
Early aniline, or synthetic, dyes create the brilliant colors in this textile, including multiple shades of red. While Diné women largely spin their own yarn from raw wool, since 1868 weavers could obtain synthetically dyed yarns. Mills in Germantown, in the northwest section of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, spun domestic wool and dyed the yarns with newly developed synthetic colorants initially imported from Europe. These time-saving Germantown yarns allowed southwestern weavers to experiment radically with form and color, as seen in this blanket.

The railway arrived in the American Southwest in 1880, expanding supply routes for industrially produced goods such as Germantown yarns. Rail transportation also brought Southwest weavings to consumers in midwestern and northeastern cities. In 1900, trader C.N. Cotton sold this blanket at his warehouse adjacent to the rail tracks in Gallup, New Mexico (see image below).
C.N. Cotton Company Warehouse, Gallup, New Mexico; film negative; Palace of Governors Photo Archives, New Mexico History Museum, Santa Fe
unattributed Diné (Navajo) artist

**Manta**, c.1880
wool and dye

This red shawl features wool yarns the weaver spun herself and then likely colored with packaged aniline, or synthetic, dyes. Compare the fullness and softness of these handspun yarns with the hard texture of the industrially manufactured yarn in the small blanket featuring the X-design to the left.

Synthetic colors first appeared in Diné weavings in the form of pre-spun and-dyed yarns from commercial mills in Pennsylvania. By the 1880s, traders on the Diné reservation carried aniline dyestuffs manufactured in Vermont. The powdered dyes were pre-mixed with mordant, or binding agent, and packaged for use in small paper envelopes. A weaver simply dropped these inexpensive packets into boiling water and added her yarns to obtain vibrant colors.

Saint Louis Art Museum, Gift of Elissa and Paul Cahn 237:2017
unattributed Diné (Navajo) artist

**Serape**, c.1865
wool and dye

This *Serape* features thin stripes of indigo-dyed blue and undyed brown wool, woven in a style that Diné peoples call a “Mexican pelt.” In addition to the standard striping, this textile features bands with diagonal and serrated lines in red, white, brown, and blue. Typically, Diné weavers experimented with design when using this pattern.

In the 17th century, Spanish colonists introduced this textile pattern to the province of New Mexico, and Diné weavers continued to reproduce the design through the 19th century. In addition to creating their own textiles, Spanish-speaking settlers prized blankets woven by Pueblo and Diné peoples. Demand from this market encouraged Diné weavers to continue producing serapes with horizontal blue and brown stripes centuries after the pattern arrived in the Southwest.

Saint Louis Art Museum, Gift of Elissa and Paul Cahn
241:2017
unattributed Diné (Navajo) artist

**Chief-Style Blanket**, Second Phase, c.1880
wool and dye

In this blanket, charcoal-gray bars and dashes float on a red ground, establishing massive patterned bands that balance against the dominant white-and-black stripes. This type of textile captivated 19th-century Native peoples from the Plains and Mountain West, who valued these striking blankets not only for their unusual form and materials, but also because they originated far away, as is often the case with luxury items (see image below). Diné peoples traded blankets like this one with neighbors in the Pueblos of Pecos and Taos, centers for Native trade networks. Starting in the 1820s, American traders also transported blankets from the Southwest to a series of commercial forts across the Plains.

By the late 19th century, when the railway brought waves of travelers to the Southwest territories, these blankets circulated in the developing national market for Native art. Thomas Dozier, an art and curio dealer based in the rail town of Española, New Mexico, displayed this blanket at the St. Louis World’s Fair in 1904.

Saint Louis Art Museum, Gift of Elissa and Paul Cahn
221:2017
Howling Wolf, Tsitsistas (Cheyenne), 1849–1927; *Drawing From Sketchbook*, 1876; hand colored; 9 1/16 x 11 13/16 inches; Beinecke Library, Yale University 2018524
unattributed Diné (Navajo) artist

**Small Blanket**, c.1880
wool and dye

Stepped lines, stacked diamonds, and comb-like forms stand against the red ground on this small blanket. Here blocks of pattern repeat evenly across the surface, echoing the design sensibilities of earlier serapes Diné weavers created for Native trade routes (see image below). Though the work in this image and the small blanket on view share similar diamond patterns, the pictured weaving is twice as large as this blanket.

The earliest small blankets were mostly collected by American explorers and military personnel in the Southwest. The first generation of Americans to acquire Diné textiles likely valued these small blankets not as wearing garments, but as miniature examples of Diné weavers’ legendary accomplishments in designs and artistry.

Saint Louis Art Museum, Gift of Elissa and Paul Cahn
248:2017
Serape, 1865–80; Diné (Navajo), United States; wool and dye; 67 1/2 x 51 1/2 inches; Saint Louis Art Museum, Gift of Mrs. H. H. Bright 99:1975
unattributed Diné (Navajo) artist

**Transitional Weaving**, c. 1900
wool and dye

A stepped border outlines this textile and encompasses a red field filled with crosses, diamonds, and serrated lines. The border distinguishes this example from earlier garments, where designs almost always extend from edge to edge, as seen on large wearing blankets elsewhere in this gallery.

In addition to the design elements, the narrow proportions of this work signal a departure from earlier weaving styles. In the 1890s, Diné women began to weave textiles with borders and occasionally added fringe to the top and bottom. These textiles, often used as rugs in American homes, supplied an emerging market for tourist souvenirs from the Southwest, as well as an established national market for hand-made home furnishings. Textiles like this, which anticipate 20th-century Diné rug production, are often called transitional weavings.

Saint Louis Art Museum, Gift of Elissa and Paul Cahn
250:2017
unattributed Diné (Navajo) artist

**Small Blanket**, c.1875
wool and dye

Five yarn colors combine here to create an electric design. Thin polychrome bands form the background while three stacked and serrated diamonds hover above. The large diamond at center features an early example of pictorial design: a lightning bolt fills the center, with additional flashes issuing from each side. In the late 1870s and 1880s, many weavers produced dizzying compositions, as seen here, called eye dazzlers. This relatively brief period saw the introduction of synthetically dyed yarns and then the transition, in the 1890s, to rug weaving.

This blanket, likely woven on the Navajo Reservation around 1875, was acquired by Santa Fe-based art and curio dealer Abe Gold and later sold, in 1899, to an American collector who sought outstanding, old textiles by Diné artists.

Saint Louis Art Museum, Gift of Elissa and Paul Cahn
253:2017
unattributed Diné (Navajo) artist

**Two Grey Hills Rug**, late 20th century wool

This rug uses undyed wool exclusively. The artist likely sheared sheep from her flock to obtain fibers in dark brown, cream, and tan. She then carded, or combed, batches of raw wool together to achieve a wide range of tones, then spun the wool into yarn, and wove the yarn to create this textile. The use of natural wool tones is characteristic of Two Grey Hills rugs, a style unique to the region around Newcomb, New Mexico.

Around the turn of the 20th century, as Americans collected greater numbers of Diné textiles, Diné weavers frequently used commercially manufactured yarns and dyes. Some traders and merchants feared these materials led to a decline in quality. Traders near Newcomb encouraged weavers to eliminate dyes in their textiles, spurring the development of the Two Grey Hills style in rug weaving.

Saint Louis Art Museum, Gift of Elissa and Paul Cahn 255:2017
Southwest Weavings: 800 Years of Artistic Exchange

Textiles reflect cosmopolitan histories of exchange in the present-day southwestern United States and north Mexico. For centuries, diverse populations have traded yarns and dyes, designs and technologies, and finished products across this region and the world.

This exhibition features garments and rugs by Indigenous Diné (Navajo) and Pueblo artists, alongside Spanish colonial work. In the early 19th century, Diné weavers won renown for their large wearing blankets with stripes in natural wool tones and bursts of dyed colors. These garments traveled hundreds of miles through Native and colonial trade networks across northern New Spain (after 1821, Mexico) and the western United States.

Smaller works showcase artists’ experimentation in the second half of the 19th century. After the United States acquired the Southwest Territories in 1848, new materials and markets spurred increasing complexity in woven form. By 1900, weavers and traders developed a rug industry, responding to markets in the United States for handmade decor. Today southwestern weavers create rugs, wall tapestries, and select garments.

This exhibition draws from a group of 55 southwestern textiles generously given to the Museum by Elissa and Paul Cahn.
Sourcing Designs, Materials, and Technologies

Southwestern weavers have used diverse artistic practices and materials to create distinctive textiles for centuries. By 1100, Ancestral Puebloan weavers in the present-day Four Corners region adapted loom technology and cotton cultivars from the south to produce all-white wearing blankets. Later, neighboring Diné peoples embraced Pueblo-style upright looms. Pueblo men create textiles; generally Diné women weave.

Spanish colonists established the province of New Mexico in 1598, introducing black, tan, and white Churro sheep that would transform weaving materials. Later, trade between colonial provinces brought elaborate textiles to New Mexico. Diné weavers saw these textiles and then incorporated diamonds, terraced lines, and spot patterns in their blankets.

By the 19th century, industrially woven flannel provided material to deconstruct and obtain yarns in lac- and cochineal-dyed crimson hues. Colors in Diné textiles exploded in the reservation era, beginning in 1868, when artists first used pre-spun yarns with synthetic dyes.
American Markets and Diné Design

Diné artists dramatically transformed weaving styles in the second half of the 19th century, as Americans began collecting their work. Full-size wearing blankets gradually gave way to other forms of weaving that were impractical as garments, such as small blankets and rugs.

The first small blankets mimicked designs from full-size serapes. United States military personnel, ethnographers, and other federal agents acquired these miniature examples while traveling around the new Navajo Reservation, established in 1868. Americans in the region started using Diné textiles as floor coverings, and designs became increasingly elaborate. By 1880, when rail transportation brought waves of American materials and consumers to the Southwest, weavers created dazzling compositions with stacks of radiating diamonds and pictorial elements.

By the 1890s, weavers collaborated with traders on the Reservation to create rugs and other woven decor to meet an emerging regional demand for tourist souvenirs, and to supply national markets for home furnishings.