

February 12,
1972

Miss Mary Kahlenberg,
Los Angeles County Museum
Los Angeles, California. 90036

Dear Miss Kahlenberg:-

Enclosed herewith is the introduction for your catalog. I do hope you will like it. I tried to keep history as slim as possible, but some is unavoidable in giving some sort of a picture of the Navaho people. I have rewritten this about six times, trying to keep it down and to make it coherent. Yesterday I showed it Corky Jones whom you may know. She did a monograph on Navaho Spinning for the Museum of Northern Arizona and is a very knowledgeable person. She approved and I am hoping that both you and Mr. Berlant will also. Please feel free to make any changes you think it should have. I trust your judgement completely.

I shall look forward to seeing the catalogue when it is finished and ofcourse I want to see the exhibit somewhere during its tour.

This brings my very best wishes for the success of your gigantic effort, and my greetings to you both.

Most sincerely

Laura Gilpin

Article for Bouant.

Laura Gilpin

One may well wonder what sort of people are the Navaho (the Diné), who have woven these superlative blankets. What is their origin, where do they live, ^{where} how do they work? Somewhat obscured in mystery, these Athabaskan speaking Indians are the latest Indian migration to reach the Southwestern part of the United States, arriving sometime about the middle of the sixteenth century, settling for a while in the region known as Old Navaho Land, near the junction of the Pine and San Juan Rivers in the central part of southern Colorado and northern New Mexico. Traces of their early habitat have been found here. Archaeologists have found also the remains of dwellings built by the Pueblo People who had been living here many years prior to the advent of the Navaho. Here, too, the Navaho encountered new domesticated animals brought ^{to} the Southwest by the Spanish Conquistadores a century earlier, horses which could be ridden and sheep whose wool could be used for weaving. Garments made of wool were worn by the Pueblos and soon the Navaho were doing likewise. Most weaving authorities believe that they learned their weaving skill from their new neighbors but, because of differences of loom and spindle, some believe that the Navaho may have brought this knowledge with them from the Northwest.

It was not long until the Navaho wanted horses and sheep of their own, trading for them when they had something to trade, stealing when this seemed the only way to such

acquisition. Horses made the Navaho mobile and, as the years went by and the Navaho became stronger and more numerous, occasional raids upon the Pueblo People and even the Spanish Villages along the Rio Grande became more frequent as the Navaho thus increased their flocks of sheep and their herds of horses. Gradually they moved toward the west, building their simple homes (or hogans), moving on to better pastures for their stock, exploring this rugged and beautiful land. At times they encountered the Spanish Government which sent out troops to try to stop the Navaho raids. By the end of the eighteenth century word of these people reached far and wide, even to Spain, and in many of the reports the weaving skill of these people was spoken of with acclaim.

Because of the necessity for good pasture for their sheep, the Navaho became a semi-nomadic people, living in groups or clans in what is now northwestern New Mexico and northeastern Arizona. They had no central government, but each group was lead by a head man, existing quite independently. When one group made some sort of treaty with the Spanish Government it in no way affected another group under another leader. This was the situation when the Government of the United States acquired the Southwest following the war with Mexico in 1846. Raids continued and finally the famous scout Kit Carson was sent out to quell the Navaho. Colonel Carson did not bring outright war to these Indians,

but subdued them by killing their stock and burning their crops, and finally rounding up a large portion of the tribe in Canyon de Chelly, that maze of small canyons in Arizona. So in 1864 the conquered Navaho were marched to Fort Sumner, on the Pecos River in New Mexico some three hundred miles from their homeland. Here, along with a group of Apaches, the Navaho were held prisoners for four long and disastrous years. An epidemic of small pox wiped out hundreds, drought and insect infestations destroyed their crops. Finally they were allowed to return to their own country where they signed a treaty with the Government of the United States. They had been promised aid to start a new life, they were to receive seed, a few simple tools and three sheep per family, but nothing was delivered until late in 1869, too late to plant any crops, so for nearly two years they existed on what they could find, rebuilding their hogans and literally living off the land. But exist they did, and grew into strong and independent individuals we know today.

Perhaps it is the long years of outdoor life, the deprivation, and the hardships they endured that have produced such vitality and character in their art. Perhaps through the necessity of their lives come the strengths and ideas for their bold and beautiful designs woven with such consummate skill. Living even more closely to nature than their urban Pueblo neighbors, they know intimately all phases of

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climate, of drought, of storm and ensuing hardships, and have put this knowledge to the best use they know how.

Like their physique, their looms are upright, easy to assemble and reassemble when moving is necessary. Unlike most weavers, the designs of these magnificent textiles are carried in the minds of their creators with never a mark or drawing. Seldom are patterns duplicated. Always there are new shapes, new patterns, new combinations of color, new uses of old figures, a variety that can be matched only by the earth and sky in their ever changing moods of light and combinations thereof.

Until recent years, simplicity has marked Navaho life. Because they have long been shepherds pasture is of prime importance, therefore their homes are scattered far and wide across the country. Small clusters of hogans, few in number, are the homes of families and are separated by land upon which their sheep may graze. Designed by the Mythological personage of Changing Woman, hogans are usually round or hexagonal in shape with a conical roof, built of the material nearest at hand, log or stone or combinations of these. Always the door faces the East, to the rising sun and the new day. To the right as one enters are the cooking utensils; in the center of the roof, a smoke hole with an open fire beneath, though in present times one finds many stoves and stove pipes. The round, or nearly round, shape of the

building holds heat with the least amount of fuel, usually wood and often hauled from a distance. Wind and storm do less damage to rounded shapes than to square corners and joints. At the rear of the hogan rolls of bedding, usually sheepskins, are stacked during the day. Containers, suitcases, or boxes for clothes, small possessions and ceremonial objects are stacked nearby. There will doubtless be a pile or sack of wool waiting to be carded, and spun. Hanging from the roofbeams near the walls will be skeins of dyed wool ready for weaving. Somewhere a container of plant and mineral substances gathered to make dyes for the wool will be kept. In winter the woman's loom will be set up within the hogan, while in warm weather the loom will be outdoors under a brush shelter, where the weaver may see distant horizons, or activities near at hand, or the slow movement of grazing sheep herded by a child, while busy hands work the web through the warp and the design assumes its final harmony.

Navaho mythology is ever present and occasional ceremonials are held throughout the year. Harmony with earth and sky, harmony in their lives is of the utmost importance to the Navaho and is the essence of their faith. They are, in a sense, integrated personalities, self-reliant, sure of their way. Their adaptability is remarkable. Taking from other cultures what they desire and molding them into something distinctly their own. This is most evident in their

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silver work which they learned from the Mexican craftsmen, yet giving their products their own design and character. Among themselves they are a gentle people, courteous and dignified and with some special quality difficult to describe, which makes them uniquely Navaho.