

The Navajo textiles in the Thaw Collection represent a unique range in period and style, including First, Second, and Third Phase Navajo blankets, a Wedge Weave blanket, a Moki-style serape, and an Eye Dazzler serape. This particular textile, a Second Phase Navajo blanket, is a very large and finely woven manta (a wider-than-long wearing blanket). It is also characteristic of the developments that occurred between 1860 and 1870, when colored stripes with rectangular blocks were added to the earlier striped “Ute blanket” (Fig. 1). Here, the black and white stripes are unplied and undyed natural wool, and two kinds of red are used in the stripes and blocks. The lighter red is three-ply Saxony yarn colored with vegetal dye while the darker red is re-spun yarn raveled from trade cloth that had been dyed with lac or cochineal, also known as “bayeta.”¹ The dark bands connecting the red blocks are unplied indigo blue and the selvage is bound with a three-ply indigo cord.² From the start of the Classic period of Navajo weaving (1650-1865), Spanish weaving influenced both Navajos and Pueblos. With the exception of indigo dye, introduced from Mexico in the 1600s, this influence was felt not so much in technique as in the appearance of loom products, since both groups made Spanish-style (longer than wide) serapes for their own use as well as for trade.

Frederic Douglas was the first to outline the evolution of design in striped shoulder blankets, describing it in terms of five phases, which have since been consolidated into four.³ Chief blankets are perhaps the best-known products of Classic and early Transition period Navajo looms. As Joe Ben Wheat has noted, the Chief blanket is one of the finest achievements in Navajo weaving. It was usually superbly woven from the finest materials available. Relatively simple in design, the careful placement and balance of design elements and the use of color were important aspects of these textiles. Like all garments that the Navajo made for themselves, it was designed to be worn, to move, and to drape on the body. When displayed flat, it appears somewhat static, but wrapped around the body it has a different appearance, and as the body moves, the design becomes kinetic. Historically, the term ‘Chief blanket’ is a misnomer, as the blanket was never intended to designate the rank of its wearer, nor was it worn only by men—a distinctive woman’s blanket following the same basic scheme was also produced. As a highly prized textile it was worn by various Southwestern tribes and traded extensively, especially far into the Plains region and throughout the intermountain West, where it often took the place of the painted, quilled, and beaded buffalo robes.⁴

By 1850, the Second Phase Chief blanket had emerged. Instead of paralleling the blue stripes, the raveled red threads were concentrated into rectangular blocks that interrupted each blue stripe at the ends and in the center, creating twelve “spots” of color. As the red blocks became larger, they

¹ Cochineal is a red dye consisting of the dried bodies of female cochineal insects, native to Mexico. Lac is a deep red colorant extracted from the resin excreted by the lac insect, indigenous to southeast Asia.

² The selvage is an edge produced on woven fabric during manufacture that prevents it from unraveling. Ply simply refers to a twisted strand (if the twist is a firm one, the yarn will be fine; if the twist is loose, the yarn is soft, thick and a bit less hardy). Unplied yarn is a piece of wool that has been stretched out slightly.

³ Douglas noted that the “phases” bear only an approximate relation to the passage of time, and the development from simple to complex is not a step-by-step progression.

⁴ Joe Ben Wheat (ed. Ann Lane Hedlund), *Blanket Weaving in the Southwest* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2003).

tended to become more complex, often containing designs within the blocks. During the 1870's, a fine three-ply yarn spun from Saxony Merino sheep's wool and dyed with natural dyes was sometimes used in place of, or in addition to, raveled threads (as is evident in this blanket). While scholars generally think of the Chief blanket as having very standard designs, it is clear that the Navajo did not, as they made many variations on the theme. Phase II blankets sometimes featured banded patterns of meanders or multiple figures along the end and center panels. Another variation had large hollow rectangles, which extended into the panels of black and white stripes.⁵

Close analysis of one particular textile in the Thaw Collection offered a critical perspective on the craft and material culture component of my dissertation and significantly enhanced my study of historic photographs of Navajo weaving/weavers. Focusing on the connoisseurship of materials during the Otsego Institute Workshop, I gained a deeper understanding of the materials, process, and techniques of Navajo weaving. In considering indigenous ontologies of the object, I was also interested in exploring how a Navajo weaver might think about and talk about the cultural value or meaning of this object in contrast to a curator, collector, or conservator. Through hands-on analysis, workshops, and discussions, my experience at the Otsego Institute provided a greater appreciation for the ideas and concepts that are woven into symbolic patterns and designs in Navajo weaving, as well as how these objects function within indigenous communities today.

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Figure 1: First Phase Blanket, ca. 1840-1860, Navajo, Arizona. Natural white handspun wool, indigo-dyed blue, organic dyes. The Eugene and Clare Thaw Collection of American Indian Art, Fenimore Art Museum, T0122.

⁵ Kate Peck Kent, *Navajo Weaving: Three Centuries of Change* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2002), 49-51.