

Navajo Weavers

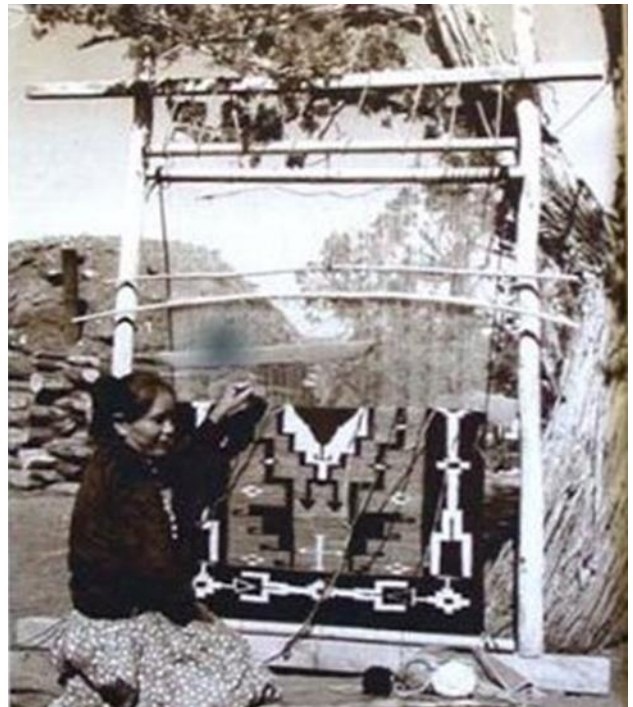
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Colorado Dept. of Education- Visual Arts Standards: The Navajo Weavers lesson meets the following standards:

- ✓ **Observe and Learn to Comprehend**
- ✓ **Envision and Critique to Reflect**
- ✓ **Invent and Discover to Create**
- ✓ **Relate and Connect to Transfer**

SUMMARY

- Navajo Indians—who call themselves Dinéh, [pronounced DEE Nay] meaning “The People” in the Navajo language—honor Spider Woman and Man, the holy people who first brought weaving knowledge to the Navajos. The Navajo weaving tradition developed in the American Southwest over centuries and emerged as a distinctive Navajo activity by 1700. Generations of weavers used handmade tools and local materials to clothe their families and made blankets in traditional and innovative patterns.
- Through tradition and innovation, Navajo textiles tell a story of adaptation, survival and change. Navajo weavers carry the distinction of being the best weavers among Native American tribes. The fiber for weaving comes from the sheep and goats they raise. The wool is sheared, washed, combed and spun into yarn.
- Navajo weaving has come a long way in the past 500 years: (Bruce Museum) “From the shoulder to the floor, to a place of distinction on the gallery wall.” Originally Navajo and other southwest Indian blankets were made of hand-spun cotton thread, but in the 16th century after the Spanish brought domestic churro sheep into the region, the people switched to wool.



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What do you want your students to know and be able to do?

- Example: Students will know that the Navajo people have a strong history of weaving as a form of art and a way to support their families.
- Students will create a small woven item demonstrating their understanding of the weaving process.

- The weaving usually features natural wool in gray, rust and white or wool dyed with local plants in yellow, black and red. Although traditional colors are still used for the most part, you will occasionally see new modern colors interspersed throughout the weaving.

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND WEB SITES TO EXPLORE:

- ***A History of Navajo Weaving*** by Lee & Eric Anderson. <http://www.americana.net/weaving.html>
- ***The Story of Navaho Weaving***. Kent, Kate Peck, 1961, Heard Museum of Anthropology and Primitive Arts.
- ***Navajo Weaving Way: The Path from Fleece to Rug***, 1997, Bennett, Noël and Bighorse, Tiana Interweave Press, Inc. Loveland, CO.
- ***History of Navajo Weaving*** information and samples from Chimayo, NM www.chimayoweavers.com ,
- ***A Brief Social History of Navajo Weaving*** <http://www.collectorsguide.com/fa/fa064.shtml>
- ***'Ndahoo'ahh Stories: Lena Atene - Rug Weaver*** www.math.utah.edu/%7Eeclmens/Stories/Lena.html
- ***The Art of Navajo Weaving***, VHS, Denver Museum of Natural History for Toh-Atin Gallery and the Durango Collection.
- ***Navajo Weaving***, Bruce Museum, Greenwich, CT www.tfaoi.com



Anthropologists believe the ancestors of the Navajo came across on an ice bridge that spanned the upper Pacific from Asia to Alaska. Navajo linguistic characteristics are traced to Western Athapaskan, a connection linking tribes in the Northwestern coastal area (Eyak, Tlingit, and Haida) to those in the Southwest (Apache, Comanche and Navajo.) The Navajo migrated through North America as nomadic hunters and gatherers. They traveled by foot and used dogs to pull travois (wood framed carts) loaded with their possessions, their babies and their elders.

The Navajo migrated south from Canada into New Mexico sometime before 1400. According to Navajo myth, the Dine or the People were led to the Southwest by Holy People from the underworld, Spiderwoman and Man. Spider Man taught the Navajo how to make a loom from sunshine, lightning and rain. Spider Woman taught them to weave.

The art of weaving cotton was well established in the Southwest by 700 AD. So when the Spaniards marched into the New Mexico Pueblos in 1540, they found people dressed in cotton clothing of excellent quality and design. The cloth was woven on a simple upright loom and handsomely patterned in geometric shapes. The Spanish valued Pueblo textiles highly and the Rio Grande people were forced to supply them with cotton blankets for export to Mexico and Spain.

As relative newcomers to the area, the Navajo were living by farming, hunting and raiding the settled Pueblos and Spanish towns. There is no evidence of weaving among them prior to 1700. However, flocks of sheep were being raised and wool was used for trading.

During the increasingly troubled years of the late 1600's and after the Pueblo Rebellion against the Spanish in 1680, Indian villagers from the Rio Grande moved in with the Navajo to avoid reprisals from Spanish authorities. There was every opportunity for an exchange of ideas and it is likely the Navajo learned to spin and weave the wool of their sheep at this time.

Prior to 1864, Navajo weavers were producing textiles of high quality in terms of weave and design. Patterns were characterized by individuality and creativity reflected throughout the history of Navajo weaving. Navajo weavings from the early Classic Period are very rare, and many exist only as fragments found at archaeological sites. The handful of examples that pre-date 1800 reveal that early Navajo weaving was nearly identical to Pueblo weaving. It included clothing and blankets made in both plain and twill weaves, rendered in striped, stepped, or plain patterns.

The **Classic period (1850-1875)** was a time of self-sufficiency and stability, with an economy based on planting crops and sheep herding. Women wove textiles that ranged from thick utility blankets (diyugis) to extremely fine "wearing" blankets. They adapted designs from their own basketry and from Mexican Saltillo serapes - terraced diamonds, triangles, and crosses in horizontally banded layouts. The broadly striped Chief blanket was avidly sought after by neighboring Indians as well as settlers.

Weavers drew their colors primarily from natural wool, which ranged from white to dark brown. Indigo, a non-native, deep blue plant dye, was being imported by the Spanish when the Navajo started weaving, and was available to them through trade. In addition, Navajo weavers made yellow dyes from native plants, and sometimes combined them with indigo to make green. By the late 1700s, Navajo weavers had access to a deep red color that came in the form of imported woolen cloth called bayeta. Weavers actually unraveled the cloth and re-spun the yarns, giving this fiber the modern name, "raveled red."

During the Classic Period, the Navajo made three types of 'longer than wide' serape style blankets. The Moqui (Moki) pattern consisted of alternating stripes of indigo and natural brown, often separated by narrow white stripes. Early traders thought the Hopi made these blankets, hence they were named Moqui, the Spanish word for the Hopi people. Serapes made from loosely spun and coarsely woven wool were called diyugi meaning "fluffy weave." Diyugi featured natural brown and white stripes, sometimes embellished with narrow beaded, wavy, or checkerboard stripes.

A new functional type of serape—the Navajo child's blanket or small blanket— became more common at the end of the Classic Period and usually is given a Late Classic Period designation. While these small, fancy serapes certainly were used by children in some cases, they also were made as saddle blankets and saddle covers, and were used as covers for the doorway of the hogan, the traditional Navajo dwelling. These small, decorative weavings also were made for trade to military personnel who wanted to take a bit of Navajo culture with them when they returned back East.

Navajo weavers made four distinct types of 'wider than long' mantas in the Classic Period: plain black with indigo twill borders, white with indigo twill borders, patterned borders on either

side of a solid center, and striped weavings now commonly known as “chief blankets.” All of these blanket types were used by both men and women with the possible exception of the white and blue mantas, often called “maiden shawls.” The use of chief blankets certainly was not limited to tribal leaders (the Navajo did not have “chiefs.”) The name probably derives from the fact they were highly prized by wealthy and powerful members of Plains tribes who sought them in trade with the Navajo’s neighbors including the Ute and Comanche.

The **Transition period (1875-1890)** was marked by many outside influences on the Navajo weaving tradition. In 1863 the era of prosperity came to a sudden and traumatic end. To prevent Navajo interference in westward expansion, U.S. troops commanded by Kit Carson rounded up 7000 of them, forced them to make the 400-mile "Long Walk" eastward, and imprisoned them at Bosque Redondo, New Mexico. After four years, the survivors were allowed to return to their homelands (reduced to one-fifth of the original area) where they found their homes, pastures and flocks destroyed.

In the 1870s, trading posts were established on the reservation. A decade later, the Santa Fe Railroad brought a flood of settlers. Travel and communication became easier. At the trading posts, weavers could buy packaged synthetic dyes and commercially spun yarns produced in Germantown, Pennsylvania. With these multi-colored yarns the Navajo wove "eye dazzler" designs, in which Hispanic serrated diamonds often replaced Classic terraced shapes. As the Eastern market sought more Navajo-woven rugs, weavers switched from making wearing blankets to floor rugs.

During the **Rug period (1895-1950)** the Navajo developed a new weaving style almost every decade. Always resourceful, weavers absorbed the new ideas, and incorporated them into existing Navajo designs or invented new ones. Around the turn of the century, traders revitalized weaving. Lorenzo Hubbell urged a return to quality weaving and to Classic banded patterns. John B. Moore urged weavers to imitate the layouts and motifs of the oriental rugs popular in late Victorian society back east. Traders sold hundreds of rugs at Fred Harvey's tourist outlets along the Santa Fe Railroad.

Regional specialization developed during the Rug Period, as weavers living in a single area adopted similar techniques and styles. Taking the names of trading posts or communities, regional styles included Ganado, Two Gray Hills, Crystal, Teec Nos Pos, Chinle and Wide Ruins.

Weavers were encouraged to experiment with native dye plants to produce designs in soft earth tones. Sand painting designs were adapted for weaving as the older styles continued to flourish. Ye'ii designs, featuring Navajo deities, appeared in weavings for the first time.

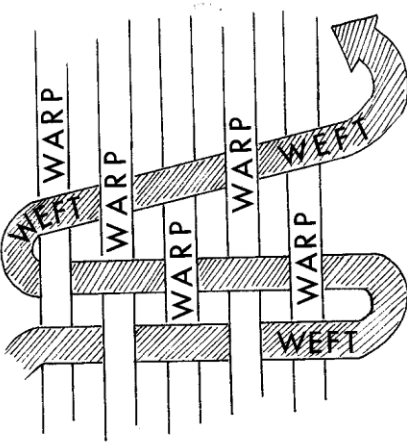
Contemporary period (1950 – present): Today, with over 220,000 members, the Navajo nation is the largest American Indian group. While most of the reservation remains rural, many households are moving away from the traditional subsistence of herding and farming.

Both on and off the reservation, women today can choose between weaving and many other jobs to support themselves, yet those who choose to weave are growing in number. Weaving

allows them to express their own ideas, and provides a balance between their spiritual and physical beings.

Weavers continue to adapt, innovate and create their art within a traditional framework. While regional styles persist, individual weavers have become known by name. In creating fine tapestries as wall hangings, rather than as floor coverings, the weaver approaches her work as a professional artist. Designs have become increasingly complex, and the dye palette more extensive.

Vocabulary



“Chief’s” Blanket - A man’s or woman’s shoulder blanket of distinctive design, shaped so that the longer dimension runs from side to side rather than from top to bottom

Loom - a frame on which warps are stretched for weaving. It is equipped with one or more heddles and a shed rod for controlling warp sets. The blanket loom of the Navajo is set upright on the ground.

Pueblo Indians - the term, of Spanish origin, used for Indians living in settled, agricultural villages in the Rio Grande valley, Western New Mexico and Northeastern Arizona.

Warp - the yarn stretched on the loom preparatory to weaving (you need to be ‘warped to weave’)

Weft - the yarn woven over and under warps at right angles to them (you weave ‘weft to right’)

POWERPOINT PRESENTATION

This Art Heritage lesson does not focus on one particular artist, as we did with the Albrecht Durer unit. Today we will learn about Navajo Weavers, a tribe with a long history of working together to create beautiful art work. As we explore the Navajo Weavers unit, we will SEE, THINK, and WONDER to learn.

1. It is believed the ancestors of the Navajo or the Dine [pronounced DEE Nay which means “The People,”] came across on an ice bridge that connected Asia to Alaska. As the Navajo migrated south from Canada into New Mexico, they hunted buffalo and gathered berries and grains from the land.
2. The people traveled by walking and their dogs pulled a wooden frame that carried their possessions, the babies and the old people. They never lived long in any one place, but moved from the mountains to the plains until they came to the Four Corners area of the Southwest—New Mexico, Arizona and Southern Utah.
3. **Navajo Weaver** about 1904-1932. Denver Public Library, Western History Collection, C. Pennington. According to Navajo myth, the People were led to the Southwest by Holy People from the underworld called Spider Woman and Man. Spider Man taught the Navajos how to make a loom from sunshine, lightning and rain. Spider Woman taught them to weave. This photograph shows a woman weaving in front of her home, called a Hogan. The Navajo people learned to raise sheep and goats for their wool and their meat. What do you see? What do you think? What do you wonder? *(allow time for one or two students to comment)*

A short 2 minute video may be played at this point. It helps if you go to the internet site BEFORE you begin your presentation so that it plays without any delay. The website for this video is found at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8E3SsomPUnk&feature=related>

4. This tells the story of how the wool gets from the sheep to a blanket. What do you notice about these pictures?
 - They are raising sheep and goats. There is a Hogan.
 - Shearing the sheep is like giving a haircut, the animals have their hair cut about once a year
 - Carding the wool: the wool is combed between 2 wooden paddles that have metal combs to clean the dirt out of the wool and straighten the curly fibers
 - Spinning the wool: This woman is using a wooden drop spindle to spin the fibers into yarn
 - Yarn: this yarn is the color of sheep’s wool, to get colors like yellow or red the yarn is dyed. Sometimes the dye is from nearby plants, sometimes the dye is bought at a store
 - Weaving on a traditional style loom. It takes weeks, months and sometimes years to create a blanket, depending on the size and design.
5. The Navajo loom is very different from other types of looms. It stands upright and is easily taken apart into sticks and poles, allowing people to set it up and to move it to wherever they want. This style of loom is still used today; the size can be changed for larger rugs or smaller wall hangings.

Weaving is a term to describe the threads or yarns that go in and out, over and under another set of threads. The strings laid out first are called the WARP, the WEFT is the thread or yarn that holds the piece together. (A way to remember these words: “You have to be ‘warped’ to weave, you weave from ‘weft’ to right.”)

What is the difference between woven fabric and knitted fabric? If you are wearing a t-shirt, the fibers of your shirt were knit together to be stretchy. If you have woven fabric in your clothing, you will notice small threads that cross over one another, over and under and over and under. Jeans are made of woven fabric. Where do you see woven fabric in this room?

6. The Navajo were taught by their Puebloan neighbors to weave in cotton; they soon learned to use the wool from sheep and created warm clothing. This photo shows a woman wearing and sitting by several woven items.

In the Navajo tradition, children care for the sheep and goats. They learn to weave at an early age. Their first pieces often follow a specific pattern, but as they become more skilled, they have the freedom to make decisions about the design, color and technique they use.

7. They also made saddle blankets for their horses. What geometric shapes do you see in these saddle blankets?
8. Over time, the Navajo weavers became very skilled and well known for the beauty of their work. Their blankets were traded for food, jewelry and other items. It provided them the ability to work from home in an area of the country where it is very remote and there are few jobs. Woven items were created for the tourist trade. They are found in museum and private collections all over the world.
9. **Germantown Eye Dazzler rug.** The artist who created this rug enjoyed using lots of color. Although they often used natural wool or used plant dyes, they also appreciate buying colors of wool that can’t be created naturally. This artist used a lot of color and worked very hard on this design. It must have taken a long time to weave this! Why do you think it is called an “eye dazzler”?

10. Although geometric shapes are the usual style for Navajo weaving, sometime an artist uses their creativity and includes things familiar to their culture: spirit figures, corn, tree of life, animals.

In weaving, the artist works to bring order, beauty, balance and harmony---a word in Navajo called “hozho”. While we enjoy the labor and creativity of a weaving, we can never see the blankets as the Navajo see them. These weavings show the spirit of the Navajo people in each blanket or rug.

During the last 5 minutes with your students, perhaps as they are cleaning up and putting away the art materials or while they are creating, take a moment to encourage the students to “REFLECT” and “CRITIQUE” on their understanding of Navajo Weavers lesson: (You might take one or two comments on each question.)

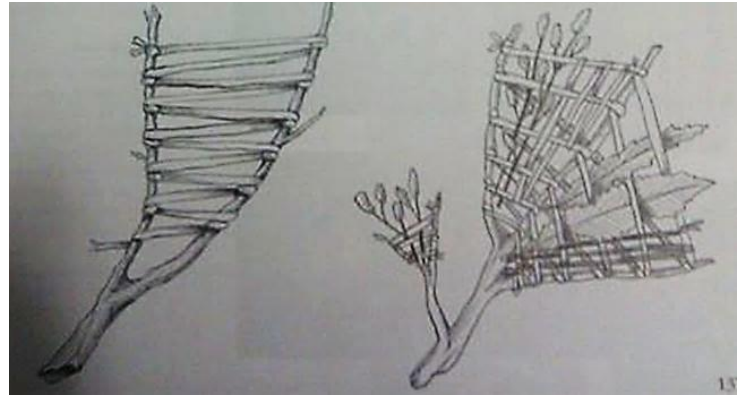
- *What was one thing you learned about the Navajo people?*
- *How did the artists use color and design in their art?*
- *What did you learn about “warp” and “weft”*
- *What choices did YOU make in your art?*
- *If you were to create your woven item again, what would you do differently?*
- *What is one thing you think it is important for others to know about Navajo Weavers?*

FEATURED ART PROJECT

A book, The Goat in the Rug is included in your supplies. You may want to ask the classroom teacher if he/she would read it to the students prior to your visit.

Your school's supply box includes a variety of yarn and beads.

You are encouraged to gather Y-shaped branches (18 inches or shorter.) As an option, you may want to include a variety of other items for weaving, small twigs, raffia, twine, etc. and things with holes to embellish the weaving—beads, metal washers, etc.



Weavers often note that their weaving becomes a part of them. Fibers, threads from our clothing, dust from the desktop, etc. become a part of the design and a portrait of the weaver.

Weaving With Twigs

Gather twigs about 12" in length, green, or as fresh as you can find. (Dried, brittle ones will break). Branching twigs with the "Y" area at least 6 inches long will work best. If you cannot find enough branching twigs, two or three straight ones, about 12" in length will work (see instructions for this alternative at the end of this section). Keep overall length of twigs no more than 18", so students will not accidentally poke one another.

Use yarn (provided), beads (provided) and any other weaving material, such as raffia, string, other yarn and bead-like objects to make woven pieces on twigs.

1. Start by wrapping the warp yarn onto the forked twig. Tie one end of the yarn to the end of one of the forks.
2. Stretch across to the other fork and wrap it once.
3. Stretch back across to a spot about $\frac{1}{4}$ inch below the knot and wrap once.
4. Continue to wrap in this way until you reach the bottom of the fork.
5. Weave other yarn, raffia etc. into the warp yarn, going up and down through the warp. Weave over one, under one, and so on.
6. String a bead or two onto your weft yarn as you go. (Encourage students to use only 2 or 3 beads or other objects)





ALTERNATIVE PROJECTS:

Instead of a forked twig, use three long single twigs.

1. Tie or rubberband twigs together at one end, or secure them in clay such as Model Magic. These twigs will serve as your warp.

2. Using yarn, raffia, twine, etc., weave on the twigs. Start at the bottom, tying to one of the twigs, then weave over one, under one, back and forth.

3. Students may change colors several times by simply tying yarn off on a twig, and starting another yarn by tying to a twig.

4. Add beads or other objects by stringing them on the yarn along the way.

CARDLOOM

Make (or borrow from Art Heritage) a loom made of stiff cardboard or Masonite (about 3 x 6 inches). Use plastic or metal, large-eyed yarn needles to help weave the yarn. (Variegated yarn looks really great!)

~ **Warp** the yarn or string around the cardboard looms about 1/4" apart for about 2 inches. Begin and end the warp on the back and use masking tape to secure it. Using about 24" of yarn, thread the needle (sometime it helps to fold the yarn over and stick it through the eye, or place a small bit of tape over the end of the yarn and cut it on an angle to thread it through).

Weave your **weft** over and under the warp yarns on the loom. Alternate the rows so that if you went **OVER** the warp thread the last row, you now go **UNDER** it on this row...over and under again and again until you run out of yarn in your needle.

You can connect the pieces of yarn with a knot, or do it the way the Navajo do, and simply overlap the yarns and continue weaving.

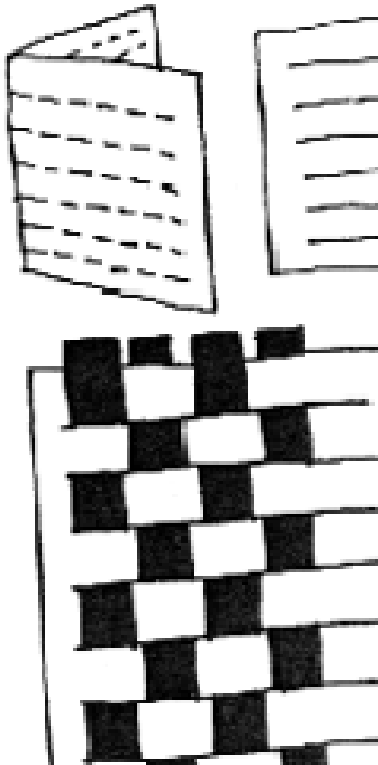
Pack the yarn down with your fingers (or a plastic fork or a comb) until it is packed tight.

At the end of the weaving, finish at the end of a row...turn the loom over and cut through the yarns at the **MIDDLE** of the back of the loom. Students can then tie the strings of warp thread tight against their weaving.

Weaving with the little guys (Susan McKenna)

I teach weaving at the k-1 level. I have them make a little loom out of **popsicle sticks**. One for the top, one for the bottom, and then five across the middle part that acts as the warp threads. This works because the warp "threads" are stable and the kids have an easier time pushing the yarn over and under. Some of the kids just aren't ready to figure out how it works and they usually just wrap the yarn around the whole thing. This gives the opportunity to talk about patterns that can be made, or to demonstrate how the over under thing holds everything in tight. The only time consuming thing is tying everyone's strings on! Try it, it is fun and full of skill and content.

Paper Weaving



Paper weaving is a good place to start if you've never tried to weave before.

Fold a piece of paper in half and make cuts from the fold out to about 1" from the edge. Open the paper. This will be your "warp".

From another piece of paper cut long narrow strips to weave in and out of the warp.

To make your weaving more interesting you can vary the width of the spaces between your warp cuts, or make your warp cuts wavy. You can also vary the width and shape of the strips you weave in. Use several different colors of paper.

To finish, glue or staple the strips in place along the edges.

Doris Miller, a Loma grandparent and Art Heritage volunteer created this Navajo style weaving. It uses twigs and is strung in the traditional style, incorporating yarns and a seed bead necklace. She was taught to weave by a Navajo friend.

