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NAVAJO RUGS:
THE REGIONAL STYLE*

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INTRODUCTION

Much has been written of the history of Navajo weaving. It is generally agreed that the origin of the craft is categorized into six periods of development; the Pueblo Period (1700-1850), Classic Period (1850-1863), Transition Period (1868-1890), Rug Period (1890-1920), Revival Period (1920-1940) and the Regional Style Period (1940-present).

The term "regional" as applied to Navajo rugs denotes an association with certain geographic locations on the reservation (fig. 1). Three of the centers are located in New Mexico; Shiprock, Two Gray Hills and Crystal, with the remaining six situated in Arizona; Teec Nos Pos, Lukachukai, Chinle, Ganado, Wide Ruins and the sector called Western Reservation. In subdividing the list by the characteristic use of dyes the centers would separate into the vegetable (native plant) areas of Crystal, Chinle and Wide Ruins; those areas using primarily commercial colorants would be Shiprock, Lukachukai, Teec Nos Pos, Ganado and the Western Reservation; the Two Gray Hills weavers prefer the natural wool tones.

The regional style rug is characterized by distinctive colors, design, motif and dyes—all combining so as to be readily identified at a glance as to its weaving center. In the Indian arts and crafts outlets throughout the Southwest it is common to overhear remarks in the rug rooms like, "isn't that a magnificent Two Gray Hills," or "look at that beautiful Crystal."

HISTORY

The origin of the regional style is largely the result of the influence of the area Indian trader; to suggest and sway the weavers in his locale as to the use of certain colors, dyes and designs that are appealing to his tastes.

The regional rug as we see it in contemporary weaves today is the primary producing style that began to achieve dominance prior to World War II. However, geographic individualism in rug types and styles began to emerge as early as the Rug Period (1890-1920). Two traders of the period, Juan Lorenzo Hubbell of Ganado, Arizona, and J. B. Moore of Crystal, New Mexico, were the first to influence the regional trend. Hubbell demanded quality of his weavers, discouraging cheap dyes and loose-woven fabrics. He encouraged a return to the Classic Period designs of the mid-1850s; bold crosses and diamonds, which he set against a brilliant red background bordered in black. He commissioned an artist to paint patterns in oil, and samples of these hung in his office for the weavers to copy. He urged the weaving of heavier products—durable pieces in larger sizes to be used as area rugs in the home. In return he promised his weavers higher sales in a greater market. The Fred Harvey Company stocked hundreds of the famed Ganado "reds" along the Santa Fe Railroad, and the rug became famous.

J. B. Moore was also a disciple of craftsmanship. He had his weavers bring in raw wool which he then shipped to eastern mills for machine washing and carding. When returned the thoroughly cleaned wool could be better spun. The technical quality of Moore-based rugs met with immediate success. Moore's enthusiasm included a published mail order catalog outlining grades of wool, classes of rugs and prices. This now out-of-print and rare booklet was illustrated with photographs of weavers at work and contained the first color plates of Navajo rugs. Like Hubbell, Moore also employed an artist to set down design styles combining some traditional Navajo figures with some geometries of his own imagination. His distinctive motif included a bordered rug with the natural wool tones of brown, gray, tan and white used in combinations with commercial dyes of red and blue. Moore's greatest contribution to Navajo weaving was perhaps the designs that he originated. In the years to come his basic patterns would give birth to another popular regional style rug called the Two Gray Hills.

During the Revival Period (1920-1940) two other regional

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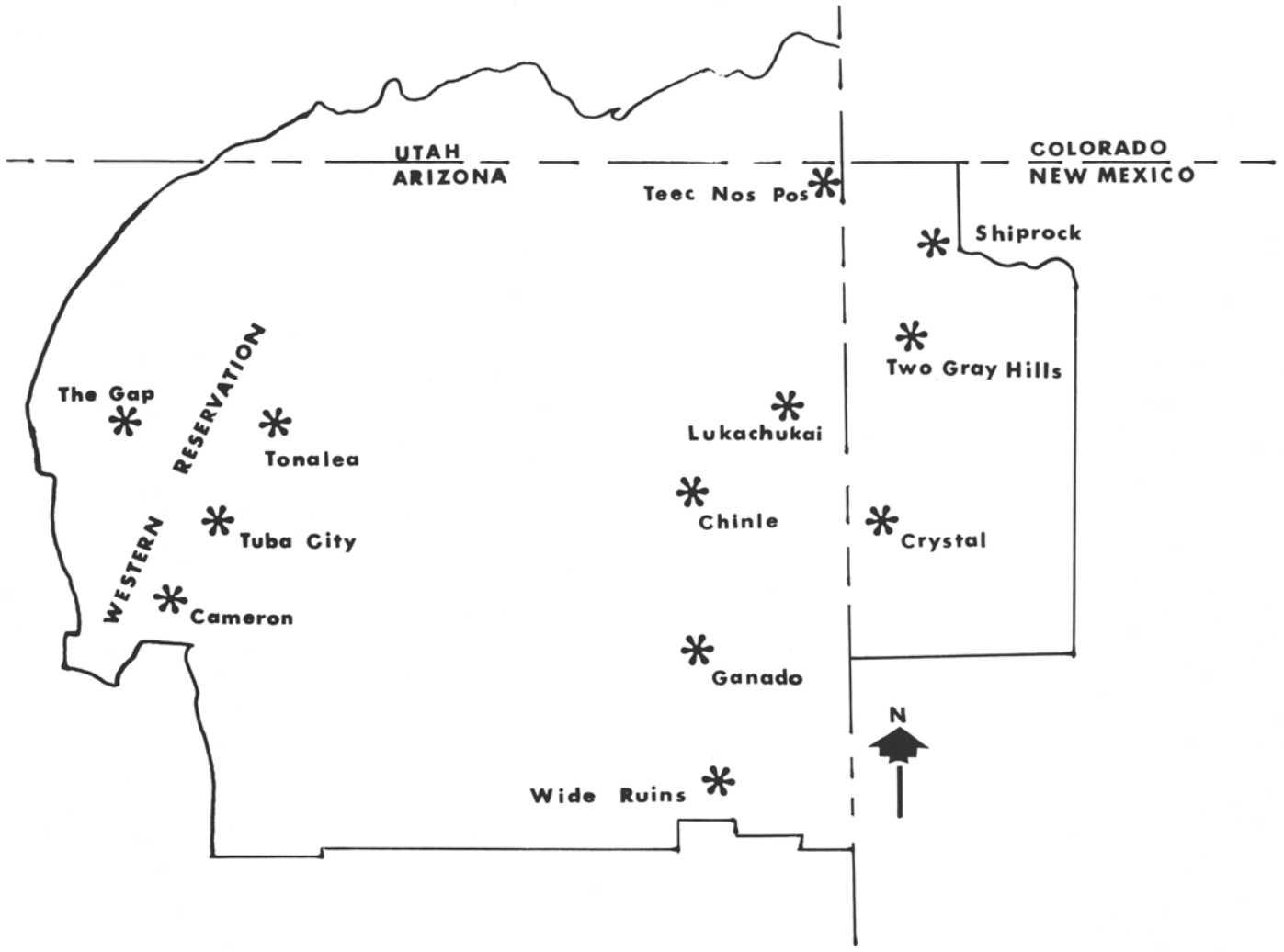


Figure 1.
Generalized map of the Navajo Reservation showing location of regional style weaving centers.

styles began to emerge. In 1923 Navajo benefactress Mary C. Wheelright, in association with Chinle trader, Leon H. McSparron, undertook a program to encourage weavers of that district to experiment with the old vegetable dye methods that were used prior to introduction of commercial colorants (late 1870s). The Chinle weavers were delighted with the challenge. They incorporated pastel plant hues of browns, golds and greens in early Classic Period patterns of simple stripes and bands set on a borderless motif—thus was conceived the Chinle regional style.

Encouraged by the restoration of old techniques, but limited in color range, the question arose as to the feasibility of creating vegetable tones from commercial dyes. Miss Lucy C. Cabot, a dye expert in Boston, Massachusetts, was consulted and subsequently a series of tests were initiated with the famed Dupont Chemical Company. The result was a produced series of dyes in a highly concentrated dry form using 28 percent acetic acid as a mordant to be mixed with a desired colorant. In 1932 the dyes were introduced on the reservation. The solutions when applied resulted in beautifully colored yarns and the weavers became amazed at the flexibility of tones that could be achieved. In the months that followed the Diamond Dye Company produced an improved series called Old Navaho. This product combined in one package the mordant with the colorant, thus relieving the weaver of the sometimes hazardous procedures of acid mixings. Today the Chinle regional style rug reflects both the vegetable and commercial dye experiments of the Revival Period.

In the late 1930s further experimentation with native plant dyes were undertaken by Mr. & Mrs. William Lippincott of Wide Ruins Trading Post. They encouraged their weavers in the subtle selection of dyes. Their labors met with excellent results and gave rise to a distinctive, well-known product called the Wide Ruins, which today denotes an all-vegetable colored rug.

The success of vegetable dyes did not end with the field tests at Chinle and Wide Ruins, but was carried on in laboratory experiments at Fort Wingate High School east of Gallup, New Mexico. Here two women, Nonabah G. Bryan and Stella Young, carried on a six-year research into native plants. A combination of eighty-four shades of color dyes was obtained. Findings of their study were published under the title, "Native Navajo Dyes, Their Preparation And Use," in 1940 by the U.S. Department of the Interior. The recipe-instruction type man-

ual was widely circulated both on and off the reservation, and for those weavers who desired to work with vegetable dye methods, the step by step procedures became an invaluable aid.

In recent years, there have been over 240 recognized vegetable tones achieved from native plant dyes; the combinations from these are innumerable. The use of plant dyes in Navajo textiles has been the greatest single innovation in the history of the craft. Its graphic and esthetic value in the eyes of the white man has, in all probability, extended the life of Navajo rugs a full 100 years.

Early in the development of the Regional Style Period many weaving areas sought individualism; to create new designs, ideas and arrangements of color to achieve a level that would be commercially attractive. As indicated previously, those rugs whose history began with imaginative traders became the modern standard bearers of the period. There were other areas that at one time could be called style centers, but through a lack of continuing improvement, or through merging their characteristics with stronger centers, they lost their identities.

REGIONAL STYLE AREAS

Here is considerable confusion in the naming of rugs. Some "authorities" outline lengthy lists of regional style rugs; others specialize on those lists and subdivide - further on the basis of design refinement and size. In the true identification of the regional rug there are only nine style centers that deserve the distinction and recognition.

7. Shiprock

Beginning in New Mexico and the northeastern part of the reservation is found the Yei (pronounced "yea") mg—a highly stylized colorful piece that depicts religious figures, but has no religious significance. The rug is usually small to moderate size carrying bright-colored, frontal-facing figures surrounded by, in most cases, a bright red and blue rainbow goddess. Backgrounds are usually white or light tan. The rug is finely woven with a growing use toward more commercial yarn. The Shiprock Yei usually lends itself as a tapestry for wall hangings in the same manner as a fine painting.

2. Lukachukai

To the southwest, past the jagged heights of the volcanic neck of Shiprock and over the forested divide of Buffalo Pass into eastern Arizona, is a second source of the Yei rug. Here the products are of larger size, representing a greater use of hand-spun yarn and the utilization of analine dyes for color. Backgrounds are usually gray or brown-colored. In some examples the rug may be bordered outside of the rainbow goddess, usually in a dark color. In many pieces the goddess is completely eliminated with a solitary heavy border encasing the figures. More figures occupy the Lukachukai Yei, but they are less detailed and colorful. The basic motif is the same as those woven along the San Juan River, but while the tapestry weaves to the north are suitable for the wall, the heavier Yeis from across the mountains are content to take their place on the floor (Maxwell, 1963).

3. Teec Nos Pos

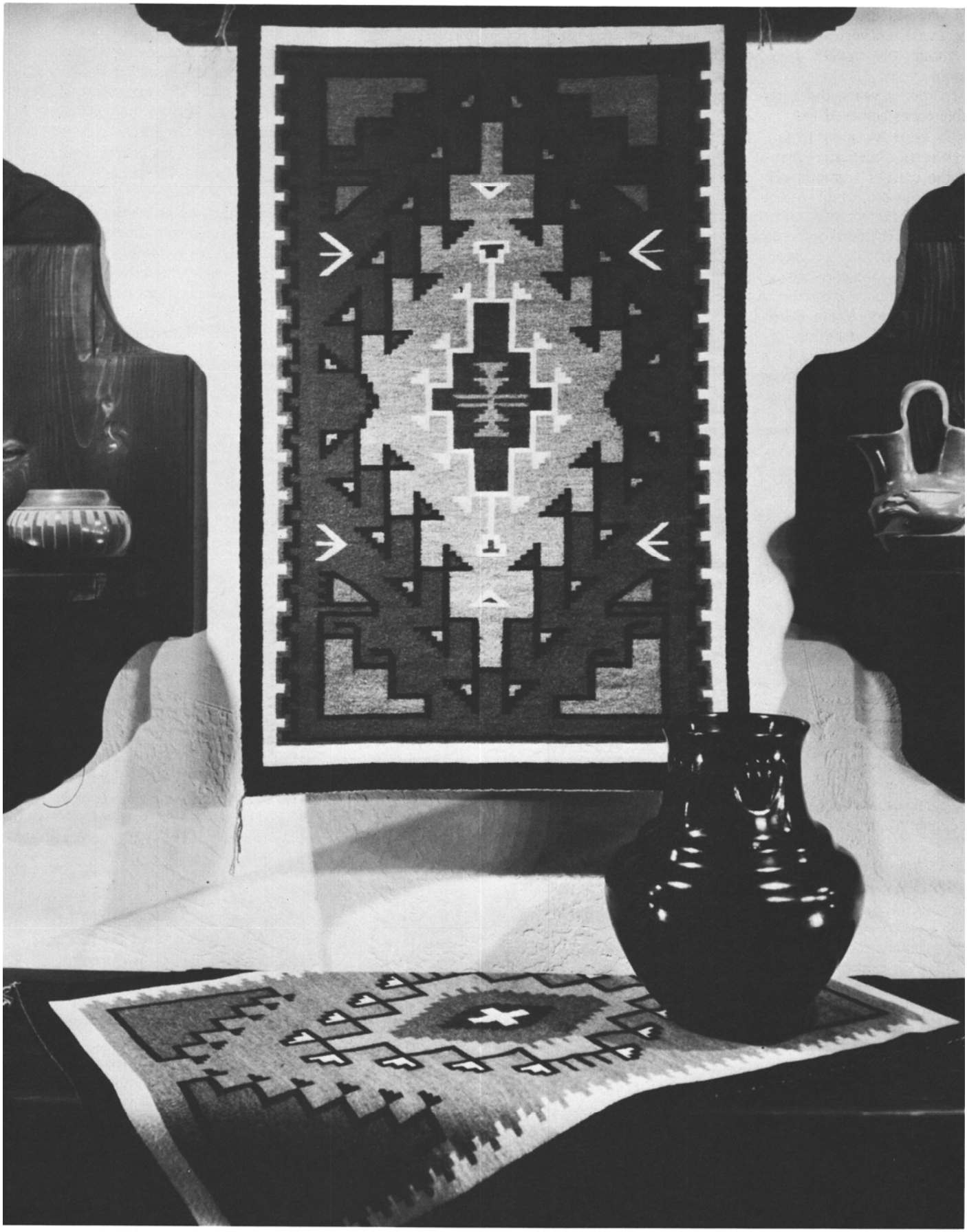
At the gateway to the Four Corners Monument, along the northern slopes of the Carrizo Mountains, lies the trading post of Teec Nos Pos ("circle of cottonwoods"). Surrounding this once isolated post, a small group of dedicated weavers produce an extremely fine, tightly woven rug that has been described by many as the "least Navajo" of all the regional styles. Maxwell (1963) indicates that the rug has a Persian flair, probably influenced by one of the early traders who circulated examples of this style among the area craftswomen. The rug is very busy and intricate in design. Colors are rather flamboyant, sometimes even wild in expression; bright greens, orange, blue and red are popular. Commercial yarns are primarily in use, with some utilization of analine-dyed, hand-spun fibers. The typical Teec Nos Pos is heavily bordered and features a serrated outline design of the main patterns, which usually consist of zigzags of diamonds, triangles and boxes. Because of its usually gaudy colors the Teec Nos Pos is more difficult to blend into schemes of home decorating. Its greatest appeal is thus reserved for the serious collector.

4. Crystal

The early Crystal rug of Moore's design was a bordered product with crosses, diamonds, terraces, a characteristic hook and fork pattern, along with swastikas and arrows. The Moore line was generously annointed with analine red, and to lesser degrees with outlines of blue. J. B. Moore sold his holdings at Crystal and took his leave of the reservation in 1912. The quality rugs that he instituted and publicized followed with him. His basic designs, however, continued to flourish on the east side of the Chuska Mountains at a lonely desert outpost called Two Gray Hills. From the grave of the pre-Revival Crystal rose a new rug type; dating from the early 1940s, the new Crystal departed radically from its predecessor, and, as it advanced into the Regional Style Period, became extremely popular. There is no mistaking the modern Crystal. It is one of the most distinctive and beautifully woven of all styles on the reservation. The rug is borderless and is composed of rich, all-vegetable, earth-toned hues of brown, gold, orange, beige and sometimes subtle touches of green, gray and maroon. The basic motif is horizontally paneled, with a characteristic "wavy line" design—an effect created by alternating two or three wefts of contrasting color. The appeal of the Crystal is great, mainly because its pleasing tones are so functional in contemporary home decorating.

5. Two Gray Hills

Along the barren slopes separating the Chuskas from the Chaco wastelands lies the trading post called Two Gray Hills, so named from the prominent buttes northwest of the store. The Two Gray Hills rug owes its origin to J. B. Moore's base of operations at Crystal. The motifs that he conceived in the early 1900s filtered eastward through the snowy confines of Washington Pass to be nourished by a group of conscientious weavers. The women eliminated Moore's bright colors, especially the red (which they seemed to dislike), and began to produce a black bordered rug with natural background tones of white, brown, tan and gray. By 1925 the design elements borrowed from Moore's line had disappeared as weavers began to concentrate on multiple geometries and crystalline entanglements resembling patterns on winter-frosted windows. The designs evolve into complexities with arrays of architectural groupings that focus on a center panel; lesser groupings are balanced in the corners and along the borders.



Two Gray Hills rugs—the reservation's finest weave.

Inch by inch and foot by foot the Two Gray Hills is the finest textile to come from the Navajo loom today—it is also the most expensive (Maxwell, 1963). Some magnificent examples have sold for as much as $7,000. One of the most attractive characteristics of the finer rugs is the light weight, accounted for by extremely fine carding and high thread count in weaving. Some of the outstanding examples count as high as 120 wefts to the inch—the texture of fine cashmere. This comparison is amazing when 30 to 50 wefts to the inch is considered a good Navajo rug.

It is interesting to note that the one male weaver on the Navajo Reservation, James Sherman, is located at Two Gray Hills. A quality weaver, Mr. Sherman's work is always in demand as collection pieces.

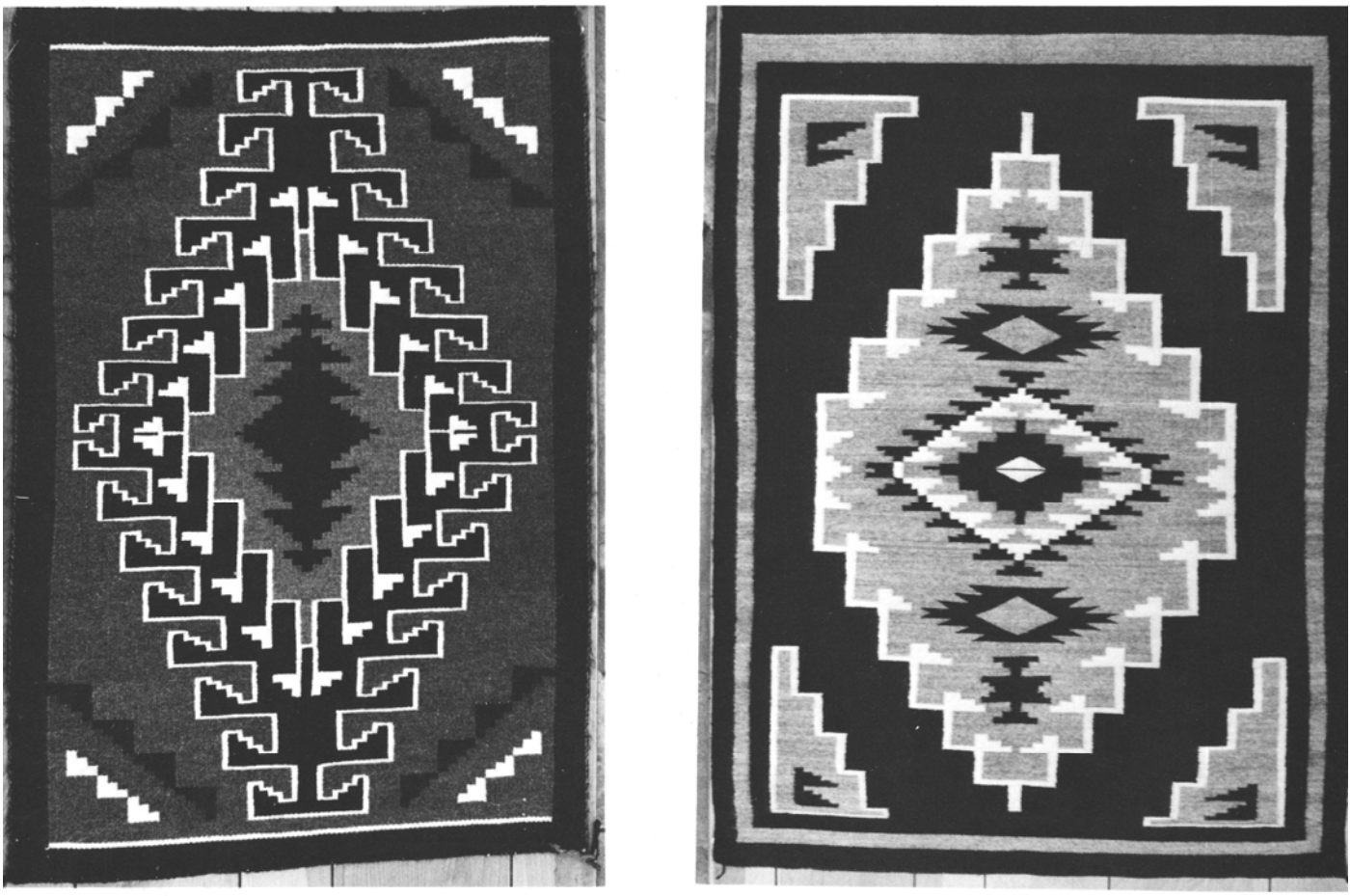
6. Chinle

At the mouth of one of the Southwest's most magnificent canyons, Canyon de Chelly, is situated the progressive town of Chinle ("at the mouth of the canyon"). Trader Leon H. (Cozy) McSparron is responsible for the regional style rug that is known as the Chinle. His experiments with dye seekers, both vegetable and commercial, provided impetus to his weavers to revive the simple stripes and bands of the Classic Period (1850-1863). The modern Chinle has maintained the McSparron suggestion of design, and today reflects the combination of both vegetable and analine dyes. It is generally considered, however, that the contemporary Chinle is basically vegetable. Commercial dyes are used sparingly to outline or accentuate the smaller designs. The borderless Chinle has a spacious feeling with small terraced designs encased on broad bands. Some of the intervening stripes have the Crystal "wavy line" technique. The weavers in the district create an attractive rug of pleasing balance. Natural white wool usually provides the background with subordinate usages of shades of vegetable dyed green, brown and gray. Rose colors and yellows are favorites along with black to denote outlines and termination panels at the ends. The rug is distinctive and well-woven. In some pieces close examination may be needed to distinguish it from a Crystal or Wide Ruins; the key is the color utilization—part vegetable and part analine. Also, the weave is somewhat less delicate than its all-vegetable neighbors.

7. *Ganado*

Ganado (Spanish meaning "cattle"), is located on the crimson plains midway between the Defiance Plateau on the east and the Hopi mesas to the west. The main trading center is nestled in a small valley along the southern banks of Pueblo Colorado Wash.

The famed Ganado "red" is perhaps the best known of all Navajo rugs, and considered by most non-Indians what a Navajo rug should look like. Its creator, Juan Lorenzo Hubbell (who held sway at Ganado from 1878 to 1930), specialized in a well-woven product that featured brilliant red backgrounds adorned with beautiful block crosses, diamonds and stepped



Contemporary Ganado "reds" illustrating designs of stepped terraces (left) and stylized diamonds (right).

terraces of gray and white, all of which was bordered in black. Hubbell's influence is still very much in evidence in the modern Ganado. The central motif, in most cases, is a bold diamond or cross outlined in black. Smaller forms, such as chevrons and checks, occupy the remaining spaces. The bright reds are still the dominant feature throughout the pattern. In recent years, however, the tones have taken on rich casts of burgundy. The rug ranges from large uncomplicated designs to small sophisticated works. There is a current tendency to create the smaller tapestry forms for wall hangings.

8. Wide Ruins

Amidst the juniper-forested hill country that separates the Chinle Valley from the Rio Puerco lies the trading center called Wide Ruins, named for the nearby great Anasazi ruin, Kinteel. This is the main all-vegetable dye center of the reservation. The native plant dye experiments fostered by the Lippincotts in 1938, and which were subsequently coupled by master weavers, have made the Wide Ruins rug the ultimate in sophisticated color and design. The Wide Ruins is extremely fine-carded, all hand-spun and beautifully dyed and woven. The natural colors of gray and white are used sparingly, but the blending of subtle shades of seemingly endless plant combinations defies description. Soft pastels of exquisite pinks, yellows, beige, deep corals, rich grays, olive greens, multiple tones of tan and brown and hues of lilac all combine to place the Wide Ruins a notch above all others in esthetic value. To complement the colors the weaving design is Classic Period stripes and bands situated across a borderless motif. Overall simplicity is intended, however, the ornamentation is quite complex; finely constructed outlines, hatch work, discontinuous sequences of alternating colors and beading techniques provide extraordinary embroidery arrangements. The attention to detail of the design forms approach true artful expression. As evidenced by their product the Wide Ruins weaver practices her craft with the utmost diligence—always striving for quality construction and continually searching for that yet undiscovered tinge that may lie in the dyebath of a wild plum or juniper seed.

9. Western Reservation

The trading posts at Tuba City, Cameron, Tonalea and The Gap are the home of the reservation's most controversial and interestingly designed rug—the Storm Pattern. The basic design is a distinctive bordered motif that is highly symmetrical displaying certain standard features. Always there is a square, or rectangular center, from which radiating lines lead to the four corners where additional squares are set. Secondary elements may include zigzags, diamonds, arrows and stepped terraces serving as fillers along the spacious inner borders. The rug has a tendency to be elongated in shape to facilitate the connecting lines between the rectangular designs. Weavers of the Storm work primarily in red-black-gray-white combinations, with some brightly colored analines gaining a noticeable foothold.

The contemporary Storm Pattern, although still very much in evidence in the western sectors, is now being found all over the reservation. Beautiful examples are reflected in most areas and usually display characteristics of the local regional style. Even all-vegetable dyed Storms are beginning to appear on racks.

The origin of the Storm Pattern has prompted considerable debate. The general inclination is that it is symbolic, although the symbolism appears to be conceived by a white man. The traditional sales factor in describing its alleged "sacredness" is that the center square is the hogan, or "center of the world," and that the four squares at the corners represent the four sacred mountains of Navajo mythology. The connecting lines, which are usually zigzagged, are intended as lightning bolts carrying blessings to and from between the squares, thus bestowing good spirits on the weaver and her household.

Some writers credit an early trader at Tonalea with devising the Storm design; others say it is a variation of a commercial design that appeared on flour sacks being shipped out of Flagstaff at the turn of the century (Maxwell, 1963). The strongest theory, however, seems to rest in the imaginative brain of trader Moore of Crystal, New Mexico. Moore was continually involved with design innovations and pictured in his mail order catalog, The Navajo (1911), is a perfect example of a modern-day Storm. Moore called this his ER-20 Class Special Design Rug, and noted, "that it is legendary in Navajo mythology and not many weavers will do it for superstitious reasons." Considering that passage it would appear that Mr. Moore's design abilities were possibly exceeded by his salesmanship.

CONCLUSIONS

It is interesting to note that while the regional style rug is the dominant textile force in Navajoland at the present time, it only accounts for approximately 40 (4% percent of the total rug production. There is no law governing regional style weaving. Some weavers, regardless of their reservation home, may prefer the natural tones of a Two Gray Hills while residing near Ganado. A few are classed as combination weavers; these rare artists, who usually live on the border between two rug regions, can produce two styles of weave of equal excellence. Furthermore, not all weavers are geared to regional styles. The majority like to combine colors, experiment with dyes and designs, and more or less create something entirely different than what is generally dictated by the region in which they live; these pieces are called general rugs. Also, another type of weaver that does excellent work is the craftswoman that undertakes and creates the difficult specialties—the two-faced, pictoral, twill, sandpaintings and double weaves; these rugs often command greater prices than the regional products.

Navajo rugs coming from the Regional Style Period loom are finer in craftsmanship and more pleasing in color balance and design that at any time in the 250-year history of Navajo weaving. In versatility and quality the craft is at its ultimate peak—in quantity it is facing extinction. From the inception of the Regional Style Period the number of rugs has decreased steadily, though not alarmingly noticeable. In the early 1960s prices began to soar (the current annual increase in Navajo rugs is approximately 20 percent), and it soon became apparent that rugs were becoming fewer and fewer, with the prize fabrics falling into hands of collectors. The craft as viewed today is not economically attractive for the young weaver. The "daughters of the loom" are not following in their mother's avocations. More and more of the younger women are becoming higher educated and leaving the reservation for better jobs. In the Crystal area alone there are only five name weavers remaining. A great imbalance has already resulted for which no

recovery is predicted; it is only a matter of time—perhaps in this century—before Navajo weaving will be gone.

H i story has been tolerant with the aboriginal craft, though—what with borrowed ingredients like the Pueblo loom, Spanish and French sheep, German and English yarn and American dyes it has managed surprisingly well. The rug came into being because the white man accepted a textile that satisfied his graphic needs at a particular time, and because of it the white man has come to a better understanding and appreciation of the red man.

The Navajo's love of beauty is reflected in the rug and per haps the chant of the Yeibichai best summarizes the spirit of their lives:

IN BEAUTY I WALK
WITH BEAUTY BEFORE ME I WALK
WITH BEAUTY BEHIND ME / WALK
WITH BEAUTY ABOVE ME I WALK WITH BEAUTY ALL AROUND ME I WALK
IN BEAUTY IT IS FINISHED .....

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