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Gaithersburg, MD 20878
November 2, 2020

Ms. Gail Hamil
President, Potomac Fiber Arts Guild
11815 Seven Locks Road
Potomac, MD 20854

Dear Ms. Hamil:

As agreed in our September 2020 contract, I am submitting the attached guide entitled *A Guide to Navajo Weaving*.

This guide provides an overview of Navajo weaving as a means to educate and encourage the members of the Potomac Fiber Arts Guild to incorporate Navajo weaving as a focus area for the guild. The guide describes the following:

- The origins and legends of Navajo weaving
- An introduction to the most common styles of Navajo rugs
- Descriptions and approximate costs for looms, tools, and other supplies
- Available workshops and classes
- An extensive list of resources to build a reference library

I hope you find this guide satisfactory for you and the guild members to proceed forward with Navajo weaving within the Potomac Fiber Arts Guild.

Sincerely yours,

Joanne Seyl
Encl: Guide to Navajo weaving

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A GUIDE TO NAVAJO WEAVING

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the most recognizable forms of weaving, even to those who are not weavers, is Navajo weaving. Navajo weaving is a technique passed down from generation to generation within the Navajo culture. The looms, tools, and techniques represent a spiritual part of the Navajo culture and must therefore be respected. The purpose of this guide is to provide the Potomac Fiber Arts Guild with an overview of Navajo weaving as a way to encourage its members to incorporate Navajo weaving as a focus area for the guild.

This guide describes the origin of Navajo weaving, the legend of Spider Woman, Navajo rug styles, looms, tools and supplies, and considerations for creating a Navajo weaving studio at home. It also provides information on where to learn Navajo weaving, as well as references to include in a Navajo weaving library. Where possible, approximate costs are included to give the weaver a better understanding of the overall investment required.

Origins of Navajo Weaving

While there is some debate regarding when the Navajo first began weaving, the history of modern Navajo weaving is generally accepted to have begun with the arrival of Spanish sheep in the late 1600s. The Spanish conquistadors brought flocks of Iberian Churra sheep with them as they made their way across the region. Churra sheep are a breed of sheep that were well suited to the region and produced wool that could be easily spun into long, useful yarn. [15]

The earliest examples of Navajo weaving featured straight lines or occasionally included diamond or terrace designs. Before the middle of the 19th century, the primary colors used in Navajo weaving were natural brown, white, and indigo. After the opening of the Santa Fe Trail in 1822 and the arrival of cheaper synthetic dyes via the railroad, Navajo weavings became much more colorful. By the middle of the 1800s, the color palette expanded to include red, black, green, yellow, and gray. Wool was obtained either from natural sources from varying fleece colors, through the use of natural dyes, or through the growing trade routes that stretched back to Europe. [15]

The Legend of Spider Woman

Traditional stories and legends were told by Navajo elders to teach and entertain children and grandchildren. One such legend is the legend of Spider Woman. Spider Woman is one of the most important deities of traditional Navajo religion. [6] She gave the Navajo the gift of weaving. In Navajo legend, the holy people of the Navajo Nation instructed Spider Woman to weave a map of the universe and to teach the Navajo to weave to bring harmony and beauty to their lives. [5]

As the legend goes, one day Spider Woman was exploring the land and came upon a young tree that was just starting to grow. Using her right hand, she wrapped her fingers around one of the branches. When she released her hand, there was a string attached to the branch flowing from the center of her palm. Uncertain of what was happening, she shook her hand but the string stayed attached. In an attempt to detach the string, she continued wrapping it around the branch. After realizing her new gift, she ran the strings to other branches and discovered she was making a pattern. She began manipulating and moving the strings into different shapes and realized she was weaving what was instructed by the holy elders — to weave a universe. [7]

When the holy elders learned about Spider Woman's new talent, they came to visit her and instructed Spider Man to construct a weaving loom and the tools used in the process of weaving. Spider Woman began singing weaving songs given to her by the holy elders to empower the weavings and the weaving tools. [7]

Today, young weavers are instructed to find a spider web that is glistening with sunlight and sparkles in the early morning. They are told to place the palm of their right hand upon the spider's webbing without destroying or damaging the web. It is said at that moment that Spider Woman's gift of weaving enters the young weaver's spirit, where it lives forever. [7]

II. NAVAJO RUG STYLES

In past times, weavers had very little opportunity to talk about their weavings with anyone that lived more than a few miles away. As a result, distinct regional styles developed because weavers were only sharing what they knew with their children or those that lived nearby. [4] Local trading posts also influenced the rug styles because the traders provided the weavers with dyes and yarns that influenced the colors and techniques weavers used in their rugs. [4]

Rug styles continue to evolve, but some common styles are easily identifiable. The familiar styles that are described include Chief, Ganado, Klaietoh, Two Grey Hills, Chinele, Teec Nos Pos, Yei, Yeibichai, and Tree of Life. Refer to Figure 1 for a map of the Navajo Nation and its regions while reading the descriptions of the rug styles.

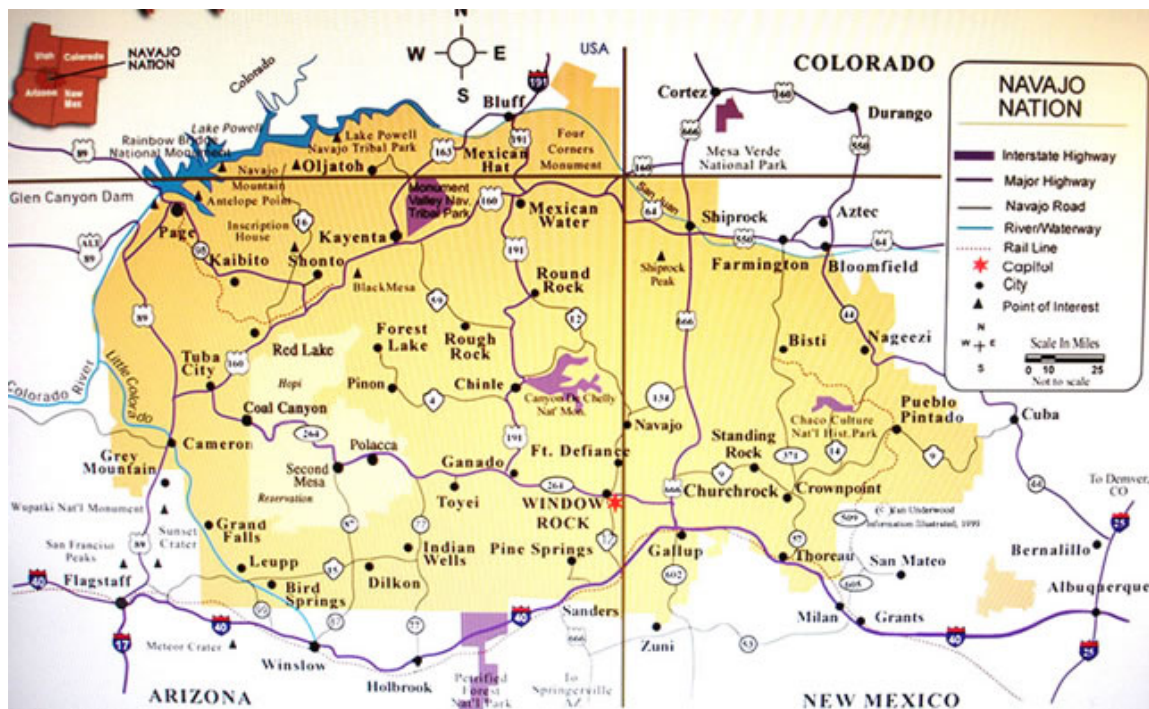


Figure 1. The Navajo Nation and its regions. [11]

Chief

The Chief blanket is the earliest known Navajo weaving style. Chief blankets are characterized by their square shape and plain design created using blue, red, black, and white wool. Their design is unique because when the four corners of the blanket are folded in toward the center, the design remains the same as when it is unfolded. [4] See Figure 2 for a photo of a Chief blanket.



Figure 2. Chief blanket. [4]

Ganado

The Ganado rug is easily identifiable simply by its color alone. Named after the town of Ganado in the Navajo Nation, these weavings always have a red background, referred to as “Ganado red”, and include a central diamond design woven with black, white, and gray wool. The borders and corners of the central shape are embellished with simple geometric shapes including crosses and zigzags. Ganado rugs are considered one of the classic styles of Navajo weaving. [4] See Figure 3 for a photo of a Ganado rug.



Figure 3. Ganado rug.

Klagetoh

Like Ganado rugs, Klagetoh weavings are also easily identifiable by color alone. They are similar to Ganado weavings but the background of these rugs is predominantly grey instead of red. Red, black, and white wool are used to create geometric patterns around the central elongated diamond design. The grey and white wool used in these weavings are not dyed. Color variations are achieved based on the natural colors of the fleece of the sheep used to spin the wool. Klagetoh rugs come from a small town south of Ganado which helps explain some of the design similarities with the Ganado rugs. [4] See Figure 4 for an example of a Klagetoh rug.



Figure 4. Klagetoh rug. [9]

Two Grey Hills

Two Grey Hills rugs are woven from natural, undyed, handspun wool in shades of black, white, and brown. The subtle shades seen in these rugs are achieved by carding wool from different sheep together and then spinning the wool into yarn. Because the wool in a traditional Two Grey Hills rug is handspun, these rugs typically cost considerably more than rugs made with commercially dyed and spun yarn. The handspun yarn tends to be finer than commercial yarn which increases weaving time and ultimately impacts the cost of these rugs. Named for a village in New Mexico, Two Grey Hills rugs tend to have a plain, dark border with more complicated patterns than the other styles of rugs. [4] See Figure 5 for a photo of a Two Grey Hills rug.



Figure 5. Two Grey Hills rug.

Chinele

Chinele rugs are considered the simplest of the group of banded Navajo rugs. They consist of stripes of plain color bands alternating with bands containing geometric patterns such as squash blossoms, stacked chevrons, and diamonds. Chinele rugs have no borders and tend to be woven using more pastel, restrained colors including natural greys, whites, golds, and greens. Chinele rugs are one of the most commonly woven rugs because the straightforward design takes less time to weave than the other styles. Named for the town of Chinele, this style of rug is woven in all parts of the Navajo Nation. [4] See Figure 6 for an example of a Chinele rug.



Figure 6. Chinele rug. [12]

Teec Nos Pos

Teec Nos Pos ,which translates to “cottonwoods in a circle”, rugs are known for their bold, busy, exciting designs. Always surrounded by a wide border, the center is filled

with a variety of motifs including diagonal lines, zigzags, stylized feathers, and arrows. Clawlike angular hooks extend from the points of diamonds and triangles. These design elements are often outlined in a contrasting color. There are no typical colors used in these rugs and the only requirement in color selection is that the colors harmonize with one another. Teec Nos Pos rugs are typically very large. Because of their size and the complexity of the design, they are often very expensive rugs. Teec Nos Pos rugs originate from a settlement in the northwest corner of the Navajo Nation near the Four Corners area. See Figure 7 for an example of a Teec Nos Pos rug.



Figure 7. Teec Nos Pos rug. [10]

Yei

Yei (pronounced “yay”) rugs depict supernatural holy people who communicate between the Navajo and their gods. Yeis are front-facing, tall, slender, styled figures seen carrying rattles, pine boughs, or yucca strips. These rugs have a wide array of colors and are adapted from sandpainting designs of the religious healing ceremonies. Yei rugs are a strong representation of Navajo culture and as such should not be woven by non-Navajo weavers. This type of weaving originates in the Shiprock area of New Mexico and is found in limited quantity throughout the Navajo Nation. [4] See Figure 8 for an example of a Yei rug.



Figure 8. Yei rug. [13]

Yeibichai

Yeibichai (pronounced “yay-ba-chay”) rugs depict Navajo healing ceremonies in which human dancers impersonate yeis. The rugs, woven using lifelike colors, typically consist of six dancers, often in profile with one leg bent. Other figures in the weaving may include a lead dancer, a medicine man, and the patient for whom the ceremony is being performed. All the figures in the weaving are depicted as realistically proportioned human beings. Because of the very sensitive and spiritual nature of the ceremonial subject matter, relatively few of these rugs are produced. As with Yei rugs, these should not be woven by non-Navajo weavers. Yeibichai rugs are typically found in the Many Farms and Shiprock areas of the Navajo Nation. [4] See Figure 9 for an example of a Yeibichai rug.



Figure 9. Yeibichai rug. [14]

Tree of Life

Tree of Life rugs portray a tree or cornstalk growing from a basket or the ground. Brilliant colored birds such as cardinals, blue jays, and woodpeckers are shown flying, perched on the branches, or even on the ground. Often other animals such as butterflies, rabbits, or squirrels are woven into the rug as well. This type of rug usually has a dark, plain border and a pale color background to set off the bright colors of the wool used to weave the birds. Tree of Life rugs originate from the Cedar Ridge area of the Navajo Nation. [4] See Figure 10 for an example of a Tree of Life rug.



Figure 10. Tree of Life rug. [4]

III. LOOMS

Navajo looms were traditionally made with materials that native weavers could readily find in their environment. Today looms can be created using inexpensive wood readily available at home improvement centers. Commercially manufactured looms can also be purchased online or through other retailers. The looms that will be discussed include table looms, Cactus Flower looms, and floor looms.

Table looms

The most common type of loom for Navajo weaving is a table loom. Table looms can easily be made by a weaver in any size required for the desired weaving. They have a very simple design with wood uprights and top and bottom crossbars to attach the warp to for weaving. The feet on either side create stability for the loom while weaving. Zip ties are used to attach the weaving to the lower part of the loom and Velcro straps are used to provide the warp tension. A loom similar to the one shown in Figure 11 can be made for under \$50.00 and measures 18 inches wide and 27 inches tall. This size loom can accommodate a weaving up to 14 inches wide by 18 inches tall.



Figure 11. Traditional Navajo table loom

Cactus Flower looms

The Cactus Flower loom was designed by Caroline Spurgeon and is now being made by Cherry Creek Valley Farms. [1] These looms come in several sizes and are meant for weaving smaller Navajo rugs or miniatures. Cactus Flower looms are considered to be lap looms and work best when the weaver is seated and the loom is leaned against a table. They are easily transportable which means weavers can take their projects with them – even on a plane. Cactus Flower looms simplify the warping process which makes these an ideal option for a beginning weaver. Warping a traditional Navajo loom can be

tedious. These looms range in price from \$115.00 to \$395.00. See Figure 12 for a photo of a Cactus Flower loom.



Figure 12. Cactus Flower loom

Floor looms

The floor loom pictured in Figure 13 is 30 inches wide and 42 inches tall. It is designed to allow the weaver to either sit on the floor to weave or to raise the weaving to accommodate weavers who find it more comfortable to sit in a chair. Weavings of this size are not recommended for beginning weavers who are just learning the proper techniques but are intended for more experienced and advanced weavers. Zip ties are used to attach the weaving to the lower part of the loom and turnbuckles are used to provide the warp tension. Building a custom floor loom of this size would cost approximately \$375.00 and may require assistance with someone more familiar with woodworking and loom building.



Figure 13. Traditional floor loom.

IV. TOOLS AND SUPPLIES

Navajo weaving requires some very specific tools for wool preparation and weaving. Many of the tools are not inexpensive, but with proper care, they can last a lifetime. Battens, combs, lap spindles, umbrella swifts, ball winders, and needles will be discussed.

Battens

Battens are an essential tool for Navajo weaving. They are slender, flat, tapered pieces of wood that are used to keep warp sets apart during the weaving process. As the weaving reaches completion, thinner battens will be needed so it's best to have three different widths of battens for each size loom in the studio. The length of the batten should be as wide as the loom and range from 1/2 inch to 1 inch wide. Because of the variety of woods and sizes, battens can range from \$20.00 to \$120.00. See Figure 14 for a photo of battens in several different widths.



Figure 14. Battens.

Combs

Weaving combs come in various shapes and sizes and are made from many different types of wood. They are used to pack the weft while weaving to produce a crisp, tight design. At a minimum, a weaver should own two or three weaving combs. In their own right, they are beautiful pieces of art so it's not surprising for weavers to have many weaving combs. If possible, it is best to try the weaving comb before purchasing it. They come in different weights and are intended to become an extension of your hand so it's a very personal and important choice. Weaving combs range in price from \$24.00 to \$75.00. See Figure 15 for a photo of several different types of weaving combs.



Figure 15. Weaving combs.

Navajo lap spindles

A lap spindle, as shown in Figure 16, is a wooden spindle used to spin wool roving into yarn and to ply yarn for making selvage cord for Navajo weavings. Spindles come in various weights and lengths and it is critical to try a spindle before making a purchase. If the diameter of the shaft of the spindle is too large, it will cause hand cramping. If the length of the shaft is too short or too long, it will impede the weaver's ability to spin properly. Spindles range in price from \$45.00 to \$70.00.



Figure 16X. Navajo lap spindle.

Umbrella swifts

An umbrella swift is a valuable addition to any home weaving studio and is an important part of preparing the yarn for Navajo weaving. Yarn is purchased in skeins that need to be wound into a ball for ease of use during the weaving process. Winding can be done by hand by using the back of a chair but the umbrella swift makes the process much easier. The swift is clamped to a counter and the yarn is placed around the swift. The swift is then opened similar to an umbrella which puts tension on the skein of yarn so that it can be wound into a ball more easily. Umbrella swifts are either made of wood or metal and come in various sizes. Prices for umbrella swifts range from \$40.00 to \$70.00.

Ball winders

Ball winders are used in conjunction with the umbrella swift and make the winding process extremely fast. The ball winder is clamped to a counter near the umbrella swift. One end of the skein of yarn is attached to the top of the ball winder, and the weaver simply has to turn the handle on the winder. An entire skein of yarn can be wound in several minutes without causing fatigue to the weaver's hands. Ball winders are available online from about \$40.00.

Needles

Navajo weaving requires a variety of needles throughout the weaving process. A weaver should have a variety of upholstery, tapestry, and sacking needles available in the home studio. Needles are available at sewing stores and online and range in price from \$2.50 to \$6.99. See Figure 17 for a photo of a variety of needles.



Figure 17. Needles.

V. NAVAJO WEAVING HOME STUDIO

In addition to the looms, tools, and supplies previously described, there are other things to consider if a weaver plans on creating a weaving studio at home. Selection of work surfaces, lighting, seating, and storage are all critical parts of creating an effective weaving space in the home.

Work Surface

When using either a table loom or a Cactus Flower loom, it is best to have an adjustable height table. Weaving for long periods can be very tiring on the arms and shoulders. Having the ability to raise or lower the work surface during the weaving process can be a real lifesaver. Adjustable height tables are available in different lengths so it's important to select one that will provide enough workspace and still fit within the space available in the home weaving studio. Adjustable tables range in cost from \$65.00 to \$90.00.

Lighting

Lighting is an important element of designing a home weaving studio. If the studio has a lot of natural light from windows, it's even better. If the studio happens to be in a room with little light, it's important to have enough task lighting to see the intricacies and details in the weaving.

Task lights. If studio space is limited, clip-on lights are a great option. They are small and can be clipped onto the frame of the table loom or floor loom. They are available to be plugged into an outlet or are rechargeable which eliminates a cord. See Figure 18 for a photo. Clip-on task lights are available for about \$15.00.



Figure 18. Clip-on task light.

Work lamps. LED work lamps are another great option, especially for larger weavings on a floor loom. They are available in adjustable height models with tripod bases, making them a very stable option. LED lighting generates less heat than other types of light so this is good for a smaller weaving studio. Work lights are available at home improvement centers for \$40.00 to \$125.00 depending on the brand.

Seating

Having proper seating is one of the most important aspects of a home weaving studio. Adjustable height office chairs are a good choice because they provide proper support and offer many other adjustments such as lumbar support, back height, and arm height adjustment. A chair is a very personal choice, so it's important to try it out before purchasing. Office chairs are available at a variety of office supply stores and online and range from \$100.00 to \$150.00.

Storage

Storage of supplies is an important component of a home studio for Navajo weaving. It's easy to accumulate lots of yarn, books, and useful tools and storing it all so it's protected and accessible is key.

Shelves. Shelves such as the one shown in Figure 19 are a good option for storing weaving supplies and books. These units are available in various sizes and can accommodate inserts for drawers or removable bins. Drawers are handy for storing miscellaneous sewing supplies such as needles and scissors, as well as weaving combs. Removable bins or plastic storage containers are a great option to protect the wool yarn and warp from dust and moths. Cube shelving is available from multiple retailers and ranges in price from \$100.00 to \$200.00 depending on the inserts purchased.



Figure 19. Cube shelves [3].

Mailing tubes. Mailing tubes are an inexpensive option for storing battens and various sizes of dowels required during the weaving process. They are available in a range of lengths and diameters and only cost a few dollars. Mailing tubes are available at office supply stores or online. They protect the tools when not in use and also provide a convenient way to transport tools when traveling.

Project baskets. When working on a weaving project, it's beneficial to have all the wool required for the project in a convenient location. Many weavers use African bolga baskets, tote bags, or even knitting bags for this purpose. Bolga baskets similar to the one shown in Figure 20 are available online for about \$60.00 and are a great way to add some color and personal style to a weaving studio.



Figure 20. African bolga basket.

VI. NAVAJO WEAVING INSTRUCTION

Navajo weaving is most easily learned by taking a class or workshop. However, if the weaver has the aptitude, it is possible to learn through books and online videos.

Navajo Weaving Workshops and Classes

Several options are available for Navajo weaving workshops and classes. Beginners should select classes that provide instruction on warping the loom, weaving straight lines, weaving simple patterns of straight lines, using basic join techniques, and finishing. Intermediate and advanced weavers should select classes that provide instruction on more advanced techniques including using side selvage cords, plying selvage cords with Navajo lap spindles, creating designs such as diamonds and squash blossom, and designing Navajo rugs.

Weaving in Beauty. In-person and online classes are offered frequently by Weaving in Beauty in Gallup, NM. Classes are taught by Gloria Begay and Jenny Slick, both of whom are very accomplished Navajo weavers. The Weaving in Beauty website (<https://weavinginbeauty.com/>) provides updated information on the current class listings, as well as additional information on Navajo weaving.

Navajo Rug Weavers. In-person classes are offered by Navajo Rug Weavers at various locations throughout the US. Classes are taught by sisters Lynda Teller Pete and Barbara Teller Ornelas, both of whom are considered premiere Navajo weavers. The Navajo Rug Weavers website (<https://www.navajorugweavers.com/>) provides updated information on the current class listings, as well as additional information on Navajo weaving.

Navajo Weaving Reference Library

While nothing is better than taking classes and weaving in groups, there are many books available that provide warping instructions, weaving techniques, and the history of Navajo weaving. The books listed here are just a subset of books that are available to the Navajo weaver and are an excellent part of any reference library for Navajo weaving.

- L. T. Pete and B. T. Ornelas, *How to Weave a Navajo Rug and Other Lessons from Spider Woman*. Colorado: Thurms Books, 2020.
- M. Walker, L. Munk, J. Slick, *Atl'ohi Binaaltsoos - How to Weave the Navajo Way*. New Mexico: Weaving in Beauty, 2010.
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