

***Collecting the Weaver's Art: The William Claflin Collection of Southwestern Textiles.* Laurie D. Webster. Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum Press, Harvard University, 2003. 159 pp.**

Weaving Is Life: Navajo Weaving from the Edwin L. and Ruth E. Kennedy Southwest Native American Collection.* Jennifer McLerran, ed. Athens, OH: Kennedy Museum of Art, Ohio University, 2006. 80 pp.

Reviewed by Maureen T. Schwarz

Together these volumes work very well as an introduction to the fascinating world of Southwestern textiles. The bane of every curator's existence is a lack of information about an object in one's collection! Unlike most collectors, William Claflin took great care in cataloguing his acquisitions of Southwestern textiles, recording information on cultural affiliation, garment type, dimensions, thread counts, yarns and dyes, date of manufacture, collection history, and description—complete with watercolor illustrations of some of the pieces. To date, this remarkably well-documented collection has remained virtually unknown to the general public. The purpose of *Collecting the Weaver's Art: The William Claflin Collection of Southwestern Textiles* is to rectify this situation and bring attention to this exemplar collection as well as to William Claflin as a collector and the people from whom he collected.

Laurie Webster's expertise as a textiles scholar and historian is unsurpassed. Contextualizing the collection and its collectors within the history of Navajo and Pueblo weaving, Webster provides a wide-ranging historiography on the Claflin Collection. Building on the copious notations of Claflin, she conducted archival research and interviewed living relatives and associates of those from whom Claflin purchased in order to gather enough information to skillfully tell the stories of the textiles as they passed through the hands of native producers to such owners and traders as Henry Bond, William Morris, Eliza Hozmer, and the Cornelius Cosgrove family.

Webster's distinction of tribal weaving styles and analysis of specific textiles is reliant on details of technique and materials used in production such as selvage treatments and 3 versus 4 ply yarns. Webster is fully conversant in the findings of the scholars who established the baseline for dating and attributing tribal affiliations to Southwestern textiles on the basis of these factors—Kate Peck Kent and Joe Ben Wheat. Moreover, she is up-to-date on ground breaking new studies such as that conducted by Casey Reed on textiles in the School of Advanced Research collection, which indicates use of cochineal dye in handspun yarn (p. 133, n. 45).

Puzzlingly, Webster closes her narrative with what can only be understood as an apology for the voices that are not heard in her text—that is, those of the individual artists who created the textiles as well as the Native people who acquired and owned them prior to their collection by non-Natives. Personally, I find it unsettling that a scholar who has done an outstanding job on all counts should chastise herself for not accomplishing something that is clearly outside the realm

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of possibilities; solid scholarship stands on its own merit. Interestingly, *Weaving Is Life: Navajo Weavings from the Edwin L. and Ruth E. Kennedy Southwest Native American Collection*, the second book under review, in part takes up the approach Webster bemoans not having taken, insofar as it focuses on the voices of Navajo weavers.

Maintaining that museums are more than repositories for novel objects, the Kennedy Museum of Art considers itself a caretaker of specimens and ideas considered culturally significant. With this philosophy in mind, the *Weaving Is Life* exhibit features the work of as many as four generations of Navajo weavers from four well-known weaving matrilineages centered in Ganado, Indian Wells, and Tselani, Arizona, as well as Crystal, New Mexico. Each family had an individual gallery in the exhibit within which to display the textiles produced by its multiple generations of weavers. In addition, audiovisual aids were installed below textiles where visitors could access a personal statement by the weaver as well as interviews with the weaver, when possible.

Statements by members of the four weaving families who participated in this exhibit reveal that weaving processes, as well as hand-woven textiles made for the off-reservation market, convey distinct personal meanings. First and foremost, acquisition and practice of this knowledge system is understood to be the culturally appropriate means by which to educate young girls about the role of Navajo women and the values by which they live (2006:22). The entire process of weaving—preparation and gathering of dye plants; cleaning, carding, and spinning of wool; as well as preparing the loom—are considered the special purview of women in Navajo society. Design elements, colors, and the fibers can each carry layers of significance. Such meanings are not always apparent to non-Native viewers or even to Navajo viewers from outside the weaver's family or community. This is because, contrary to what is often thought, not all designs carry common meanings to all Navajo people. Rather, designs employed by weavers convey distinct personal meanings particular to clan and family history.

The degree of influence traders exerted upon Navajo weavers is a hotly contested topic, upon which these two volumes converge. Although the relationship between traders and Navajo weavers has been deemed predominantly exploitative by some (see especially M'Closkey 2002), the approach taken by Jennifer McLerran, curator of the *Weaving is Life* exhibit, allows weavers to voice their own views on the working relationship between traders and weavers. From the weavers' perspective, even the practice of having Navajo women "perform" weaving at the Hubbell Trading Post in Ganado, Arizona, had positive elements.¹

Scholars studying handcrafted objects produced for an off-reservation market by Native American groups elsewhere in North America note that several powerful social forces, including but not limited to agents of an assimilationist Federal Indian policy and members of social reform movements, influenced the creators of products for sale (see Cohodas 1997; Hill 2001). In response to these often opposing influences, craftspeople increasingly experimented with form and design as the economic importance of marketing increased. Likewise, on the Navajo reservation, in close consultation with traders, weavers varied formal attributes such as size, weight, design, and colors of textiles in efforts to distinguish their weavings and make them desirable to buyers.

For her part, in *Collecting the Weaver's Art* Webster credits the influence of traders on weavers without denying agency to weavers. She notes, for example, that traders encouraged weavers to create floor rugs and portieres for the eastern market. She also describes efforts on the part of J. L. Hubbell to revive classic period textiles and by Cozy McSparron and others of Chinle, Arizona, to revive the use of vegetal dyes. Yet, she does not overemphasize the influence of traders and credits the weavers with wide-ranging creativity and innovation in terms of design elements and use of materials.

In regard to the textiles made as rugs, which found such wide popularity in the off-reservation market during the later 19th century and throughout the 20th, McLerran argues that they conveyed significance on multiple levels of meaning. As floor coverings in Euro-American homes, for example, these textiles not only served a decorative function and certified a homemaker's good taste, they also demonstrated the consumer's enlightened consciousness. By prominently displaying the handicrafts of Native American women on their floors—where they would be walked upon—non-Native homemakers powerfully communicated the “superiority” of their own culture (2006:9).

Weaver's interviewed for this exhibit—who themselves wove at Hubbell or who had female relatives who did—considered the experience a means for keeping traditions alive in the face of rapid cultural change. These women credit being able to weave at a post for a wage with being allowed to practice on a daily basis, and with a stable income, a traditional form of expression that provided for their sustenance while enabling them to perpetuate an important component of their culture, which may have been lost if they had been required to seek out another form of employment. This opportunity has enabled women to pass down knowledge and skills, including weaving songs and prayers, to daughters and granddaughters. Moreover, knowledge retained through this system is not limited to weaving. For example, information needed to produce vegetal dyes has been integral to retaining knowledge about medicinal herbs.

As the narratives of the weavers in *Weaving is Life* delightfully attest, weaving and its associated practices is a form of creative thinking by which Navajo women deepen their understandings of their culture and their place in the world. In sum, I highly recommend these books. Read together, *Collecting the Weaver's Art* and *Weaving is Life* provide a carefully researched and executed, multi-faceted introduction into the world of Southwestern weaving from the technical aspects of yarns and dyes, through the history of collecting, the interrelationships between weavers and traders, to the personal thoughts of weavers.

Note

1. The Hubbell Trading Post is the longest, continuously operating trading post on the Navajo reservation. Established by John Lorenzo Hubbell in 1878, it was operated by members of his family until it was sold to the National Park Service in 1967.

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