

GENESIS OF A COLLECTION

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In the summer of 1979, when I was working for the Navajo Tribal Museum in the heart of the Navajo Reservation, I received a message from New York City. A *biłagáana* woman named Gloria F. Ross wanted to commission Navajo weavers to make a series of tapestries designed by American painter Kenneth Noland. A widely experienced tapestry *ofit'ni*, she would translate Noland's designs into appropriate colors, textures, and dimensions for the weavers. Using



Gloria F. Ross in the yarn room at Burnham Trading Post, Sanders.

images by Romare Bearden, Jean Dubuffet, Robert Motherwell, Louise Nevelson, Frank Stella, Jack Youngerman, and others, Ross had been collaborating with artists for over twenty years, first in her New York workshop and then through commissions to weavers in Edinburgh, Scotland, and Aubusson, France.² Now, she wanted to work with Native American weavers and selected Kenneth Noland as designer. Known for his bold, shaped canvases with concentric circles, cat's-eyes, chevrons, diamonds, stripes, and plaids, Noland balances finely tuned color combinations against strong geometry. In these paintings and in other work such as handmade paper, color and shape dominate. With Morris Louis, he had been a pioneer and well-known proponent of the Washington Color Field School that emphasized, as he once said, "color and surface, that's all" (Waldman 1977:33). Ross selected Noland's work for a collaboration with Navajo weavers because the upright Navajo loom and its particular type of tapestry weave tend to produce

flat, even surfaces enlivened by blocks of pure, unshaded color. She saw rich potential for translating Noland paintings into this Navajo medium. Did I know anyone with whom she might work?

I explained that Navajo weavers do not work in studios or ateliers like those Ross knew in Europe. Surrounded by children and grandchildren, goats and sheep, Navajo weavers typically work in their homes. They proceed at their own pace, fitting weaving into a wide array of other household and community activities. In most cases, the weavers themselves choose all of their materials and work "on speculation," as it were; they usually wait until a rug is cut off the loom before seeking a buyer.

Navajo weaving, like life on the reservation, I told Ross, places high value on individuality and autonomy. Weavers work from their own heads and their wealth of experience, not from paper *mapettes* or cartoons (as they are called by European tapestry weavers). They are accustomed to letting a design grow on the loom and to following a pattern in their mind, as the interlaced yarns shape it. They might not make a rug exactly as she specified. Their designs and color combinations derive from complex origins—indigenous basketry motifs coupled with borrowed Pueblo Indian, Spanish, Anglo, and Middle Eastern patterns—but these borrowings are modified and reshaped into a fully Navajo expression.

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and do not speak English fluently; communication could be a challenge. On the other hand, there are Navajo weavers with college degrees and international travel experiences. In their case, finding time in already busy schedules could be the challenge.



Bessie Watchman working at home, Káilichee

Spiritual concerns also might limit collaboration. In addition to avoiding excessive behavior of any kind, traditional weavers do not work at certain times, such as during preparations for a ceremony, in the final stages of pregnancy (lest the rug be unfinished when the baby is born), and during frequent summer rainstorms. Although few, if any, woven designs are held sacred, some women harbor strong feelings against weaving certain types of designs—those that completely enclose a figure, for instance, and those designed by someone else. I was, of course, simplifying matters, because my fieldwork on the Navajo Reservation had shown me, if nothing else, that weavers actually take a wide range of approaches to their craft.

Working with Navajo weavers, as in any cross-cultural enterprise, would be an adventure in flexibility and self-discovery. Listening to and learning from their views would have to take precedence over expressing our own interests and wishes. Would New Yorker Gloria Ross and Navajo weavers find common ground on which to make commissioned

tapestries? And would I, a museum anthropologist, be willing to collaborate on a project that could directly influence the craft of a Native American society?

On reflection, I agreed to become part of the project. The eclecticism and diversity of current Navajo weaving might well serve as an asset to the Ross/Noland/Navajo project. The weavers' strong identities and self-determination that I'd originally listed as potential obstacles became the very reasons to collaborate. Ultimately, my decision to participate in this venture was based on four premises.

First, the Navajo world is resilient and eclectic. While Navajo weavers have opened themselves to a wide variety of influences over the 300 years since they adopted the craft, they have maintained a characteristically Navajo sense about their work. I judged that this integrity would survive yet one more introduced set of images and that the weavers would adapt the new elements to their own purposes. Their intense interest in the process of weaving prompts them to make textiles with diverse images. Furthermore, because the Navajos' approach to most woven designs is secular and nonsymbolic, it seemed likely that Noland's designs would be accepted alongside familiar patterns.

Second, Navajo weaving is a practical, commercial enterprise; many weavers want the income and professional recognition such a project would bring. Most Navajo families mix different income sources—full-time wage labor, part-time and seasonal jobs, stockraising, farming and household gardens, arts and crafts, welfare and other federal and tribal subsidies may all contribute to an extended family's collective support. Families range from very poor to quite well-to-do, depending largely on how much land and livestock they control and by

their access to wage-paying jobs. Weaving, as part of the Navajos' mixed economy, can make the difference between a tenuous and an adequate living for many families.

Third, autonomy and individualism are a prominent feature of Navajo culture. Shouldn't the weavers themselves have the option to accept or reject Ross's proposal?

And fourth, collaborating on the Ross project would offer me new opportunities for studying the relationships between Navajo weavers and their patrons and clients. The Ross/Noland/Navajo project would extend my research and provide another way to compensate some of the weavers with whom I'd been working.

Gloria Ross and I made our first joint expedition to the Navajo Reservation during the summer of 1979. In advance, she sent out several small paintings by Kenneth Noland to serve as models for the Navajo weavers whom we would select. I will never forget picking up a modestly wrapped package at the Greyhound bus station in Gallup, New Mexico, and unpacking Noland's two gemlike artworks—one was handmade, tinted paper, the other a painting in acrylic. Ross and I traveled extensively across the reservation that summer. We visited many of the weavers who had collaborated with me on earlier research projects, and we saw many rugs in progress. Several weavers agreed to create large tapestries from Kenneth Noland designs. Ross worked with them on overall dimensions and motif proportions, yarn weights, color selection, and a multitude of essential details. Several "Navajo/Nolands," as we came to call them informally, were produced for Gloria F. Ross Tapestries by the end of the year. Equally important, Ross recognized the weavers' own artistic talents and bought several rugs woven with the weavers' own designs.

During our long drives through Navajo country, we compared notes about weaving history, American Indian cultures, the art market, museum activities, travel in other parts of the world, our families and friends, and anything else that came to mind. A special friendship was swiftly and smoothly formed. My anthropological world in the Southwest and her art-oriented world of the East Coast made perfect counterpoint. Ross appreciated the visual aspects of weaving and of our surroundings, while I was more attuned to their cultural and historical significance. She related to the personal elements of each weaver's life, and I often focused on their collective experiences. She taught me to test my own judgments about aesthetic quality over and over again; I showed her how to see the weavers' work through the eyes of an anthropologist, how to look at the independent and internal merits of another culture's aesthetics.

On our second reservation trip in March 1980, Ross put several more Navajo/Nolanis into production and acquired more contemporary Navajo rugs. By then, she had studied Navajo weaving and added that knowledge to her extensive understanding of tapestry and fine arts. And, even though she wasn't necessarily interested in acquiring a large personal collection, the collecting bug had struck.

As time went on, Ross and I began to talk about the possibility of establishing a collection of contemporary Navajo weaving at a major art museum. We agreed that the ultimate purpose of such a collection should be to exemplify the best weaving we saw in progress on the reservation. But how should "the best" be defined? Ross's primary intent was to assemble Navajo examples that could be presented as fine art in urban art museums, where their visual qualities would be judged by the same criteria as Euroamerican

fine and decorative arts. Her experienced eye and aesthetic sensibilities would establish a baseline for selection from this perspective.

My ethnographic knowledge of the weavers and their backgrounds, their technical capabilities, and weaving trends would add a cultural dimension to the selection process. We would seek one-of-a-kind experiments, as well as rugs representing known styles. We would highlight the individual creativity of the weavers. Always, we agreed, the collection should demonstrate the technical proficiency and eclectic spirit that characterize recent Navajo weaving.

The size and diversity of the Denver Art Museum made it our choice for this collection of significant contemporary Navajo textiles. Most important, the museum has a tradition of honoring native peoples and their art as an integral part of its larger mission. Founded in 1893, the Denver Art Museum held the first, and for many years the only, collection of native art acquired by an art museum according to aesthetic, cultural, and historical criteria. The Department of Indian Arts, as the Native Arts Department was first called, was established in 1925 expressly to preserve and showcase Native American contributions to the world of art. Frederic H. Douglas, curator of the department from 1929 to 1955, was responsible for the development of a major collection of "outstanding examples of almost every style and medium in which Native American artists worked" (Conn 1979:16). The Ross collection would build on the museum's own superb collection of Southwestern weaving.

By the end of 1980, Gloria Ross had selected several Navajo rugs from her recent reservation purchases as gifts to the Denver Art Museum and had established a generous fund there to create and curate a permanent

collection of contemporary Navajo weaving. I was to purchase additions to the collection during my travels to various parts of the Navajo Reservation. Goals for the Gloria F. Ross Collection of Contemporary Navajo Weaving were drawn up with Richard Conn, then curator of Native Arts and now chief curator, and three successive directors of the museum. The explicit guidelines have not changed since their inception:

- To acquire some of the finest specimens of modern Navajo weaving available today in order to represent the best artistic and aesthetic qualities of the craft;
- To illustrate current trends in Navajo weaving by seeking as wide a range of styles, materials, and techniques as possible, including both representative ("typical") and aberrant examples;
- To acquire pieces with as much documentation as possible about their construction (i.e., native names, type of wool and yarn, dyes, etc.), their makers (ethnographic background, individual biographical data), and their culture (historical, economic, symbolic significances);
- And lastly, to complement the present permanent collections with examples that extend stylistically and temporally the interpretations of Navajo weaving already possible.

The Gloria F. Ross Collection of Contemporary Navajo Weaving is thus the result of a unique collaboration between donor, researcher, weavers, and museum. It is also the product of a dialectic between Ross's art historical (aesthetic) approach and my anthropological (cultural) perspective.⁷ In this collection, Navajo weaving can be seen as a visually exciting art, emerging from and still enmeshed in a rich cultural matrix. Like artists of any other time and place, the weavers are individual creators who contribute to the contemporary art world even as they respond to and draw from it.

Putting together the Ross collection at the Denver Art Museum has raised difficult questions about

selecting and interpreting native objects and describing the lives of those who make them. For instance, there is considerable challenge in attempting to collect "the best" or "the finest." A search for the "modern masters" of Navajo weaving today is bound to be quixotic, for there are many well-qualified contenders and many cross-cutting criteria to employ—technical proficiency, designs, colors, materials, historical connections, family background, previous accomplishments. And the search may begin from many viewpoints—art historian, anthropologist, private collector, businessperson, museum curator, relative, neighbor, community member, fellow weaver, and others. Native Americans, Anglo-Americans, Europeans, and groups with other ethnic origins hold different views, and so do members within each of those groups. Clearly, there is no single set of objective criteria for collecting.⁴

The Ross collection represents a meld of professional and personal decisions. The broad goals that were outlined at the project's outset always guided choices. One of the most important standards—visual impact—was a personal one, developed by examining literally thousands of rugs over the past two decades and gauged very directly by personal preference. Technical proficiency (appropriate thread counts, straight edges, evenness, unusual materials, and so forth) was necessary but not alone sufficient. Cultural and biographical criteria (trends represented, regional styles, family lineages, prizes received, for example) added weight. We also took into account how each rug contributed to the collection as a whole—how it fit with other pieces and what kind of interpretation it could add to the overall story of weaving's vitality.

Listening carefully and trying to represent the diverse viewpoints of

Navajo craftspeople have posed the most exciting opportunities in this project.⁵ As Canadian museum director Michael Ames (1986:46) avows in *Museums, Anthropology and the Public*,

There are many voices, many stories. They do not add up to one consistent view, nor should they, because they represent different people with different interests and experiences. We nevertheless need to listen. The articulation of native points of view may serve to remind us that outsiders do not have the final word. It is the continuing interaction between these various perspectives that is important.

Unlike many Navajo blanket and rug collections described from traders' and collectors' perspectives, documentation for the Ross collection views weavers as active protagonists rather than passive recipients of and respondents to outside influences. Because I'm not a Navajo weaver, I do not write from the weavers' perspective, but I have tried to observe and listen closely and have begun, at least, to understand how little of the weavers' own perspectives are represented in other collections or publications. The Ross collection reflects my interpretations of the many voices that belong to contemporary Navajo weavers. Indeed, these weavers and their families are part of the intended audience for this book and exhibition, and so our dialogue continues. Hook forward eagerly to the time when Navajo weavers organize museum collections, exhibits, and catalogs and independently take museum projects in new and unforeseen directions.⁶ New directions might mean entirely different intentions, goals, or formats, and I relish thoughts of what I cannot yet imagine.

The weavers represented here were involved directly in practical aspects of the Ross collection. Whenever possible, weavers were told their work was going to the Denver Art Museum for an eventual book and exhibit and asked in what other ways

they would like to be involved. Each gave the museum express written permission to reproduce the work; for issues of privacy, some declined to have their pictures taken or included here. Those who agreed received prints of my photographs of themselves, their families, and homes. They also reviewed and made suggestions about what was written about them. Because of local rivalries, family jealousies, and financial concerns, two weavers—a mother and daughter—declined to have details of their careers included here. Although they originally agreed to the use of their names, they later asked for anonymity.⁷ With a characteristic respect for autonomy and without a hint of resignation, other weavers counseled us to do the project our own way. "It is up to you," they often said.

We assembled the Gloria E. Ross Collection in the daunting knowledge that those weavers selected could easily become singular icons for Navajo weaving. Hundreds of others equally deserve recognition. The weavers chosen are unquestionably among the very best; the point to emphasize is that there are still others, meritorious but unnamed here. The Ross collection is not meant as a template for collecting "name" weavers or their specific styles of rugs.

Certain tactical questions also arose in the collecting process—not just who and what to represent, but how to buy? Whenever practical, we bought directly from the weavers. In an effort to document marketing as part of the weavers' world, rug purchases were also made from an array of outlets—small trading posts, large rug stores, elite off-reservation galleries, the Crownpoint Rug Auction, the Museum of Northern Arizona's Navajo Show, and Santa Fe's Indian Market. A persistent challenge required balancing three goals: to maximize funds set aside for purchases, to pay

prices that honor weavers and encourage them to do their best work, and to minimize interference in the local economic system in which local traders are long-term participants. Weavers and traders alike agree that establishing an appropriate price is a difficult undertaking.

There is, also, the inevitable matter of influencing the weavers' future work through our selections. Ames (1986:48) aptly notes that "anthropologists through their curatorial and research activities are actively contributing to the development of the phenomena which they are so busily collecting and studying." Placing special orders and selecting rugs that meet certain technical and aesthetic criteria can have significant, but unpredictable, impact on future production as buyers' standards and expectations become reinforced in the weavers' minds. In fact, such suggestions, inadvertent or intended, are often welcomed by weavers eager for feedback from the market. Reassuringly, Navajo weavers' responses remain, as always, delightfully their own—it is "up to them" to decide what ideas to use and what to discard.

I first visited the Navajo Indian Reservation in 1970 when, as a geology student, I spent two weeks hiking in the canyons around Navajo Mountain. In the next few years, I learned to spin and weave, Anglo-style, while briefly living on a sheep farm in Canada; I switched from studying rocks to anthropology; and I made many visits to Navajo country. The information about Navajo weaving and culture I present in this catalog comes principally from the weavers with whom I have worked since the mid 1970s. Seeking as many perspectives as possible, I talked not only with weavers and their families, but also with nonweaving Navajos, traders, collectors, reservation school

teachers, and tribal officials; I studied trading post ledgers and weavers' scrapbooks; I attended sheep shearings, community meetings, and rug auctions. My earliest fieldwork involved the study of blankets and rugs in museums and a survey of traders and their rug inventories on the Navajo Reservation. For my doctoral dissertation, I gathered biographical and cultural information from weavers in one community, and I learned about their learning and teaching networks, divisions of labor and roles of relatives, religious and spiritual issues, marketing patterns, and economic concerns (Hedlund 1983). I also documented the range of loom types, other tools, raw materials, and techniques in use during the 1970s and eighties (Hedlund 1987), and I regularly surveyed the state of the art across the reservation (Hedlund 1988). For several summers I worked for the Navajo Tribal Museum in Window Rock, where I examined and documented the collection of Southwestern blankets and rugs and involved local weavers in the museum.

"Participant observation" is the major method of anthropological fieldwork, and that is how most of my time on the reservation is spent—watching, listening, and taking part in activities—in order to learn about Navajo families, their weaving practices and preferences, and the larger context in which they live. Being a *bilagáana* handspinner and weaver myself, I often work alongside Navajo weavers, with less need to talk than to contribute through activity. As one weaver aptly observes, "It is not a Navajo way to ask questions." Being present for everyday and special events in many homes, helping cook meals, herd sheep, and corral cattle, giving people rides to the store, school, or hospital, setting up my own loom, and being tutored by my adopted Navajo "mother"—as well as the more formal activities of keeping

fieldnotes, gathering census data, and making maps—all have contributed to my learning about weavers and their work, to choosing pieces for the Ross collection, and to writing this book.

The weavers' own words, used throughout this book, were recorded on tape or in my handwritten field notes and represent more weavers than those with rugs in the Ross collection. Many conversations took place in Navajo with on-the-spot translations or verbatim translations made later from tape-recordings. Because English is spoken as a second language by many Navajos, I have corrected grammar slightly in direct English quotations to clarify meaning and to represent the speakers accurately as articulate individuals when speaking their native language. Brackets indicate my editorial additions. Although all quoted speakers gave me permission to repeat their statements, I have preserved their anonymity when requested. For Navajo terms, I have used Young and Morgan's orthography (1980), with the exception of the "slash L" and the symbol for nasalized vowels.

The next chapter of this book briefly summarizes the 350-year history of Navajo weaving and then describes in more detail the contemporary setting for Navajo weaving. The lively 1980s are marked by a number of social, economic, and aesthetic trends that contribute to the current status of Navajo weaving as an art form; I discuss in particular the weavers' autonomy, eclecticism, and emphasis on process. I have divided the textiles in the Gloria F. Ross Collection into five groups based on their design sources. The glossary contains definitions for pertinent weaving terms, historical and contemporary rug styles, and selected Navajo words. I've included in the bibliography books and articles I recommend for further reading, as well as full references for sources I've cited in the text.

Today, the Gloria F. Ross Collection reflects the major weaving trends and traditions of the 1980s. It documents a vital craft during a decade in which emergent artists created expressions of their society, spirituality, patrons, and, perhaps most important, themselves. As the craft moves on, there will always be more to see and more to say. As one weaver notes,

We are going forward. We're not going back [to the old ways of living]. Just like you [white people], we're not going back, we're following you. We want [our kids] to go to school so our kids will learn how [to get] higher educations.

On looms throughout the Navajo Reservation today there are many rugs that build on the pieces in this collection. New yarns, innovative tools, and stimulating ideas for imagery are explored by weavers every day. Finding a final cutoff point for the collection as it is presented here was a major challenge because Navajo weaving is a living art. The Ross collection, we hope, will continue to grow and reflect future changes in Navajo weaving.

¹The Navajo word for any white (Caucasian) person is *biłagáana*, apparently derived from the Spanish, *americano* (Young and Morgan 1990:221). I use the Navajo term throughout this book.

²Gloria F. Ross has also collaborated with Richard Amasakiewicz, Milton Avery, Gene Davis, Stuart Davis, Paul Feeley, Helen Frankenthaler, Robert Goodnough, Adolph Gottlieb, Al Held, Hans Hofmann, Paul Jenkins, Alexander Liberman, Richard Lindner, Morris Louis, Conrad Marca-Relli, Larry Poons, Clifford Ross, Lucas Samaras, Richard Smith, and Ernest Trova.

³James Clifford notes, "The boundaries of art and science, the aesthetic and the anthropological, are not permanently fixed. Indeed anthropology and fine-arts museums have recently shown signs of interpenetration" (1989:228). He has discussed at great length "the art-culture system" in which objects—art and artifacts—move within a matrix where classifications and relative values can be assigned and reassigned according to context and perspective. Navajo weaving provides a provocative example of the art/artifact system in action.



Navajo sheep below Ganado Mesa

⁴The subject of ethnographic collecting and exhibit-making has attracted considerable scholarly attention over the past decade. I am able here to reflect on only a few aspects of these enterprises. The complex interplay among collectors, curators, and "the collected" is addressed provocatively and with much insight in such works as Ames (1986, 1992), Clifford (1988), Karp and Lavine (1991), Stocking (1985), and Vergo (1989).

⁵Recent writings on this subject challenge earlier notions of museum authority and examine issues of cultural representation. See, for example, Dominguez (1986), Jules-Rosette (1984, 1990), Karp et al. (1992), and Myers (1991).

⁶Several publications and exhibits authored and curated by Navajos already point the way. Ruth Roessel has written and edited a number of significant works about weaving (Roessel 1970, 1981, 1983). The periodicals *Táłtsee'* and *Dooł Be'niina'* have provided outlets for articles written from the native perspective. *Navajo Weaving: From Spider Woman to Synthetic Rugs*, curated by Harry Walters, was mounted at Navajo Community College's Ned Harshbarger Culture Center in 1977-78. Weaver D. Y. Begay is an active participant in planning a major catalog and exhibition of Navajo blankets and rugs at the National Museum of the American Indian, scheduled for 1994-95.

⁷Fear of witchcraft and other misfortunes eventually outweighed any possible advantages of "going public." Both weavers originally agreed to my using their names because their work had already appeared in several books and magazines—without their permission, however. Unfortunately, Navajo weavers often discover their work has been reproduced without permission although the U. S. copyright laws are intended to protect their creative products as they do all artists' works. The sale of a work of art does not automatically transfer copyrights to the buyer; the artist retains all copyright privileges, and the work may not be reproduced in any form without permission.