Water, Wind, Breath: Southwest Native Art in Community

AN EXHIBITION AT THE BARNES FOUNDATION
FEBRUARY 20 – MAY 15, 2022

Teacher Background Summary

This exhibition highlights Navajo and Pueblo art as living traditions that promote individual and community well-being through their making and use. Throughout the exhibition, students will encounter objects such as textiles, carefully crafted jewelry, and unique ceramics.

How Albert Barnes Collected Artworks from the Southwest

Albert Barnes travelled to the Southwest during the 1930s when his wife's illness led her to treatment in the area. While he was there, Dr. Barnes visited numerous trading posts and started collecting a multitude of Indigenous artwork. He went on to include some of these objects in his collection, as he especially enjoyed the aesthetic qualities of the textiles.

Aside from looks, Navajo artwork should also be understood in the context of its culture and origin. The Navajo people are the second most populous of all Native American peoples in the United States, with a majority living in New Mexico, Arizona, and Utah. When the Navajo people migrated from Canada to the Southwest and interacted with the Pueblo groups, they adopted the Pueblo practice of weaving cotton on upright looms. The Navajo artistic tradition of silver jewelry also emerged, which was most likely learned in the middle of the 19th
century from Mexican silversmiths. When the railroads arrived in the region, Navajo weaving dramatically changed. Non-native consumers fueled production and early European-American settlers established trading posts. While many of the traditions of early Navajo weaving and silver jewelry are practiced today, contemporary Navajo artists are also creating new styles by blending old and new.

**Historical Information**

Navajo Long Walk: During the mid-1800’s, the United States was determined to expand west of the Mississippi River. Many native nations like the Navajo fought to resist these efforts, but they were ultimately removed from their homelands by the US government in the 1860s. In efforts to remove the Navajo from their traditional homelands in Colorado, New Mexico, and Arizona, American forces burned villages, slaughtered livestock, and destroyed water sources. Thousands of Navajo people were forced to march between 250–450 miles to the Bosque Redondo Reservation in eastern New Mexico, where they were forced to stay and adopt American cultural values. Later, many Navajo people made resistance efforts to return to their homelands.

Pueblo Revolt: In the 1670s, the Spanish governor of New Mexico ordered whippings and execution of Pueblo warriors and holy men. One of the men that was whipped, Po’pay of Ohkay Owingeh (formerly referred to as San Juan Pueblo), was inspired to organize and lead a revolt against the Spanish. This would be the only successful Native uprising against a colonizing power in North America. The Apache also likely participated in the revolt, which consisted of the removal of evidence of Catholicism, and resulted in the Spaniards being forced to flee. The Pueblo Revolt helped ensure the survival of Pueblo culture, traditions, religion, and autonomy, though the area was ultimately recaptured by the Spanish in 1692.

**Glossary**

Cultural Appropriation: The use of objects or elements of a non-dominant culture in a way that doesn’t respect their original meaning, doesn’t give credit to their source, or reinforces stereotypes or contributes to oppression.

Naja (naah-djia): Navajo term for crescent shape.

Serape (sə-rä-pē): A prominent form of Navajo weaving, traditionally worn around the shoulders.

Diné (Dêné): The name for the Navajo people in their language; literally translates to “people.”

Hózhó: Navajo word loosely translated as peace, balance, beauty, and harmony; said to be the most important word in the Navajo language.

Cultural Competence: The ability to understand, appreciate, and interact with people of other cultures.
Exhibition Objects

*Rug, Navajo, c. 1890–1900*

Navajo textiles were multifunctional and could be used as clothing, blankets, door coverings, rugs, and wall decorations. While this example is labeled as a rug, it could have fulfilled any of these functions. The intricate symmetrical patterns and colors reflect the Navajo concept of *Hózhó*, the sacred beauty and balance between the human, natural, and spirit worlds. The design also creates an optical illusion, with the geometric patterns of diamonds, serrated diamonds, and stars rising above the field of red.

The versatility of this object highlights the importance of these textiles to the Navajo people, highlighting the function of art in their society. Research shows how Navajo art was also spiritual and delves deeper into hózhó; a core concept in Navajo spirituality. Hózhó is an understanding of universal beauty that encompasses values such as harmony and balance. The concept of hózhó is reflected in life's relationships, especially between an artist and their art. Additionally, this object was created using wool. During the 18th century the Navajo had begun to import bayeta red yarn to supplement local black, grey, white, and indigo dyed wool. This object contributes to the story of the Navajo as an example of beauty of their artwork, the multifaceted uses of their textiles, and the ways patterns and colors reflect their spiritual practices.
Squash Blossom Necklace, Navajo, c. 1910–1915

This style of necklace dates to the 1700s, when Spain colonized what is now the Four Corners region of the Southwestern United States (Colorado, Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico). Members of Native American tribes—including Navajo and Pueblo—wore these necklaces to display wealth and status. The curved centerpiece of the necklace also accounts for its original name—in Navajo this is called a naja (naah-djia), which in English means “crescent.”

This object highlights how the Navajo and various other tribes interacted with Spanish settlers. The Navajo wore this jewelry to depict wealth and status partly because their land had been invaded by these settlers. Some research has highlighted the importance of wearing “flashy jewelry” to the dynamic between settlers and the Navajo.

The materials that were used in the creation of this necklace include silver alloy, turquoise, and leather. The act of making this jewelry is called silversmithing. The first known Navajo silversmith was Atsidi Sani, who learned the art from a Mexican man known as Nakai Tsosi. Atsidi Sani in turn taught the craft to other Navajo people. Around 1880, Navajo silversmiths were creating bracelets, necklaces, earrings, rings, belts, and buckles. This object helps tell the story of the Navajo by showing how their dress for important occasions was influenced by conflict with Europeans, which later evolved into silversmithing for tribal use as well as for sale to tourists.