



ASHLEY TWIGGS

Vanda McArthur of Fresno, Calif., works on a rug during a Navajo weaving workshop at the Hillcreek Fiber Studio. This annual workshop has been happening for eight years and features guest instructors Sarah and Leo Natani.

Weaving a spirit trail

Students get lessons in the threads of Navajo lifestyle

According to Navajo legend, White Shell Woman had a series of four dreams; the last was of a "spider spinning a glistening white web." The next day White Shell Woman felt the canyon calling her, so she followed the rising smoke to Spider Rock where Spider Woman sat weaving on a loom. For the next four days, White Shell Woman learned the process of weaving. In turn, she taught other Navajo women to weave.

Navajo Sarah Natani says this is how she believes her people learned to weave. Natani lives on a reservation in Shiprock, N.M. She says her people prefer to be called by their respectful name, the Diné. That's what they call themselves, and in their language it means "the people." The Spanish named these people *Navajo*, and the term is actually a derogatory.

Natani visits Columbia annually to teach advanced Navajo weaving at Hillcreek Fiber Studio. Carol Leigh Brack-Kaiser owns the studio and teaches classes in fiber arts, which include spinning and dyeing, and beginning and intermediate Navajo weaving.

There are several features unique to Navajo weaving. Navajo tapestry is distinctive in that it looks the same on both sides. Unlike other tapestry forms, the strings of the old color do not hang out the backside. The pattern is therefore reversible.

Also unique to Navajo weaving is that an entire row is completed before moving to the next row. In other forms of Navajo weaving, one color is woven in a single spot, and then other colors are woven in to fill the gaps. Navajo weaving is also devoid of fringe.

Natani came to Columbia for the eighth time in November. Students flew in from as far away as California and Texas to learn from her. The studio doubled as their classroom and as a bed-and-breakfast, which allowed everyone to stay in one place.

During the four-day session, the group walked together and collected willow branches, which they shaved and weaved into their looms. They listened to the album *Songs of the Indian Flute* by John Rainer Jr. as they wove.

"Everything about weaving is kind of sacred ... You feel peace, and you have harmony."

— Sarah Natani

Ginger Webb, a student at Natani's workshop, kept a red amulet bag pinned with a silver spider with a turquoise abdomen hanging on her loom. Amulet bags are worn by the Diné around the neck to hold small objects of high importance. Natani wove the bag and made the pin. Webb says she uses it for inspiration and to remind her of Spider Woman.

Handwork teacher Marian Vitucci designed a rug and brought her education in Navajo weaving back to the Austin Waldorf School in Texas where she teaches. "I thought of the pouch and liked the design," she says.

FRUIT OF THE LOOM

There's more to weaving than stringing some yarn along a board. Here are some techniques that turned empty looms into beautiful tapestries at Hillcreek.

"Ganado" The red background of the Ganado style distinguishes it from other forms. It originates from the Hubbell trading post in Ganado, Ariz., located on the eastern side of the reservation. Like the "Two Gray Hills" form, it often includes geometric shapes.

"Pictorial" A picture is woven into this rug, which depicts Father Sky, the black figure, and Mother Earth, the white figure. The rock formation across the top represents the mesas in Shiprock, N.M., just miles from Natani's hogan.

"Storm Pattern" The lightning shapes differentiate this pattern. The corners contain geometric patterns and are connected by the lightning formation. This style originates from the western part of the reservation.

"Two-faced" The only style of Navajo weaving that isn't reversible. Each side has a different pattern. This is an advanced technique.

"Two Gray Hills" This style is known for its natural color scheme. Black dye is permitted, but otherwise only natural colors of the sheep can be used. This includes silvers, whites, grays and shades of brown and tan. Geometric patterns are often used, and the technique originates from the northeast part of the Navajo reservation.

The business of Navajo weaving boomed after the Civil War when Navajos were sent to live on reservations. The reservation system gave rise to dozens of trading posts. The managers of these posts recognized Navajo blankets as a profitable market. To make the blankets more appealing to non-Native Americans, each manager created a design for the Diné that imitated Persian rugs that were popular at the time.

Many of these designs called for a border around the edges of the blanket, but this posed a problem. The Diné are spiritual as a nation, Brack-Kaiser says, and they believe that when weaving, the weaver's spirit becomes locked inside the art. To set the spirit free, the weaver must complete the piece. However, if a border is created, the spirit has no form of regress. This led the Diné to develop spirit trails. A spirit trail is a single line running from the background color through the border to the edge. The Diné believe this line provides an escape route for their spirit. Spirit trails became less common in modern times, but a recent revival has led more weavers to make spirit trails today.

"Everything about weaving is kind of sacred," Natani says. "You feel peace, and you have harmony ... your mind is open to others, and you feel free."

Brack-Kaiser enjoys the spiritual aspect of weaving as well. "It's a slow process," she says. "But it's meditative, and it allows you to communicate with your own space."

Before retiring for the day, everyone removes the baton, a wide stick that spreads the strings out on the loom. "Spider Woman can come and undo the weaving if you leave the baton in," Natani says.

Navajo weaving has taken Natani around the globe: to Rome, Chicago and right here to Columbia. Like the Spider Woman brought Navajo weaving to the Diné, so Natani brings Navajo weaving to Columbia.

— NISA KORTE