Background Information

Composed of modern day northern Mexico and the southwestern United States, the North American Southwest is one of the most important centers of handwoven textile production in the world. Over the past 2,000 years, weavers in this region have created a wide variety of textiles that express, in both design and technique, the changing circumstances of their lives and the extensive flow of ideas across cultural frontiers. The weavings presented here, drawn from the extensive textile collections of the Smithsonian Institution, testify to the skill and creativity of these weavers and to the dynamism of their weaving traditions.

Saltillo Poncho
ca. 1850
Mexico

This textile is a poncho, a sarape with an opening in the center for the head. It features the hallmarks of the Saltillo design style. These include a central serrated diamond motif that shares colors and design elements with a border, which are distinct from those of the background.

Saltillo-style textiles are widely regarded as among the finest in the world. Tightly woven with finely spun yarns, they combine dramatic color schemes with intricate design patterns to create a pulsating effect and the illusion of three dimensions. Because of the technical skill required to produce these strikingly beautiful textiles, they are highly prized by collectors.

The creation of Saltillo-style textiles is attributed to the Tlaxcalans, indigenous people of central Mexico. Before Spanish contact in 1519, the Tlaxcalans wove sophisticated textiles on backstrap looms, relying on cotton and other plant fibers for their raw materials. Soon after contact, they began producing equally outstanding textiles using wool and treadle looms adopted from the Spanish.

In 1521, the Tlaxcalans and Spanish defeated their common enemy, the Aztecs. In return, the Spanish awarded the Tlaxcalans special rights and privileges, and the Tlaxcalans supported Spanish efforts to integrate Indians farther north into the colonial system. By the late 16th century, they had established colonies as far north as New Mexico.

Perhaps the most famous of these colonies was San Esteban de Nueva Tlaxcala, founded in 1591 near Saltillo, today's capital of the Mexican state of Coahuila. San Esteban soon became a major center of woolen textile production and, according to most scholars, the place where the Tlaxcalans developed the new weaving style known as Saltillo.

The development of the Saltillo style was influenced by Spanish textile traditions, which in turn were influenced by Middle Eastern and Asian traditions.

Ceramic Jar
14th century
Casas Grandes, Mexico

Prehispanic Mexican designs also were important. The pottery vessel shows a man wearing a kilt with a serrated diamond design, a common motif of the Saltillo style. The vessel was made in the 14th century by American Indians living at Casas Grandes, in the northern Mexican state of Chihuahua.

In the 19th century, Hispanic weavers in New Mexico developed their own version of the Saltillo style, and Navajo weavers created a series of innovative designs derived from Saltillo patterns and elements. The impact of Saltillo textiles is still evident in Hispanic New Mexican and Navajo weaving, as well as that of the Mayos of northwestern Mexico.

Saltillo textiles were woven on treadle looms, often in long but relatively narrow pieces. To create wider textiles, such as this poncho, weavers produced two identical pieces that they seamed together, sometimes leaving an opening for the head. Creating pieces that match exactly is an impressive technical feat but is a common practice in many weaving traditions.

The region of Saltillo, in the northern Mexican state of Coahuila, was the earliest and most important center of Saltillo-style textile production, but these textiles also were produced in other parts of Mexico. To the south, Zacatecas, San Luis Potosí, Querétaro, Aguascalientes, and Guanajuato were major centers. The town of San Miguel de Allende, in the state of Guanajuato, was Saltillo's principal competitor. Diffused far beyond these production centers, Saltillo textiles inspired weavers from Guatemala to New Mexico.

Most Saltillo-style textiles are sarapes. The Saltillo sarape was a practical garment because its fine weave shielded the wearer from both rain and cold.

Josiah Gregg, who visited New Mexico in the 1830s, describes the Saltillo sarape:

> This peculiarly useful as well as ornamental garment is commonly carried dangling carelessly across the pommel of the saddle, except in bad weather, when it is drawn over the shoulders, after the manner of a Spanish cloak, or as is more frequently the case, the rider puts his head through a slit in the middle, and by letting it hang loosely from the neck, his whole person is thus effectually protected.

By the late 18th century, Saltillo sarapes had become popular garments worn by men of all classes in the North American Southwest. After Mexico gained its independence from Spain in 1821, these sarapes became a symbol of Mexican culture. Their popularity waned in the second half of the 19th century, as clothing styles changed and manufactured cloth became less expensive and more widely available.

Mayo Sarape
ca. 1960
Sonora, Mexico

This style of blanket is called a sarape. The Mayos did not weave sarapes before the arrival of the Spanish in their northwestern Mexican homeland in the 16th century and may have not begun producing them until the 19th century. Their sarapes are clearly inspired by Saltillo-style sarapes made by weavers in other areas of the North American Southwest. The elements the Mayo sarape and Saltillo poncho have in common are the dominant diamond design, centered on a simple background, and the border around the edges.

Starting around 1950, the Mayo did less weaving, as inexpensive machine-made blankets became available. In the 1970s, however, the high prices of handwoven textiles made by Navajo and Hispanic weavers in the United States created a demand for Mayo weavings. In response, the Mayos improved the quality of their sarapes and cobijas, introducing new designs or reviving old ones, and reintroducing the use of natural dyes.

Among the Mayos, most weaving is done by women. Usually a woman weaves by herself but sometimes several women will work together to produce a single piece.

Navajo Blanket
ca. 1880
New Mexico

The Navajos began weaving with wool during the 17th century, when sheep were introduced to the New Mexico-Arizona region by the Spanish. Navajo women soon came to be regarded as the premier weavers in this region.

The elaborate designs in this blanket are inspired by those of Saltillo-style textiles. Navajo weavers began experimenting with Saltillo designs in the second half of the 19th century. Before then, most Navajo blankets displayed designs of narrow stripes or bands. In this blanket the weaver has taken the diamond design that often forms the central motif of Saltillo-style weavings and broken it up into serrated half-diamonds and parallelograms arranged in bands across the blanket.

We do not know who wove this blanket but we can assume that the weaver was a Navajo woman. In contrast to neighboring Pueblo societies, where men traditionally were the principal weavers, most Navajo weavers were and continue to be women.

This blanket belonged to Ganado Mucho, pictured here during a visit to Washington, D.C., in 1874. Ganado Mucho was an important Navajo leader during much of the 19th century.

His name means “Livestock Many” in Spanish, reflecting the large herds he owned. In the late 19th century, Ganado Mucho befriended the famous trader Juan Lorenzo Hubbell who operated a trading post near Ganado Mucho’s home in northeastern Arizona. Hubbell encouraged Navajo weavers near his trading post to develop a distinctive weaving style, known today as “Ganado.”

This blanket was woven around 1880, at the time when commercial wool yarns colored with synthetic dyes were first becoming available to the Navajos. It combines these yarns with handspun wool yarn, in both natural white and colored blue and pale yellow with plant dyes.