

Washington Matthews

Navajo Weavers

 Publio

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Minden jog fenntartva!

§ I. The art of weaving, as it exists among the Navajo Indians of New Mexico and Arizona, possesses points of great interest to the student of ethnography. It is of aboriginal origin; and while European art has undoubtedly modified it, the extent and nature of the foreign influence is easily traced. It is by no means certain, still there are many reasons for supposing, that the Navajos learned their craft from the Pueblo Indians, and that, too, since the advent of the Spaniards; yet the pupils, if such they be, far excel their masters to-day in the beauty and quality of their work. It may be safely stated that with no native tribe in America, north of the Mexican boundary, has the art of weaving been carried to greater perfection than among the Navajos, while with none in the entire continent is it less Europeanized. As in language, habits, and opinions, so in arts, the Navajos have been less influenced than their sedentary neighbors of the pueblos by the civilization of the Old World.

The superiority of the Navajo to the Pueblo work results not only from a constant advance of the weaver's art among the former, but from a constant deterioration of it among the latter. The chief cause of this deterioration is that the Pueblos find it more remunerative to buy, at least the finer *serapes*, from the Navajos, and give their time to other pursuits, than to manufacture for themselves; they are nearer the white settlements and can get better prices for their produce; they give more attention to agriculture; they have within their country, mines of turquoise which the Navajos prize, and they have no trouble in procuring whisky, which some of the Navajos prize even more than gems. Consequently, while the wilder Indian has incentives to improve his art, the more advanced has many temptations to abandon it altogether. In some pueblos the skill of the loom has been almost forgotten. A growing fondness for European clothing has also had its influence, no doubt.

§ II. Cotton, which grows well in New Mexico and Arizona, the tough fibers of yucca leaves and the fibers of other plants, the hair of different quadrupeds, and the down of birds furnished in prehistoric days the materials of textile fabrics in this country. While some of the Pueblos still weave their native cotton to a slight extent, the Navajos grow no cotton and spin nothing but the wool of the domestic sheep, which animal is, of course, of Spanish introduction, and of which the Navajos have vast herds.

The wool is not washed until it is sheared. At the present time it is combed with hand cards purchased from the Americans. In spinning, the simplest form of the spindle—a slender stick thrust through the center of a round wooden disk—is used. The Mexicans on the Rio Grande use spinning-wheels, and although the Navajos have often seen these wheels, have had abundant opportunities for buying and stealing them, and possess, I think, sufficient ingenuity to make them, they have never abandoned the rude implement of their ancestors. Plate XXXIV illustrates the Navajo method of handling the spindle, a method different from that of the people of Zuñi.