

BOOK REVIEW



Patterns of Exchange: Navajo Weavers and Traders by Teresa J. Wilkins. 248 pp., 8 color plates, 19 figures, 1 map, Acknowledgements, Appendix, Notes, Bibliography, Index. University of Oklahoma Press, 2008. \$34.95 (Cloth). ISBN 978-0-8061-3757-5.

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A new and important work has just been added to the study of Navajo weaving. Teresa Wilkins's *Patterns of Exchange: Navajo Weavers and Traders* is a thoughtful and persuasive account of the role weavers, traders, and the buying public played in the development of this legendary trading system in American history. Solidly grounded in anthropological analysis that draws upon a variety of historical and ethnographic sources, Wilkins's work describes the multiple influences that have shaped the exchange of Navajo rugs over the course of the last two centuries. Wilkins fully embraces the complex nature of Navajo textile exchange, examining the multiple cultural understandings and social interactions that have shaped and guided their circulation. She accomplishes this by putting people at the center of her analysis—weavers, traders and the buying public—deepening readers' understanding of Navajo textile trading in relation to specific historical and social contexts.

Patterns of Exchange begins with a succinct history of the trade. Wilkins describes the various inter- and intratribal exchange systems in which weavings played a part, the emergence and success of trading posts within Reservation land, as well as wider policies and events—such as the Long Walk, annuity programs, and the introduction of different types of government-issued sheep—that would forever alter the traditional Navajo economy and usher in new exchange systems to further connect local economies to national ones. Wilkins provides three case examples of trading posts—Coyote Canyon, Two Grey Hills, and Hubbell Trading Post—to illustrate variability and particular historical trajectories of posts within Reservation lands. Wilkins then shifts to a careful analysis of the cultural environments in the development of the trade of textiles. This includes a thorough description of buyers' desires and tastes, weavers' aesthetic choices and

decision-making processes, and the influence of traders in each of these areas. Wilkins also provides an analysis of the multiple kinds of exchange (credit, barter, pawn), as well as key aspects of Navajo views of exchange (notions of "helping" and an emphasis on social relations) that have been used to guide interactions and shape the trade of Navajo weavings over time.

The strongest part of *Patterns of Culture* rests on Wilkins's rich descriptions and analysis that draw the reader into learning about the various cultural worlds and sensibilities that led to the development of this trading system. She provides insight into the tastes and desires of the textile-buying public in the early stages of the trade, and the role that traders played in supporting and sometimes crafting the rug market according to these preferences. Wilkins uses specific examples to illustrate ways in which influential traders (Cotton, Moore, Hubbell) created a wider market and generated a greater interest in Navajo rugs. These methods included an appeal to anti-Modernist notions of authenticity, the development of standards for assessing quality and workmanship of Navajo textiles, and the presentation of weaving as an object and practice that embodied a less-alienated form of labor and production. Drawing largely upon her extensive knowledge and ethnographic research of the Hubbell Trading Post in Ganado, Arizona, Wilkins utilizes Hubbell's famous commissioned paintings of weaving designs to shed light on the centrality of culture and social interactions in the development of the textile trade. Her keen analysis of the creation and use of these paintings shows that Navajo textiles were created through multiple influences and interactions between weavers, traders, and the wider public. Wilkins thus offers an alternative analysis of the Navajo rug trade, one that runs counter to many earlier accounts, which often emphasize the exploitative and impersonal nature of these exchanges. While Wilkins never dismisses the fact that traders' primary motivations were to make money in the textile trade, her account also reveals a more dynamic and complex cultural project, one informed by multiple cultural understandings and practices of all parties involved.

Agency and social interaction are also central in Wilkins's description of the frames of reference that guide Navajo weavers' decision-making processes and exchanges. Earlier studies on the economy of Navajo weaving tend to focus on wider market forces and the control of traders over weavers in development of the exchange of Navajo textiles. In contrast, Wilkins asserts that weavers have always competently navigated external influences associated with the weaving trade. While some weavers incorporated elements that traders and buyers preferred into their designs, many viewed these requests merely as suggestions, and often essentially "wove what we wanted." Wilkins also makes the crucial insight that local notions of "helping," which guided many weavers in their exchange of textiles, were also adopted by some traders including Hubbell; success often rested upon traders' incorporation of local conceptualizations and strategies of exchange into their businesses. One wonders if featuring an additional trader, one less willing

than Hubbell to integrate aspects of Navajo economic practice into his enterprise, might not provide a fuller picture of the variety of trading-post experiences. Nevertheless, by including local frames of reference in her analysis of the trade of Navajo textiles, Wilkins presents weavers as active agents rather than victims of exploitative systems.

In short, *Patterns of Exchange* offers a fresh perspective to the study of Navajo weaving and Navajo society more generally. Wilkins illustrates the variable and dynamic nature of the Navajo textile trade in the context of social interactions. *Patterns of Exchange* is a valuable work for anthropologists and others who are interested in the analysis of specific histories and development of material objects in local and global exchange.