

ROBES of many COLOURS

the history and use of the Trade Blanket
By Nicholas breeze Wood



Pendleton's
'Sioux Star'
blanket

a pile of
trade blankets
at an early 20th
century Kwakiutl
pottlach or
give-away

The commercially made woollen 'medicine' or 'trade blanket' with its often brightly coloured, geometric designs, has become quite a feature of Native American life in the last century or so, and its origin can be traced back to the traditional, native weavings of the peoples of the Southwestern states of the US.

Used as items of clothing, as gifts, and for ceremonial times, these beautiful blankets have become works of art in their own right and are sold in specialist shops throughout the world.

Weaving, and the making of blankets and other textiles, is one of human-kind's oldest skills. The materials used for weaving depend of course on the fibres available to the weaver. A British weaver told me once that "If it has two ends and a middle you can spin it into thread; and if you can spin it into thread, you can weave with it". Dog and buffalo hair were used by some Native American weavers and - where it was available - hemp and cotton made excellent vegetable-based fibres.

At one time, in the Southwest of the United States, the Pueblo

nations were all expert weavers, mostly using cotton until the Spanish invaders introduced sheep there. Many of these Pueblo people no longer weave to any great extent, but around 1700, the Diné (Navaho) seem to have taken up the art with determination, and have developed since then into craftspeople of great skill, becoming the area's most famous weavers.

Cloth and blankets were obvious items to use when Europeans and native peoples began to trade. Originally, many trade blankets were manufactured in Europe, often England, and the area around Stroud in Gloucestershire was an important centre, giving its name to the heavy woollen 'Stroud Cloth'.

Contemporary accounts tell of blankets being used in trading in the late 17th century, and the records of the Hudson Bay Company refer to such trade as early as 1682.

As they became more widely available, these commercially made blankets began to replace the traditional animal skin robes and native hand-woven textiles.

EARLY DESIGNS

Early trade blankets were of a simple design, either a plain overall colour, or stripes of various colours; but as the taste of Native Americans was for bright colours, the European manufacturers began to develop designs with more colours in them to keep their customers happy. This became especially true from the closing years of the nineteenth century



Modern Pendleton blanket designs (from left to right), 'Raven', 'Red Rock', 'San Miguel', 'She Who Watches', 'Spirit Bear'



onwards, when hundreds of different blanket designs in a wide range of colours appeared on the market. Many of these blanket designs were taken directly from Native American traditional artforms such as Diné weaving patterns, symbols from Pueblo pottery, or Plains beadwork patterns.

All of these blankets are woven to create reversible designs in which one side, the 'colour side', enhances the blanket's colours more dramatically, and the other side, the 'pattern side', gives the design more prominence.

Over the years trade blankets - which are often known as robes - have become a fairly standard size and construction, generally approximately 177cm x 203cm (70 x 80 inches) with a felt or satin binding along all four edges. On less expensive blankets, the edges are folded over and stitched to create a binding. The earliest trade blankets, were made of pure wool. These wool blankets were significantly heavier than those sold today, which are wool on a cotton warp¹.

THE WEAVING COMPANIES

The early the trade blankets were made exclusively by English and European companies and shipped into the US. In 1845 there were only eleven mills that manufactured blankets, and of these only one - the 'Buffalo Manufacturing Company - was listed as a manufacturer of 'Indian blankets'. But following the introduction of a more advanced loom in the 1880's, American manufacturers started to make blankets like those seen today with the reversible designs. Since these new looms allowed easier production, the years after their arrival saw a blooming of the art, and many weaving companies competed strongly to have their blankets chosen by native customers. In seeking to develop their designs, the manufacturers even carried out market research trips to a tribe's agency headquarters, or a nearby trading post to get reaction to their latest robes.

PENDLETON BLANKETS
The Pendleton Woollen Mills were founded in 1896, and had considerable

a 1920's
Pendleton
'Nine Element'
blanket



competition in their early years from other makers; but by the turn of the 20th century, the smaller companies had mostly closed, and the vast majority of the trade blanket business was served by Pendleton and four other companies.

The Great Depression of the 1930's was a hard time, and during that time many companies were forced to close or turn their production to other items, so that eventually Pendleton was the only one of any size left producing blankets primarily for the Native American market.

Although there were many companies who produced the blankets, and many who designed them, the only blanket designer who achieved a degree of fame was Joe Rawnsley. Rawnsley worked for Pendleton between 1901 and 1929, and spent months at a time living among tribes

an early 1900s
Native American
fool dancer
relaxes and
smokes a pipe
while wrapped
in a trade
blanket





quality blankets include Babbitt Brothers and the Navajo Textile Mills, an Native American-owned company based in Mesa, Arizona.

THE USE OF BLANKETS
 Due to their relatively high cost trade blankets are generally considered special items, but with native people their role is not confined to a ceremonial use - unlike the large proportion of the blankets sold in Europe, which are often specially bought as 'medicine blankets'.

Because they are highly coloured, they are used as bedspreads, throws or wall hangings, as well as shawls and items of clothing.

The commemorative and special-edition blankets are generally aimed at the

collector market, which is largely non-native.

A more ceremonial aspect of the trade blanket is seen in its use as a gift to honour a friend or relative. Blankets have also become a gift to give to a medicine teacher with whom you are entering a period of study. Sometimes they are worn by, or wrapped around, the participant of a ceremony, or on occasions used to wrap sacred objects in, or used as an altar cloth to keep sacred items from touching the ground.

Blankets may be given to a new born child, or wrapped around the dead and buried with them. Cherished blankets received in a special event are often traditionally kept in trunks or cedar chests, to be brought out and worn only on very special occasions.

One Kiowa-Comanche woman tells of her own typical experience:

"Once when my aunt was visiting me, she was wearing a

a 'blanket scramble' at a potlatch, thrown from upper windows, blankets sail through the air to the people gathered below to receive them

throughout the US. His travels enabled him to learn first hand about traditional designs and their importance, directly from the Native American people he met and talked to. Back at the mill, Rawnsley transformed this information into designs that were incorporated into Pendleton's blankets.

MANUFACTURE TODAY

Trade blankets are still highly sought after, desirable items, and today there are several companies who make them. Pendleton is perhaps the market leader, and outlets from trading posts to upmarket galleries sell their blankets, while collectors vie for the commemorative and limited-edition blankets they produce. Other companies who produce

people gathering for a ceremony at a pueblo



a modern Pendleton

beautiful shawl, and before I thought about it, I told her how much I admired it. But then she explained that someone special had given it to her and she wanted to keep it. Later on, she was holding a sweat for a special occasion. I was honoured to be there with her. At the last minute, she realised she hadn't planned for the feed she was going to give everyone at the sweat. She wasn't ready, and she came and told me.

Well, I never cooked so fast in my life, helping her get ready for that feed. When it was over, she gave the man who ran the sweat a Pendleton blanket, and he gave her a shawl. And then she gave me that same shawl I had admired before because I had helped her with all the work."

The colourful trade blanket has become such a feature of native and non-native culture, equally at home at a pow wow, in a hogan, outside a sweatlodge or in a trendy designer's gallery. Whether for ceremonial or decorative use it looks set to remain with us for a long time yet - perhaps as long as there are chilly evenings.

NOTES:

1: Warp refers to the threads that are tightly strung on a frame or loom at the start of the work and into which the 'weft' is woven in horizontal rows to form the fabric.

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Some suppliers of Pendleton Blankets.

UK:

Opie Gems,
Paradise Valley,
St Clears,
Carmarthen,
SA33 4JY.
(01994) 230 028

Ajadica, Fennells
Home Farm,
Lypiatt, Stroud,
Glos, GL6 7LJ.
(01452) 770 388

USA:

Crazy Crow Trading Post,
PO Box 847,
Pottsboro,
Texas. 75076-0847
(903) 786 2287

Eagle Feather Trading Post
168 W. 12th Street,
Ogden,
Utah 84404
(801) 393 3991



a modern Pendleton 'Turtle' blanket

pueblo dwellers wearing blankets in photographed in the 1920's



looking down into the valleys of Stroud, England, the home of the original trade blankets, while wearing a Pendleton 'Chief Joseph' blanket

a Pendleton 'Spirit Quest' blanket

