



MASTER OF THE SOUTHWEST 2005
IRENE CLARK

Weaving New Traditions

Irene Clark, creator of Navajo rugs, hands down her art generation to generation

TEXT BY DAVID M. BROWN

Clark, opposite, makes her own dyes, using the colors found in nature to produce her weavings.

RUG: NAAT'S LILID (RAINBOW) COURTESY DENVER ART MUSEUM, GIFT OF GLORIA F. ROSS AND KENNETH NOLAND





M

ASTER NAVAJO WEAVER

Irene Clark hears the centuries old songs of the rug weavers at Spider Rock and through the White House Ruins at Canyon de Chelly. She sees her rug designs in the sacred landscape of Diné, the 27,543 square mile Navajo Nation, and selects her colors from the red sand stone mesas and multicolored plants near her home at Crystal To Niltz ili “where the crystal water flows out” along the western slope of the Chuska Mountains in New Mexico.

Clark, 70, has been creating masterful Navajo rugs for only 25 years. Having learned from her mother, Glenabah Hardy, herself a master weaver who had learned the art from her mother, Clark now guides daughter Teresa and daughter in law Gwen Clark, as well as grandchildren Kimberlyn and Kyle and twins Klayton and Kristen. “Weaving,” she says, “is my life.” This was not always the case, she notes, looking back on her life.

“I didn’t know how to weave. I was a shepherd,” she relates. “That was my job.” So, until about age 12, Clark tended sheep near the one time Crystal Trading Post, which helped establish the well regarded “Crystal” Navajo rug pattern in the 1940s. All the while, she watched and listened to her mother as she worked at her loom.

Crystals, one of a dozen or so world famous Navajo rug styles, are distinctive for their evocative linearity—complex design bands alternating with signature pinstripe wavy lines. “Termination panels” wider solid or wavy line bands also appear sometimes at each end of a Crystal rug, notes Ann Hedlund, found

ing director of the Gloria F. Ross Center for Tapestry Studies at the Arizona State Museum, University of Arizona, Tucson, and author of many books on the subject.

Although early Crystal rugs contained aniline dyed wool, later versions (since the mid 1940s) are prized for their vegetal dyed, hand carded, hand spun wool, with borderless designs, explains Steve Getzwiller of Sonoita. Getzwiller, who with other traders worked closely with Clark during the late ’70s and ’80s, has been collecting and selling Navajo rugs for four decades. He has helped publicize Clark’s work, including her achievements in his 1984 book, *The Fine Art of Navajo Weaving*.

“Irene has pushed the palette with color and design,” Getzwiller says. Clark and Glenabah (actively weaving at age 94) have developed more richly colored rugs with more complex designs, producing true “Clark” rugs distinct even from other fine Crystals.

Clark’s parents sent her to a school in Oklahoma for five years, where she met her husband, Jimmy, who has distinguished himself working for the tribal government’s Water Resources Department. They had seven children, five of whom survive: sons Virgil, Victor, Ferlin and Fitzgerald, and daughter Teresa, who lives

This page and opposite:
Clark’s Navajo Crystal
rugs feature distinctive
complex linear designs.



RUGS: COURTESY KENNEDY MUSEUM OF ART, OHIO UNIVERSITY





“Someday, Irene, you’ll be a good

with her family in Mesa, where she weaves at night and on weekends.

Clark spins her day around her family and her craft. She has told Hedlund: “Most of the time, I stay home in order to maintain a healthy household. The day begins with cooking for the family, cleaning the house, feeding the livestock, and then I finally weave from around 8:30 until noon. At that time, I’ll take lunch, check the livestock, and go back to weaving until 4. By then, the family will be coming home, so I’ll start supper, feed the livestock, and start weaving again until bedtime. It’s a full time workday.”

She spends about 50 to 60 hours a week creating rugs both on commission and for speculation. She doesn’t just sit at the loom, though. A normal rug, a 4 by 5, for example, requires about 500 hours to complete, including shearing, cleaning, carding the wool, spinning, dyeing, rinsing (at least twice) and, finally, weaving. She is involved in the entire process, sheep to loom.

Clark began weaving when her children became adults. She remembered what her mother had shown her as a child and con-

tinued to watch and listen to her. “I asked my mom just to watch me weave, and if I was doing something wrong, to tell me I was doing it wrong,” she told Hedlund.

Clark listened to the advice of traders, too: She once told Hedlund how, early on in her career, the late Bill Young, a trader at the Hubbell Trading Post (the National Historic Site at Ganado), would say to her: “Looky here, Irene, this is where the mistake is.” And then he’d say, “Don’t ever get mad when I tell you that. Some ladies get mad and don’t like to be told about their mistakes. Someday, Irene, you’ll be a good weaver maybe even the best.”

Indeed, awards acknowledging her skills have been plentiful: Best of Show at the Navajo Show, Museum of Northern Arizona in Flagstaff (1990); Best of Class, Indian Fair and Market at the Heard Museum Guild in Phoenix (1994); and First Prize during the Intertribal Indian Ceremonial in Gallup, N.M. (1982), to name a few. In addition, she is a recipient of the prestigious Southwest Association on Indian Arts Fellowship.

Her work appears in the Gloria F. Ross Contemporary Navajo Weaving Collection at the Denver Art Museum and the National Museum of the American Indian in New York City. The Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard

RUGS: COURTESY KENNEDY MUSEUM OF ART, OHIO UNIVERSITY



weaver—maybe even the best”

has one of her rugs, as does The Textile Museum in Washington, D.C.

A number of years ago, traders told Clark that the Crystal design's traditional colors—orange, gold, yellow, green and brown—weren't selling. So, instead of turning to the pinks, pastels, deep greens, blues and purples that weavers from other schools were trying, Clark chose to use the colors of nature, earth tones such as terracotta, light green, rust and other hues. This has helped make her work distinctive and eminently marketable.

She has told Hedlund: “I see that vegetation is green. The dirt is brown. Orange and yellow—it seems like they represent the flower and rainbow colors.” Orange also reminds her of the changing autumn colors.

“Irene is technically a very controlled weaver who has expert command of her materials, dyes, designs and weave structure,” says Hedlund. “I can identify her work at a distance without any trouble because of the crispness of both her colors and her designs and the straight, even quality of her weaving. She understands how to use contrasting colors and when to employ subtle juxtapositions, shading and highlighting.”

Hedlund comments further: “Her design motifs are often more complex than

many other Crystal weavers, and yet they have a clarity and brilliance to them.” Sometimes sketched, but often ideas she keeps in her head, her designs require precision of execution. One of Clark's sisters who doesn't weave, Maria Saltclaw, has said to Hedlund: “Weaving takes your whole head. You need to know science and math, especially algebra and geometry. Our mother says that Irene outdesigns even her.” And daughter Teresa adds: “Challenge is her way of life. She always wants to do better, more detailed work.”

In addition, she uses the hair bundle (or hair bun) design that her mother originated. “She carries on that design as a way of honoring her mother,” says D.Y. Begay, a Navajo weaver who knows Clark well.

Keeping the tradition alive inspires Clark: To Dr. Jennifer McLerran, curator of a Navajo weaving exhibition at Ohio University's Kennedy Museum of Art, she has said: “My mother here, she is very thankful for my weaving. She said, ‘Thank you, my daughter, you learn to weave. This is going to be your life. . . . This is what she told me. Forever I will remember my mother. I'm going to continue weaving. I'm a daughter, and I want my daughter to learn. I want my grandkids to learn. I want to pass it to whoever wants to learn it.’” □

See Resource Guide.

This page and opposite: Clark, known for the even quality of her weaving, creates both traditional and innovative patterns in her Crystal rugs.