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Features

- Right from the Start – Determining Tabby Order** 10
by Marcy Petrini
- The 2022 HGA & Dendel Scholarship Recipients** 16
by Gussie Fauntleroy
- Capturing the Soul of Mother Earth:
Dyeing and Coloring in the
North American Southwest** 22
by Robin Hanson
- HGA Celebrates These Award-Winning
Fiber Artists** 30
- Hiding in Plain Sight** 36
by Carl Stewart
- Organizing a Traveling Exhibit** 43
by Marlene Lloyd

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Departments

- Advertisers' Index** 58
- Books & Media** 48
- Classified** 58
- Fiber Trust** 56
- Guild Spotlight** 29
- News & Inspiration** 5
- President's Letter** 4
- Travel & Workshop** 8
- Update** 52



5 **News & Inspiration**



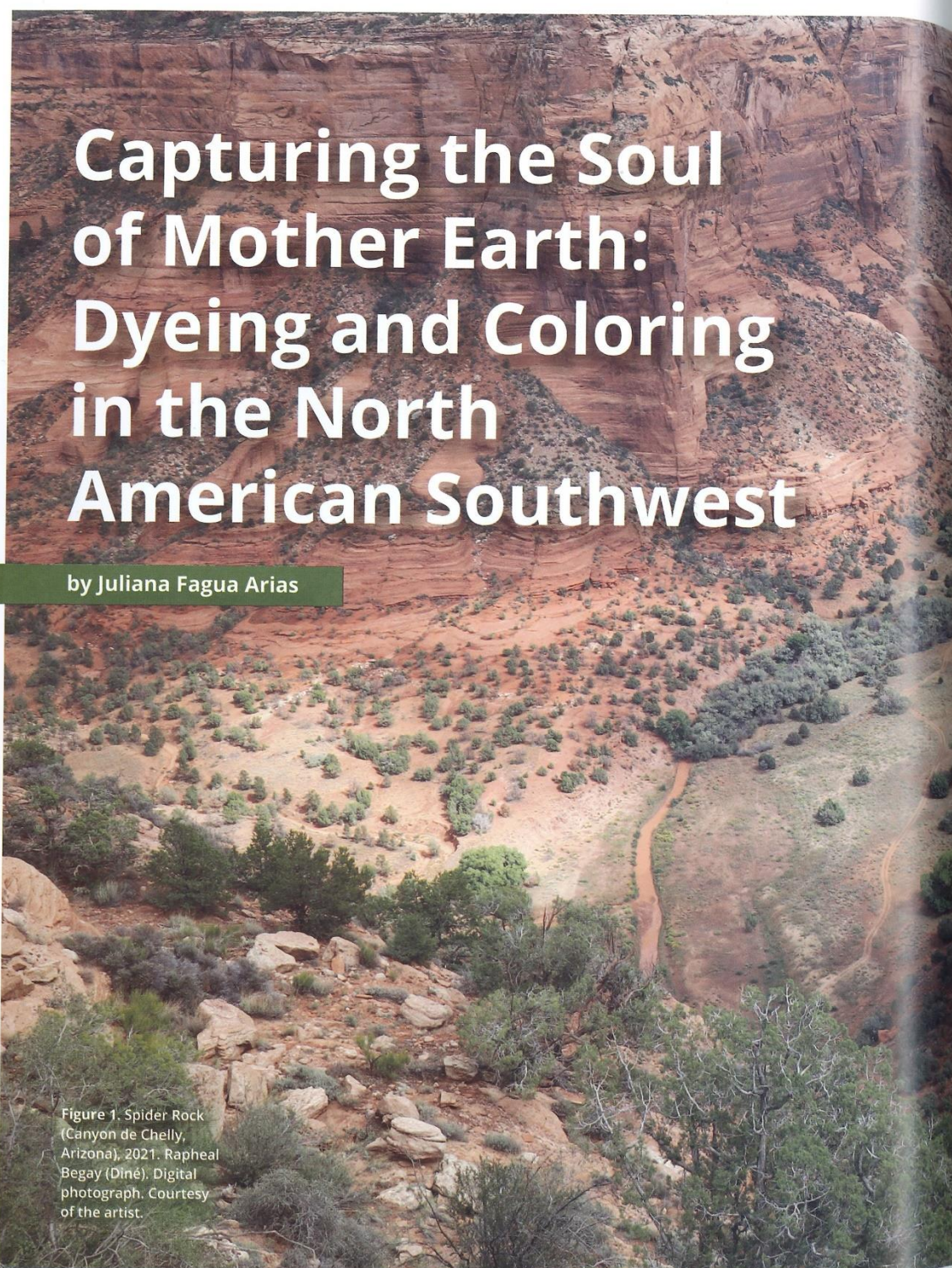
22 **Capturing the Soul
of Mother Earth**



43
**Organizing
a Traveling
Exhibit**

Photocaptions:

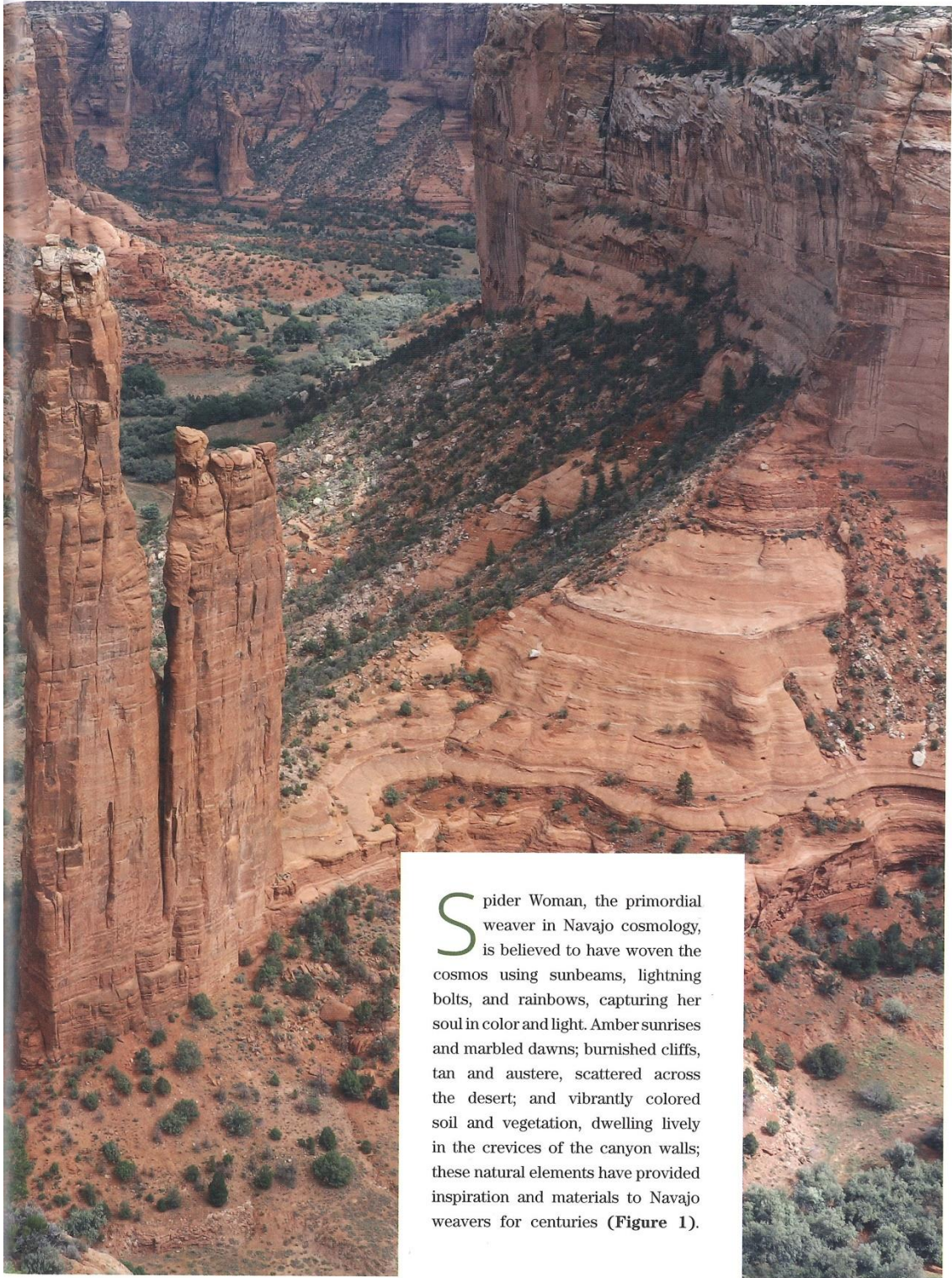
- 5 *Mixed Signals (Diptych)*, detail, 2020. Paolo Arao. Sewn cotton, denim, corduroy, canvas, handwoven fibers, map pins. Photograph courtesy the artist. Currently on view in *Homespun, Hudson Valley Artists*.
- 22 *Diné/Navajo dye chart*, 2019, detail. Roselyn Washburn. Dried plants, wool, ink and paper. Courtesy of John McCulloch, Teec Nos Pos Trading Post. Photograph by Bruce White.
- 48 *King's Coat: Henry VIII*, Anne Abendroth. Recipient of the People's Choice award in the WeGO 2013 traveling exhibition, hosted by the Portland Handweavers Guild. Photograph by Shelly Schmidt.



Capturing the Soul of Mother Earth: Dyeing and Coloring in the North American Southwest

by Juliana Fagua Arias

Figure 1. Spider Rock
(Canyon de Chelly,
Arizona), 2021. Rapheal
Begay (Diné). Digital
photograph. Courtesy
of the artist.



Spider Woman, the primordial weaver in Navajo cosmology, is believed to have woven the cosmos using sunbeams, lightning bolts, and rainbows, capturing her soul in color and light. Amber sunrises and marbled dawns; burnished cliffs, tan and austere, scattered across the desert; and vibrantly colored soil and vegetation, dwelling lively in the crevices of the canyon walls; these natural elements have provided inspiration and materials to Navajo weavers for centuries (Figure 1).



Figure 2. Roselyn Washburn, Diné/Navajo dye chart, 2019. Dried plants, wool, ink and paper. Courtesy of John McCulloch, Teec Nos Pos Trading Post. Photograph by Bruce White.

A weaver's color expertise is embedded in a complex system of embodied practices and territorial knowledge: they know where and how to gather and prepare dye plants and minerals (Figure 2), and are often aware of the vegetation's role in healing, ceremonial, and cooking practices. Elders impart this knowledge to children, strengthening family bonds and bestowing a sense of identity in relation to the landscape. Visitors to Bard Graduate Center's exhibition *Shaped by the Loom: Weaving Worlds in the American Southwest*, opening on February 17, 2023, will be able to explore the traditions and cosmologies that underpin Navajo weaving. Focusing on Indigenous aesthetics and ways of knowing, *Shaped by the Loom* will examine the individual and communal rhythms of making, including the production of fibers and dyes.

Figure 3. Black Dye Material (Bundle), Chaco Canyon, San Juan County, New Mexico, 1898. Leaves, Twigs (Rhus Aromatica). Collected by George H. Pepper, donated by B.T.B. Hyde. Courtesy of the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History.

Before the Spanish entrada in the sixteenth-century, coloring originated from two main sources: minerals and plants. Mineral pigments come from the soil, rocks, cliffs, and rivers, and provide the earthen, misty reds and browns. On the other hand, plant pigments come from bark, roots, twigs, leaves, ashes, and flowers, and add shades of black, orange, yellow, purple, and pink, among others (Figure 3). Weavers



followed multi-step dyeing procedures; they boiled the chosen parts of the plants or minerals until the liquid acquired the desired concentration; then, they strained the decoction and boiled it again, clean, with a natural mordant, usually alum; after that, they submerged the clean yarn in the dye for an amount of time that depended on the desired hue; and finally, they washed the yarn in yucca suds, then rinsed and dried it.

After the sixteenth century, three new coloring sources entered the Southwest, drastically changing weaving practices. Merchants established a new commercial road that connected Mexico City to Santa Fe, the *Camino Real de Tierra Adentro*, and introduced brilliant red cochineal-dyed cloth and deep-blue indigo cakes. Later on, in the late nineteenth century, Navajo weavers incorporated synthetically dyed yarn from Germantown, Pennsylvania, into their pieces, creating a new color palette as well as innovative design patterns that accentuated the bright colors. To this day, pre-contact dyeing techniques coexist with these newly introduced materials, demonstrating the dynamism and adaptability of so-called traditional practices; instead of a threat, material transference has been an invigorating force in Navajo weaving, proving the weavers' remarkable resilience.

Cochineal

Cultivated for its brilliant red dye since pre-contact times, cochineal—a sap-sucking cactus parasite native to Mexico and Peru—was used as a colorant by the Mixtecs and Zapotecs in Central America, and the Incas in South America. However, there is no evidence of a pre-contact cochineal dyeing practice in the North American Southwest, perhaps because the local wild type of cochineal is considerably

less potent than the Mexican domesticated one. Soon after the conquest, merchants and government officials introduced cochineal-dyed wool cloths (called bayeta, which were often woven and dyed in Spain with Mexican cochineal) to the Spanish Americas.

Weavers from the North American Southwest unraveled these cloths to obtain the crimson threads and reweave them into their dresses (*biil*) and blankets (*beeldléi*) (Figure 4). Likely, they cut the bayeta into strips and pulled the threads from the short ends of the fabric. Then, the weaver would either incorporate the single strands into the textile or re-spin them to match the weight of their yarn, carding any leftover strands with local churro wool to create pink shades.



Figure 4. Unidentified Diné/Navajo artist, Biil (woman's dress or manta), before 1910. Wool, twill weave with interlocking tapestry weave. Purchased by Erastus T. Tefft, 1910. Courtesy of the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History.

Indigo

Although not widely used by North American Southwest weavers before the seventeenth century, indigo became one of the most precious dyes and predominant imports after its introduction by Spanish merchants. Its prevalence afterwards was everlasting, being one of the last natural dyes to be used by Navajo weavers in the late nineteenth century, despite the already entrenched tendency to use synthetically dyed commercial yarns (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Unidentified artist, Blanket, San Miguel (?) Mexico, before 1910. Cotton, wool, weft faced tapestry weave. Collected by Dr. H.C. Bumpus, donated by Anson W. Hard. Courtesy of the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History.

Deep, dark indigo blues were obtained from the leaves of the *Indigofera* using a lengthy and sometimes toxic process. The dyer placed the leaves in large vats to ferment, creating an oxidized solution which, left undisturbed, allowed the indigo precipitate to settle; this blue paste was then filtered and strained into a cake. Since oxidized indigo is insoluble in water, dyers employed special techniques to extract the pigment, including dissolving it in urine. This private practice made the preparation of indigo somewhat mysterious to outsiders as weavers were reluctant to reveal the recipe. When finally removed from the dyebath, yarn appeared yellow at first, but as it oxidized, almost magically, it turned a rich blue.

The introduction of indigo quickly overshadowed Native recipes for blue, such as the Navajo method of mixing blue clay and sumac, or a Hopi dye made from blue corn. Rapidly, it became the principal dye imported to New Mexico, followed by brazilwood, lac, and madder. Guatemalan indigo was especially prized; by the 1600s it was the major export product of the Central American colonies, and by the early eighteenth century Caribbean plantations were so dominant that exports from India, the main Indigo producer of the early modern period, dwindled. Enslaved Africans, and to a lesser degree Indigenous people, made up the largest workforce of the indigo plantations.

The high quality and permanence of indigo dye, its seemingly magical process of transformation upon oxidation, and the fact that it does not require a mordant to adhere to the fibers, established it as a precious dye in the

North American Southwest. The Hopi, for example, exchanged ceremonial cotton textiles and female manta dresses for indigo with the Rio Grande pueblos. It also played an important role in gift exchange practices between Spanish secular and religious authorities and the Pueblo people.

Germantown Yarn

In the 1860s, the Navajo people were forced by the United States army to migrate from their ancestral homeland in current-day Arizona to a government-sanctioned reservation in Eastern New Mexico called Bosque Redondo. This collective trauma, known as the Long Walk, subdued the Navajos to economic pressures and scarcity, and obstructed their access to resources and materials such as natural dyes, prompting them to appropriate Euro-American ways and technologies.

One of the materials that weavers incorporated into their practice was the government-supplied, commercially manufactured yarn known as Germantown yarn produced in Germantown, Pennsylvania. Most of this yarn was provided in the form

of aniline-dyed wool blankets which the Navajos unraveled to obtain single threads, the same way they acquired cochineal-dyed yarn. A machine-spun, three or four-ply wool yarn characterized by its synthetic and bright colors, Germantown yarn sharply differed from the more opaque, naturally-dyed indigo, brown, white, black, and red yarns that Navajo weavers previously used. To match this new chromatic palette, weavers created vibrantly colored new designs commonly known as “Eye Dazzlers” (Figure 6). Diamond patterns, stacked geometric forms, overlapping jagged lines, and serrated chevrons characterized this new style of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century weavings, an aesthetic that diverged from the earlier broad horizontal bands, small diamonds, and squares. The adoption of new materials and tools was closely related to a shift from subsistence production and inter-tribal trade to nationwide production oriented towards the tourist



Figure 6. Unidentified Diné/Navajo artist, Germantown blanket (Eye-Dazzler), ca. 1895–1905. Wool and cotton, Germantown yarn, tapestry weave. Purchased by Uriah S. Hollister, 1911. Courtesy of the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History.



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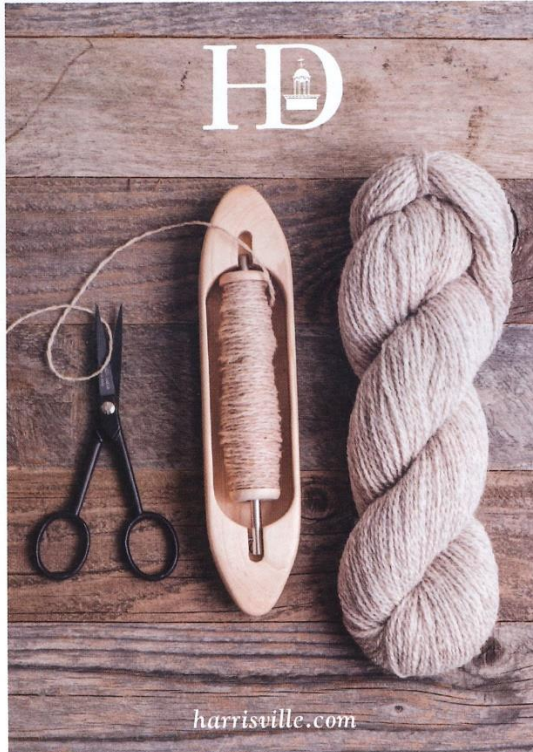
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market, as these innovative styles, patterns, and color palettes suited the tastes of Euro-American buyers, dealers, and collectors.

Dyeing and coloring in Navajo weaving is a place-based practice, a reciprocal relationship between the weaver and the environment that is dependent on the vitality of the land, and the mental, physical, and spiritual harmony of the weaver. Embedded in a complex system of tradition, practice, and belief, color functions as part of a visual language that is culturally and environmentally defined.

Weavers have nurtured and used endemic dye plants and mineral pigments for generations, perfecting complex procedures to obtain rich color palettes. The introduction of foreign coloring sources such as cochineal, indigo, and Germantown yarn strengthened Navajo weaving, revitalized their economy, and proved the weaver's ability to appropriate while innovating, and to adapt to new power dynamics. Unraveling cochineal, fermenting indigo, and incorporating aniline-dyed threads, the weavers of the North American Southwest have demonstrated their resilient capabilities with the ancestral loom, time and time again.

Born and raised in Bogotá, Colombia, Juliana Fagua Arias is an art historian and curator researching the material culture of the Americas and its hemispheric and transoceanic connections. Juliana has an M.A. in Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture from the Bard Graduate Center, and most recently she finished the prestigious Tiffany & Co. Foundation Curatorial Internship at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Currently, Juliana is a Ph.D. student at Cornell University in the History of Art and Visual Studies department.



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