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Magazine

NAVAJO RUG SPECIAL

Pictorial Rug
Revival

Oriental
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Crownpoint
Rug Auction



new mexico

Magazine

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Cover — A modern Navajo pictorial rug from the Monument Valley area was woven in 1975 by Jessie Begay. The weaver has used elements from everyday life in her charming composition. In the center, the weaver herself is at work beside the hogan, her baby next to her. Can you find the jackrabbit, the tiny cow, the dogs, goats, sheep, corn — and the skunk? (Don Woodard Collection.) Photograph by Mark Nohl.

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The Crownpoint Rug Weavers Auction

GOING... GOING...

by Tony Hillerman

Photography by Mark Nohl

The rug is perhaps three feet by four — a background the color of rabbitbrush blossoms on which the stylized forms of three Navajo yei stand. Mrs. Pauline McCauley, chairman of the Crownpoint Rug Weavers Association auction, is frowning at it, her fingers pulling at the weave and finding it a bit loose for her exacting standards. But otherwise it passes inspection and she stacks it atop a growing pile of other rugs on the tables in the school gym in Crownpoint, New Mexico, a tiny settlement northeast of Gallup. The rugs will go on sale later in the evening at an auction that attracts buyers from all over the country.

"Before we started having these sales," says Mrs. McCauley, "this little yei rug would have sold for as little as \$20 to a dealer. Tonight it will bring a lot more."

Just how much more it will bring won't be determined for about four hours, when Herman Coffey and his assistant auctioneers mount the platform at the end of the Crownpoint Public School gym-auditorium and begin the rapid-fire ritual of determining highest bidders. Now it's check-in and inspection time — a line of Navajo weavers having their rugs tagged at the door and a cluster of potential buyers examining them on display tables.

A Navajo assistant auctioneer holds up a rug for bidders to see at the Crownpoint Rug Weavers Auction. The rug will be sold within seconds.



Mrs. McCauley, who learned rug weaving from her grandmother as a child, screens out entries that aren't authentic or aren't properly finished and notes on the rug's tag any shortcomings — such as use of commercial yarn or chemical dyes. The buyers — depending on their nature — have more detailed interests. They measure dimensions, check edges for straightness and the weave for "cupping," look for "lazy lines" and other flaws in the pattern, and scrutinize the colors. If they intend to bid on a rug, they record such information next to its number on their notepads and clipboards along with a range of prices they're willing to bid.

It's a serious business, but it's also a friendly one. The buyers are about evenly divided by late afternoon between curious first-timers and the experts — those buying for resale, and those long-since hooked on the beauty of Navajo rugs. There's a lot of renewing old acquaintanceships and the making of new ones going on around the tables. Mrs. McCauley, an attractive young woman, is everywhere, answering questions and radiating charm and helpfulness. She establishes a tone that makes the affair as much reunion picnic as commercial event.

The yei rug catches the eye of a young couple from Nebraska who had read of the event and decided to use it as an excuse for a brief autumn vacation. They'd like a souvenir, and the golden yei design is among the possibilities. Mr. and Mrs. Pete Petersen, Albuquerque rug dealers, take time out from their checking to tell the Nebraskans what to look for in weaving and what to expect when the bidding begins. The yei, Petersen guesses, will be bid to \$100 or higher — still substantially under retail value.

The auction begins a few moments after 7 p.m. — following a dinner of "Navajo tacos" served in the school kitchen. The tacos are plate-sized slabs of fry-bread buried under a hearty gravy of red chile, beef and beans. By the time the cafeteria is cleared, Mrs. McCauley is on stage greeting the crowd in Navajo and English. The buyers seem to drift to the front, the weavers and their families settling toward the back of the gym, which is equipped with folding chairs. Tiny Indian tots cavort in the aisles or fall asleep on rug piles. Coffey and his assistants

Bob Enders and Wayne Conners are on the platform, with Coffey explaining the rules. Bidders must hold up their bid cards, which show their number, he says.

"If you want a rug, here's the place to get you one at a bargain," Coffey says. "Don't take 'em to the hock shops and get somebody to guess what they're worth and then expect to bring 'em back and get your money back."

That out of the way, Coffey says "here we go," and the first rug is unfolded and its number and weaver announced. It's sold in a quick flurry of bidding in just a beat more than 40 seconds.

That's the pace Coffey maintains with 123 rugs sold in 114 minutes and the event over by 9 p.m. He's handled most of these sales for years and judges quickly when he's run out of bids. Sometimes his assistants are Navajo auctioneers, who throw in occasional Navajo jokes, to the delight of the crowd. And some evenings there are as many as 600 rugs, with the sale going on until the early morning hours.

"Got some commercial yarn in this one," Coffey says, and starts the bidding at \$17.50. (The weaver lists the minimum price she is willing to accept — and bidding starts there.) The rug, a beautiful modification of the famous Crystal design, goes for \$22.50.

Of another he notes "they lost the curry comb there — in about four different places," and it sells for \$32.50. The very next rug, smaller and little different to the untrained eye, Coffey declares "a little dandy."

"Here's one that won't play second

fiddle to no Two Gray Hills," Coffey declares. "Here's one you can take home and brag about." It goes for \$190, with several dealers obviously sharing Coffey's estimation of its value.

The next rug is large and beautifully woven. Coffey eyes it doubtfully. "Guarantee part of that color not to be vegetable," he says, "but it is a nice little rug." Its touch of chemical color is forgiven and it sells for \$105.

Then comes a heavy black-and-gray rug — double-woven to give it a different pattern on each face and the durability of Gibraltar. "I don't

Continued on page 36



Mrs. Martha Benally, president of the Crownpoint Rug Weavers Association, inspects rugs as they are brought to the stage for auctioning



The auction may go on into the early hours of the morning, but it's all too much for one tuckered-out Navajo lad.

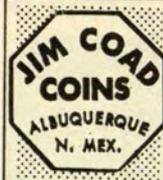
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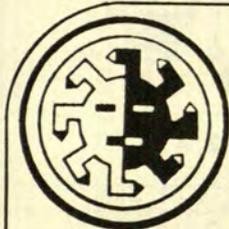
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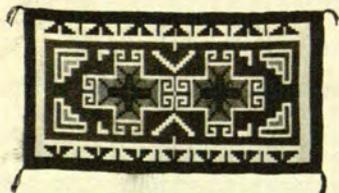


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GOING...

Continued from page 29

think a horse is stout enough to carry it," Coffey declares, but bidding isn't enthusiastic.

"Yumat 80-80, bid 80-80-80-80, yumat 80," he stops. "This one you could hold up the four corners and pour a gallon of water in it and it wouldn't leak through. I'm at 80-80 gimme 85. Yumat 80-80-80." He stops again. "I thought that speech would be worth at least \$5," Coffey declares. But it isn't. The rug goes for \$80. The dealer next to me wasn't bidding on that one but he had inspected it. "It would bring maybe \$200 in Albuquerque," he says. "Somebody got a real buy."

In general, the rugs seem to be going for a little more than half their retail price in off-reservation shops with the margin of bargain smaller on low quality rugs and growing with size and quality. The Nebraska couple happily bid on a big red-and-black geometric for \$90. "A real buy," the dealer says. "It would have cost them twice that in a store — maybe more."

The most expensive rug of the evening is a lovely traditional pattern in gray, white and red. Bidding starts at \$400, moves quickly to \$480 and falters. Coffey seems dismayed. "Go downtown and you couldn't touch this for \$1,000," he says. A dealer gets it for \$500.

The golden yellow yei rug, with its stick-figure Navajo Holy People, comes up late. Coffey likes it. "Here's a little cutie," he declares and the first bid is \$80, jumping to \$100 and ending at \$130.

The stacks of rugs are down to almost nothing now. Mrs. McCauley is sitting at the back of the platform with one of her daughters and her gray-haired aunt, Martha Benally, who is president of the Crownpoint Rug Weavers Association, three generations passing the time by spinning wool. At both sides of the auditorium lines have formed. Buyers are picking up their purchases to the left of the stage, and the weavers are being paid at a table to the right. Most of them are middle-aged or older — recalling dire prophecies current since the 1950s that Navajo rug weaving is a dying art because it involves too much time and too little pay.

The weaver being paid now is perhaps 75, her white hair tied in a

tight bun, and a magnificent sand-cast silver necklace around her neck. She signs the receipt by leaving her thumbprint on the paper. But behind her are a cluster of young women — not long out of high school and wearing pantsuits and jeans. Perhaps, you think, the difference between \$20 and \$130 for a yei rug is the difference between a dying art and a live one. 

Auctions are scheduled in 1976 for March 5, April 16, May 28, July 16, August 27, October 8 and November 19 — all Fridays. Rug inspections may be made during the afternoon. Supper is served at 5:30 p.m. and the auction starts at 7 p.m. Overnight accommodations are available in Grants and Gallup. It's well to check into your motel in the afternoon so that you can stay as late as you want at the auction. From I-40, about midway between Gallup and Grants, take NM 57 north from Thoreau about 25 miles to reach Crownpoint.

Music Man

Continued from page 32

flute with leather thongs — he plays a haunting phrase.

"In my woodwind quintet, *Ritmo Indio*, the oboist plays this wi-iki-zho," he says.

Some musicologists feel that the Indians had no stringed instruments before the arrival of the white man, Ballard says, but he thinks they may be wrong.

"The Apaches have a stringed instrument made from the century plant and horsehair, with no frets," he says. And in North Carolina, he found a Cherokee one-string violin, that hinted at an earlier history.

"And of course there were percussion instruments — drums!" he adds with a laugh.

Born in Oklahoma, Ballard studied music at the University of Oklahoma, where he received his B.A. From the University of Tulsa, he got his M.A.

"My mother was a musician," he adds.

In 1962, Ballard became chairman of the music department of the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, and in 1968 he became the national curriculum specialist in music for the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

He also began to gain fame for his compositions based on Indian heritage.

In 1893, Anton Dvořák said that the United States would have its own music only when it was based on the



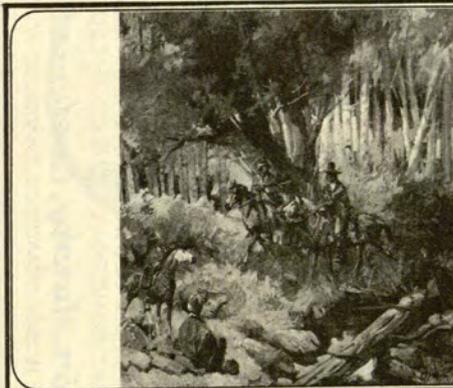
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