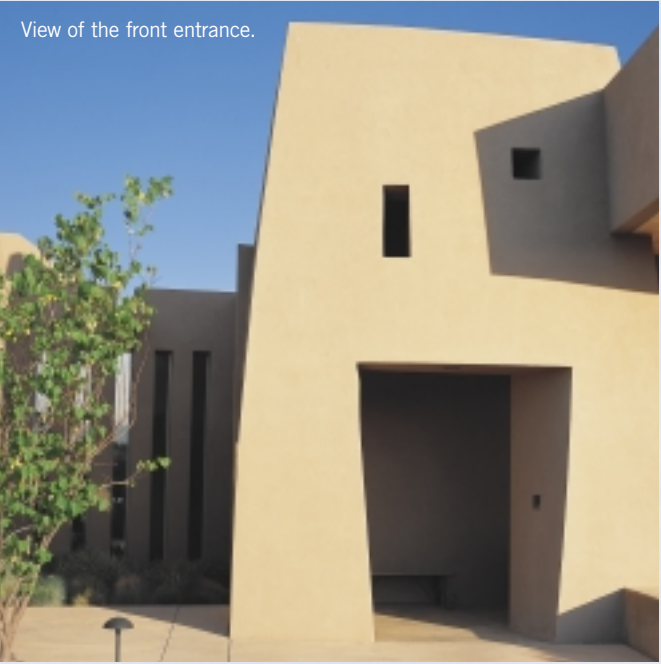




Lifestyle

Weaving an artistically Southwest collection

by Sunamita Lim



View of the front entrance.



View from the front portal.



The sleek lines of the DeJong residence fit snugly into the desert landscape. Designed in 2001, it was awarded the American Institute of Architecture's Santa Fe 2002 Design Excellence Award.

Approaching the home of Susan and Conrad DeJong, one is immediately struck by its sleek, fluid lines, which echo the surrounding desert mountain terrain. The dynamic interior spaces are equally striking; inviting an interplay of shadows and light against a variety of surface textures. This setting is the perfect complement to the museum-quality Navajo textiles that fill the house; their geometric motifs and timeless designs in perfect harmony with this environment.

The DeJongs' collection is unique for its broad range of blankets and rugs from the 1870s to the present, with recent interest focusing on blankets and serapes—the former having greater width and the latter greater height. Each example has been carefully selected for its pattern, colors, rarity, and aesthetic merit, resulting in a collection considered by many to be one of the best of its type in private hands. Aware that great design spans time and cultures, the DeJongs have combined their textiles with contemporary art; juxtaposing them throughout the house, both in their casual spaces and in their formal gallery designed to capture optimal natural light.

The seeds of this collection were planted over thirty years ago, when Minneapolis-based concert flutist Susan DeJong began playing for the Santa Fe Opera in 1969. In her spare time, she traveled throughout the panoramic Southwest, exploring the back rooms of trading posts, her favorites being Teec Nos Pos in the Four Corners area and Toadlena on the New Mexican reservation.

The combination of antique textiles, baskets, pottery, glass, and contemporary art and sculpture creates a relaxed, comfortable setting. While creative in their own right, the DeJongs were assisted with the placement of the furnishings by interior designer Ron Scolman of Santa Fe and Minneapolis.

Resting on the far left end of the sofa is a sand painting weaving, circa 1950, by Gladys Manuelito. Woven with the intent to preserve ceremonial imagery, such blankets are rare because of their sensitive subject matter. This example depicts part of the “Night Way Chant” with Yei figures and sacred plants. On the table in the foreground is a contemporary flute by Native American Ira Funmaker. The larger of the two pots is a circa-1910 Santo Domingo Pueblo pot from the Walkir Art Collection. An early twentieth-century Sunday (Fancy) saddle blanket and a 2001 wedge-type design blanket by Julia Upshaw are on the sofa. The dining room with its suspended treble clef lighting device is seen beyond.



ABOVE:
A pair of watercolors by J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851) offer a visual contrast with the contemporary dining area and view to the portal and hills beyond. A Zuni pot signed Josephine Nahohai and decorated with symbolic creatures rests on the counter. A Leguna pot is placed on an ebonized oak table with lattice and glass central inset; the table and chairs are from Berman Rosetti, Los Angeles, California.



A Germantown Chiefs Blanket, circa 1880, hangs above a selection of Native American baskets.

While she purchased fine basketry and other smalls, her first love was for exquisitely handcrafted contemporary weavings from the Navajo Nation Reservation in New Mexico and Arizona. As she learned more about Navajo textiles, Susan began to turn her attention to weavings of the preceding century, purchasing only “the very finest” she could afford. Her resulting collection extends across the early historical period to transitional and modern pieces.

As Susan explains, blankets have always been central to Native American life; as a protective layer from the elements, as trade items, and as signifiers of traditional culture. The earliest surviving Navajo blanket, now in the ?? museum, is a fragment dating to 1804(40?); its decorative elements consist of horizontal striping. Perhaps the most recognized blankets with this design motif are the Chiefs Blankets, woven for tribe leaders and also highly prized as trade items among tribes. Though crafted throughout the history of Navajo weaving, the finest examples were made during what is



Architect Pedro Márquez of Santa Fe rests against the front portal.

now referred to as the “classic period,” which extended from the 1850s to the 1870s. There were three styles of design during these twenty years. Blankets from the first phase have simple broad horizontal bands and stripes of natural brown and white wool with the addition of indigo. Red was introduced into the designs of the second phase, in the form of stripes or rectangular blocks. In the third phase, diamond designs, either quarter, half, or full form, were introduced, often with serrated or stepped edges. At this stage, additional colors, such as yellow and green, were added to the palette.

Susan explains the shift in the 1870s from blankets made traditionally with handspun wool and natural dyes to those made with three- and four-ply machine yarns colored with aniline dyes, which yielded numerous brilliant colors. The reason behind this change was the tragic federally mandated relocation of the Navajo people in 1864 to Bosque Redondo in central New Mexico, 350 miles from their native land. The move was a disastrous failure, and four years later the Navajos



A selection of Germantown “eye dazzlers” line one of the hallways, with a contemporary landscape painting by Dennis Nechuatal (1994) the focal point at the end.



ABOVE:

The relaxed living room and concert hall segue into the more formal marble-floored gallery. In the front room, a selection of baskets, pottery, and clay figures create an eclectic display in contrast to the smooth plaster of the opposing wall. Three rare Navajo blankets are draped on the back of the sofa: an 1870s “Slave Blanket” in colorful pastels that reflect Hispanic influence; an 1875 late classic period serape with a striking white background; An 1880s Chiefs Blanket with band and lozenge design. On the floor, a 1940s Navajo rug from the Four Corners trading post, Teec Nos Pos, shows the distinctive influences of Oriental rugs. An 1880s Germantown “eye dazzler” blanket beckons from the gallery.

were allowed to return home. But by then, their sheep herds had been decimated and they had to rely on synthetic yarns for their blankets.

By 1874, the first federally licensed trading posts were established, providing an outlet for the Navajo to trade their goods for supplies. The railroads followed in the 1880s, giving the Navajo access to the new vibrantly colored wools from the east, specifically from Germantown, Pennsylvania. Among Susan’s Germantown blankets, as they came to be known, are quite a few “eye dazzlers,” the term, as Susan explains, that describes their “explosive, vibrant colors in elaborate, jazzy designs, often expressed with serrated and saw-toothed elements.”

The nature of weaving also changed once the government started supporting the production of factory-made Pendleton blankets (named for the major commercial producer) [in the ??]. These

CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT:

Conrad and Susan DeJong in their concert hall. On the wall behind them are two circa-1875 classic Moki blankets, identified by their indigo and dark brown alternating stripes. English artist Glenn Brown’s *Saturday Night Fever*, 1998, hangs above the harpsichord and circa-1815 double music stand. A Teec Nos Pos pictorial Yei figure trade rug with unusual bird motif is on the floor.

The juxtaposition of old and new. A Crystal J. B. Moore rug, circa 1910, shows design the influences of Oriental rugs. It features an unusual dark brown background, which creates a dramatic effect. Beside it is John Buck’s 1986 woodblock print, *Father and Son*.

The DeJong’s home includes a gallery in which components of their textile collection are displayed as works of art alongside modern studio work. The blankets and rugs are regularly rotated, with those not in use stored in a cedar-lined, temperature-controlled vault.

The Crystal trading post rug (front left), circa 1920s, is one of Susan’s favorite’s. It is unusual in its pictorial imagery depicting four men, one smoking a cigar, driving model T cars. Beside it is Dennis Nechvatal’s *Power Grid* of 1996, composed of metal tin can lids, paint, and wood. The contemporary image is paired with an unusual diagonally striped blanket, circa 1910, “The only one I have ever seen like this,” says Susan. In a case on the opposite wall is Mary Bero’s 1990 *Heart Throb*, embroidered with words describing different emotions connected with love.





ABOVE, LEFT: Susan describes this circa- 1890 pictorial Navajo rug as her favorite. “Everyone goes wild over this,” she says, “the artistry is really wonderful and visually striking.” The combination of figures and colors is also quite unusual. The imagery and color scheme is complemented by Deborah Oropallo’s 1993 *Red*.

ABOVE, RIGHT: This 1880s Germantown eye dazzler with variegated yarn is “an outstanding piece,” says Susan. The vertical windows play against the architectural elements of the blanket.

FACING: “I love this area,” says Susan, which is no surprise given its views of the mountains and the room’s bright atmosphere, the result of the expansive windows and contemporary table and chairs designed by Dakota Jackson. Other twentieth-century design elements, such as the 1980s Italian designer lamp and 1986 James Rosenquist print, *Kabuki Blushes*, are balanced with early-twentieth-century African masks and an Apache figurative basket.



were made available through the trading posts. By the turn of the century, with the need to produce their own clothing now diminished, the Navajos had begun to focus on making blankets and rugs for a growing tourist trade. Rugs made during the “trading post era” are recognized by the distinctive designs associated with each post, some with patterns influenced by Oriental rug designs.

Because of her passion for collecting, Susan amassed more blankets and rugs than she could display. As part of the solution, in 1983, she started Southwest Accents and began to buy and sell Navajo textiles for a private clientele and participate in select shows. In 1993, she assembled over forty of her finest textiles and arranged for them to tour museums in the Upper Midwest. The exhibition, *A Century of Navajo Weaving*, documented the history of Navajo weaving from 1870 to the present. She subsequently put together a smaller version that traveled to schools under the auspices of Young Audiences. This show not only displayed the artistry and culture of the Navajos, but enabled students to try their hand at weaving and designing textiles. Susan says that it gave her great joy to share her collection and have it used as an educational resource.

Because they want their collection to be shown to its best advantage, Susan and Conrad believe the style and design of their home is important. When they decided in 1997 to move to Santa Fe, they contacted twenty architects before selecting local architect Pedro Márquez. “Pedro gave us more than we ever expected,” say the DeJongs. Completed in 2001, the house won an American Institute of Architecture’s Santa Fe Design Excellence Award in 2002.

In addition to creating a structure that complemented the collection, Márquez paid tribute to the couple’s musicianship (Conrad was a professor of theory and composition at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls), symbolized in part by the treble clef lighting fixture above the dining table. He also incorporated a space for performances. Fittingly, Márquez, an accomplished composer-crooner of cowboy ballads, together with Susan, gave the first recital at the house dedication in June 2001. The DeJong residence is now known not only as a place where some of the finest Navajo textiles may be found, but it has become an intimate setting for arts fundraisers and musical soirees.

Sunamita Lim is a Santa Fe freelance journalist and editor of Santa Fe Trend.

