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Ceremonial blankets are woven into tribes' history

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By [Kathaleen Roberts / Journal Staff Writer](#)

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This Tlingit Chilkat ceremonial dance blanket design represents a killer whale.

When both the U.S. and Canadian governments banned the potlatch near the end of the 19th century, the Chilkat blanket nearly died with it.

Today these traditional ceremonial blankets are undergoing a revival, thanks in part to the efforts of Cheryl Samuel, the author of "The Chilkat Dancing Blanket," as well as master weavers such as the late Jennie Thlunaut.

More than a dozen of these historic and contemporary weavings will be exhibited at Santa Fe's El Museo Cultural beginning on Monday, Aug. 17, through Aug. 20. The exhibit is in conjunction with the Antique American Indian Art Show. The bold graphics of these complex weavings have come to encapsulate the art of the Northwest Coast.

The Chilkat blanket descends from Tlingit mythology through a love story about a chief's daughter and a benevolent sea spirit. The legend culminates in Raven's gift of the blanket to the human race to unravel and learn the art of weaving. This abundantly fringed robe graced the shoulders of Native nobility from Yakutat, Alaska, to British Columbia's Vancouver Island.

"We have about 14 original pieces. They probably date from about 1840-1890," curator Kim Martindale said. "For a while, the potlatches were outlawed, so very few blankets existed. It was a lost art in the '50s and '60s."

Women wove the blankets from finely spun mountain goat fur, often collected from trees and bushes as the animals shed in the spring. They spun the foundation or warp from yellow cedar bark.

The men painted the pattern board; the women interpreted the designs in wool. Weavers dyed the wool in subtle shades of yellow, black and blue while incorporating the fur's natural buff. The process took more than a year.

The costly and labor-intensive items served as grand displays for family clan emblems, the prevailing feature of both the Tlingit and Haida. Often comprised of stylized animal figures or mythological beings, the crest amounts to a family inheritance. Some are easily identifiable, but the majority are difficult to decipher.

These artists used natural dyes at first, including copper, which produced green, as well as tree lichen. Later they obtained synthetic dyes from Russia.

The blanket was the principal actor in ceremonial costumes that included similarly designed leggings, tunics and aprons. Potlatches were complex social affairs marked by the host's presentations of the rights and privileges he claimed – such as the right to a specific crest, name or totem pole. The guests endorsed the rights and the host showered them with gifts.

Only the wealthiest chiefs used the robes as symbols of power and status, the fringe swaying as they danced. The chiefs sometimes cut them into pieces to distribute as the ceremony ended. Recipients prized the robes enough to stitch the cuttings into their clothing.

In Santa Fe, Tlingit weaver Clarissa Rizal of Alaska will present two full ensembles with her daughter Lily at the exhibition. Rizal wove with the late master weaver Thlunaut, as well as Samuel.

If you go
WHAT: Chilkat Blankets: Artistic Masterpieces
WHEN: Opening night gala 6-9 p.m. Monday, Aug. 17. Through Aug. 20. 11 a.m.-6 p.m.
WHERE: El Museo Cultural de Santa Fe, 555 Camino de la Familia, Santa Fe
HOW MUCH: \$15; \$20/joint admission to Antique American Indian Show. Opening night gala \$50 benefits New Mexico PBS (KNME). Call 505-660-4701 or visit AntiqueIndianArtShow.com

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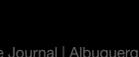
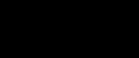
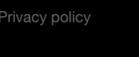
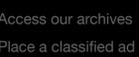
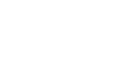
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