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LIVING WITH THE THINGS YOU LOVE

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gathering rainbows

The romance of the West drifts eternal in the vivid colors and rich patterns of Indian trade blankets.

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Beyond their wonderful colors and patterns, Indian trade blankets are also rich with the romance of the American West and the legacy of its native people. Collectors can own blankets taken from the same trading-post shelves shopped by Chief Joseph and Geronimo. Great treasures can lurk in flea markets and antiques shops, as avid collector Barry Friedman attests. His gems include a wonderfully riotous design, *opposite*, produced by Oregon City Woolen Mills, and a vintage Harding pattern blanket, *below right*, from Pendleton. Love the Harding, but can't find one on an antiquing trip? Never fear—it's still in the Pendleton catalog. And for 2009, Pendleton's 100th anniversary, the company is celebrating its history with a new Vintage Collection that brings back historic patterns including Los Lunas, *below*, and Gallup, *above*, with a soft stonewashed coziness and an accessible \$300 price tag.

“There’s a soul in these blankets,”

Barry Friedman says.

He first glimpsed it as an unfledged collector, barely 22 years old, in 1969. Wandering the seemingly barren landscape of an Arizona garage sale, his gaze was waylaid by a Pendleton: spectacularly hued, wildly patterned, and attached to a price tag that read 85 cents—firm. “I’ve been in love ever since,” Friedman says. “There’s nothing like an Indian trade blanket.”

Friedman believed it so strongly that, after buying the 85-cent find, he immersed himself in a four-decade research project that has elevated him to a position as the world’s foremost authority on trade blankets—and the genre’s most prolific broker, with 26,000 blankets bought and sold. “After 40 years, I’m still every bit as transfixed and transported by trade blankets as I was on that first day,” he says.

It’s a feeling Friedman shares with Native Americans, who have embraced trade blankets since their introduction in the 1890s. The end of the Indian wars had brought new federally licensed trading posts stocked with crates of coffee, twists of tobacco, hats, rakes—and bold, geometric-pattern blankets machine-made at American woolen mills. “That’s the big aha of the whole thing,” Friedman says. “Many people don’t realize that a trade blanket is a blanket made *for* Indians rather than *by* Indians.”

The blankets, unlike most trading-post wares, were quality products designed specifically with Native American aesthetics in mind. At least one company, Pendleton, did “market research,” with designer and jacquard-loom master Joe Rawnsley spending time among native people near the Pendleton, Oregon, woolen mill. Others, like J. Capps & Son, just dived in with a loom and a prayer. That company, the first to produce trade blankets, signed on a group of laborers who left their homes in Portugal on the promise of a better life—and jobs at a hemp mill—in Jacksonville, Illinois. “When that didn’t pan out, they stumbled down the road and got jobs at Capps,” Friedman says. “Portuguese immigrants who had never met an Indian in their life were designing blankets for Native Americans. The whole thing is very odd.”

But serendipitously, the designs—and hence the blankets—sold. “The Indians loved them enough to own them by the hundreds





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Trade blankets have been integral to the daily lives of Native Americans for the past 110 years. Following this tradition, today's collectors can incorporate these uniquely American textiles into their home decor and their lives. Being close to nature is even better wrapped in a vintage Racine Woolen Mills shawl, *opposite*, or a napped Oregon City Woolen Mills robe, *above*. Their endless colors and patterns lend incredible color into room settings while also infusing a space with history. A round-corner Pendleton, *foreground left*, for example, dates to the turn of the 20th century, and the Oregon City blanket, *below*, is just slightly less aged. Very old, well-kept blankets in rare patterns and hues of blacks, reds, and greens are the most collectible, drawing \$10,000 for "the greatest trade blanket on Earth," Friedman says. But most pre-1942 finds fall into the \$100 to \$1,000 range.

of thousands," Friedman says. "An Indian and his blanket were inseparable." Far more than warm bedding, trade blankets were daily wearing apparel, an important part of a Native American's image. "Indians looked forward to new blankets coming out like you might look forward to the latest offerings from your favorite designer," Friedman says. "Even today, trade blankets are a living, breathing textile, not something you fish out of the closet when it starts snowing."

Pendleton, the only company still manufacturing the blankets, continues to evolve the genre, introducing new patterns each year while keeping old favorites in its catalog. But collectors like Friedman focus on vintage prizes, blankets made from 1892 to 1942.



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“They’re the perfect collectible because you can find them in the field,” he says. “I bought a perfectly nice vintage Pendleton two weeks ago at a flea market for \$130.”

Although that was a rare find, most vintage blankets sell for less than \$1,000. “They’re not terribly expensive compared to other things this old, especially things associated with Native Americans,” Friedman says. “They’re affordable, they’re beautiful, and there are endless patterns and colors, so there are always surprises. That keeps it compelling to a collector—and, for me, I’m sure it always will be.”

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live with history



For 110 years, trade blankets have been found in Native American homes. Here’s how to pull them into your decor.

COVER UP. Blankets, obviously, make great bed coverings. But don’t stop there! Drape a classic Capps, *above*, over a table, chair, or sofa.

INTERTWINE. Merge collections by using a special early Pendleton, *left*, as a springboard for a grouping of classic Edward S. Curtis prints.

ADMIRE. Trade blankets, like quilts, are easily elevated to art status. Hang several on a display rack or attach a rod pocket to one special find and hang it on a wall to create a meaningful focal point.