

NEWS RELEASE

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WNMU MUSEUM TO HOST YUCCA FIBER SPINNING AND FUR/FEATHER BLANKET DEMONSTRATION

Silver City, NM – Dr. Eric Blinman, Director of the New Mexico Office of Archaeological Studies, will kick off Western New Mexico University Museum’s new series, *A Window on the Past*, on Wednesday, May 18, 2011, with hands-on Yucca Fiber Spinning and Fur/Feather Blanket Demonstration. The demonstration will be held on the Main Floor of the WNMU Museum from 5:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. Partnering with the University Museum to provide the demonstration is the Southwest Women’s Fiber Arts Collective, who will provide light refreshments.

According to Blinman, yucca fiber is underappreciated today, but it was the staple of New Mexico textile artists for millennia. Thigh-spun into thread, string and rope, it formed the basis for both “hardware” and fine multi-colored weavings. Fur and feather blankets were built on yucca string foundations, rabbit nets were made partially or entirely from yucca, ropes were tied to finely woven tump bands to carry heavy loads, and women wove beautiful multicolored aprons and sandals for their families.

Yucca takes natural dyes well, with blond, reddish brown, and blue-black commonly used throughout the Southwest. Spinning skills were probably ubiquitous within families and communities, given the diversity of uses in daily life. “Although cotton and eventually wool became niche fibers, neither was as versatile as yucca, and the demise of yucca’s use can be traced to the devaluation of hand work with mechanization over the past century,” states Blinman.

Processing of the fiber is simple, especially with today’s appliances, although the highest quality fiber requires hand extraction with artisanal attention and care. Any species of yucca can be used, with some variation in coarseness, strength, and ease of fiber separation.

Blinman says that thigh spinning is easily learned with many possible variations in technique. It only requires shorts and a hairless thigh. Basic spinning results in two-ply cord, but three or more plies can be attempted as a challenge to dexterity. Once the spinning technique is mastered, the quality of the finished product is determined by experience and precision in fiber bundle preparation. A practical upper limit is ½ inch diameter rope (well over 500-pound test strength), and fine thread can be produced by working with only a few individual fibers in each ply. Dyeing is best done after spinning,

and the ancient colors were achieved with the bark of cedar root, reddish brown, and sumac leaves, blue-black.

The demonstrations will be hands-on, with areas set up for up to four individuals to “spin” yucca fiber at once. Blinman asks that those individuals interested in learning thigh spinning to wear shorts and have a clean-shaven thigh.

Blinman, who has been involved in archaeology in the western U.S. since 1967, was appointed the director of the New Mexico Office of Archaeological Studies in 2006. In 1999, he served as acting director of the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture in Santa Fe.

Beginning in 1978, Blinman’s research has focused on Ancestral Puebloan archaeology. His research activities have included paleoclimate studies to reconstructions of the social history of Puebloan people. However, he is best known for his research on pottery and textiles and for his participation in OAS educational programs throughout New Mexico.

For more information about the demonstration, please contact the University Museum at 575-538-6386, e-mail CaveP@wnmu.edu, or contact the Southwest Women’s Fiber Arts Collective at their gallery in Silver City, *The Common Thread*, at 575-538-5733. For more information about the New Mexico Office of Archaeological Studies please visit their website at www.nmarchaeology.org.

The University Museum, located at the top of 10th Street within the university’s Silver City campus, is open to the public daily, Monday through Friday 9:00 am to 4:30 p.m., Saturdays and Sundays from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. It is closed University holidays. *The Common Thread*, the Southwest Women’s Fiber Arts Collective gallery of unique handmade fiber items, is located at 107 Broadway in historic downtown Silver City, and is open Monday through Saturday 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.



Located in Silver City, New Mexico, Western New Mexico University has served the people of the state of New Mexico and its surrounding areas as a comprehensive, regional, rural, public coeducational university since 1893 and caters to a student body diverse in age, culture, language and ethnic background.

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