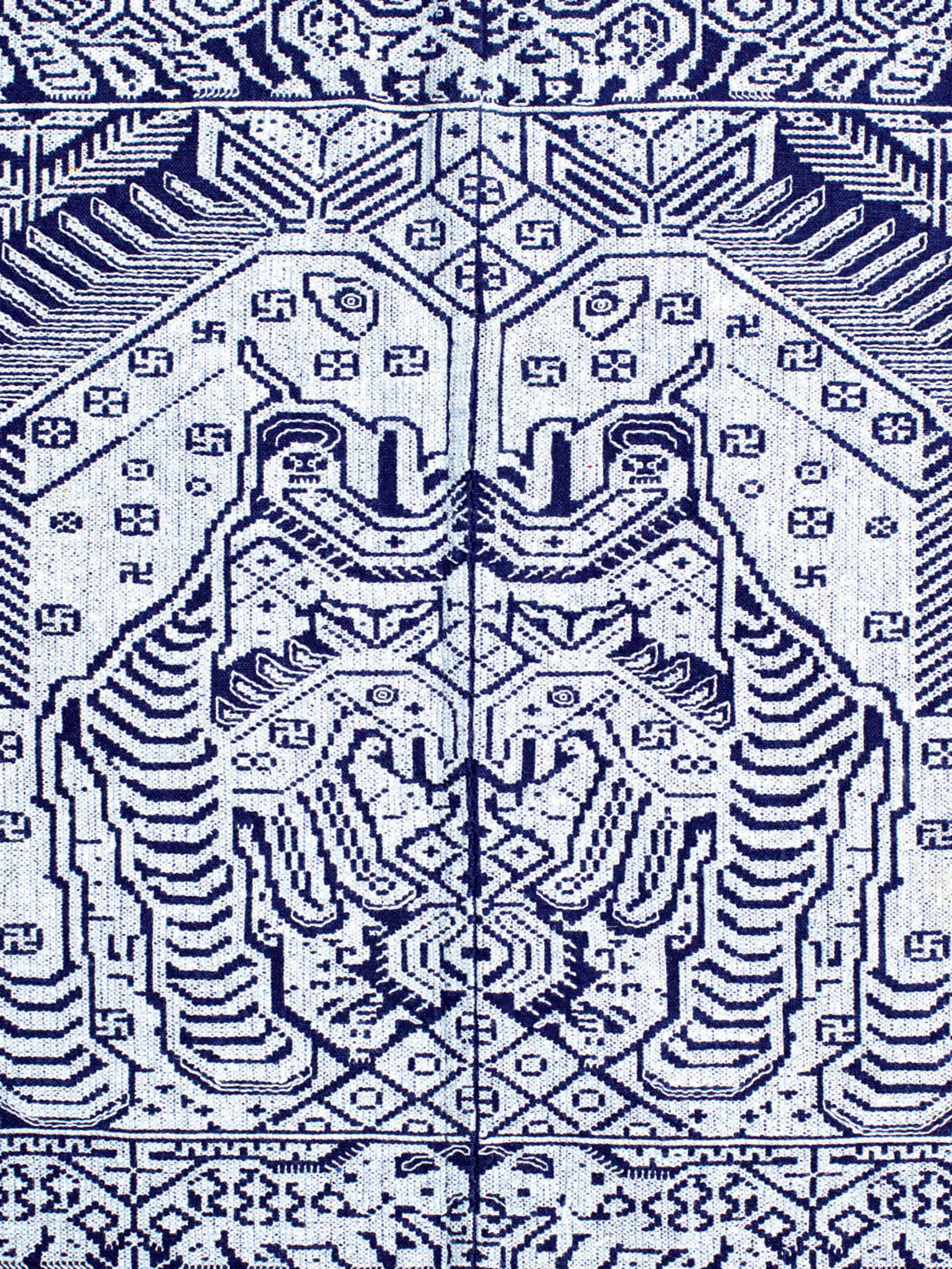

In search of the Flowery Yao

Lee J. Chinalai has gained fresh insight into the obscure history and hidden meanings encountered in the little known embroidered skirts made and worn by the Huayao women of Hunan

All photos: Chadri Chinalai

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1 At first glance, one sees two large horses. A second look captures confronting tigers with heads formed by the underside of the horses' heads and necks. Directly beneath, in the bellies and below the main horses, are six more horses. Focusing on the very centre, the small animals merge into a large, forward-facing beast or spirit with a wide grin

2 Han-style *foo* lions may signify 'a pair of lions try to roll a ball'. The upper border features six mythical *ch'ilin* with rats on their rumps

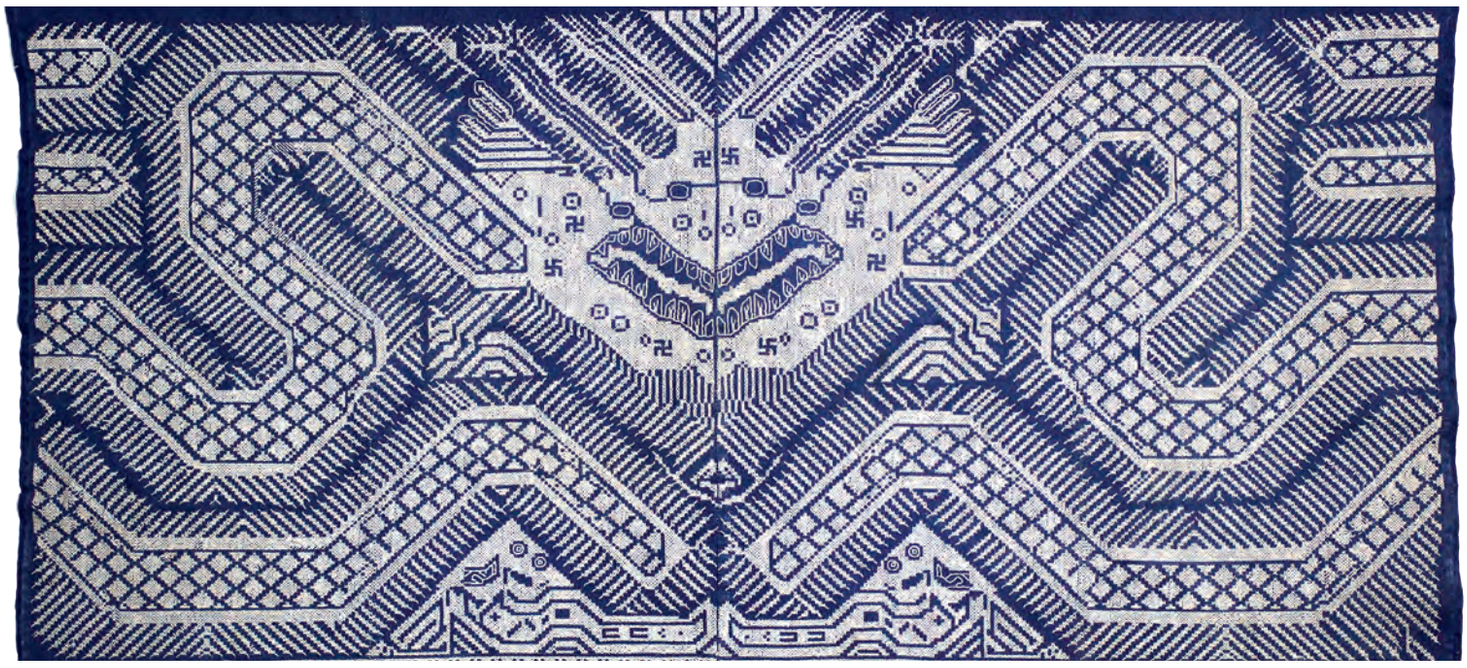
Five years ago I wrote an article on what made some Huayao women's skirts from Hunan in south China stand out among others (HALI 164, 2010, pp.29-31). I could find little information on this tiny sub-group, so depended to some extent on research available on the Yao as a whole – a large tribal minority living mostly in Guangxi Province. Now, with further investigation and much appreciated translations from Chinese by Sophia Huang of Harvard University, I can correct one misconception and have gained additional knowledge about the Huayao specifically. But information remains limited, and is often given from a Chinese central government point of view.

Older skirts consist of two fairly square natural indigo-dyed cotton panels joined together to form a rectangle, usually bordered on top by a natural cotton waistband and at bottom by a hem of red commercial cotton, measuring 60 - 75 cm by 90 - 105 cm overall (recent skirts being of microfibre or polyester). Rectangular pieces of cotton cloth, embroidered with colourful cotton or silk thread are pulled into triangles by gathering the top portion into pleats. These adorn either side of the central section, which is embroidered in thick white cotton thread - mostly in cross-stitch with some flat stitches. The patterns are symmetrical and at times exceptionally complex. The finished skirts were worn with the coloured panels overlapping in front, held together by a belt or sash and accompanied by a blouse, jacket, leggings and hat. Skirts were worn for all occasions with varying cloth or silver embellishments.

Recognising the extreme commitment required, Huayao women named their embroidery 'The Great Wall'

There are fewer than 8,000 Huayao – less than a quarter of a percent of the total Yao population of over three million. They mostly inhabit the mountains of northern Longhui County in southwestern Hunan. Being such a small and rather isolated group, the Huayao have managed to sustain a variety of cultural traditions, including the making of women's skirts with cross-stitch embroidery. Only Huayao women have created the distinctive embroidered skirts, which in recent years have been declared to be state-level intangible cultural heritage. Their colourful side panels (5), and the presence of embroidered flowers and vegetation, may be responsible for this branch of the Yao being called Huayao, or 'Flowery' Yao. In one folk song, the Huayao refer to themselves as the offspring of the flower god and flower goddess, another possible source of the name.

The Huayao were known to be expert weavers, dyers and embroiderers from the time of the Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220), when they wove with bast fibre dyed with grass seeds. Their exceptional talent in cross-stitch embroidery is said to have matured during the Ming and Qing periods. Different sources have



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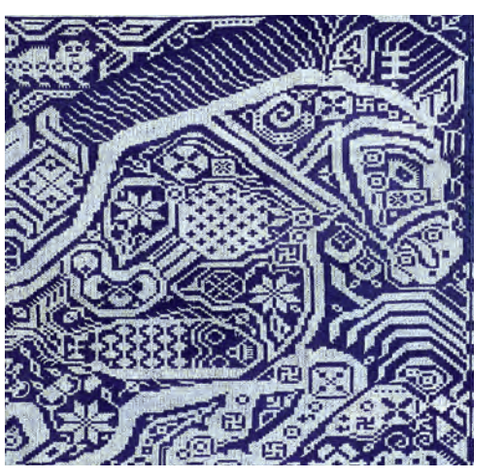
3 A recurring motif of confronting snakes or dragons. Where the heads and bodies meet one often perceives humanoid figures with eyes staring forward

4 Robust horses (detail) face each other in this dynamic skirt filled with imagery. Inside the horses' bodies are fish, birds, monkeys, snakes, rosettes and good luck *wan* (swastikas). The Chinese character for 'king' appears in the mane

5 This skirt (detail) has side panels that wrap around to the front when the skirt is worn. The tigers along the upper border have rosettes in place of heads. Tiger cubs and two vertical ducks add to its charm



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estimated the number of stitches on one skirt to be between 100,000 and 250,000, and the length of time to finish it to be from several months to half a year. Recognising the extreme commitment required, Huayao women called their embroidery 'The Great Wall' (Confucius Institute online, p.3).

Girls were taught by their mothers or sisters to count threads, and between the ages of six and eight to use needles to follow the warps and wefts. They continued to embroider until an age when they could no longer see well. Each woman filled a storage box with her skirts. Girls without a collection of skirts or whose skill in embroidery was lacking were considered to be unworthy of a husband.

In and around villages the women were, and still are, in the habit of carrying cloth, needles and yarn, so time is never wasted. One might come across a Huayao woman sitting in front of her house sewing. She does not use an embroidery frame, tracing or stamp to create the pattern. It comes from the heart – inspired by nature, tradition, perception, feelings, and experience, and believed to be a legacy of the ancestors. Researchers have counted up to a thousand different embroidered patterns on the skirts. According to an online source, translated from Chinese, one Huayao woman claimed that wearing the skirts made life 'feel rich'.

Referred to by the Chinese government as 'our national historical forgotten Yao branch,' the Huayao were so secluded as to be almost forgotten by the world and history. Yet several Huayao festivals memorialise their turbulent relationship with the Han Chinese since the Han Dynasty, when thousands of people from the North began to migrate south. Many indigenous people were displaced, including the Yao who had lived in southern forests since before the time that their presence entered historical records in 350 BC. The Yao had no written language of their own, but like many tribal cultures, retained a rich oral history. Thus we hear about the Huayao ancestors escaping persecution throughout centuries by fleeing southward from the Yellow River to Jiangxi Province, then running again through the Guangdong, Guangxi, Yunnan and Guizhou provinces. Eventually, some 150 years ago, they settled in the Xuefeng Mountains of Hunan.

Their bloodshed and bravery are also recalled in some of the skirt designs. In times of flight, the Huayao found safety by hiding in the forests. Consequently they believe trees to be their guardian spirits as well as under the protection of the gods. Trees are anthropomorphised, so that entwined roots might be considered lovers, and Huayao parents might ask a tree 'elder' to be godparent to a difficult or unhealthy child. To preserve the benefits of *feng shui* and the good graces of the ancestors, trees planted at burial sites or near villages are never harmed or uprooted. A skirt that gives deference to trees usually has one large tree at its centre flanked by important domestic animals like horses, cows or chickens. Versions with trees sometimes incorporate auspicious Chinese characters that also occasionally appear in other motifs.

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It is not unusual to borrow from the Han: besides Chinese writing there may be Han symbols, including Chinese-style dragons. Still, it seems that an overwhelming majority of Huayao skirts instead feature snakes, also known as 'little dragons', respected for their agility and worshipped as spirits. These skirts are some of the most captivating because humanoid figures can seem to be lurking, either within the negative space surrounding the snakes and dragons or encompassed between their heads and bodies. Perhaps these are the embodiment of serpentine spirits or of Huayao ancestors. This inventive illusion is worthy of M.C. Escher and speaks of considerable artistic talent (3).

Other tricks of perception occur in skirts with four-legged animals, which highlight the technique of 'filling'. Patterns are embedded inside one another, generating a near-psychedelic experience (3, 4). In several instances, the animals have striped fur, which originally led me to believe them to be representations of Pan Hu, father of the Yao people, often described as a tiger-striped talking dog.

But while Pan Hu, or King Pan, is celebrated by much of the general Yao population, there is no such festival within the Huayao community. Indeed one has to wonder whether perhaps the Huayao are not Yao at all. Contemporary researchers allude to a number of disparities in their legends, customs, celebrations and language, noting that in some ways the Huayao are more similar to another large southwest Chinese tribal minority, the Miao.

If it is not Pan Hu adorning the skirts then the likely conclusion is that the animal is exactly what it appears to be: a tiger. This makes sense for a people living in a forested area that at one time was inhabited by tigers, in the foothills of a tiger-shaped mountain revered as the spiritual centre for the most important Huayao ceremonies and celebrations.

A creature both feared and respected across China, the tiger symbolises courage and protection and has the power to drive off demons. It is also a *yang*, or masculine symbol. We may surmise that its presence held layers of meaning, including perhaps a desire to impress and attract a young man. Certainly the skill necessary to create magnificent tigers through cross-stitch embroidery already spoke of a young woman's attractiveness and marriageability (5).

The intricacy of these densely embroidered skirts is ingenious. In addition to the many smaller animals resting within the main creatures, the enveloping landscape is frequently filled with other wildlife, vegetation and symbols including mammals, birds, flowers, rosettes and *wan* - Chinese emblems of good fortune. Spirit figures may also materialise from the negative space. Some of the skirt themes have names: 'A Pair of Lions Tries to Roll a Ball' (2), 'Double Goose Annunciation (Two Geese Bring Good News)', 'Fish Jump Over the Dragon Gate', 'Two Snakes Attempt a Fighting Pose', and 'Roosters Set a Goal They Need to Reach' (perhaps a reference to cockfighting).

Chinese legends, such as 'The Monkey King' or 'The Conqueror', and Huayao history might also be subjects for the embroidery.

Although the categories of skirt motifs may be finite, the artistry achieved by each Huayao woman through the use of embroidery is limited only by the number of skirts she can produce in her lifetime. Craftsmanship runs the gamut from bold to elaborate, resulting in imagery enchanting both wearer and observer.

One can only wonder how long traditional art will survive changes in the lifestyles of indigenous people worldwide as all generations look outside of their cultural heritage for identity and survival. Being dependent upon the availability of elders to teach, and the interest and attention of upcoming generations to learn, traditional clothing and customs that transmit a Huayao group consciousness, may well be entering the realm of endangered species. Encountering any of the graphically stunning cross-stitch works of such a small and isolated group is like finding buried treasure. It is therefore both a pleasure and an honour to give the Huayao skirts and the women who produced them some degree of the exposure and respect they so well deserve.

'Deeply Yao', *an exhibition of objects including textiles exploring Yao material culture will be held at the El Museo Cultural in Santa Fe in conjunction with Objects of Art Santa Fe and The Antique American Indian Art Show, 12-20 August 2015*