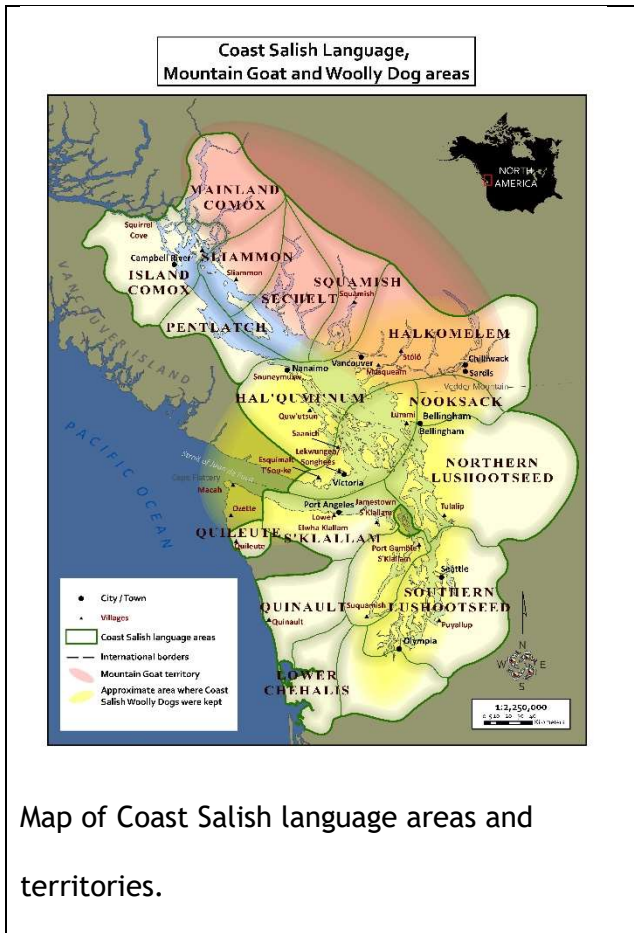


The innovation, evolution, and adaptation of the Salish spinner

One of my favorite spinning wheels is a bit of an ugly duckling—it looks a little strange as if it is missing parts: it’s a bobbin and flyer without the wheel, a head without a body—yet when properly assembled on top of an old treadle sewing machine it transforms into a swan complete with a heartbeat and the treadle beats in time with mine. It relaxes and calms me in a meditative way.

It is known by different names: originally the “Indian Head”, the “Cowichan” and now, the “Salish” spinner. It even has brothers and sisters who are complete units with the treadle and the head combined, like the Ashford (a New Zealand company thousands of miles away) Country Spinner. How did this all come to be? The use of the original— ‘Salish’—spinner was unique to the Pacific Northwest, the traditional Coast Salish territory (see map).



Map of Coast Salish language areas and territories.

Why is the Salish spinner so useful? To understand that, you need to know a little about the Coast Salish and their traditional textiles and yarns. The Coast Salish people are many nations with a common ancestral language and use similar fibers, tools and techniques to make their incredibly beautiful blankets, robes, regalia, and sweaters. They invented the Salish spinner to make a specific yarn, a warm lightweight lofty single wool yarn that is used in the famous Cowichan or Salish sweaters. While the Salish spinner was invented in the early 1900s, its ancestry can be traced from ancient times from thigh spinning, and then to a unique spindle before emerging as the Salish spinner.

The most common Coast Salish style blanket and regalia, still made and in use today, is a twill weave made from a bulky 2 ply yarn. Traditionally yarn was made from the hair of a mountain goat or a special breed of dog, known as the Coast Salish woolly dog, and sometimes a mixture of the two.

The mountain goat was revered and seen as a protector. Elder Ellen White who has since passed away, once explained: “The mountain goat is most pure of all the animals because it lives in remote areas nearest the sky. Nothing can reach it there.” It looks down over the lands like a guardian. As a protector, its wool also provides protection. The mountain goat’s spirituality was embedded into the spinning of the yarn and into the blanket. People are wrapped in blankets or stand on a blanket during ceremonies: a couple getting married, a newborn baby, a naming. The blanket provides warmth and spiritual protection and is still used today. It is this spiritual protection that has guided the evolution of traditional spinning methods into their current methods.

There are two main types of Coast Salish weavings: 1) twining, a more tightly spun and then twined robe with colorful, intricate geometric designs and 2) twill woven, white, loosely spun.



Figure 1 Colorful twined blanket collected prior to 1823. Perth Museum and Art Gallery, Perth Scotland (Photo by author)



Figure 2 Close-up of a mountain goat twill blanket

To achieve the bulky lofty yarn for the twill weavings, fibers are rolled together on the thigh. More fibers are spliced in and spun lightly with barely enough twist to get the fibers holding together into a roving.

The next step is to use a spindle but a drop spindle which hangs in the air wouldn't work. It would put too much weight on the roving, especially one made of dog wool which does not have the grabby crimp like sheep wool and the fibers would easily pull apart before you could start your spin. If you are spinning a light bulky yarn suitable for the twill blanket, your spindle needs a large whorl and a long spindle stick to hold it. All this means a heavy spindle that needs to be supported

somehow without too much stress on the fibers while the twist goes in. That is where another innovation came to be, the Salish spindle.

The Salish spindle is around 36" long with a whorl around 8" in diameter. One side of the whorl tends to be flat and the other side has a slight curve to it. Often the curved side that faces the spinner is carved. The whorl is placed about a third of the way down the tapered spindle. The rough roving is attached to the spindle and winds up to the tip.



Figure 3 Mrs. Selisya Charlie, a Musqueam weaver spinning in 1915. Photo by Dr. Newcombe. RBCM #11165



Woman spinning yarn near Ft Victoria, 1847. Drawing by Paul Kane. Stark Museum #31.78.96

The support comes from your hands holding it rather than the blunt end resting on the floor, like the Navajo spindle.

The spinner then turns the spindle either by rolling it in her palm, tossing it a bit or by rolling the spindle down her thigh. If you try this a few times, your yarn becomes kinked with too much twist collecting near the tip and you will naturally lift the spindle away from the source of the roving to straighten the newly formed yarn and let the twist flow along the yarn. This movement is like fly fishing and pulling the tip of the rod back which tugs the lure thru the water. If you gently tug the spindle while pulling back, you will draft out some of the lumps. For this tugging action to work, the spinner needs to pull against something. Coast Salish

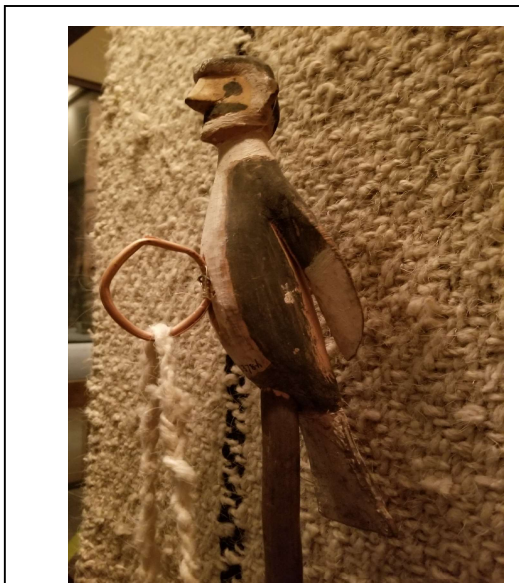


Figure 4 Coast Salish tension ring, with a mountain goat blanket in the background. On display at the Field Museum FMNH 85378.H Photo by Susan saOamitCa Pavel, weaver.

spinners came up with another innovation—the tension ring. The tension ring is just a small 1” or 2” hole in a small piece of wood or stone, or a loop made from plant material. The roving to be spun is threaded through the hole and the loop is placed up high.

The spinner would then sit far enough away from the tension ring to allow enough distance between it and the tip of the spindle. If one is plying, the distance can be quite far, but if spinning a single, yarn is

likely to come apart and need fixing, so the spinner would sit closer and the tension device would be lower, say up over an upright loom, or an open door.



Figure 5 Klallam woman weaving a white twill blanket with a colourful twined border. In the middle is a white woolly dog whose wool is used in blankets. In the background a woman is spinning using a large whorl Salish spindle and the yarn is draped over a roof beam. (Royal Ontario Museum #912.1.93)

In the painting by Paul Kane, based on his 1847 visit to Ft. Victoria in BC, you can see a woman weaving a traditional blanket with a colorful geometric twined border around the plain white twill. You can also see in the background a woman spinning using the Coast Salish spindle with her yarn going up over a ceiling beam.

After 1847 sheep were imported into southern Puget Sound and Vancouver Island. Sheep wool became easier to acquire but sheep wool never took on the spiritual function of mountain goat wool in the blankets. The breeds brought to the West Coast were meat sheep that have crimpy springy, elastic qualities which made them easy to draft out on a spindle.

In 1858 the Sisters of Saint Anne arrived in the Cowichan Valley and likely taught the Cowichan (Quw'utsun) people how to knit and the story is that Jerimina Colvin, a Scottish settler, taught them the Fair Isle technique of knitting in the round. Soon, many Coast Salish women from other areas learned to knit Fair Isle and make Salish sweaters.

Two hundred years ago, the spinning was for Salish weavings, and using the Coast Salish spindle a lovely, lofty, bulky, and warm 2 ply yarn could be made for the twill blankets. Prior to Cowichan sweaters (late 1800's), all Coast Salish yarn was plied. With knitting, only single yarns were used. The knitting stitches provided protection against pilling and abrasion negating the need for an overly bulky 2 ply.

Spinning wheels never really caught on with Indigenous women. A missionary in the late 1800's wrote of an Indian Agent supplying spinning wheels to the Skokomish (Southern Puget Sound) and although some of the women became proficient, they did not care for them, preferring their spindles. At the time, spinning wheels were designed to spin thin yarn, not the medium or bulky yarns preferred for the Salish blankets. Cowichan women also commented that the spindle was far easier to transport as they moved throughout the year to gather resources or for seasonal work. So the spindle remained in use even after sheep wool and spinning wheels became available.

Although spinning wheels never became common, among the Coast Salish people treadle sewing machines did and this is where another innovation came to be—the Salish spinner. Cowichan men took the sewing machine off the treadle, placed the

large whorl spindle horizontal in its place and added another whorl with a groove for the drive band onto the other end of the spindle creating a jumbo bobbin. The cast iron treadle provides momentum and helps to keep a rhythm, a slow, steady pace, like a calm heartbeat. This spinner became very popular amongst the Coast Salish, not just amongst the Cowichan but up and down the coast because it met their need for a lofty yarn.



Figure 6 Singer treadle sewing machine with the sewing machine removed and the 'Salish Head' traditional spindle showing how the spindle transitioned to the Salish head. (Photo by author)

For every press of the foot treadle, the bobbin spins two to four times, giving the 'Salish Head' spinner a low twist ratio somewhere between 1:2 and 1:4. The drive band turns the bobbin which gobbles the yarn in quickly not giving it time to acquire a lot of twist, while a brake on the flyer can slow the intake giving time to

draft fibers out. The low ratio, and a fast, strong intake results in a bulky low twist yarn perfect for light, airy, warm yarn similar to the traditional bulky yarn originally made of mountain goat. This yarn, along with the Fair Isle technique became the standard for use in Cowichan sweaters made with traditional stylized motifs (e.g., eagles, whales).

Other innovations came along, like the small sewing machine motor used instead of the treadle to turn the bobbin. However, by the 1960s old treadle sewing machine bases were becoming hard to find and home-made wooden treadles started to be made.

In the mid-1970s interest in bulky yarn was growing around the world. At first it was craftspeople and small production houses who started building “bulky” spinners. They all have a similarity to the Salish Head spinner with a low wheel ratio, large bobbin with the break on the bobbin, large orifice and large hooks. However, these spinning machines are built complete with the head and wooden treadle.

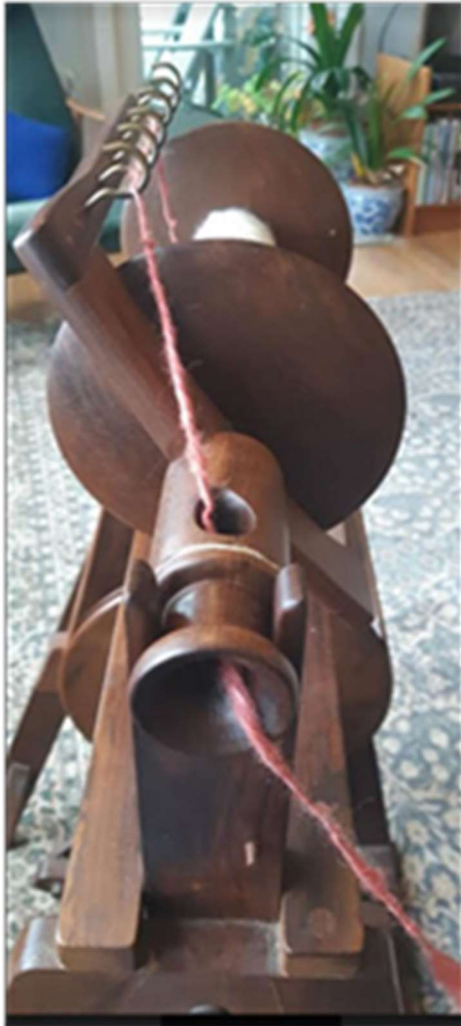


Figure 7 Salish spinner made by Byron Marks of Salt Spring Island @1975-85 (Photo by author)

Salt Spring Island lies a short way from Cowichan Bay and has many craftspeople like Byron Marks and his wife who in the late 1970s built finely crafted and finished spinning and weaving equipment. His Salish Spinner was likely inspired by the local Coast Salish women and in turn inspired many a spinner and knitter on Salt Spring and in nearby Victoria.

Other craftspeople like Lin Black and his wife Sharon, from Mud River BC, made and sold thousands of “Mud River wheels” all around the world. Another craftsperson was Sid Sharples who made the California Bulky Spinning wheel.

In the late 1970s Terry Nelson and his parents Gilbert and Nancy of Treenway Crafts, supplied Coast Salish women with wool roving. They were also distributors for Ashford in western Canada, so when Richard Ashford came to visit Victoria in 1978, Terry took him to meet the Cowichan Coast Salish women who described what they wanted—the big bobbin, a low ratio and whorl for bulky spinning and something lighter and more portable. On returning to New Zealand, the Ashford company launched their Indian Spinner in 1979 and sold 550 in the first year! Over the years Ashford designed a series of bulky spinners: in 1984 their Bulky Spinner, then the Country Spinner in 1988, and more recently their Super Jumbo e-spinner.

Ashford wasn't the only company to make bulky spinners. In 1975 the now classic loveable Louet S10 was developed, and it is still going strong. Lendrum came out with the bulky plying head attachment. More recently with the upswing of “art yarn” more bulky options are available. SpinOlution has a bobbin that can take 4 pounds of yarn! While many of these spinning wheels were probably originally inspired by the Salish spinners, the Coast Salish were inspired to make bulky yarn by their ancient traditions.

So next time you look at bulky yarn, remember the yarn inspired by time and the Coast Salish tradition.