Royal British Columbia Museum

Canadian Museum of Civilization collection

Coast Salish Spindle Whorl:

From Practical Use to Present Day Art

by Kristin Wood ©
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Down on his hands and knees, he swept the trowel back and forth across the dirt, led only by intuition. "Something just told me, keep digging," said Lower Elwha Klallam tribal member Mark Charles, aka "Hammer," the nickname he earned as a guard on the high-school basketball court. But with that trowel, its handle carved in the shape of a raven with a red "H" painted on the end, he was delicate, carefully pulling back the soil until something caught his fisherman's eye.

It was a disc, carved out of whale vertebra. He brushed it off and called an archaeologist over to look. The disc turned out to be a rare find in Puget Sound archaeology: an intact spindle whorl, used for spinning wool (Seattle Times, Mapes 2005). The spindle whorl, once a tool indispensable for weaving in the native household, is no longer just an artifact for museums, but a symbol that has been reborn as an icon to globally identify the cultural lineage of the Coast Salish people.

The spindle whorl has been used by Coast Salish women for centuries to spin their wool into yarn. The oldest whorls discovered by archaeologists were carved from stone. Shell, bone, and whale vertebra were also used, but wood became the most common material from which they were made. Spindle whorls consist of a circular disk and a center pole. They came in various shapes and sizes, the size of the disk and the center pole determined the thickness of the diameter for the strands of yarn.

Spindle whorls provide a spinner with a tool that facilitates the manufacture of a more standardized product. Its use would be advantageous if producers need to more quickly manufacture cord, manufacture greater quantities of cord, or to create a finer, thinner thread. Spindle whorls would have enabled textile producers to increase both the quantity and the quality of produced yarns (Alt pg. 124).

Spindle whorls were often carved with intricate designs of iconographic meaning. C. F. NewCombe, a well-known museum collector in the Northwest Coast region recorded that design motifs used on spindle whorls often represented personal spirit powers. He stated the structured style used for decorating spindle whorls is indicative of their role in producing material wealth—sources of power and prestige. The designs were not merely decorative, but depictions of spirit helpers (MOA, Coast Salish Book 34, item 32b).

As the wool was spun, the circular designs would appear to be in motion. It was believed that the spirit powers would infuse the yarn thereby bringing wealth and honor to the wearer of the garment. The Contemporary Coast Salish Art (Blanchard and Davenport

2005) book contains many photos and descriptions of eighteenth and nineteenth century spindle whorls. These whorls show the rhythmic crescents-and-trigon patterns typically used in Salish art. Rhythmic rows of design elements create movement patterns within the compositions.

One particular example, Spindle Whorl with Human and Flanking Birds, is on display at the Burke Museum in Seattle. It is described as:

“The two flanking thunderbirds overlap and blend with the human figure at the center of the design field and the human faces in the circles within the birds’ bodies are in deeply carved relief.

Foreshortened wings extend out to the edge of the surface dwarfed by the body forms. The human figure’s hands converge at the center hole, where the spindle shaft would pierce the whorl. It’s at this point, say Coast Salish shamans that spirit power enters and leaves the body. The small two-dimensional image inside an oval in the man’s body may represent a spirit helper who dwells within.” (Blanchard and Davenport 15) The

spindle whorl, therefore, was multifaceted tool. The Coast Salish believed that as they turned raw material, such as wool, into yarn it could infused with spirit power. The yarn would then be ready to weave ceremonially garments and blankets important to the Coast Salish people.

Weaving had many functions for the Coast Salish peoples. For wedding ceremonies, blankets would be woven in pure white and given to the bride. The blankets would be kept throughout the bride’s lifetime and when the woman passed on they would go with her to the grave. Weavings were also handed out to guests who traveled from afar to visit the longhouse (Blanchard and Davenport pg. 94) However, before the wool could be spun and woven, raw material first had to be gathered. In the Fraser Mountains above the Cowichan Valley, live herds of mountain goats. The goats would shed in the spring and their wool would get caught on bushes.

The native tribe that lived in the mountains would collect large quantities of this wool. Another method for gathering mountain goat wool was to hunt the animals and then pluck the fibers from their pelts. The Fraser Mountain Indians would then trade with the Coast Salish for dried salmon or coastal delicacies that they did not have access to. (Royal Canadian Museum, Weaving Exhibit 09/16/2006)

A curator at the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, Barbara, told of another source of wool. She said there was an island off the coast of Vancouver where fluffy white dogs lived. These dogs were well-tended so as to produce a constant supply of fine, white fibers that could be spun into yarn suitable for weaving (Personal Communication, MOA, 09/15/2006). The Europeans, who began arriving and settling in British Columbia in the mid-1800’s brought with them sheep. Since about 1850, sheep’s wool was available for weaving as well.

The arrival of the European’s however, created a big change in the textile production of the Coast Salish. Blankets from the Hudson Bay Trading Company were now readily available. These new blankets were much more easily obtained than the laborious process hand-woven blankets required, and they were generously given away at Potlatches (Kirk 59).

Within a few decades the art of hand-weaving was all but lost among the Coast Salish peoples. Another change that came with the Europeans’ was machine-spun wool. Mechanized processes for preparing yarn quickly replaced the use of the spindle whorl. And while the textile art of weaving was discarded, a new textile art emerged: knitting. The English and Scottish settlers brought with them the technique of knitting.

They taught this new form to the women of the Cowichan tribe. Instead of weaving blankets, they began to knit sweaters. In the early 1900’s, Jeremine Colvin, an emigrant from Scotland, taught the native women an advanced technique called the Fair Isle method. This method of “knitting in the round” permitted sweaters to be knit with no

seams, making for high quality sweaters that did not wear out quickly. In fact, on display at the Cowichan Cultural Centre is a sweater worn by three generations of the W. L. Hill family.

The sheep wool used in the Cowichan sweater is highly durable and even water resistant. The Cowichan people soon discovered they had a lucrative asset in knitting and quickly became famous for their high quality product. Their sweaters were sold and traded all throughout the Northwest Coast areas. This proved to be an economic benefit that helped the Cowichan people weather the transition from a traditional economy to the wage economy. Because of their association with British Columbia, Cowichan Indian sweaters have been commissioned for presentation to royalty and celebrities. On display at the Cultural Centre is 1945 photograph of President Truman wearing a Cowichan sweater knit by Mrs. Patrick Charlie. (Cowichan Cultural Centre Knitting Exhibit, 09/17/2006)

Since the early 1900's, knitting has flourished among the Cowichan tribe of the Coast Salish. In the 1980's, the beginning of a renaissance of traditional weaving began to form at Musqueam (another Coast Salish tribe). The Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia sits on traditional Musqueam territory. The museum features an exhibit which highlights the reviving of the weaving. A quote from Wendy John (1999) explains:

"I wanted to see the traditional use of weaving for ceremony come back and I also thought it would be perfect to bring weaving back so it could financially sustain individual women. That was my dream. After learning Salish weaving techniques through a class, I started to learn different stitches and dye techniques on my own. In 1983 we put together a proposal and applied for funding to teach Salish weaving at Musqueam. That was the first weaving school, with four women to start. We started making things for the longhouse ceremonies because that was what was close to the women. Then it just grew and grew." (MOA Weaving Exhibit Placard, 09/15/2006)

The curator at the museum, Barbara, (personal communication 09/15/2006) commented that when the women started weaving it brought back memories of the older generation of their mom's and aunties weaving. As they began to recall the weaving scenes, it helped them bring back other memories and traditions. Today, the MOA, proudly showcases weaving by the Musqueam artists and it also hosts monthly workshops for weavers to gather and share their knowledge with each other (MOA, Weaving Exhibit Placards 09/15/2006).

A placard in the weaving exhibit at the Royal Canadian Museum states, "At the World Indigenous Education Conference, only two years after the first weaving school, the entire Musqueam delegation wore newly created blankets. From this strong beginning, weaving continues to grow and flourish at Musqueam" (RCM Weaving Exhibit 09/16/2006).

So what became of the spindle whorl? Today the Northwest Coast Native artists are not using it to spin yarn. Mechanized processes have taken over that task. Instead, the spindle whorl has been reborn as an icon to globally identify the Coast Salish cultural lineage. Master Carver John Marston of the Cowichan tribe, pays tribute to the weaving traditions of his ancestors and also to the tales told about Thunderbird and the Cowichan people in his Thunderbird Spindle Whorl carving.

This thirty-six inch diameter whorl has a design with two great thunderbirds carved head to tail. One can imagine being transfixed by this design as the thunderbirds are locked in perpetual flight as the wool would have been spun into yarn. The legend inspiring this piece has been told to Marston many times since his childhood and is similar to the legend told to us at the Cowichan Cultural Centre (Blanchard and Davenport 66). As the story goes:

In ancient times, Killer Whale became trapped in Cowichan Bay. The whale had the fortunate position of being able to feast on all of the salmon as they journeyed from the sea back to the rivers. While this was ideal for Killer Whale, the people of the villages up the river were starving. They relied on the abundance of the returning salmon to sustain them.

Distraught, the villagers called on the Creator to help them in their time of desperation. In answer to their pleas, Thunderbird, an enormous supernatural being with an insatiable appetite for whales, descended from the skies. As Thunderbirds spread his great wings, lightning flashed from his eyes and thunder rolled forth across the sky. Thunderbird swooped down and grabbed Killer Whale with his talons and flew to a faraway mountaintop to enjoy his feast. The salmon could then make their way up the rivers to spawn and the people could again rely on this abundance for food. Grateful for the return of the salmon, the people honored Thunderbird with a prayer and dance of thanks (Blanchard and Davenport 71).

Legends such as this one, not only chronicle history, but express the love and respect that native peoples have for their heritage. Another artist, Susan Point, also uses the spindle whorl as an integral element in her art forms. As a Coast Salish artist, she declares "the task of my generation is to remember all that was taught and pass that knowledge and wisdom onto our children" (www.susanpoint.com).

Susan was inspired by the spindle whorl and from the beginning of her Salish art career has incorporated the circular design into many of her pieces. The spindle whorl became a prominent figure in Susan's work primarily because it was one artifact that was available. With the onset of European contact, much of the Salish art was either destroyed or pieces sent off to distant museums.

However, the intricately carved spindle whorls, proved to be a major primer in Coast Salish art. Susan was able to observe the pattern of the wedge, position of the crescents, the shape of the raven, whale, salmon, among others, so that today when she does a contemporary piece with a theme that relates to present day issues, she keeps the traditional elements as part of the design. (Hare 166) In an interview with Jane Hare (2002), Susan explains her passion for research and understanding the elements of authentic Salish art.

"My rapid mastery of the design form resulted in a sense because I was copying. Everything was already in place, it looked as if I knew all about it, but I didn't….in the beginning, imagery from the spindle whorl from slides and photographs were about all I could find, they all had intricate designs carved into them."

It took her years of study combined with questioning the elders to gain an understanding of authentic Salish art. Today, she is equally passionate the upcoming artists to their research and study the basic elements to understand what it is they are doing, otherwise it is "all for naught". (Hare 175)

I think it is interesting to realize the changes that occurred in Coast Salish textiles. Technological advancements rendered the use of the spindle whorl obsolete. The establishment of the Hudson Bay Trading Company provided an ample supply of blankets which led to the demise of weaving by hand. The Scottish empowered the Cowichan with the ability to economically sustain themselves by knitting their famous sweaters.

Today, the Coast Salish has experienced a renaissance in their weaving and the spindle whorl, possibly because of its deep spiritual connection, has taken on a whole new purpose. From a simple hand tool, used to turn raw fibers into woven works of art, the spindle whorl has become a foundational element to the spectacular Coast Salish art being produced today.

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