

# FIBER HERITAGE OF THE SALISH

by Whonnock Spinners & Weavers



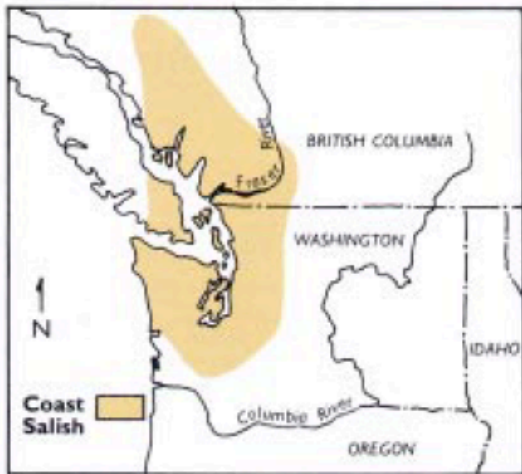
Coast Salish carved spindle whorl.  
*Photo courtesy of the Provincial Museum, Victoria, B.C.*

**T**HE TERM "SALISH" is a term imposed by the European explorers to denote groups of people native to the coastal southwest corner of British Columbia, the southeast third of Vancouver Island, and the northwest Puget Sound area of Washington state. The Salish, although similar in certain respects, had distinctly different languages and neighboring communities often could not converse together. These people were not nomadic but lived seasonal lives of hunting, fishing, and berry gathering. This rhythmical flow of life—intense activity interspersed with lengthy leisure periods—permitted the development of artistic skills. The elaborate rituals developed in a sedentary lifestyle imbued their art with strong philosophical and social values.

Spinning and weaving tools found at sites in this area have been dated between 500 and 1200 A.D. A folded blanket found in a wooden box in Ozette (Cape Flattery, Washington) thought to be 500 years old shows weaving techniques similar to those of Salish goat hair blankets woven in the Fraser Valley of B.C. in the 1800's.

## Materials, Tools and Methods

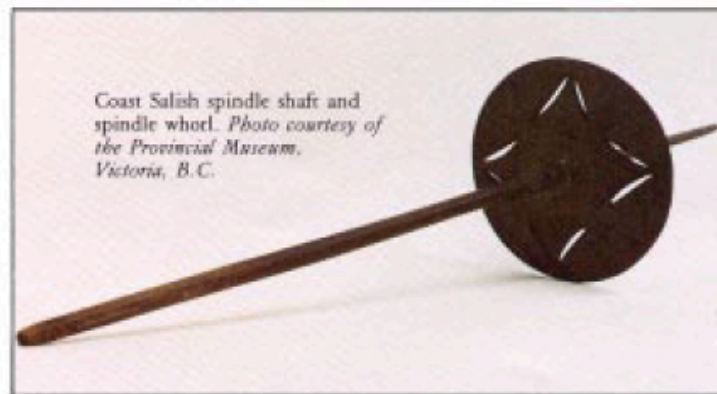
The most important fiber in Salish weaving was mountain goat hair. It was used on its own as well as spun around a core of cedar bark fiber. The hair itself was collected from bushes and the bed areas where the kids were born. Goat hair was used as currency and measured by the double handful. It was



and although historic references are made to it by the early explorers, there is no extant proof that it was ever used. Under modern tests a "dog hair" blanket in the Brooklyn Museum has proven to be woven from commercial yarn.

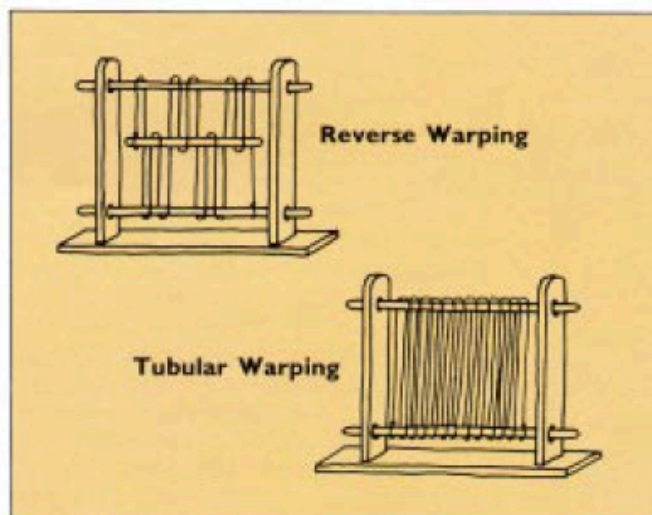
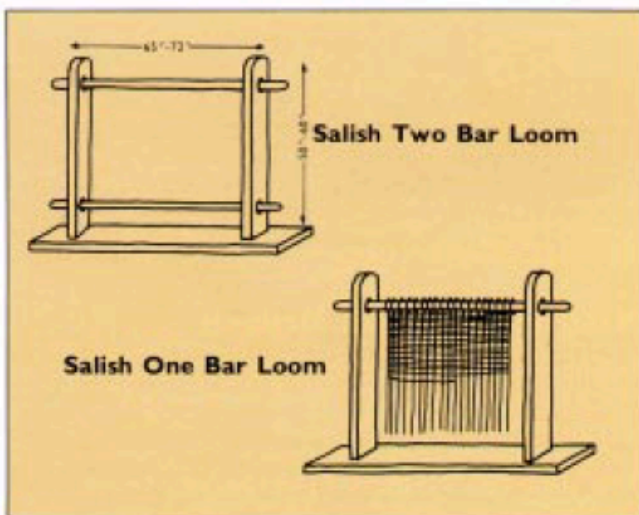
The basic Salish spinning tool consisted of a whorl with a central hole through which passed a long shaft. These spindles were not dropped as is common to many other countries, but were twisted on the lap while the roving was suspended from the ceiling. The weight of the roving itself provided the tension for spinning. Sometimes a stone weight was suspended from the roving to create more tension. The whorls were intricately carved with symbols belonging to the family group. Although spinning and weaving were considered feminine occupations, all the tools were carved by the men.

traded for goods as well as food stuffs. Consequently, the woven goat hair blankets had set value as currency in this society. Five blankets plus several other items would purchase an ocean-going canoe. When the Hudson's Bay Point blankets appeared, they were worth 1/20th of the native goat hair blankets. Thus 100 Hudson's Bay Point blankets plus similar other goods purchased an ocean-going canoe. Although many other materials were used, none had any monetary worth. Stinging nettle and Indian hemp were used and processed similarly to flax to remove the fiber from the pith. The soft fibers from the seed pods of milkweed and fireweed were used, as were cat-tail heads and cotton grass. Bird feathers were used as well as bird skins, strips of animal skins, and fur. Also strips of old blankets were ripped up and used to weave new ones. After the white man came, strips of red flannel were a popular design pattern. After the introduction of sheep, between 1838 and 1840, wool was also used. However, sheep's wool never gained a strong foothold in the historical weaving of blankets. The intrinsic value of the goat hair was probably the main reason for this. Dog hair is a rather controversial material



Coast Salish spindle shaft and spindle whorl. Photo courtesy of the Provincial Museum, Victoria, B.C.

The Salish loom itself was simply a warp frame with no heddles. There were two main types—the one bar loom and the two bar loom (see drawings). On the one bar loom, the warp threads were weighted with stones. The diagrams illustrate the two ways of warping a two bar loom—both ways produced a blanket that was twice the distance between the bars, but the reverse warping gave a blanket with no cut warp ends. With both kinds of





looms, the uprights were imbedded in the ground, and the weaving was done from top to bottom. The finest warps were made of nettle fiber, and the heaviest warps of cedar. Wool was used for warps after 1840.

Basically there were two Salish weaving techniques—twill and twining. The twill weave was used to produce the common white goat hair blankets, with both warp and weft being the same. Twining produced the ornate blankets where the warp was covered and could be of any fiber. The designs on these blankets were owned and the ownership respected. If a woman married into another

Salish weavings showing traditional designs and nature colors. Photographed at the Salish Weavers, Sardis, B.C.



family group, she took her designs with her and added them to those belonging to her new family. The colors for the designs were obtained from lichens and other plants native to the region.

Monica Williams (Salish Weavers, Sardis, B.C.) twining on a two bar loom. The 61 cm x 30 cm (2 ft x 1 ft) piece will take 4 to 5 hours to weave.

## Decline and Resurgence of Salish Weaving

The mid-1850's saw the decline of the art of Salish weaving. This decline was mainly caused by the introduction of commercial blankets and the extermination of the mountain goat population. By the 1920's, the art was completely lost. In 1961 it was revived by the late Oliver Wells. He discovered Mary Peters rag weaving, still using some Salish techniques remembered from her grandmother. With his help and encouragement, other Salish women rediscovered their weaving heritage. Nowadays, in Sardis, British Columbia, an enthusiastic group of Salish women are continuing to practice this ancient art.

### Bibliography

- Gustafson, Paula. *Salish Weaving*. (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1980.)  
 Wells, Oliver N. *Salish Weaving, Primitive and Modern*. Sardis, B.C.: Oliver N. Wells. 19

