

Traditions Continue...Spinning a Good Yarn

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**The woolly fleece of the sheep
keeps the sheep warm in winter.
In the spring the animal is sheared,
And the fleece is prepared for the spinner.**

– Bobbie Kalman

Spinning

Spinning is twisting two or more fibers together to make a continuous thread. Hand-spinning is done to create one-of-a-kind thread. Spinning is a relaxing activity. The spinner's whole body is in rhythm with the movement of the wheel. Hands and feet work together in coordination to produce a thread.

History of Spinning

Why do people spin? Spinners, who stand or sit while creating thread, are connected to a tradition handed down over generations. In the early days before the Industrial Revolution, the spinner provided the threads needed for survival. After the Industrial Revolution when machines powered by water or steam produced thread for clothing at a reasonable price, there was no need for the home-based spinner.

The creativity of the hand-spinner allows the fiber artist to make thread like no other. Leisure spinning is when a fiber artist spins just to enjoy the creative process. Production spinning is when the goal is to produce large amounts of thread. Producing the thread is the main goal, with little importance given to enjoying the creative process.

Spinning in America

Colonists came to America about 1609. They brought with them the treadle wheel and the walking wheel. Both wheels were used into the 1800s. This was the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in America. The wheels were then stored away and forgotten. The hand-spinning process was no longer a necessity in a household. People could buy ready-made clothing. A few wheels survived the Industrial Revolution. Today, many wheels are being made by woodworkers in America and in other countries. The spinner has many choices when purchasing a wheel or fiber.

The Spinning Process

Preparing the fiber is the first step in spinning. Cotton and silk are examples of clean fibers that do not have to be cleaned. The fiber from animals needs to be sorted, and it often needs to be washed to remove dirt and chaff. Carding is done to align the fiber for spinning.

When a spinner uses a Saxony wheel, the whole body is involved in the act. The feet control the speed at which the wheel turns. The hands guide the fiber as it becomes thread.

The hands control the amount of fiber going into the twist that becomes thread. The amount of fiber determines the size of the thread. The whole body becomes involved in the rhythmic motions of the wheel.

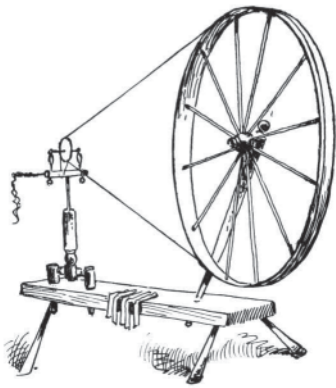


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Spinning Today

Hand-spinning is often done as a demonstration at fairs and festivals throughout America. Such demonstrations help preserve the tradition of spinning by showing how this artistic craft is done. Apprentice programs provide the opportunity for a master craftsman to share talents and experiences with interested participants.

In West Virginia, the Augusta Heritage Center in Elkins offers a year-round program for deserving apprentices. The Mountain State Art and Craft Fair in Ripley offers a four-day apprentice program during the fair for selected applicants.



Great Wheel

Hand-spinning is done by spinners who desire to make a unique yarn for a particular purpose. Some manufacturing companies contract production spinners to produce the yarn for their garments. They then advertise their garments as being made from hand-spun yarn. Hand-spun yarn is more costly than machine-made yarn.

Animal furs are often dirty and need to be washed to remove dust, dung, and bits of hay from the fleece. Most other fibers (cotton, silk, rayon, and flax) don't need to be washed before spinning. Cotton comes from the cotton plant grown in the South. Cotton needs to be carded to align the fibers for spinning. Silk comes from the silkworm. Silk preparation is not for the novice to do. The preparation of the filament from the cocoon is a highly specialized skill. Silk worms are raised in captivity and handfed mulberry leaves. The Chinese kept the source of silk a well-guarded secret for 3,000 years. Rayon is made from wood pulp. Rayon fibers are cut to lengths of 4 to 6 inches for spinning, and they may be crimped. It is often used in the place of silk. Flax comes from the flax plant. Flax preparation requires the outer part of the stem to be rotted off in water or laid on the ground to let the dew help the outer stem to rot. The fibers are then beaten until the outer stem falls away. The inner fibers are ready to spin.

Resources

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