

# The Coast Salish Knitters and the Cowichan Sweater

## An Event of National Historic Significance

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Article abstract

*Long before the arrival of Europeans, the Coast Salish First Nations of southwestern Vancouver Island turned mountain goat wool, dog hair and plant fibres into woven textiles of great value among the peoples of the Pacific Northwest. Around 1860, Coast Salish women in the Cowichan Valley were introduced to European two-needle and multiple-needle knitting and began to produce what came to be known as the Cowichan sweater. Preparation combined ancient fibre processing and spinning techniques with European knitting to produce a high-quality, iconic garment. Profit margins for the knitters were minimal, but knitting provided an economic foothold in a new and challenging market-based economy. In 2011, the Government of Canada designated the Coast Salish Knitters and the Cowichan Sweater as an event of national historic significance on the advice of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada.*

MARIANNE P. STOPP

## The Coast Salish Knitters and the Cowichan Sweater: An Event of National Historic Significance

### Résumé

*Bien avant l'arrivée des Européens, la Première nation des Salish de la côte, au sud-ouest de l'île Victoria, fabriquait des tissages à base de laine de chèvre des montagnes, de poil de chien et de fibres végétales, qui avaient une grande valeur auprès des peuples de la côte nord-ouest, en bordure du Pacifique. Vers 1860, les femmes salish de la côte de la vallée de la Cowichan entrèrent en contact avec la technique européenne du tricot, à deux aiguilles ou à multiples aiguilles, et elles commencèrent à fabriquer ce qui a fini par prendre le nom de « chandail Cowichan ». Elles combinèrent l'ancienne technique de production et de filage de fibres au tricot européen pour produire un vêtement emblématique de grande qualité. La marge de profit des tricoteuses était faible, mais le tricot leur permit de prendre pied dans la nouvelle et exigeante économie de marché. En 2011, le gouvernement canadien, par l'intermédiaire de la Commission des lieux et monuments historiques du Canada, a qualifié « les tricoteuses salish de la côte et le chandail Cowichan » d'événement historique national.*

### Abstract

*Long before the arrival of Europeans, the Coast Salish First Nations of southwestern Vancouver Island turned mountain goat wool, dog hair and plant fibres into woven textiles of great value among the peoples of the Pacific Northwest. Around 1860, Coast Salish women in the Cowichan Valley were introduced to European two-needle and multiple-needle knitting and began to produce what came to be known as the Cowichan sweater. Preparation combined ancient fibre processing and spinning techniques with European knitting to produce a high-quality, iconic garment. Profit margins for the knitters were minimal, but knitting provided an economic foothold in a new and challenging market-based economy. In 2011, the Government of Canada designated the Coast Salish Knitters and the Cowichan Sweater as an event of national historic significance on the advice of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada.*

The Coast Salish bridge the 49th parallel and include a large number of First Nations and Native American communities in and around the waters of the Strait of Georgia, Juan de Fuca Strait, Puget Sound and the lower Fraser River (Fig. 1). The Northern Coast Salish, Central Coast Salish and Bella Coola Salishian groups are all in Canada, while the Puget Sound Salish, Southern Coast Salish and Oregon Salishian are in the United States. Strong social, kinship and

ceremonial ties exist between all of these communities. There are, however, important language and cultural differences within the Coast Salish region, as illustrated by the continued use of at least twenty-three languages that developed from seven ancestral Pacific Northwest language families. There is archaeological evidence of 10,000 years of human occupation in this region. Complex sets of knowledge and technology, developed over millennia for utilizing the resources

of rich terrestrial and aquatic environments, are reflected in sophisticated art styles and remnant technologies (Nelson 1990: 481-84; Thom 2005).

The Coast Salish possess a long tradition of fibre preparation and weaving. Before European colonization, the textiles woven by Coast Salish women of mountain goat hair, dog hair and plant fibres were both items of everyday life and valuable trade commodities. Their blankets, in particular, were central to rituals and ceremonies, and at the time of contact were widely traded with other First Nations and used in the potlatch. Coast Salish knitting is a post-contact acculturative art that combines traditional aspects of fibre preparation and spinning techniques with a European craft technique to produce a distinctive garment. The warm, weatherproof, sturdy and serviceable Cowichan sweater was from its inception distinctively Coast Salish and in the early 1900s came into increasing market demand.

Traditionally, no two sweaters were alike. The earliest sweaters may have been knit in Tzouhalem, in the Cowichan valley, but Coast Salish people from Victoria to north of Nanaimo can trace knitters in their families back to the late 19th century (Meikle 1987; Olsen 1998: 46).<sup>1</sup> The social and economic transformations that the Coast Salish underwent after decades of contact are symbolized in the Cowichan sweater. Historians have looked at wage labour, government relief and subsistence activities in analyzing post-contact Pacific Northwest cultures but have largely ignored the importance of sweater knitting to Coast Salish family economics and cultural maintenance. Sylvia Olsen explored the issue in a 1998 MA thesis at the University of Victoria. She noted that if asked how a family made ends meet up until the 1980s, most Coast Salish adults of

any age would likely respond: “My mother knit” (Olsen 1998: 7).<sup>2</sup>

The introduction of knitting to the Coast Salish coincided with the arrival of European settlers. Fitting well into traditions of Coast Salish wool-working, knitting perpetuated women’s work with fibres and the creation of textiles of strength, beauty and everyday usefulness, and it perpetuated age-old ethics of industriousness and productivity (Olsen 1998: 145). Coast Salish knitting is significant not only because it is rooted in tradition, but also because it is a modern art with innovative 20th-century forms, meanings and functions (M. Black, personal communication, Royal BC Museum, February 18, 2009). A precise start date for Cowichan sweater production cannot be identified, but the

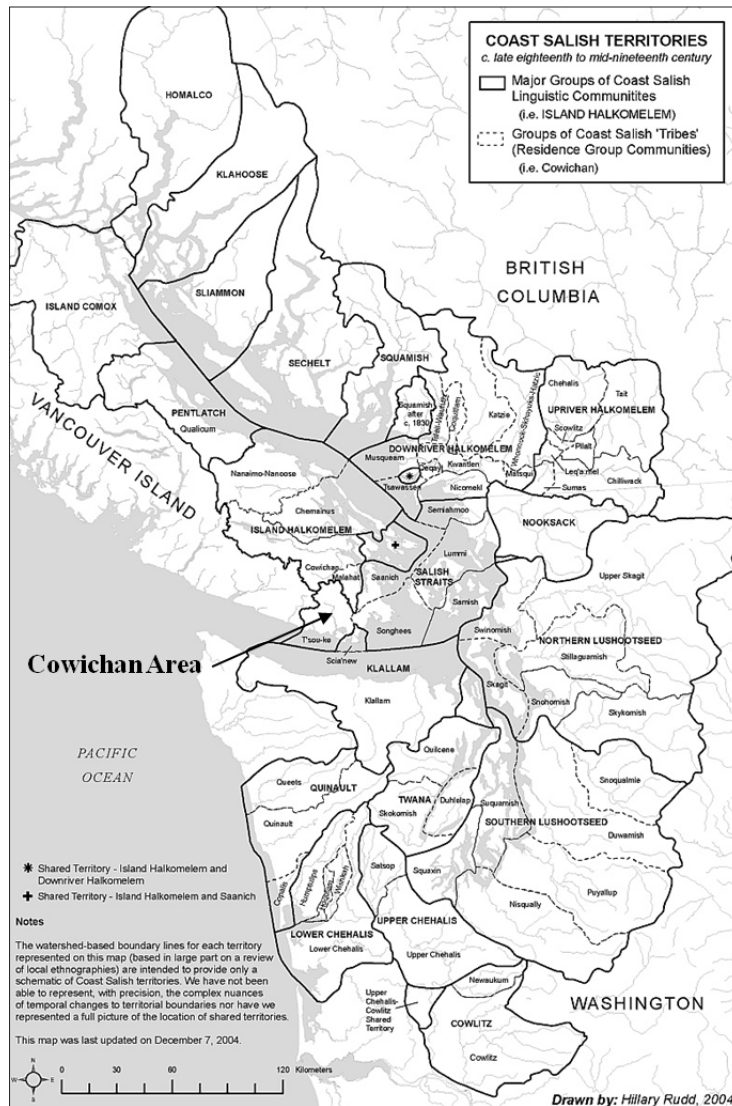


Fig. 1  
Coast Salish Territories.  
(Thom 2011.)

garment was recognized as warm and durable by the First World War. Officers from Vancouver Island, for instance, were granted permission to wear Cowichan sweaters under their uniforms during European winters (Olsen 1998: 64). By the 1940s, the number of active knitters had risen and the Department of Indian Affairs' (DIA) Cowichan Agency, which administered the region, considered knitting as a viable means of bringing all Coast Salish into mainstream economy by teaching "Cowichan sweater" knitting in schools (Department of Indian Affairs 2004, entry for March 31, 1942).

Sweaters were initially sold and traded throughout the Northwest Coast but by the 1960s had spread to wider markets. Unfortunately, throughout the decades of sweater production, Coast Salish knitters have never received remuneration in proportion to the garment's popularity, its final selling price or production time but earnings helped families weather the periods of land loss and decades of uncertainty in a wage-driven economy. As people knitted year-round and passed on skills and patterns within families and through generations, the knitting industry greatly aided Coast Salish cultural continuity and contributed to Coast Salish identity.

An authentic Cowichan sweater is unique in its manner of production and styling. Always made of thick single-ply wool and always hand-knitted because machines cannot duplicate the firm fabric, it is recognized as one of the world's distinctive sweater types. In 2011, the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada designated the Coast Salish Knitters and the Cowichan Sweater as an event of national historic significance for reasons that range from its history to cultural continuity and economic health, to the unique technologies it employs, as summarized in the following statements (Stopp 2009; Parks Canada 2010):

Since the late 19th century, Coast Salish women have combined ancient wool-working technologies with knitting to produce the Cowichan sweater, a durable, weatherproof garment of distinctive styling that is an internationally recognized knitting tradition and sweater type and is a cultural symbol of the Coast Salish and of Canada;

Knitting perpetuated Coast Salish traditions of women's creation of textiles of beauty and usefulness, and of the ethic of industriousness and "busy hands." Washing raw wool, carding and spinning it into thick, single-ply strands were exacting tasks that produced the distinctive wool used to knit the Cowichan sweater. Knitting year-round, passing on skills and patterns within families and through generations, the knitters have aided Coast Salish cultural continuity and contributed to Coast Salish identity;

Wool was spun using the large-diameter "Salish spindle," a hand spindle uniquely Coast Salish and not found elsewhere in North America. With increased demand for sweaters in the late 1940s, Coast Salish men developed two types of innovative treadle-powered spinning machines. Designed with large whorls, these machines were eventually adopted by the knitting industry and marketed as "Bulky" or "Indian Head" spinners;

Never well compensated, and often working long hours to fill large orders, Coast Salish knitters and their families persisted in wool production and sweater knitting to meet the challenges of loss of traditional resources and the uncertainty of the postcolonial market economy.

The historical context and socio-economics of Coast Salish knitting and the distinctiveness of the Cowichan sweater are the three themes examined in the following sections.

### From Woven Blankets to Knit Sweaters: The Early Historical Context of Coast Salish Knitting

Like other Northwest Coast groups, the Coast Salish spent part of every year in villages of substantial plank houses often built close to river mouths where anadromous fish species could be harvested; they then moved to temporary outlier camps away from the coast to harvest other key resources during the year such as wood bark, plants and mammalian species. In a society with relatively complex social structures, wealth and status were emphasized through family names, ritual knowledge and songs, as well as by the accumulation of canoes, clothing, ornaments and woven blankets. The famous potlatch was a ritual process of wealth sharing and prestige

accumulation in which woven blankets were key items of value.

Relative to other First Nations in North America, particularly along Canada's eastern seaboard, contact with Europeans began quite late on the West Coast, beginning with the arrival of Captain James Cook's ships at Nootka Sound in 1778. Manuel Quimper was in the Coast Salish region in 1790; Francisco de Eliza and José María Narvaez were in the Strait of Juan de Fuca in 1791; other Spanish ships were there in 1792 at the same time as Captain George Vancouver made direct contact with the Coast Salish near Puget Sound. Vancouver observed, among other things, the "extremely well-wrought" woven garments. In the same year, Spanish naval captains Dionisio Galiano and Cayetano Valdés y Flores circumnavigated Vancouver Island. By 1825, more than 330 recorded sailing vessels had visited the Northwest Coast, all intent on exploiting the resources of the region, from sea otter furs and salmon to timber (Gustafson 1980: 30; Suttles and Lane 1990: 49; Olsen 1998: 20; Black, personal communication, February 18, 2009; Virtual Museum Canada 2009).

By the late 19th century, traditional settlement, economy and social organization of the Coast Salish had been severely disrupted by the varied pressures of European settlement. Depopulation also contributed significantly to change. The first smallpox epidemic may have come in the 1770s, with waves of epidemics taking increasing tolls in the early 19th century (Suttles 1990: 471; Harris 1994).<sup>3</sup> All Coast Salish communities were situated in important resource regions, locations that European arrivals also favoured (such as today's cities of Vancouver, Victoria and Seattle). Traditional territory was thus lost early in the colonizing process, followed by Coast Salish resettlement onto reserves, loss of traditional knowledge, loss of local language diversity, and especially loss of access to resource areas (Turner, Davidson-Hunt and O'Flaherty 2003; Oliver 2007).<sup>4</sup> In this context of extreme change, it is not possible to show an unbroken evolution from traditional wool-working to its application in the late 19th century, but elements of continuity are apparent in that the same general area produced both ancient and recent wool-working techniques not found elsewhere in North America (Smith 1955). Several aspects

of traditional life have been carefully maintained and inform today's resurgence of Coast Salish culture and diverse arts that are grounded in ancestral knowledge (Gustafson 1980; Johnson and Bernick 1986; Suttles 1987).

The sweater production of the Coast Salish knitters finds part of its lineage in an ancient tradition of transforming plant and animal fibres into woven textiles. Mountain goat hair, the hair of a special dog bred for its hair<sup>5</sup> and plant varieties were collected, processed and spun or woven into clothing, blankets and matting for tent material and bedding. Although we do not know when weaving began in the Pacific Northwest, the archaeological record shows that it was perfected by at least 1500 (Gustafson 1980: 15; Lutz 2006: 223).

Coast Salish motifs, form and style were also expressed in basketry and woodworking. Examples of the earliest Coast Salish basketry have been recovered from archaeological contexts that date back 5,500 years and incorporate materials and techniques still observable in the historic period (Carlson 1983: 203). Examples of carved wooden Coast Salish artifacts dating from 3,000 to 4,000 years ago also bear stylistic resemblance to much later carvings (Blanchard, Davenport and Brown 2005: 9). The oldest evidence of wool-working comes from the archaeological site of Ozette, Washington, in Makah (Nuu-chah-nulth) territory. The ancient village of Ozette yielded nearly intact cultural deposits buried under a mudslide that occurred sometime between 300 and 500 years ago. Among the objects found were six roller looms, several spindle whorls of carved wood, one spindle whorl of whalebone and, most remarkably, a folded twill-weave blanket of mountain goat hair. The weaving technique of this blanket is almost identical to that of Coast Salish mountain goat hair blankets from the 19th century (Gustafson 1980: 16-17, 20-21). Although both knitting and the sweater style of clothing were European introductions, the preparation of fibre and its processing into yarn to produce items of function, beauty and symbolic meaning appear to predate the contact period by many centuries.

Fibre production held an integral place in Coast Salish spirituality, and it is presumed that Salishian textiles have always been both functional items and held symbolic meaning.

Unspun mountain goat hair held a place in Coast Salish ritual and was associated with purification. The handling of mountain goat hair during the process of converting it into yarn was also tied to the spiritual. The action of spinning the wool into yarn is presumed to have held transformational elements activated by the pulsating movement of the decorated spindle whorl, bringing the spinner into a trance state that imbued textiles with spiritual qualities (Suttles 1987: 130). Goat hair and goat hair blankets were central to spirit quest dances. Certain animistic spirits called up by female dancers—such as Wolf, Mole, Sandhill Crane, Loon and Snake—bestowed skills for weaving, spinning and basketry. Spirit dancing ceremonies held during the winter months were a setting for the redistribution of woven blankets, which were given as tokens of esteem to dance participants. Dance costumes were donned behind a screen made of mountain goat hair, dancers wore headdresses made of long strands of mountain goat hair, and during the initiation ritual of the dance, when a dancer was finding his or her “spirit song,” he or she would be constrained by a woven belt of mountain goat hair (Gustafson 1980: 34, 36).

Coast Salish woven blankets also held a central economic place in the potlatch ceremony observed by Europeans in the 19th century (Suttles 1960; Bracken 1997). Many of the items distributed during the potlatch were blankets, originally those made of mountain goat hair and later the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) “Point” blankets. The market value of unspun mountain goat wool and woven blankets was considerable, signifying the economic importance of women’s work. Indeed, dog and mountain goat wool appear to be the fibres with currency value, as no similar accounts exist for yarns of stinging nettle filaments or for Indian hemp. In the early 1900s, the photographer Edward S. Curtis noted that “five blankets, a deerskin skirt, and a fathom of shells would purchase ... one ocean-going canoe” (Gustafson 1980: 70-71). When HBC blankets became available, they were valued at 1/20th the cost of a goat hair blanket—an ocean-going canoe cost one hundred HBC blankets, a deerskin shirt and a fathom of dentalium shells (approximately 40).

Members of Captain James Cook’s expedition to the Pacific in 1778 collected plain and pat-

terned woven blankets and clothing that resemble the Coast Salish blankets we know today, many of which eventually entered European museums. As a result, some of the earliest and best-preserved examples of Pacific Northwest textiles are found in Europe. The general lack of interest in Coast Salish territory for another fifty years protected the culture to a degree from overt European influence. The last of the traditional patterned goat hair blankets may have been made near the end of the 19th century and the last of the plain ceremonial blankets in the early 1900s. European blankets began to replace traditional ones at the same time as colonial encroachment led to the destruction of mountain goat habitat. The further impacts of cultural change and disease ended ancient trade links to wool and broke the continuity needed to pass necessary skills and technical knowledge to younger generations. By the 1850s, fibre production had nearly become a forgotten art, but since the 1960s Salish blanket weaving has re-emerged and acquired renewed status and value (Gustafson 1980; Black, personal communication, February 18, 2008).

Even before European arrival, wool was relatively challenging to acquire. Mountain goat hair and quality yarn might be saved over several years until enough was on hand for weaving important ceremonial blankets. Gustafson observes that mountain goat hair was obtained through both harvesting and trade (1980: 70). Wool harvesting took place in late spring while men went hunting at higher elevations. Salish women, children and the elderly would climb into the coastal mountains and seek out the shed winter coats of the mountain goat, or their birthing beds, which were made of hair pulled and shed from the female goat. Hair from two mountain goats was needed to weave an average-sized simple blanket of approximately 150 cm by 115 cm. Olsen further notes that it was Coast Salish women who controlled trade links to acquire mountain goat wool, which women from the mainland traded for the dog hair of the southern Vancouver Island groups (1998:19). Both yellow cedar, used for woven matting and clothing, and mountain goat hair were collected at higher elevations in the Coast Mountains or obtained through trade with First Nations groups on the mainland. The highlands and the coast (where many plant fibres were obtained)

were part of necessary and integrated seasonal resource areas for the production of a wide range of items of material culture. These resource areas gave meaning to social life at a variety of levels before First Nations' displacement by colonial settlement.

Sheep wool replaced mountain goat hair and plant fibres in the mid-1800s. Sheep were imported to Puget Sound from England and California between 1838 and 1840, and it is likely that they were introduced farther north at about the same time (Lane 1951: 16). By 1852, HBC posts kept herds of cattle and sheep, and by the 1870s Coast Salish in southeastern Vancouver Island bred horses and cattle and served as shepherds for settlers. Sheep wool came to replace mountain goat hair and plant fibres. There is evidence to suggest that the Coast Salish maintained their own sheep herds for several decades. Livestock counts collected by the DIA through its Cowichan Agency in 1886 record 292 sheep owned by Coast Salish. Over time, the DIA recorded gradual increases in flock sizes (with some fluctuations): 622 sheep and 265 lambs in 1897; 1,094 sheep and 416 lambs in 1902; and 1,125 sheep and 325 lambs in 1906. In 1916, the final year of the DIA's livestock count, 1,100 sheep and 660 lambs were recorded (Department of Indian Affairs 2004).

A small number of Cowichan elders can still recall a time when some families raised sheep for both meat and wool.<sup>6</sup> Accounts suggest that since at least the 1930s, knitters relied chiefly on non-Salish sheep farmers for their wool. When ethnologist Barbara Lane undertook one of the first studies of Coast Salish wool-working in 1949, she recorded that "a few Indians own[ed] sheep," but "even these families [were] largely dependent on additional supplies" (Lane 1951: 16; Welsh 2000). The majority of knitters for many decades purchased wool from three sources: directly from (non-Salish) sheep farmers, which gave the knitter control over the quality of the finished yarn, but was more time-consuming because the wool had to be processed; from wool carding and spinning operations, which allowed more time for knitting by eliminating time spent preparing yarn, but with some sacrifice in quality and colour tone; and from middlemen buyers as partial payment for finished sweaters, which represented income loss but allowed more

time for sweater knitting. Rose Sparrow, a Salish (Musqueam) knitter, recalled that she purchased all her wool in the 1930s, for 20 cents per pound (per 0.45 kg) (Sparrow 1976: 138; Welsh 2000).

The first documented instance of Coast Salish knitting took place at the Sisters of St. Anne Roman Catholic mission in Duncan, in the Tzouhalem district, which opened in 1864. Until 1904, when the school became a boys' school, the Sisters taught local women and girls to knit items such as socks, hats and mittens using the technique of circular knitting with multiple needles (Olsen 1998: n24). Circular knitting of socks, sweaters and mittens was once widespread in Europe and has recently made a resurgence, but by 1800 had been replaced with flat knitting (using two needles) for sweaters in all but the northern islands of Scotland, such as Shetland, Orkney and Fair Isle (Gibson-Roberts and Robson 2004: 161). The Annual Reports of the DIA for the 1890s regularly note that young girls were taught knitting in schools. In Tzouhalem, for example, their output was used to raise church funds, was displayed at local fairs

*Fig. 2  
Jeremina Colvin sweater  
with Fair Isle elements  
and some later Cowichan  
traits, ca. 1929. (Meikle  
1987: 5, catalogue no.  
983.2.1, Cowichan  
Historical Museum,  
Duncan, BC.)*



and even reached the 1893 Chicago World's Fair (Department of Indian Affairs 2004).

Knitting was also taught at other institutions such as the Anglican mission at Metlakatla, which established a number of cottage industries as early as the 1870s (Knight 1978: 97). Before the missions, it may have been Orkneymen at HBC posts as early as 1827 who brought a knowledge of knitting and married local women well versed in the techniques of processing fleece and spinning yarn. Mrs. Jeremina Colvin, a Shetland Islander who settled in Cowichan Station in 1885, is generally attributed with introducing patterned sweater knitting in the Fair Isle style around that time (Meikle 1987: 4; Lambert 2002: 62). A Jeremina Colvin sweater dating to 1929, in the collection of the Cowichan Historical Museum, bears several hallmarks of what became known as the Cowichan sweater while retaining indisputable Shetland roots (Fig. 2).

The adoption of knitting by the Coast Salish represented a shift in textile work. But this took place without the loss of several traditional elements such as the association between women and fibre, women's production of textiles of high quality that had marketable value, and ancient techniques of fibre washing, carding and spinning. Sweater knitting in effect provided continuity with textile traditions of Coast Salish women. Knitting itself also had much in common with Coast Salish weaving, which was done with the fingers by twisting, or twining, spun strands into one another, a process much like knitting (Olsen 1998: 44-49). Wool-working and knitting skills passed on to one's daughters represented a deeply rooted generational transfer of knowledge that predated European arrival and contributed to a sense of cultural maintenance. Knitting, like weaving before it, reinforced female identity within Coast Salish society and continues to link knitters to ancestral lines of fibre workers.

During fieldwork in 1949, Lane noted that

Indian women have knitted as far back as the oldest informants can remember. These informants, all women over eighty years old, learned to knit from their mothers. At that time, however, the women knitted only socks and informants believe that the technique [of sweater knitting] was relatively recent in their parents' generation. (1951: 15)

Her timeline places the introduction of knitting among the Coast Salish in the mid-1800s, with the further, pertinent information that the production of sweaters began sometime around 1900. The DIA records, moreover, corroborate the beginnings of sock knitting in the 1890s along with basketry and needlework (Department of Indian Affairs 2004). From the start, the "Cowichan sweater," or "Indian sweater" as the knitters called the garment (Olsen 1998: 46), became recognized for its warmth, weatherproof quality and its durability for outdoor pursuits. The two-bar fixed-warp frame (a form of loom) and the special finger-weaving technique of the Coast Salish are not found elsewhere in early North American fibre traditions (Wells 1969; Gustafson 1980).

### "Knitting for their lives": The Socio-economics of Coast Salish Knitting

The appropriation of knitting by Coast Salish women as a means of livelihood coincided with the loss of land-use areas and the end of the traditional exchange economy, one example of which was the outlawing of the potlatch in 1885. Many men and women began to find work at seasonal jobs away from home and women began to earn extra income on a year-round basis by making and selling basketry and knitted garments. In 1933, a loaf of bread cost six cents, butter was twenty-five cents a pound, and a work shirt cost one dollar and fifty cents. A Cowichan sweater in those years sold for only a few dollars, but represented much-needed cash for a knitter's household (Knight 1978; Gustafson 1980).

Susan Olsen's (1998, 2010) expansive study of Coast Salish knitting has opened a window to understanding the industry. Women were introduced to wool-working by the time they were seven or eight years old. This practice was borne partly out of economic necessity, but it also aligned with traditional Coast Salish practices of training young girls to become skilled textile producers and to live productive lives. One Salish woman who grew up near Sardis, BC, recalled that she learned to knit and make baskets when she was about seven years old, in 1907 (Sparrow 1976: 18, 23, 138-39, 205). Olsen captured an essential leitmotif from another knitter, who



explained the broader significance of wool in the teachings she received from her grandmother about industriousness and productivity:

I ... was raised traditional ... my grandmother told me that I had to work. I had to keep busy from the time I got up in the morning until I went to bed. First thing I went down to the beach for a cold bath. Then when I came home I used to tease and card the wool until it was time to go to school. Same thing when I got home. If I wasn't cooking, I was working with the wool.... My grandmother said it was important for women to learn to keep their hands busy. It is part of who we are as a people. It is important to us. (1998: 145)

From approximately 1930 onward, when the demand for Cowichan sweaters began to increase exponentially, entire families became involved. Knitting was an enterprise to which everyone in a family could contribute. Many men learned as boys to knit but were particularly involved in the time-consuming process of wool preparation. Wool spinning and sweater design, knitting and finishing were largely the domain of women. A knitter from southern Vancouver Island recalled that in the early 1930s, her “dad went fishing once in a while but it was seasonal. [Her] dad used to card the wool, [her] mom would spin and knit” (Lutz 2006: 235). Children were taught to work with wool at an early age, starting with wool washing and preparation, then learning to knit simple toques and sleeves, graduating in time to sweaters. Carding and spinning were left to the older, experienced women, whose daughters would often not perfect these techniques until their mothers had passed away. Cecilia Smith, born in 1923, began knitting with her mother when she was eight years old. Her family bought wool from farmers and processed it in spring and summer in readiness for winter knitting. As with most Coast Salish women, knitting became much more than a pastime for Cecilia Smith: “I got left with eight kids when my first husband died. I was knitting about five sweaters a week at that time. I stayed up most of the night. I would pack wood up from the beach for the fire. Then I would knit all night” (Olsen 1998: 83).

Finding her inspiration in Sylvia Olsen's work, Christine Welsh, producer and director of *The Story of the Coast Salish Knitters* (2000), highlighted the essential disjunction between the Cowichan sweater's renown and the low rate of

return received by the knitters, emphasizing that women were “knitting for their lives.” This was true in all possible meanings of the phrase since most knitters, like their mothers before them, gave their lifetime to knitting, from age eight to eighty. They also knit continually and as fast as possible in order to meet demands; and they knit to put food on the table, to stay alive.

When viewed as high output for low return in a context of necessity, Coast Salish sweater production fits into the broader economic history of knitting, which was always a source of income for the poor. Knitted items made by impoverished Icelandic settlers in 1600, for instance, were exchanged for necessary staples from Scandinavian traders, with 72,000 pairs of socks and 12,000 pairs of mittens traded annually, and sweaters being reported by the 1700s. In 17th-century Sweden, knitting was a key source of trade and revenue for the poor, while in the Shetland Islands family incomes had been supplemented by a stocking industry since the 16th century, with sweaters appearing after the 18th century once machines began to produce hosiery. Knitting cottage industries abounded throughout northern Europe in these centuries. Between 1850 and the early 1900s many of today's recognized traditional sweater types emerged in poor northern outposts; types such as the Fair Isle sweater took form in northeast Scotland, alongside Irish Aran sweaters, Scottish Argyle knits and Swedish Bohus knits, among others, and each had its beginnings in mitten and stocking production (Lambert 2002: 16, 19, 26).

Similarly, the Cowichan sweater style emerged out of an early stocking and mitten industry as a distinctive type of folk knit produced under economically challenging conditions and with consistently low earnings; Cowichan sweater prices paid to knitters in 1991, for instance, were unchanged from those of 1978 although the price of wool and the price of living had significantly gone up (Olsen 1998: 2).

The 1920s saw the beginnings of the sweater industry (Norcross 1959: 79). Knitting supplemented seasonal incomes because it could be done at home, in the evenings, and out of season. Knitters both traded and sold their goods, but always for low remuneration. Rose Sparrow recalled that at the turn of the 20th century, women and girls were trading (not selling) socks and baskets

to European residents door-to-door for clothing and shoes (Sparrow 1976: 18, 23, 138-39, 205). Murial Jarvis Ackinclose, a non-Salish historian in Duncan, BC, recorded a visit by knitters to her home in the 1920s that illustrates the central role of women in this trading economy as well as the currency of sweaters—they could be traded for used clothing and a little money:

One of my earliest recollections in [our] home was of the local Indians visiting with their baskets and sweaters for trade or sale. Mother would tot out all our outgrown or surplus clothing, etc. for appraisal, and the bargaining would begin. The whole family of Indians were involved: Grandma, daughters, granddaughters, children and babies, even the odd male member.... Grandma sat on our front steps ... thoughtfully smoking her pipe ... she was the ultimate authority on any deals.... Eventually the transactions would be completed and they would trail off to the next house, enriched by some new bits and pieces as well as money. (2000: 15)

The first evidence of formal sweater buyers may date to 1909 when peddler Jim Warnock was recorded as trading whiskey for sweaters on Kuper Island. The earliest reports of local shops carrying Cowichan knitting date to 1916 and by the 1920s merchants in Duncan, Victoria, Vancouver and Nanaimo set up special departments for Cowichan knitting and advertising billboards (Olsen 1998: 71, 74). First sold in sporting goods stores as hunting and fishing wear, the sweaters came to be sold in West Coast souvenir shops, in department stores across Canada, by mail order, and abroad as fashionable and utilitarian wear.

The 1930s saw severe deprivation as a result of the Great Depression. First World War industry for a time provided some employment but the post-war call for technically educated labourers as well as growing class consciousness and racism excluded many First Nations in British Columbia from the work force. Knitting took on far greater importance between the wars and was one of the few means of earning money. The number of knitters increased and more families became involved. Sweaters were traded for groceries, to the point where storeowners had too many sweaters in stock. One contemporary observer in the 1930s thought that Coast Salish women on southern Vancouver Island produced about 500 sweaters a year (Knight 1978: 15; Olsen 1998: 80; Lutz 2006: 235, 239).

The Second World War once again drew many Coast Salish out of home production and into the workforce. Women and elderly people as well as older children worked in canneries and on farms in British Columbia and Washington, and men fished, all in aid of supplying the war effort. Conditions were good, work was plentiful, and wages were relatively high. It may have been in these years that the flocks of sheep recorded by the Cowichan Agency went into decline. By the 1950s, however, the Salish economy underwent another shift. The large Empire Cannery closed and local food production in general declined in the post-war period. An influx of Japanese fishermen replaced Salish men, and with the extension of Old Age Security allowances to First Nations in 1954, the importance of the wage economy fell. Women returned to knitting to support families, many knitting full-time for many years to come. Mrs. Rose Sparrow earned five dollars for her sweaters in the 1940s, selling them to local sporting goods stores. As with all Coast Salish knitters, the earnings supplemented her husband's wages from seasonal work and went mainly toward school clothes for her children and to buy food. When she gave her interviews, in the early 1970s, she was still spinning and knitting full-time but had stopped selling to stores. Like many knitters, she took orders, selling a sweater for \$50 to \$60 (Sparrow 1976; Olsen 1998: 80).

By the 1940s, government agents across Canada decried the depressed state of the reserves and advocated First Nations arts and crafts revival as part of a welfare movement and a way of entering the "mainstream" economy. The Canadian Indian Art and Handicraft Association was the government vehicle for this push. There were many examples across the country of groups actively participating in the "revival" movement. The Canadian Handicrafts Guild, a Montréal non-profit organization created under a special Act of Parliament many years earlier, was a particularly influential representative of such groups. The Vancouver Folk Song and Dance Festival, as well as the Knights of Columbus in British Columbia, had fundamental goals of advancing economic conditions by engineering "Indian" arts and crafts to suit the market. At this time, the Cowichan sweater was the only viable craft product that the Cowichan Agency could promote. Recognizing the poor sums earned by

knitters, government officials lobbied for better prices and market conditions, “but knitters continued to receive little more than steady work for starvation wages” (Olsen 1998: 97-100). Advertising provided by government about the sweaters directly benefited the merchants and buyers, but did little to improve the situation of the knitters.

By the 1950s, city merchants greatly expanded the sweater trade and most knitters marketed in one of two ways: dealers sent buyers or middlemen to reserves as many as three times per week, prearranging with knitters what sizes and designs they were buying; or, less commonly due to transportation difficulties, knitters brought their sweaters directly to urban shops for sale.

Olsen records accounts that showed that selling was a constant source of anxiety and sometimes even confrontation for knitters, whose long hours of labour on a product they knew to be marketable were rewarded by poor returns:

The buyers always say they are having a hard time selling the sweaters so they pay you less. Sometimes we would argue with them about the price but we never won. Every time you brought in your sweaters they would say they were overloaded with sweaters or that they were having trouble selling.... They always said they were not doing too well, but I noticed that they were going away on holidays. They looked like they were doing alright to me. Buyers always gave such a sob story. (1998: 88-89)

In order to sell their wares, knitters were forced to adapt to a range of buying practices, as another account illustrates:

The buyers were ...good sometimes. Hindeman used to come around every Wednesday and buy sweaters and sell wool. He would give us cash and some wool, but we didn't have to buy wool if we didn't need it. Mrs. Hill wanted us to trade half for groceries and wool with just a little cash. Sometimes I needed the cash. Bruce wouldn't take your sweaters unless you used his wool so we only got half money and the rest wool even if we didn't want wool. He didn't let us use our own wool. (Olsen 1998: 88)

Olsen also recorded how some knitters travelled considerable distances to get their sweaters to market for a better price. One knitter recalled, “My mother and I used to row to Ladysmith [3 hours].... We sold our sweaters to Ladysmith Trading. We'd get all our household stuff from

them” (1998: 89-92). Another recalled her mother rowing from southern Vancouver Island eastward, across the Haro Strait, to Anacortes, Washington, in the 1940s in order to earn \$7.00 for a sweater. Knitters would also try to sell their sweaters as each one was completed, in order to ensure a regular flow of income for household needs.

By the 1960s, the demand for sweaters increased beyond the capacity of individual knitters—sweaters were being sold throughout Canada, the United States, Japan, England and elsewhere. Most knitters had enlisted the help of all available family members, working day and night to prepare wool, carding, spinning and knitting. One popular article from 1965 exulted that earnings for knitters reached \$100.00 per week, upon initial consideration a reasonable sum. It neglected, however, to clarify that this sum represented the combined earnings of several full-time family members. The common profile of a family of knitters in the 1960s included a mother and father, participating children and elderly grandparents, aunts or uncles. Children were often kept at home or quit school early in order to contribute. If a family worked ten- or twelve-hour days and was able to produce seven or eight sweaters per week, they might earn \$315.00 to \$350.00 per week after the cost of wool—again, however, this would be the total earnings for the full-time work of many people. Just prior to 1970, knitters' earnings rose from \$15.00 per sweater to \$45.00-\$50.00 (after the cost of wool) and remained that into the 1990s. The only way a knitter could raise her earnings was to increase production—that is, to knit faster and longer. Knitters received wool and very little money in exchange for sweaters that might sell for \$300 retail (Brothers 1965: 44; Olsen 1998: 133).

It is difficult, however, to identify the precise economics of the sweater trade because sweaters were often bartered for food, buyers issued no receipts and dealer records are unavailable—for the most part cash and wool payments sealed an exchange. No Revenue Canada records exist because income generated on reserves is tax exempt, and knitters did not keep records of how many sweaters they made or sold, except in memory. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the number of knitters grew from 70 to 100 in 1936, producing approximately 1,000 sweaters, increasing to

*Fig. 3*  
*Chief and Mrs.*  
*Ed Underwood*  
*demonstrating hand-*  
*teasing and wool*  
*carding; Saanich, 1962.*  
*(Meikle 1987: 9.)*



approximately 10,000 sweaters sold in 1965 by some 600 knitters. The wool that buyers offered knitters represented half of their payment for each sweater. Exchanging wool for sweaters gave buyers the opportunity to profit twice from every deal. Indian agents were concerned about this but instead of eradicating the practice it became entrenched in the sweater trade (Brothers 1965: 43; Olsen 1998: 103-106).

The number of middlemen and dealers also increased in the 1960s to meet market demand. There were three major sweater dealers on southern Vancouver Island. One of these was buying 1,500 sweaters a year, and a decade later 5,000 sweaters in a single year. In 1963, Norman Lougheed, who owned the Cowichan Trading Company, a Native crafts shop in downtown Victoria, paid out \$180,000.00 to knitters for roughly 7,000 sweaters, representing about \$25-\$30 paid per sweater (but half of this would have been paid in wool to complete further orders). Lougheed's market included Canada, the U.S., Australia, Japan, India, Great Britain and Europe (Brothers 1965: 44). Most knitters worked closely with their buyer, filling orders designed by the dealer and customer. As the industry expanded, its control shifted from knitter to dealer: customers were no longer buying from knitters, but from stores in cities.

Some knitters sought alternative means of selling their sweaters in an effort to receive respectable remuneration. Although many more sweaters could be sold in the shops of Victoria, Vancouver, Nanaimo and Duncan, many knitters were dissatisfied selling to dealers. Some established private clientele and got better prices while maintaining greater control over their product and over the amount of time that they spent knitting. Some set up shops in their homes, stockpiling from other knitters and relying on word of mouth and a highway sign. Others travelled to Washington State or to mainland British Columbia where sweaters were rare and buyers offered a better price.

Alternative approaches were also initiated on behalf of the knitters. Lloyd and Frances Hill began selling Cowichan sweaters in 1946 from their Koksilah/Duncan general store and post office in an effort to get reasonable returns for the knitters, paying them with groceries, wool and some cash (Halliday and Chehak 2000: 18). The Cowichan band owned a store in Duncan, Cowichan Indian Arts and Crafts, which actively marketed high-quality products from the area. In 1956, Chief Richard Harry of Tsawout, on the Saanich Peninsula at the southern end of Vancouver Island, tried to break into the sweater

business in a bigger way in order to benefit the knitters. Buying sweaters from knitters and providing them with wool at cost, he sold their sweaters on a wholesale basis across the continent but, lacking capital, this business lasted only a few years (Meikle 1987: 22; Olsen 1998: 92).

There is some evidence that at least one co-operative was formed in the 1960s in an attempt to achieve better remuneration for Cowichan sweater production. Little is known about the Goldstream Village Co-operative, except that it was operational in 1962 on the Saanich Peninsula and ran for two years. Managed by Chief and Mrs. Ed Underwood, this was a federal initiative, at a time when the Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources was encouraging the development of co-operatives among First Nations and Inuit peoples (Sprudz 1975; Suttles 1990: 461). The Underwoods coordinated and sold Cowichan sweaters and other knit goods produced by the Salish (Fig. 3). The co-operative approach, however, proved less effective for individual knitters than producing and selling their own work through filling custom orders, selling to retailers or wholesalers, selling at fairs and even trading at grocery stores for food (Meikle 1987: 22; Olsen 1998: 114; University of Victoria 2012).

Increased production was stimulated in the 1970s by Sarah Modeste of the Koksilah Reserve who purchased a carding machine. She had identified a need for expediency in an industry that was time-consuming and always undervalued, but with a high market demand. After several setbacks, which involved discovering that First Nations people could not get loans because their property was not considered collateral, she managed to get a credit card loan through her local bank and purchased an industrial-grade carding machine that washed and carded wool. Modeste Wool Carding on the Koksilah Reserve had a revolutionary effect on the knitting industry, eliminating hours of processing labour and offering wool at better prices than those offered by the sweater buyers who paid for sweaters with wool. Her machine facilitated the production of thousands of sweaters by the knitters who no longer had the time to prepare and process wool (Steltzer 1976: 92; Olsen 1998: 115; Welsh 2000).

Maintaining exacting standards for the preparation of their wool and the design of their

sweater, the Coast Salish knitters demonstrated remarkable energy, exacting standards, and dedication to their craft over many decades. The result is a garment that has been collected by thousands of people worldwide. It is included in museum collections nationally and internationally and is among the most readily recognized First Nations productions in Canada (Meikle 1987: 1). The Cowichan sweater was for many decades considered a quintessentially “Canadian look”<sup>27</sup> and as a result became a nationally recognized symbol of both British Columbia and of Canada. Sweaters have been presented to HRH Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip (1959), to Prime Minister and Mrs. John G. Diefenbaker (1957), and to President Truman in 1945. Most recently, a Cowichan sweater was presented to Dr. Jacques Rogge, president of the International Olympic Committee in acknowledgement of this country’s hosting of the 2010 Winter Olympics (Roels 2010). The theme of the Coast Salish knitters and the Cowichan sweater has captured academic interest and holds popular appeal, as exemplified in the film *The Story of the Coast Salish Knitters* produced by Christine Welsh (2000) through Prairie Girl Films/National Film Board of Canada, and in interpretive exhibits at the Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia (August–December 1986); at the Royal Alberta Museum (January–March 1988); and at the Cowichan Valley Museum and Archives, Duncan, BC. (May–October 2008).

Today, Coast Salish artists continue to perpetuate motifs and techniques associated with wool preparation. Ancient spinning and roller-bar loom techniques have re-emerged for the production of spectacular blankets and robes by a number of weavers. Striking interpretations of Coast Salish spindle whorls are the work of Susan Point, from the Musqueam band of the Halkomelem Salish. One of these is a 4.88-metre diameter sculpture in wood for the international arrival terminal of the Vancouver International Airport, which is sited on traditional Musqueam land. Another immense spindle whorl carved of wood was given as a gift to the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC, by the Canadian government through the Canadian Embassy in 2004 (Brown 1998: 189; Blanchard, Davenport and Brown 2005: 38–35). Modern Salish Nez-Percé artist Stan Greene has also

**Fig. 4**

*Mrs. Helen Jimmy holding the traditional “Salish spindle,” comprising the large whorl pierced by a long spindle stick. The roving passes over the peg at Mrs. Jimmy’s left hand. Note that she is rolling the spindle rather than using the toss technique; Koksilah, 1949. (Courtesy of Dr. Barbara Lane, personal communication, March 21, 2013; also in Meikle 1987: 11.)*

replicated the ancient spindle whorl in his art (Blanchard, Davenport and Brown 2005: 73). The mesmerizing effect of the spinning whorl can be viewed on the web page of Coast Salish artist Joe Jack (Jack 2010).

### What Makes the Cowichan Sweater Distinctive?

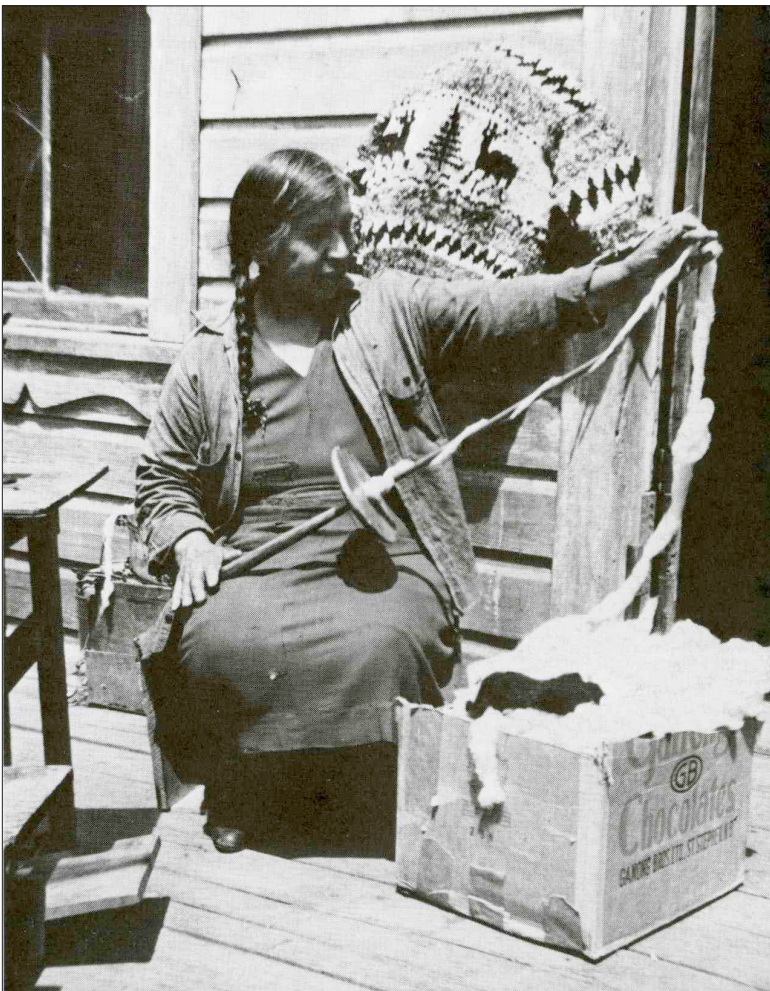
A number of distinctive features that relate to both wool preparation and knitting style emerged early in the Cowichan sweater's production history that make it unique and rank it among the world's knitting traditions such as Scottish Fair Isle, Irish Aran type and Swedish Bohus sweaters, among others (Lane 1951; Meikle 1987; Lambert 2002). The Cowichan sweater remains the only formally recognized knitting type from North America. An authentic Cowichan sweater is remarkably warm, weatherproof and long-

lasting, and many were worn for generations. The durability of the Cowichan sweater sets it apart from all competitors. Meikle (1987: 1) records one example of a man who received his Cowichan sweater in 1929. He wore the sweater while serving for five years in Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry in the Second World War, followed by many more years as a bridge builder and repairman in the Yukon, Manitoba and northern BC, and was still wearing it in 1987. The earliest Cowichan sweaters still in existence, which do not predate the 1920s, show considerable variation in construction and design detail, suggesting that they developed out of influences, trial and error, and copying over several sweater generations. Olsen (1998: 67) suggests that this may signify that the sweater had no single source of origin.

### Distinctive Attributes of Coast Salish Wool Preparation for Sweater Making

Several elements of the wool preparation process contribute to the Cowichan sweater's distinctiveness. Chief among them is that until the 1970s all wool used by the knitters was prepared by hand—not only were their sweaters hand knit, but the woollen yarn itself was the result of hands-on craftsmanship. The wool-processing techniques used by the knitters included both age-old Coast Salish approaches and, by the 1940s and 1950s, mechanical spinners that were special Salish adaptations, or hybrid innovations that allowed the knitters to meet the demands of a growing market and that were later adopted by other knitting industries.

The durability and weatherproof quality of the classic Cowichan sweater stand alongside other design traits that distinguish this sweater from other knit garments. The qualities of the wool itself were the result of traditional Coast Salish wool processing knowledge that involved seven steps and several months to execute. Following sheep shearing, a batch of wool was first washed many times, and then hung outdoors for several weeks for further cleaning and to bleach in the sun, rain and frost. Thereafter, the wool was hand-teased to separate and disentangle the fibres, hand carded to align the strands, drawn out in preparation for spinning, and then



loosely spun by hand to make a roving or initial yarn. Finally, it was tightened with a spindle and whorl to produce the thick, single-ply yarn that became characteristic of the Cowichan sweater. The repeated but gentle washing at the beginning of the process ensured that the wool retained just the right amount of lanolin to make the sweater weatherproof, while the final spinning produced the wool thickness characteristic of the Cowichan sweater that gave the garment unusual durability and made it warm. Coast Salish knitters used undyed wool in shades ranging from white to tan to grey, brown and black.

Until the development of the Coast Salish mechanical spinners, the knitters (and earlier weavers) produced hand-spun wool using the “Salish spindle,” a hand spindle recognized as being uniquely Coast Salish and not found elsewhere in North America (Buxton 1992: 37, 48-50). It was, firstly, larger than all known North American hand spindles, and as a result was also handled differently. The Coast Salish spindle consisted of a shaft with a circular cross-section, onto which was pushed a whorl with a hole at its centre that was a circle of wood (or, more rarely, of stone; Fig. 4). The whorl served as a weight and encouraged the shaft to continue rotating by lending momentum to the initial turn. The Coast Salish whorl was large relative to other known whorls, with a diameter of 18-20 cm, and was sometimes paper thin at the edges. The tapered shaft was 90-120 cm long.

Spinning with a large whorl involved using a tension ring suspended above the spinner and tossing the spindle with outstretched arms—hence the name “hand-tossed spindle” or “Salish spindle.” The action of tossing differs from other recognized Canadian (and North American) hand spindle techniques (including drop spindle, resting spindle, rolled spindle and finger spindle techniques) where tension in the thread results from the weight of the spindle, and the twist in the thread is made by turning the weight. In Coast Salish spinning, the spindle is pointed upward and the fibre, or roving, is drawn down from the tension ring toward the upper end of the spindle as the spindle is turned. Tension results from this pulling of the roving as the spindle is turned to create a twist in the yarn. Each turn of the roving over the upper point of the spindle is



*Fig. 5*  
Steatite spinning whorl from Milliken archaeological site, near Yale, BC. The whorl is carved on both sides, shown here. It is estimated to be 700 years old. (Gustafson 1980: 20; photo, University of British Columbia.)

followed by one pulled twist. This action creates thick, strong, single-ply wool fibre.<sup>8</sup>

Coast Salish spindle whorls are at once objects of function and testaments of exquisite artistic and spiritual expression. The carving of spindle whorls was the purview of Coast Salish men and reached a very high standard of perfection (Ravenhill 1944: 74). Many spindle whorls bear sophisticated carved designs that show the owner's crest, and among those in museum collections no two designs appear to have been alike. When the spindle is in use, the images on the whorl spin around, animating the design, which might be a bird, a human or geometric pattern, or a combination of motifs. As already mentioned, the mesmerizing effect of the revolving whorl may be tied to spiritual qualities of the fibre. The oldest whorls discovered by archaeologists were of stone, some undecorated and others incised with imagery. Wooden whorls appear to date back

**Fig. 6**  
*Mrs. Pat Charlie and her grandson Francis. She is spinning wool on one type of converted treadle sewing machine, Koksilah, 1949. Note the bobbin with characteristic large whorls at either end. (Courtesy of Dr. Barbara Lane, personal communication, March 21, 2013; also in Meikle 1987: 12.)*



to a much later time, but this may be a factor of poor wood preservation over long periods. One of the earliest stone spindle whorls, from the archaeological site of Milliken near Yale, British Columbia, dates to between 500 and 1200. It is made of steatite, a form of soapstone that is easily shaped, and each face bears a different set of designs that are precursors of motifs found in much later Salish design (Gustafson 1980: 20; Fig. 5).

Two modern Coast Salish innovations to spinning arose from a need to meet the growing demand for sweaters. Both innovations were treadle-powered spinning machines with pulleys that operated a substantial bobbin and flyer assembly, considered “an important development of spinning wheels in Canada” (Buxton 1992: 269). The large size of both the bobbin and flyer in both are uniquely Coast Salish and are direct descendants of the large Coast Salish spindle whorl. The first type of mechanical spinner was made on the base of a sewing machine, retaining the foot treadle, pulley and table. A spindle mounted on the table was suspended horizontally with a whorl at each end to form a spool that was rotated by means of the treadle.

The second type of spinning machine was also entirely homemade and included improvements on the converted sewing machine such as shifting the foot treadle ninety degrees, which allowed the spinster to sit facing the end of the

spindle. In this position she was clear of flying dust and could also feed the roving straight on to the spindle, instead of reaching around (Fig. 6-7). These Salish-designed machines were made by men in and around Duncan, BC, in the late 1940s. Since the 1960s, these spinners have been copied by wool-working manufacturers in Canada, New Zealand and the United States and marketed as “Bulky” or “Indian Head” spinners (Lane 1951: 19-21; Meikle 1987: 10-12).

#### Distinctive Stylistic Attributes of the Cowichan Sweater

The characteristic structural elements of the Cowichan sweater are the absence of side seams, V-neck shaping, a shawl collar, and sleeves that gradually slope off the shoulder. One of the hallmarks of a true Cowichan sweater is that it is knit “in the round.” Total stitches are divided onto at least eight double-pointed, circularly arranged needles, depending on sweater size. For cardigans, the knitter works back and forth all in one piece. This results in a garment with no side seams (Fig. 8, 9). Sleeves are begun on picked up armhole stitches and knitted from the shoulder to the cuff. (Conventional knitting patterns prepare the sleeve separately as a flat section, beginning at the cuff. The sleeve edges are then stitched together and the whole is attached to the sweater armhole by stitching.) The Cowichan sweater



sleeve can easily be unravelled from the cuff for repair or adjustments to length. The shawl collar differs in design from other shawl collars in that the stitches at the back of the neck opening are knit in a separate panel from the front collar sections, forming a rolled collar made of three panels (Lambert 2002: 64-65).

Classic Cowichan sweaters are in two main colours with a third sometimes used in the design. The wool of Dorset, Hampshire and Suffolk sheep provides the sweater's characteristic natural colour tones of creamy white to brown, black and grey. Early sweaters, however, often incorporated dark yarns that were achieved with berry and bark dyes before the introduction of dark-haired sheep. The decorative patterns have varied widely over the years, ranging from geometric designs in early sweaters that are reminiscent of Salish basketwork patterning to non-geometric motifs taken from nature such as trees, leaves, animals and birds. These either repeat as small units or as a large figure, such as a deer or eagle dominating the front and back of the sweater. In sweaters where only geometric designs are employed, the patterning is arranged in broad horizontal bands. Sweaters with non-geometric elements are generally the result of market trends but include bands of traditional geometric design above and below the non-geometric figure (Lambert 2002: 24). Decorative patterns are incorporated in one of two ways. The simplest is a complete change in the colour of the row, used most often in the bottom ribbing, the cuff and the collar. More complex larger bands of patterns are created using two colours in the Fair Isle technique: the unused colour is carried along the inside of the work between design units. Lane observes that many designs were derived principally from knitting, embroidery and crochet patterns that the knitters copied onto graph paper. Other designs were taken from oilcloth table coverings, linoleum floor coverings, commercial blankets and product labels. An unusual dragon motif was popular in the late 1940s that had probably been adapted from a Chinese tea box, although Lane notes that many knitters were unfamiliar with this imaginary creature (1951: 24).<sup>9</sup> Lane's informants incorporated design as an artistic device and there was no meaning or symbolic significance to the designs.<sup>10</sup>



In recent years, the Cowichan sweater has become a fashionable clothing item that has been copied and reproduced in many ways by overseas knitting factories, by fashion houses and through knitting catalogues. Authentic Cowichan sweaters continue to be made by Coast Salish knitters, but the number of knitters has dropped due to continuing poor returns and because a wider range of employment opportunities and job-training is now available. Most recently, the Coast Salish have fought a legal battle to prevent use of the term "Cowichan sweater" by non-Salish knitters and knitting factories.

*Fig. 7*  
Mrs. Helen Jimmy spinning wool on a second type of converted treadle sewing machine with large bobbin heads and with the foot treadle shifted ninety degrees, allowing the spinster to face the emerging yarn. (Courtesy of Dr. Barbara Lane, personal communication, March 21, 2013; also in Meikle 1987: 12.)

#### Originals versus Copies

Since the early 1950s, a number of commercial interests have attempted to replicate the Cowichan sweater. Because of the thick single-ply nature of Coast Salish-spun wool, no knitting machine could duplicate the originals in texture. In the 1970s, however, Japanese interest in these sweaters, both by tourists in Canada and in Japan, brought the demand for Cowichan sweaters to an all-time high, a demand that knitters could hardly meet. Manufacturers, in conjunction with dealers, re-designed the original Cowichan style and began to produce machine-knit replicas of lightweight wool bearing motifs preferred by the Japanese, mainly of eagles and deer (Olsen 1998: 123). Although the knitters could not control this mass market for inauthentic sweaters, more direct competition came from hand-knit sweaters modelled after the genuine product and produced

by Canadian companies organized as cottage industries. Such companies began to produce sweaters marketed with the label “Hand Knit in Western Canada by Western Craftspersons,” undercutting Cowichan prices by as much as half and using natural wool spun in New Zealand to immitate the Salish yarn.

Cowichan band members were concerned with the loss of productivity and the use of the name “Cowichan” by other producers. In July 1979, the band council began legal proceedings and in January 1980 won an out-of-court settlement to prohibit the Cowichan name from being used by other wool manufacturers or knitters (Meikle 1987: 23). Significant competition also came from “Cowichan style” knitting kits produced by a company in New Zealand and another called the “White Buffalo Wool Company” in Brandon, Manitoba, and by 1979 Cowichan-style “White Buffalo” look-alikes were being produced by a company in British Columbia (Olsen 1998: 125). Poor quality copies continue to be made and are

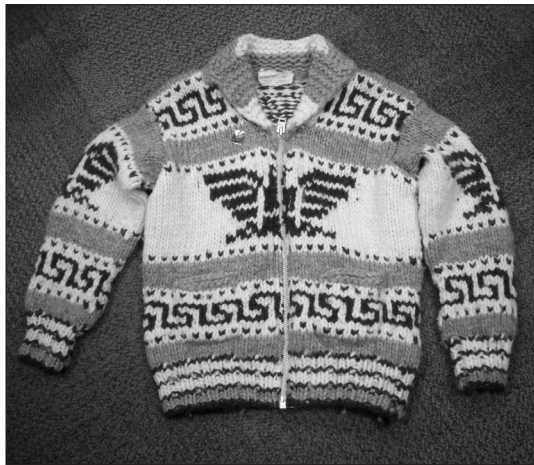
actively marketed in Vancouver and Victoria, with twice as many copies selling as originals (Welsh 2000). In recent decades the number of knitters of authentic sweaters has declined considerably and “Cowichan-style” copies sell at half the cost. Although the Cowichan Band does not have any copyright protection on the sweater, they have registered the Name “Genuine Cowichan” and sweaters are each given a registration number with a label indicating “Cowichan Indian Knit” (Stopp 2009: 28).

The imitation sweater business has remained extensive and competitive especially with fashion-based markets in Japan and New York<sup>11</sup> where there is little understanding or appreciation of the trademark qualities of this garment and its association with the Coast Salish. The characteristics that made the Cowichan sweater a garment of long-standing marketability were gradually abandoned to accommodate shifting market demands. The sweaters lost the originality of design in order to satisfy dealers filling enormous overseas shipments; the speed of production compromised quality in favour of quantity; and the rough, weatherproof wool that was for so long a signature of this garment was replaced with thinner, refined, multi-ply wool fibres that lack durability (Olsen 1998: 127).

In the 1980s—when commercially produced imitation sweaters threatened the future of Coast Salish knitting—dealers, knitters and the Cowichan people rallied in a number of ways. Store owner Judy Hill worked on reasserting the quality of the original sweaters, increasing the price paid to the knitters, and re-educating both knitters and customers. On June 23, 1981, the Cowichan Band Council produced a resolution listing the necessary requirements for an authentic Cowichan sweater:

- A durable hand knit finished product made from unprocessed water repellent wool
- Of long stranded wool spun to produce a strong yarn
- Having geometric or animal designs on the clothing

**Fig. 8**  
The durability of the Cowichan sweater is evident in this example, more than thirty years old, of the cardigan style. It shows traits typical of all true Cowichan sweaters, including a shawl collar of three sections; sloping, inset shoulders; horizontal decorative motifs combining both geometric and non-geometric patterns; natural wool colour tones; and the thick, well-spun, single-ply wool fibre that makes these garments durable. (Courtesy of the Fulton / Pearen family, Ottawa).



**Fig. 9 (Left)**  
The same sweater as in Fig. 8 laid out to show two traits of a true Cowichan sweater—namely, the absence of side seams, and continuous knitting of the sweater body. On other sweater types, a seam joining the front and back sections would normally be visible extending from the underarm to the bottom cuff. (Courtesy of the Fulton / Pearen family, Ottawa.)

- Sweaters which are knit in the round producing a tubular seamless body
- Sleeves are knitted or attached by yarn
- Having no artificial or natural dyes. (Olsen 1998: 130)

The Council continues to work toward legal protection of the name “Cowichan” used overseas.

## Conclusion

Coast Salish knitting has its roots in ancient fibre processing traditions as well as in European craft technique, and in this respect it is considered a hybrid, transcultural or acculturative art. Such products have in the past been relegated to the sidelines in scholarly approaches because of perceived lack of authenticity, failure to recognize and acknowledge the rich source of information provided about contact between cultures, intensive economic production, and especially about emerging aesthetic expression in post-contact culture. As art historian Ruth Phillips has observed, the discourse of authenticity represents a failure of real respect for the transformative cultural processes that First Nations underwent, and that colonial cultures insisted they undergo,

while seeking the authentic. These objects represent the evidence of ethnicity in a new age, by taking imported baseline techniques and actively negotiating and transforming them into authentic expressions (Phillips 1998; Graburn 1968: 457). Coast Salish knitting represents many interleaved elements, among them the blending of ancient Coast Salish fibre working, itself unique among North American indigenous textile traditions, with European knitting and the persistent productivity of skilled but poor families who used knitting as a way of making ends meet. In the Cowichan sweater, knitters developed a distinctive garment type using spinning techniques and tools that were, in the context of North American fibre-working traditions, unique to the Coast Salish. The result was the creation of a distinctive sweater type of exacting design. Wool processing and knitting maintained age-old cultural standards related to women’s work and the contribution of women to wealth. In effect, the valued blankets produced by pre-contact Coast Salish women as items of wealth and prestige find their post-contact expression in the equally unique and prized Cowichan sweater.

## Notes

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1. Many knitters also came from Sooke, Songhees, Saanich, Malahat, Chemainus, Kuper Island and smaller villages.
2. Sylvia Olsen has recently published her excellent MA research on the Cowichan sweater knitters as *Working With Wool: A Coast Salish Legacy and the Cowichan Sweater* (Winlaw, BC: Sono Nis Press, 2010).
3. Smallpox may have arrived earlier than the 1770s, in advance of the actual arrival of Europeans on the coast (M. Black, Royal British Columbia Museum, letter to author, February 18, 2009).
4. Dr. Turner’s work has catalogued lost resource areas that bespeak the diverse environments and resources used by the Coast Salish as well as their range of technical and environmental knowledge. Resource areas include, among others, cranberry bogs, eelgrass beds and herring spawning grounds, salmon and trout creeks, clam and oyster beds, tidal flats where root vegetables were cultivated, cedar trees whose bark and wood people relied upon, yew and other tree species used for wood and for medicine.

5. Coast Salish women bred special wool dogs and each weaver's wealth was partially determined by the number of dogs she owned. Extinct shortly after 1866, the dogs were kept on small islands to prevent inter-breeding with other dog breeds. Their hair was densely curled and could not be woven on its own but was combined with mountain goat hair. There are, however, few extant specimens of dog hair fibre in early blankets. Study of "almost all of the historical Northwest Coast textiles in museums in North America and Europe" revealed only one dog hair blanket collected about 1893 from Neah Bay, Washington, in Gustafson (1980: 79-86). Dog hair may have been used for items that have not survived over time. In 1889, anthropologist Franz Boas stated that wool dogs had been extinct for some time (Lutz 2006: 224; Olsen, 1998: 19-20; Huck 2007; Schulting 1994).
6. Luschiim (Arvid Charlie), son of Master carver Simon Charlie, recalled at least three families who raised sheep, including his grandfather, Abel Charlie, as well as Patrick Charlie, husband of the famous Cowichan knitter, Mrs. Patrick (Amelia) Charlie, and the Page family of Tzouhalem (Kathryn Gagnon, Curator/Manager, Cowichan Valley Museum and Archives, based on communication with Cowichan elders, November 2008).
7. As in Lefoli's (1965: 50) image of John Diefenbaker fishing in his Cowichan sweater.
8. Spindles appear to have been turned both clockwise and counter-clockwise, to produce what in spinning jargon is known as S-spun or Z-spun yarn, respectively (Gustafson 1980: 91; Buxton 1992: 37, 48-50).
9. The dragon motif on Cowichan sweaters, while clearly of Eastern origin, may have resonated with recorded petroglyphs on southern Vancouver Island of zoomorphic serpent-like figures with long undulating bodies (as shown in Lundy 1983: 91). Salish knitter Marilyn George believed that her grandmother adapted the dragon motif from a Chinese tea box (Meikle 1987: 18, fig. 32).
10. In Sylvia Olsen's *Yetsa's Sweater* (2006), the young girl wears a sweater with wave, flower and salmon motifs that link with family stories.
11. "Invest in Liberty and Look Cool While Staying Warm" details the extent to which these sweaters are copied (Yahoo! Groups 2003).

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