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A Woolly Tale: Salish Weavers Once Raised a Now-Extinct Dog for Its Hair

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by Patricia Jollie

In 1792, Captain George Vancouver of the British Royal Navy was in the middle of his five-year expedition along the North Pacific Coast of North America when he witnessed something startling. Dogs have been used throughout the Americas as guards, to aid in hunting or for

companionship for thousands of years. However, the region's Coast Salish inhabitants were raising a particular breed of dog for a unique reason—their woolly coats.

"The dogs belonging to this tribe of Indians were numerous and resembled those of Pomerania, though, in general, somewhat larger," Vancouver wrote in his journal. "They were all shorn as close to the skin as sheep are in England."

(https://www.americanindianmagazine.org/sites/default/files/styles/max_1300x1300/public/2021-02/gallery_painting.jpg?itok=StDExUPW)

Explorer and artist Paul Kane's painted stylized version of a scene of Songhees/Saanich (Central Coast Salish) weavers on Vancouver Island in British Colombia was one of reasons the Salish were associated with their unique breed of woolly dog. Image Courtesy of the Royal Ontario Museum, © ROM

"A Woman Weaving a Blanket," Paul Kane, oil on canvas, Southeastern Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada, 1849-

A Vanishing Canine

The Coast Salish live from the Bute Inlet in British Columbia to the Columbia River in Oregon. A study published in the Journal of Archaeology in September 2020 reported that domestic canine bones have been found throughout Salish and Makah settlements along this upper North Pacific Coast of North America, some of which are 6,000 years old. Remains of the "woolly dog" were found throughout the region. They were recognized by their significantly smaller size compared to other village dogs (about 17 inches high), and traces of their fish-rich diet could be found in the composition of their bones.

This small canine was of the Spitz variety, with a curled tail and very furry, upright ears. Their long, white or light brown hair was excellent for yarn, since these lighter colors were more accepting of dyes and their fine strands were easily spun. Vancouver reported that "so compact were their fleeces that large portions could be lifted up by a corner without causing any separation." Vancouver and others observed that the Salish people raised these small dogs in pens and isolated on islands, separating them from the community's other dogs so they would not interbreed and diminish the quality of their valued fleece.

The dogs' hair supplemented the Salish's other traditional source of wool, mountain goats. The Coast Salish obtained wild goat wool by trading with those who lived more inland and were able to collect the goat's wool that was shed in the spring or hunt the animals in the mountains. Squamish Hereditary Chief Janice George says her great-grandfather would hunt goats in the "Ch'ich'iyúy Elxwíkn," (Twin Sisters, also known as the Lion Mountains) above the Squamish Nation's land in British Colombia. She says he "not only had to climb miles up, but also bring them down."

This took an exceptional amount of effort, so blankets and clothing made from goat hair were typically reserved for events marking a change in a person's life, such as naming ceremonies, weddings and funerals. However, no matter what wool was used, blankets and other woven pieces were often supplemented with plant material such stinging nettle, fireweed or cedar spun into the wool to make it stronger.

In 1827, the Hudson Bay Company established Fort Langley on the boarder of British Columbia. It began to sell its sheep wool blankets, which could be more quickly made than traditional dog and goat blankets, to surrounding communities. The practice of keeping woolly dogs separate from village dogs began to decline until herds of woolly dog eventually disappeared by the mid-19th century. The last known Salish woolly dog was said to have died in 1940.

The Last Threads

Textiles confirmed to be woven with woolly dog hair are rare in museum collections. The only known woolly dog fleece is in the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, collected in the mid-1800s.

Determining what kind of wool was used to weave textiles by just looking at them is nearly impossible. Microscopic analysis has been used for some time to link threads to their animal or plant source, but Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian and NMNH used a more precise approach to verify if any of the Salish textiles in the museums' collections were actually woven with dog hair.

In 2010, NMAI textile conservator Susan Heald and conservation scientist Caroline Solazzo at Smithsonian's Museum Conservation Institute used protein mass spectrometry to examine small fiber samples taken from nine blankets, a fur robe and a belt in the NMNH and NMAI collections. The textiles all dated from 1803 to 1927. This technique looks at the structural proteins in the fibers to identify the genus of the species used. As Heald says, "dog hair would have a different protein fingerprint than goat hair or sheep hair, and proteomic analysis quantifies those differences." Compared to microscopy, which relies on a hair's morphological features, or structure, she says "proteomics can offer more specificity, especially when a fiber's morphology is altered by age and physical damage."

In a paper published in Antiquity in 2011, the researchers revealed that whereas five blankets, the robe and the belt at NMNH all contained dog hair, none was found in any of the three blankets in the NMAI's collections. These were woven with goat hair, and one blanket from each museum also contained sheep wool.

The plain twill woven ceremonial blankets in NMAI's collections were created using mountain goat hair. This could indicate that goat hair was preferable over dog hair for ceremonial items. Dog hair was also used in all the textiles produced prior to 1862 but absent from those woven

between the late 19th century to early 20th century. Therefore, the researchers concluded, in those textiles created during the mid-19th century or earlier, dog hair was probably used to boost the thickness and strength of the blankets' goat hair.

While Heald says she was "really hopeful" that the NMAI blankets contained dog hair, given these were dating into the 20th century when commercial blankets were coming into the market, she wasn't surprised to find some contained sheep wool. "Traders and others coming into the territory disrupted a lot of traditional living and access to resources," she says.

Reviving a Dying Art

George says that whether during a wedding, the naming of a child or a memorial, weaving is "the foundation of our ceremonies." At the beginning of a ceremony, blankets are often put down for the person to stand on as "a pure space for someone to go into a new part of their life," she says.

Yet even though weaving is so central to Salish culture, just a few decades ago, the traditional art was in danger of going the way of the woolly dog. George says generations of her people, including her grandmother and mother, went to Canada residential schools where they weren't allowed to learn or teach traditions such as weaving. "That is a long time to have a gap in your culture," she says.

But thanks to the efforts of a group of Coast Salish weavers, the art is once again thriving. Susan Pavel, president and founder of the Coast Salish Wool Weaving Center in Skokomish, Washington, has been teaching traditional Salish weaving classes for the past two decades. She first learned from her husband's uncle, Skokomish master weaver Bruce Miller, when only a handful of people in his community were known to be still practicing traditional weaving. Since Pavel started teaching in 2004, more than 3,000 people have learned how to weave Salish textiles.

Pavel was among a group of weavers to make the first mountain goat and sheep wool twinned blanket in the community in generations. They took 12 years gathering enough wild mountain goat hair and another two years to weave the blanket. The weavers revealed it in a 2006 ceremony. "It was a monumental event," says Pavel.

George, who learned from Pavel and Miller, now serves as a board member and teacher for the Coast Salish Wool Weaving Center. She was among those chosen to weave robes for the Squamish, one of the four First Nations who hosted the opening ceremonies of the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver. The weavers worked from 2004 to 2010 to make enough robes for the Squamish who participated in the event. "Much work and love went into that regalia," she says. "We were so proud."

George and other students of Pavel and Miller have taught for the Squamish Nation Education Department, which has since developed weaving curricula. They have also taught at colleges, high schools and elementary schools. She says before the weavers started teaching, she would see Squamish people having to use Pendleton blankets in ceremonies as they didn't have any from her culture. "Now our blankets are in our ceremonies," she says.

One of the most meaningful uses of the traditional robes was to wrap remains of ancestors who were repatriated from the Canadian Museum of History in Quebec in 2006. "It showed our people what the weaving is for," says George.

So while the woolly dog is no longer with the Coast Salish people, its legacy lives on. It is a reminder of an art being brought back into the contemporary Coast Salish culture, engendering pride and furthering the Salish's cultural identity.

"Nothing is ever gone," George says. "The weaving techniques were sleeping in our community and we were privileged to wake them up."

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