Art & Craft, Indigenous Art and Craft

Warp and Woof: The Unexpected Story of Dogs' Wool

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By **Michelle Woodvine**

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Coming, as I do, from a community of word players and pranksters, when I first heard the term *chiengora*, I was convinced that someone was pulling my leg. This portmanteau of *chien*, the French word for dog, and -*gora*, from the word *Angora*, is used to describe—you guessed it—fibre made from dog hair. And, while it's often the target of skepticism and the source of some truly awful puns, dog-hair yarn is far from a joke.

Having lived with numerous dogs and cats over the years, the appeal seemed obvious, if initially far-fetched (pun intended). I mean, who hasn't surveyed the seemingly impossible volume of pet hair covering every surface in their home, and thought, "Surely, there has to be a use for all.this.hair."

Photo credit Alla Pogrebnaya/Shutterstock.com.

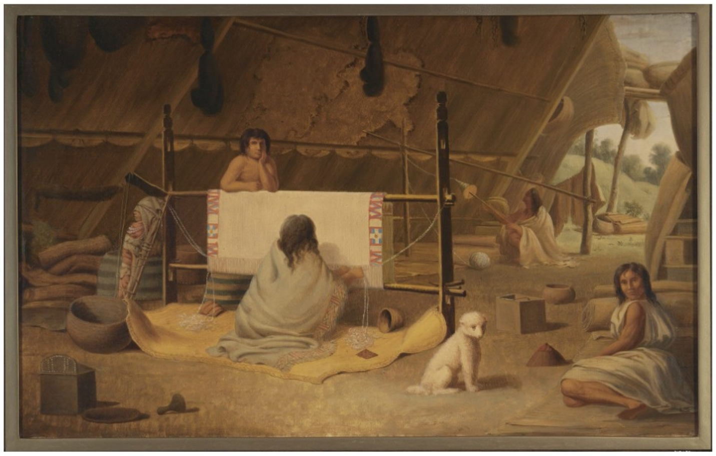
As Instagram-worthy trends go, you'd not be faulted for thinking that spinning—and then weaving, knitting, or crocheting—dog hair is a new fad; influencers tout chiengora as the latest in sustainable, zero-waste, slow fashion. But, while they're correct about the positive attributes of dog hair-based fibre, it is by no means new. In fact, chiengora has a history—and a Canadian connection—that might surprise you.

The Coast Salish Woolly Dog

The story of the Coast Salish wool dog, like many other "Canadian" stories, was ignited by Indigenous ingenuity and extinguished by European colonization [1]. The history of these little white dogs—once a major part of a thriving economic system along the coast of the Pacific Northwest—remains alive today thanks to the oral histories of the Coast Salish Peoples and years of research by teams of archaeologists, anthropologists, historians, ethnographers, textile scientists, and microscopists. (Visit the sources, linked here and in the included reference list, for more information about the multidisciplinary effort to recover the story of the wool dog.)

Thousands of years ago, Indigenous societies living along the coast of what is now British Columbia, Oregon, and Washington State, had a problem: The only animal fibre available for weaving came from mountain goats, and it could only be obtained through trade or by gathering it on long, difficult treks into the mountains. At this point in time, domesticated dogs already had a long history of living alongside humans [2], and what happened next may have been a first for a non-agrarian community anywhere in the world.

Coast Salish women turned to dogs as a source of fibre, developing a selective breeding program to create a wool dog with soft, spinnable fur.



Coast Salish wool dogs were valued for their fibre, but they were also beloved companions. In this scene, captured by the artist Paul Kane, a weaver (thought to be from the Songhees or Saanich Coast Salish community in what we now call Vancouver Island, British Columbia) weaves an intricately patterned white blanket, as a small, white wool dog sits beside her.

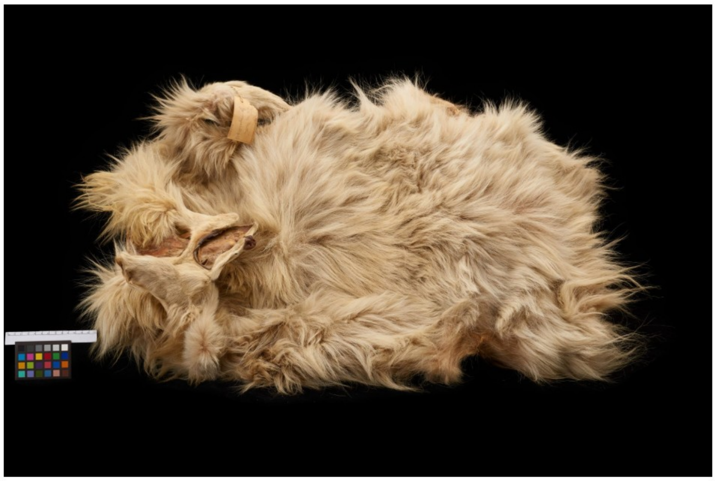
Photo Credit: *A Woman Weaving a Blanket*. Paul Kane. Created sometime between 1849 and 1856, this painting currently hangs in the Daphne Cockwell Gallery dedicated to First Peoples art & culture at the Royal Ontario Museum. Courtesy of ROM (Royal Ontario Museum), Toronto, Canada. ©ROM

These small, white dogs, with their fox-like faces and upturned tails, are described as most closely resembling the contemporary Spitz dog.

Woof! Coast Salish wool dogs are thought to have most closely resembled the contemporary Spitz breed, like this German Spitz dog. Photo Credit: Lenkadan/Shutterstock.com

The women took great care of the dogs—who were, by many accounts, also beloved companions—feeding them a diet rich in seafood and marine mammals, singing to them as they brushed their fur, and isolating them on near-shore islands when necessary to keep the breeding lines separate from other dogs in the community (those used for hunting or guarding). Then, twice a year, the women used mussel knives to shear the dogs' coats. The fur was mixed with mountain-goat fibre, plant fibre, and goose down to create a strong, warm yarn which was then dyed and woven into blankets. In addition to everyday uses, these often colourful and intricately designed blankets were used in ceremonies and for trade. Not only were they important symbols of wealth and community connection, but the use of dog hair formed a connection with the spirit world, as dogs played significant roles in the lore and mythology of coastal Peoples.

Sadly, the story of the Coast Salish wool dog does not have a happy ending. European colonization brought an influx of cheap wool blankets to the Pacific Northwest and eventually the Coast Salish women stopped isolating the dogs. **Oral histories describe the RCMP killing the dogs along the shorelines** in what is now British Columbia, and by 1858 the Coast Salish wool dog was virtually extinct.



In 1859, naturalist C.B.R. Kennerly collected the pelt of the American ethnologist George Gibbs' "famous Indian dog, Mutton" for the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History. Comparing hair proteins from this pelt and those found in one of the few remaining Coast Salish blankets from the period, scientists proved that fibre from wool dogs had been used by the Coast Salish Peoples to create textiles. This pelt is thought to be the only remaining wool dog specimen.

Photo Credit: Brittany Hance. The Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History. (USNM 4762 Canis familiaris "Wooly Dog" – Skin: dorsal) Image used under CC0. http://n2t.net/ark:/65665/m33a7e2576-42fe-46be-9afc-123905e46dd1

Dogs of War

The demise of the wool dog in North America did not mean the end for dog-hair yarn, and as two World Wars raged across Europe in the first half of the 20th century, dogs were once again called upon to solve a fibre shortage problem.

In 1918, as more and more wool was diverted to the war effort for uniforms and equipment, U.K. civilian populations faced growing shortages, and the British Dogs' Wool Association was formed. Posters went up around London, and newspaper articles and advertisements reached as far afield as The Globe newspaper in Toronto as the Association made a special appeal to owners of long-haired dogs to send in their pets' combings. At the time, the Royal Academy of Art in London had given the use of seven of its galleries to the Red Cross to accommodate more than 1,200 volunteer sewists making bandages and garments for distribution to the sick and wounded. Soon, the British Dogs' Wool Association joined them, setting up spinning wheels to spin hair from dog breeds like the Chow, Pomeranian, Borzoi, Samoyed, and others. The yarn, compared favourably to the finest wool, was used to make warm, hard-wearing mittens, stockings, socks, sweaters, cardigans, et cetera [3].

In the 1940s it was the turn of the Canine Defense League to appeal to the British public for dog hair both to mitigate WWII-related wool shortages and as part of a national anti-waste campaign. The Canine Defense League (now known as the Dogs' Trust) is an animal welfare charity that housed hundreds of dogs during the Second World War. When they set out to test the potential of dog hair as a source of yarn for garments and accessories, they were quickly inundated by donations. As spinners set to work, there was soon a shortage of both spinning wheels and spinners, prompting campaign organizers to call on Highland crofters to help spin the fibre! (The British Pathé film and newsreel archive includes several fascinating reports from this period about the production of dog wool, and links to these are included in the reading list.)

Hair of the Dog

Dogs produce three types of hairs: whiskers, coarser guard hairs of the outer coat, and finer hairs of the undercoat. This undercoat hair, often with a lovely "halo" property, much like hair from the Angora rabbit, is spun to create chiengora. Conveniently, this undercoat is the hair that is mostly shed onto you and your furniture.

"But hold on just a minute," I can hear all the fibre experts asking, "What about barbs? What about crimp?!" The characteristic tensile and insulating properties of wool come from barbs (microscopic hooks on the outside of each fibre that allow it to grab onto surrounding fibres) and crimp (related to the cellular structure of the fibre). Dog hair doesn't have barbs or crimp, so fabric made with dog hair doesn't have the same stretch and feltability as wool. However, because dog hairs are hollow, chiengora can be up to eight times warmer than wool (giving a whole new meaning to *sweater*). Chiengora's warmth and tensile properties, in addition to the small-scale production of dog hair, is why it is often blended with other fibres before being knitted into garments.

Toasty toes! Dog hair has a "halo" quality like Angora and is incredibly warm. Photo Credit: Maryna Muzyka/Shutterstock.com.

Sit. Stay. Good Dog!

If you're eyeing your dog right now and thinking of getting the brush out, you might want to first make sure Fido's got what it takes to make for a cozy pair of socks. According to Modern Farmer Magazine, the "double coated" breeds are best, like Briard, Collie, Old English Sheepdog, Bernese Mountain Dog, Samoyed, and Golden Retriever. These breeds have a dense, soft undercoat, with fibres that are long enough for spinning (at least 5 cm/2 in).

If your dog fits the bill, then save those combings, and once you have a grocery bags' worth (about 170 g/6 oz), you should have enough to make a scarf. Spin the fibre yourself (see the resources section for a how-to book recommendation) or send it to one of the several spinners in North America who specialize in spinning dog hair. Either way, you'll have a warm, soft yarn that you can use to create an eco-friendly, sustainable, and cherished memento of your beloved woof.

References:

[1] Morell, Virginia. "The Dogs That Grew Wool and the People Who Love Them." *Hakai Magazine.* February 23, 2021.

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Additional Resources:

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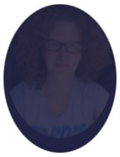

About Michelle Woodvine

Michelle Woodvine is a Toronto-based freelance writer and editor on a quest to never stop learning and making. When not wordsmithing for others, Michelle can usually be found working on her trilogy of speculative fiction novels, learning a new skill, or goofing around with her family (including her very own rocket scientist, two teenage boys, and one feisty ginger cat). Follow the weird, wonderful, and wordy adventures @woodvinewrites or visit www.woodvinewrites.com

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