

Spinning Straw into Gold

(By: **Kass McGann**, as posted in the Winter '99 Plague)

This October at Hastings, many of you may have seen me wandering around with what looked like my grandmother's ponytail over my left shoulder and a chopstick in my right hand. Those who didn't already know asked and found out that I was spinning flax.

Flax was spun by the ancient Egyptians and the Swiss lake dwellers. Flax was probably the first fiber ever spun, predating the use of wool.

Flax is one of a number of plants that are used to make linen (the others include nettle and hemp). Most of what we call linen today is made from the flax plant.

Flax is a bast fiber. That means that the fiber comes from its stalk, not the "fruit" as do tufts of cotton. Flax grows in tall, closely planted stems that greatly resemble hay or straw. It grows to three or four feet high and has delicate blue flowers. The flowers produce sesame-size linseeds used for oil and as dietary fiber. Flax is usually pulled from the ground, not cut, so that the fiber can be as long as possible.

To prepare flax to be spun, many steps must be followed. First the flax must be retted to remove the woody fiber from the stalks. There are two methods of retting: dew or field retting and pond or stream retting. Dew retting involves laying the stalks on the ground for up to a month and allowing the dew to keep the plants wet until the woody husk rots off. Stream retting takes considerably less time (ten days to two weeks). The stalks are tied underwater and the wood rinses away. Stream and pond retting, however, pollute the water supply and are much more costly than dew retting.

After retting and drying, the flax must be broken. The flax is either beaten with a wooden mallet or chopped on a flax break. This breaks the remaining woody material on the stalks. Next, a scutching blade is used. This wooden "sword" is used to scrape the flax until the woody outside starts to fall off. Then the flax is hackled. The hackler drags the flax through a device that looks like a 6" x 6" bed of nails. Usually the flax is hackled on two or three different hackles of varying degrees of coarseness. The flax is pulled through the coarsest one until it pulls smoothly. Then the hackler moves to the next fine hackle and so on. Once the flax is hackled on the finest hackle and all the wood is off, it resembles human hair. Pond-retted flax looks blonde while dew-retted flax has a grayish tint. That's why you thought it was my grandmother's ponytail!

There are quite a few differences between spinning flax and spinning wool, the least of which is not that flax is a plant and wool is an animal. Cotton, for instance, spins remarkably like wool. Flax is different. Wool (and most other fibers) is spun clockwise. The superstition that spinning anti-clockwise was "evil" probably developed from the same idea that left-handed people were "sinister" (left-handed spinners tend to spin counter-clockwise). Flax is usually spun counter-clockwise. The truth is that the cellular structure of the fiber is such that it spins better counter-clockwise. If wetted and allowed to dry naturally, the individual flax fiber will turn itself in a counter-clockwise direction. However, the extant linen garments in the London excavations show clockwise-spun thread. Perhaps the fear of being "sinister" was enough so that the fiber was spun "against the grain" as it were.

Spinning flax on a hand spindle is also very different from spinning wool. Primarily, the flax fiber is much longer and does not need to be drafted like wool. It also requires a smaller amount of twist to stay together. When you spin flax, you must keep it wet. This activates the natural gum in the fiber and makes it stick to itself. Most spinners keep a cup or bowl near them to wet their fingers and brush the flax strands. I tend to either lick my fingers and stroke the flax or run the fiber through my mouth; both techniques were practiced in the medieval period.

Tomb paintings show the ancient Egyptians spinning flax on a top-whorl drop spindle. The spindle hung from the thread like a wool drop spindle. It is rolled down the thigh to give it its spin. Therefore, flax spun by a right-handed person on a top-whorl spindle yields counter-clockwise spun yarn (S twist). However, Western European flax spinners are depicted spinning on a bottom-whorl or no-whorl spindle that is supported in their fingers. Because little or no weight is put on the thread, flax can be spun very fine with a supported spindle. When spun in the right hand, the natural tendency is to push with the thumb and thus spin the spindle clockwise. Perhaps that is why the London linens are Z twist (clockwise spun).

European paintings and engravings show women and men spinning with a distaff either under their non-spinning arm, into their belt, or into a bench designed for that purpose. A distaff is simply a stick around the top of which the flax fiber is wrapped for easy drawing. Flax can be spun without a distaff (as I was doing at Hastings), but it certainly makes things easier to manage. Egyptian tomb paintings show an assembly line of workers. Some hackle the flax, others separate it into easily spinable sections, and yet others roll the sections into balls and place them behind the spinner. With this production team, there is no need for a distaff.

References:

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