

Indigo and Wool: Teaching history through learning ancient crafts

For years I have spun and dyed wool as a personal hobby, in addition to other fiber arts such as knitting and weaving. Though knitting is fairly popular nowadays, the other three are best described as niche, invisible unless one is looking for it. In fact, the processes of creating textiles are largely invisible in the modern United States – their manufacture, from raw material to finished product, is largely done overseas. Many, if not most of us, do not think of how our clothes, or any of the textiles that we use in our lives, are created. The not-so-hidden secret, at least to any hand spinner, is that the entire process, from beginning to end, is time-consuming and laborious. And the fact is that all of these crafts, as practiced by individuals, were mainstays of textile production until 150 or so years ago. Even today, textile production, particularly finishing garments, is one of the least automated aspects of modern manufacturing. It is no exaggeration to identify textile production as a major focus of human labor throughout history.

Many classicists have struggled with passages in Latin and Greek literature that involve textile production, from sheep or flax to finished product. No surprise, based on life in the modern industrialized world. And this disconnect is also seen in courses on ancient history and civilization – it's difficult to imagine something that many of us have little idea how to create. Diagrams are often only somewhat helpful. What has made a difference, both to me as well as to students I have taught, is not only seeing the process in person, but also actually learning how to spin wool and dye with indigo.

I have demonstrated and taught a wide range of audiences, from preschool to adult, about fiber arts for years. For the past three years, I have run intensive workshops for University of Iowa honors students contrasting ancient and modern textiles. They learn how humans first began to use fiber, dating to almost 30,000 years ago, as well as the significance of fiber and

what E.W. Barber called the “twist revolution” to human technology, contrasted with the modern perception of clothing as consumer goods. The advent of “fast fashion,” emphasizing the disposable aspect of clothing and focusing on appearance more than quality, may be closer to an extreme, but nevertheless represents a stark contrast to how textiles have historically been valued.

Most importantly, students in these workshops learn how to spin wool on spindles and dye with indigo. Spindles, not spinning wheels, have been the most common tools used to spin fiber around the world prior to industrialization. While the Greeks and Romans did not themselves commonly dye textiles with indigo, they did have access to them through trade, and used indigo for paints. Indigo itself was and is used all over the world, even today, and the chemical process of applying the color is also of interest to students of antiquity because it is the same as using murex to create the crimson purple familiar to the Greeks and Romans.

What students gain from seeing and learning these processes is substantial. They go beyond diagrams into understanding the significance of these activities for literature and history. For example, students immediately understand why the Latin for “spin wool” is *deduco* – it is apparent when seeing a spinner draft out wool for a drop spindle. Speaking as an historian, at least as significant is understanding at a deep level the time commitment and labor needed to create even the simplest garment. This insight in turn can be deployed to explain, among other topics, gender roles in labor, as well as the very different consequences for the economy based on that labor.

I will demonstrate aspects of spinning during this presentation and will bring a variety of material to share with the audience. In addition, I will provide resources for audience members interested in pursuing the topic for their own teaching.