

Welcome to Indigenous Stories and Songs. Here is Dylan Thomas, Indigenous Artist in Residence with the City of Victoria, telling us about the Salish Wool Dog.

Wool Dogs

The Salish Wool dog is an extinct breed of dog that, until the 20th century, had lived alongside most Salish communities for over a millennium on the NW Coast. This small white dog resembled a modern Samoyed with a thicker and curly coat of fur. The Wool Dog was the only type of dog in North America that, before European contact, was deliberately bred and maintained through animal husbandry. Since there were no domesticated goats or sheep in North America, wool typically had to be collected from the wild and was therefore a rare luxury for most Tribes in the region. But this was not the case for the Coast Salish. Through selective breeding, the Coast Salish people (for *at least* fourteen hundred years, according to archeological research) purposely bred dogs that produced a thick, long, and woolly coat of fur, which could be sheered twice a year and processed into textiles.

From a young age, Salish women learned how to spin wool into yarn on a spindle whorl and weave yarn into the various textiles that distinguished Coast Salish regalia from that of their coastal neighbors. Wool also appeared on most ceremonial objects and was frequently gifted in rituals and cultural events. For the Coast Salish, the spindle whorl became abundance and cultural importance, and Salish artists frequently adorned them with intricate relief carvings of animals, humans, and much more. These elaborate objects became a defining feature of Salish art, and their circular designs have remained essential to the Salish art tradition, even to this day.

Due to its significance, wool essentially became a type of proto-currency in the Salish world, with yarn and textiles becoming the economic metric against which all other valuable items could be measured. This allowed for reliable and fair exchanges between individuals, families, and tribes – which helped the Salish economy become more robust and complex.

Considering the beneficial impact that wool had on Salish culture, it should come as no surprise that the Wool Dogs were cherished within the community. Unlike the semi-wild “Hunting Dogs”, Wool Dogs received personal names, were allowed to sleep indoors – and according to most accounts, were cared for much like a contemporary lap dog.

But keeping the breed pure and producing wool required a tremendous amount of effort and resources: since Wool Dogs were a smaller breed, Salish communities needed to continuously care for a large number of dogs to maintain wool production; since dogs are carnivores, they had to sacrifice a significant amount of their salmon supply to feed the pack; and since their woolly coats were due to a recessive gene, their bloodline needed to remain pure – which meant that the dog breeders had to tirelessly keep them separated from the hunting dogs to prevent interbreeding.

When Europeans introduced new textiles and Sheep’s wool to the Northwest Coast, they were able to offer them at a much cheaper rate than traditional Salish textiles. Sheep – as a large, grass-fed farm animal (rather than a small meat-eating pet) – produced significantly more wool for far less labor and resources. The sudden introduction of cheaper wool into the Salish world instantly depleted the Wool Dogs economic importance. And as a result, the millennia-old practice of breeding Wool Dogs became too costly to maintain. And as Salish communities shifted their focus away from dog breeding, the Wool Dogs began interbreeding with the hunting dogs and European breeds – then quickly vanished.

While the Salish Wool Dog as a breed may be lost forever, its legacy is still evident in nearly all aspects of Coast Salish culture: wool still adorns most ceremonial objects and regalia; Salish textiles have undergone a renaissance in the past century, with the knitted “Cowichan sweater” evolving from traditional weaving patterns. And despite rarely being used as a functional object, the spindle whorl has become an icon of contemporary Coast Salish art – appearing on prints, wood carvings, jewelry, glass, and much more.