Cowichan Indian Knitting

Margaret Meikle
Figure 1. Mrs. Mabel Modeste using the characteristic Cowichan technique of knitting with a number of double pointed needles to produce a seamless garment with set-in sleeves. Koksilah Reserve, 1985.
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Figure 2. George family, Shell Beach, 1985.
Now praise the Indian sweater
    In accents clear and bold!
No garment suits us better
    For working in the cold.

While water pipes are frozen,
    While wood-piles melt away,
That trusty garb is chosen
    When buckling for the fray.

For, though it shows rotunder
    The over-portly form
The sweater is a wonder
    To make the blood run warm.

Oh, cherish, wear and guard it;
    Refuse to have it washed;
All hints that we discard it
    Indoors may too be squashed.

So thank you, woolly baa-lamb,
    For yielding us your fleece.
Thank-you, whoe'er you are, ma'am,
    Who first removed the grease;

Who carded, span, and knitted,
    With labour and with art,
Each sweater snuggly fitted
    About a grateful heart.

Nika

The Cowichan Leader 20 February 1936.
Introduction

Genuine Cowichan sweaters are more than warm woollen outer garments: they are visual statements, symbols of the West Coast, readily identifiable Canadian dress. They are collectors' items for hundreds of thousands of people worldwide, and have been presented as official gifts to heads of state and even royalty.

Why do these Cowichan sweaters, essentially unchanged in about eighty years, remain popular? Certainly because they are economical, waterproof, serviceable, sturdy, beautifully patterned, durable, and locally-made for the coastal British Columbia climate. Still, other garments share many of these qualities. It is the distinctive Indianness of the sweaters that makes them particularly attractive to both British Columbians and tourists, and creates the strong attachments owners have to them.

Personal affection for the Cowichan sweater and its life-long service is revealed in a letter from Mr. John Rennie of Victoria, written in 1984:

*I have one, purchased for me by my parents about 1929. I would estimate that the price at that time would have been $15.00 or less as money was very scarce. This sweater has seen a lot of service, is still in excellent condition, and I can and do, still wear it on occasion. During World War II while serving with the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry in England and Italy for five years, I had my wife mail it to me to wear under my uniform during the cold winters. She removed the collar so that it would not show above the uniform collar.

When I returned home from the war the collar was stitched back on and [the sweater] was used for three years while I was engaged in bridge building and repairs on the Alaska Highway in the Yukon. It has also seen service during the cold winters in Manitoba and northern B.C. Since then I have used it fairly regularly up to present date.*

The garment that created such loyalty has an unusual history, requires distinctive wool preparation, needs special knitting techniques, and incorporates a variety of designs. It is unique among sweaters, and the demand for it has led to serious marketing problems with significant social consequences.

These characteristics—and the uniqueness of the Cowichan sweater—are the concern of this monograph. The author is indebted to the 1949 field research of Dr. Barbara Lane and the 1985 oral history project of Cowichan Band members Ramona Williams, Eva Williams, and Joyce Underwood.


Figure 3. HRH Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip, Nanaimo, 1959, PA-C123682; Figure 4, 8, 9. Private snapshots; Figure 5. Former Prime Minister and Mrs. John G. Diefenbaker, Ottawa, 1957; Figure 6. Mr. and Mrs. Jim Green at the Stone Church, Duncan, 1985; Figure 7. Mrs. Pat Charlie holding singer Bing Crosby’s sweater.
Figure 10. Cowichan Indian village, (Comaiken) and the stone St. Ann church under construction, 1866. The stone church has been restored and is now the Cowichan Band's Cultural Centre. HP C-9261.

Figure 11. Map of Southern British Columbia and northern Washington.
History of Cowichan Knitting

Cowichan knitting is an example of what anthropologists call the arts of acculturation: objects produced, typically for export, by minorities or indigenous peoples when contacted or colonized by larger societies. These arts reflect the history of the relations between the cultures in contact; they provide concrete material examples of culture contact, continuity, and change or acculturation, indicating how the smaller group has been influenced by the larger group. Cowichan knitting represents a combination of European textile techniques and Salish spinning and weaving methods. From this union, new tools, techniques and designs developed over the years.

Prior to the 1850s, when the first European settlers arrived in the Duncan area, the Cowichan people had been in contact with settlers in Fort Victoria and Sooke. Natives and settlers communicated in Chinook jargon, a mixture of English, French and several Northwest Coast native languages. Settlers were attracted by the Cowichan Valley, which provided rich potential for logging and fishing. Roman Catholic and Anglican Missions began visiting in the 1850s and took up residency in the following decade. In 1861 construction of the Goldstream Trail, a five foot wide cattle path from Victoria to Cowichan, was begun, supplementing the early canoe and steamship routes.

Before European contact the Coast Salish people wove blankets, leggings, and tumplines (burden straps) out of mountain goat wool, dog hair, and other fibres. The wool was spun with a spindle and whorl, and the blankets were woven on a two-bar loom. There is little information on pre-contact production and use of these weavings, although examples remain in museum collections. No archaeological or ethnographic evidence of knitting or knitting needles exists.

Sheep were introduced to Vancouver Island in the 1850s, providing a more plentiful source of wool. Knitting by native women probably began in a number of ways shortly thereafter. The most organized instruction in knitting was provided by the Sisters of St. Ann, missionaries who came from Victoria to the Cowichan Valley in 1864 to start a school for the Indians. They

Figure 12. Late 19th century Salish blanket, worn by Chief Tsaltelmalt of Koksilah, Vancouver Island. Acquired through the assistance of the National Museums of Canada Emergency Purchase Fund. M\A A17200.
taught the Cowichan women to knit such items as socks and mitts. The mission has records of students' knitting and other domestic skills being displayed at local fairs and at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893. Influence from the Anglican missionary in the Duncan area is also recorded:

...a systematic course of instruction is to be offered in connection with the Church of England mission at Cowichan. Every inducement is to be afforded them [the Indians] for improvement in agriculture, house building and fencing; and a gentleman is about to teach them how to manufacture the wool produced in the vicinity into clothing. The mission being already provided with a carding machine.

Victoria Times Colonist, 15 May 1869.

Similar instruction was occurring in other mission schools throughout the province. It is probable, however, that this formal instruction was only one of the ways that Salish women began to knit. Settlers who became their neighbours shared skills, and, with samples of knitting available to copy, native women skilled in other handwork most likely could teach themselves to knit.

After learning how to make socks and mitts, Cowichan women began to knit knee-length underwear and sweaters. Like the other garments, sweaters were and are today knit in the round with no seams, using multiple needles in the European style of the period. The earliest Cowichan sweaters were all of one colour, knitted with a turtle-neck. Some knitters used a raised stitch similar to the British garments called Ganseys—fishermen's seamless pullovers. Many settlers to the Cowichan area were British fishermen, who would have knit their own sweaters.

In time, Cowichan knitters began to embellish sweaters using the technique of two-colour or Fair Isle knitting, where the yarn not in use is carried along the back of the work between design units. The technique evolved in Fair Isle, one of the Shetland Islands north of Scotland, and became popular around 1910. The teaching of patterned sweater knitting is generally attributed to a settler from the Shetland Islands, Jerimina Colvin. Mrs. Colvin settled in Cowichan Station in 1885, raised sheep, and hand-spun and dyed her own wool. She probably began to teach knitting by the 1890s, and added patterns as she learned them from other Scottish settlers.

Figure 13. Longjohns by Michael Canute. Comiaken, 1985.
"They look sort of funny, Leroy... I didn't realize the Indians up here make slacks too..."

Figure 14. Barron, Victoria Daily Times, July 22, 1959.

Figure 15. Fair Isle Sweater by Mrs. Jerimina Colvin. Cowichan Station, 1925, Cowichan Historical Museum 983.2.1.

in two or three colours, producing a warm bulky outer garment, that contrasts with the fine multi-coloured Scottish garments made from lightweight two-ply dyed yarn.

The knitting industry's history has been reconstructed from various sources: accounts of informants during Dr. Lane's 1949 fieldwork and informants involved with the 1985 oral history programme of the Cowichan Band; archival documents; and an analysis of the techniques and materials used by the European settlers and by the Coast Salish people before contact.
Wool and Its Preparation

Until European contact and the introduction of knitting, Coast Salish women primarily used mountain goat wool for their textile production. Sheep were not introduced to Vancouver Island until the 1850's, shortly before the Cowichans learned to knit. Since then sheep's wool has been used exclusively for knitting Cowichan sweaters. Down breeds of sheep, such as Dorset, Hampshire and Suffolk, thrive in the coastal climate. Garments produced from the short lofty fleece of these local breeds are characterized by their uneven texture, their warmth and their lightness relative to overall bulk.

The preparation of greasy wool demands several steps, and early procedures have been modified over the years. The oldest wool processing method followed by Cowichan women involved six basic steps: the wool was washed, dried, hand teased, hand carded, drawn out and loosely spun by hand to make a roving, then tightened with a spindle and whorl. Today, many of these steps have been mechanized or eliminated. Some knitters still buy shorn fleeces and go through most of the traditional preparation, but most buy the washed and carded wool directly from a commercial carding mill such as Modeste's on the Koksilah Reserve in Duncan.
In 1949 Barbara Lane found that there were three ways the Cowichan procured wool from settlers before the commercially carded products became readily available:

*During the spring, Indians help white farmers shear their sheep in return for some of the wool. In the fall, the Indians buy the pelts of butchered animals. At other times of the year they buy sheared wool. A few Indians own sheep, but even these families are largely dependent on additional supplies.*

Lane 1951:17.

If wool is obtained from pelts, knitters remove it by leaving them out in the rain to soften and then pulling the wool out. Wool from any source must be washed in warm soapy water, rinsed a number of times, and hung on lines or spread out to dry. Yellowish wool is left in the
sun to bleach. Washing is done primarily during the warm summer weather. 

_Tourists watch for the wool drying on the line to know to come and buy sweaters._

Mary Harry, Koksilah Reserve, 1985.

Knitters hand-tease the dry wool to loosen and separate the matted or tangled fibres by pulling them apart. This allows the dirt, hay and twigs to fall out and makes the wool ready for carding.

**Carding**

Carding aligns fibres to make spinning easier and the yarn more even. Carding by hand is painstakingly hard work which Ellen Aleck, an elderly resident of Cowichan Lodge, remembers well:

_We couldn’t go to the Indian dancing; we had to stay home and work…teasing wool. We used a hand carder and got a pile of wool ready for Mom to spin. We would do enough wool for three sweaters. Could knit one in two full days._

Ellen Aleck, Cowichan Lodge, 1985.

Though a few knitters still use the very slow hand cards and others use drum carders, most buy spin-ready factory-prepared wool.

Hand carding, likely practiced since the 1890s, is the least expensive and most portable method of carding wool, but also the most time consuming. Before carding became a common practice, wool was simply teased and spun. The cards have a piece of wire-tooth studded leather nailed to the inner surface of a slightly larger rectangular slab of wood. One card is held in each hand so that the teeth-bearing surfaces are face-to-face. The knitter puts a handful of teased wool on one of these surfaces and combs the fibres with a second card to produce a loose batt which when rolled lengthwise is called a rolag.

The drum carder, which has been in general home use since the 1930s, is quicker and more efficient than hand cards. It is slightly larger than a sewing machine and usually sits on a table for use. It consists of a large cylinder which is rotated by a handle, and a smaller roller called a licker or worker which moves in the opposite direction. The knitter feeds teased wool through a trough, then it is combed by two rollers which are covered with wire-toothed card cloth. To remove the carded wool from the larger roll, the knitter passes a doffer (like a knitting needle or an ice pick) between the teeth to lift off the batt, approximately 12" x 16" in size. Some knitters have motorized their drum carders but hand-cranked drums are most common.

The families of knitters often help out with the carding process, as Nora George explains: 

_I got help from my kids... when I came to be a widow and we were short of money I used to knit day and night to keep up with our bills. So I figured it out—one of them has to card the gray and one of them has to do the white and the black and they all take turns. And I told them we_ 

Figure 20. Chief and Mrs. Ed Underwood hand-teasing and carding wool. Saanichton, 1962, PA-C123678.
all eat so... you can't knit so the best thing you can do is card my wool. I showed them how to card and how to mix wool colours and they learned really good. But you know their arms are strong. I didn’t know even then but my boys, when they learned to drum card the wool, they were going around to the neighbours and charging five cents for a batt so they had spending money.


Even though the drum system is easier than hand carding it is still tedious, and most knitters now use commercially carded wool for the advantages it offers. The commercial material eliminates all production steps except spinning and knitting. The cost can be more than four times that of raw wool, but hours of work are saved. A major disadvantage is that the quality of the wool is often substandard and/or inappropriate for the garment, and the colours can become muddy and homogeneous. The end product thus looks drastically different from hand-processed work. Some knitters, unhappy with the mixed material provided by mills, buy raw wool instead, then wash and tease it themselves before sending it to a mill for custom-carding prior to spinning.

### Spinning

Cowichan knitters spin wool three different ways: with a Salish spindle and whorl, with a converted sewing machine, and with a homemade spinning machine. The spindle and whorl are rarely used today:

*I used to use the sul’sul’tin (wooden spindle whorl) in the summer when we were travelling. But we were at this cannery... where they salt the herrings, we were there and the Japanese wanted some socks. I thought I can make money if I start knitting. So I started carding my wool and I didn’t have my sul’sul’tin, so I made one out of the cover of the lard tin.*

There are five known types of Salish spindles (Marr 1979:67). The version used exclusively by the Cowichan people was very large and was used for spinning two ply mountain goat wool and dog hair for weaving. The spindle was a tapered shaft approximately four feet long. The whorl, which rested one-half to two-thirds of the way down the shaft, was about eight inches in diameter. Coast Salish spindle whorls were often highly decorated, and many fine examples can be found in museum collections.

Spinning with a large spindle and whorl involved using a tension ring suspended above the spinner and tossing the spindle with outstretched arms. The availability of European furniture prompted a modification: the roving was placed over the back of a chair, thus lowering the position of the yarn being drawn toward the spindle (Kissell 1916: 265-266).

Another way of handling the spindle, according to Lane, was more typically used for the spinning of single ply sheep’s wool. The roving was held in the left hand over the thumb or index finger, and the spindle twirled between the palm of the right hand and the right thigh.

Neither the large mountain goat wool spindle nor the smaller sheep’s wool spindle are much-used today; the majority of spinners prefer to use machines. After missionary teachers instructed their pupils in the use of a European spinning wheel, it was adapted to produce the large quantities of thicker yarn needed for knitting and for much of the Salish weaving. Eells (1976:41-42) mentions that homemade spinning machines date from the 1890s. There are two types of Cowichan wheels: each has a foot treadle and pulley, a flyer assembly with a large-sized orifice, a substantial bobbin and flyer, and large, widely spaced guide hooks.

One type of wheel has the wooden flyer assembly mounted horizontally on the table of a treadle sewing machine, and is rotated by means of the foot treadle. The spinner’s left hand draws out the wool to her side, and the right hand guides the twisting yarn into the orifice. The second wheel is completely homemade. It also uses a foot treadle, but the spinner faces the spindle orifice instead of the side of the flyer, and feeds the roving in directly. Today most of the spinning machines have been motorized. The Indian-designed spinner heads were copied by manufacturers in the United States, Canada, and New Zealand due to the renewed popularity of crafts in the 1960s. The specially-adapted spinning wheels are now known as Bulky or Indian Head spinners.

Figure 23. Mrs. Helen Jimmy spinning with the traditional spindle and whorl. Koksilah, 1949.
Figure 24. Mrs. Pat Charlie and her grandson Francis. She is spinning wool on a converted treadle sewing machine. Koksilah, 1949.

Figure 25. Mrs. Helen Jimmy using a homemade spinner developed in Cowichan for spinning thick wool. Koksilah, 1949.
Knitting

Learning to knit sweaters and other items was—and remains—a family process. Children often start by helping out with wool processing, and begin to knit mitts and socks around the age of ten. Irene Cooper remembers her apprenticeship: *You just had to watch your grandparents or your parents to learn. No one taught me; I picked it up on my own. That was sort of a traditional way, for grandparents to let you learn on your own. They were just there to answer questions... You show it to them and ask if there's any faults. I guess that's where we spoil our children. We try to show them and now they're not interested.*

Irene Cooper, Esquimalt, 1985.

Today, as in the past, most knitting is done by women. Men play a role by making or repairing the spinners and carders, possibly helping with the washing or carding of the wool, and often driving their wives to the retailers to sell their sweaters and other garments.

Once the preliminary wool preparation steps are completed, knitting can begin. Early materials for needles included whalebone, deerbone, telephone wire, bamboo chopsticks (Lane 1951:21), and wood. Today, knitters primarily use readily-available and inexpensive plastic or metal needles.

Wooden needles made from dogwood, ironwood, yellow cedar, ocean spray, vine maple, ninebark, and mock orangewood are still preferable because they are not cold and remain smooth and strong, but they are rarely sold today. No matter which material is used for needles, the sizes vary from 4–7.5mm depending on the weight of the hand spun yarn. *Well, you really don't have a wind-proof sweater when the needles are too coarse. When it's finer needles, say six or seven [5 or 4.5mm], it all depends how coarse your wool is. It's almost water repellent and sheds the water.*

Irene Cooper, Esquimalt, 1985.

To produce a sweater, the knitter casts on stitches in the usual manner; evenly divided onto at least eight double pointed needles. The number of needles varies according to the size of the sweater, the weight of the yarn, and the length of the needle. There is one extra for the knitting. For sweaters, the knitters always work in the round for a pullover, or back and forth in one piece for a cardigan. Sleeveless sweaters or vests are very popular, especially for outdoor activities. Some knitters make a pullover, and they or the dealer will machine-sew two rows down the front of the sweater and cut between the stitching to insert a zipper. This practice is faster but makes an inferior cardigan, since the stitches sometimes pull and the knitting stretches.

Figure 26. Stitches used in Cowichan Indian Knitting: stocking/plain, garter, basket and ribbing.
After the knitter has divided the stitches on the proper number of needles, she knits a band of ribbing of her chosen design, then increases the number of stitches and continues in stocking or plain stitch. Pockets of the knitter's design are often knit in, a feature desired by many customers.

Designs are incorporated in one of two ways. The simplest is a complete change of colour for a whole row, used most often in the waistband, the cuff, and the collar. Because there is now a variety of natural-coloured wool for contrasting patterns, contemporary knitters no longer dye their raw material. Such was not the case when Agnes Thorne was learning her craft:

There used to be no black sheep, just the white, and the women dyed the wool the colours. We used the berries: lutosup (Oregon grape), and it comes yellow, and taw (balsam) and the bark comes brown. You use the two together and get a dark brown for the design. My grandmother used it all the time for making designs on socks. Agnes Thorne, Somenos, 1985.

The larger bands of design are created using the two-colour or Fair Isle knitting technique, in which the unused colour is carried along the back of the work between design units.
Just before reaching the armholes, the knitter may add a few stitches for extra room under the arms. At the armholes, the knitting is divided into an equal number of stitches for the back and the front, and about five stitches from the front and five from the back are put onto a safety pin. The knitter then divides the front into two by putting four stitches from the middle on a safety pin to hold for the collar base. The back is worked straight up from the armholes, and the fronts are worked to the same height with some decreasing at the neck edge for shaping. The shoulders are knit together, and the remaining stitches (usually about one-third) at the neck back are held for the collar.

Each knitter has her own method of making a shawl collar, using garter stitch, basket stitch, or ribbing, and knitting in one colour or incorporating stripes. A common technique is to pick up two of the four base stitches, start on one side and work up the neck edge to the shoulder by picking up a stitch from the lapel edge on each row and increasing the width of...
the collar as it is worked. The top ends in line with the shoulder seam. The same is done for the other side. The knitter then picks up stitches from the neck edge and knits back and forth, increasing on each row and picking up stitches from the top of the lapel, then casts off the collar back. Some skilled knitters are able to pick up stitches all around the neckline and knit the collar all at one time by increasing and decreasing for shaping.

To knit the sleeves the knitter picks up the front half of the armhole stitches on the safety pin, picks up stitches around the sleeve front and sleeve back and then adds the back half of the held stitches. Sleeves are knit on three to five needles depending on the size of the garment. The shaping of the sleeve depends on the needle sizes and the designs. Knitters decrease as needed, mostly in the elbow area and cuff, and cast off at the wrist. Knitting down the sleeve, rather than attaching on a separate sleeve produces a better fitting garment. It also easily enables a sleeve to be lengthened or a cuff repaired.

The actual knitting process usually takes from two to three days, but, as Nora George explains, the preparation takes at least as long: *When the wool is all ready it used to take me maybe a couple of days to knit. I try to get a lot ready ahead. My mom, her way was to card all her wool and spin it all, then she just picked it up and knit. And I think that's better. And that's what I'm trying to be, to be like her. Have my wool spun and just take it when I feel like knitting. But before when I was quite young, it used to take me two days to knit a sweater, and that was never knitting my sleeves separately like the others do now. It fits better and when you put your arm down there isn't a lump under your arm because of the way they sew it in. When they really rush the sweaters they knit the sleeves separately now—they get kids to knit the sleeves.* Nora George, Westholme, 1985.

Over the years Cowichan knitters have produced a variety of items in addition to their sweaters. They have responded to market demands by making socks and mitts, and more recently toques, tams, ponchos, slippers, and baby booties. The most contemporary products include legwarmers and Cowichan sweaters for Cabbage Patch Dolls! Knitters will produce special orders for special needs, as Irene Cooper’s mother did:

*My mother made a belt just for the stomach part and the back, especially for people that had lumbago. That helped them a great deal. That’s from the oils, they claimed that controlled their pain.*

Irene Cooper, Esquimalt, 1985.

Figure 30. Rita Johnny, 1975.
**Designs**

Knitters probably began using Fair Isle patterning in the early 1900s, contrasting shades and colours of wool. As they now use only natural colours, the range is limited to whites, greys, browns and blacks, or a combination produced during the carding process. Most knitwear includes only two or three colours.

In sweaters, the colours form either geometric or representational designs. Characteristically they are placed horizontally on the mid-portion of the body of the sweater. If the design in this centre portion is geometric, it is laid out in a broad band and repeated on the sleeves. If the main design is representational, it is usually centred on the back, with the same design on the front of a pullover, or two smaller versions of the same representation on either side of the front on a cardigan. There are usually geometric motif bands above and below the representational figure; motifs which are also repeated on the sleeves.

Most knitters collect designs which they carefully copy out onto graph paper, or more commonly today, reproduce on a photocopier. Some designs are passed on through families and friends. Nora George explains some of the sources of her family’s designs: *Some of them are old. Certain designs people always like. Some of them I got from the newspaper. My sister and I used to always watch for the little charts in the knitting column. My grandmother just started off design on it. And my mother thought: “Wouldn’t it look nice if I put a design on it?” She grabbed one of the maple leaves and she put it in front of her and she started to knit, just copy how it looked, I guess, and she had, and I still got that design.* Nora George, Westholme, 1985.

There is no limit to the potential sources of designs: embroidery and crochet patterns, a child’s pinwheel, tablecloths, linoleum, labels, a kerchief, a tea box, lace curtains, and oak leaves. Many designs, however, are aboriginal in origin, taken from traditional Salish basketry and weaving motifs. Some families have proprietary designs, although this is relatively rare. Designs are incorporated only for their artistic appeal; there is no meaning or implication to them.
The popularity of Indian-patterned sweaters prompted the Mary Maxim Company of Sifton, Manitoba (now of Paris, Ontario) to produce graphed commercial patterns, beginning in the 1940s. Ironically, the knitters soon began to collect and use these charts and the wide variety of Indian sweater patterns available today. They continue to retain favourite designs and to make modifications of them. There are, for example, many variations on the eagle theme.

Knitters will also create custom patterns, often with no traditional Indian associations, such as anchors, baseball players, or even Smurfs. Despite the diversity of patterns, however, experienced knitters and dealers can often identify the maker of a sweater through the particular qualities of design and knitting style that form a kind of personal signature.

Figure 32. My grandmother, I guess, got this pattern off a Chinese tea box.

Figure 33. True Lover's Knot design, often seen on basketry. Sweater bought in 1932 at Corfield's Store in Duncan. BCPM 17703.
Figure 34. *I saved my pennies and bought myself a Cowichan sweater in 1919. I got it on the Quamichan Reserve from an elderly Indian lady called Big Mary. It cost $14.00.*

Figure 35. *Edith has knit for me for 25 years. She learned from her mother, Agnes, who I bought from before her. I used to judge at the Cowichan Exhibition, and Agnes was a hands down winner every time.*
Edith Page swallow pattern sweater, 1986.

Figure 36. *In 1959, on the occasion of the royal visit, a sweater was knitted for Prince Philip [and for Queen Elizabeth]. The woman who knit Prince Philip's sweater made an exact duplicate, which was raffled money for the band. It was won by my great aunt who gave it to my father in 1959. Twenty years later he gave it to me.*
David Paterson, Vancouver, 1986.
Knitting Today
Cowichan: A Community and a Sweater

Cowichan knitters are part of an important Canadian cottage craft industry, strongly rooted in the community. Locally, both natives and whites wear the Cowichan or Indian sweaters, which are seen as a symbol of British Columbia identity. As a Duncan resident attests:

*When I was in Munich for the Summer Olympics I was walking down the stairs in the new subway system. Two Cowichan sweater wearers came up the stairs. I felt like I was at home. It was great.*

Jean Irwin, Duncan, 1986.

Cowichan knitting was named for the Indians in the Cowichan Valley, but other Coast Salish Indian groups on Southeastern Vancouver Island, the adjacent mainland, and Washington State also knit similar garments. Cowichan Indians consider a genuine Cowichan sweater to be one made by any of the 2000 Coast Salish knitters active today.

The knitting industry is centered on the Cowichan Reserves in and south of Duncan in the Cowichan Valley District on Vancouver Island. The band or tribe Cowichan is a legal division designated in 1916 for purposes of Indian administration. There are six villages and one summer camp-placement in the Duncan area which are collectively called Cowichan: Somenos, Quamichan, Comaiken, Clemclemaluts, Koksilah, Kenipsen and Kilpaulus. There are approximately 2000 members (1986) in the Cowichan Band, the largest band in British Columbia.

The Cowichan Band has its own nursery school, a gymnasium, a language and cultural programme in the schools, and is involved with economic development projects such as aquaculture and construction. Yet many band members suffer financially, and the women in these families may knit purely out of necessity. Knitting provides a dependable although not very lucrative income. It has the advantage of being year-round rather than seasonal work, in contrast to the traditional male occupations of fishing and logging. Women who knit can work at home, which allows them to look after their immediate and extended families. Knitting requires a low capital outlay and no formal education.

*Figure 37. Advertisement for Cowichan sweaters.*
Figure 38. The Canoe, Koksilah, 1949.

Figure 39. Cowichan Trading Company, Victoria.
Retail stores in Duncan, Victoria, and Vancouver have been selling Cowichan sweaters since the 1920s. Originally sold in sporting goods stores as hunting and fishing wear, today they are sold locally in West Coast souvenir stores, in department stores, by mail order, and abroad, as fashionable and utilitarian garments. The Cowichan band owns a store in Duncan, Cowichan Indian Arts and Crafts, which is actively marketing high quality products from the area.

Attempts have been made by knitters to organize into a cooperative, but individual methods of producing and selling their work have been more effective. The knitters market their products by filling custom orders, selling to retailers, selling to middle-men who collect the knitting and wholesale it, selling their own knitting at crafts fairs or from booths, or trading for food or supplies at retail stores. Often the buyer supplies more raw wool for the knitters as part of the purchase price. But the already meagre returns for the work depends on the integrity of the Cowichan name, which has recently become an important issue with the Indians. There are two additional problems, the
less threatening being commercial knitting patterns. The other, more serious problem is
the existence of organized production and distribution of hand knit sweaters patterned
after the Cowichan products.

Commercial knitting patterns have long been available to home knitters. At first, the only avail­
able commercial yarns were lightweight and factory-spun, producing a very different looking
version of the sweater. Some non-Indians do spin their own wool and knit Cowichan sweaters,
but never in a quantity to retail them successfully, so their work does not represent a com­
mmercial threat.

Serious competition was introduced in 1974 when a Vancouver wool distributor, Yarn Barn
Holdings Wholesale, arranged for a manufacturer in New Zealand to produce a six-strand unspun
roving for home knitting under the name Cowichan. The company produced a series of
Cowichan sweater patterns to accompany the wool. The same type of roving, manufactured in
Manitoba and marketed under the label White Buffalo, had already been available previous to
the Cowichan product. The availability of the Cowichan brand meant that knitters could
produce a sweater using a commercial pattern and New Zealand wool, and market it as a
Cowichan sweater. The sweaters produced in this manner began to be found for sale in yarn
stores and some souvenir shops.

These sweaters, modeled after the original Cowichan products, are similar in appearance
and texture. Closer examination, however, reveals important differences. The Cowichan
Indians’ wool has a twist that gives it elasticity, reduces the tendency to pill and ensures a
sweater that wears well with a very long life. The genuine Cowichan sweaters generally have
set-in sleeves, not raglan, no side seams and are knit in natural, not dyed, colours.

The Cowichan Band members were concerned that the reputation of their products would be
tarnished if associated with the competitors’ sweaters. To prevent a knitting wholesaler from
using the Cowichan name, the Band Council instituted legal action in July 1979. In January
1980, the Indians won an out of court battle to prohibit the Cowichan name from being used
for commercial wool. The Cowichans’ struggle to keep their name inviolate was important to
them: a genuine Cowichan sweater has the unique qualities of being warm, water-repellent
and serviceable; as well, each is a one-of-a-kind hand crafted product, made exclusively by the
Indians of southwest B.C. and northern Washington.

Since the early 1950s, commercial manufacturers have attempted to produce products similar to
the original Cowichan knitting. Because the real sweaters are so heavy that they must be hand
knit, no machine-made sweaters have ever matched the originals in weight. In the mid-1970s
the influx of visitors to British Columbia, particularly from Japan, brought the demand for
Cowichan sweaters to an all-time high. The Indian knitters could not produce enough to meet this
demand. Manufacturers began to supply this market both in Canada and in Japan with a bit of
Canadiana. Lightweight machine knit sweaters with Indian motifs were widely sold, but since
they were obviously different in appearance they were not seen as serious competition for the
Cowichan knitters.

More serious competition was provided by hand knit sweaters modeled after the genuine
Cowichan product. A number of companies were set up as cottage industries, using a central
marketing base and employing home knitters. These companies began to produce handknit
Indian style sweaters, market them under labels such as Hand Knit in Western Canada by
Canadian Craftspersons, and undercut the
prices by as much as half of that of the genuine product. At first, most of the sweaters were made of unspun rovings and were thus fairly easy to differentiate from the Cowichan. More recently, however, some companies have begun to use a spun yarn which makes the products more difficult to identify.

There are now more than a dozen manufacturers of Cowichan style sweaters, now priced closer to the Indian products. This competition has hurt the knitters, some of whom earn less than $1.00 an hour for their work. The more desirable but rarer custom orders can earn knitters closer to $5.00/hour. In order to work faster, some knitters use short cuts such as bigger needles and separate sleeves. This lowers the quality of the Cowichan product. The economic problems are of grave concern to Salish knitters, particularly the elders:

Nowadays the buyers buy the sweaters too cheap and we barely make anything on the finished garment. I'm just making money for the buyers at this price.

Wool is expensive now and sweaters are getting cheaper. I earn very little. I knit because cash is low, I buy extra food and to meet the bills.
Monica Joe, Comaiken, 1985.

They [the buyers] buy a lot more [at lower prices] in the winter when the people need the money for the [Winter Ceremonial] dances. They should show kids the right way. I'd like to see the knitters getting together and working to a certain standard. Making more sweaters is not the answer. I think sweaters really should be made better than the way they are, instead of rushing it. Then you'll have a good name, you'll have a good quality sweater.

The Cowichan Band has opened a store, Cowichan Indian Arts and Crafts, and they, and some other dealers, are publicizing their sweaters as the original, emphasizing the quality of Cowichan Indian products, and paying the knitters an increased wage. A similar strategy is being followed by another Salish tribe, the Samish, in Anacortes, Washington. The Samish are setting up a marketing programme for their own product, Samish Indian Woollens.

During the last century, Cowichan sweaters have become a highly visible and well-known feature of the cultural traditions of British Columbia and nearby Washington State. Although native production is presently threatened by the competition of other products, the loyalty of knowledgeable consumers and the knitters' protection of their product should ensure that these garments continue to be produced as they have been for so many years. Functional and beautiful, Cowichan Indian knitting is a recognized statement of West Coast identity.
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