



SPINNING

Twisting fiber into thread and yarn is a process that has existed for probably 10,000 years. Most historians believe that spinning began in the Middle East. In the Western Hemisphere, murals show Mayan and Aztec women spinning. Today, yarn and thread are produced in factories, but that has not always been the case. For almost 9,000 years, the drop spindle served as the primary tool for making thread and yarn.

A drop spindle is one of many hand spindles. A hand spindle is any implement that can be rotated by hand in order to twist fibers together into yarn. A drop spindle uses a weight (whorl) attached to a stick (spindle) to twist the fibers. Wool, flax, or cotton fibers are attached to the spindle, which is then spun like a top and dropped. The whorl (weight) allows a longer twisting time and provides tension on the fiber, thus creating a tighter, stronger thread. The earliest whorls were probably rocks or lumps of dried clay attached to the spindle. Later whorls were made of wood, bone or a variety of other substances.

At first, women fed the spindle from a ball of dried cotton, flax or silk fibers. As spinning developed, a straight stick with a fork or comb at one end was added to make spinning easier and more efficient. This implement was called a distaff. It was often held under the left arm as the woman spun her thread.

The Chinese invented the spinning wheel about 1000 CE. It spread to India, then to Persia and finally arrived in Europe in the 13th century. The spinning wheel increased the rate at which fibers could be spun by a factor of 10 to 100. The result was the increased production and availability of cloth. It also meant that larger cloth sections could be made and joined together more quickly. This was especially important as larger sails meant larger ships, which could travel further with larger loads. This, in turn, led to more exploration, colonization and the development of a more diverse world economy.

Spinning has defined gender roles. From the earliest times, spinning has defined domestic industry as “women’s work.” Spinning has introduced words into the English language that we associate directly with the female gender. “Spinster,” the term for an older, unmarried woman, derived from a single woman’s role in the family as the person in a household responsible for spinning. The “distaff side” of the family refers to the female side. To “spin off” means to make something new from something that already exists. To “spin one’s wheels” is to work at something, but to stay in one place or to get nowhere, just like the spinster who stayed in one place spinning thread day-in and day-out. Spinning classes at health clubs consist of participants riding stationary bicycles as fast as they can; yet going nowhere.