



TOOLS: WOOL CARDS

Carding is one step in the process of spinning cotton or wool. It occurs once the cotton has been “ginned” (the seeds removed), or after sheep have been sheared and the wool “skirted” (leg and belly wool removed) to create a “fleece.” In either case, what remains are bundles of fibers from 2 inches to 12 inches in length. However, the fibers are bound together and can contain knots and lumps. Carding straightens the fibers and removes the knots. Once the fiber has been carded, it is ready for spinning.

A wool fleece naturally contains an oily substance called lanolin. If the person spinning the wool wants to create a fabric that repels rain and water, then the fleece is not washed before carding. This process is known as “spinning in the grease.” The material produced in this fashion helps keep the person dry in wet weather. Regardless, the next step in the process is the straightening of the threads or “carding.”

In the carding process, wool is placed on wooden “cards” or paddles covered in pin cloth and tiny wire bristles or “pins.” The cards vary in size from 2” x 2” to 4” x 8”. The density of the pins varies. A card with a high pin density, 90 pins per inch or higher, is used to produce fine yarns. Cards with 120 pins per inch or higher are used for cotton. Most wool cards contain 72 pins per inch and produce medium threads. Cards are used in pairs. Wool is taken in small handfuls and placed on the wire pins of one of the cards, which is then pulled across the other. This not only straightens the fibers but also frees it from tangles. The bunch of straightened fibers are called “rovings” which are then collected on a distaff from which the person spinning the yarn draws them to a drop spindle or spinning wheel to make the thread. In colonial times both along the East Coast and in the Southwest, children as young as 3 or 4 years of age were tasked with the job of carding wool.