

In Praise of the Humble Spindle

Sally Hands, Online Guild

I once read an account by a weaver of a visit to India where she saw a man sitting outside his house with all his possessions – these were so few he could pick them up and walk away with them. Reflecting on her own situation she was moved to write about her house and studio overflowing with looms, spinning wheels, baskets of spindles and surplus fibre. ‘We have too much stuff!’ she wrote.

Several years ago I picked up and read Julia Cameron’s book, *The Artist’s Way*. Wonderfully inspiring, she urges us to get more creative, and insists that, no, you don’t need to dramatically change your life, to leave your job or move house, and you don’t need a studio. Working at your small kitchen table is enough, and that’s certainly what I did when my son was young, printmaking on our kitchen table in a two-room flat while he was asleep. We don’t need so much stuff! I’d like to write an article for artist weavers or spinners who would like to be creative and satisfy the soul, with very little time, space or money, and also for spinners, like me, who for some reason find two or three wheels indispensable.

In 2009 I discovered the book (and also the video) *Respect the Spindle* by Abby Franquemont. I must have watched the video over and over again. I went online and ordered a spindle and another great book, *Spinning in the Old Way* by Priscilla Gibson-Roberts. Book and spindle arrived late morning a few days later. I started reading and started spinning. An hour later I had to go to work; the spindle came too. I spun during a break at work. I got home at 6pm and carried on spinning. Dinner was cancelled that night. I spun all evening and then at 11pm my husband went to bed, leaving me still reading and spinning.

It was at 2am that I finally stopped. I felt I’d cracked it and went to bed. Six weeks later I had a stand at *Wonderwool Wales*, the Welsh wool fair. I had still hardly put my spindle down. Standing in the exhibition hall in front of the table I continued to spindle spin and was amazed by the reaction of visitors. A crowd gathered round to watch the spindle and everyone was saying they would love to do that but had tried and given up. Many felt that spindles were too difficult to use, too slow, and plying was impossible. I found myself giving away my extra rolags. The stand opposite, selling spindles, began to do roaring business. I actually ended up giving away spindles I’d just bought myself!

So, for weavers like me who think we have too much stuff: Abby Franquemont learned to spin in the Andes when she was five. Women there spun to eat and pay for the home they lived in. An Andean woman might have one good handmade spindle she relied on to feed herself and her children. For someone in this country who’d like to be more creative in a small space, on a budget, a spindle can be a source of joy and provide an unexpected form of meditation. You pass the wooden tool between your hands in a rhythm and, probably very like counting rosary beads rhythmically, it soothes the soul. Spinning requires just enough concentration to clear your mind of worries: you can take it to work to spin in your lunch break; you can take it through airport security and spin while you wait for a flight. I even spin in the passenger seat of the car.

There’s an intimacy with a spindle. You sort of get up close to your work in a way that you don’t with a wheel. The area of fibre

Prepare your fibre carefully for easier spinning
Photos: Sally Hands



you are drafting is right in front of your eyes and this may make for a better yarn. Early medieval spinners thought so. They were allowed to spin weft on a wheel but were made to spin warps on their spindles. It was believed to make better quality yarn. For more than 20,000 years all spinning was done on spindles. Spinning wheels are a comparatively recent invention. If early humans needed a rope to tie the blade of an axe to a handle or to tether an animal, that rope would be spun on a spindle. When the Vikings crossed the sea in sailing boats to invade these shores, their sails would have been spindle-spun and woven at home.

Spindles differed all over the world as they appeared in different ancient societies and developed to meet the needs of the particular local fibres used in each society. Suspended spindles are usually just a stick or spindle shaft, and a disc, or whorl, adding weight and momentum to the turning stick.

The whorl may be placed at the top of the shaft, i.e. a top whorl spindle, or at the base of the shaft – a low whorl spindle. It is also possible to find mid-whorl spindles with the whorl at the centre of the shaft. Top or low whorl spindles appeared in different parts of the world and behave in slightly different ways. Ancient Egyptian linen spinners appear in paintings with top whorl spindles. Andean spinners seem to use low whorl spindles which can be more stable if a spinner is on the move.

For would-be spindle spinners, three things seem to deter them: it’s seen as difficult, too slow, and too hard to ply. Let’s look at these in turn.

I will assume a reader of this journal may know the fundamentals of spinning so I will just outline strategies for learning that I have found helpful. For a beginner spindler it’s probably not a good idea to start with a homemade spindle made from a CD and a stick. It may be better to invest in a spindle from a good supplier; probably this will cost less than you may imagine. Buy a slightly heavier spindle if you’re starting out, as a heavier one will cope with a thicker yarn. One with a heavy whorl which is weighted at the rim can give a long spin before it stops and reverses direction. A hook helps to secure your yarn. If the spindle has a bottom whorl and a notch to secure the thread, looping the yarn on is just another problem for a beginner to overcome. I started on a high whorl spindle with a hook, and still use one.



Wind on at an angle, it's a lot quicker

Left: Plying from two teapots



Start out with a fibre like wool which has a fairly long staple. Prepare your wool carefully so spinning is easy and a pleasure. I actually comb my wool and draft it out into a long top, which I wind around my wrist and tuck the end under my watch or a band of tied wool. If there is a long tail of fibre hanging near the spindle, it's going to get caught in the spinning. I started by twirling my spindle with my fingers but quickly moved on to rolling it on my thigh to get the spindle moving fast.

Many spindlers start off with the 'park and draft' method. Hold up the spindle, with a long leader, set the spindle in motion and allow the twist into the leader. 'Park' the spindle between the knees and draft the wool, allowing the stored twist into the fibres to make new yarn. Pinch off the twist from the fibre supply, wind the yarn onto the spindle, and spin again. Park. Draft. Wind. Abby Franquemont suggests that you practise doing this for a few weeks before you get yourself coordinated enough to twirl your spindle and draft while it is spinning. As someone who first started spinning using a wheel, I would say that spindling does require more practice, but it's so worth the time. Others, who started with a spindle, may say otherwise.

Plying is done really quite easily. I wind two small balls of waste wool and tie them up securely, then put them in the washing machine and drier to felt them. I wrap the singles around these felted wool balls and get a hook or weaver's



Local wool, naturally dyed,
on its way to the loom

threading tool. With the balls of yarn in two teapots at my feet, I hook the ends of the singles out of the spouts. The teapots are about a metre apart and with their spouts facing away from me as I ply. This keeps a little bit of tension on the singles and they don't snarl up together. I separate the plying singles with the fingers of my left hand. I do find plying with a spindle makes a better yarn than when I use my wheel. Uprturned flower pots work equally well to contain the singles, but aren't as much fun.

If you feel enthusiastic now, I would recommend the book *Respect the Spindle*. It was Abby's father Ed Franquemont, a field anthropologist, who famously compared spindles with spinning wheels and wrote that 'spindles were slower by the hour but faster by the week', because you can take your spindle with you. I don't want to get my wheel out late at night. Instead I keep my spindle and fibre by me and frequently spin over the side of the armchair while I share a glass of wine or pot of tea with my husband. I take my spindle with me to the kitchen to boil the kettle, I have it with me when I answer the phone. It's a beautifully simple, highly functional tool that is thought to have been invented in prehistory, even before the wheel. Anyone can do it. Go for it!

Spindles

www.handweavers.co.uk – good, inexpensive spindles
www.thewoodemporium.co.uk – British handmade spindles by Ian Tait, in beautiful woods
www.goldingfibertools.com – these are pricey but are no-fail, Rolls Royce spindles! Golding also make spindle Lazy Kates

Bibliography

Franquemont, Abby (2009): *Respect the Spindle: Spin Infinite Yarns with One Amazing Tool*, Colorado: Interweave Press.
[The video is available from www.interweavestore.com]
Gibson-Roberts, Priscilla A. (2006) *Spinning in the Old Way*, Colorado: Nomad Press.

About the author

Sally Hands is an artist, weaver and musician living in South Wales. All her wool is locally sourced and she grows a lot of her own dye plants. When possible she buys British-made spindles.
www.sallyhands.co.uk