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Performance article

Re-hackling flax before spinning

Using questions as a method of understanding

ABSTRACT

Flax is a traditional plant used to make textiles. Flax, like all natural fibres, is a material with variations. Knowledge of a crafting process can be obtained by studying artefacts and all available documentation and by being present in a craft tradition and society of spinning. A craftsperson will make many small decisions during their work. How do we gain knowledge about handling materials, and how do we preserve the intangible skills relevant to a craft? This performance article aims to make visible specific knowledge of material, tools and working methods for re-hackling flax. The text and performance illustrate the perspective of a reflecting craftsperson. By asking questions about the work process, critical decisions regarding crafts will be highlighted. This approach will help preserve and transmit craft skills within flax processing.

Keywords:

Craft materials, craft skills, flax processing, intangible heritage, traditional craft skills.

INTRODUCTION

Flax is a bast fibre, meaning that it is obtained from the plant stem. Flax is the raw material, and linen is the processed result. Early findings from Sweden included flax seeds from 800 B.C.E. (Viklund, 2011). Major Swedish flax production began in the 18th century, and as a result, spinning wheels became more common. Commercial production ended in 1966 (Fröier & Zienkiewicz, 1989). Today, there is renewed interest in Swedish flax production.

I have studied weaving, ethnology and textile science and have been spinning for many years. Some of my teachers spun only once a year in the context of teaching, while others were specialists and tradition bearers. I have taught spinning for 25 years at the Sätergläntan Institute of Craft and in other contexts, both for beginners and masterclasses. I have learned a lot through interactions with students. When I first started my research on old weaving tools and methods (Ekstedt Bjersing, 2016, 2021b, 2022a, 2022b), I needed hand spun linen yarn, which led me to spin more and become a spinner. I

studied literature, the oldest material a book written by Stephan Bennet (1738), as well as tools in museums, photographs and videos from different places. I also engaged in social media, discussing flax spinning. I used different types of flax and methods for spinning and different ways to use the spun thread. This work, together with a reflecting perspective, resulted in extensive knowledge. ‘To know things, you have to grow into them and they grow in you, so they become a part of who you are’ (Ingold, 2013, p. 1). This is also my approach and what I found happening when I became a spinner. This is a good thing, but it may also bring greater difficulty in explaining what you are doing.

AIM

Spinning is more than just twisting fibres; the preparation of the fibres is also important. This performance article aims to illustrate the reflecting craftsperson’s perspective on the preparation of flax. How can we understand and preserve knowledge and intangible skills? Through my performance, I aim to demonstrate skills and, in this article, explain my thoughts on the crafting process.

THEORETICAL APPROACH

Making creates knowledge and making creates reflections (Ingold, 2013). As a craftsperson and researcher, I use this approach. Both roles are crucial. Reflections are made by making, writing, talking, teaching, sketching and creating videos and photos (Figures 1 and 2).

To make is to think.
To make is to understand.
To make is to see connections.
To make is to be frustrated.
To make is to want to know more.
To make is to focus.

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Marie Ekstedt Bjersing



FIGURES 1 AND 2. Reflections on making. Translated from my diary written in Swedish while working on a reconstruction project (Figure 1). My hand interacts with re-hackled flax before dressing the distaff: feeling, thinking and making decisions (Figure 2). Photo: Marie Ekstedt Bjersing.

The workmanship of certainty and workmanship of risk concerns the purpose of making (Pye, 1995). The workmanship of *certainty* involves mass production, guaranteeing a given quality as a result. The workmanship of *risk* is about making single products and adapting to a dynamic process. Both approaches can be professional. In a spinning context, this would mean spinning for production versus spinning for self-sufficiency. In the early 19th century, hand spinning for manufacturers and self-sufficiency coexisted and could be done by the same person using the same tools. Depending on the type of workmanship, there will sometimes be different solutions.

Video as documentation

Video documentation of crafts has been done for many years. The oldest video about flax in general found is from 1918 (Deutsche Lichtbild-Gesellschaft), a video from Germany about industrial flax processing and spinning. This video was probably made to promote the linen industry. The oldest video documentation of the flax process or spinning is from Västergötland, made for Nordiska Museet (Granlund, 1941). During the 1960s and 1970s, there was a lot of documentation from Scandinavia and Europe. Video documentation of the Scandinavian tradition was made by Hoffman (1975) and Ågren (1974). Together with these videos, there are often articles. There is interesting documentation from

Tyrol, Austria (Rutz & Simon 1965). In the videos, we can see the movements, but we still do not know how the decisions were made.

The information in old crafting videos may not be sufficient for a craftsperson to reconstruct crafts. One reason is that video documentation was not usually made by a craftsperson (Almevik et al., 2013). With an increasing interest in hand spinning, new documentation has been made on flax production, processing and spinning, including both written articles and videos (Anderson, 2022; Ekstedt Bjersing, 2021a; Hemslöjden, 2022; Skansen, 2016). My involvement in some of this documentation increased my understanding of the problem of what to demonstrate. There is a risk of conserving a specific way rather than showing any variations. Craft relies on a lot of tacit knowledge that is difficult to describe (Polanyi, 2009). Video documentation, made with the craftsperson as both the object and subject, may capture some of the tacit knowledge. The craftsperson can explain the choices made. However, dual roles can also be problematic and affect the crafting process (Seiler et al., 2021). In this performance article, the act of making will be the focus, and the article will highlight some of the critical questions that a craftsperson may have.

FLAX FIBRE

It is a long process to extract fibres from plant stems (Figures 3–14). The flax is harvested by pulling and the seed bolls must be removed. Next, a biological process, retting, is initiated. The flax must be dried before the mechanical processing stages: breaking, scutching and hackling. In the same flax stem, there are short and long fibres. Flax fibre can be separated into at least three qualities: long line, tow from scutching and tow from hackling (Baines, 1989; Fröier & Zienkiewicz, 1991; Hemslöjden, 2022).



FIGURES 3–14. TOP: In the field (Figure 3). Different flax depending on the harvest time: green, yellow or brown flax (Figure 4). The flax has been pulled and is now drying (Figure 5). Removing the seed with a ripple (Figure 6). Dew retting (Figure 7). Drying (Figure 8). BOTTOM: Breaking (Figure 9). Scutching (Figure 10). Hackling (Figure 11). From flax straw to line (Figure 12). Tow (Figure 13). Short tow (Figure 14). Photos: Marie Ekstedt Bjersing.

There are many ways of processing and preparing flax. Tools and working methods can be local and change over time. Important sources documenting the Swedish flax tradition include Grenander Nyberg (1967, 2001), Jirlow (1924, 1932), Adelberth (1933) and Fahlén (1981). These works also mention special tools such as a large wooden mallet for breaking, different tools for scutching (*draga*) and rubbing (*stångklyfta*, Figure 8) and brushes. Brushes are used to remove dust and achieve better separation of fibres. It is also important to keep in mind that the length and quality of flax also differ over time.

Most commonly, the processed flax is stored before spinning. Flax from the same harvest year will be kept together (Figure 15). The spinning method will differ depending on fibre length, diameter, softness, spinning tools used and end purpose.



FIGURES 15–18. Different flax stricks (Figure 15). Three old hackles (Figure 16). Old and modern flax brushes. Flax brushes were mostly used in the north of Ångermanland and in the south of Västerbotten. Ångermanland was famous for making the finest linen threads (Figure 17). Tow from re-hackling. Even tow can be re-hackled, but often, I do nothing but open and arrange the fibres to lie parallel using only my hand (Figure 18). Photos: Marie Ekstedt Bjersing.

A SPINNER'S THOUGHTS ABOUT PREPARATIONS FOR SPINNING FLAX

Before spinning, I always re-hackle and often brush the flax to separate the fibres in the strick, remove dust and shives and prepare the fibres for the distaff (Figures 16–17, Video 1). Another reason to re-hackle the flax is to feel the material and assess its limitations. I put all the tow from the re-hackling in one bag (Figure 18).



VIDEO 1. Performance. Re-hackling flax and preparing the distaff. Recorded during the Biennial International Conference for the Craft Sciences, BICCS, Mariestad, September 2023 (<https://biccs.dh.gu.se/>). To watch the video, click the picture.

My focus in this work is on the choices that must be made before and during re-hackling (Figure 19). These choices depend on the weather, the flax, the tools and what I plan to do with the flax, and there are further emotional aspects due to sentimental value and personal connections. Rather than explaining the decisions, I pose relevant questions to maintain dialogue among crafters.

What is the weather like?

Is it rainy or moist? Is it windy? Flax is highly absorbent, and hackling is best done in dry weather so the dust and shives can fall away. If working indoors, I choose the cleanest flax to hand.

How much flax do I need and how much do I have?

What flax do I need to make the thread I want? How large an amount of the same quality is needed? Can it be mixed with other qualities? I choose by visual assessment, holding a strick, feeling its weight, estimating the length of the fibres and looking at the colour. Which retting method has been used, and with what results? Is the flax dirty?

What tools do I have/will I need for re-hackling?

One or two hackles, and which ones? Will I go back in the process and re-scutch or rub the flax? A harsher mechanical treatment of the fibres is an option if the retting was insufficiently done. If the hackles are put on a table, clamps are needed to attach them. I often hold the hackle between my knees, and for this, I need a chair and an apron that is big enough. Which brushes do I want to use?

Where shall I store the flax and the tow?

If the strick is large, a table, a tray or something to hang the strick on is needed. Will my pocket be enough to store the tow from the hackling or do I need a bag/basket for it?

Which distaff will I use?

What distaff will be best suited for the flax? Will the distaff fit the spinning wheel? If not, some carving is needed. For some distaffs, a piece of cloth, a band, and a wooden pin are needed. I prefer having several distaffs to choose between, depending on how the fibres turn out, which I will know after re-hackling.

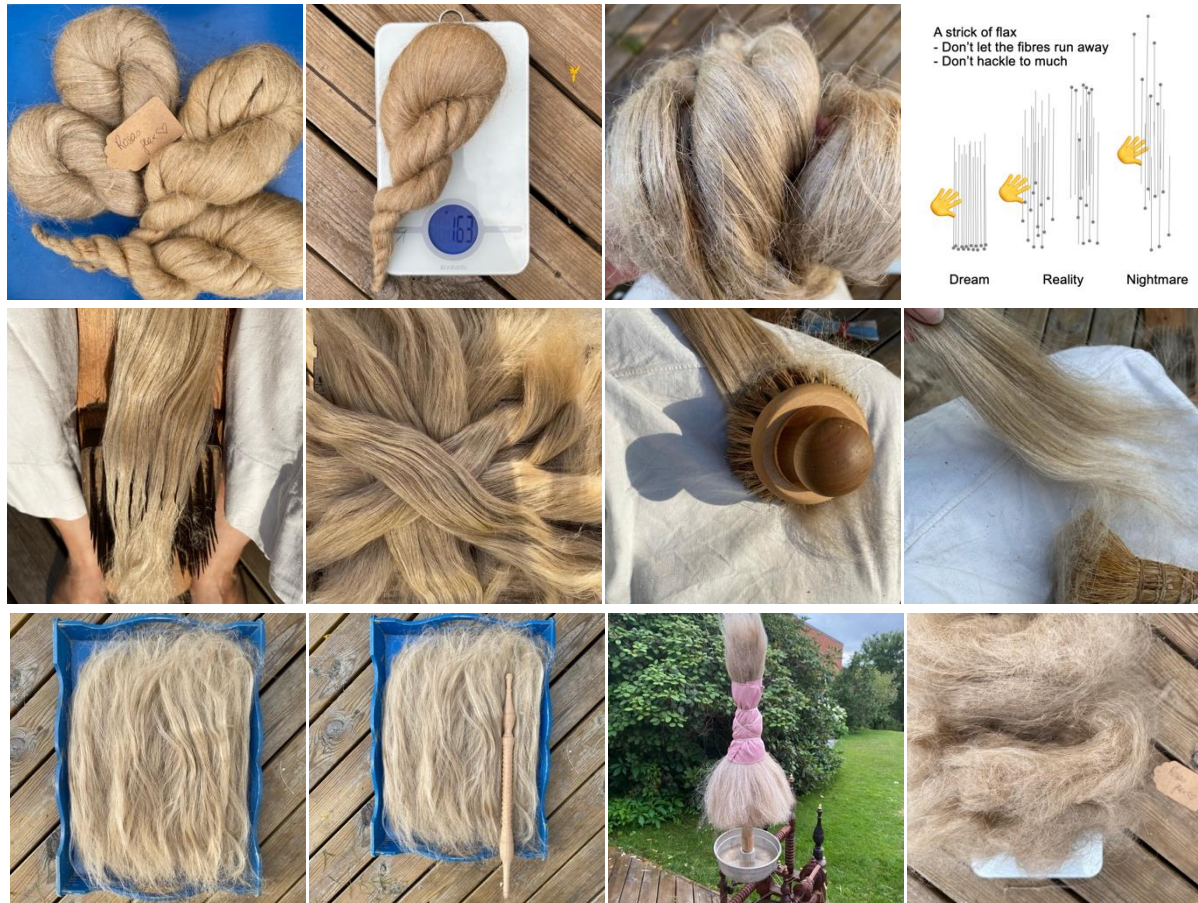
Are there emotional aspects to consider?

Do I know where the flax is from? What place, what age? Is there perhaps a special story connected with this flax? Are there any tools related to it? Where will I spin? At home, on the beach, on a stage, at a digital meeting? Will I move the distaff and spinning wheel during the spinning process? Most of my tools are old, handmade by professional craftsmen, or by me. I create a story with the tools and flax that I choose, while also connecting people. Some stories are my own.

FIGURE 19. Questions before and during re-hackling. Further questions beyond this list may also be relevant.

RE-HACKLING THE FLAX

Having prepared tools and materials, I open the strick and strike it against my leg to open it up and sometimes I shake it out. Are there several bundles in the strick or just one? How are the fibres placed? How should I hold the bundle? It is important to grip it in the right place (Figure 23). The flax should not be thrown onto the hackle but rather be allowed to fall on the upper tips of the nails. The photographs below illustrate the results of the process (Figures 20–31).



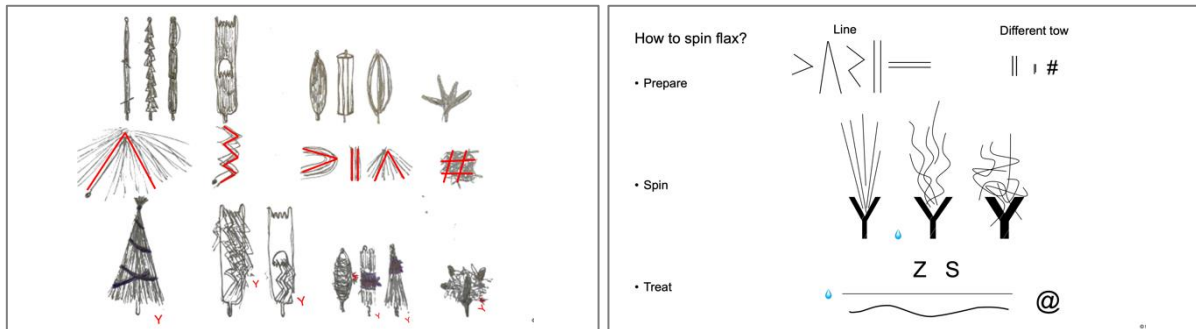
FIGURES 20–31. Re-hackling July 2021.

TOP: This flax was grown in Austria before 1960, from the same farm but probably grown in different years from “Rosa wedding chest” through The Berta’s Flax Guild (Seufferlein, <https://www.bertas-flachs.at/en/>, figure 20). One strick of 163 grams (Figure 21). One strick consisted of small bundles (Figure 22). Positions of the hand (Figure 23).

CENTRE: Re-hackling (Figure 24). Small re-hackled bundles were stored crosswise (Figure 25). Every bundle was brushed (Figure 26). This time, I used two different brushes (Figure 27).

BOTTOM: The fibres were laid parallel on the tray (Figure 28). The flax is ready for the distaff; the fibres will be wound around the distaff (Figure 29). The dressed distaff on the spinning wheel. The flax was dressed on a distaff for spinning on a double flyer spinning wheel (Figure 30). Tow, 33 grams, from re-hackling and brushing (Figure 31). Photos: Marie Ekstedt Bjersing.

Sometimes I just take a strick of flax to a hackle and simply re-hackle the flax. Then I grab the distaff that is closest – not necessarily the best one for the job. Sometimes, I omit the re-hackling stage.



FIGURES 32 AND 33. Slides from the author’s lectures on spinning flax, showing methodology with questions, keywords and symbols (Figure 32). For alternative ways to dress a distaff, refer to the videos from Hemslöjden (2022). The junction of “Y” shows where the fibres are twisted and formed into a thread (Figure 33). Photos: Marie Ekstedt Bjersing.

There are many ways of dressing a distaff. Depending on the distaff, the fibres are pulled from it in different ways when spinning before being twisted into a thread (Figures 32–33).

CONCLUSION

Preserving craft knowledge is difficult. All documentation is time-consuming, removes focus from the making process and may interrupt the workflow. Some processes are best performed quickly, including re-hackling the flax before dressing the distaff, for ideal fibre separation. The process involves many detailed decisions, and the crafting process depends on many things: raw materials, the tools, the weather and sometimes sentimental or emotional aspects.

In this presentation and performance article, I have shared a craftsperson’s knowledge: how to read the flax, and what decisions are necessary in the crafting process – preparing flax. By hackling different types of flax, different working methods were demonstrated, and a difference between workmanship of certainty and workmanship at risk was shown.

A craftsperson is not always consistent in their work. Small decisions are made during the making process. How will we preserve that knowledge? The method presented is based on asking and identifying critical questions. With relevant questions in mind, we can observe a work process from a more initiated perspective, guiding us when making documentation, discussing with colleagues and gathering knowledge. The documentation will be more valuable by highlighting such questions. Using them, we gain knowledge about the critical aspects of intangible heritage and craft skills. This may make it easier to preserve and transmit knowledge and skills.

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