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Salish Blankets

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Salish Blankets

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Salish Blankets

Robes of Protection and Transformation, Symbols of Wealth

Leslie H. Tepper,
Janice George (Chepximiya Siyam),
and Willard Joseph (Skwetsimltexw)

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The authors are grateful to the Elders and cultural leaders from Salish communities who have supported and encouraged this project. They have been important advisors to us over the years. Weaving, we were told, is a key element of Salish traditional culture, and the teachings surrounding it should not be lost. The way to keep culture alive, they said, is to share it, experience it, and record people's knowledge—both of the historical teachings and of the contemporary activities. The privacy associated with particular sacred and ritual traditions has been respected in the research and the writing of this book. We have been careful to present only those materials and information that would have been, or are currently, used for family-related or community and public ceremonies.

We would like to thank the research and collections staff at the Perth Museum and Art Gallery, the Pitt Rivers Museum of the University of Oxford, the Royal British Columbia Museum, the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History and National Museum of the American Indian, the American Museum of Natural History, the Peabody Museum of Harvard University, the Burke Museum of the University of Washington, the Museum of Vancouver, the British Museum, the Museum of Anthropology of the University of British Columbia, and the Canadian Museum of History. Their gracious welcome into the storerooms and their enthusiasm in sharing ideas, documentation, and artifacts made this project truly a joint effort with our museum colleagues.

We gratefully acknowledge the support of the Canadian Museum of History. From our initial proposal for this study, the museum has allocated curatorial time for research and writing, provided travel funding that allowed us to analyze Salish weaving collections, and offered financial and administrative assistance when the manuscript was accepted for publication. The encouragement and interest of the chiefs of the Ethnology Department and of the Research Division over the years have carried this project steadily forward. We would like to thank the staff at the University of Nebraska Press, particularly Matthew Bokovoy, for their guidance in bringing the manuscript to publication.

The authors are all weavers, though from different traditions. We have experienced the excitement of thinking about a new project; the pleasure of choosing colors, textures, and design; and the satisfaction in taking a finished textile off the loom. Weavers form a strong community. We are indebted to the people who taught us the joy of weaving, to our families and friends, and to the many people who have shared their insights, experiences, and expertise.

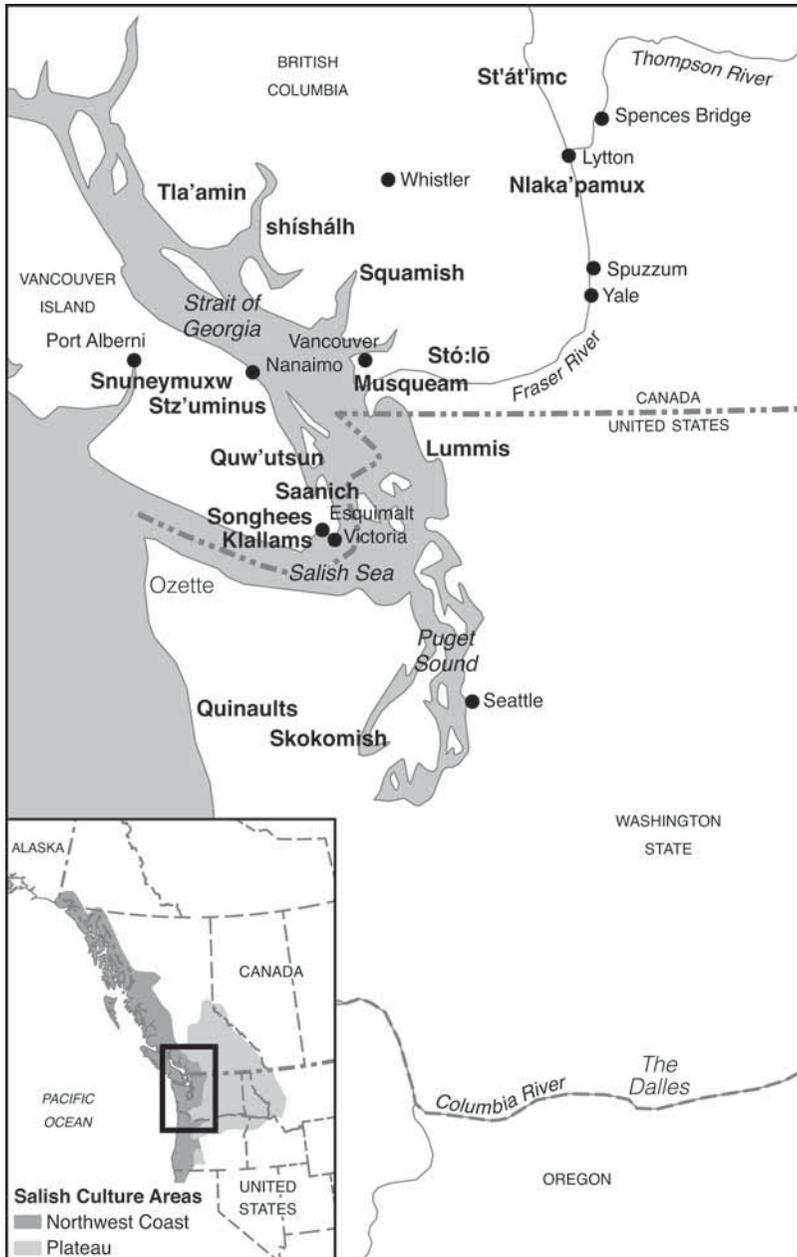
Introduction

You should think about blankets as merged objects. They are alive because they exist in the spirit world. They are the animal. They are part of the hunter; they are part of the weaver; they are part of the wearer.

—CHIEF JANICE GEORGE, Squamish

The Salish blanket, worn as a ceremonial robe, is an object of extraordinary complexity. Said to exist in the supernatural realm, these robes are made manifest in the natural world through Ancestral guidance. Wearing a woven blanket during ritual is transformative, moving the individual from the domain of the mundane to a sacred space. They are protective garments that at times of great changes in a person's life—celebrating a birth, participating in a marriage, mourning a death—offer emotional strength. A well-made blanket can raise the owner's prestige in the community and demonstrate a weaver's technical expertise along with her finely honed artistic vision.¹ The object, the maker, the wearer, and the community itself are bound and transformed through the creation and use of the Salish blanket.²

A shared interest in Salish weaving brought the authors together, and for several years we have researched, traveled, discussed, and collaborated in order to gain a better understanding of these fascinating textiles. We studied fabrics in museum collections in Canada, the United States, and Great Britain. Libraries were searched for publications and archives were examined



1. Selected Salish First Nations. Courtesy of the Canadian Museum of History, mapmaker François Goulet.

for relevant entries in diaries and records kept by explorers and fur traders. Historical photographs and audiovisual materials added valuable information. We spoke with Elders, interviewed weavers, and organized and attended workshops. During this time, information and expertise were shared in conversations among the three authors, with participants at textile conferences and gatherings, and with museum registrars, curators, and conservators. We explored ideas about the historical and contemporary role of Salish blankets and the importance of weavers in the community. Continually questioning our assumptions, we gradually began to perceive Salish textiles in new ways.

Our partnership began in 2005 when we organized a workshop at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, now named the Canadian Museum of History (CMH). Salish weavers from several communities near the city of Vancouver and from Vancouver Island were invited to come to the national capital to research the collections. They shared experiences and discussed topics of mutual interest.³ By the end of the meetings two areas for further research were identified. The first project was in response to the need for teaching materials in Salish communities. The participants said they needed to “make teachers.” It is important that people can teach in their home communities. In 2008 the authors, with the assistance of the workshop participants, produced a multimedia CD-ROM on Salish weaving.⁴ It includes videos showing how to warp a loom and how to weave using twill and twine techniques. Blueprints for building a tabletop loom, ideas for community weaving activities, and supportive comments from Elders provide guidance to new weavers. It also offers online links to museum databases, a bibliography, and a list of archival images. The CD-ROM has been used by Salish teachers and students in schools, cultural centers, workshops, and Elders’ gatherings.

The second concern expressed during the workshop was the absence of a viable market for contemporary Salish weavings. The production and sale of some forms of traditional Northwest Coast material culture, such as carvings, prints, and jewelry, have become profitable for many Aboriginal artists. These art

forms are traditionally made by men. The gift and tourist shops that carry this merchandise rarely include basketry and textile items typically made by women. The contrast in availability and market value between carvings and textiles is apparent as well in auction prices. Late nineteenth- and twentieth-century carvings often sell for thousands of dollars while early textiles and baskets, with the exception of Chilkat blankets, rarely command more than several hundred dollars.

Some Aboriginal artists have recently breached the barrier between the European-defined categories of craft and fine art. One of the distinctions between art and craft can be seen in the different venues of exhibition and sale. Northwest Coast sculptures in fine art galleries are made as limited editions or created as unique works of art. These items are valued in the tens of thousands of dollars. Unfortunately, women's weaving has been rarely featured in fine art galleries. For example, the 2013 exhibition *Sakahàn: International Indigenous Art*, was shown at the National Gallery of Canada.⁵ It was described as "one of the most ambitious contemporary art exhibitions in its history."⁶ The curators incorporated several pieces by well-known Northwest Coast carvers and painters, but works by famous Northwest Coast textile artists were not selected.

Purchasers of Northwest Coast fine craft or fine art can rely on a range of scholarly and popular publications for information about the artists' traditional culture. These volumes are usually available in the same galleries and shops where the objects are sold. Books explain the traditional art form, with its configurations of ovoid and U shapes, provide a guide on how to identify the crest figures on totem poles, or describe the supernatural personae represented by the dance masks made for sale. The artist's biography and a summary of the symbolic significance of the imagery are often included in the sale package. This type of information helps educate the buying public and adds to a new owner's enjoyment of the handmade object. The participants at our workshop suggested that increased public awareness of women's traditional work would help create a better

market for weavings, as both fine craft and fine art. It is hoped that this book will contribute toward a better informed audience with an appreciation of the skills, creativity, and remarkable history that form the fabric of Salish weaving.

A New View of Salish Blankets

In most material culture studies there comes a moment when the objects, the associated documentation, and the historical context suddenly coalesce. For the authors, the mid-nineteenth-century patterned blankets began to make sense about halfway through the research. We had traveled to study a blanket at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, and each section of this complex robe was carefully examined and photographed. The apparently random black and white embroidery-style stitching in the middle of the blanket was particularly interesting. To get a better overview, we headed to the second floor of the new Pitt Rivers collections area. Standing on the walkway we could look down one story to see the blanket on the table below. From this height it was clear that the weaver had arranged the patterns and the embroidery to create an illusion of a small blanket lying on top of a large one. This sleight of hand began to inform the analysis of every patterned blanket in our study.

In the search for an explanation of this particular design, the authors began to consider the patterned blankets within the context of Salish cosmology and society. During her life, Squamish Elder Lena Jacobs (1910–2008) talked of robes and blankets as providing spiritual protection from the negative thoughts that came from enemies or strangers. Contemporary community leaders and participants in traditional ceremonies spoke of how the words and emotions of people attending the gathering could distract or “weigh on” them. Wearing a blanket gave them a sense of strength and focus and a feeling of calmness. The idea that “robes are worn for spiritual protection” came to be a fundamental concept in this study of Salish weaving. It helped to explain the choice of mountain goat wool as the desired weaving material. It suggested reasons for histor-

ical textile designs and for the practices that guide a weaver's actions and define her responsibilities. It clarified how the creation of woven textiles integrates the spiritual and supernatural into the life of the weaver and contributes to the well-being of those who wear her blankets.

If blankets provide psychological comfort in today's world then perhaps they played a similar role in the mid-nineteenth century when this complex pattern blanket was first woven. By the 1860s smallpox and measles had decimated Northwest Coast villages. Strangers from around the world had arrived to dig gold and establish farms and businesses. The changing Salish social and physical environment may have seemed an uncertain and frightening place. Perhaps the shifting patterns and "double-layer" style woven into this robe was intended to "shield" the person beneath the textile and provide a sense of protection.

Use of brilliant colors and the illusion of a double robe also spoke to this period of history in a different way. The earlier, highly treasured goat hair blankets had been objects that expressed wealth and status. They also functioned as a form of standardized currency. By the mid-nineteenth century the flood of white trade blankets into Native villages had reduced the value of individual blankets. A "double-layered" robe, woven from multicolored threads acquired through trade, could be viewed as a statement of extraordinary wealth, social power, and high status.

The analysis of the Pitt Rivers and other patterned robes, when placed within the framework of our conversations with Elders and with a new generation of Salish weavers, was an opportunity to explore this cultural history. We felt it was time to build on Paula Gustafson's classic study of Salish weaving, discuss a different interpretation of some of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century handwoven textiles, and offer information about the contemporary use of traditional Salish robes.⁷

Studies of Salish Weaving

Remarkably few studies have been published on Salish textiles. Articles for professional journals and pamphlets discuss par-

ticular blankets or give an overview of weaving and its mid-twentieth-century revitalization.⁸ The most comprehensive study is still *Salish Weaving*, published in 1980. For this major contribution to the field, Gustafson located and analyzed Salish blankets in North American and European museum collections. Her book, now out of print, provides information on spinning and weaving techniques and natural dyes as well as instructions on how to warp the loom. She also briefly speculates on the symbolic meanings of the designs and colors. In the final section she tells the history of the renewed interest in weaving in the Chilliwack Valley during the 1960s and the formation of the Salish Weavers Guild around 1970. Gustafson's most influential contribution to the study of Salish weaving was her classification of blanket styles according to the use of twill or twine and pattern placement. The categorization of blankets as "Traditional," "Colonial," and "Post Colonial" has structured much of the discussion about Salish blanket types for more than thirty years.

Recent interest in the art style of the southern Northwest Coast and in women's work has created a greater awareness of Salish culture and weaving. Barbara Brotherton's 2008 exhibition *S'abadeb: The Gifts; Pacific Coast Salish Art and Artists*, brought together historical and contemporary carvings and weavings from major museum collections.⁹ The associated catalog included an important contribution by the ethnologist Cisca Bierwert, who provided an overview of major textiles in Canadian and American Coast Salish communities.¹⁰ In other recent exhibits, the work of Salish weavers has been incorporated as a small component of a larger display of contemporary carvings or of Chilkat and Raven's Tail weavings.¹¹ The Salish artist and curator Rose Spahan, in a show titled *SMASH*, included contemporary Salish textiles along with the work of Mi'kmaq, Alaskan, Southwestern, and Hawaiian artists.¹² A 1986 exhibit at the Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia (MOA), presented the revival of weaving in the Salish community of Musqueam.¹³ Such exhibitions create new audiences with an interest in Salish textile art. Hopefully these and other

venues will continue to explore historical and contemporary themes while celebrating the weavers and their work.

Sharing the Study of Material Culture

Working relationships between museum curators and First Nation consultants have changed fundamentally in the past half century. Recognition of Indigenous ownership of traditional knowledge, of an independent Aboriginal voice, and of the complex nature of ethnographic narrative has created new styles of partnership. Ethnographies and museum exhibitions have generally moved away from the single perspective of a non-Native researcher and are incorporating quotes, perspectives, and personal accounts from Indigenous contributors. A growing number of exhibitions and catalogs are now curated and written entirely by members of a First Nation community.¹⁴

The authors of this volume wanted to maintain a partnership and work in a collaborative manner. Our project has required several years of close, cooperative effort that combined material culture analysis, archival and ethnographic research, and fieldwork. Aboriginal perspective is woven into this text by the very nature of its coauthorship, as well as in the inclusion of personal stories and perspectives acquired through interviews. These voices are mainly, but not exclusively, from Squamish First Nation community members.¹⁵ Additional perspectives are provided by Snuneymuxw, Stz'uminus, Musqueam, shíshálh, and Tla'amin First Nation as well as individuals from Lummi Nation and Skokomish Nation whom we have worked with over the years. Weavers in these communities are often closely linked through kinship and cultural teachings to Salish Nations on both sides of the Canadian-American border.¹⁶ For example, the Squamish authors who live in Canada were taught to weave in the United States by the Skokomish Elder Bruce Miller and his student Susan Pavel. Though each Salish community has its own traditions, many of the teachings are commonly held among them, and personal experiences, such as learning to weave or bringing out a new blanket, are similar.

Organization of the Volume

Salish weaving began thousands of years ago in the preparation, spinning, and interlacing of fibers for various purposes. The raw materials that were locally available, the development of weaving tools and techniques, and the role of textiles as utilitarian or ceremonial objects created a unique art form. The first chapter presents a framework of the geography, climate, resources, and cosmology that structured Salish weaving. A brief discussion of the tools and techniques of weaving is followed by an overview of the blankets and woven bands chosen for study.

The focus of chapter 2 is the history of Salish blankets. It suggests how the textiles have been intertwined with the changing social and cultural practices of Salish society. Blankets served as bedding or as warm clothing in the winter. They could be a significant component of a bride price and distributed as gifts. In the late eighteenth century, European explorers began to arrive on the Northwest Coast, followed by fur traders, missionaries, gold miners, and settlers. They brought a new economy, new diseases, and different religious beliefs. Changes in Salish culture are reflected in the production, materials, and patterns of Salish weaving during this period. By the early years of the twentieth century, handmade blankets were rarely seen and the knowledge of weaving was almost lost. The chapter concludes with an overview of the recent revitalization of weaving in several communities.

Chapter 3 brings together the historical weavings in museum collections with the contemporary use of ceremonial textiles. The authors offer a blanket typology based on use, size, design, and weave. Historical Wedding Blankets, Standing Blankets, and Naming and Chiefly Robes are discussed in the context of the experiences of contemporary weavers and wearers of these textiles. The chapter reviews the different categories of blanket types proposed by other researchers and concludes with a discussion of mid-nineteenth-century complex patterned weavings.

The fourth chapter, “Motifs and Patterns,” explores the use

of color and design in Salish weavings. Decisions made by nineteenth-century craftswomen about color application and pattern composition are traced in examples of basketry, woven bands, and historical textiles. Traditional practices and what appear to be innovative approaches to design combinations are described using detailed analyses of sections of selected nineteenth-century weavings.

Each of the textiles in the fifth chapter offers a unique statement of a weaver's aesthetic judgment and technical skill. Included among these blankets are the shifting patterns of Scotland's Perth Museum blanket and the double-layer blanket in Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum. One blanket has been chosen for analysis from the group of remarkable blankets woven in the 1860s near Yale, British Columbia, and another from the robes worn by a delegation of Salish chiefs in 1906.

The final chapter turns from a focus on the early textiles to a contemporary weaver. Though the voices of Salish weavers are incorporated throughout the text, the conclusion offers one artist's perspective. Siyaltmaat (Joy Joseph-McCullough) speaks about her choice to become a weaver; the experiences that inspire her, and the teachings that guide her.

The volume includes two appendixes. As noted earlier, there are few books on Salish weaving and, though interest in Salish weaving techniques and patterns is growing, it is often difficult to find resources for further independent study. The information in these appendixes is organized to reflect two pedagogical approaches to learning and sharing knowledge.

Appendix 1 is a compendium of some of the cultural teachings that are shared with new weavers by Salish Elders and weaving instructors. Traditionally the information would have been restricted to family members. However, the authors have been encouraged by Elders and community leaders to include it in this study because such teachings are considered to be an important aid to the preservation of Salish weaving practices. The texts are presented in the way they were told: as stories, memories, and lessons. Readers are asked to imagine themselves in the pres-

ence of knowledge keepers, who teach by sharing traditional wisdom, personal experiences, and expectations.

The second appendix provides a list of Salish weavings in museum collections and has been compiled from the authors' working database. Though it is not a complete listing of all Salish weavings held by all museums, it provides the location and catalog number of more than two hundred items, including blankets, textile fragments, wall hangings, and woven bands and belts. Readers can search online in the database of an individual institution for a visual image and catalog record. Inquiries for more information or comments can be sent directly to the museum's webpage or to its curatorial staff.

The Authors

Chepximiya Siyam (Janice George), a Squamish hereditary chief, and Skwetsimltxw (Willard Joseph) live and work on the Squamish Nation's Capilano Reserve in West Vancouver. After receiving a degree from Capilano College in the Textile Arts Program, Janice continued her education at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in museum studies. She has curated various exhibitions, including, most recently, the Squamish storyline for the Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre in Whistler, British Columbia. Though working full-time, Willard, familiarly known as Buddy, finds opportunity to weave and teach. Together they established their studio L'hen Awtxw: The Weaving House, have participated in major exhibitions, and have been featured in publications on Salish weaving.¹⁷

Leslie H. Tepper, PhD, is the curator of Western ethnology at the Canadian Museum of History. Her research focus is material culture studies with particular interest in weaving and women's work. In consultation with Interior Salish communities on traditional clothing patterns and techniques she co-curated the exhibition *Threads of the Land* and wrote an associated publication, *Earth Line and Morning Star: Nlaka'pamux Clothing Traditions*. Research projects for the exhibition helped to create greater community interest in the renewal of willow bark and

cedar bark technology and in the production of traditional material culture.¹⁸ Her appointment to a new position as Northwest Coast curator and Janice George's participation in the CMH's Aboriginal Training Program in Museum Practices offered an opportunity to research and write this volume.

A Note to Weavers

Discussions about the design, construction, and role of woolen weavings are an important part of the preservation of traditional knowledge. The authors hope this book will assist Salish weavers and researchers in the study of early textiles and will encourage weavers to conduct their own analysis of blankets and woven bands held in city, state, and provincial museums located in Salish territories. These objects are usually made available for study by calling the museum's curator or collection manager. Requests for exhibitions and loans from national and international museums can bring rare Salish blankets to nearby communities. The study and sharing of information about traditional textiles nurtures the creation of new weavings and inspires designs that express contemporary Salish cultural identity.

Abbreviations

AMNH American Museum of Natural History, New York

CMH Canadian Museum of History, Gatineau, Quebec

MOA Museum of Anthropology, University of British
Columbia, Vancouver

NMAI National Museum of the American Indian,
Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC

NMNH National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian
Institution, Washington DC

RBCM Royal British Columbia Museum, Victoria