

Hand Spinning and Dying Mohair

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Using mohair in hand craft is quite different to farming and the production of fibre for the textile industries. Nevertheless, fibre crafting with mohair gives insights and understand of the concepts of fibre quality. Hand spinning is the most obvious craft activity, but this is only half-way to making something of use. In this article I want to explore a variety of craft techniques I have picked up while experimenting with spinning and dying mohair.



Figure 1A range of dyed, hand spun yarns.

The basics – start with a quality fleece.

Of course, there may be specific reasons to “do something” with a fleece but by far the most obvious is to start with the best fleece possible. Mohair has three outstanding properties – **fibre length, non-felting character and high lustre**. Parallel fibres allow the lustre to be displayed and when dyed, the remarkable colour properties of mohair can be exploited.

So, I choose long, open, or relaxed fleece where the staples and fibres are easily separated. The second fleece (shorn before September when fibre shedding can result in tangles) and the third fleece shorn in autumn offer the best general fleece for craft. There is a saying – ***shear yesterday and it will be short, shear tomorrow and it will be too long***. However, shearing tomorrow is probably best for craft fleece. I use staples which are 14 to 16cm long and that means fleece grown for 7 months. Fleece from show goats also offers a good starting point (as long as it’s not too long or expensive to buy). Such fleeces are relatively clean, open and free of vegetable matter.

The next step is getting the fleece shorn. Double cuts are a pain when spinning mohair so the rule is “keep the handpiece on the skin!” Of course, if you can do your own shearing it helps.

Skirting the fleece.

Special fleeces are best skirted straight away then bagged and labelled. I add a moth ball or two just in case and tie the bag. You pick up the fleece from the shearer’s end and throw it, underhand, onto the skirting table. That way the neck goes further and the britch drops close to you, with the cut edge down. Now you can remove the stains (mostly close to you) and then the short pieces from the sides. Use your sense of touch to detect burry pieces and cotted lumps. If the neck is obviously strong, remove it before you bag the fleece.

Storage.

The danger is that you save too many fleeces. So, I try not to get carried away with selecting many really nice fleeces.

Scouring.

There is a lot of dirt and grease in mohair fleeces, even those from show teams. Your fleece must be clean for both dyeing and spinning. Greasy mohair will stick to the cards and is very hard to draw out to spin. Grease will also prevent even dye penetration.

I find I need at least 3 cycles of washing plus at least 2 rinses. A neutral pH wool detergent like Softly is best, but I might start with an overnight soak in Napisan or Vanish if there is a lot of grease in paddock grown fleeces. To remove all the “wool” grease you need hot water (almost too hot for your hands). Luckily mohair does not felt so agitation is not a problem and vigorous stirring and squeezing is recommended. That does not mean you can tumble wash or dry a fleece but spin drying is OK to get most of the water out. Fleeces can be spread out on a towel in the sun to dry. It might take 2 days to fully dry.

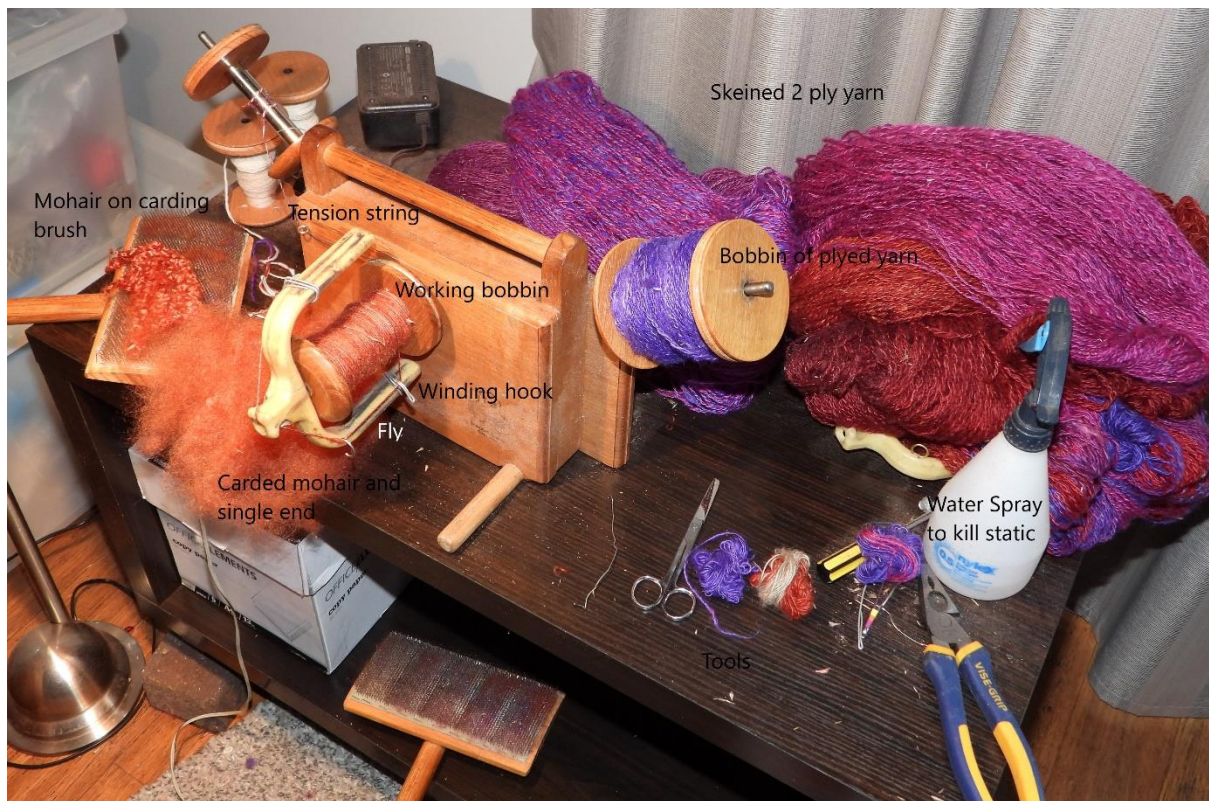


Figure 2 My work area. An Inwood-Smith electric wheel and skeins of finished yarn.

Dyeing “in the wool”.

Dyeing is a whole subject in itself, but I use the “dyed in the wool” technique to produce a lot of each colour. Clean fleece can be dyed. My objective is to produce yarn for sale, but some buyers want a lot of one colour or up to 10 balls of a mix of colours. I also do fairly big projects like blankets needing a lot of particular colours. I choose the dye colour related to my current fancy and drop half a (wet) fleece into a 20-litre dye pot to bring to the boil and simmer. You have to use a lot of dyestuff because dye sometimes fails to reach the centre of the staple and this results in lighter colour when the fleece is finally carded.



Figure 3 Multi coloured yarn in blues produced by carding and spinning colours in rotations

Carding.

I find that carding is a must for mohair. Carding brushes can be used but you only card a small amount at a time. The staples should break up easily and be reduced the mass of even fibre. Tight staples with too much twist tangle and take a lot of opening. I have a drum

carder but while it has its uses to open fleece or to mix colours, I am unconvinced of its value. Again, it works if you only card small amounts at a time and run the “sliver” through at least twice.

Dying Yarn.

For solid colour you can dye white yarn. This tends to restrict the amount of one colour you can achieve because it is very difficult to repeat an exact colour in another dye batch. Three or 4 skeins is about the maximum you can handle at home and that is a lot of spinning to muck up with a bad colour. Plying two similar colours of dyed slivers lets you experiment and adjust without endangering a lot of effort.

Dying a skein (or more) is easy and again, the non-felting character of mohair makes it easier than boiling wool which will felt unless you are very careful

Wash and hang the skein(s) in the sun to dry.



Figure4 Three or four skeins of white immersed quickly into a dyebath and simmer

Dye Colours.

Now you can try natural dyes obtained from boiling vegetable matter for hours. Unfortunately, this is not only messy, but the dyes are not “fast”. That is, they fade to a fairly uniform brown. There are exceptions and soaking the yarn in a chemical “mordant” before dying can help.

A wide range of “fast” colours is available from Landscape Dyes. These are “acid” dyes, mostly intense and but quite dark. Try some of the lighter shades. As instructed, you finish the boilup with a cup of vinegar to help the mohair absorb all the colour.

Spinning.

We finally get to my real interest. My advice is to start slow, with low tension. Keep practicing and gradually you will get the hang of it.



Figure 5 Draw back with the rear hand to give a uniform amount of mohair then slide the front fingers back. Don't let the twist get past your front fingers

Mohair is slippery so you use a light tension. **Even so there is a danger you will over twist the yarn and create "string"**. Set the tension so you can just feel the spun yarn pulling on your front fingers. If the twisting is too fast the tension will increase and pull the yarn away.

Two bobbins of "single end" are plied together using a reverse spinning direction. The mistake I continue to make is to go too fast and not put enough reverse twist in the plying almost takes as much time as spinning. Such yarn will divide when knitting or crocheting.



Figure 6 Skeins ready to be washed with completed balls (approx. 100g)

Two-fold yarn is stable and can be skeined. I skein "hand to elbow" and then wash the yarn to settle the twist and then ball.

Further experimentation.

You might try a multi-species approach. Various wools, alpaca and silk blends are available. Moths are a danger and you should check very carefully for and signs of little white granules of moth faeces or even small white cocoons. When examining sliver and top, check the fibre length. Commercial

top from a mill is often too short for hand spinning. Use the same criteria you have for mohair fleeces. 14-16cm in raw fleece, 12 to 14cm in a draw from top. Some people are "purists" and only want to work with mohair fleece, but I have experimented with other fibres. Working with wool makes you appreciate the non-felting capacity and brightness of mohair.

What next.

There are many things you can do with fleece and yarns. This will be covered in the next article, but you can help by sending me photos of completed projects and ideas of crafting mohair.

NOTE. The full version of this article has been posted on the mohair.com web site.