

"Words Weave the Word" and "The Storyteller"**By: Rebecca Chamberlain**

Introduction--Coast Salish Design: The images I created are based on a traditional Coast Salish spindle-whorl design that was originally used for spinning mountain goat wool and other fibers into thick yarn for Salish weavings. The main character has human features and its hands are upraised in gratitude and thanksgiving. Two wolves seem to fly out the character's hands, wrapping themselves around its head to face each other. Some people assume that the images carved on spindle-whorls or other objects were not only decorative, but reflected creatures that could help artisans in their work. The original image was carved into wood, and a spindle would have passed through the main character's mouth.

I fell in love with the design the first time I saw it, and have drawn representations of it several times in the last 30 years for different purposes. When I was asked to participate in "Painted Word," I saw this image in my mind's eye, spinning like a waterfall, churning words from its mouth. Salmon were swimming forth in cross lateral directions, replenishing the earth and waters. In my design, a wolf comes out of the right hand of the main character, and an eagle comes of its left hand. They balance each other and represent different qualities: the wolf represents fire; the eagle represents air; the human-like character represents earth; the strips of words tumbling from its mouth represent water.

In order to represent what I imagined, I had to create two pieces, "The Storyteller," and "Words Weave the World."

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"The Storyteller," the first image, is a sphere painted with salmon-egg paint and rimmed with a thick rope of braided cedar bark. This image turns on an axis, like a spindle whorl, with a cascade of words churning like a waterfall from its mouth. This was my way of playing with Lushootseed sounds that I found interesting because they sound similar, but have different meanings. These similarities keep the listener alert, but like any good word play, I also relish the multiple associations that come to mind.

For clarity, I printed English translations with the Lushootseed words. However, I also wanted to emphasize that language is not static. It does not lie on the page; it is spoken into being. To bring the words to life, I supplied a tape recorder so that the words could be sounded into the space of the exhibit. For audience participation, passers by could play a tape of the words used in the design. I also supplied strips of words so that they could take representations of the language away with them. For fun, I printed on the outside of the jar, "Please take one," and on the inside, "if you feel free to."

s̓xud̓xud words hudud fire s̓xud̓xud words hudud fire s̓xud̓xud words hudud
 taq̓'u? thirsty təq̓'ubə? snow-covered taq̓'u? thirsty təq̓'ubə? snow-covered
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“**Words Weave The World,**” the second image, repeats the first design. However, instead of being wrapped in a tight circle bound by cedar bark, it is printed in a large, square, open space. Outgoing and incoming salmon swim on cross lateral lines that move out of the corners. Like salmon who transit the ocean--along with the courses of the rivers and creeks of great continents--this character is seemingly suspended by the threads that the salmon are following to regenerate and weave the world into being.

Lushootseed is the traditional native language of Puget Sound. There are several Lushootseed dialects, but it is divided primarily into Northern Lushootseed (NL) and Southern Lushootseed (SL).¹ The dialects can be mutually understood, but there are many differences in words and pronunciation. Though the dialects are distinctive, fluent speakers can understand and flow easily between one dialect and another. All of the words are printed in the international-phonetic-alphabet with symbols that represent the native sounds.

I mixed the Northern and Southern dialects to present two ways of thinking about words and stories. This reflects the acceptance and cultural syncretism that occurs when people can understand and appreciate each other’s way of speaking. Through this kind of exchange, a living language can be enriched with nuance. Both Northern and Southern speakers would understand what is meant, but generally a speaker would use terms from one dialect or the other. For example:

sx̣udx̣ud (SL) Words

x̣ẉiʔab (SL) Myths or stories

syəhub

yəyəhubəx̣ẉ

yeyehubtx̣ẉ

*sx̣udx̣ud tuʔal ḳwi tuhaʔḳẉ g̣ẉəl ti šəx̣ẉələx̣
ʔə tuyəlyəlabčəł. ʔuq̣ẉibid tubułəx̣ẉ ḳwi
g̣ẉəs yəyəhub.*

*sx̣udx̣ud tuʔal tudi tuhaʔḳẉ ḳwi səx̣ẉwələx̣
ʔə tuyəlyəlabčəł, dəx̣ẉ ʔu yəyəhub čəł,*

sg̣ẉadəd (NL) Words

syəhub (NL) Myths or stories

Traditional myths and stories about the world before the transformation.

Tell a story now!

Recite a traditional myth!

Words of long ago were the strength of our ancestors, preparing them preparing them to tell the stories now.

Ancient words were the strength of our ancestors, preparing us to tell the traditional myths.

¹ For more detailed information, see: *Lushootseed Dictionary*, by Dawn Bates, Thom Hess, and Vi Hilbert, 1994.