

Eri silk slivers (from back): white eri, red eri, and bleached eri

A Spinner's Tussie Mussie

Preparing Eri Silk Sliver

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Thirty-five years ago, the eri silk I was able to purchase felt, looked, and behaved more like cotton than it did silk. But with advances in the technology used at a commercial scale, the eri silk sliver available today is quite different. Improved degumming and fiber preparation techniques have resulted in an eri silk sliver with

a soft, cashmere-like hand and a delicate pearlescent sheen. I enjoy working with eri because it is almost as fine as bombyx silk, but unlike bombyx, eri blends readily with other fibers.

One of my challenges with this new and improved commercial fiber preparation was to find a way to

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preserve the fiber's luster, and at the same time, manage the fine, slick, and slippery fiber. My solution is to manipulate the fiber to form what I call a tussie mussie, which is simply an organized way of arranging and loosening the commercial sliver to give the spinner more control.

At first blush, you might think fiber spun from a silken tussie mussie would tangle horribly and result in an awful mess. Instead, the silky eri fibers simply float past one another as you draft. If you think about it, this fiber preparation is not too far a stretch from either what we know as "cloud," or the careful fanning and layering of flax when dressing a distaff, or even the spinning draft known as spinning "from the fold." Tussie mussies work well as a fiber preparation for spinning on either wheels or spindles.

It is true that this additional preparation method takes more time than simply spinning from the fold or directly from a sliver, but I find it is time well spent for the types of yarns I am making. Redistributing the fibers and creating a crisscross orientation that reins in those slippery fibers gives me more control. This allows me to spin finer, more consistent singles faster.

I find that this also keeps fibers in check during spinning; the ends do not waft away from the apex of the drafting triangle as they do when I spin from the full width of silk sliver. I encourage you to give this technique a try with either worsted or woolen spinning drafts.

HOW TO PREPARE A TUSSIE MUSSIE

I am right-handed. If you are left-handed, you may find it easier to transpose these instructions. Also, working



1. Pull the sliver into short sections, about the length of your hand. Open up the fibers on the left-hand side of the sliver. With the side of your left hand (or index finger and base of your thumb if it works better), hold the open wisps of fiber firmly against the surface while the right hand pulls the length of fiber across the surface. This leaves a thin veil of silk fiber in its wake as you move your right hand from left to right. Stop once you have spread out a wisp of fiber approximately 6 inches wide.



2. Transfer the fiber supply to your left hand. Hold the right edge of the veil of fiber with your right hand and pull the fiber to your left. These two layers complete one pass. Repeat these steps to create a second complete pass.

on a smooth surface will prevent the fine strands of eri from snagging as you guide the silk across the surface. I use my leather lap cloth, smooth side up.

Depending on how the eri cocoons are processed, the commercial slivers available contain either very

short ($\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 inch) or medium-long to extralong (4 to 6 inches) staple lengths. I developed this fiber-preparation technique for commercial silk slivers with longer staple lengths.



3. After you have completed two passes, set the resulting "cake" of silk aside. From one length of silk, I usually get three or four cakes. Once I have eight cakes prepared, I move on to the next step and start spinning. More would be better because they spin up quite quickly, but I can never wait to start spinning this beautiful fiber.



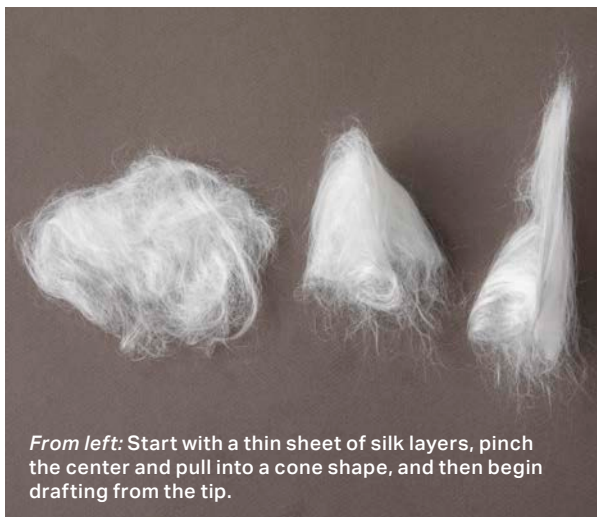
4. To prepare the cake for spinning, pinch the fiber in its center and pull up. This results in a cone-shaped mass of crisscrossed fibers. Spin from the apex of the cone and you are away to the races. To join a new tussie mussie, I pull about an inch and a half of fiber from its apex and lay the wispy strand on top of the tuft remaining from the previous tussie mussie.

If you prefer to spin a smoother, finer yarn, you can modify the cone shape a bit. After you pinch the middle of the cake and pull up, fold the cake in half as if closing a book to create a flattened, roughly triangular shape. Starting at the apex and working toward the base, gently draft the fibers into a length of roving.

SPINNING

Tussie mussies work equally well when spun with a short-forward worsted, short-backward worsted, or woolen draft. They are a lovely fiber preparation for spinning eri on a wheel, suspended spindle, or supported spindle when consistency and control are vital.

When spinning any silk with my wheel, I add just enough tension to the brake band to wind the singles onto the bobbin. If I want to slow down the take-up the tiniest bit, instead of adjusting the brake band, I will first try cross-lacing the singles on the flyer. If that is not enough, then I will adjust the brake band.



From left: Start with a thin sheet of silk layers, pinch the center and pull into a cone shape, and then begin drafting from the tip.

What Is a Tussie Mussie?

A tussie mussie is a portable, miniature, cone-shaped flower vase, popular in the Victorian era. Tussie refers to a small flower bouquet, and mussie refers to the moistened moss wrapped around the stems to prevent the flowers from wilting. The fiber preparation method described here is similar to a tussie mussie. It is cone shaped and consists of a crisscrossed web of silk reminiscent of the delicate filigree design common to Victorian aesthetic.

One of the reasons I love connecting this Victorian curio to the handling of eri silk is that tussie muscies were popular during the life of Sir Thomas Wardle (1831–1909), a colleague of William Morris. Wardle owned Hencroft Dye Works, which specialized in silk dyeing and, in particular, “wild” silk fiber. Wardle had a deep-seated interest in the many facets of sericulture including entomology, botany, the processing of silk cocoons, and silk spinning and

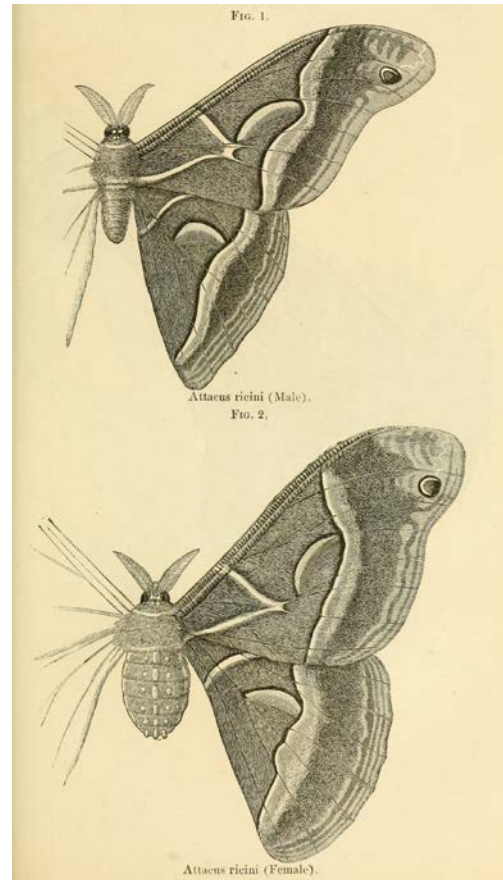
weaving as well as the use of silk cloth. He wrote extensively on the subject.

In 1881, after several years of research in India, Wardle published the *Handbook of the Collection Illustrative of the Wild Silks of India, in the Indian Section of the South Kensington Museum*. The book is an interesting read for anyone who enjoys silk, botany, entomology, and history. It also contains lovely drawings of the different species of silkworms at various stages of their life cycles, leaves of the various host plants the silkworms fed upon, maps showing where the different species were reared and processed, etc.

Thomas’s wife, Elizabeth, was a skilled and renowned needlewoman who led an “art embroidery” movement that used “tusser” (tussah) silk floss. In about 1879, Elizabeth and Thomas established the Leek Embroidery Society.



A Victorian-style tussie mussie



Attacus ricini (eri silk moths). Illustration from Thomas Wardle’s *Handbook of the Collection Illustrative of the Wild Silks of India, in the Indian Section of the South Kensington Museum* (1881).



Skein spun from Kim's eri silk tussie mussies. The silk fibers were 5 to 6 inches long. Her wheel was set at a 13.5:1 ratio, and she used a short-backward draft.

For extremely fine, consistent spinning, try creating tussie mussies made from one complete pass instead of two.

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If you are looking for an enjoyable spin that results in handspun with a lovely soft hand, excellent drape, and exquisite luster, I suggest you add some eri silk to your fiber repertoire. ●

Resources

Wardle, Thomas. *Handbook of the Collection Illustrative of the Wild Silks of India, in the Indian Section of the South Kensington Museum*. London: G. E. Eyre and W. Spottiswoode, for H. M. Stationery Office, 1881.

Curiosity is what propels **Kim McKenna**. She is constantly learning and improving upon her handspun yarn. Kim shares her learning through virtual workshops with Sanjo Silk and in-person workshops through Coniagas Fleece and Handspinning School and SweetGeorgia Yarns, as well as through the School of SweetGeorgia. You can follow her journey at claddaghfibreats.com and on Instagram @claddaghfibreats.