Qʷaʔələmu łukʷalabəł (Nancy Jo Bob), left, who co-founded Ancestral Languages Indigenous Voice Empowerment, known as ALIVE Alliance, teaches the Southern Lushootseed language and how it connects to weaving to her daughter Qʷəlišəbəł (Qwulishubulh Bob), 9, at "Woven in Wool: Resilience in Coast Salish Weaving" an exhibit at The Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture in Seattle. Qʷaʔələmu łukʷalabəł is an enrolled member of the Lummi Nation and a descendant from Duwamish Tribe. Qʷəlišəbəł is an enrolled member of the Puyallup Tribe and a descendant from Lummi Nation and Duwamish Tribe. (Ivy Ceballo / The Seattle Times)

Thread of resilience runs through Salish wool-weaving exhibit at the Burke

By Lynda V. Mapes
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IN SOFT CLOUDS of mountain goat wool, in rich colors and textures, a story of Coast Salish cultural resilience is told.

"Woven in Wool: Resilience in Coast Salish Weaving," a new exhibit at the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture by Coast Salish artists, shows the persistence of the art of weaving in their culture. But also woven into the exhibit is the culmination of decades of work building new relationships between Native artists and the museum that make this exhibit so special.

Museums all over the country were once a place where Native artists' belongings were locked away after they were wrested, even stolen, from their communities. But at the Burke, the relationship with Native artists and their work is in a new place. "Woven in Wool" is the first wholly Burke-built and -originated exhibit in the museum's new building, and the co-curated exhibit is "a testament to the power of community," says Sara Gonzalez, interim executive director of the Burke. "It's a moment for connection, hope, healing and joy."

The reset began decades ago at the Burke, with directors and curators who welcomed Native artists who wanted to study the collections, and provided funding and staff support to make that invitation real. Then in 2003, Robin Wright, a professor at the University of Washington and curator of Native Art at the Burke, established the Bill Holm Center for the Study of Northwest Native Art, to support not only individual artists, but their mentors, apprentices, elders and colleagues.

Qʷəlišəbəɬ (Qwulishubulh Bob) practices weaving while visiting "Woven in Wool: Resilience in Coast Salish Weaving," an exhibit at the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture in Seattle. (Ivy Ceballo / The Seattle Times)

TODAY, "WOVEN IN WOOL" shows what is made possible by deep collaboration. The idea for the exhibit was conceived in 2020 by Native weavers on the executive board of the Coast Salish Wool Weaving Center. In addition to embracing the idea, the Burke turned over most of a $75,000 grant from the Terra Foundation for American Art to fund years of research by the weavers for the exhibit, notes Kathryn Bunn-Marcuse, curator of Northwest Native American

Art at the Burke. “They are the experts,” says Bunn-Marcuse, who provided the institutional leadership to make the exhibit happen.

The result, co-curated by the weavers and Bunn-Marcuse, is a multilayered exhibit, luminous in texture, color, narrative, history and sensory experience.

Guests visit the exhibit “Woven in Wool” during an Indigenous preview at the Burke Museum. (Ivy Ceballo / The Seattle Times)

“Chiefly Tunic,” made of mountain goat and sheep’s wool by Buddy Joseph, a member of the Squamish tribe, is displayed at the “Woven in Wool” exhibit at the Burke. (Ivy Ceballo / The Seattle Times)

“Mountain Protector,” a cape, hat and skirt made by Gail White Eagle, is part of the “Woven in Wool” exhibit. The mask is by Tyson Simmons. White Eagle, a member of the Muckleshoot tribe, used mountain goat wool, sheep wool, yellow cedar bark, red cedar and sinew in the work. (Ivy Ceballo / The Seattle Times)

First is the variety of the work. The exhibit shows the full range of Coast Salish regalia; not just the robes but also hoods and leggings and tumplines (a headband for carrying heavy loads) and capes. Second, the exhibit is a rich visual instruction in what specifically Coast Salish regalia

looks like — entirely distinct from button blankets or Chilkat weaving that has dominated popular understanding.

Finally, the exhibit shows the whole process of creating the work. Explore the seasonal round of gathering materials, from tufts of wool from the goats' mountain redoubts to plants and materials used for dyes, including red alder, huckleberries and lobster mushrooms. Accents and decorative elements are presented, too, from deer bone and antler to shredded cedar bark and abalone shell, fluff from cattail, fireweed and cottonwood.

In this way, the exhibit is a celebration of Native women's knowledge, notes Bunn-Marcuse, something she wanted to emphasize by showcasing the deep and intimate relationship with the land, seasons, animals and plants of their home places the weavers use to make their art.

IF YOU GO
"Woven in Wool: Resilience in Coast Salish" runs through Aug. 30, 2026, at the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture, 4303 Memorial Way N.E. in Seattle.

For Burke info about tickets, hours and parking, see burkemuseum.org. The museum is closed on Mondays.

For Coast Salish Wool Weaving Center info, see coastsalishwoolweavingcenter.com.

THE EXHIBIT INCLUDES audio recordings of weavers talking about the discovery of their ancestors' work in museum collections, including the Burke, and how that work influenced them. Kids can give weaving a try on small looms set aside at a crafts table. Visitors can look into the life of the woolly dog, now extinct, that used to be specially kept by Coast Salish peoples for the use of its fluffy white fur for weaving. The dog breed was destroyed in the violence and chaos of colonization.

Chief Janice George, of the Squamish First Nation in British Columbia, views a portrait that shows Salish chiefs, including her ancestors, on a wall of the "Woven in Wool" exhibit. (Ivy Ceballo / The Seattle Times).

The overall effect of the exhibit is one of wonder, both at the beauty of the pieces, and the marvel of the resurgence under way in the Coast Salish wool-weaving art form, being taught by weavers passing the gift forward from their ancestors. For many years, artists had held these teachings close, for fear they would be exploited. Then that began to change.

“Uncle said the teachings need to be passed on. I couldn’t say no,” says Susan Pavel of the late Skokomish elder and master weaver Bruce Miller, who helped birth the weaving renaissance. The vision of Miller and other master weavers, including elders Fran James and her son, the traditional chief Bill James of the Lummi Nation, was to teach anyone who would come to learn. While they have all walked on to their next life, their work lives on in their teachings — and the students who learned from them.

There would be no shortcuts in the teaching, or the learning. “If we are going to do this, we are going to do the whole thing, how to spin the yarn, dye it, go up the mountain,” Pavel says. Filipina, she married into the Skokomish tribe, and is a member of the weaving center’s executive board. Her work is in the exhibit.

Edith Nagle, a member of the Tulalip Tribes, takes a close look at a piece in the “Woven in Wool” exhibit at the Burke Museum. (Ivy Ceballo / The Seattle Times)

“Grandmother Tunic” is part of “Woven in Wool” exhibit at the Burke (Ivy Ceballo / The Seattle Times).

Woolly dog hair is displayed in the Burke exhibit “Woven in Wool” (Ivy Ceballo / The Seattle Times)

THE DECISION TO use mountain goat wool for the pieces in the exhibit was both exciting and high stakes. “We were trying to be as authentic as we could to our traditional ways,” says Kelly Sullivan, executive director of the Port Gamble S’Klallam Tribe, and a member of the executive board of the weaving center, who also made pieces for the exhibit.

And that meant using the material cherished by their ancestors: soft, warm and beautiful mountain goat wool. Today scarce and hard to come by, it is hand-gathered, tuft by tuft, from

shrubs and plants the goats rub up against in their travels and shed in the course of the year. It can take a whole day's hike up and down a mountain to gather about enough to weave just a headband.

"It is so scary to weave with mountain goat, when you cannot get more, you cannot get it from the store," Sullivan says. "You didn't want to have any left over, but you also didn't want to come up short."

In addition to making their own gathering expeditions, the weavers urge hunters and hikers to bring back and give them the wool they find in their excursions. In this way weaving is a doorway to relationality, Sullivan explains — weaving together not only materials, but families and communities, and people with their plant and animal relatives, the seasons and the land.

It can take many hands to make a piece — hunters to gather hooves, bone, antler and wool; carvers to make a loom and work the decorative materials into blanket pins, buttons and more; gatherers to collect the plant materials to dye and accent the piece; weavers to spin and make it.

Susan Pavel, a weaver who married into the Skokomish tribe, becomes emotional while listening to her narration near the "Grandmother Tunic" part of the "Woven in Wool" exhibit. (Ivy Ceballo / The Seattle Times)

"It takes a whole village to do our Coast Salish weaving," says Gail White Eagle, a citizen of the Muckleshoot Indian Tribe and member of the weaving center executive board, whose work in the exhibit includes a dramatically beautiful cape, woven of mountain goat wool, with accents of yellow cedar strips.

ON A RECENT fall day, Pavel, co-instructor in a course taught collaboratively with Zoltán Grossman, a professor at The Evergreen State College in Olympia, brought their students to

Flaming Geyser State Park east of Auburn to learn from White Eagle, leading a walk in one of her favorite gathering places in the traditional territory of her ancestors.

“They used to walk here, they fished and hunted here, they gave birth to children here,” White Eagle says. “We come here to honor the ancestors, to take care of this area, in a good way.”

Master weaver Pavel, left, teaches about harvesting materials for weaving to students taking a course offered by The Evergreen State College called “Art and Place: Pacific Northwest Native Weaving and Geographies” at Flaming Geyser State Park along the Green River. (Ivy Ceballo / The Seattle Times)

The idea was to reveal a bit of the landscape as they saw it, with eyes and hearts trained in traditional knowledge. To them, these weren’t just plants along the trail, but helpers that can provide medicines, materials, dyes, foods, tinctures and teas — something in every season. But only if approached with the right teachings and practices.

Those include giving thanks, not taking more than you need, and acting respectfully on the land, they instructed.

“Introduce yourself to the land,” White Eagle told the students, before heading out on the trail. Raised hands show not only a greeting, but that you have no weapons, and come in peace, she explained. “The ancestors are here, and we want them to know.”

Her three times great grandfather was a war chief who defended this place, she told the students, a man of great stature with a longhouse filled with family and relations gathered around eight fires, one for each family, living in a communal home filled with their gathered foods, woven blankets and cattail mats.

Pavel shows mountain goat wool to students. (Ivy Ceballo / The Seattle Times)

A kingfisher clattered by the Green River as she spoke, and a raven gronked in the mists that twined in deep green firs. Cottonwoods turned autumn's gold. White Eagle spoke of how the elders would have stayed in the longhouse minding the children, as those in their 20s, 30s, and 40s would go out to gather foods and medicines and materials from this land, for their own use or trade.

As the class headed into the forest, White Eagle kept calling out plants along the trail, useful in so many ways: licorice fern for a sore throat, devil's club for pain relief. Maidenhair fern, its stems used as an accent in basket weaving. Suddenly, they drew up short, startled at a splash: chum salmon, lumbering up Cristy Creek, a tributary of the Green River.

Some of the big fish had already spawned, their bodies bringing nutrition from the feeding grounds of the seas. A chorus frog krrrrrecked from the ferns along the stream, and silver water drops flew from thrashing salmon tails, as they completed their cycle of life under way since the ancestors walked here.

Would White Eagle's ancestors have heard these same splashes, heard these same voices of frog, kingfisher and raven, enjoyed these same golden fall colors, felt the same wonder at the salmons' return?

Valerie Viera, 31, a student at The Evergreen State College, observes spawning chum salmon at Flaming Geyser State Park. (Ivy Ceballo / The Seattle Times)

Spawned out salmon in a tributary of the Green River at Flaming Geyser State Park. (Ivy Ceballo / The Seattle Times)

White Eagle pointed to an old tree with bent boughs; was it perhaps culturally modified by her ancestors, she asked the class, to point the way toward something important on the landscape? Could it be the geyser this park is known for, where a natural methane seep from a coal seam bubbles in a spring, creating calcium bicarbonate deposits — the same medicine we take today, in over-the-counter products, to settle an upset stomach?

Part of the joy is never knowing what they will find when they head out to gather, Pavel says. "Suit up and show up," is the teaching, Pavel says. Just going out to look is its own reward.

"We have mixed our tracks with the ancestors," White Eagle told the students. "Sometimes, it's gathering spirit, too."

Once the materials are in hand, the weavers use both traditional and modern methods in their work. When she was first learning to spin wool, she was taught on a hand spindle whorl, White Eagle says, but she also uses an electric spinner. "If our ancestors had had this, they would have used it."

FOR WEAVER Janice George, a hereditary chief at Squamish First Nation in British Columbia, and another member of the executive board, the exhibit is a triumph of the commitment to teaching weaving and bringing the art back. "We have been working on this for over 20 years now," she says. "It didn't just happen, we made it happen.

Ellie Keeley, 22, left, a junior at The Evergreen State College studying environmental education, and master weaver Pavel, look at a dye indicator from a water sample taken at the Bubbling Geyser at Flaming Geyser State Park. (Ivy Ceballo / The Seattle Times)

“We were able to teach it, but it was our people who just wanted it, and we have more than 2,000 weavers (in her Squamish community) now.”

Now, they are not only teaching people to weave, but how to teach it to the next generation, “to make sure it never goes away again,” says George. She says this as she stands in front of an enlarged historical photograph, up on a wall within the exhibit, by the display of her work. The photo shows Squamish tribal leaders, including her ancestors, wearing spectacular mountain goat wool regalia for a diplomatic visit. It’s an elegance that is now seen once more at important tribal gatherings — and even on the runways at Indigenous fashion shows.

Today at Port Gamble, kids in their tribal community routinely wear woven wool regalia at graduation — something that wasn’t happening even five years ago, Sullivan says. “Now it’s just everywhere, the guys are interested in making the tools, and my nephew wanted to make a shawl pin.” She expected something as simple as a pencil shape with a point — and instead he made the shape of a whale’s fluke, carved from deer bone.

The pin graces the robe on the cover of the exhibit poster, along with buttons he fashioned from the antlers of a deer he hunted. Making that first pin has spurred him to undertake more study, to learn how to use every part of a deer. “I’m just so proud,” Sullivan says.

Warren King George, a Muckleshoot Indian tribal member and the tribal historian, says the resurgence of the Coast Salish weaving art today is the result of immense intergenerational determination.

Master weaver Gail White Eagle, who is a member of the Muckleshoot tribe, tells students at Flaming Geyser State Park. “We come here to honor the ancestors, to take care of this area, in a good way.” (Ivy Ceballo / The Seattle Times)

“You are witnessing something incredible, the rebirth of something that had gone away, it is no longer that way, it used to be in the past tense, now we can talk about it in the now, it is truly a great gift,” he says.

“We owe a lot to our ancestors … this is another piece of what was, that is now part of our culture again.”

“Woven in Wool” will continue at the Burke through August 2026.

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