

# My Linen Legacy

## A Tale on Women's Strength

Words by Marta Bahillo Photography by Adrià Cañameras

My grandmother was like linen: robust, hard to get, beautiful and practical.

She lived in Chaveán, a very small village in Galicia, North West Spain, by the highest mountain of the area, in a house that she had inherited from her great grandparents. She was wealthy enough never to have cattle, but she loved cultivating linen. From flax to cloth: for many years it was an obligatory process. And she made sure I knew about it. Ever since I can remember, during each of my summer visits, she told me the story of the linen process.

I was the eldest granddaughter and now I know how important that story was to her. It was a story of community, a story of women's hard work and beautiful results, just the way she liked it.

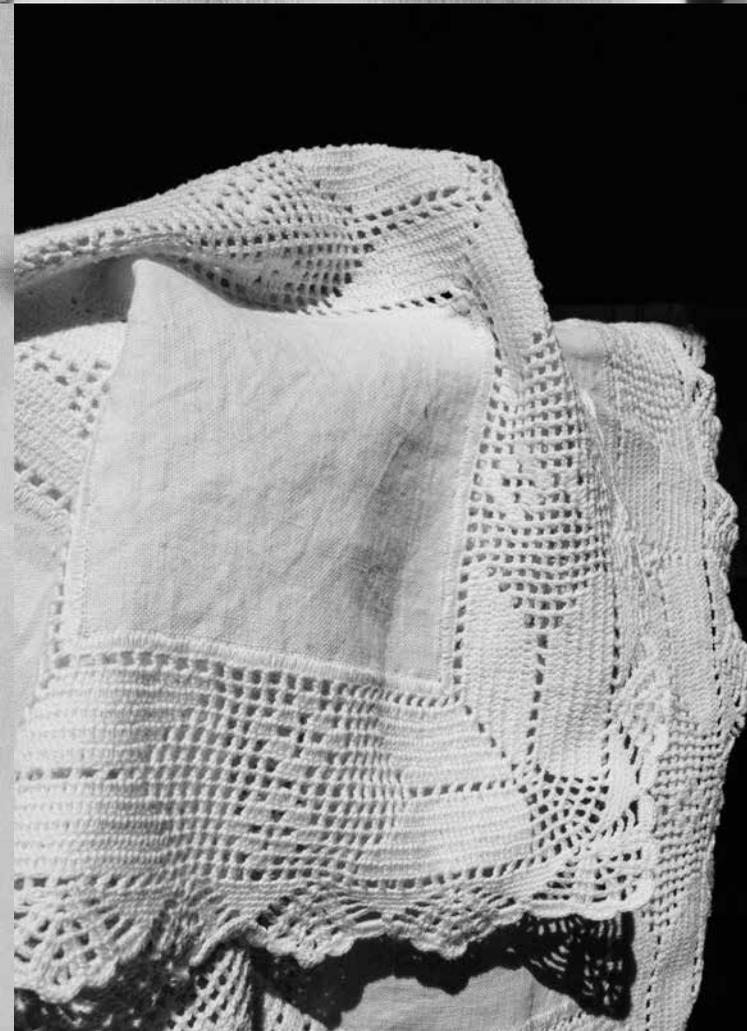
Flax is the seed used to grow linen. Seeds were planted at different times all over the country but in this area of Galicia, being so high up in the mountains, it can be cold until late spring so they always started their seeding in early May. To grow linen, a cool, damp environment is needed but you also need to avoid extreme cold or heat while the plant is growing. So women planted the flax seeds just after the last cold days of March, and the grown linen plants were collected before the extreme heat of August.

She always talked about watching for the 'brown little ball' to come out in order to know when it was ready. These brown little balls are the seeds. When they are brown and the stem turns yellow it is time to harvest the plant. In order to get the maximum length of fibre for the linen, the plants were never mown but uprooted: the longer the stems, the longer the fibres and longer fibres meant better quality. This laborious process, now done by machine, was performed by hand right up until the end of the Second World War.

Once the harvesting was over, the real work began. The stalks were left to dry for weeks in the open summer air. Then the stems would be collected and with a special rake, they would get rid of all the seeds still attached to the stems in a process known as threshing.

It was time then to form them into bundles and start the stage of the process known as retting. The bundles of stalks had to be left in water for days or even weeks. In my grandmother's village they would use the big piles of stone where they would wash their clothes. These were like big baths made out of stone in the route of a small river.

This way the bundles would always be in water, but water that was moving slowly. This kind of



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water is the best for retting. Slow-running water: water that moves but that it is retained long enough in the same container. Micro fauna helps with the process. Nature is amazing. What this water does is a chemical process that allows the fibres to separate from the stalks in order to be processed and spun. The water rots the plant and allows the sticky elements inside the stem to dissolve, giving access to the valuable fibres.

The retted stalks would be washed again, this time with running water from the river to get rid of bad smells (the smell after retting can be something else) and all the organic substances left behind. Then it was back to the summer sun, in which it was left to dry. After drying it was stored for weeks, allowing the curing to take place.

The cured flax fibres had to be beaten hard with big thick wooden sticks – they were like big rolling pins called *mazas* – different devices are used in different countries, all with the goal of reducing the remaining woody sticks still attached to the fibres to small pieces. This beating would be done on big stone surfaces, many of them situated at the fronts of the houses. This process is called scutching and at the end of the process they had finally separated the stem from the fibres.

After that it was time to use a special rake with iron dents for a very labour-intensive process called heckling. It involved scraping the fibres along with the dents, like brushing them, finally pulling the broken woody bits away from the fibres. Once the fibres are clean from wood, they kept combing them to polish them and separate the shorter fibres – coarse yarn from which low quality linen products were made, like sacks– from the longer fibres, that would be then ready for spinning.

The spinning of linen was done with traditional spindles. It was a time for women to gather and sing

songs. The spinning was done by women that had participated in the whole process as well as by the elderly that could no longer collect the linen or be part of the scutching and heckling. Spinning took a long time but also very skilled hands since the linen is not easy to work, even at this stage.

When all the yarn had been spun it was separated onto cones and sent to the weavers. In this part of Galicia the weavers were in a different village a few miles down the road where women would have wooden looms in their homes. It was they who would then make the special cloth that would be turned into tablecloths, sheets or clothing, depending on the quality of the yarn.

Many of these clothes would then be embroidered and ornamented, as family economy permitted. It was the pride of the families to own such textiles, after so much work went into them.

It is my own pride and pleasure to share this story with you: a story of many stories that my grandmother told me over the years. It brings back lots of memories from our time together in her garden, pulling up carrots (my favourite!), collecting fresh eggs in the morning or cooking for hours in her wonderful open fire kitchen. Of course linen is processed in a very different way nowadays and it is amazing to have all the new technology that allows us to enjoy this wonderful fibre with less effort. But I love to remember how these women worked so incredibly hard not such a long time ago, and how the final result contained a story woven within its fibres, a very strong story both for those that participated in it and for those of us that admire it.

My grandmother died at home a few years ago aged 98 and I feel lucky to have inherited some of these textiles from her, her mother and beyond: beautiful textiles for every day use that will be treasured forever.



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