



Spinners of Imagination

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PHOTOGRAPHS **SUE SALEM**

...cloth of gold she is weaving
silver she is working
from a gold shuttle
with a silver reed.

THE KALEVALA, tr. **KEITH BOSLEY**

Thread of Memory

To watch a woman sewing or crocheting, knitting, weaving, or spinning is to be filled with a palpable sense of peace and beneficence. I remember experiencing such moments of bliss while sitting on the threshold of my sister's room as a child, watching her piece together a dress or a skirt, mesmerized by the concentrated grace of her gestures. No surprise then that those practitioners of the needle arts — most ancient and essential of occupations — fill a high and honored place in fairytales, myths, and folklore.

They are the wise, often ageless, shape-shifting beings, magical gatekeepers to enchanted realms; forgotten by the world but perceived by children or journeying heroes. The yarn they spin is no ordinary thread, but that which possesses magical properties. Perhaps its shimmering strand leads the hero out of darkness into light, or spun from dull chaff on the thresher's floor it turns to gold, winning

a cobbler's or a miller's daughter a husband, a fortune, and a place in society. Spinning and weaving were tokens of wifely value in the world from which these ancient tales spring. The later day spinning wheel, surpassing the drop spindle for speed in the Middle Ages, recalls the great wheel of life, whose hub is T. S. Eliot's "the still point of the turning world," while the weaver at her loom holds the threads of destiny in her hands.

Whose imagination has not been captured by the sight of a woman sewing; who has not listened with rapt attention to stories told by an aunt, grandmother, or caretaker as she darns a sock, takes up a hem, or mends a seam? How many stories can you remember in which such creatures as the spinning crone, the wicked fairy with her poisoned spindle, or the clever weaver, figure for good or ill on the periphery or at the very heart of the matter?