From flax to fabric. The traditional linen process

The flaxseed/liñaza is cultivated at the end of April, or in May. From seed planting, it is ready to be harvested in about a hundred days. The plant is not cut, but uprooted/arrigado.

Then the flax undergoes the removal of seeds or threshing/ripado with a ripple/ripo. Flax stalks/marrucos are then immersed in stagnant or slowly-moving waters, like ponds, bogs and streams for some weeks. This process is called water retting/embriar and it produces the highest quality fibers.

The retted stalks, called straw, are dried mechanically or in natural air, and are then usually stored for anywhere from a few weeks to months in order to allow curing to take place. After curing, the woody stalks that still cling to the bast fibers are further broken, a process called scutching/mazar o liño, using a break/tascón and later on a scutching sword/espadela.

The small pieces of leftover bark that remain after scutching are called shive/casca, and are sometimes used as a filler in thermoplastic composites.

The separated bast fibers are next heckled/anciñado, or combed with heckling combs/rastros through a bed of nails that splits and polishes the fibers, and removes the shorter tow fibers from the mix. These tow fibers/estopa can then be spun into a coarse yarn from which low-quality linen products are made. The longer fibers are then ready for spinning/fiar.

Two tools are used for spinning, the distaff or rock/roca and the spindle/fuso, from which the fibers are hung. Flax is always spun very finely—especially the longest of the fibers—resulting in a thin yarn/fío, then winding the yarn onto a bobbin/mazaroca. The yarn is often slightly dampened during spinning, which helps prevent fly-away strands from escaping the twist and creates an especially-smooth yarn.

Bleaching/branqueo is the next step. The resulting yarn is typically finished by boiling for several hours in soapy water, sometimes with oakwood ashes, which gives it a nice shine. Yarns are then wound onto spools/novelos by using a winder/sarillo. The resulting spools can already be used by the weaver/tecelá. Linen yarn is generally woven into sheets—a process in which multiple threads are interlaced both horizontally and vertically on a loom/tear.
Flax seed

Flax stalks
ripple

Water retting
Scutching swords

Heckling comb

Distaff and spindle
Ali tedes a Marica, rapaza traballdora, dezasete mazarocas, unhas nove eran de liño, as outros oito de estopa.

Valentín Lamas Carvajal (1849-1906)