

american craft

Vol. 69, No. 3
June/July 2009

Long a favorite of home crafters, felt has evolved into a thoroughly modern textile adaptable for use in sophisticated home furnishing, fashion and installation art.



Thoroughly Modern Felt

STORY BY
Andrea DiNoto

**Smithsonian
Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum**
Fashioning Felt
March 6 – September 7, 2009
New York, New York
cooperhewitt.org



First you take some raw sheep's wool, lay it out, pound it, spritz it, roll it up, apply pressure and, voilà, you've got felt, the soft, densely matted cloth that may well be the most ancient of man-made textiles. Long a favorite of home crafters, felt has evolved, as this show reveals, into a thoroughly modern textile adaptable for use in sophisticated home furnishing, fashion and installation art. The objects on view vary widely in concept and sensibility, from free-form organic to high-tech industrial design, depending upon the type of felt being used (handmade or manufactured). But whether you're marveling at the glowing "eyes" of LED-embedded felt safety carpeting (designed by Yvonne Laurysen and Erik Mantel for Airbus) or Pernelle Fagerlund's whimsical "textile stones," it's the material's unique warm-soft-fuzzy texture that speaks to you.

The organizers of "Fashioning Felt" understand this and provide a touch wall of samples at the show's end, where you might consider starting your viewing. It is here that several videos demonstrate the arduous process of felting as it is done in factories, craft studios and on the plains of modern-day Mongolia, where the method is thought to have originated, and where felt is used to make wind-resistant yurts, carpets and saddle blankets. The latter technique, which involves the shearing of docile sheep and the use of a compliant camel to drag huge rolls of wool over the stony ground (the bouncing supplies the equivalent of the necessary hand pounding that causes the wool fibers to bond to each other), is far more diverting to watch than automated rollers churning out a smooth, homogenized product by the yard. And yet when you've seen both methods, you're better prepared to appreciate the variety of objects on display.

Because felt is basically a pulp (a textile with no internal structure), it can be industrially produced in a variety of thicknesses—as sheet or padding—or worked by hand into textured decorative panels and patterned carpets, or molded on wooden forms into shaped objects such as hats, or sculpted into pieces such as the aforementioned decorative "stones." Among the show's many revelations is stylish clothing created without stitching of any kind. Françoise Hoffmann, Christine Birkle and Andrea Zittel use felt to make unusual garments, some of which are worn wrapped around the body like saris, while others have been pre-shaped

Opposite top to bottom:
Pernelle Fagerlund
 Textile Stones, 2008,
 felted wool.

Jorie Johnson
 Winged Vessel cup,
 2004, wool, bast fibers,
 leaf, urushi lacquer
 by Clifton Monteith.

Louise Campbell
 Bless You chair, 1999,
 wool felt, gelatin sheets.

This Page clockwise:
 Mosen, Mongolia,
 late 19th century,
 felted wool, shibori-
 dyed.

Claudy Jongstra
 Felt walls for the
 Central Library,
 Amsterdam, 2007 (de-
 tail), Drenthe Heath,
 Wensleydale and Mer-
 ino wools, raw silk.

Andrea Zittel
 A-Z Fiber Form:
 White Dress, 2002,
 felted wool, skirt pins.



on forms. Hoffmann, who designs costumes for theater, uses soft merino-wool-based felt combined with silk mesh, linen or cotton fabrics in a complicated layering technique that results in luxurious textures (resembling flocking and cut velvet) in subtle hand-dyed colors. (The artist explained that the natural shrinking action of the wool—as it becomes felt—is the “glue” that holds the different materials together.)

A similar sort of layering (collaging, really)—but taken to the highest level of complexity and beauty—is to be seen in the multi-textured curved wall installation by the Dutch artist Claudy Jongstra, well-known in Holland for her exquisite hand-felted architectural interiors. Her self-described “landscape of textiles” contains both felted and hand-dyed wool from her own herd of heritage Drenthe Heath sheep. Compare this organic approach to the modernist acoustical walls created by Kathryn Walter for L.A.’s Wosk Theater at the Simon Wiesenthal Museum (shown in the catalog), made from stacked off-cuts of industrial felt, and you understand the material’s phenomenal aesthetic range.

The show’s glorious centerpiece is Janice Arnold’s “palace yurt” installation created in the museum’s conservatory. Arnold’s translucent off-white, free-hanging panels,

which completely cover the 24-foot-high glass walls and cupola, modulate the natural light from outdoors to create a magical, glowing interior. This “yurt” alludes to the traditional Mongolian structure, which is often furnished with colorful felt carpets, of which there is an excellent example, along with a felt dervish hat from Iran, and a late 19th-century tie-dyed tea ceremony rug made in Mongolia for the Japanese market. These antique pieces stand in stark contrast to the show’s ultramodern furniture, such as Louise Campbell’s Bless You chair of white cut-out felt that resembles an elaborate napkin fold.

The show’s most curious objects, by far, are the felt and urushi lacquer vessels (fully functional) made by the team of Jorie Johnson and Clifton Monteith. Fuzzy on the outside, sleek inside, these cups result from the natural bonding that occurs between lacquer and a protein (here wool). But for pure unadulterated feltiness, nothing compares to the white pleated and textured panels designed and made by the Swiss artist Ursula Suter. This is felt for its own sake, teased by hand into exquisite “structures and surfaces” and with no other purpose than to seduce the eye and hand. They do. ✦

The softcover catalog is \$35.

