

# Felting

**Felt** is a textile material that is produced by matting, condensing and pressing fibers together. Felt can be made of natural fibers such as wool or animal fur, or from synthetic fibers such as petroleum-based acrylic or acrylonitrile or wood pulp-based rayon. Blended fibers are also common. Felt has special properties that allow it to be used for a wide variety of purposes. "It is fire-retardant and self-extinguishing; it dampens vibration and absorbs sound; and it can hold large amounts of fluid without feeling wet..."

## History

Felt from wool is considered to be the oldest known textile. Many cultures have legends as to the origins of felt making. Sumerian legend claims that the secret of feltmaking was discovered by Urnamman of Lagash. The story of Saint Clement and Saint Christopher relates that the men packed their sandals with wool to prevent blisters while fleeing from persecution. At the end of their journey, the movement and sweat had turned the wool into felt socks.

Most likely felt's origins can be found in central Asia, where there is evidence of feltmaking in Siberia (Altai mountains) in Northern Mongolia and more recently evidence dating back to the first century AD in Mongolia. Siberian tombs (7th to 2nd century BC) show the broad uses of felt in that culture, including clothing, jewelry, wall hangings, and elaborate horse blankets. Employing careful color use, stitching, and other techniques, these feltmakers were able to use felt as an illustrative and decorative medium on which they could depict abstract designs and realistic scenes with great skill. Over time these makers became known for the beautiful abstract patterns they used that were derived from plant, animal, and other symbolic designs.

From Siberia and Mongolia, feltmaking spread across the areas held by the Turkic-Mongolian tribes. Sheep and camel herds were central to the wealth and lifestyle of these tribes, both of which were critical to producing the fibers needed for felting. As nomads travelling frequently and living on fairly treeless plains, felt provided housing (yurts, tents, etc.), insulation, floor coverings, and inside walling, as well as many household necessities from bedding and coverings to clothing. In nomadic peoples, an area where feltmaking was particularly visible was in trappings for their animals and for travel. Felt was often featured in the blankets that went under saddles.

Dyes provided rich coloring, and colored slices of pre-felts (semi-felted sheets that could be cut in decorative ways), along with dyed yarns and threads were combined to create beautiful designs on the wool backgrounds. Felt was even used to create totems and amulets with protective functions. In traditional societies, the patterns embedded in the felt were also imbued with significant religious and symbolic meaning.

Feltmaking is still practised by nomadic peoples (Altaic people: Mongols; Turkic people in Central Asia, where rugs, tents and clothing are regularly made. Some of these are traditional items, such as the classic yurt (Gers), while others are designed for the tourist market, such as decorated slippers. In the Western world, felt is widely used as a medium for expression in both textile art and contemporary art and design, where it has significance as an ecologically responsible textile and building material.

In addition to Central Asian traditions of felting, Scandinavian countries have also supported feltmaking, particularly for clothing

# Development of Felting as a Profession

As felting grew in importance to a society, so, too, did the knowledge about techniques and approaches. Amateur or community felting obviously continued in many communities at the same time that felting specialists and felting centers began to develop. However, the importance of felting to community life can be seen in the fact that, in many Central Asian communities, felt production, is directed by a leader who oversees the process as a ritual that includes prayers—words and actions to bring good luck to the process. Successfully completing the creation of felt (certainly large felt pieces) is reason for celebration, feasting, and the sharing of traditional stories.

In Turkey, craft guilds called "ahi" came into being, and these groups were responsible for registering members and protecting the knowledge of felting. In Istanbul at one time, there were 1,000 felters working in 400 workshops registered in this ahi.

# Felt in musical instruments

Many musical instruments use felt. It is often used as a damper. On drum cymbal stands, it protects the cymbal from cracking and ensures a clean sound. It is used to wrap bass drum strikers and timpani mallets. Felt is used extensively in pianos; for example, piano hammers are made of wool felt around a wooden core. The density and springiness of the felt is a major part of what creates a piano's tone. As the felt becomes grooved and "packed" with use and age, the tone suffers. Felt is placed under the piano keys on accordions to control touch and key noise; it is also used on the *pallets* to silence notes not sounded by preventing air flow.

