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FELTMAKING

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Felt is considered mankind's oldest textile. Created of wool or hair through pressure and shocking, and the application of heat and cold, felt is a warm, sturdy fabric used for shelter, clothing, carpets, saddles, and bags or container covers. Felting is a world-wide tradition in the sense that it is practiced in such disparate regions as Mongolia, Central Europe, Central Asia, the Middle East and North Africa.

In the souk in Marrakech, Morocco, a two-sided prayer rug is created, one side white and one side grey, using the natural color of the fleece. The process involves the addition of soap which acts as a binding agent during the felting process. Rolling and pressure cause the fibers to bind together forming a flat, finished mat.

In Central Asia and the Middle East, the biblical bow and mallet is employed to break up the fiber into a cloudlike mass which is laid on a dampened canvas in a given shape. The feltmakers in this area create inlaid coats and carpets for local consumption. Once a coat has been partially felted, it is folded over, and the softly rolled fleece is applied to the surface in a given design. The laminating process continues in order to felt in the yarn design and to shape the coat. The finished garment has closed sleeves which act like mittens.

In Afghanistan, where the carpet designs are very intricate, the dyed fleece is laid in a given pattern on a reed mat and the plain black fleece backing is then laid on top. The entire mass of wool is rolled up in the mat and a canvas and felted through continuous rolling and pressure.

In Aqsha, an Afgan town very near the Russian border, a carpet market takes place every week, featuring pile carpets and "namdas" or felt carpets. This is my carpet which took me 7 hours to buy. During the price haggling which is, as you know, a ritual in this part of the world, this is the crowd which gathered on my carpet and this is the gentleman who made off with my SS&D - an issue devoted to American Indian rug design. I wonder how many Hopi and Pueblo "namdas" are being created in Aqsha today?!!

I believe that feltmaking in India began with the Mughal invasion from Kabul. Prior to the arrival of Babur, Indian carpets were the sujani or embroidered cloth surfaces such as this detail from a piece in the Ethnographic Museum collection in Basle, Switzerland. Those areas in India, where I was able to work are Bhuj in the Rann of Kutch in Gujarat, Tonk and Jaipur in Rajasthan, and Srinigar in Kashmir.

This carpet and this saddle are the work of Mr. Mansoor, who is one of India's acknowledged master craftsmen. He creates these intricate patterns by dyeing the fleece and then carding and rolling the yarn, rather than spinning it. This loose format enables him to create the intricate inlaid patterns in his designs. Here is a series which shows how the finished saddle is felted in layers and finally shaped and laminated into one piece. This particular work is a speciality of Mr. Mansoor's workshop.

The felt carpets of Tonk in Rajasthan, are lightly felted surfaces which are then inlaid with colored pieces of felt - unlike those of Mr. Mansoor, who felts the colored fleece into patterns. This workshop also employs the wire and mallet technique which we have seen earlier in the Turkish coat series, to break up the wool fibers which are then laid in a pile, dampened, and shaped. The carpet is then wrapped in a mat and pressure is applied through rolling. Dyed felt is cut into pieces and a design is applied to the initially lightly felted surface. The piece is then re-felted to integrate the new designs and the final step is the ironing process.

Jaipur produces very simple layers of white felt - the poor man's carpet in the Middle East and India. In Srinigar, the carpets are produced, as in Jaipur, solely in white, then embellished with stitchery, (note the use of the ubiquitous awl - everpresent throughout India). Here is a detail of a Kashmiri felt carpet in the Ethnographic Museum collection in Switzerland. The carpets are stitched, then washed and dried in the sun.

This is a piece, also from the Ethnographic Museum collection which is actually woven prior to felting. As you can see in this detail, it has the look and feel of soft felt, but the woven structure is very clear.

In the U.S., felt has many industrial purposes but it is also a material much appreciated by contemporary artists like Robert Morris, whose "Madison Avenue Man" is part of the Los Angeles Museum of Art collection.

At my college, an enterprising young artist, Mary Motti, decided to apply 20th century technology to her felted work. She rigged up a tiny felt bundle to the rear of a toy car and pulled it through a local park, eliciting many interested comments. She then demonstrated her success in larger scale. The roving, which is prepared fleece and saves the time spent on skirting, carding, and picking the raw fleece, is pulled apart and laid out and covered with a sheet, rolled, and pinned into a bundle and wet. This is the apparatus devised to allow the bundle to roll behind the car as the cyclical motion of the rolling is what causes the felting. The wet bundle is unrolled and re-rolled around the bar, pinned in place, and tied. A blanket is then wrapped over the sheet and wool bundle and the final package is hooked to the rear of the car. A few laps around the parking lot and voila!....a marvelous sheet of felt is created!

To sum up, let's look again at the two variations in felt designs: inlaid felt in which the design is an integral part of the ground fabric and appliqued felt where the design is applied to the surface and stitched onto the ground fabric.







