

OF FIBER



FELT

by Pat Boutin Wald

In this article I would like to discuss some of the history of felt and its contemporary application in fiber arts. It has been said that Noah, to make the long voyage more comfortable, covered the floor of the ark with wool plucked from the back of his sheep. When the "waters were abated", felt was left. It is perhaps a little more likely that felt evolved from the use of skins for clothing. These skins were worn fur side against the body where the heat, moisture, and friction would cause the wool to mat. Later, wool was cut from the sheep and beat with stones to form large pieces of felt. The removal of the fleece from the skin eventually led to the spinning of thread and the evolution of weaving, knotting and other methods of fabric construction.

Felt has been used for clothing by the common man for the greater part of history. Pliny the Roman reports that "self-felted fleeces make clothing, and also if vinegar is added withstand even steel, nay more, even fire, the latest method of cleaning them." More recently, the felt hat was one of the major uses of felt in clothing. Much of this country was opened up to European settlers by fur trappers and the fur they collected was used mainly for hatmaking. The hat industry finally diminished in the 60's when President Kennedy

made it acceptable and popular for men to go without hats. So felt is not as abundant as it was twenty years ago and many items once made of felt are now fabricated from new paper products.

Felt as a new medium, however, has been discovered by the textile artists. Robert Morris has been constructing sculpture from commercial felt for a few years now. (A Morris piece is on display at the Walker Art Gallery.) More recently, artists have been making their own felt. This allows for endless variation in color and texture, and the construction of three dimensional objects from a single piece of felt.

Closely related to felt making is the Art Protis Technique where pieces of wool, lace, foil, etc., are layed on a cloth backing. They are then run through a machine that uses thousands of needles about an eighth of an inch apart, making a zig-zag stitch which buries a plastic thread in the material. The finished surface appears similar to that of a tapestry. Both felt making and the Art Protis Technique enable the fiber artist to work freely on the surface with little restriction from technical considerations.

The processes of hand made paper also have similarities to the felt making process. Paper can be interchanged with felt in a press for embossing and other techniques previously associated only with printmaking. Not only does felt offer new areas for textile exploration, but it offers a bridge between what have been considered very diverse mediums as well.



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