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Jul 29, 2009

[Baa-baa Bauhaus \(http://blog.pushthefuture.org/2009/07/baa-baa-bauhaus/\)](http://blog.pushthefuture.org/2009/07/baa-baa-bauhaus/)

by [Katherine Emmons \(http://blog.pushthefuture.org/author/katherine-emmons/\)](http://blog.pushthefuture.org/author/katherine-emmons/)



Forget bioplastics, carbon nanotubes, “smart fabrics,” and polli-bricks, ... Apparently, the new darling of the design world can be found grazing in flocks on grassy hillsides. In celebration of this ancient technique/emerging trend, the [Cooper-Hewitt Museum \(http://http://www.cooperhewitt.org/exhibitions/Fashioning-Felt/\)](http://http://www.cooperhewitt.org/exhibitions/Fashioning-Felt/) is currently featuring *Fashioning Felt*, an exhibition dedicated to exploration of the “varied new uses of felt,” a material derived from sheep’s wool.

A hallmark of such far-flung regions as Austria and South America, felt or felted wool is created by washing and pressing woven wool, causing the fibers to shrink and tighten into a dense fabric of uniform thickness. According to exhibit curator, Susan Brown, the process of matting together wool fibers using humidity and friction requires very little technical expertise and is believed to be one of the earliest techniques for making textiles. Wikipedia dates the practice back to before the Middle Ages, “... as the raw material has been readily available since the widespread domestication of sheep, the use of felted wool for clothing and other purposes characterizes some of the earliest civilizations.” In fact, the word “felting” comes from High Old German, “a language spoken before the 12th century.” (I myself have unwittingly been a practitioner of this craft for decades, as evidenced by the stack of unintentionally felted sweaters in the corner of my closet.)



We’re not talking about mittens here. The decidedly low-tech felt has found its way into the halls and walls of high style design and avant-garde environments worldwide. The Cooper-Hewitt exhibit presents “innovations in handmade felts and contemporary uses of industrial felt in a wide range of fields including product design, fashion, architecture, and home furnishings.” An architectural application of felt from the Wosk Theater at the [Simon Wiesnethal Center Museum for Tolerance \(http://http://www.museumoftolerance.com/site/c.tmL6KFNVLtH/b.5052747/k.A6C8/Our_Facilities.htm\)](http://http://www.museumoftolerance.com/site/c.tmL6KFNVLtH/b.5052747/k.A6C8/Our_Facilities.htm) in LA is shown left. The stacked felted wool walls create a peaceful and intimate, yet powerful “inner sanctum” for screenings and special presentations.



Commercially produced felted wool is also an excellent versatile material for dyeing and sculpting. Strips of wool felt can be cut, twisted, folded and stitched to form sculptural wall panels and firm thicknesses can also be combined with other materials to create sleek, modern furnishings. Heads up [Bauhaus \(http://http://www.dezignare.com/newsletter/bauhausmovement.html\)](http://http://www.dezignare.com/newsletter/bauhausmovement.html) fanny-meisters Breuer, Le Corbusier and van der Rohe – designer, Ben Mickus pairs stair-stacked grey wool felt with stainless steel in his functional, form-fitting *Relief Chair* (2008), shown left.

But, probably the most fascinating element of the *Fashioning Felt* line up is video installation, [Making of the Palace Yurt \(http://http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Qv23mOfcE\)](http://http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Qv23mOfcE), by William Berry. Susan Brown describes the pain-staking project and processes in a February '09 blog:

During a visit to Cooper-Hewitt about a year and a half ago, West-coast felt-maker Janice Arnold was intrigued by the form of the museum’s conservatory. Its domed roof and iron mullions resemble the radiating struts of the framework of a yurt — the circular tent dwelling of the nomadic tribes who first created felt. Next week, Arnold will begin installing Palace Yurt, an installation created especially for the Museum’s exhibition.

The traditional yurt is a trellis-frame tent covered with thick felts made from raw sheep’s wool. The largest, most elegantly decorated tent is the place of celebration, songs and epic poems... Arnold will create a total environment from her luxurious handmade felts, which combine Merino wool with silk, metallic fibers and sheer fabrics ... Her technique allows for richly textured [opaque] areas in combination with gossamer sheer ones.”

So – New cool design isn’t always about uber-techno-nano breakthroughs. Really, the only necessary component here is the ability to be open to new possibilities. “Smart fabrics” might be the wave of the future, but close on its heels are the same old “dumb fabrics” presented in brand new ways. The *Fashioning Felt* exhibit runs through September 7th... and, no time to spare. In an effort to raise the profile of wool and other natural fibers, the General Assembly of the United Nations proclaimed 2009 to be the *Year of Natural Fibers*. Really.

Post Note: For those who wish to pursue felted wool on a foundational level, the Cooperative Extension Service at the University of Wyoming College of Agriculture sponsors [About Sheep Basics \(http://http://uwadmweb.uwo.edu/laramieces/about_sheep_basics.htm\)](http://http://uwadmweb.uwo.edu/laramieces/about_sheep_basics.htm), an intro course designed to “provide a broad spectrum of sheep information for the new or intermediate sheep practitioner.” The \$45 fee covers a 3-ring binder complete with all course materials. Individuals completing the course will receive a certificate of completion from the University of Wyoming.

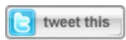
Post-post-note: The U Wyoming course is about raising sheep, not making yurts.

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2 comments ↓

#1 (#comment-187) Susan Brown (http://www.cooperhewitt.org/EXHIBITIONS/Fashioning-Felt) on 07.30.09 at 1:43 pm

As the curator of Fashioning Felt, I have to be a technique geek, right? In your description above you are conflating felting and fulling. Fulling is when woven (or knitted) fabrics are made denser and thicker by a process not unlike what your sweater goes through in the laundry. True felting begins with the raw wool fiber, which is matted together through the application of heat, moisture, pressure and friction. It has no underlying structure, and has been around for at least 10,000 years. (Loved the article otherwise!)

#2 (#comment-188) Katherine Emmons (http://www.katherineemmons.com) on 08.02.09 at 9:51 am

Susan – Thank you so much for sharing your “geekiness” (a highly coveted professional credential in this new millennium) and providing clarification/expertise around the knitty-gritty of the felting process.

As mentioned in the blog, the ancient and amazing technique of felting is demonstrated in “Making of the Palace Yurt” which accompanies the discussion on your site: <http://www.cooperhewitt.org/exhibitions/Fashioning-Felt/> (<http://www.cooperhewitt.org/exhibitions/Fashioning-Felt/>)

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