

Felting

(In Lithuanian – “**vėlimas**”)

What is it? Where does it come from?

Felting is one of the oldest variants of natural textile work, with origins in the Middle East and Central Asia. It is known that felting was also familiar to the ancient Greeks and Romans.

A common misconception about felted fabrics is that they are rough in texture, heavy and warm, and only suitable for winter clothing or footwear. Traditional Lithuanian felt cloth is commonly used for warm footwear, outerwear and ponchos, but times are changing and so are felting techniques and applications.

Felting had been largely forgotten in the Western world, but has made a comeback in various creative ways. It has advanced from simple crafts to stunning modern clothing design, wall hangings, sculptures, and architectural applications such as natural insulation for homes.



Photos by R. Smolskis

Felt is made using natural wool, warm water and soap, painstakingly manipulated by hand through kneading and rolling. These combine to create supple, uniform textiles which are resistant to cold and dampness, retain body heat, and can be dyed.

Various types of wool are suitable for felting, the most popular being sheep’s wool. Goat, camel, alpaca and even dog fur has been used in creating various felt garments. Wool material

for felting can be raw, carded (or combed. Raw wool is full of lanolin (the animal's body fat). Raw, untreated wool has bits of the animal's environment mixed in, such as hay, etc.

There is a dramatic variety of wool, such as Merino, Corriedale, New Zealand, Shetland, Manx Loaghten, Jacob, Blue-faces Leicester, Norwegian, Alapaca and others. They vary in thickness (measured in microns) and when felted, produce different textures.

Wool, carefully blended with other fabrics has yielded a new concept, "Nuno" felting (Japanese for "fabric"). Nuno felting combines wool, fabric or silk, and was created by designers Polly Stirling of Australia and Sashiko Kotaka of Japan.

Nuno felting can be heavy or light, but is mostly recognized as light, free-flowing, and summer-like, having a high percentage of silk content – only a minimal amount of wool to bind the combination is required. Winter felt has a higher proportion of wool in relation to other fabrics. In all cases, wool is the critical binding product – other fabrics alone will not create felt. In combination with wool, warm water and soap, silk shrinks and produces a nice *bouclé* texture. This type of felt can be used for light summery dresses, blouses, scarves, and even jewellery.



Photos by R. Smolskis

Felted textiles can also be made using a technique called “lamination”, in which layers of different fabrics and wool are integrated, producing stunning 3-D effects.



| Another technique called “appliqué” uses separate pre-felted (incomplete) wool pieces or fabrics (silk, cotton, ribbons, etc.) integrated with wool felt to create interesting patterns and designs.



Photos by R. Smolskis

There are also other felting decorative techniques available to the artist. One is “needle felting”, used in sculptural felt work, such as dolls, figures etc. Needle felting requires special felting needles to repeatedly jab at the work to compact and tangle wool fibers so as to shape them. This technique is called “dry felting” as it does not use water or soap.



Photos by R. Smolskis

I hope you have enjoyed this basic introduction to felting!

“Wool-fully” Yours,
Remigija Smolskis