Felt Encyclopedia Article

Felt

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A legend concerning the invention of felt begins with a group of merchants traveling on foot. After many hours their feet became sore and chafed and, seeking relief, they padded their shoes with soft fur plucked from their camels' coats. When they removed their shoes that evening the moisture, heat, and pressure had compressed the fur into a new material--felt. While the authenticity of this tale is dubious, it demonstrates the basic method for preparing felt.

For thousands of years felt has been made by cultures that domesticate wool-bearing animals, such as sheep. The natural wool fibers are scaly, so that they will become interlocked when meshed together. In order to make felt, a quantity of shorn wool is dampened and pressed; heat is often applied as well. The thickness of the felt depends upon the quantity of wool and the amount of pressure used; the resulting felt can be soft and thick, or very thin and rigid (such as the felt used to cover piano hammers). Felt is a versatile material: it can be used for clothing, upholstery, carpeting, and hats.

While felt, unlike woven fabrics, cannot fray, its meshing will begin to unravel if it is not stitched or quilted in some way. Felt can also be easily shaped, just by pressing the loose wool against a mold. Because it is created through a single-step process, felt is an inexpensive material to manufacture, and simple felt "planking" was carried on until the 1970s. Recently, attempts have been made to replace wool felt with felt made from synthetic fiber s, called bonded-fiber fabrics. Because the artificial fibers (usually polyester or acrylic) do not possess scales, an adhesive must be used to make them mesh together.