

**FELT FABULOUS** One of the most malleable of natural materials, felt is enjoying a renaissance in interest with textile and products designers from around the world. **Ros Weaver** reveals what is in store for felt

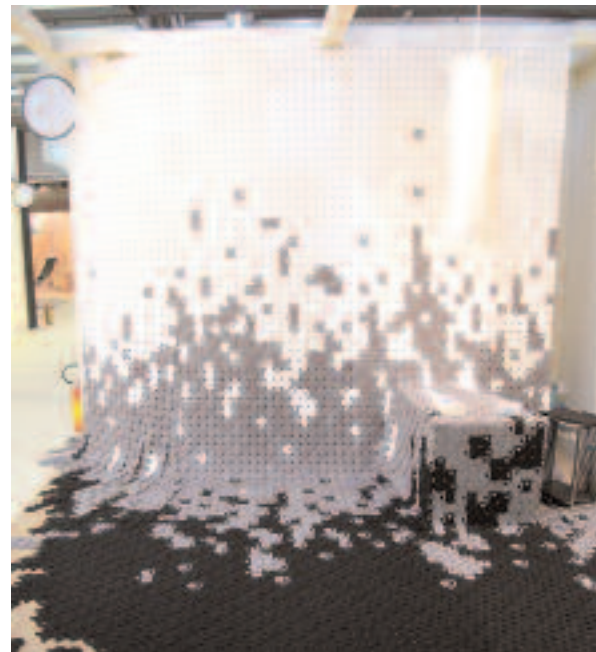
One of the world's earliest fabrics and the simplest to make, felt has been with us for thousands of years. Viewed under a microscope, sheep's wool is covered in scales. When the fibres are rubbed together these catch onto each other and the fibres become irreversibly matted. Heat and alkalinity help the scales to open out and speed up the felting process – a technique probably discovered by placing loose fleece inside footwear for warmth and finding that the stomping of sweaty feet had turned it into comfortable insoles. These days warm water and washing up liquid do the same job.

Soft, strong, warm and durable, felt has been used in many cultures for a variety of insulating as well as decorative purposes and even for making armour. Contemporary designers are revisiting this special fabric, experimenting with the technique and methods for working with it. Unique amongst textiles for its non-fraying shape-holding qualities, felt can be cut into various forms and adapted to a surprising number of new uses.



#### ▲ MUR MUR

The former Baltic States of the USSR have become a hotbed for innovative design. Take this chair designed by Zane Homka from Latvia, who has taken a textilian approach to furniture, cutting the three-legged chair out of dense felted material from one seamless pattern – rather like tailoring a piece of clothing. She describes the extraordinary shape as a “figure or jumping body making acrobatics”. A light aluminium construction hidden within the felt gives the structure strength. [www.murmur.lv](http://www.murmur.lv)



#### ◀ ANDOO

Takehiro Ando covered his stand at Milan's 'Salone Satellite' in April – walls, floor and all – in his DIY interlocking felt 'units'. A marvellous use of felt's shape-holding properties, *Felt Unit* consists of small cut-out shapes which can be interlocked to create interior accessories. Two compatible shapes of elements come in black, grey or white washable wool/rayon felt: *Cuma*, which forms a dense mat suitable for floors and *Cross*, a more open network for curtains, lampshades or wall-hangings. [www.andoo.jp](http://www.andoo.jp)



#### ▲ ANNE KYRO QUINN

“I've been working with felt for about ten years and I still love it,” says Anne Kyro Quinn, who claims her Finnish roots helped her to choose her medium. “I grew up wearing felt boots in the snow,” she says. Anne began by making her own felt but found that hand-made felt was limited to the production of one-off pieces, when she wanted to produce series. She has developed a system of cutting using a rotary blade to sculpt the felt, creating incredible three-dimensional surfaces like these wall panels for Bovis Lendlease head office in Hanover Square, London. Felt used in this way has been tested to have high sound absorbing properties. At ICFF Anne is launching a modular system of magnetically mounted felt wall panels. [www.annekyroquinn.com](http://www.annekyroquinn.com)

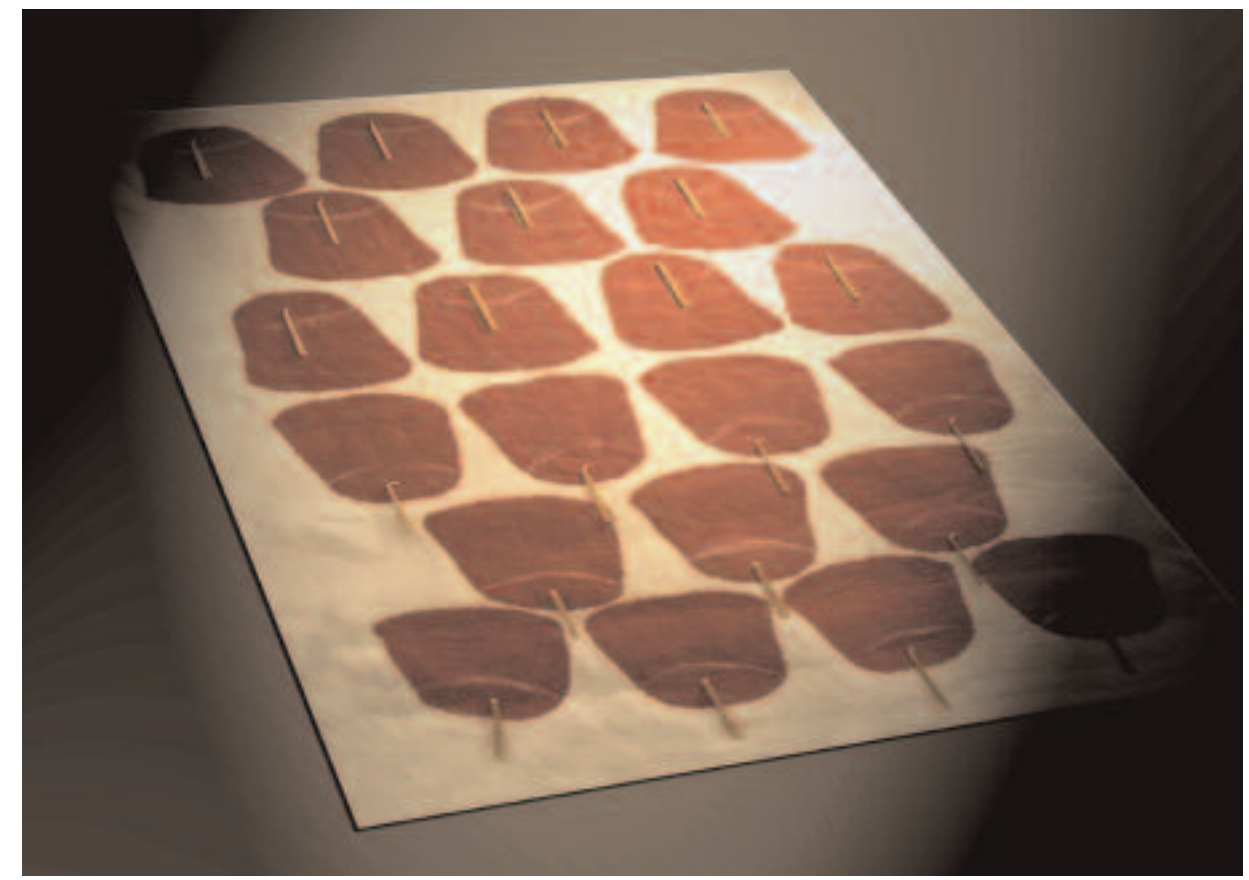
#### ▶ CLAUDY JONGSTRA

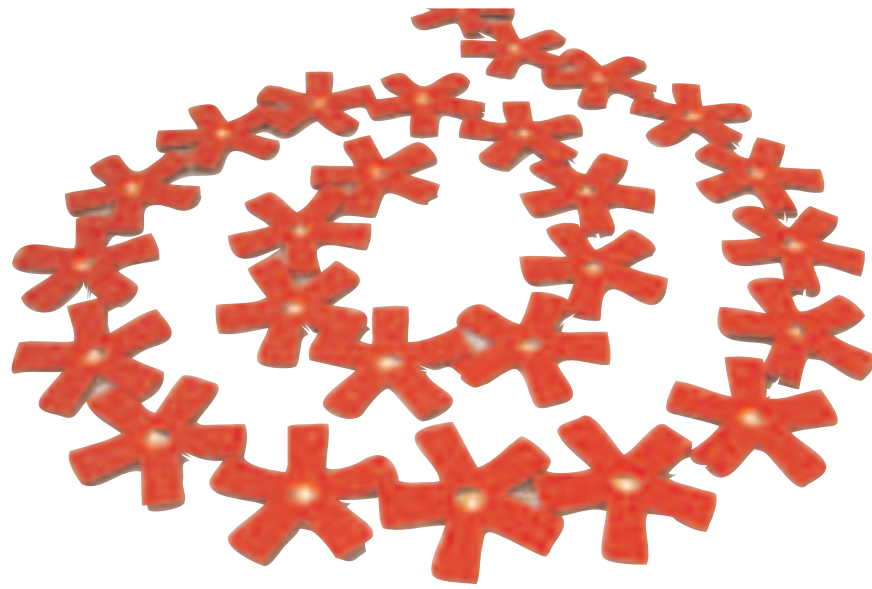
The difficulty of manipulating large quantities of felting wool means that felt-makers usually produce relatively small pieces. But Jongstra, award-winning designer and producer of extraordinary felt fabrics for applications from fashion to interiors, has developed a technique for making large and highly individual pieces incorporating the wool of her own Dutch Drenthe Heath sheep, the oldest breed in Western Europe. Working with architects and private clients around the world she creates extraordinary carpets and wall hangings. Commissions include large-scale wall panels for the Nijverdal House of Culture and Government right. She is currently working on a wall covering for Jo Coenen's National Library building in Amsterdam. [www.claudyjongstra.com](http://www.claudyjongstra.com)



#### ▶ ALI BAKOVA

Turkey could be considered the home of felt. Some of the world's earliest depictions of the material – felt caps and clothes – are to be found in the Hittite relief carvings of the second millennium BC in Anatolia. Later Turkmen migrants from Central Asia traditionally lived in tents made of white and black felt symbolising wealth and poverty, and to this day shepherds wear a stiff felt cloak known as a *kepenek*. There is also a strong tradition of felt headgear. Ali Bakova's felt rug *Fezz* is a contemporary take on the felt tradition, depicting the maroon felt fezzes worn by men in the northwestern province of Kirklareli within the same medium that produces them. [www.alibakova.com](http://www.alibakova.com)





### ▲ ILLU-STRATION

Mary-Ann Williams's German company Illu-stration has come up with an astonishing number of different applications for felt, including rugs in various textures of tufted felt, bowls and lamps.

The Hip-Hop Lightchain is made up of 30 red asterisks whose centres are lit by LED bulbs.

[www.illu-stration.com](http://www.illu-stration.com)



### ▲ NANI MARQUINA

Why should a deep-pile carpet be constructed of straight lengths of material when it could be composed of leaves, petals or flowers? In Tord Boontje's award-winning *Little Field of Flowers* for Nani Marquina, lengths of felt with each end cut into a leaf or flower shape are hooked through the warp between knots to create the effect of a bed of wild flowers and foliage.

[www.nanimarquina.com](http://www.nanimarquina.com)

### ◀ SOFAR/SONEAR

The Milan-based design firm Sofar/Sonear combine Italian design flair with the handicraft traditions of the developing world. And of course felt is a tradition and a medium that is ripe for original input and new applications. At 100% Design in London (20-23 September) it will present a number of new products including the Fantasia rug collection which uses block and screen print on felt with applied silver glitter. [www.sofarsonear.com](http://www.sofarsonear.com)



### ▲ FELT

The nomadic peoples of the Tien Shan Mountains in Kyrgyzstan have been making their dazzling felt rugs for over 2,000 years. Known as *shyrdaks*, these wool rugs have a tough flattened felt base sewn with geometric surface patterns in coloured felts. Motifs are chosen to bestow blessings, describe a scene or tell a story. The base of each rug is made from raw wool which is felted by being dragged across mountain pastures behind a galloping horse. The finished product takes a master cutter and her team between ten and twenty days to complete. These rugs are available in Britain as the result of a fair trade agreement set up by Tim Mook and a Kyrgyz business partner. [www.feltrugs.co.uk](http://www.feltrugs.co.uk)



### ▲ ISOS

2PM, who are now producing Massimo Fenati's *Eliot* rugs for the London firm Isos, first approached the Italian-born but London-based designer because they wanted him to develop a product that would use its die-cutting facilities, initially suggesting materials such as plywood, leather and polypropylene. "I've always loved felt for its warmth and tactile appeal and there is something very low-tech about die-cutting that intrigues me," he says. "So I suggested we could do some felt rugs, moving the decoration to the borders to replace fringes. By working with thick felt we could achieve a very fine quality of detail and still preserve durability and longevity." *7Circles2s* is one of a series of six rugs that have been recently added to the store's inventory and can be ordered on-line.

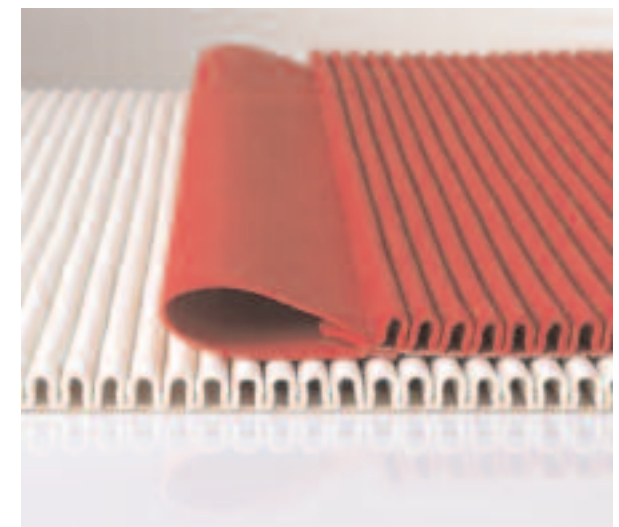
[www.isoscollection.co.uk](http://www.isoscollection.co.uk)



### ▲ MIYIKA KOBAYASHI

Felt is the material of choice for Japanese designer Miyika Kobayashi, whose doughnut-shaped *Ceppo* stool is surprisingly comfortable. First shown at the 'Salone Satellite 2007' in Milan, and designed to be easily portable, the stool is made from a lightweight aluminium construction which is topped off with a padded 'doughnut' seat upholstered in colourful felt.

[www.mikiyakobayashi.com](http://www.mikiyakobayashi.com)



### ▲ DANSKINA

Ulf Moritz's latest textile developments for the Dutch rug company Danskina are as adventurous as ever while remaining utterly tasteful. *Dune* is a carpet formed of two layers of felt, the upper one corrugated and attached to the lower one through the use of a process called fusion bonding – using high pressure instead of glue – to create this wonderful rippled effect. *Dune* can also be ordered in the form of tiles as 100 x 100 cm 'modules' that can be used equally successfully as wall or floor panels.

[www.danskina.com](http://www.danskina.com)

### ► BOTH TEXTILES

Ruth Waller makes felt balls. She fashions these into bags and jewellery as well as rugs in scrumptious colours. *Panamic*, inspired by the biological complexity of the natural world (for instance the underside of a starfish from which it gets its name), as well as many days sitting in the sun on Brighton beach, has around 2,000 hand made felted wool balls to every square metre, meticulously hand sewn together to produce a complex and richly textured surface. The pebbled rug looks as good on the wall as it does on the floor.

[www.iloveboth.com](http://www.iloveboth.com)

