

The

ENGLISH HOME

Celebrating the essence of English style

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the design cognoscenti

Happiness found
from gloriously rambling rectory to seaside haven



Kit Kemp has embraced the creative possibilities of felts and boiled wools in some of her hotel rooms. This headboard in a suite at the Covent Garden Hotel is in a boiled wool by Holland & Sherry with embroidery and appliqué designs by Pippa Caley.

from modest
BEGINNINGS

Felt is a simple, humble material yet also a strong, durable choice for flooring and upholstery that is being rediscovered as a resource for decorative effect

Felt is often undervalued, perceived as a utility fabric, or thought of simply as a material for craft projects.

Yet it is incredibly versatile, chic and can be used to decorative effect, in both interiors and high fashion. As with any woollen product, it possess benefits such as insulation and water resistance, and the making process imbues the textile with strength to create a surprisingly durable finish, whilst being soft and sumptuous. Relatively simple to make, felt has been used for centuries, for military uniforms and as lining for armour. In medieval times, the material was even used to make drinking vessels, bowls and plates. Today the material is being refashioned to alluring decorative effects.

THE ART OF FELT

Liz Clay specialises in creating very fine felt, which has been used in haute couture by fashion houses including Givenchy, Balenciaga and Stella McCartney. She enjoys the traditional process of wet felting by hand which she says is akin to paper making, where plant fibres are pounded to create a material. Felt-making kits can be bought for those wishing to try the process at home. Try Gillian Gladrag and Blooming Felt.

Felt making begins with wool fibres being beaten to break them up. Tim Moock is director of Felt, a company that supplies beautiful felt rugs made in Kyrgyzstan by nomadic people who have used felt for centuries to create decorative rugs to line their yurts. He explains the traditional process used by the Kyrgyz women: "Felting is the meshing of wool fibres – when you make a strand of wool hot and wet, it coils. So first the wool fibres are broken up using metal sticks, the fibres are then laid out into a layer up to 10cm deep on a reed mat. It is then made wet with water and rolled up. In Kyrgyzstan, they use a traditional technique to apply heat and friction; the roll is secured and tied to the back of a horse which they ride out over pasture for a kilometre or so and back so it gets very hot and spins around." Moock notes that this process can be achieved in other ways, involving rubbing and spinning with heat.

Wool strands are made up of interlocking scales and the combination of heat, water and friction causes the



This traditional rug made by nomadic people in Kyrgyzstan was constructed using two pieces of felt that were cut through at the same time to create interlocking pieces which are then stitched together to form two rugs with the opposite colour pattern. £1,275, Felt.

fibres to coil and mesh together as the scales snag. The more the felt is worked, with more rolling by hand, the tighter the meshing becomes, creating a stronger felt. Moock adds that this process reduces the felt to just 2-3mm deep.

Clay uses a similar technique, however her aim is to create a finer, more delicate felt, so she begins with very thin layers which she builds up, to create a translucent, paper-like quality which is quite unusual. She has used this process for her fashion work, but recently has been commissioned to create pieces for interiors which clients have used on walls or to hang at windows, where, thanks to its soft, ethereal quality, the textile works as an alternative to sheers. Clay also experiments with adding different fibres to the mixture: "You do need wool to create felt," she explains, "but so long as you have a high percentage of wool you can introduce silk, cotton or

synthetic fibres for interesting textures. I like to exploit the different properties of the fibres for decorative effects."

FELTING MATERIALS

Woven wool can also be 'felted' to create a similar finish to traditional felt. Textile manufacturer Hainsworth has a long history of producing boiled or felted wools. Its cloth is used for military uniforms, from the scarlet uniforms worn at the Battle of Waterloo to the uniforms worn by the Queen's guards today. Its broadcloth and baize is also suitable for use in interiors, for walling, curtains and bedspreads. Julie Greenough marketing manager, says: "The precision required by the Ministry of Defence for uniforms used on parade and for royal events is carried through into all our collections." She explains that the woven material is scoured and milled and then felted down, which reduces the size of the cloth. ▶



CLOCKWISE FROM

ABOVE Jacqueline Duncan used Hainsworth's broadcloth as a wallcovering: "Scarlet is a wonderful colour for rooms – dramatic, but almost like a neutral in that it will take any colour against it." Some examples of the exquisite work by Liz Clay

who experiments with felting techniques to elevate felt from a utility fabric to a fine material for fashion and interiors. **BELOW** Beautiful cushions from Cushlab show how felt holds its shape to create eye-catching three-dimensional design. 30cm x 50cm, £199 including feather pad.



However, the broadcloth is still one of the largest width fabrics available, at 220cm wide, so it can be used for expansive pieces of upholstery, such as headboards, without a seam.

This is a benefit noted by Jacqueline Duncan, principal of Inchbald School of Design, who used Hainsworth broadcloth to cover walls in her home. "Felt is excellent for covering walls," she enthuses, "and because it is wide, it is, of course, much cheaper [for this purpose] than other fabrics." She does note that the wide width can cause problems if you want to back the felt with paper for application, and advises a traditional method of 'upholstering the walls', which involves stretching the fabric over a wall surface and fixing to batons. As with all wool cloths, felt has excellent insulation properties keeping the room warm in winter and cool in summer. Greenough also suggests that wool is a good anti-allergy choice: "It cleanses the atmosphere, removing pollutants and odours."

CREATIVE MATERIAL

Another benefit of felt is that it does not fray. Kit Kemp, who designed the rooms in her collection of hotels, has used this to decorative effect. "As the selvage

does not fray you can do lots of things with the hemming, like having it inside out so that the hem line shows, or you can use felt to add appliqué designs – we have done all sorts from dogs on the backs of chairs to flowers or patchwork." This benefit is also exploited by Rebecca Barton who uses felt to make decorative cushions for her business, Cushlab. "Felt allows me to create pieces that would be impossible to do with any other material." Barton creates flowers and the felt holds it shape to achieve three-dimensional effects. This is something Clay enjoys about the material, too, and has developed techniques for pleating and folding felt to create textural patterns for wall art.

STRENGTH AND SOFTNESS

Although it has a lovely softness to the touch, felt is surprisingly tough. Kemp advocates boiled wools and felts: "They last so well on upholstery and look so good. At home I have two sofas covered in very pale grey boiled wool with appliqué on them. I have three dogs that live on them, and three years later they still look as good as the day they arrived." This strength makes felt a good choice for flooring. Roger Oates is known

for his woven rugs, but has recently created the tapis rug which uses a traditional French felting technique. "Its appeal lies not only in the boldness and variety of colour but in its luxurious softness underfoot. It is a highly practical material for rugs as the wool is extremely tough and resistant to spills.," says Oates.

Tim Mook advises that if something is spilt on a felt rug that liquid will sit on the surface (thanks to the lanolin oil) and can be dabbed away. "Food stains should be left to dry so they can be gently scraped off." He adds that felt rugs should only be lightly vacuumed occasionally so as not to distress the surface fibres. For all those who work with this material, its texture, strength, variety and versatility is what appeals as it allows for creative expressions that will last for years to come. ■

