

Felting Wool for Appliqué

by Kris Cornell

Felting or Fulling Wool Fabrics

Most of us have done it....we have opened the door to the dryer and found out that our favorite wool garment will now fit a small child! And, it wasn't even a difficult process! If this has happened to you, you have just had your introduction to the world of felting, or fulling, a process of shrinking the wool fibers so that the wool fibers will interlock. Wool that has been tightly felted does not ravel, making felted wool very easy to work with for appliqué projects as the edges of the wool appliqué shapes do not have to be turned under before being stitched down.

Finding a source of wool

NEW WOOL

- Wool on the bolt . Some shops will carry wool on the bolt already felted or you can buy wool on the bolt and felt it yourself. The wool should be a least 80% wool - typically the other component will be nylon or polyester. For wool appliqué, a skirt weight wool is perfect. Stay away from worsted wool (you can recognize it because it feels hard and flat....like wool for a man's suit) and washable wool - neither felt very well. You also want to avoid wool that is loosely woven as it may not shrink enough in the felting process to make a good appliqué fabric. If you find the perfect fabric, but fear it is too loosely woven - you can felt it as much as you can, and then use Fray Block© by June Tailor on the edges of your appliqué shape. I like Fray Block© better than other non-fray products on the market as the results are softer, more pliable and less visible than some of the other products.

RECYCLED WOOL

- Frequently used woolen clothing items are very inexpensive at thrift stores. Chose garments that are 100% wool or are blends of 80% wool and 20% nylon or polyester. The fabric from garments with less than 80% wool content will not felt. Like wool on the bolt, stay away from worsted wools, washable wools and clothing constructed from loosely woven fabric. Your best bets are skirts or lightweight blankets. Jackets, especially in these days of fusible interfacings, just don't give you enough fabric for the time it takes to take them apart.
- Clothing items need to be taken apart before you can felt the wool. The thread used to sew the garment is usually not wool and will not felt and your wool will be stretched or misshapen if you do not remove the non-wool parts of the garments. I will occasionally purchase wool trousers if I fall in love with the fabric, but most wool pants are from worsted wool, so the clothing I usually purchase for recycling are skirts. I usually use a pair of tight fitting surgical type gloves to handle the wool garments and work outside or in the garage as the garments can be dusty or full of lint. I use scissors to cut off the waistband, open up the

hem and cut out and discard any lining and bias tape or zippers,. Any buttons go in my button jar. I use a seam ripper to undo the seams and I end up with two or three pieces of wool, depending on how the skirt is constructed which I can now felt.

JUST A NOTE ABOUT HAND-DYED WOOL

- Hand dyed wools are available in a variety of sizes and textures. There are a number of companies, some larger, some smaller who dye wool. The wools are overdyed, which means the color as added “over” the woven pattern of the wool. Wool is dyed to create a unique color or range of colors or to create visual texture. Some hand dyed wools are dyed over solid wool and some are dyed over woven plaids or checks. The resulting wool can be fairly solid in nature or can be more mottled which will add visual interest to your appliqué piece. Color, mottle and shading can be affected by many factors, including: water hardness and temperature, dye pigments and the wool fibers themselves. Variations in each piece of dyed wool are to be expected even using the same dye formula, but the gift is that every piece will be unique. Wool can be felted in the dyeing process, so hand-dyed wools meant for rug hooking and appliqué are already felted, you may however felt these wools a second time if you wish to tighten the weave further.

Procedures

I. Wool Felts with three things:

- Change in temperature
- Agitation
- Alkalinity (ph of the water)

So, in order to felt wool all you need to do is provide heat and agitation in the washing machine, and add a pH changing agent (otherwise known as laundry detergent!).

Felting wool is sort of like beating egg whites. You beat and you beat and you beat, and then oops, suddenly when you were not looking your foamy egg whites are so stiff they are a sculpture in white! It is all too easy to miss the moment when your piece of wool goes from beautifully, softly felted wool to wool that is too thick and covered with little fuzz balls.

Wool blends will stop felting at some point - usually at somewhere around 25 - 30% shrinkage. Fabrics that are 100 % wool will shrink much more - up to 50%.

Wool fabric can be felted by putting the pieces in the washing machine and adding hot water. I felt like colors together, especially if the wool is hand dyed, and I always felt white or cream wool by itself.

- **TOP LOADING MACHINES:** Use just enough hot water to cover the item, so in my machine, I set it on small load as there is more agitation with less water. Then, if you can, set the agitation level to high. Add about 1/4 the amount of detergent you would normally add. Once the washer starts, check the fabric after 15 minutes or so, at least the first time you try the process. Remember that 100% wool will shrink more than a wool blend. Continue to agitate wool in wash cycle until it gets close to the right size or thickness you want as the

wool will shrink some more when it rinses, it will shrink a little more when the fabric spins out will felt even more when you put it in the dryer. Rinse and spin your wool. If your spin cycle adds cold water, your wool will felt more than if it adds hot water (due to temperature change). After the wool is rinsed and spun, put it in the dryer to continue the felting process. If I think that the piece of wool I have needs a lot of felting, such as a wool that is more loosely woven, then I just let the wool go through an entire washer cycle and then I put it in the dryer to shrink even more.

- **FRONT LOADING MACHINES:** The common misconception is that wool fabric cannot be felted in a front loading machine. There are just a couple of things that you need to do in order to provide a couple of elements that are missing in a front loading machine - the lack of agitation and the inability to check on the progress of your felting process. Like lots of folks, I now own a front loading machine, but I can still felt my wool! I have had good success in adding an old pair of jeans (ones that I don't care if some of the wool color comes off on the jeans) to my load of wool to provide agitation. The first time you felt wool in your machine, set the machine on the shortest cycle possible so you can check on the felting progress fairly soon. After all it is easy to wash the wool a second time, impossible to unfelt a piece of wool that has gone too far. I have learned subsequently, that a medium cycle, with a cold water rinse is the best for my machine (note: the hot water at our house is really hot -we have no small children and a pump that circulates hot water continuously) - and with more loosely woven tweeds or herringbone wools, I need to run the wool through the washing machine twice. Since felting is a combination of several factors including water temperature and amount of agitation, you will need to do a little experimenting with your machine to find the combination that works best for you.
- **STOVETOP METHOD:** If for one reason or another you can't use a washing machine to felt your wool fabric you can boil it in a pot on the top of the stove. Fill a pot (I like to use a five or six quart pot), preferably one you won't be cooking in again - half full of water and bring water to a boil. Add a couple of tablespoons of mild detergent (dish soap or laundry soap) and immerse your wool (like colors together) in the water. Keep the water boiling and stir occasionally with a wooden spoon until your fabric is the thickness you desire. Lift the wool out of the pot with tongs and plunge into cold water. When wool fabric is cool enough to handle, squeeze gently and put fabric in dryer. The only caution with boiling wool is that sometimes the very hot water can cause some of the dye to bleed from the fabric and change the color of your wool.....either test a small piece before felting or you can just enjoy the serendipitous nature of the process.