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February 2004

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# Teddy Bear

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# THE INTRIGUING NEW Art of Needle

Felt has been fundamental to human survival for millennia. Teddy bears have tugged at our heartstrings for a century. A new technique marries the two in an incredibly expressive new art form.

BY MINDY KINSEY

**N**eedlefelting is something of a backward art in that it was invented by industry, then was simplified by crafters into a home art. In factories, machines use 250,000

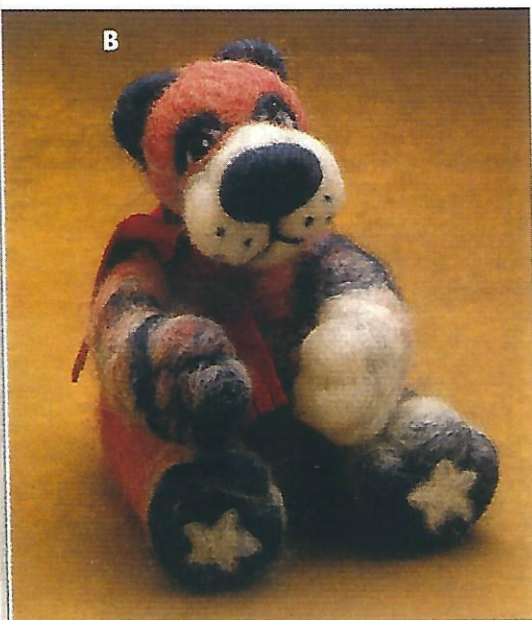
needles at a time to create craft felt, quilting bats, and esoteric products like piano-key pads and imitation leather. In their studios, artists use one needle, or a few in a holder, to felt much more accessible items—clothing, jewelry, rugs, quilts, and soft-sculpture art.

But what is felting? What distinguishes needlefelting from other methods? And why is everyone talking about it?

According to FeltCrafts.com, “Felt is a non-woven fabric formed when sheep’s wool or animal fur is subjected to heat, moisture, and pressure or agitation.” This is usually accomplished by swishing the fibers in soapy water until they matt together. The water and soap cause scales along the fibers to open and lock together, then a protein in the fibers creates a permanent bond, meaning that the felting process, which seems insubstantial, is actually irreversible.

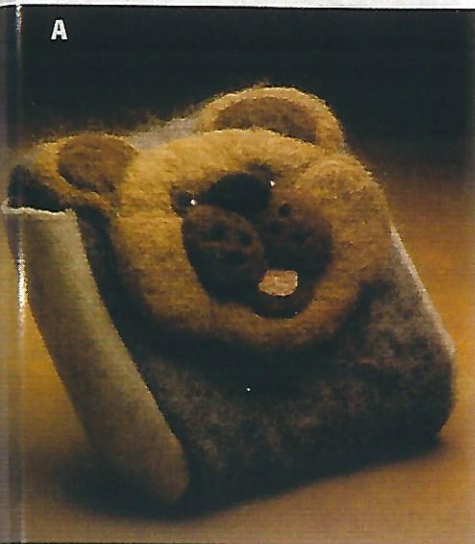
“No one knows for certain how humans first discovered the felting properties of wool and animal fur,” reports FeltCrafts.com, “but several ideas suggest how early humans may have become interested in making felt. Matted wool may have been noticed on sheep. Wool shed from wild sheep may have been found formed into a mass of fibers as a result of the elements. Perhaps they stuffed their footwear, presumably animal hide, with wool to keep their feet warm. After walking on the wool for a while, they found that it became stiff and formed a kind of fabric.”

The oldest archaeological finds containing evidence of the use of felt are in Turkey and date from 6500 to 3000 B.C. Examples of feltmaking have been found around the world, from many time periods, and demonstrate many uses for the fabric, including as armor, clothing, and decoration. Today, felt is used for, among other things, tents (Mongolia); rugs





# felting



Artists are making an incredible variety of objects using needlefelting techniques. Irene Heckel shared a purse (A) made from a piece of traditional felt embellished with a needle-felted bear head; a small bear (B) made from a combination of fibers; and a needlefelted doll (C), *Beula*, which wears a felted outfit and has an internal armature so she's poseable.

and hats (Turkey); cloaks and blankets (Asia); and boots (Scandinavia and Russia). Feltmaking as an artistic form is on the rise in Great Britain, Scandinavia, and the United States.

So what is the difference between traditional felting and needlefelting? According to Marr Haven Wool Farm in Allegan, Michigan, the difference is water. Unlike traditional felting, which relies on water and agitation to entangle the fibers and form the fabric, needlefelting is a dry process. Artists use needles that are about 4 inches long, sharp, and covered in tiny, almost invisible, barbs. When the artist repeatedly pokes a mass of fibers with the needle, the barbs cause the fibers to matt. The fibers can mat to themselves, forming dense shapes; attach to each other, as a limb to a torso; and attach to other fabrics, such as a teddy bear paw or wet-felted hat.

Needlefelting is a recent phenomenon, but no one seems to know when

crafters separated needlefelting from traditional felting or who began the fad. It is sweeping the crafting world, though. People are making everything from dolls to vases and scarves to rugs with fibers that range from sheep's wool to cat and dog fur. (We're told that you could felt human hair, if you had the time, patience, and supply of hair!) In the teddy bear world, we're seeing lots of realistic bears, though our cover bear, by Debbi Henretty, proves that felters haven't lost their sense of whimsy. Some felters, like Bobbie Ripperger, like to needle their pieces until they are quite dense and hard. Others, like Debbi, leave them a bit soft and squishy. Jean Olsen and Irene Heckel both enjoy combining felting with traditional bearmaking. The one thing the artists all agree on is that needlefelting is both fun and highly creative. "No patterns, no sewing machine...just wool and a vision," says Debbi Henretty. "It is really 'soft sculpting' in its truest form!"

## Resources

Note: This list is a sample of the needlefelting resources available. It is not, and cannot be, exhaustive.

### Web Sites

FeltCrafts.com  
MieklesFarm.com  
WoolFestival.com  
HookedOnFelt.com  
MarrHaven.com  
EarthSongFibers.com  
WoolCraft.co.nz  
BlackSheepDesigns.com  
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/needlefelting>

### Books

***The Felting Needle from Factory to Fantasy: Working Wool without Water & Related Matters***

by Ayala Talpai

***Felted Treasures: How to Felt & Sculpt Wool with a Felt Needle***

by Jean Paccagnan Armes

***Needle Felting: Art Techniques & Projects***

by Anne Einset Vickrey

### Supplies

Edinburgh.com  
PurelyNeysa.com  
EarthGuild.com  
BearsandBooks.com



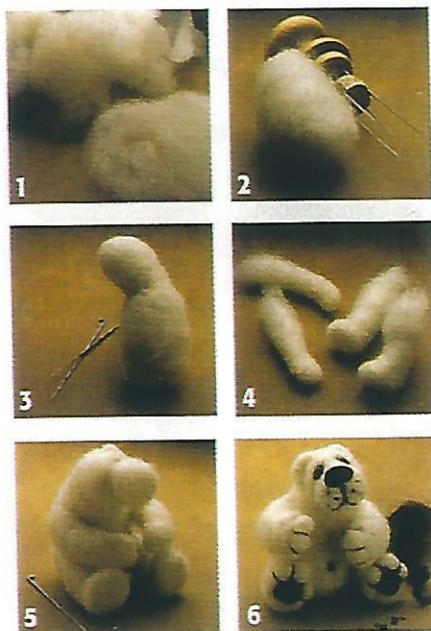


# From Fluff to Friend

To answer the question, "What is needlefelting?" in a visual way, we invited Irene Heckel to join us at the photo studio for a felting demonstration. Irene brought the tools of her trade: clean, combed wool in a variety of colors and a set of felting needles. We watched in fascination as she rolled, twisted, and poked the loose fiber into shape, eventually creating a personable little 4-inch bear from the amorphous handful of fluff.



Irene at work.



1. Clean, combed sheep's wool looks a bit like pillow stuffing, or clouds. The untwisted wool is called "sliver" or "batt." It can also be called "roving," but that term actually refers to wool that has been slightly twisted.

2. Irene begins most bears with a piece of rolled wool about one-third larger than she expects the finished piece to be. She needles it into an oval, leaving the fibers loose in the areas where she plans to attach limbs. For a larger piece, she might use a four-needle punch, like the one shown here. Note: Irene uses "needle" as a verb when she describes her technique; others use "poke" or "stab" to describe the action of the needle.

3. Though the felting needles look smooth, they actually have tiny barbs along the shaft which tease and matt the wool fibers—which themselves aren't as smooth as they

seem—into a solid piece. The needles are usually triangular or star-shaped in cross-section. Here, Irene used needles to first make a small oval out of a handful of wool, then to attach the head to the top of the body.

4. Note how the arms and legs are more firmly shaped at the bottom and loosely "fluffy" at the top where they will be joined to the body.

5. After needling the limbs onto the body, Irene sculpts them into shape and position. She also does preliminary sculpting on the face.

6. This little friend comes to life with the addition of tiny glass eyes and features formed of contrasting wool. Irene might use only a couple of fibers—and a fine, sharp needle—to delineate toes or create freckles. **TB**

## Tips for Beginning Felters

- WoolCraft.co.nz notes that if you're having trouble holding your felting needle, you can use polymer clay (such as Fimo or Sculpey) to make a handle. They recommend that you match the color of the clay to the gauge code on the needle so you know which needle is which.
- If you're planning a big project and the

prospect of needling with one tool seems daunting, try a punch. A punch is a handle that holds several needles at once, making it possible to do more in less time.

- Felting needles are very sharp. Being made from tempered steel, they are also somewhat brittle and can easily snap. Don't worry about it—just keep a couple

of extras on hand and dispose of the broken pieces carefully.

- For your own safety, use a piece of thick, dense foam, rubber, or sponge as a work surface so you neither poke yourself nor break a needle on the tabletop. Irene Heckel has discovered that a mouse pad works, too.



# The Next BIG Thing

Needlefelting is the next big thing in the bear world. Artists rave about its creative possibilities and collectors are thrilled with the freeform sculptures they're finding at shows around the world. This is just a hint of the marvels available—keep your eyes open at your next show and you're sure to find a needlefelted sculpture begging to go home to your hug.







## **1. Eleonore Unkel-Schäufelin**

Though, like most artists, she is new to needlefelting, Eleonore is enjoying success with the medium. Her first needlefelted bear, *Oki*, was nominated in the Tokyo International Teddy Award competition. Despite her change of method, Eleonore's bears are immediately recognizable from their lifelike poses. Contact Tatze in der Tatze, [tatzetatze@aol.com](mailto:tatzetatze@aol.com).

## **2. Irene Heckel**

Irene enjoys making pieces that are entirely needlesculpted, like her grinning cats, and enhancing her mohair bears with needlesculpted faces and accents. "You can needle right into the mohair!" she says delightedly. Contact Irene Heckel Originals, 631-369-0127.

## **3. Jean Olsen**

Jean enjoys combining traditional bearmaking with her new needle-felting skills. She felted the head of *Black Bear* from merino wool, then added a fully jointed alpaca body. Jean strives for realism in her pieces, and says that needlesculpting enables her to capture details that would be difficult to achieve with traditional methods. Contact Olsen Designs, 920-992-6190; [info@olsendesigns.com](mailto:info@olsendesigns.com).