

## Whirls and Swirls

### Techniques for felting

#### Karen Rao

Felt has been in existence for 8000 years and its uses are seemingly endless. We have felted scarves, hats and bags, toys, jewellery and also wall art. I moved from the city to live by the sea a few years ago and found life here invigorating and inspiring. The waves have become a focal point of my creativity and I strive to produce a work of art that captures this dramatic force of nature. I refer to sketches and photographs and find it so important to study and understand my subject matter, which results in a highly tactile three-dimensional piece of art.

I am going to recreate my Purple Whirlpool felt art, shown right, in order to produce an image in wool, while maintaining a sense of order: using pattern in feltmaking creates random results. I use the wet felting method to create my 'underpainting' and the needle felting method to enhance the feeling of motion and depth.



## Equipment

100g dark purple wool tops  
100g mid purple wool tops  
Small quantities of pale purple and white (a mixed bag of assorted colours is recommended)  
Soap  
Bubble wrap (or a bamboo blind)  
Cotton/muslin square  
Towel  
Jug - for hot water  
Plastic piping 80 cm long (the length of the image to be created)  
Felting Needle  
Foam 4 cm (1½") thick

## Materials

A 250g bag of mixed colour Merino 70s wool is recommended

I used:

100g lilac merino 64

100g deep violet merino 64

Purple and peacock

White scoured kid mohair/ wensleydale (curly locks)

Felting needle - 36 gauge triangular

Olive oil soap

Useful link:

<http://www.winghamwoolwork.co.uk/index.php>

## Preparation

Think about the size of felt art you would like then work larger (60 cm, 24"). The more you manipulate the wool, the greater the shrinkage. This happens as the fibres of the wool mesh together to create felt. Decide on your colour palette. I have chosen to create the background layers in dark and mid purple. Details are added in light purple and a contrasting turquoise, with highlights in white.

Prepare the work surface by laying a towel down first to help capture excess water, then a square of bubble wrap, bumpy side up. Pull off an arm's length (approx 1 metre) of mid purple wool. You do this by placing your hands about 15 cm (6") away from each other and gently pulling. Split the wool into 3 lengthways and then pull apart lengths of wool approx 10-15 cm (4"-6"). Lay the small lengths of wool in a row with each piece touching the next so there are no gaps – see below.



Repeat until you reach the desired width (60 cm, 24"). Create a second row in the same way making sure the ends overlap the first row. Repeat until you have reached your desired length (60 cm, 24"). See below, left. For the second layer, split the mid purple wool tops as explained earlier. Create another layer of wool in exactly the same way but this time lay the wool at a 90 degree angle across the first layer. Below, right.



When the whole area is covered, repeat with a third mid-purple layer, laying the wool down as you did for the first layer at a 90 degree angle to the second layer. I like using a different colour or tone for the first layer. As the wool is felted, the fibres blend together resulting in a two-tone effect. You are now ready for the composition.

Take thin strips of light purple wool and arrange in a whirlpool shape. Add the dark purple to the corners, as shown.



Further define the whirlpool.  
Graduate areas by placing fine wisps of wool, as shown right.

When happy, add the turquoise  
and finally the white highlights.  
See below.



### **Wet felting**

Lay the cotton or muslin square over the wool. Pour hot water from a jug slowly over the back of your hand to disperse the water and press down. Continue until the whole area is quite wet. Now rub the soap carefully backwards and forwards until the whole area is covered. Gently rub with circular motions using your palms. The wool should start to compress. If not, add more water. Press harder and continue until wool fibres start to appear through the cloth. This means that the felting process is underway.



Carefully peel the cloth away as the fibres can be firmly meshed to it. You now have a very soapy composition.



Roll the picture up with the bubble wrap around the plastic pipe, smoothing out any wrinkles. Roll to and fro 100 times. Unroll. Turn the felt 90 degrees, roll up then roll 100 times. Repeat until you have done this four times. The felt should be quite strong when pulled slightly, if not, repeat the rolling process twice more.



Wash the soap out, squeeze out the excess water and hang to dry.

Feltmaking does distort your planned composition, resulting in some surprises.



I do like to have some control sometimes and for this I amend my felted picture by needle felting. This is purely optional and a matter of personal preference.

## Needle felting

If necessary, Iron the felt on the reverse using the wool setting and then place onto the sponge.



Lay fine wisps of roving to blend colours or thicker pieces to redefine the whirlpool shape – below left. Use the felting needle to ‘stab’ the wool into place. The needles have small barbs on them that push the wool through the felt then hook it onto the existing layers – below right. Continue adding more wool until satisfied with the end result. Step back to view the result from a distance. I liken this to painters viewing a canvas. Feltmakers do repeat the wet felting process at this stage, but I prefer the three-dimensional quality that this method produces.



## Hanging your felt art

For smaller pictures, I wrap the felt around a canvas and attach. For larger pieces I needle felt tabs onto the back, insert a bamboo stick, then hang. The irregular edges of the felt show this material to its full advantage and a dramatic piece of tactile wall art is created.

Experiment with the fibres used: from possum to camel, from jute to bamboo! Try using the embellisher machine for the needle felting stage. Use the method for other compositions. The piece below left is Summer Wave and the one on the right is called Sunset, so you can guess the source of the design. But above all, have fun!



Karen Rao completed a foundation course in Art and Design before going on to take a degree in Graphic Design at Newcastle Polytechnic. She worked for many years as a packaging designer in London before moving to Brighton on the south coast of England. There, her work broadened into design for print and design for web, illustration and feltmaking.

Karen has always enjoyed the relationship between image and typography with colour being an essential part of her work. Her packaging background has been integral in designing a composition in felt that is powerful in colour and content, with a freshness in the use of texture and relief.