

## History of Felt: What is Wool Felt?

Felt is a non-woven fabric formed when sheep's wool or animal fur is subjected to heat, moisture and pressure or agitation.

Soap, or an alkaline environment, helps the felting process.

Heat and moisture cause the outer scales along the wool fibre to open, and the soap allows the fibres to slide easily over one another thereby causing them to become entangled.

The wool fibres are made up of a protein called keratin. The keratin in the fibres becomes chemically bound to the protein of the other fibres thereby resulting in a permanent bond between the fibres.

Felting is a simple technique requiring very little equipment. The main advantage felting has over other textile making methods is producing a finished product in much less time than weaving for example.

No one knows for certain how humans first discovered the felting properties of wool and animal fur, 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 fibres.

Perhaps they stuffed their foot ware, 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. Wall paintings that date from 6500 to 3000 B.C. have been found which have the motif of felt appliqué. At Pazyryk in Southern Siberia archaeological evidence of felt was found inside a frozen tomb of a nomadic tribal chief that dates from the fifth century B.C.

The evidence from this find shows a highly developed technology of feltmaking. (These felts are in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia. Some pieces can be seen on the museums web site ([www.hermitagemuseum.org](http://www.hermitagemuseum.org)) The Romans and Greeks knew of felt. Roman soldiers were equipped with felt breast plates (for protection from arrows), tunics, boots and socks.

The earliest felt found in Scandinavia dates back to the Iron Age. Felt sheets believed to be from about 500 A.D. were found covering a body in a tomb in Hordaland, Norway.

Today felt is still in use in many parts of the world especially in areas with harsh climates. In Mongolia, nomads live in felt tents called yurts or gers. In Turkey, rugs, hats and other items are made of felt. In South Central Asia nomadic tribes use felt as tent coverings, rugs and blankets. Shepherds use felt cloaks (kepenek) and hats to protect them from the harsh climate. In Scandinavia and Russia, felt boots are produced and widely used.

More recently there has been a revival in the interest in felt making especially in Great Britain and Scandinavia and also in the United States with contemporary felt making design and techniques becoming more widespread.