



Texture – Felting knitted fabrics – Tutorial and tasks

Introduction

Felting (or, more correctly ‘fulling’) occurs when animal fibre fabrics like wool, alpaca or cashmere are repeatedly washed in hot, soapy water and then plunged into cold water. This can be done by hand or in a washing machine. The combination of hot to cold water, the friction of washing and the slightly alkaline nature of the soap, cause the fibres to shrink and mesh together. This process of shrinking and matting creates a fabric that may be slightly thicker, more dense and a little smaller through to very dense fabrics that are suitable for use as shoes or even tents!

The preferred yarns for felting are those made from loosely spun animal fibres. Yarns which are slightly fuzzy are likely to felt more readily. Avoid ‘superwash’ or similar yarns that are labelled as machine washable. This process is a treatment specifically intended to prevent felting and shrinking!

Objective

In these tasks you will be exploring how yarns like wool can be felted/fulled and ways in which felting can be used to develop designs, focusing in particular on the use of this technique to add texture to knitted fabrics.

Task One

Machine felt

1. Using a double knitting or similar weight yarn and 4mm (old UK 8, USA 6) needles, cast on 30 sts.
2. Knit in stocking stitch until the piece is square. Measure the swatch, noting the number of rows and the finished dimensions.
3. Wash the swatch on a hot wash in the washing machine with a normal detergent—you can use a half load wash cycle. Throw in a large, clean towel, a pair of old jeans or some tumble dryer balls. This adds the friction needed to help the felting process. When the wash is finished, tease the swatch into shape and dry flat.

Task Two

Hand-felt

1. For this task you will be making a felted fabric by hand.
2. Knit a swatch as for task one then felt as follows:
3. Prepare two bowls: Fill one with hot, soapy water (just hot enough to put a gloved hand in). Fill the second bowl with very cold water.
4. Wearing sturdy rubber gloves wash the knitting in
5. the hot water for a couple of minutes, squeezing it vigorously under the water.
6. Remove the fabric from the hot water, open it out flat and plunge into the cold water. Again, squeeze vigorously, lift it out and open flat.

7. Repeat this process several times until the fabric is matted and the knitting stitches are barely distinguishable.
8. Rinse twice more in fresh, cold water, squeeze out the excess moisture, and leave flat to dry.

Task Three

Make a sample of your choice

1. Make a third sample. This time, choose a different yarn or yarns, knit on different size needles, work in a different stitch or vary other factors (length of felting time, temperature etc.).
2. You may also want to incorporate other, non-felting fibres such as plant fibres or some of the unconventional materials you explored in the previous session.
3. You may felt your sample, either in the washing machine or by hand.
4. Finish and dry as above.

Task Four

Reflect and record

Measure your felted swatches and make notes on how they feel. Are they still square? Are they very firm or still quite soft and malleable? What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of the washing machine versus hand-felting methods? How did the changes you made in task three alter the end result? Can you think of ways to incorporate felt in knitted projects?