

PICTORIAL FELTING NEEDLE FELTING ONTO A BACKGROUND

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There are many ways to make pictures in feltmaking. One of the easier ones for beginners, is to use a pre-felt as the background for the picture. Students can make their own pre-felt or they can use a merino quilt batt. These batts are made on a needle-felting machine. The fibers that are run through this machine are tangled together to form a kind of pre-felt. The batts are usually white, so designing on them is a lot like designing on paper. Or you needle onto commercially made felt, interfacing or even pieces of cloth. I have done some great projects on commercially made felt hats.

Materials needed:

- Sheet of foam rubber, bigger than the felt wall hanging, by 3-5 inches on all sides.
- Design ideas. (Work out a the possible design on paper. If you can't think of your own design, you can look at photographs, embroidery design books, stencil books, decorative painting books, etc for ideas. The design cannot be too complicated, after you've tried one of these wall hangings, you will see that it is not possible to be really intricate.)
- Felting needles. (Choose the correct needle size/type for the fiber that is chosen. When I am using Merino, or even the slightly coarser Corriedale; I like to use the Gauge 38, triangular needle, with the notches that start approximately 1/8 inch from the tip. When using a coarser fiber, such as Romney or even the rug fleece, Karakul; I like to use a Gauge 36, triangular needle, with the notches starting approximately 3/8 inch from the tip.)
- Lots of fleece in different colors. (I like to use Merino, because the fiber is so fine I can get more detail. When I use coarser fiber, I really have to simplify the design. The fleeces I use are usually from sheep whose wool felts well. This is because I like to strengthen the felt by doing some wet felting as well as the regular, dry felting. With felting needles, you can also use a fleece that doesn't felt well by conventional, wet methods. These fleeces tangle together well with the felting needles, but cannot be hard felted with water.)
- Fuzzy or softly spun yarns. (Yarns are good for adding lines to a design. With some practice, they can even be used for making words!)
- Equipment for wet felting:
 1. Cellulose sponge.
 2. Bar of glycerin or olive oil soap.
 3. Towel.
 4. Rolling bar, 1 1/2" PVC pipe, wider than wall hanging.
 5. Sheet of bubble wrap, 3-5 inches bigger on all sides than wall hanging. (Use the bubble wrap with small bubbles, not the large ones.)
 6. Stripes of rag, about 1 inch wide by 18 inches long.
 7. Gallon bucket for water.

1. Lay the background on the sheet of foam rubber.
2. Figure out where the design is going to be. There are several ways to do this.

- Using yarn outlines as a guide:

Some people like to lay yarn down on the background, and "draw" the outlines of the shapes with it.

After the yarn is in place, you can use the felting needle to baste it down into position. (I hold the length of yarn in one hand and needle it down with the other. The yarn needs to be longer than you'd think, since it draws in as it's being needled. I don't cut it off until I have the entire shape outlined.) Once the shapes are outlined, you can needle colored fleece into the outlined areas. This is much like filling in a page of a coloring book.

- Using cut paper shapes as a guide:

Cut out shapes in paper. Then lay these shapes down on the background and arrange them until the composition is pleasing. When they are in place, use the yarn to outline the shapes, then remove the paper. Fill in the outlined shapes by needling colored fleece into them.

- Using stencils as a guide.:

- Lay the stencil over the background and lay fiber over the stencil, extending slightly beyond the edge of the stencil shape. Needle around the outside edge of the stencil to make a line and fold the excess fiber into the middle along this line. Needle down all of the fiber inside the stencil.
- Working directly, without a guide:

Some people like to design directly onto the background. There are a couple of different ways to do this. You can cut shapes out of pre-felts. (Some people make pre-felts out of a lot of different colors so that they have a “pallet” of colors to choose from.) Use a dog brush to roughen up the back side of the shape and then lay this rough side down on the background. Needle the shape into position.

Or you can lay colored fleece down onto the background and needle it into position. Depending on how much fleece you needle down, the shape will opaque or transparent (with background showing through).
3. Needle the shapes into position on the background. I usually use the felting needles to baste the shape down first, by jabbing it down a few places in the middle of the shape. Then I carefully needle around the edge of the shape, making sure that it is holding down well.
 4. Hold the foam mat up so that you can see the design well. Stand away from it and squint. Any shapes that are too dominant will jump out at you. Does this dominance disturb the balance of the composition? Or does it make it more interesting? If it is disturbing, you can easily pull the shape off the background and put another shape or color there instead. This is a lot like using an eraser to remove unwanted areas of a drawing, only less messy!
 5. After the composition is the way you want it, needle it a little more to make sure that everything is holding on well. Then carefully peel the background off the foam mat. I gently pull up, and roll the background as I’m going in order to get it off the mat without mishaps.
 6. If the wool is a type that can be felted by the wet method, you should now felt it a bit to “set” the design. This will prevent the shapes from being pulled off. To do this:
 - Lay the wall hanging on the piece of bubble wrap, bubble side up.
 - Put the bar of glycerin soap into warm water and swish it around until the water looks milky. Sponge this soapy water over the wall hanging, until all of the wool is well saturated. This will take more soapy water with coarse wool than with fine wool.
 - Lay the rolling bar on one end of the bubble wrap and roll it up with the wall hanging. Make sure that the rolling bar does not actually touch the wall hanging. Try to have one turn of bubble wrap around the bar before the wall hanging starts. Tie the roll in a few places with the rag strips.
 - Rotate the roll back and forth with your fore arms or your feet, 30 times.
 - Unroll the bundle and place the rolling bar on the other end of the wall hanging. Roll it up again and rotate another 30 times. (The area against the rolling bar will felt more tightly, so it is best to alternate ends so that you get even felting.
 - Unroll the bundle and give the wall hanging a quarter turn. Re-roll and rotate 30 times. Re-roll from the other end, rotate 30 times. Now, you have rolled it from all four sides. Depending on the fleece used and how hard of a skin you want on the wall hanging, you might be able to stop now. If the felt feels too loose, you will roll and rotate the bundle from the four sides again. But increase the rotations to 50 times, each side.

*TEST FOR FELTING “DONENESS”: Push on the fibers on the surface of the wall hanging. Do they shift or stay in place? If they shift, you need to roll it more. If they are tightly in place, you can stop.

Gently rinse the soap out of the wall hanging and soak it in a vinegar solution for 15 minutes. (1/4 cup vinegar to 1 quart water). Rinse out the vinegar solution. Lay out the wall hanging on a towel to dry. You can block it’s shape by stretching and patting it into position.