Felt Vessels

Sherry L. Clark

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Fine and Applied Arts
in Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

FELT VESSELS

By
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Thesis Proposal for the Master of Fine Arts Degree

College of Fine and Applied Arts
Rochester Institute of Technology

Title: Felt Vessels

Submitted by: Sherry Clark        Date: October 2, 1980

Thesis Committee:

Chief Advisor: Don Bujnowski

Associate Advisors: 1. Katarina Weslien
                      2. Bob Schmitz

Department Approval: 1.
                      Date: 8/3/81

Approval, Graduate Representative of Academic Council:

Date:

Final Committee Decision:

Date:
For my thesis, I plan to develop my interest in landforms as imagery in my work. I want to represent these images three dimensionally in a series of vessel forms, using feltmaking as my technique.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Felt vessels. To view them brings up so many questions. Why have I chosen the medium of felt? Why is the form that of a vessel? What is the purpose of these pieces and what are they meant to convey? To see a stable three dimensional form made of soft material seems to be a contradiction. What is the reasoning behind this?

A number of years ago I began recording my travels with a camera. I was capturing the moods and feelings of landscapes and in essence, capturing my own responses at the same time. I continue to photograph, but I feel a need to express these responses personally. My purpose in this thesis is to express feelings of awe and concern for the land, and finding an appropriate medium was my first step.

The use of felt evolved from a need that was not being met in other media. I had been making raku plates with images of landscapes, and although I am very pleased with these, the affinity for the materials and the desire to know more about the process and the materials was not there. I chose felt partially because of its potential for the construction of these vessel forms and also because it was reminiscent of the clay slabs that were used to form the ceramic plates that initiated this work. As the work evolved, the appropriateness of the materials
CHAPTER I
HISTORY OF FELTMaking

Felt. What is it and how is it made? Felt is one of the most ancient and primitive fabrics known to man and it is speculated that it may predate spinning and weaving. It is defined as the "dense fabric formed from wool and other hair fibers by application of heat, moisture, and agitation."¹ It is a process that is quicker and simpler than weaving and creates a strong, relatively durable waterproof fabric. Compared to woven fabrics, it is less durable and wears quickly, but because of the simple process involved, it is easily replaced.

Wool is the simplest fiber to felt, although it is possible to felt many other types of animal fibers, especially when in combination with wool. Vegetable and synthetic fibers do not felt, but when they are used in combination with wool, they add bulk to the final felt. The surface structure found in animal fibers in the form of scales is the key to the felting process. "When wool crimps in moist heat and its fibers interlace, the scales prevent the fibers from sliding back."² The scales interlock forming a dense fabric. The different qualities


of felt make it ideal for a variety of uses today. Its insulating qualities make it useful in garments and as boot liners. Felt also absorbs vibrations and sound. It is used as cushioning and padding for private and industrial purposes, and it can be found in musical instruments, under noisy machinery, and as insulation for recording studios. Felt is an integral part of the manufacturing of paper. It is also used in felt tip pens, as a filtering agent, for polishing materials such as glass and stone, and now is used with other materials to capitalize on a combination of properties.

Some of the earliest discovered felts have been found in Scandinavia, Siberia and northern Germany. These felts date back from 1500 to 1000 B.C. and were found frozen in burial tombs. Other cultures undoubtedly developed a use for felt, but because of different climatic conditions, the felts were not preserved. There are several legends about the origins of felt, one being that Noah padded the floor of the ark with sheep's wool and after forty days and forty nights, the pressure and moisture from the animals produced a matted fabric which we know as felt. Another such legend is that of a French monk making a pilgrimage to a shrine. To pad his uncomfortable sandals, he put wool from sheep into his sandals and after fifteen days of walking, discovered a durable cloth had formed from the sheep's wool.
Aside from the legends, it seems to be understood that felt evolved from cultures that had an available supply of wool that would come from a shepherding people. For the nomadic shepherders of the steppes of Central Asia, felt was a necessity for their way of life. As a by-product of their way of life, felt provided them with insulation and protection from snow and rain and its portability echoed their nomadic existence. Its qualities were almost symbolic for these people — it represented warmth, security, protection and portability. It is no wonder felt assumed religious, symbolic overtones because it was such an integral part of their culture. Its uses extended beyond that of practical tent and wagon coverings, garments, blankets, insulating wall hangings, saddle covers and horse trappings to idols and statuettes for religious purposes.

Feltmaking is not as prevalent in these cultures today. It can still be found in village workshops and felt-making centers in Turkey, India and Iran, but in many countries where it was once a thriving craft, it is virtually unknown anymore. Lifestyles are changing so rapidly and the Western influence is so great that felt is no longer a necessity in the lives of these people. Western-style homes are replacing the traditional yurt and mass-produced textiles and ready-to-wear clothing is replacing the traditional felt garments.
The making of felt is a relatively strenuous yet simple process that is irreversible. Few tools are necessary to complete the process. Different peoples use different techniques, but all are variations on the same basic method. Traditionally, feltmaking was women's work among the nomadic peoples, but once the carding bow was introduced, it became a man's craft and today it continues to be done by men in the villages.

Among the nomads, feltmaking was a once a year process, done in September after the second shearing of the sheep. The longer wool from the first shearing was used for spinning, and the shorter wool from the second shearing was preferred for a fine felt. In the felting workshops in the villages, the process was a year-round one. The wool was sorted according to quality and color and picked by hand to remove the impurities. The wool was then carded with a carding bow. The vibrations from the carding bow separated the fibers and continued to clean the wool. The fluffed wool was then spread evenly on a reed mat with a fork. If patterns were to be used in the piece, colored wool was placed according to the pattern on the mat and then the fluffed wool was placed on top. The entire surface was then sprinkled with water and then carefully rolled into the reed mat. The mat was then rolled in canvas or old felt and secured with ties. This finished roll was then rolled on the floor
with the feet, "hardening by stepping" as it was called. At intervals, the roll was untied and opened to make any necessary adjustments, and the stepping process was repeated. Once the piece was hardened, the fulling process was begun. The fulling process is a shrinking process where the hardened mass of fabric is exposed to hot water and agitation from rolling and beating directly on the fabric with the hands and arms. This produces a strong water-repellant piece of fabric.

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CHAPTER II

VARIATIONS ON THE TRADITIONAL FELTING PROCESS

My technique of felting is basically the same as the traditional method used in the village workshops mentioned in the previous chapter. Variations were used to achieve different qualities of felt. For the first felt vessels, I needed a strong and hard self-supporting felt. Most of these felts were made from five to seven layers of wool batts placed on a reed mat and "rolled" in a manner similar to that mentioned previously. After the initial rolling, the felt was then worked with the hands, alternating hot and cold water baths and lubricated with liquid soap. With each bath, the agitation and rolling and rerolling in different directions became stronger, until the effect was that of scrubbing on a washboard. I found agitation to be one of the biggest factors in hardening the felt. I would end with a cold water bath to contract the fibers and then put the entire felt in the dryer for about five minutes. This process would give me a medium weight, fairly thick felt, and if I had extended the process, I would most likely have gotten a heavier, harder thick felt.

When I was experimenting with thicker felts, I was also experimenting with felting to shape. I was able to felt a shape I wanted by cutting the batts to shape
and wrapping the shapes in fiberglass screening. These were lightly felted and then removed from the fiberglass screening and worked directly by hand. If the shape needed readjusting, it was cut and the final hardening and fulling was done. There was less waste of wool using this method, but since my technique has changed, I did not explore this way of working any further. This method seems ideal for cutting back on waste as well as being able to control the amount of felting if one is working with more delicate materials.

With my later pieces, I began working with a thinner felt, mostly because it was necessary for my method of construction. I have been able to get this quality felt by extracting the water from the felt between each exposure to hot or cold water and then pressing the felt on the exhaust press. The felt goes into two hot baths and three cold baths, alternating each and ending with a cold bath to contract the fibers. The felt is pressed between each bath and then once again after it has dried. This gives me a thin dense felt that is more manipulative for my method of piecing than the more cumbersome thicker felts I was first using.
CHAPTER III
"CLOUD POTS" -- WHAT ARE THEY AND WHAT IS THEIR PURPOSE?

...we may hope to make others feel all the psychological elasticity of an image that moves us at an unimaginable depth. 4

This quote expresses the essence of my "cloud pots". My felt vessels, from the materials used, the method of construction, to the form and imagery are cohesive units in thought and feeling. Because of the personal evasiveness of my imagery, reinforced by the airy lightness of felt, I refer to the forms as "cloud pots". They are vehicles for capturing fleeting memories and feelings, always changing form, but essentially the same.

The emphasis in my work is about my concern and awe for the land -- a naive wonder that I hope never to lose. The feelings come from my childhood and grow stronger as I age. Traveling in the western states of Wyoming, Montana and Washington in the past five years has deepened my feelings and it has become a need to express the emotional impact I feel from the rolling fields, the vast open quality of the land, the overpowering mountains, the uplifting of the layers of rock -- the magnificence and silent strength of nature. In the West,

there is less indication of mankind and his influences, and it was an overwhelming realization to be suddenly taken back to the very beginnings of the formation of the earth and to also be made to see the earth thousands of years in the future. The vast scale of the land and the history the rock layers reveal is a constant reminder of how small mankind is. This perspective has had the greatest impact on my life. These thoughts, these feelings, almost religious in nature, are always with me. I feel it necessary to put them into some tangible form for myself -- thus, the "cloud pots".

The form I have chosen to use to express these feelings is the vessel form. This form, though coming from a love of ceramics and basketry, goes beyond any medium. The fact that it is a vessel conjures up associations of containment, security and warmth, privacy and intimacy, and the reference to a past. Meanings and associations are held quietly in each vessel. Landscapes and my feelings about those landscapes are incorporated into the surface and interior of the vessels. The forms are not meant to be ceramic, and they are not basket forms -- they are containers for very primal feelings. The light, elusive quality of felt reinforces these strong, yet fleeting feelings. This contradiction of strength and evasiveness is presented by a form that looks strong and refers to historical forms that were strong, yet is
made from a light, supple material that seemingly should not support itself.

Since the imagery is most important to me, the form has become the vehicle for supporting and containing these images. Searching for a form that successfully works with the landscapes without overpowering them has been a struggle. The first vessel forms were successful (Plates I, II), but problems arose when the forms became stronger and too rigid (Plates IV, VI). There was too much emphasis on form and it took the viewer's attention away from the subtle linear landscapes. I am looking for an ambiguous form, an anonymous form -- one that stands on its own and crosses all media boundaries so that the reference is containment, not ceramics or baskets -- one that is secondary, yet supportive in nature to the images.

It is important to me to have some reference to function in my work, whether or not function exists. Alice Westphal referred to vessels as "unpretentious objects which relate to traditional forms which have served man's common or ceremonial needs in daily activity."5 The vessel evokes the sense of a link with history and the past -- conjuring up feelings, memories and

associations. The vessel in shape is a vehicle for containing feelings, as I mentioned before, and also, the vessel itself brings to the viewer a wide range of feelings by association -- tradition, humanity, a past. The vessel has become a strong means of communication for me.
CHAPTER IV
THE VESSELS

There were initial hurdles to overcome in beginning to work with felt. This was the first time in working with Textiles that I really did not know what would happen — it was truly an experiment. I was searching for a medium that would best suit my needs and even though I had imagined the potentials of felt, the results were very much unknown.

I began with a lot of sketching and the construction of paper models. The models were invaluable, but frustrating. The qualities of paper were so unlike the qualities of felt, yet both were basically planes from which the constructions would be made. After beginning to construct from the felt itself, the paper models took on more significance, because I knew then what to expect from the initial models and I could anticipate the variations the felt would give to the finished piece.

The first vessel (Plate I) was constructed from three separate pieces of heavy felt stitched together. Two layers of white roving were lightly felted, then cut to shape and felted together with five layers of grey roving. Extreme agitation seems to be important for me in obtaining a heavy enough weight of felt that will stand on its own. I was unsure of this piece because it was
the first form and its success or lack of success would determine the course of my work. The piece did work. Constructing vessels from heavy felt with no inside or outside supports was possible. Hand stitching was incorporated into the body of the piece to emphasize the imagery.

This particular vessel I feel is the most successful of the series. There is a spontaneous, yet direct quality to the vessel. It makes use of the soft fiber qualities of felt -- it does not deny the use of felt as a material, but rather allows the felt to assume its own shape. The piece is simple in form, color and imagery and this simplicity is its strength. It quietly reinforces a strong association with the land and though the piece does not stand out as some of the other vessels do, for those who take time to look at it, the strength and the associations can be appreciated.

I then experimented with several pieces that were influenced by Wayne Higby's ceramics, using the idea of landscape imagery that reads from both inside and outside the piece. I was interested in creating a sense of depth with an abstraction of a landscape with the exterior of the vessel going back into space and the interior of the vessel receding even further...creating the feelings of canyons and valleys and mountains -- all trying to emphasize the vastness, the magnificence of natural forms.
The ideas are still ongoing in my work, but the particular pieces mentioned were not successful in form and the imagery was awkward.

In the second thesis vessel (Plates II, III), the concern was with thin-ness and transparency with no outside structure for support. The top part of this piece is made of two batts felted together and the bottom is two more batts felted to the first two. Hand-stitching again emphasizes the land images. This piece, while very light and fragile, does stand on its own with no outside support. The stitching used to construct the form adds considerable strength and although not necessary, the rattan was added for support and visual emphasis.

This piece I also feel is successful. I intended to push the light quality of felt to its limits and still create a three dimensional form. In addition to the quality of lightness, what has resulted is a translucency that emphasizes the lightness, the airiness -- giving the vessel an almost ephemeral character. The fleeting color reinforces this feeling.

Stitching seemed to be such an important factor in the strength of each piece. In experimenting for later work, the idea of stitching reinforcing the strength of each plane that was used to construct the final forms was predominant. The stitching would then become a part of the whole structure and the piecing of the felt would
become the imagery itself. The imagery would also be accentuated with subtle color variations achieved with layering naturally dyed felt between various shades of grey, brown and off-white wool. There is a comfortable unity in the entire process -- using natural dyes and natural fibers to reconstruct the imagery.

The later vessels have, as a result, taken the form of piecing and using edges to define shapes and give color. This way of working appeals to me very much -- the subtlety of shapes and colors reflect feelings about my subject matter. Forms changed from the pyramidal shape to boxes, six-sided figures and other strong forms. After working with these new forms, I realized that the imagery was the most important factor in the pieces and that the new forms were too strong -- they were taking over the imagery. I want a form as strong as the land- scapes, but more anonymous so that the form and the landscape read as one strong unit. The pyramidal shapes have come the closest to an ideal form, but the search for forms will continue to be an ongoing process for me.

With the piecing process, I have begun using a thinner felt. The thin quality of the felt makes it much easier to work with while piecing. The subtle color variations are achieved by using five layers of batts, each layer being a different color. A sample batt might be composed of one layer grey, one layer white, one layer
natural dye color, one layer white, one layer grey. A variety of combinations pieced together gives endless subtleties of color as can be seen in Plate IX.

Vessels IV, VI, and VII all use the piecing method. The forms have become stronger and begin to overpower the imagery. These vessels were an integral part of my exploration of the piecing method, but it was important at this point to find a form that more closely supported the imagery.

The next vessel (Plate VIII) has the more anonymous form that I am looking for to support the imagery. The form needs to have this subdued quality, yet be strong enough to stand on its own and still have a loose, comfortable quality to accentuate the soft nature of felt. This form works well, but falls short of my expectations. The imagery through the piecing, however, is more than successful. There is a feeling of layering, of building up -- of rock layers and sediment, of the face of a massive mountain, and of space beyond. The colors and the images in this piece have more than satisfied my needs.

The last thesis vessel (Plate X) also was successful in combining the imagery and the form. Because of the flatness of the form, the image is seen overall and the two read as one unit.
CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

Looking back, from the very beginnings of this work -- when I first started recording moods and feelings of landscapes with a camera, through the desire to recreate these same moods and feelings in other media and through the search for an appropriate medium for myself -- I feel an exhilarating sense of progress, of movement, and of success. The vessel, with its many references and associations, has become my means of communication and felt with its lightness and its sculptural qualities has become my choice of medium. I feel the images, the medium and the vehicle of expression -- the felt vessels -- are successful in expressing my feelings about the land. Each of us has something of importance to us and I have been able to express what is important to me through my work.
PLATE I
Felt Vessel
with Stitching
Height 13½"  Diameter 9"
PLATE II
Translucent Felt Vessel
Height 13" Diameter 7½"
PLATE III
Translucent Felt Vessel - Detail
Height 13" Diameter 7½"
PLATE IV
Rectangular Felt Box
Length 9" Width 5" Depth 6"
PLATE V
Rectangular Felt Box - Detail
Length 9" Width 5" Depth 6"
PLATE VI
Hexagonal Felt Box
Height 5 1/2" Diameter 7"
PLATE VII
Felt Vessel
with Ochre Insets
Height 10½" Diameter 6"
PLATE VIII
Felt Strata
Height $15\frac{1}{2}"$  Diameter $9"$
PLATE IX
Felt Strata - Detail
Height 15½"  Diameter 9"
PLATE X
Felt Plate
Depth 3" Diameter 15 1/2"
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