

Feltmaking - an immemorial art

For thousands of years man has practiced his ingenious methods of turning the fleece of the sheep into warm clothing. Loom and spinning wheel have come to stand as the symbols of these skills. The art of felt making, too, harks back to earliest times. Historical specimens of felt have survived in large numbers and give ample evidence of a degree of inventiveness, aesthetic feeling, and refinement quite unlooked for in the production and use of this material. Caps of thick solid felt (first knitted) from the early Bronze Age are preserved at the National Museum in Copenhagen. These date back some 3500 years and were found in the pre-historic burial mounds of Jutland and North Schleswig. They combine weaving and felting techniques as several layers of fabric have been felted into a uniform material by a series of milling treatments. These felt caps are unique, being richly decorated with trimmings and threads, and must have formed part of ceremonial dress. In addition, they afforded protection against blows and sword-cuts. In 1939, a tomb from the later Bronze Age (about 1400-1200 B.C.) was uncovered in Hesse, Germany, which yielded a horse bridle incorporating a carefully fulled felt strap of sheep's wool. Another find consisting of a piece of felt from a barrow at Behringen in the Soltau district of Hanover and preserved at the Berlin State Museum until the last war is thought to have been produced about 1200 B.C. There are many references to the use of felt in Greece in classical authors, from Homer onwards.

Significantly, India and Persia are also mentioned in this connection. Everything points to felt manufacture having reached an advanced stage of technical excellence in the European west by the beginning of the Christian era. This may be inferred from the specialized workshops for making felt hats and felt gloves [Ref?] that have been discovered in Pompeii. The early settlement of artisans in the Petersberg quarter at Basle, where leather craftsmen are known to have plied their trade in late Roman times, has also yielded a sole of hare fur felt [Ref?] in a good state of preservation.

There is an even more impressive and extensive range of material evidence from eastern countries. Scythian graves of the fifth century BC known as 'kurgans' or barrows and found throughout the Russian steppes from the Carpathians to Mongolia have proved veritable treasure houses of the magnificent craftsmanship which the Scythians, that ancient nation of horsemen, developed in felt.



Mongolian yurt www.ulaantajji.com Photo: Tim Scarlett

Traces also show of Greek, Persian, and Indian influence. Russian archaeologists have found 'kurgans' buried deep under permanent ice and snow. As one would expect, perfect saddle felts, an article still associated with the finest craftsmanship, were also produced. The blue, red, or white saddle blankets discovered in the 'second kurgan' at Pazyryk are made of fine, firm but nevertheless resilient felt. Three of these blankets are decorated with an eagle or elk, or with embattled animals, in appliqué work of coloured felt. Another cloth for placing under the saddle, of thicker but softer felt, also came to light. The floor and the walls of the tombs were lined with black felt, and a folded sheet of the same material covered the bottom of the coffin. Other objects discovered in the tombs were wooden containers with semi-spherical bottoms and felt rings for supports and pictorial friezes of felt with many-coloured patterns in thin felt applique. [Ref?]

Articles of daily use found in the tombs included a leather bag remarkable for its exquisite shape, and exhibiting on one side a striking border sewn of strips of thin red felt. The felt strips, in turn, were decorated with small copper ducks covered with gold leaf. The head coverings of the dead were of hard thick felt. The dainty low riding boots of a Scythian woman of high rank also contained a pair of felt socks of the same cut and sewn from two pieces of thin white felt.

Graves left by the Huns in northern Mongolia and dating from the third and fourth centuries of our era have yielded carpets and patterned blankets of felt adorned with elaborate designs in brilliant colours. The conical felt hats with turned-up, slashed brims unearthed in the graves are known to be products of a very ancient tradition. [Ref?]