

One Way to Make a Felt Purse

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A couple of years ago, I decided that what I would most like in the world is to become a feltmaker. I quit my office job, started educating myself about the various breeds of wool, and took several classes from master feltmakers. After participating in a class taught by a Turkish rugmaker, I discovered that I really enjoyed designing flat pieces of felt. I have always loved pattern and color and the idea of combining the two with felting seemed to bring together what I loved most in the fiber world. So I started designing rugs. Along the way, however, my aunt asked me to make her a purse. I couldn't refuse and so I applied my felt rug making skills to the creation of a purse. Here's how I did it.



Felting the Fabric

My first step was to determine the wool. Icelandic was the natural choice, of course! I loved the fast felting nature of the fiber and also its ability to felt flat and hard. I had learned from experience that these are the qualities you need to make an item that will hold up to daily use. However, I also wanted color in the purse so I chose to use some of the Harrisville wools. Harrisville is a small family owned mill in New Hampshire that produces beautiful dyed wools and yarns for felting, knitting and weaving. I have a wholesale account with Harrisville and really love their range of color—they have a palette of 60 plus hues. Since I have a limited supply of Icelandic wool, (I don't usually have enough to dye), I tend to use the natural colored Icelandic as a base and supplement the color design with other wools. My aunt had already specified the pattern design she wanted, having seen it on one of my rugs, so I just needed to make sure that I had the right colors in stock.

My next step was to use the Harrisville wools to make my prefelt pieces. For those of you who are unfamiliar with the felting process, prefelt is the step where the wool is holding together, but not firmly felted. It is also sometimes called "half felts" which I think better describes what it actually is. The advantage of a prefelt is that you can handle it like a fabric – you can cut it in whatever shape you want – but it still felts. I usually make a pile of prefelts to have ready when I need them.

Next, I needed to lay down my base or background wool. Fortunately, I have a friend who owns a flat bed felting machine, just perfect for making large pieces of felt. Every other month or so, I drag my washed and carded fleeces over to her home to lay down a few pieces. I compose the pieces on the machine, felt them to a soft felt stage (a bit further than the prefelt stage) and then take them home for further fulling. So, for this project, I toted all my materials over to her house and created a large piece of fabric that I needed to make my purse. I laid out the fibers in the typical felting method, like shingles on a roof, putting down layers in alternating directions and laying out 4 layers totaling 1 ½ lbs of fiber for a 3 foot by 4 foot piece. After about 10 minutes on the machine, I opened it up and laid down my color design. Another 30 minutes on the machine and the piece was ready to take home.

Fulling the Fabric

At home, I fulling the piece to a hard felt stage. One of the most important lessons I have learned from my Turkish teacher is that felt (for rugs and daily use pieces) must be fulling to a very firm stage in order to last and not pill. So I rolled the piece in all directions, from both sides, top and bottom as well as the corners. I turned the piece over and repeated that process. Each time I rolled for approximately 5

minutes for a total of 40 minutes per side. I rolled and rolled and rolled until (and this is the important part) the felt could no longer stretch.

Constructing the Purse

Now I was on to the construction of the purse. My first step in this process was to cut the fabric! With such a large piece, I was actually able to get three purses out of this piece of fabric. Here is how I made my cuts:

side panel-purse #1	side panel-purse #2
side panel-purse #1	side panel-purse #2
Handle-purse #1	small purse
Handle-purse #1	
large purse #1	large purse #2



This allowed me to make two large purses with side panels; one purse had handles and the other had a slit cut in the top on both sides. The cut formed the handle. The last purse was a small purse just large enough for a bit of cash and a credit card, maybe a cell phone, too! After making the cuts, I wanted to soften up the edges a bit, so I poured some hot soapy water directly on the edges and felted them to soften them and give the purse a more finished, professional look.

Next came the assembling of the purses. Again, I wanted a professional look so I used my sewing machine to construct the purse. For the first purse, I folded the handles in half and sewed the sides together, seam outside, starting and ending 2" from the end. These ends were then opened up, laid flat and sewn to the purse equal measurements from the sides. I then sewed the side panels in the purse, seams on the outside, and finished the purse by sewing buttons on the handles at the point where they are attached to the purse, (See photos). The second purse was constructed the same way but without the handles. As mentioned previously, cuts were made in the top of the purse on both sides to create the handles. The third purse was simply constructed by two folds that allow for a small flap in front. A twisted yarn or leather handle will be added to complete the purse. All of the purses were simply constructed with few finishing details.

Some Thoughts

I admit that this is not the easiest way to make a purse. It is in fact, much quicker and easier to make a seamless felt project. However, as described earlier, my joy is creating fabric and this project allowed me to do that **and** make a purse. My goal was to create a hard wearing functional piece that was also beautiful. I think I succeeded in that. One last thought; I'm glad I created more than one so that I can keep one for my own use!

Felting Resources

If you are interested in creating a similar project, check out the following books:

Simply Felt: 20 Easy and Elegant Designs in Wool by Margaret Docherty and Jayne Emerson. This book provides all the information you need to make flat felt and create a similar purse.

Feltmaking by Deborah McGavock and Christine Lewis. Great felting book with detailed info on laying out fiber and creating many different items.

Feltmaking: Fabulous Wearables, Jewelry and Home Accents by Chad Alice Hagen. Another great book with good information on soap solutions and detailed instructions on laying out fiber. ∞

