



## FELT

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**FELT** (Mid. and New. Pers., *namad*), material produced by process of felting, the entanglement of animal fiber in all directions, appropriately done to form a soft and homogeneous mass. The technique was originally devised in nomadic communities of Central Asia (Pazyryk, 5th to 3rd centuries B.C.E., see Bidder, pp. 29 ff.; Burkett, 1979, pp. 7 ff.; Baranski), spreading toward China and the Greek world well before the 3rd century B.C.E., but for a long time confined to the Asian continent (Laufer).

In ancient Iran, felt was already used in the production of numerous kinds of clothing, in particular headgear—the turbans of Zoroastrian priests (Strabo 15.1, 3, 5, 67), the toque and tiara of Lycian, Persian, Median, and Bactrian soldiers (Herodotus 3.12, 7.92; Xenophon, *Anabasis* 2.5, 23; see also clothing ii)—as well as bed-clothes, floor carpets, different kinds of sacks, and horse trappings (Laufer, p. 10).

The geographical spread of the word *namad* and its variants (Ossetian *nymat*; Tāleši, *neme*; Lorī, *nemet*; Kābolī, Rōšānī, and Šuḡnī *namat*; Parāčī, *namo*; Monjī, *nām(e)yo*; Sanglēčī, *namād*; Eškāšmī, *namūd*, Yazḡolāmī, *nomt*, Pashto, *nimacy/limacy*), which extends beyond the Iranian world *stricto sensu*, overflowing into India (*namda*; Laufer, p. 10), into Sinkiang (*nemed*, in parallel with pan-Turkic *kīgiz*, see Jarring, p. 56), to Georgia (*nabadī*), and even into Hungary (*nemez*), suggests that the Iranian world may have been an important center for the development and diffusion of felt technology. Nevertheless, the fact that, on the one hand, some northeastern Iranian languages use a word of another origin (Wakhī: *ījīn*, *writ*; Monjī: *yīstān*, alongside *nām[e]yo*; Pashto:



*krāsta*, alongside *nimcay*), and, on the other, the existence of a few Turkish loan-words in Persian (*yūn* felt, felt saddle < Turk. *yun/yün*, animal hair; *kīz*, felt-cloth < Turk. *kidiz/ki'iz*, felt; *kapan[a]k*, felt coat < Turk. *kepenk*; see Dörfer, *Elemente* III, pp. 581-83, 661-62, IV, pp. 227-28; Moʿīn, pp. 2896-97, 3050, 5274), points to the well-known overlapping of cultural influences in Central Asia.

The method of felt-making, rather simple and uniform, constitutes the basis for a large number of products currently in use. As is often the case, the banality of the phenomenon have contributed to leading researchers astray; the techniques, usages, and aesthetics of felt appear, therefore, to be relatively unknown, particularly in comparison to those of what is perceived as the more “noble” craft of weaving.

*Production.* The main primary substances used in the production of felt are camel and sheep wool (preferably that of autumn, the second shearing season, and of lamb wool, which are finer), goat’s underhair (Pers. *kork/kolk*) taken from the animal by combing, which produces felt of a higher quality (Burkett, 1976, p. 61). By contrast, in the case of some felts of inferior quality, left-over cottons are sometimes mixed with wool (Dupaigne, 1968, p. 54). To produce a felt overcoat or a carpet of 1.2 x 2 m, four to five kg of wool are required; a *yurt* requires 130 kg, that is, 150 to 200 lamb fleeces (Gervers, p. 15; Jazmī et al., p. 71; Tapper, p. 58).

The production of felt takes place in several stages (Wulff, *Crafts*, pp. 222-24; Róna-Tas; Burkett, 1979, pp. 1 ff.; Jazmī et al., pp. 58 ff.; the latter is very useful for its illustrations and detailed terminology): (1) The wool is cleared of its impurities, degreased with potash, rinsed, and dried. (2) The fibers are bound together (carding) by different methods (which can sometimes be applied successively): threshing with one or several sticks or batons; combing on a fixed comb, vertically installed, with its fangs pointing upward; carding, in the proper sense of the word, with a carding bow (Pers. *kamān-e ḥallājī*, *kamān-e naddāft*). (3) The carded wool is spread on a metallic mold (for hats) or on a vegetal mat, with the dimensions of the felt required, in several successive layers, depending on the desired thickness. (4) The entire piece is abundantly soaked with hot water, often alkalinized by adding grease, oil, soap, starch, or eggs. (5) The felt is pressed by rolling the mat very tightly, or by rolling it in a cotton cloth (for hats), and then the cylinder thus formed is compressed by treading on it (Plate I), rolling it on the ground under one’s forearms or by dragging it with a rope. (Having a galloping horse cause it to roll over the ground as is done in Turkey and Mongolia [Burkett, 1979, p. 77] as well as in



Kirgizia [Bidder, pp. 15 ff.] is not attested in the Iranian world.) The operation is repeated by rolling the mat in the opposite direction. This can last for four to five hours. (6) The felt is left to dry in the sun for several days (if for a hat, it is placed on a wooden mold). (7) Once again it is rolled up and unrolled for some time until it becomes soft.

Most felts are made out of white, beige, brown, gray, or black natural wool. In addition, some types of light-colored felts can be more or less highly decorated. Several methods, applied at different stages of production, are available: before soaking, tufts of wool dyed in advance can be applied to achieve the desired motifs; before the felt has dried, designs can be made with dye; after drying the felt can be embroidered, decoratively cut, or embossed (Feilberg, pp. 73-74; Dupaigne, 1975; Dhamija et al.; Jazmī et al., p. 71).

Felt is produced to some extent everywhere, either within the household—a situation prevalent in rural areas, where men and women work together, generally under the direction of women—or in the context of exercising a craft: professional felt-makers (*gāzūr*, *qaṣṣār*, *namadmāl*, *namadsāz*, *kolāhmāl*), generally men, are grouped together in specialized neighborhoods or *bāzārs*, as in Dezful (q.v.; Feilberg, pp. 70-71), Nīšāpūr (d'Allemagne, pp. 122-23) or Herat (Dupaigne, 1968, p. 54). Their activity is often seasonal, and they may move from one town to another (Centlivres, 1970, p. 111). Each important center has its own decorative style. The province of Kermānšāh in western Persia has some fifteen specialized production centers (Jazmī et al., map h-t).

*Products and usages.* The *yurt* and other kinds of dwellings, not dealt with here, are evidently the most spectacular felt products in the Iranian world, but not its most characteristic, although an Iranian origin for a certain number of the trellis tents is not to be completely discounted (Andrew, 1990). In Persia, these tents are only found among Turkic nomads—Turkmens (the proper *yurt*: *kara öy*, see Andrews, 1973), or Šāhseven (*alāčiq*); in Afghanistan, where inter-ethnic exchange is more intense, many non-Turkic nomadic groups of the north have adopted them—only the Moğols and the Gūjars do not use them (Balland, pp. 112 ff.). The interior lining of the *yurt*, made of unornamented white felt, turns black within two years from the smoke of the hearth but lasts twenty years; the felt employed in floor carpeting, on the other hand, remains in use for thirty years (Dupaigne, 1968, p. 54).

Felt rugs, a great specialty of Mongolia and northwest China (Bidder, pp. 63



ff.), have also been known in the Iranian world since antiquity (see *eir.* IV, pp. 859, 862; Dhamija et al.; Löffler and Friedl, p. 148f.; Burkett, 1976 and 1983, pp. 29 f.). Nevertheless, they are considered to be the “carpets of the poor,” and as such preferably reserved for places of work, such as the kitchen, and for more practical than decorative purposes. They always occupy a secondary place in the specialized *bāzārs* (of the 260 shops in 1978 in Mazār-e Šarīf selling hand-made textile articles, only 23 carried felt products; in Qandahār, the proportion was 8 to 214; in the Kabul kilim *bāzār* only 2 out of 39 shops also sold felt rugs; see Jebens, pp. 234, 254, 268). The felt rugs decorated with very colorful geometric designs (*košma*) made by Afghan Uzbeks, particularly those made by the Lakai group, have, nevertheless, a real decorative value (e.g., see Burkett, 1979, pp. 68 ff, pl. h.-t. 6 and 7; Klieber, p. 217). Those made by the Turkmens, simply in two colors, are, on the other hand, the only types to be decorated on both sides, and are thus reversible (Burkett, 1979, pp. 48 ff., pl. h.-t. 2 and 3; [Plate II](#)).

In its usage for clothing, felt appears to be reserved for men. Kinds of headgear made of felt have been particularly characteristic of the Iranian world since antiquity. Such headgears generally take the form of more or less firm, convex skull-caps, or toques, in black or brown, which are found from Ossetia to Central Asia (Pers. *kolāh*, Turk. *bork* / *bör(ö)k*; the Persian name—by no means reserved for felt toques—is in general use in the majority of Turkic languages of Central Asia: Sukhareva, p. 339; see also *eir.* V, pp. 845, 850, 852; Burkett, 1979, p. 57; Löffler and Friedl, p. 160; Mortensen, pp. 317, 324 f.; Centlivres, 1968; Westphal-Hellbusch and Soltkahn, pp. 162f., 282 ff.; on the production of *kolāh*, see Wulff, *Crafts*, pp. 222-24). The most original forms of headgears are those of the Qašqā’īs—felt toques, with two flexible “ears” (*dogūšī*)—as well as the Kirgiz white felt hats with large rims (*kalpak*) adopted by Tajik truck-drivers (Sukhareva, p. 332). The Ossets traditionally change their headgear from summer to winter: felt headgear (*nymat kud*) in the summer and then fur headgear (*waldzarm kud*) in the winter (Kaloiev, p. 178)

Widespread in both the Iranian and the Turkic worlds—the Turks being perhaps the original source—are the hooded mantles and cloaks of felt, with true or false sleeves used for carrying anything and everything, worn by shepherds to protect themselves against rain or cold (*eir.* V pp. 835, 846, 860, 865-70; Gervers, apud Burkett, 1979, pp. 31 ff.; [Plate III](#)). They are ubiquitously found above all, but not exclusively, among pastoral nomads, bearing an astonishing variety of names from Eastern Europe (the Hungarian *szür*,



Gervers-Molnár) to Central Asia (Gafferberg, p. 57), passing through Anatolia (*kepenek*), the Caucasus (*borka*; lit of the Lezgians of Daghestan; Agashirinova, pp. 61 ff.), Kurdistan, the Zagros (*‘abā-namad*, *kelowqūr*, *šawla*, *kapan[a]k*, *karrak*; Digard, pp. 208 ff.; Jazmī et al., p. 72), the Alborz range, Khorasan, and southern Afghanistan (Pashto, *kōsay*; Baluchi, *tapur*; see Bellew, p. 31; Elphinstone, p. 415 and pl. II), whence Dorrānī nomads and Baluchi emigrants spread its usage into Ġōr and Turkmenistan (Janata, p. 97; Gafferberg, p. 61). These mantles are also known among the Hazāras and the Jamšīdīs of central Afghanistan (*čaydam*; Gafferberg, p. 58, n. 14). The majority of these mantles are made of one-color felts, often of coarse quality, but there exists, particularly in Afghanistan and Central Asia, a tradition of a white felt mantle (rarely in brown) that is richly adorned and a sign of social prestige (Burkett, 1983, pp. 22 f.). Those made in Qandahār used to bear a high reputation (Aslanov, pp. 86 ff.). Yet in our time the usage of felt mantle is being rapidly abandoned, particularly in towns. It has, for instance, practically disappeared in Kabul, where it was widely worn in the 1930s (Markowski, p. 66)

The usage of felt in the production of shoes, known to the Sakas (*eir*. V, p. 753), does not appear to have been maintained up to our time, except outside the Iranian world (e.g., felt soles of female boots in Daghestan; Sergeeva, pp. 132 f.). The production of felt socks has been briefly reported in Afghanistan, but it remains to be confirmed (Burkett, 1979, p. 65). By contrast, protective felt devices, such as saddle blankets for horses or dromedaries (*‘araqgīr*, *bīldīk*; Klieber, p. 126; Burkett, 1983, pp. 24 ff.) and sacks for household objects (Turk. *kap*, *sovārī*), in a more or less elongated pentagonal form, especially used for transporting vessels and cups for preparing and drinking tea (Klieber, p. 219; Burkett, 1983, p. 27) are found everywhere in Persia and Afghanistan.

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**Plate I.** Treading felt in Isfahan, ca. 1890. After E. Höltzer, *Persien von 113 Jahren*, ed. and tr. M. 'Āšemī, Tehran, 1975, p. 280.

**Plate II.** Large decorated felt floor mat. Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Kendal, Cumbria, U.K. After Burkett, 1979, cat. no. 43. Photograph courtesy of Mary E. Burkett.

**Plate III.** Kurdish villager in short-sleeved felt coat (kapanak). After Burkett, 1979, col. pl. 5a. Photograph by Michael Gervers, courtesy of Mary E. Burkett.