



<https://doi.org/10.7577/formakademisk.5444>

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Change and Transformation of Functions in Turkey’s Felt Objects

ABSTRACT

This study analyses felt and the practice of felting from the geography of Turkey, as a way to explore felt’s function in material culture. Felting is a method of craft making that consists of compressing fibres (wool or other). Felt, (in Turkish “keçe”) can be defined as the outcome product of felting process. However, keçe represents more than just a cloth or a textile. It was an important part of daily life in the geography of Turkey, for instance among nomads who produced their daily necessities from felt. For the study, first, I introduce some felt products from Turkey. Afterwards, I share the processes and results of a field study, through observations and interviews conducted with feltmakers in Tire region in Turkey. Then I share an analysis and results from the product research and field study. Nowadays felt is found through another range of accessories and artistic works, such as decorative products, hair bands, slippers, vase, tumbler, hats. While felt was commonly used for important functions such as carrying, moving; today, other materials are used for these functions. Therefore, felt objects can be perceived and bought as accessories rather than necessities in modern culture. Nevertheless, felt is still used for the representation of identities. Although felt is considered to have lost its value, for the context of Turkey, I argue that the functions have shifted to new contexts. Through different functionalities such as being tools for self-expressions/communication, felt has a similar value in the current culture.

Keywords:

Felting, material culture, traditional textiles, felt, identities.

INTRODUCTION

In this study, felting is discussed through its possible changing meanings and relations to daily life. Felting is a traditional and contemporary making method that consists of compressing wool fibres together to create surfaces. Usually, “felt” is referred as the outcome artefact of felting process. The study analyses felt and the practice of felting from the geography of Turkey, as a way to explore felt’s function in material culture.

The meaning of felt, felting and wool may differ in different languages. It is said that the first written document about felt is in Homer’s “Illiad” (Begiç, 2014; Baltacı, 2016). In Turkish, felt translates

as “keçe”, which is a word derived from “kidhiz”, believed to be firstly used in Kasgarli Mahmud’s “Divanü Lugat-it-Türk” in 11th century (Özdarıcı, 2011; Atış Özhekim, 2016). Making of felt “appeared among Turks who were nomadic tribes in cold climate of Central Asia” (Soysaldı, 2008). The felt findings decorated with animal and human figures from the Pazarlik tombs date back to 5th. B.C., which reveals the history of felt (Soysaldı, 2008).

It is known that ancient civilizations had used felted artefacts, however it is not fully known where and how felt appeared. In Anatolian societies, felting has been a part of the culture and daily life for ages. For instance Seljuk Turks used felt tents and kepeneks, made of kicked felt. Among Turkish nomads, felting is thought to have appeared in Central Asia and has been continued in Anatolia. In nomadic Turks, many elements of felt in everyday life existed, such as carpets, tent covers, floor coverings, clothing, saddles, wall hangings, tents, beds..., made from wool of animals such as sheep, angora goat, camel.

More recently, making felt has been a research subject in various places in the world. In diverse cultures, different approaches are seen to felt material: Pia Wallén, a Swedish designer long working with felt describes it as “the oldest form of textile material” and as a “material of survival” (Fiell & Zabalza, 2002, p. 644). From the Scandinavian context, she reflects on felt as a bringer of warmth to the atmosphere to the northern climate condition. It is a *suitable* material to produce decorative textiles and household textiles for long and cold winters in Scandinavia. Elizabeth Susan Clay writes that “felt presents a diverse and eclectic material, deeply embedded within the textile history of many cultures and within the broader system of textile hierarchies. Its visibility and opaqueness reveal identities that are contemporary, yet profoundly traditional” in her doctoral dissertation “A material-led investigation into the creative potential of British 'waste' wools for fine craft felt-making” (Clay, 2013, p. 168).

Felt Production

Felting has been continued in Turkish culture as sheep wool is obtained from animal husbandry over livestock and for easy transportation of felt materials for nomadic culture. It is a well known fact that felt was produced by many ancient civilizations, and before Turkish nomads migrated to Anatolia. Since the felt production is affected by contemporary lifestyles, industrialization and globalisation (Ovacik and Gumusler 2016), the number of construction equipment and felt masters have decreased (Kucukkurt 2018). Although mechanisation reduces labour in felting, today the craft of felting and craftspeople are still needed (Kucukkurt 2018).



FIGURE 1. Kepenek visuals from the past. Source: Akyürek, 2016

Traditional recoil felt production (known as “geleneksel tepme tekniği” in Turkish) requires time, body strength and large workshops. This production consists of three phases (Çeliker, 2011; Gumus Ciftci & Walker, 2017): First, the felt maker places the wool on the ground and prepares the pattern above the laid wool. Then the wool is spread, the pattern is laid on it and soapy water is poured over the wool before it is rolled out. Finally, the felt is washed and left to dry. However, the new felt making techniques, whether it be wet felt or dry felts, are new techniques that are simple enough to produce in home. Often used by hobbyists, the felt objects made with these techniques are not suitable for products that require durability such as tents, beams, sacks, saddlebags, but can mostly be used for making products such as shawls, jewellery, panels (Çeliker, 2011). In this technique, the felts are thinner and easy to form, they can also be cut, stitched and combined with different materials (Çeliker, 2011).

Past and Current Correlations of Felt

Felt has a long history in the geography of Anatolia. It was often associated with rural lifestyle. For instance, shepherds in the countryside often prefer special felted clothing called “kepenek” (Figure 1). Kepenek is a unique felt garment, which provides insulation and warmth in cold and changing climates. This outfit demonstrates the practical and functional properties of felt.

Another example in Anatolia to demonstrate the versatility of felt comes from nomadic tribes, named Yoruks. Yoruks used felt for everyday life, such as tents, carpets, tent covers, floor coverings, clothing, saddles, wall hangings, beds. As animal husbandry was common, wool as a side-product from animals were commonly used for the making of everyday life objects, for instance through felting. The tents, also named yurts, are portable dwellings. Felt as a material had a crucial role in construction of dorms due to its related qualities for the nomadic lifestyle, for instance providing insulation, durability, and ease of assembly/disassembly. Felt layers were carefully lined up and fixed to create a comfortable and functional living space by forming the dormitory walls, roof and floor. Yoruks used these felted yurts as their homes, which allowed them to adapt to different climates while migrating. Furthermore, felt was used to make practical or decorative items for everyday use, including rugs, carpets, socks, blankets, and saddle pads. These textiles often have intricate patterns, vibrant colours. The combination of felt's insulation, softness and durability made it a preferred material for textiles, enhancing both their functionality and aesthetic appeal. However, as modern culture puts emphasis on fast production and consumption, these qualities have not been enhanced and promoted, resulting in people preferring industrially produced objects for their everyday life use. As an example of this transformation, Yoruks who still sustain this nomadic lifestyle today are using plastics, nylons, fabrics in their daily life objects (Agca & Akbulut, 2018).

In Turkey, similar to other textile making techniques such as weaving and knitting, felting has received an increasing interest. In recent years, there were some attempts in reviving and preserving felting art in Turkey. Craftspeople, artisans and artists work to perpetuate ancient techniques, incorporating contemporary designs and innovations. Some cultural festivals and organisations promoted the heritage of Turkish felt.



FIGURE 2. Belkis Balpınar’s Work of Carpet: Cells, 2005. Source: Ovacık, 2016.



FIGURE 3. Selçuk Gürışık’s exhibition with felted artefacts (Source: <https://selcukgurisik.wordpress.com/exhibitions>, Accessed 27 July 2023)

Aside from the artists who use the felt together with different techniques, there are artists who refer to the traditional felt usage with new designs. Some artists such as Belkis Balpınar (Figure 2), Filiz Otyam and Selçuk Gürışık (Figure 3), were working together with craftspeople to make felt, while some others learned felt process from masters and made artistic felt production (Gür, 2012). Felt also received recent interest from academia, Mine Ovacık and Tülay Gümüşer, from design perspective, wrote about new approaches to felt in their article “Felt from Past to Present: An Analysis on Ayfer Güleç’s Business Model”. Bilge Merve Aktaş and Maarit Mäkelä presented a case study in felting in Turkey, in order to comprehend diverse forms of craft production rooted in traditional knowledge and expertise (Aktaş et Al, 2017).



FIGURE 4. Felt Bag. Source: Gümüş Çiftçi & Walker, 2017.

Examples of craft-design collaboration can also be seen in the felt-leather bag above. After visiting two feltmaking workshops and identifying main problems with feltmaking in Eastern Turkey (e.g. limitations in market, having to compete with cheaper mass-produced textiles and supply of wool material), Hazal Gumus Ciftci and Stuart Walker proposed a felt bag design as a combination of felt with leather from local sources (Figure 4), that still has the “characteristics of the upcycled rugged felt and open up a different market” (Gumus Ciftci & Walker, 2017). The design intervention’s main elements consisted of upcycling, combining felt with diverse materials (local leather) and new product development (ibid). This example draws back to Clay’s (2013) observation that traditions of felt, as a rich social heritage can be reimagined through communities of felt makers, researchers and designers.



FIGURE 5. Felt Notebooks. Source: <https://www.keceden.net/kecedefter> (Accessed 20 November 2018)

In everyday life, it is still more common to see industrially produced objects, made from various materials and methods due to many factors. Among these, objects are commonly bought from chain stores that sell industrially made textiles and other products made with fibres. Some of the reasons for this is related to affordability and accessibility, since industrially made products are cheaper and more accessible in shops, especially if they are not made with natural materials. Even with carpets, a domestic item that is considered to have a special position and relation to tradition in Turkish culture, many people started to abandon traditionally made (usually woven and sometimes felted) carpets and prefer industrially produced carpets often made of synthetic fibres. This has many reasons such as economic, practical or

cultural ones, for instance artificial carpets can be cleaned easier than handmade carpets. Cases such as urbanisation, modern house designs, and the influence of trends in the world resulted in a demand for carpets that align with contemporary living spaces. Many people associate modern carpet designs with the urban living, therefore do not prioritise the materials or making techniques when buying products.

Felt Craft Today: Field Study Observations

In this section, I reflect on a study from August 2021, when I visited a museum and craftspeople making felt, in Tire region of Turkey. Tire was chosen as the field site to the research, as there is a strong tradition of felting in the region. Being from Turkey and my native language being Turkish helped gain further insight from locals.

The aim of my field study was to identify some key points about felting craft. The study consists of a visit to a local museum consisting of local handicrafts, visits to local feltmakers. In this section, I analyze the feltmaking through data gathered from fieldnotes, photos and videos in the museum and visits to feltmakers. The key points gathered from the analyses were, change of display and perception of felt, change of techniques, and change of functions/associations in felt products.

In this and many other ethnographic studies, subjectivity brings value to the research itself. Furthermore, I acknowledge Gadamer’s statement that in any research, it is not possible to distinguish one’s subjectivity from the research itself, as positivists have tried to do (Gadamer 1999). Cerwonka states in other words, that “one cannot reduce understanding to a method, because the researcher and object of inquiry are always historically situated and historically related” (Cerwonka p. 23). In this article, I conducted the field study as a researcher and maker with an educational background in design. I experienced with felting in my past design practice and has research experience with craft-design relationships in Turkey (Tarcan & Cox, 2017). As I was born in Turkey, I have knowledge on cultural and societal norms, and speak the Turkish language. The fieldwork location was located close to my hometown, and I had not visited the felting workshops before. According to these aspects, the study may have differences from other studies on felting. As the study was enhanced through my native language, it allows some readers an insight that would not have otherwise occurred, therefore it provides a unique contribution to knowledge.

In the felting workshops visited, there were people working in the workshops, in addition to the master feltmakers. In the beginning of the first workshop trip, the master was not present in the workshop, and I talked to other people in the area. I had some small conversations with people visiting the workshop and conducted a semi-constructed interview with one of these apprentices working in the workshop. This helped clarify some points, and to have a pluralistic view of the practice.

Change of Display and Perceptions of Felt

My observations from the museum and craft workshops have also informed my thinking process about the current situation of crafts and brought up many questions I wrote to my working diary. The museum had a section where they displayed artefacts produced by craftspeople, grouping them according to the specific craft, all from the region (Figure 6). Furthermore, craftspeople were present at the museum, which was an enjoyable way to meet and talk to them. On the other hand, I was sceptical about this situation. I wrote in my diary the question, “Does this mean these crafts are going to be history and could be over in real life, and only fit to be in a “museum,” like ancient findings from history? I knew that many of the showcased crafts had ateliers outside of the museum, such as the felting craft (which I visited afterwards); and wrote it was a positive thing that these crafts were valued and put in the museum to make it visible to visitors. Still, it brought confusion about what to think of the situation. Afterwards, in the first felting workshop that I visited, an apprentice working there mentioned that there are no problems about their practice (meaning the felting workshops), but many craftpeople such as “takunyaci” and “semerci” had to close their workshops, due to the lack of demand for the products. The craft workshops having to be shut down was ongoing and known situation even before Covid times. Sustaining the legacy of traditional felt-making through adaptation, changes and bringing in new lenses is therefore an important example, and could benefit other craft communities.



FIGURE 6. Visit to a local museum, which consisted of a living exhibition of craftmakers, including felting

Change of Techniques

As Sennett (2008) writes, it is not true to imagine that as traditional craft communities pass on skills from generation to generation, the skills they pass down have been rigidly fixed. Ancient pottery making, for instance, changed radically when the rotating stone disk holding a lump of clay came into use; new ways of drawing up the clay emerged. But the radical change appeared slowly (Sennett, 2008, p. 26). This change can be observed in many felting workshops in Tire. In the felting process, the common approach in the workshops is a mixture of handmaking and machine usage. A recurring theme I asked was about the usage of machinery. In felting workshops, the process involves handmaking and machine usage (Figure 7). Both workshops talked about how helpful it was for them to use machines for the demanding work part (such as pressing the bigger scale objects like carpets). It was said that if these machines did not exist, the craft would have died already. That is because it would be so difficult to produce many objects from handmaking only. The craftspeople were therefore positive about using machines.



FIGURE 7. Tools and workshop surroundings, from a visit to the local workshop of Ahmet.

However, it should be stated that these machines are operated by these craftspeople and differ from automated felt machines used in the industry. According to Dormer, the central issue for the craftspeople is not whether they can create perfection, but rather that technology is robbing them of their unique claim to diversity. *“The most disturbing attribute of technology, from the point of view of the craft person, is that it can mimic craft effectively in randomness, accidental quirks and less than perfect condition. Software of fuzzy logic has sufficed for the machines to imitate the randomness and differentiation of pattern up to now associated with crafted work. At this point, one of the foundations of craft, being able to produce things that machines cannot imitate, collapses”* (Dormer, 1997). This issue about technology relates to felting communities and their usage of machines, but in the case of traditional felting, the machines are used together with handmaking, which differs this production process from industrially produced felt material.

Change of Functions and Associations in Felt Products: Range of Items Sold in Tire

In addition to learning feltmaking process, I asked about the products they produce and sell, and observed the workshop and materials. Many artefacts in the workshop were fashion items such as shawls, jackets, slippers...etc, or gifts such as soap, keychains, decoration items (Figure 8). Some of the items were replaced according to demand or economic reasons. For example, two years after the study, my relative and her friend visited the same region for touristic purposes, and they stopped by the same workshop. Her friend wanted to buy some products, especially the small cushions, with white surfaces and colourful patterns seen on Figure 8, middle photo. However, these cushions were not sold or produced at that time. The reason could be that there was not high demand, and as the white surface of the cushion is quite thick, it requires a higher amount of wool material, compared to the thinner fashion items. The cushions (and carpets), unlike many fashion items in the workshop, were made from wool material, with small additions of stitching around the edges. Therefore, the cost of producing the cushion may have changed drastically during the last 2 years, given the economic situation of Turkey and the wool materials getting more expensive.



FIGURE 8. Objects sold and displayed in Arif’s felt shop, such as shawls, bags and cushions.

Producing fashion items by mixing lighter materials was seen as a common method, as it was appealing to more customers and it reduced the cost of material. Especially, fashion items such as shawls were commonly mixed with silk textile. When asked about it, Arif stated that using silk and other textiles reduces the costs significantly and attracts more customers (Figure 9). One other reason could be related to the climate of the region. Tire is located in Izmir, which has warm weather even during winters, and reaching up to 40 Celcius degrees in summer, hence people prefer to use lighter products such as silk for accessories.



FIGURE 9. Dyed wool types in Arif’s felt shop, where the craftspeople also make felt objects and display the making process to shoppers. On the right. An example of shawl making in progress, made with entangling silk with wool.

Another reason could be the growing demand for clothing and small home furnishing/decoration items. Arif explained that now they have a new consumer group, who are concerned with sustainability issues, mostly living and working in big cities of Turkey. With this new consumer group, it is possible to sell felt clothing or home decoration items. This customer group, usually belonging to upper-middle class, associates the value of local crafts and materials with living more sustainably and are positive about spending their money on the felt products.

RESULTS

Today’s excessive consumption culture compels designers and makers to review old production and consumption forms (Ovacik 2015). Many studies on craft cultures today reflect on the changes occurring in practice. From Turkey, scholars reflected on felting from various directions, for instance focusing on processes, material transformations and bodily movements (Aktas & Mäkelä 2019), societal changes and reclamation of cultural heritage (Ovacik & Gumuser 2016). This initial study was an attempt to understand felt from changing functions of the objects and practice. After the studies with feltmakers and reflecting on my diaries, this came to an understanding that understanding felting has many layers, and contemporary and traditional meanings of felt should be in further collaboration to each other, rather than a comparison of differences. The functions of objects only consist of one layer to understand the changing practice, and when studying the changes, other layers such as the practice of felting itself and other factors should be taken into consideration.

While felt was a part of the common culture and often associated with rural areas, now it has become a part of everyday life in metropolis. There is an ongoing use of felting in fashion and accessories/home furnishings. Clothes are objects of consumption in addition to being tools for self-expression / communication, mostly being purchased from unlimited options of mass produced “ready-to-wear” fashion industry. As some point out, using fashion is one of the fastest ways to express oneself in the city. “As a material and cultural artefact, fashion has been instrumental in defining the self—whether consciously or unconsciously” (Buckley & Clark, 2012, p.23). According to Simmel, the individual in the monotonous city life has to attract attention in another way, and the fastest way to be an “individual” again is through clothing.

Thus, an interesting conclusion is that although felt seems to have lost its value as felt objects are not used for seemingly-important functions, it gained a similar value in today’s world. While it was

one of the materials commonly used for functions such as carrying, moving, living, sleeping..., today, it is used for fashion or furniture items, as well as accessories. Nevertheless, felt material is still used for defining a lifestyle. Afterall, in the metropolis, we often find ways to express ourselves through home and fashion:

...the person in the big city consumes in order to articulate a sense of identity, of who they wish to be taken to be. The body decoration and clothing, for example, which a particular individual uses as a means of marking themselves out from others, have to be interpreted and understood by others. So someone can only mark themselves as being different from others if they also share some common cultural signs with others. (Bocock, 2008, p. 17)



FIGURE 10. On the left. Wearable art examples, produced by applying different surface arrangement techniques on felt (Source: Sevinç & Oyman, 2016, p. 268). On the right. Felt workshop of Ayfer Gulec in Seferihisar, with contemporary approaches (Source: <http://bilkentpost.bilkent.edu.tr/index.php/2021/06/30/yavasladikca-ilerleyen-sehir-seferihisar> Accessed 26 July 2023)

As an example for felt having a value and interest today, traditional felt processes and products has inspired designers in fashion/accessories in many regions, including the large metropolis. For instance, considering the position and significance of felt in Turkish culture from past to present, and its importance in terms of human health, Sevinç and Oyman (2016) presents designs for wearable art products by applying different surface arrangement techniques on felt, inspired by butterflies (Figure 10). On the other hand, the term slow fashion and its relation to felting is also brought up. As an example, feltmaker and entrepreneur Ayfer Gulec has a workshop in Seferihisar, the first “Slow City” of Turkey, where she produces contemporary designs with felt. This provides an interesting correlation between feltmaking and slow fashion, slow design movements (Ovacik and Gumusler 2016).

CONCLUSION

In the beginning of the paper, I aimed to identify the use of felt in history and today, and define the differences in products. The outcome was predicted to be that felt products have lost their place in everyday life and were diminished to just accessories. However, in the end, I found out that felt’s place in everyday life still continues in different ways. Noticing some missing opportunities for felting, I share some suggestions for future studies in design and craft studies. These suggestions are made not only for Turkish felt community, but also for the international audience. I believe that learning from traditional and contemporary Turkish felt production would inspire the broader international design community. Movements such as craftivism (a contemporary craft movement made from the combination of “craft” and “activism”), repair culture, sustainability, waste culture... are very useful resources for the use of felt. Felt can also be used with different techniques such as patchwork, or combined with materials such as fabrics, silk... This use can be transferred to many applications, as seen in the example of adapting silk blends within the felt process. These transformations can be researched and employed by researchers and practitioners working with material innovation. The increasing interest of the new demographic from larger cities can be investigated further, as this brings new questions to the field.

Felt-making, like many crafts, also relates to the contemporary movements of DIY, maker culture, craftivism. There is a contradiction between felt and new production techniques: For instance, techniques such as laser cutting, etc. are being used extensively with felt materials. In contrast to this, newspaper articles such as “Felt-makers are Resisting to New Technologies” are coming out. Apart from experimenting with new technologies, traditional methods for felt or a mixture of different methods can still be used or adapted. Further, the use of wool is very relevant to waste culture. Waste wool can be turned into felt, and other waste materials can be combined with this waste wool to create a combination material. All in all, there can be many ways to use felting whether it is from the traditional or contemporary sides, and when considered with recent maker cultures, felting still defines a type of lifestyle.

All in all, felt is still a part of everyday life and new opportunities can still be found in the intersections of art, design and craft. The changing functions and the change of everyday life objects affect each other: Among cultures in geography of Anatolia, for instance in Yoruk lifestyle as noted in the study above (Agca & Akbulut, 2018), felt used to be a crucial part of daily life. In current Yoruk daily life, Agca observed that materials such as felt has been replaced with other fabrics, plastics and nylons (ibid). Yet, in the city, there are many uses of felt; from decoration to notebook covers, fashion to gift ornaments. Also, people are practising felt-making at home, creating their own ornaments from wool. Thus, it is still in relation to our daily life with different functions, but numerous ways.

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