



Felt to Stitch

Creative felting for textile artists

Sheila Smith



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SHEILA SMITH



BATSFORD

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks must go to felt artists Linda Hume, Sarah Lawrence, Jackie Lunn and Jenny Pepper for generously allowing me to include their work in this book.

Thanks also to my students, for asking questions and expecting answers; their curiosity and enthusiasm over the years have encouraged me to experiment and explore new ideas.

Last, but not least, I would like to thank my long-suffering husband for his unstinting interest and support.

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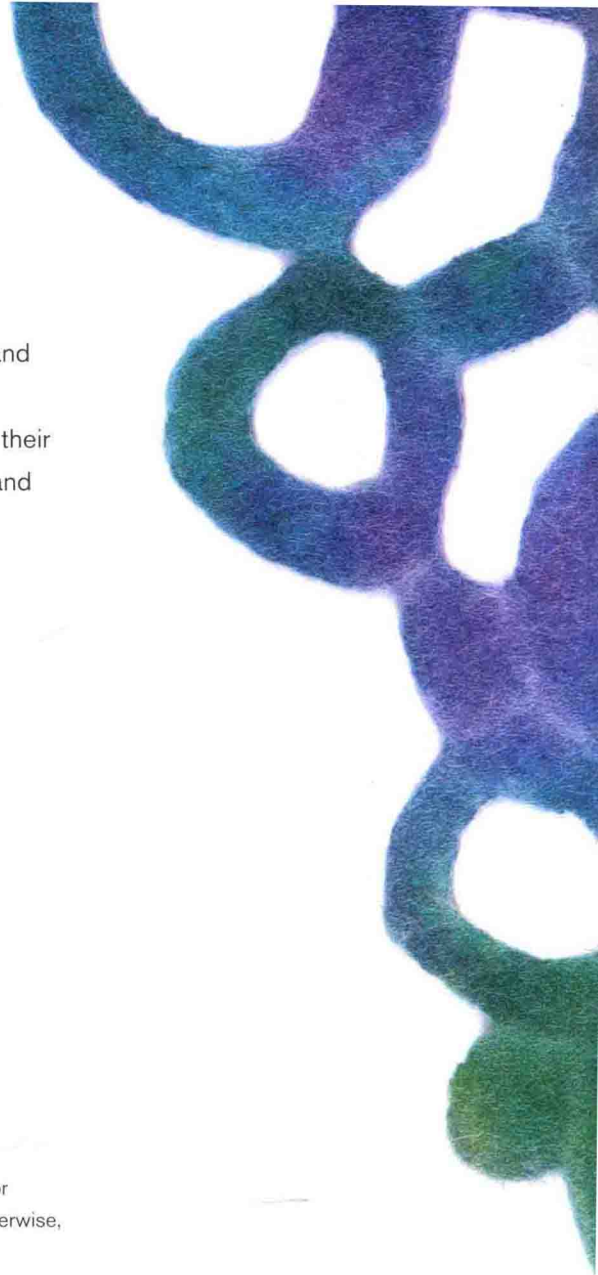
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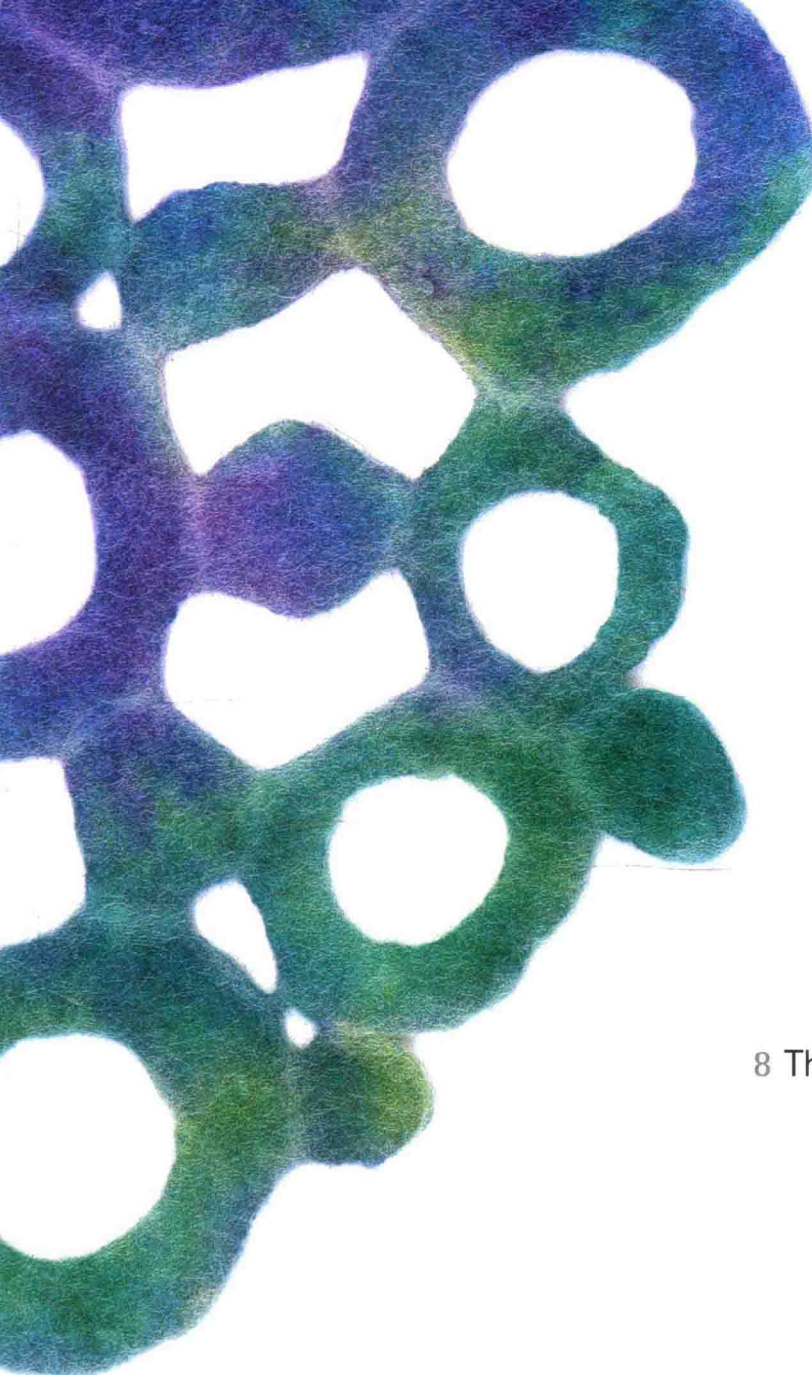
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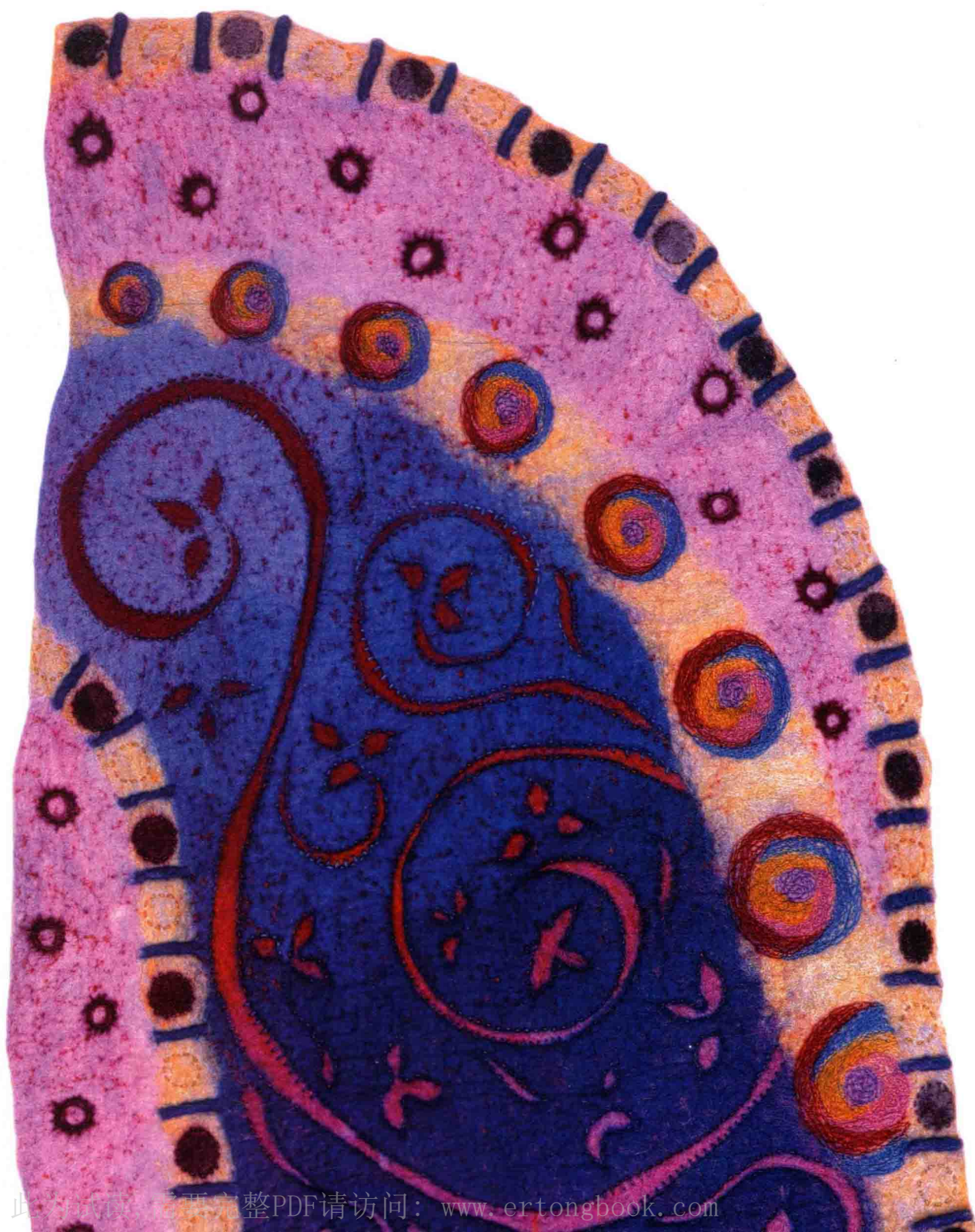




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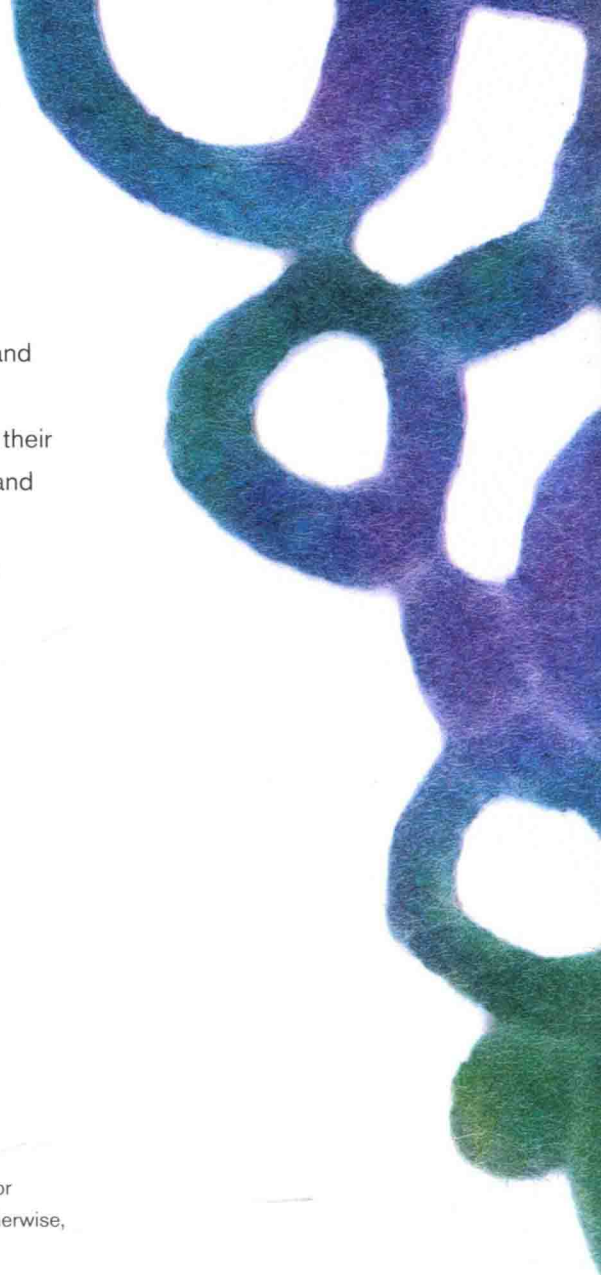
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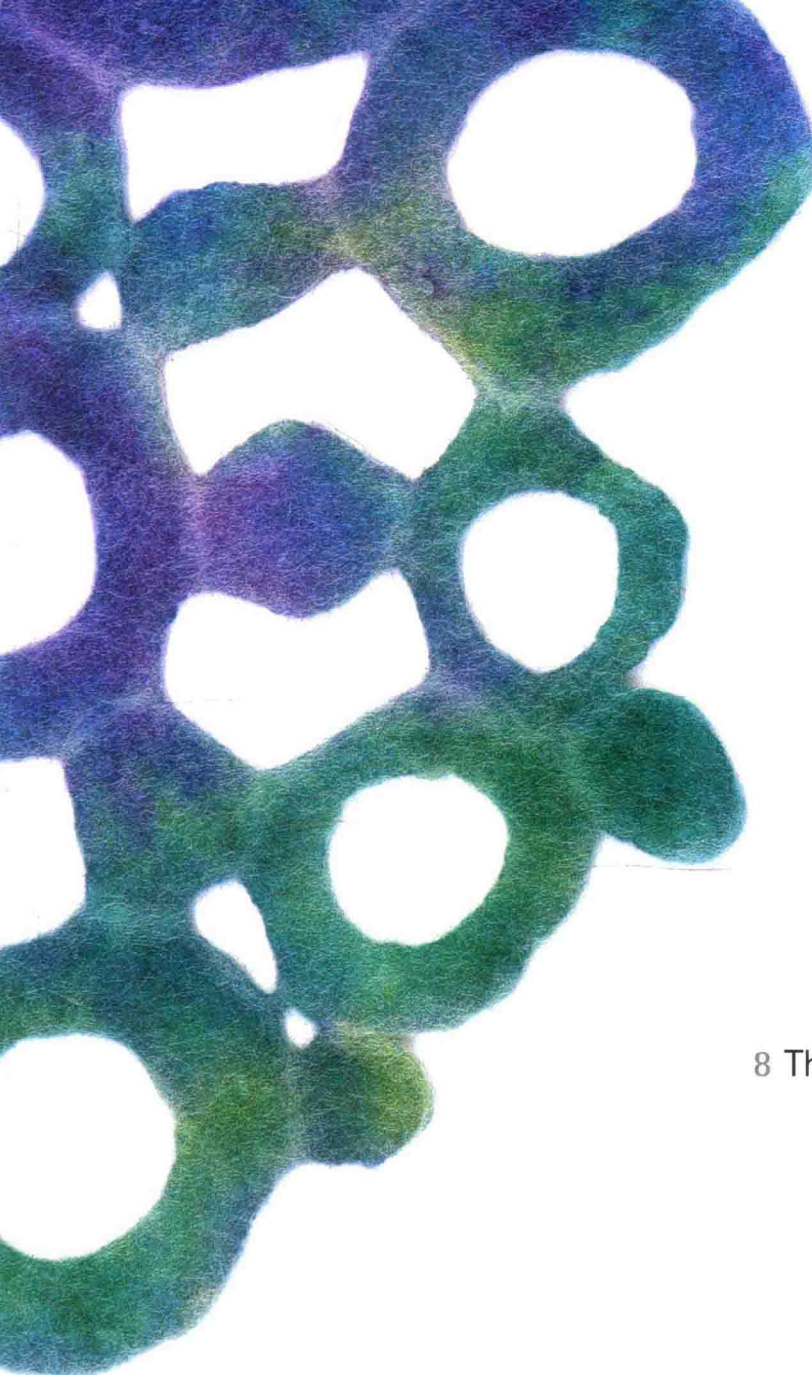
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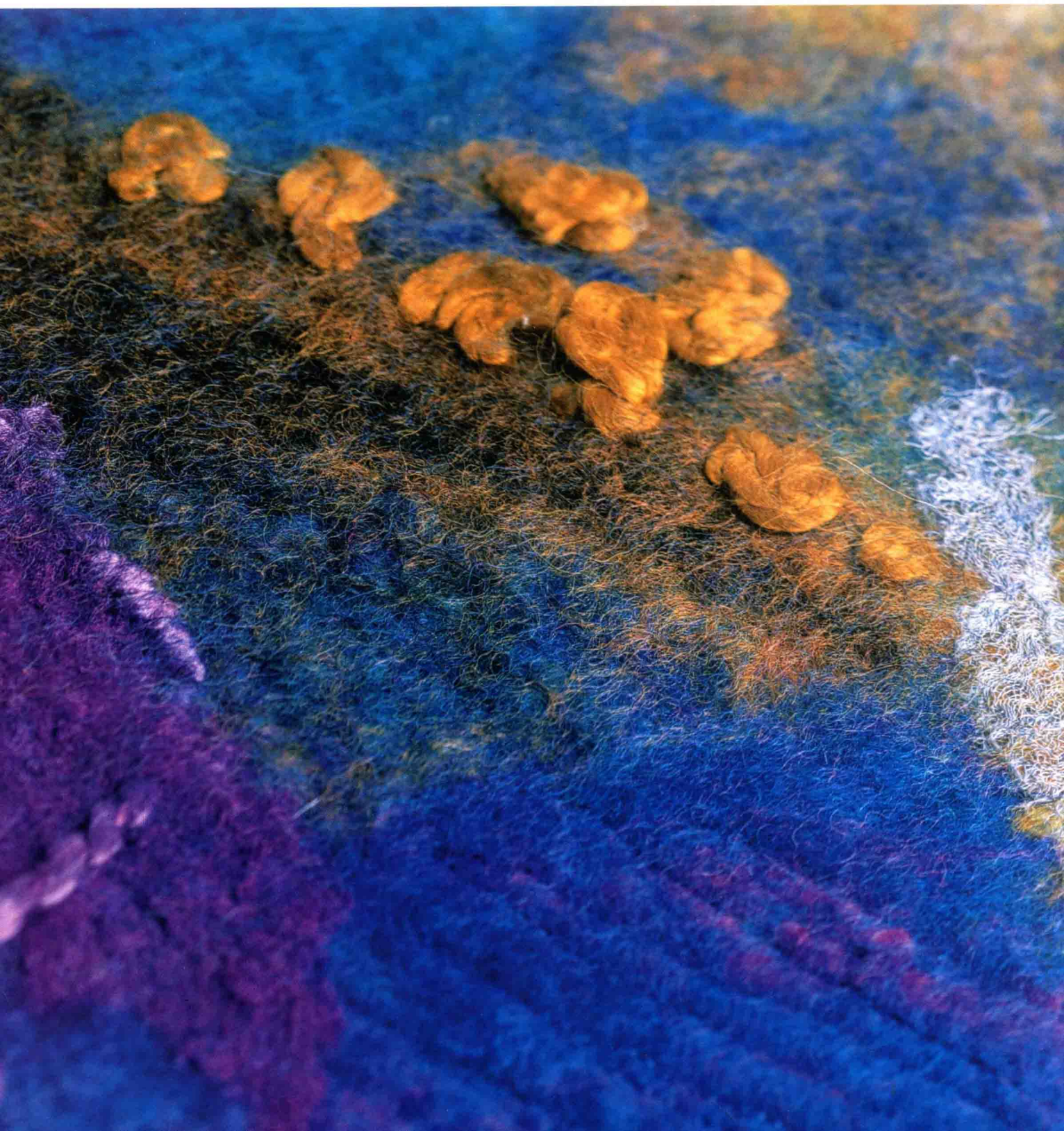
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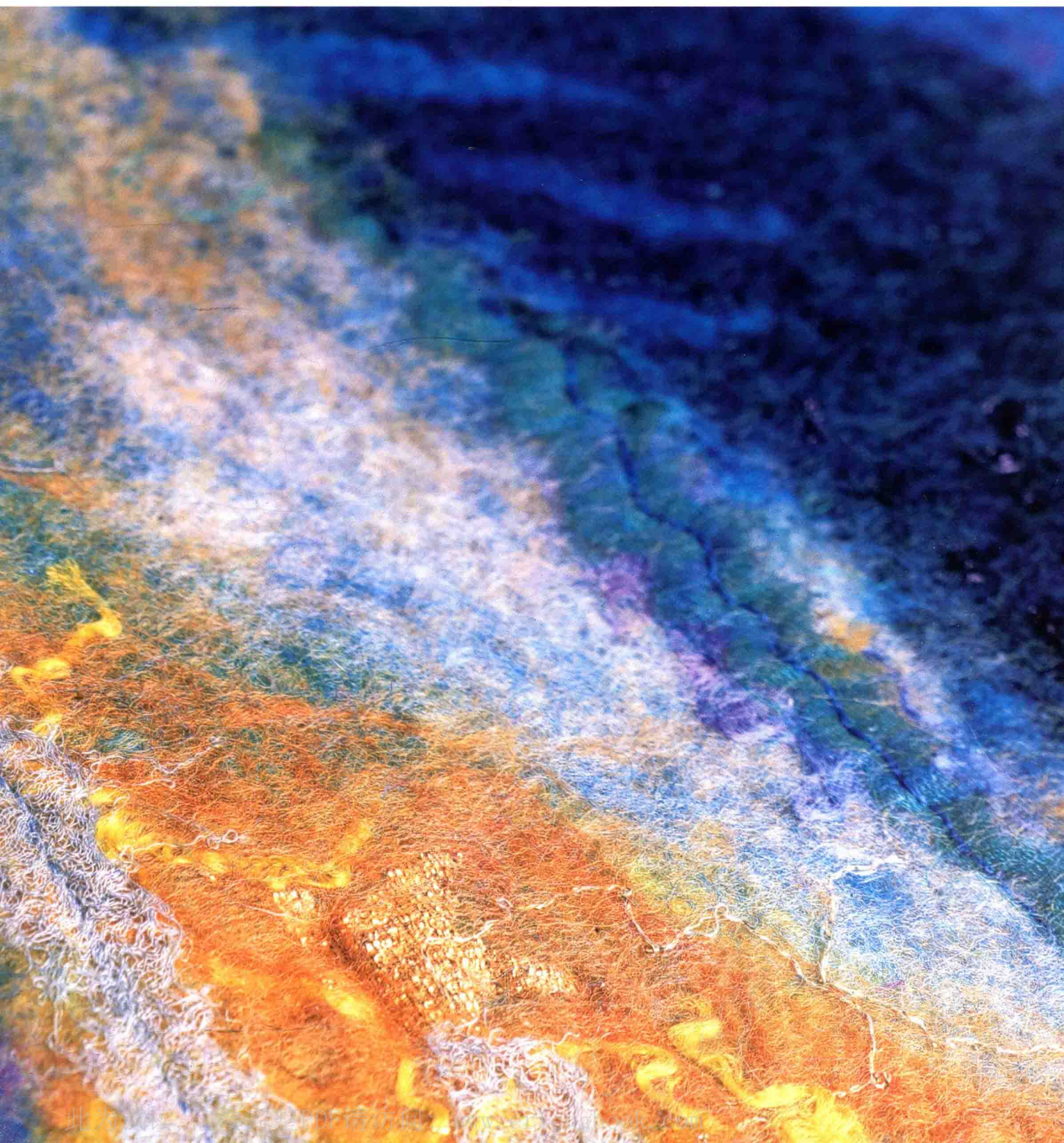


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Introduction



Introduction

Felt is probably one of the oldest known textiles, with a history dating back to around 600 BC. To the nomadic peoples of Central Asia, it was an essential part of their daily lives. It was used as the outer covering for the wooden-framed tents in which they lived and also as carpets to furnish and decorate the tents. Felt is still being made today in countries such as Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. More recently, the interest in felt has increased as textile enthusiasts have discovered the possibilities of felt as a textile medium. After all this time, the basic principles of feltmaking remain unchanged – the essential ingredient is wool, which becomes felt with the addition of moisture, friction and some heat. Contemporary feltmakers combine these essentials in different ways to achieve a diverse range of results.

This book is intended for anyone with an interest in felt. It is aimed at embroiderers and quilters, to encourage them to experiment with methods of creating felted fabrics. It is also intended for feltmakers, in the hope that they will find new techniques with which to extend their practice. It is a book about techniques of preparing felt as a base for stitching rather than completed works, but a small number of projects are included to suggest some initial answers to the question: 'Where to go now?'

Although this is not intended as a technical manual, but rather an ideas book, it is essential for beginner feltmakers to understand the process to enable them to have control over the results.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WOOL FELTS

Each individual wool fibre is covered with a layer of overlapping scales. When wool gets wet, it becomes elastic and the scales open up. If friction is added to a bundle of wet wool fibres, the scales become displaced and entangled with each other. The more friction that is applied, the greater the entanglement. At the same time, the fibres begin to shrink and the result is felt. This is an irreversible process, as anyone who has accidentally felted a wool sweater by washing it too vigorously will be aware.

CHOICE OF WOOL

Wool is available from a wide variety of breeds and in a wide range of qualities. While all wools will felt to some degree, some will felt more quickly than others. Fibre thickness is an important factor in the quality of wool and is usually classified in the United Kingdom by the Bradford Count system, while in other parts of the world fibre thickness is measured in microns. The Bradford Count predates the industrial revolution and is based on the number of skeins of wool, each 560 yards in length,

Previous spread: *The Blues.*

This piece combines a range of techniques including colour blending of fibres, inclusion of fabric pieces and simple stitches added at different stages of the felting process.

that could be spun from a one-pound weight of wool. The higher the number, the finer the wool. A micron is a measurement of fibre width: one micron is equal to one millionth of a metre.

| System | Coarse | Medium | Fine |
|----------------|-----------|-------------------------|--------|
| Bradford Count | 40/44s | 56s | 64s |
| Microns | 37 | 28 | 22 |
| Breed example | Swaledale | Blue-faced Leicester | Merino |

COMMERCIAL PREPARATION OF WOOL

The first stage in the commercial preparation of wool is scouring or washing to remove dirt, vegetation, natural grease and sweat. Wool is then dried and carded by machinery with revolving drums coated with small wires to open up the wool and deliver it as a continuous web of fibre, known as a carded batt. Long strips, known as carded sliver, are divided from the batt into long, loose ropes ready for spinning. In both of these forms, the fibres lie in different directions. Another method of preparation, used for finer wools, takes the processing further by removing all short fibres and then combing and stretching the remaining fibres into long, loose ropes with all the fibres lying in a vertical position. The resulting ropes are known as wool tops. Most wool sold for feltmaking is sold in the form of combed tops.



Right: Traditional Kyrgyz inlaid mosaic design.



Making Hand-Rolled Felt



1 Making Hand-Rolled Felt

CHOICE OF FIBRE

The quality of a felt relates directly to the choice of fibre, the nature of the fibre depending on the breed of sheep from which the wool is taken. Fine lightweight felt can only be made from fine fibre, while hardwearing firm felt requires a coarser fibre.

Below are some examples:

- *Merino* is a soft, fine fibre, suitable for garments and lightweight felt that will drape.
- *Shetland* is also soft and fine and is available in a range of natural colours.
- *Blue-faced Leicester* is a stronger fibre than merino and Shetland, but felts well. It is suitable for outdoor clothing and soft-furnishing fabrics.
- *Wensleydale*, a long-stapled, lustrous fibre with curly locks, is often dyed and used as decoration, but the fleece felts well and produces a strong serviceable felt.
- *Swaledale*, *Herdwick* and *Black Welsh Mountain* are all hill and mountain sheep, producing wool that is strong, sometimes with coarse fibres. The wool is slower to felt than that of the finer breeds, but produces strong, hardwearing felt, suitable for slippers, bags and rugs.

Further information on different breeds of sheep, and their wools, can be obtained from the British Wool Marketing Board (see page 126 for more information).

FELTMAKING EQUIPMENT

Equipment for feltmaking is simple, inexpensive and easy to improvise.

What you will need

Old towels

Bamboo/matchstick mat

Bubble wrap (with small bubbles)

Length of heavy wooden dowelling or broom handle

Net curtain fabric

Plastic bottle with small holes drilled in the lid

Waterproof apron

Rubber gloves

Plastic carrier bag – lightweight supermarket type

Previous spread: detail of Kyrgyz shirdak mosaic felt. The stitching is there both for decoration and to increase the strength of the felt.



Above: Some feltmaking equipment – bamboo mat, wooden dowel, bubble wrap, sprinkler bottle, hand carders, net curtain.

Thick string

Soap jelly (see recipe on page 14)

Wool tops

- Old towels are used as a base to work on and to absorb any excess water.
- Bamboo mats provide a textured surface on which to make felt. They are sold as window blinds and can be obtained in various widths from home furnishing departments or DIY stores. The mat needs to be larger than the felt to be made (remove the blind fittings before using). If this type of mat is not available, a lighter weight of reed mat, of the type intended for use as a beach mat, may be substituted. A good width for general purposes is 75cm–1 metre (30–40 in).
- Bubble wrap is placed on the bamboo mat in the early stages of the felting process. Wool fibres are laid on the plastic so that when the fibres are wetted the plastic prevents the water from draining away. Choose the type sold as packaging material, which has small bubbles.