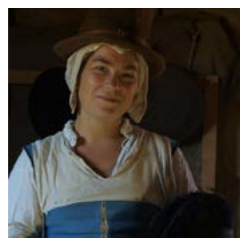




THE HISTORICAL FELT HATTER

RACHEL FROST



One felt maker is gathering up all the clues she can find to discover what she can about the methods of hat making before the age of mass production.

Based in the Scottish Borders, I have lived here since graduating from the Edinburgh College of Art in 1998. I was introduced to felt through Gunilla Sjoberg's book 'New Directions For Felt' from which I created my first hat, made from Scottish blackface wool gleaned from the neighbouring fields and fences. Needless to say, it wasn't a very good hat, but it sparked an interest and opened a door to a deeply satisfying and unexpected career path. Shortly after, I set up my business 'The Crafty Beggars', making bespoke, handfelted historic hats for the heritage industry and supplying re-enactors, museums, theatres and film companies. This in turn led to an interest in the history of pre-industrial felt hat making techniques.

The hat has always played an important role in the clothing of man. Both functional and fashionable, it offers protection from the elements and is capable of clearly defining the wearer's wealth or status. Although the technique of making felted headwear goes back thousands of years, evidence suggests that Britain's history of feltmaking is not so long. Throughout Britain's medieval period, there are many contemporary sources depicting simple felt caps and hats being worn (and probably made). These are likely to have been relatively crudely felted using the local sheep's wool, which was not known for its good felting qualities. However, expensive, fine hats were being imported from across the continent: in the late C14th, Chaucer describes his merchant as wearing a 'Flaundrish Bever hat'.

It was not until the C16th, with the availability of better felting materials and the introduction of more advanced techniques by immigrant feltmakers, that Britain's hatting industry improved dramatically. This was further advanced by the availability of beaver fur from America, enabling new, outlandish styles to be created with taller crowns and wider brims, helping to establish Britain's global reputation over the years to come.

In 2008 I received the Janet Arnold award which is given to facilitate the study of extant examples of early costume. Focusing on Britain and Ireland, I visited museums and private collections, examining felt hats made prior to 1860, after which the craft became largely mechanised. I was delighted to find that there were many surviving examples, and awed by the exceptionally high quality of the felt produced by these early hatters, particularly those dating from the C17th onward. Knowing that these hats had been made by hand using only simple tools, made me appreciate just how much of the skill and knowledge of this craft has been largely forgotten, and this encouraged me to improve my own skills. Much can be learnt from studying original examples: I looked for flaws and imperfections that might indicate how the hat was made, and noted how thick and dense the felt was, what kind of fibres were used, the size, the weight, the colour, the shapes of the blocks they were formed on and how each hat compared with the other. But most significantly, I experienced a direct connection with the maker through their work that could never be experienced through an image.

All the designs for my historic hats are taken from period sources. Portraits and paintings

- often provided by the customers - make up the majority of my references. History provides many fantastic and outrageous designs to work from, whether it is a cap from a C15th Italian manuscript in the shape of a swan (fig 3), or the flamboyant and impractical wide brimmed hats of the C17th.

Despite being a notoriously secretive craft, there are fortunately a number of contemporary written sources from various countries on the subject. These provide a valuable insight into the methods used in the trade, often with useful instructions and illustrations.

I spend a huge amount of time experimenting with materials, testing new techniques, testing theories, trialling recipes for stiffeners and exploring methods of natural dyeing to achieve authentic colours. This aspect of exploration is an important part of my development process, because until I feel I have regained the skills and knowledge of the feltmakers of previous centuries, there is always going to be more to learn.

Working within the limitations of authentic tools is an important part of re-creating an authentic hat. These tools I make myself based on the various written sources that

describe them. One of the most significant pieces of equipment to become obsolete through industrialisation was the 'bow carder' whose function was to open up the fibres and arrange them in a manner ready for the felting process. This tool played a key role in the development of the felt hat making industry. Its striking image was often used to symbolise the feltmaker's trade and, as such, is a tool that I feel has particular importance within my work.

It has been 150 years since the bow carder was last used here. Like Britain, many countries discarded hand-made felt in favour of the cheaper and faster methods offered by machinery. However, some feltmakers will have continued to make tradition hats in rural villages and until very recently there was a feltmaker in Hungary making hats using exactly the same techniques as those used back in the C17th. My hope is that these traditional techniques may still survive in other countries, but my worry is that they may have not. I am therefore taking this opportunity to ask that, if any reader knows or hears of any traditional hat makers still working - in particular, those who use, or have knowledge of using a bow carder to prepare their fibres - they contact me.

Felt hat making, for me, is about much more than just the hat. It is about the journey to get there, and the things I learn in the process. It enables me to explore many other subsidiary craft disciplines and gain a deeper understanding of the process as a whole. I feel that it is also important for me to bridge the gap between practitioner, and academic historian, for without a living tradition to learn from, both are needed to form the full picture of this important heritage craft.

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PHOTO CAPTIONS
1) Medieval hats. Natural brown merino. Photo Lion TV
2) C16th hats for 'Twelfth Night', Broadway 2013. Merino, naturally dyed. Photo Joan Marcus
3) Swan hat from the Fiore dei Liberi Manuscript, Italy, 1460. Merino wool & gold threads. Photo R.Frost
4) Fur being prepared for felting with a Bow Carder. Photo Y.Frost
5) Trilbys & Homburg. Merino, fur and silk. Photo R.Frost
6) Topper 'inspired' hat. Natural brown merino. Photo R.Frost