



LEARNING TRADITIONAL TEXTILE TECHNIQUES: WET FELTING AS A PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH IN CONTEMPORARY TEXTILE DESIGN

Professional paper
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ABSTRACT: *The growing demand for sustainable practices in the textile industry has highlighted the importance of integrating traditional craft knowledge into contemporary design education. Historical textile techniques offer valuable insights into material properties, low-impact production processes, and culturally embedded knowledge systems that can contribute to more responsible design approaches. Among these techniques, wet felting represents one of the oldest textile manufacturing processes based on the natural properties of wool fibers and their ability to interlock through moisture, heat, and mechanical action. This paper examines the pedagogical potential of wet felting within contemporary textile design education. The study focuses on an educational process that combines experiential learning with the transmission of traditional craft knowledge through collaboration with artisans. Students explore the material intelligence of wool through hands-on experimentation with wet felting techniques. The learning process further introduces nuno felting, a more recent textile technique developed approximately three decades ago, which integrates wool fibers with lightweight fabrics and enables contemporary design interpretations. The research adopts a practice-based pedagogical approach integrating theoretical reflection, material experimentation and design development. The results indicate that learning traditional techniques enhances students' understanding of material behaviour, fosters sustainable thinking and encourages innovative textile design exploration.*

Keywords: wet felting; textile education; sustainable textile design; craft knowledge; textile heritage.

UČENJE TRADICIONALNIH TEKSTILNIH TEHNIKA: MOKRO PUSTOVANJE KAO PEDAGOŠKI PRISTUP U SAVREMENOM DIZAJNU TEKSTILA

APSTRAKT: *Rastuća potreba za održivim praksama u tekstilnoj industriji naglasila je značaj integrisanja tradicionalnih zanatskih znanja u savremeno obrazovanje u oblasti dizajna. Istorijske tekstilne tehnike pružaju dragocene uvide u svojstva materijala,*



proizvodne postupke sa manjim uticajem na životnu sredinu i kulturno ukorenjene sisteme znanja koji mogu doprineti odgovornijim dizajnerskim pristupima. Među tim tehnikama, mokro pustovanje predstavlja jedan od najstarijih postupaka proizvodnje tekstila, zasnovan na prirodnim svojstvima vunenih vlakana i njihovoj sposobnosti da se povezuju pod dejstvom vlage, toplote i mehaničkog delovanja. Rad razmatra pedagoški potencijal mokrog pustovanja u savremenom obrazovanju za tekstilni dizajn. Istraživanje se fokusira na obrazovni proces koji povezuje iskustveno učenje sa prenošenjem tradicionalnog zanatskog znanja kroz saradnju sa zanatlijama. Studenti istražuju materijalnu inteligenciju vune kroz praktično eksperimentisanje tehnikama mokrog pustovanja. Proces učenja obuhvata i nuno pustovanje, noviju tekstilnu tehniku razvijenu pre približno tri decenije, koja povezuje vunena vlakna sa laganim tkaninama i omogućava savremene dizajnerske interpretacije. Istraživanje se zasniva na praksi orijentisanom pedagoškom pristupu koji objedinjuje teorijsku refleksiju, materijalno eksperimentisanje i razvoj dizajna. Rezultati ukazuju da učenje tradicionalnih tehnika unapređuje razumevanje ponašanja materijala kod studenata, podstiče održivo promišljanje i ohrabruje inovativno istraživanje tekstilnog dizajna.

Ključne reči: mokro pustovanje (mokro filcanje); tekstilno obrazovanje; održivi tekstilni dizajn; zanatsko znanje; tekstilno nasleđe.

1. INTRODUCTION

Textile design education is increasingly expected to connect material knowledge, sustainability, heritage, and innovation. These concerns remain abstract when they are separated from direct engagement with material processes. Wet felting provides a focused learning situation: loose wool is transformed into a coherent nonwoven structure through water, soap, heat, pressure, friction, and time. At each stage, students can observe how an initial fiber arrangement becomes a surface and how process decisions influence density, shrinkage, handle, and form [7-10].

This professional paper examines wet felting as a pedagogical method across two linked learning settings. In the first stage, students attended wet-felting and nuno-felting workshops led by artisan Anja Musek at her AMUSE art studio in Škofja Loka. Through fiber preparation, directional layout, wetting, rubbing, rolling, fulling, and the integration of wool with lightweight fabrics, they acquired an embodied understanding of both techniques. In the second stage, within the first-year Textile Techniques course in the Fashion and Textiles program at the Faculty of Design, students applied this technical knowledge in a sustained material and structural investigation. Responding to AIR / ZRAK, the publicly announced theme of BIEN 2025, each student developed an individual conceptual spatial textile work. Rather than presenting wet felting as a hobby practice or an automatic sustainability claim, the paper considers how a traditional technique can support material understanding, reflective making, and contemporary textile design development.

The paper is a practice-based, reflective account rather than a controlled study of learning outcomes. Its evidence consists of workshop photographs, sample sets, process notes, the lecturer's reflective observations, and selected final works. Because the author was also the lecturer responsible for the second stage, the account is explicitly reflexive. In the abstract, the term results is used in a descriptive, case-based sense: the documented material experiments and design outcomes make visible the process variables and design consequences encountered by students; they do not quantify or isolate causal learning effects.

2. WOOL, FELT AND TEXTILE CULTURE

Sheep were among the early domesticated livestock species of Neolithic West Eurasia. Recent archaeogenomic research places key domestication processes in Southwest Asia and demonstrates the subsequent movement, admixture, and diversification of sheep populations across Eurasia [1]. Sheep domestication, however, should not be equated with intensive wool production. Archaeological research indicates that wool and wool textile production became increasingly important in parts of Europe during the Bronze Age, as selective breeding, herding practices, and textile technologies developed together [2].

Felt occupies a distinctive position within textile history because it is made without spinning yarn or weaving cloth. Prepared wool fibers are arranged in layers and consolidated into a nonwoven textile through wetting, agitation, pressure, and fulling. Historical and ethnographic accounts document felt in pastoral and nomadic settings as insulation, protective covering, padding, floor covering, horse equipment, clothing, and shelter material [3-5]. Its importance lies not in technological simplicity, but in the close relation among material properties, climate, labor, mobility, and use.

For contemporary design education, this history is valuable when it is approached as material intelligence rather than as a source of decorative motifs. Traditional felt can be studied for the way it integrates fiber, body, environment, maintenance, and practical purpose. The pedagogical task is therefore to translate this structural logic into present design questions rather than to reproduce historical forms uncritically

3. WOOL AS MATERIAL BASIS FOR WET FELTING



Figure 1. Electron micrograph of a clean Merino wool fiber showing overlapping cuticle scales. The scale structure contributes to the directional friction central to wet felting.
 Source: CSIRO ScienceImage 2487 (2000), CC BY 3.0; cropped [6].



As shown in Figure 1, the surface of a wool fiber comprises overlapping cuticle scales, a structural feature central to the directional-friction effect involved in wet felting. Wool is an animal protein fiber composed primarily of keratin. Its structure includes an external cuticle of overlapping scales and an internal cortex that contributes to strength, elasticity, crimp, and resilience. Fiber fineness, staple length, crimp, cleanliness, and preparation all influence the behavior of a developing felt [7-10]. These are not background facts; they are variables that students encounter in every sample.

Wool's directional-friction effect is central to felting. When wetted and subjected to rubbing, rolling, compression, and progressive fulling, fibers migrate, bend, entangle, and lock. The resulting material is neither glued nor woven; it is a consolidated textile formed through entanglement, shrinkage, and compaction [7,9,10]. Shrink-resistant or superwash wool is generally unsuitable for conventional wet felting because its surface has been modified to reduce scale interaction. This contrast is pedagogically useful because it shows that felting is not a generic property of all wool products, but depends on fiber structure and preparation.

Material explanations become meaningful when they are tested through the hands. Students can register the transition from loose fiber to a provisional web, from a fragile web to a surface that holds, and from that surface to compact felt. They can also compare the consequences of fiber quantity, directional layout, water and soap, pressure, duration, and finishing. The workshops therefore treated sampling, comparison, and documentation as integral parts of learning rather than as secondary records of a finished artifact.

4. LEARNING THROUGH MAKING: PEDAGOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Wet felting is a direct material experience, but its educational value lies in a structured cycle of action, observation, interpretation, and adjustment. Kolb's model of experiential learning and Schön's account of reflective practice are useful because both describe knowledge as developing through the transformation of experience and through judgment in action [14,15]. In a wet-felting session, the cycle is concrete: a student arranges fibers, observes instability or uneven shrinkage, considers a possible cause, changes the next intervention, and encounters the consequence in the developing textile.

This sequence gives educational value to failure only when failure is made legible. A surface that separates, develops holes, shrinks unevenly, or loses its intended transparency is not a wasted sample when students can identify what happened and revise the process. Kapur's concept of productive failure is relevant here because it distinguishes unstructured frustration from exploration that is later consolidated through guidance and reflection [16]. In this context, the sample becomes both outcome and evidence: a material record of choices that can be compared, annotated, and used to guide the next attempt.

In this teaching sequence, collaboration with an artisan provided access to strongly embodied knowledge. An experienced felt maker can calibrate pressure, rhythm, fiber placement, surface resistance, and the timing of fulling in ways that cannot be wholly reduced to a checklist. This corresponds to the tacit knowledge described by Polanyi and to the relation between hand, material, and judgment discussed by Sennett [17,18].



Research on the transmission of master-craft knowledge and on material experimentation in studio education likewise supports the value of observation, correction, and repeated practice [19,22].

5. NUNO FELTING AND CONTEMPORARY DESIGN INTERPRETATION

After basic wet-felting processes have been established, nuno felting introduces a more complex relation between wool and cloth. Practitioner accounts associate the term and technique with Polly Stirling and Sachiko Kotaka, who described developing Nuno Felt in 1994 by working a small amount of wool through a fine base weave [20]. Nuno felting combines wool fibers with lightweight or open-weave fabrics, allowing the fibers to migrate through the cloth and create a hybrid textile in which fiber quantity, fabric openness, layout, shrinkage, and finishing jointly determine the result.

Pedagogically, nuno felting makes relation rather than decoration the central problem. Wool does not simply sit on a support; it enters, grips, and transforms the fabric. Students can therefore investigate transparency, drape, contraction, edge behavior, density, and spatial responsiveness through a material system rather than through surface styling alone. The technique can be relevant to garments, wearable objects, membranes, screens, acoustic or spatial textiles, and installations, but a proposal should follow what the material demonstrably does.

The movement from technical sample to design proposition is a further learning step. Material experimentation generates evidence, but that evidence must be interpreted and translated deliberately into a contemporary design question. Design-research literature similarly positions materials as active generators of design knowledge and material experience rather than as a merely preliminary stage of styling [21,22]. In this way, a historical technique becomes a resource for design development rather than a decorative reference to heritage.

6. TWO-STAGE PEDAGOGICAL SEQUENCE: ART-STUDIO WORKSHOPS AND COURSE-BASED DESIGN DEVELOPMENT

The educational sequence was realized within the Slovenian Textile School activity of AlpTextyles, an Interreg Alpine Space project concerned with heritage-sensitive, circular, and innovative Alpine textile value chains [23,24]. The sequence comprised two linked stages. First, students learned wet-felting and nuno-felting techniques in workshops led by artisan Anja Musek at her AMUSE art studio in Škofja Loka. Second, they continued in the first-year Textile Techniques course in the Fashion and Textiles program at the Faculty of Design, where the acquired techniques were developed through individual research and artistic interpretation. AIR / ZRAK, the publicly announced theme of BIEN 2025, provided the conceptual framework for this second stage [25]. It was a biennial theme rather than a narrowly prescribed course brief: students formulated their own artistic-conceptual responses to air.

The initial technical workshops were led by artisan Anja Musek at her AMUSE art studio in Škofja Loka. Students worked with prepared wool and lightweight textile substrates supplied through the studio, learning fiber orientation, layer construction, wetting, soap application, rubbing, rolling, fulling, and nuno-felting processes. The workshop documentation does not distinguish specific wool grades or substrate compositions; the materials are therefore reported only at the level documented in the teaching record. Moving from the classroom into the practicing artist's studio was a situated feature of this teaching case: technique was encountered within an active artistic practice, including Musek's account of material decisions, iterations, and artistic intentions. This observation is descriptive rather than an independently evaluated effect of the studio setting. The workshops were not a comparative study of regional wool types or local supply chains. The evidence base consists of workshop photographs, student-generated sample sets, process notes, the lecturer's field notes, and the spatial works submitted for assessment in the first-year Textile Techniques course. The lecturer, who is also the author, selected the samples and works discussed here as illustrative of a range of observed outcomes, including technically resolved samples and instructive failures. This collection documents process and outputs, but it cannot isolate causal learning effects from the wider educational context. The selection is illustrative rather than statistical and is consistent with the practice-based purpose of the paper.

The first phase established a shared technical vocabulary at Musek's art studio. Students handled prepared wool, considered fiber direction and layer construction, and observed how wetting, soap, rubbing, rolling, and fulling progressively changed the material. The teaching emphasis was diagnostic rather than merely demonstrative: students were asked to identify when fibers remained loose, when the surface started to hold, when pressure could be increased, and when shrinkage became irreversible. Figure 2 documents the fiber layout and rolling/fulling stages through which these changes were made visible.



Figure 2: Wet-felting workshop at Anja Musek's AMUSE art studio, Škofja Loka: (a) fiber layout before wetting; (b) rolling and fulling. Photographs: author archive.

Figure 3 documents the second workshop phase, which moved from basic control to comparative material experimentation. Students produced and reviewed samples that tested

density, transparency, openings, edges, layering, and the relation between wool and lightweight fabrics. In the nuno-felting exercises, the focus was on comparing fiber-fabric assemblies: how much the substrate contracted, where the fibers migrated, which areas remained open, and how the material responded when lifted, folded, or suspended. Photographs, sample sets, and process notes were treated as design evidence rather than as administrative records.



Figure 3: Nuno-felting workshop at artisan Anja Musek's AMUSE art studio in Škofja Loka: (a) students test wool-fabric assemblies, fiber distribution, and surface variation; (b) students review lightweight and translucent nuno-felted samples. Photographs: author archive.

Following the technical workshops, students continued with an extended material and structural investigation. This stage was not random or merely expressive experimentation. Each student constructed a personal sample set by systematically varying fiber quantity, directional layout, layer construction, density, transparency, openings, edge treatment, fabric substrate, contraction, and drape. The purpose was to generate a sufficiently broad body of material evidence before selecting a final spatial proposition. Working in relation to AIR / ZRAK, BIEN 2025's theme, students evaluated their sample sets and further developed those that most convincingly expressed their own conceptual interpretation of air. The selected material findings became the basis for individual artistic-conceptual spatial textile works. The lecturer guided the translation from sample evidence to spatial proposition, distinguishing unresolved technical failures, where a sample did not hold and offered no further design information, from productive failures, where uneven shrinkage, an unplanned opening, or an asymmetric contraction could be reframed as a usable design finding. This sequence aligns with material-driven approaches in which systematic material exploration informs design development [21,22].

Figure 4 presents selected examples of the works later exhibited in Idrija as part of the international Textile Art Biennial BIEN 2025 [25]. Only selected works, rather than all student projects, were exhibited. Each exhibited spatial textile work measured 80 × 200 cm. The transition from workshop and course to public presentation created an additional requirement: material process, conceptual interpretation, and spatial form had to be communicated beyond the teaching setting.

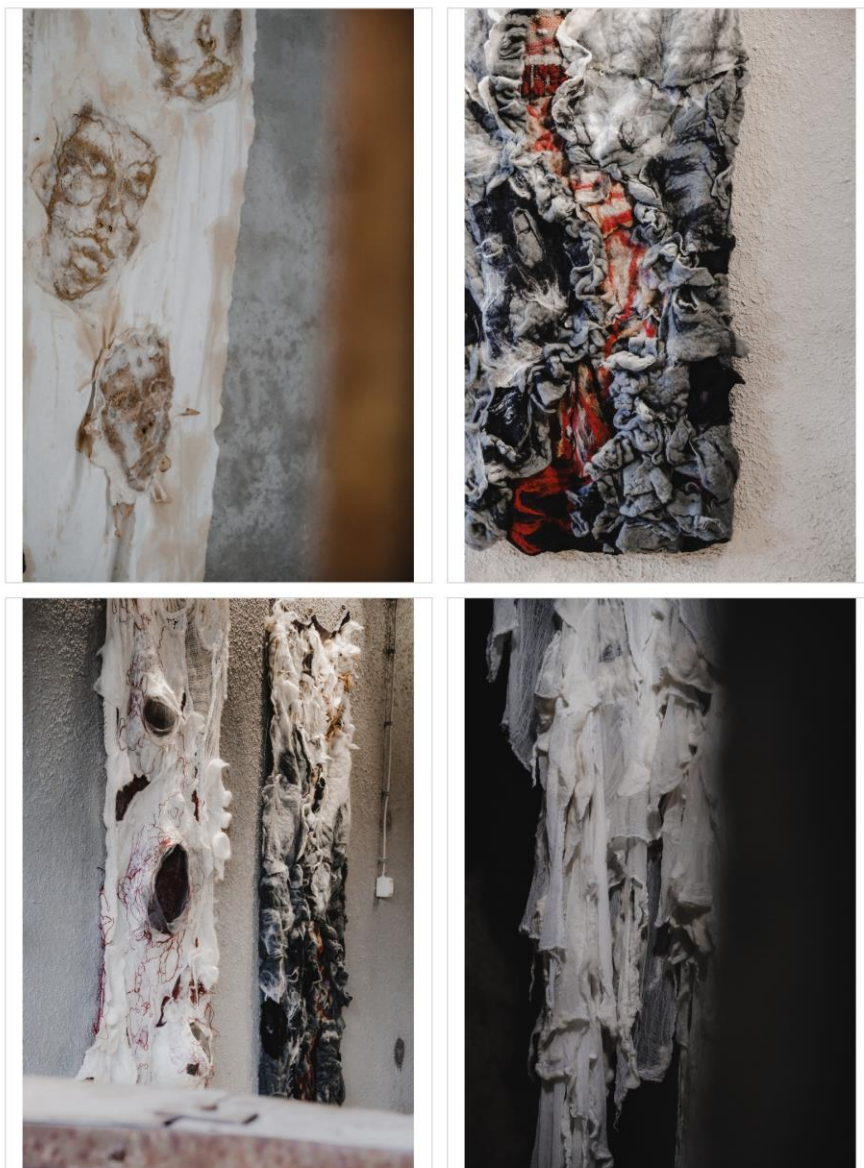


Figure 4: Selected 80 × 200 cm artistic-conceptual spatial textile works developed in the first-year Textile Techniques course in response to AIR / ZRAK, the theme of BIEN 2025. Lecturer: Asst. Prof. Almina Duraković Korošec. Exhibition photograph: Maša Pirc.



7. DISCUSSION

Wet felting is sometimes underestimated because it requires relatively little machinery. Low equipment intensity, however, does not mean intellectual simplicity. The technique requires sustained attention to fiber architecture, water, soap, pressure, temperature, friction, shrinkage, and time. Its pedagogical strength lies in the fact that these variables cannot be fully abstracted: students must encounter them through their hands and then articulate what they mean for the resulting textile.

The case also clarifies the relation between heritage and innovation. Heritage is not preserved by freezing a technique in historical form or by treating it as a decorative label. It becomes active when students learn the material logic of a technique, recognize the conditions in which it developed, and translate that logic responsibly into contemporary applications. In the present case, AIR / ZRAK, BIEN 2025's theme, provided a shared conceptual horizon within which students selected material evidence and developed questions of permeability, layered softness, tactility, openings, suspension, and spatial enclosure [25].

A central argument of this paper is that sustainability must be treated as a question of material responsibility rather than as an inherent property of wool or a quantified result of this case. The environmental and social implications of wool depend on animal husbandry, collection, washing, processing, transport, durability, use, and end-of-life routes. Research on wool valorization shows that logistics, processing capacity, heterogeneous fiber quality, and market conditions shape whether wool can be used effectively; these questions are particularly relevant where usable fleece is undervalued, stockpiled, or discarded [11-13]. Neither low equipment intensity nor wool's renewable origin is sufficient to establish environmental benefit. Although the workshops reported here did not compare local wool sources or conduct a life-cycle assessment, they provided a context in which students could ask more precise questions about material origin, preparation, intended use, and the consequences of design decisions.

The limitations of the account should remain clear. The photographs, samples, and final works document process and outputs, but they cannot establish causal learning effects independently of the wider educational context. The author's dual role as lecturer and analyst further reinforces the need to read the account as reflective and practice-based. A future study could add student reflection logs, interviews, pre/post prompts on material reasoning, or a systematic analysis of sample development. The present contribution is narrower: it offers a documented teaching sequence in which traditional knowledge, structured material investigation, and contemporary design development are deliberately connected.

8. CONCLUSION

Wet felting remains relevant to contemporary textile design education because it makes fundamental questions tangible: how fibers become structure, how the hand acquires



material judgment, how craft knowledge is transmitted, and how a historical process can generate contemporary design possibilities. In this teaching sequence, students first learned wet-felting and nuno-felting techniques at artisan Anja Musek's AMUSE art studio in Škofja Loka. They then applied the acquired techniques in the first-year Textile Techniques course in the Fashion and Textiles program, where systematic material and structural investigation informed the development of individual artistic-conceptual spatial textile works.

AIR / ZRAK, the theme of BIEN 2025, was interpreted through a deliberate research process rather than through arbitrary experimentation: students first created and evaluated personal sample sets, then selected and developed those that most clearly expressed their own interpretation of air. Only selected works, each measuring 80×200 cm, were later exhibited in Idrija as part of the international Textile Art Biennial BIEN 2025 [25]. The educational value of the method lies not in producing expert felt makers in one workshop, nor in making unqualified environmental claims. It lies in allowing students to experience how loose fibers, worked through one of the oldest textile technologies, can become self-authored spatial textile propositions that connect technique, tactile judgment, design intention, and contemporary textile expression.

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