

Friday

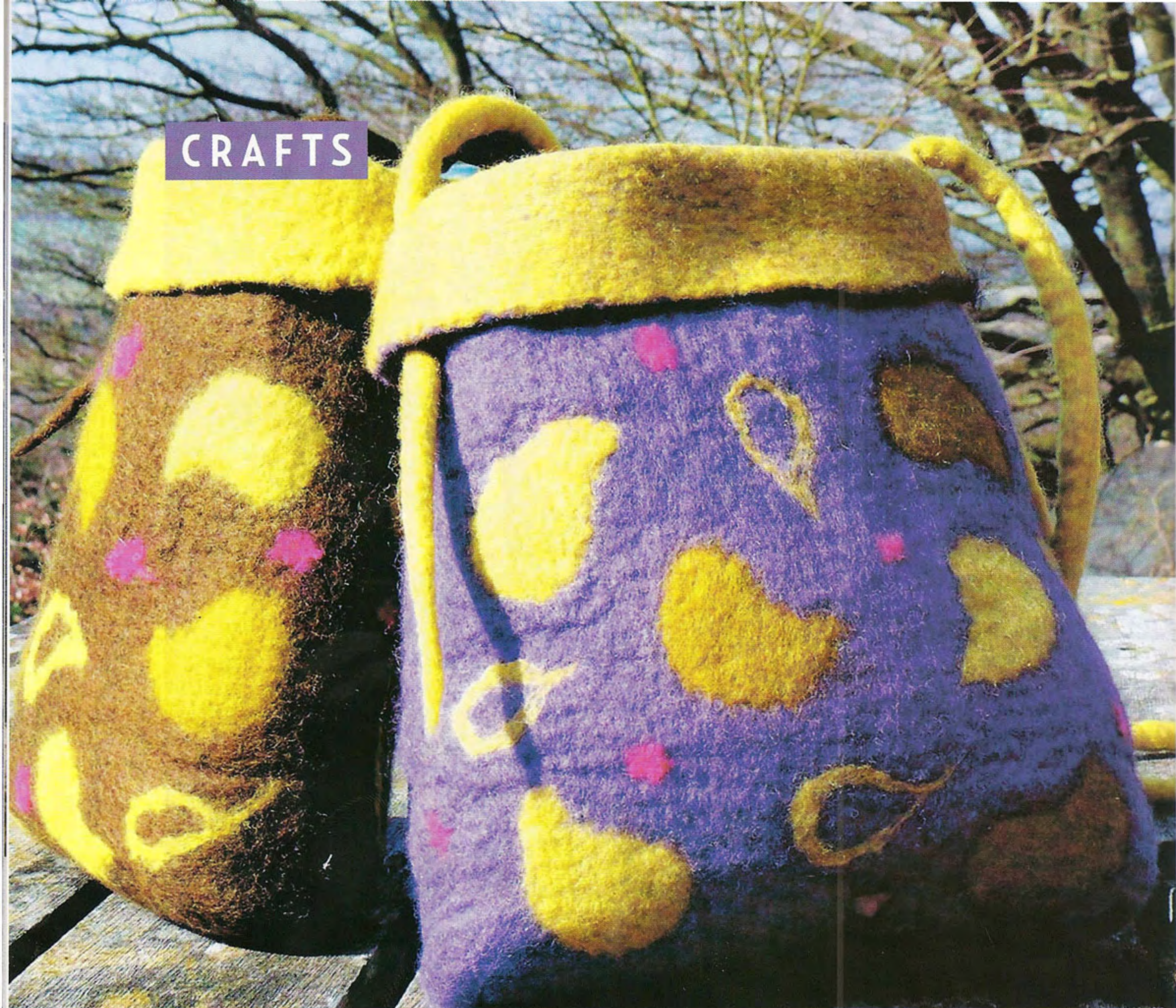
DECEMBER 4-10, 2009

Rich pickings

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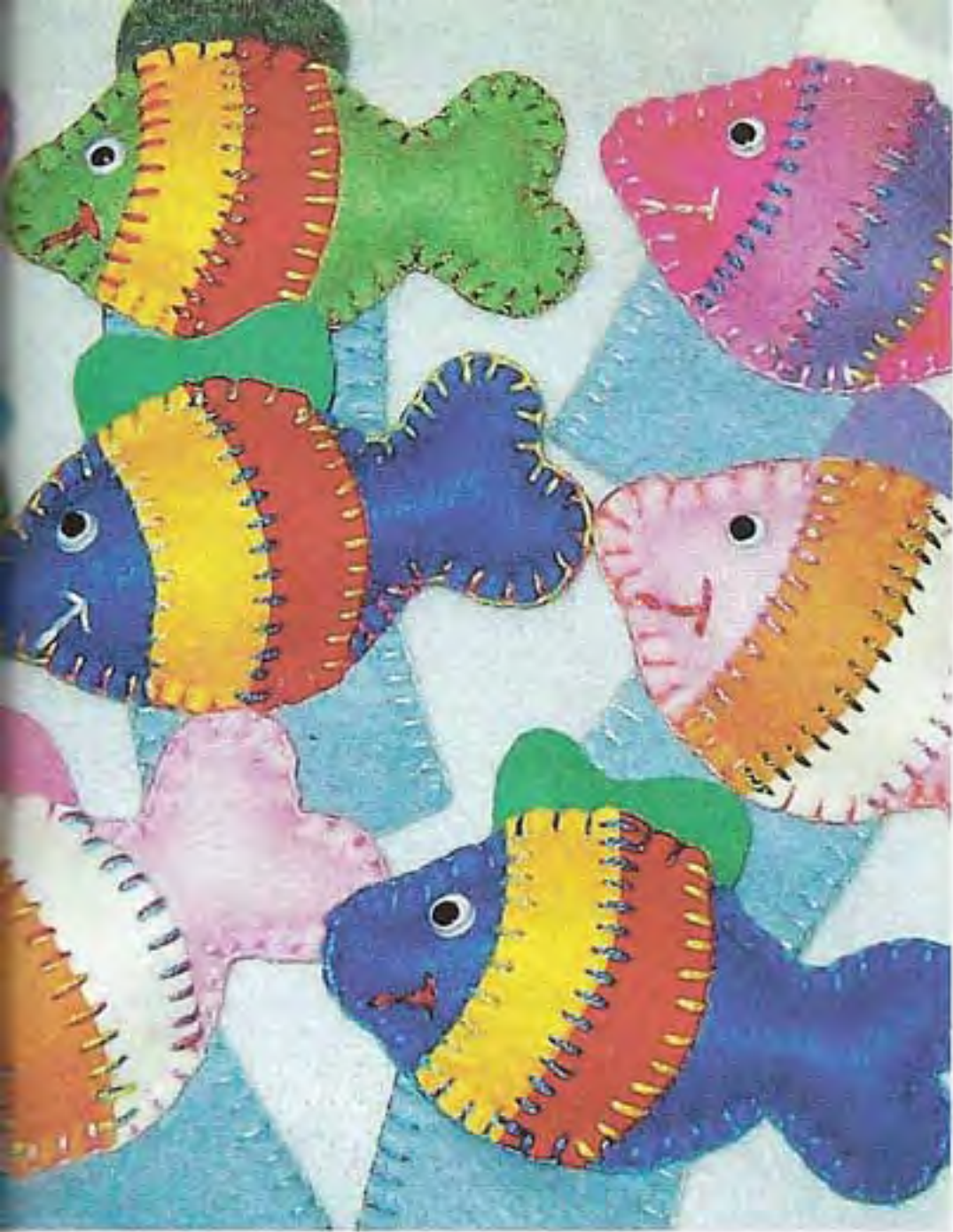


Felting creativity

A TTRACTIVE FINGER PUPPETS, magnets, hats, Emirati dolls – there are any number of things that can be created with felt. **Preethi Janice D'Sa** talks to some makers of felt products about the joys of the craft.

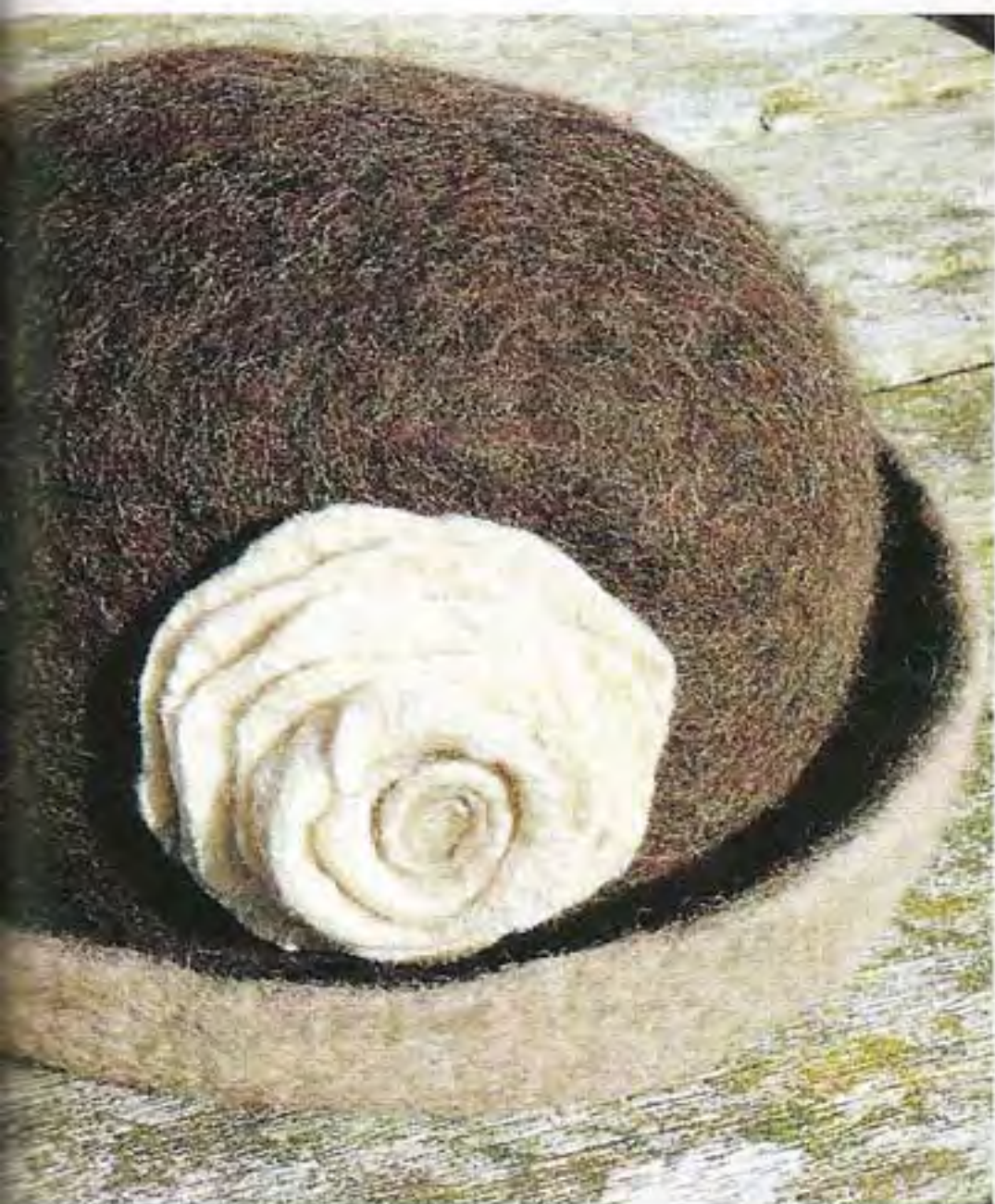
Carine Ribeiro Calé is an ever-smiling Brazilian lady who lives in Abu Dhabi with her husband Alex and daughter Giuliana. She will tell you straightaway that she comes from a big family and she is very proud of it. When she moved to Abu Dhabi a year ago, she was nearly distraught about leaving everything behind. But she has made some fun friends in Abu Dhabi and the fact that she is a nutritionist by profession helps keep her in a positive frame of mind whenever she feels a little bit homesick. And it helps that she also loves craft-making.

“I have always helped my mum make crafts. She is a great artisan. She was the one who actually taught me many crafts.” So when Calé moved to the UAE and the memories of all the laughter and good times would crowd her mind, she decided she would do what her mama always did. - turn to making crafts. Her muse? Her perky and sweet daughter Giuliana.



Clockwise from far left:

Lis Lawrence's felt bags are a favourite among UAE buyers; Carine Calé's felt fish puppets are a colourful hit with kids; Carine Calé with her products; Lis Lawrence loves converting wool into something beautiful and uses felt to make hats



SUPPLIED PHOTOS

Her first decision was that she would work with felt. Felt is easy to work with, looks good and the designs are quite sweet, she says, as sweet as her daughter. "My daughter is truly my inspiration."

And that statement is not a stretch. Cute finger puppets, felt magnets that are so minutely and intricately put together they seem almost imaginary. But Calé assures you they are functional. The felt book covers look perfect for those who can't seem to keep a book in one piece.

Throw in lots of buttons, beads, threads, fabrics, ribbons, glitter, glue and felt is the new fabulous. With all this fun involved in making felt designs, Calé loves taking part in ARTE souqs.

She used to teach how to felt at the Bead Palace on Jumeirah Beach Road once a month. "I aim to teach various felt stitches and templates. Working with felt is meant to be enjoyable and I want to show people it is possible

to create goods, gifts, book covers, toys, dolls and much more with this underrated material."

Lis Lawrence

Lis Lawrence is one of the veteran felters and feltmakers who has lived in Dubai for a considerable number of years before returning to the UK. She regularly visits Dubai where her husband still lives. "We moved to Dubai in 2003 and this has been our base since then. For the past 18 months or so I have switched my base to the UK primarily to be with my children and granddaughter. I still manage to spend a reasonable amount of time in Dubai, by returning about four times a year for a month or so each time. I have, however, moved my feltmaking workshop back to the UK."

Lawrence started being creative quite early - she was knitting at the age of four. Over the years, other interests have included spinning and dyeing yarn, embroidery, patchwork

and quilting. She was a handicraft teacher at a Rudolf Steiner School for eight years, during which time she taught both children and adults. "Felt arrived relatively late in my textile career, around ten years ago. This was when I attended a workshop run by Sheila Smith, one of the UK's top feltmakers. She was a brilliant teacher and made everything seem so easy. I've not looked back since and have been lucky enough to attend many other workshops by top feltmakers since then. I never cease to get a kick out of the fact that I am transforming a pile of wool into a beautiful and useful item, unique and unlike any other."

Lawrence does not follow the well-worn route of felting, that is, she does not create the felt and then craft it into an item. "Several feltmakers do work like that, but I prefer to do it another way. I make the object, for example, a hat... Basically, I wrap the wool around a piece of plastic cut to the desired shape and felt the wool with the plastic inside it. When it is properly felted, I cut open the top of the bag (or bottom of the hat) and remove the plastic. There is absolutely no wastage from this method and it doesn't cease to amaze me!"

She does admit that the most difficult thing about felting is that it shrinks considerably. "Due to this, I always have to start off with something that looks way too big, knowing that it can shrink up to 40 per cent. This makes garments such as jackets and waistcoats quite tricky to make, involving complicated calculation. This is why I very rarely make felt garments!"

She prefers to stick to making hats, which is her favourite accessory. "The design and decoration possibilities are endless and as I have a range of hat

blocks, which I finish the hats on, in several sizes, the problem cited above (about calculated shrinkage, and the worry that it might turn out to be the wrong size) does not occur.”

So why has she moved her workshop to the UK? “I found that more often than not, when I was selling in the UAE, my work was bought by Europeans who were planning to take the items back home to a colder climate, especially in the case of hats and scarves. However bags and jewellery sold well to all nationalities. Perhaps they were novel and unique and could be used just as easily in the Middle East as in Europe. In the UK, I find that most of the accessories that I make sell. I sell my work through craft galleries. I occasionally get asked to repeat a design in either a different size or different colour. But on the whole I am blessed in that I make what I want to make and I deliver my accessories to the galleries and just hope that the customers like what they see.”

Fiona Caution

Fiona Caution’s felted Emirati dolls are a must-see. They fit into your palm and the soft, beautiful design makes you want to hold on to it. This Australian textile designer has made Dubai her home for the last seven years. This is what she had to say about her Emirati dolls, “I invented the concept of the Emirati dolls so that ARTE customers can have a taste of local culture and take something home to their friends or just as a souvenir. No two Arabic dolls are alike. I feel so passionately about them that they all have their own name and characteristics. They have been well received by Emiratis and tourists



THE ART OF FELT MAKING BY LIZA GREEN

This ancient craft stretching back more than 3,000 years enjoys a devoted following to this day. From the sturdy homes, known as Yurts, of the people of the steppes of Central Asia to the beautiful gossamer creations which grace the catwalks of Paris and Milan, the central theme is the same. Sheep’s wool is cleaned and washed, dyed and combed, then subjected to a number of indignities in order to turn it into felt.

So, take a skein of what we call ‘tops’, wool, unspun, in its fluffy state, which has been cleaned and, perhaps dyed into a fabulous colour never seen on a sheep. (Most feltmakers prefer merino wool, but any wool will eventually, through hard work, turn into felt.)

Tease (gently pull apart the fibres) or ‘card’ the skein. Carders are two large ‘combs’ with wire teeth upon which the wool is laid and combed back and forth until all the fibres are evenly spread and free of lumps, this process is also used to blend colours together – yellow and red make orange, blue and red make purple, etc.

The teased wool is laid on to a surface, (I use bubble



Liza Green... she loves sharing feltmaking tips with people

wrap, some use a rattan mat) a layer at a time, each layer laid at right angles to the one below. This allows the wool to ‘knit’ or blend together. Wool, like human hair, is made up of a shaft with miniscule barbs growing in the same direction, if combed in the same direction it stays untangled and shiny, but if rubbed the wrong way – it becomes knotted and tangled, exactly the effect we seek in felt making in order to make the fibres ‘knit’ together.

When enough layers have been laid – say six thin layers – cover the wool mass with a fabric which will not felt – such as nylon net. This holds any design in place, and is necessary to hold the wool together.

Now the felting process begins. Every feltmaker has a different method, but essentially they all employ soap and water. Sprinkle

enough hot soapy water onto the wool to soak but not saturate it. Gently rub with your hands working it into the fibres. This can take five minutes or an hour, it depends how big the piece of felt is! When the water is absorbed begin to rub more vigorously, taking care not to disturb your pattern. Continue rubbing and when you feel that the fibres are welded together carefully, remove the top piece of nylon and check that the wool has bonded. Squeeze out as much water as possible from the mass, then pour on some very hot water and begin to rub more vigorously, bash it, knead it, roll it up in the mat or bubble wrap and roll it, vent all your frustrations, in other words, this becomes very therapeutic. Every now and then, check your work, pull it into shape, make it do what you want. When it’s finished, it will be much smaller than the original pile of wool you started with – about one-third is a good measure.

Rinse off all the soapy water and place it to dry. Congratulations – you are now a feltmaker.

Liza Green is an Abu Dhabi based textile artist and feltmaker. She supports original handmade goods sold through the ARTE souq

alike, and now I am looking to take things to the next step and find more retail outlets for them.”

For Fiona, felt is a natural, tactile textile to use. “It has a lot of properties that other fibres do not have. It is an insulating type of fabric that needs no sewing machine. During the textile designing course at a famous university in Melbourne, I had hands-on experience on fabric and

fibres. We learnt all about crimping, weaving, knitting. We even spun our own yarns. Textile designing is different from fashion design in that we didn’t make or design our clothes.” Caution shares some dos and don’ts on felting and feltmaking:

- If using a machine-made felt, choose good quality wool felt, because I believe that a well hand-crafted item that is made with passion should be made to last.
- Felt folds up and pills, that is it rubs in one place and then the material tends to look old. Therefore choose good quality felt.

One of Fiona Caution’s creations

Felt is a natural, tactile type of textile for her to use

CRAFTS

Fiona Caution... her fluffy Emirati dolls add a local spunk to her felted collection



■ Choose happy and bright colours. Dubai has lots of sunshine, let that sunshine reflect in your work.
 ■ Enjoy making your item as it is a wonderful, tactile medium that can be enjoyed by any age group. Through this creative process, it can be useful to relieve stress.

■ Even children can felt. Blunt needles are available. Just give them a thick needle and circle shaped felts and they are on their way to creating something unique and exciting.

Fiona reckons that craftwork in general is a good stress reliever. "We live in stressful times. Crafting is a great pastime to relax and there is nothing better than the sense of achievement all ages can feel when you make it yourself! People who take up a creative activity need

not be disappointed if the project doesn't turn out to be what they were expecting. It is best to just enjoy the journey. Do not view any craft as being complicated. If you think that way, you will be hesitant to try it. After a few simple lessons, voilà, you will be surprised by how much you enjoyed the craft."

According to Fiona, there is cause to be concerned that hand-crafted work seems to be disappearing, due to the sale of mass produced goods. "Think about it, clothing is cheap and therefore it's not worth making your own. I find these days that it is

hard to make any sort of living solely on crafting and more often than not, people don't fully appreciate the kind of work that goes into a piece of our work. I hope in due time that my work and my label project will show the public what is involved and hopefully the next time they are looking for a gift, they will consider a hand-crafted original over the mass-produced stuff. I hope to offer workshops and classes in textiles as well as in hand-made items in order to keep the love for handicrafts alive."

- Preethi Janice D'Sa is a Dubai-based freelance writer

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