

# TEXTILE + DESIGN LAB

**Industry Case Study Number:** 08/2016

**Project Title:** Felted Romney Wool Rugs

**People Involved:** Sarah Hewlett and Chris Coffey

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**Project Period:** September 2016 – October 2017

## **Project Description:**

This project has been a process of experimentation, research and development for a potential commercial product. Sarah Hewlett and Chris Coffey are Northland sheep and cattle farmers who, like many wool growers, are frustrated at the poor prices being paid for their coarse (strong) wool fibre. Rather than accept this situation, they decided to consider ways to convert their wool themselves by producing some prototype felted wool rugs.

## **Background:**

The New Zealand Romney sheep breed has been the mainstay of the New Zealand wool industry for almost 100 years, mainly because of its ability to thrive in a wide variety of environments, in particular, damp or humid lowland regions. It currently makes up about 40% of the national flock and is barely recognisable from the original Kent Romney Marsh stock, although the NZ Romney is still categorised as a British long wool breed.

However, it must be recognised that a mature Romney fleece is not suited to many apparel applications. Heavy woven jackets or knitted work sweaters are feasible but other finer fleece types are better suited to lighter apparel. Where Romney comes into its own is in furnishing fabrics, carpets, mats and drapes, where its durability under hard working conditions makes it ideal.

‘For many years, I have wanted to create something from the wool produced on our family farm’, says Hewlett. ‘The wool is currently sent off shore in its raw state and is worth very little as a commodity product. I thought that it would be rewarding to make something from it and thereby add value to our own wool. Last year I saw The Textile and Design Lab’s felting machine on display at an Expo in Auckland and thought that this could be a way to transform our wool into something marketable’, she adds

## **Process:**

AUT’s Textile and Design Lab (TDL) purchased its FeltLoom in 2014 and started to offer felting workshops as part of its short course programme. Participants are welcome to bring their own materials, which was an added attraction to the farming duo, who attended one of the earlier workshops to ascertain if this technology would be of any benefit to us. ‘After talking to Donna Cleveland, a PhD student who supervises the workshops, we decided to experiment with rugs’ says Hewlett. ‘Clothing is not so much an option with the Romney wool. My

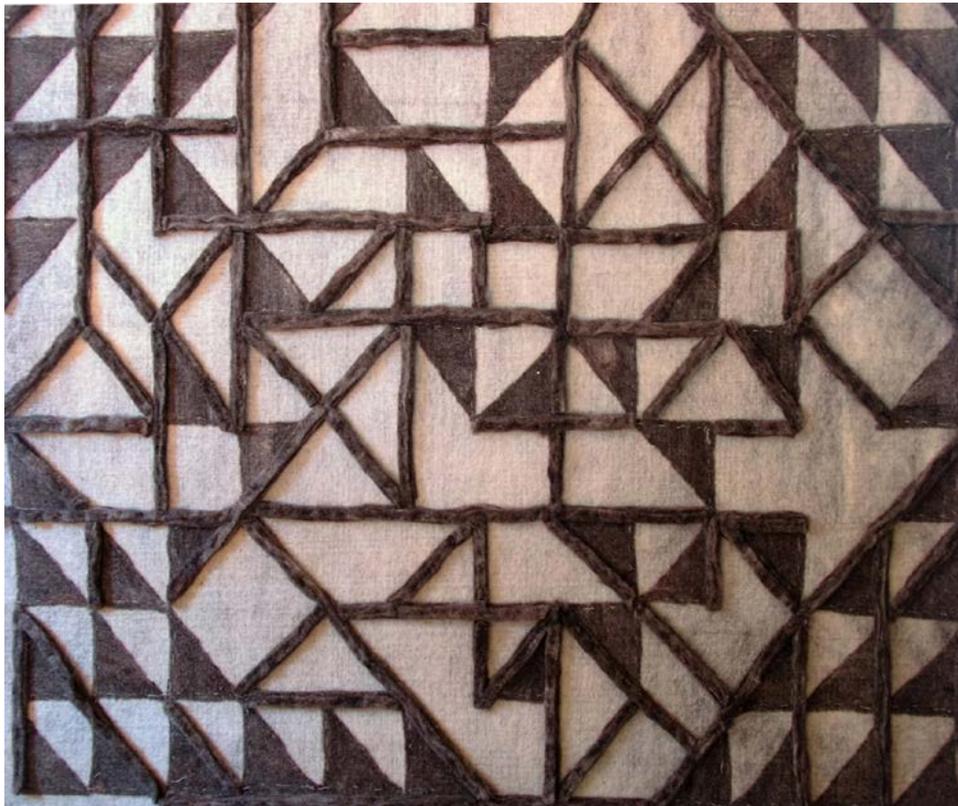
grandmother would wash, card, spin, dye and knit hats and jerseys for us, however people are now accustomed to wearing very soft, fine fibres such as merino. Romney is a strong, coarse wool of around 35 microns and is traditionally used in carpets', she says.

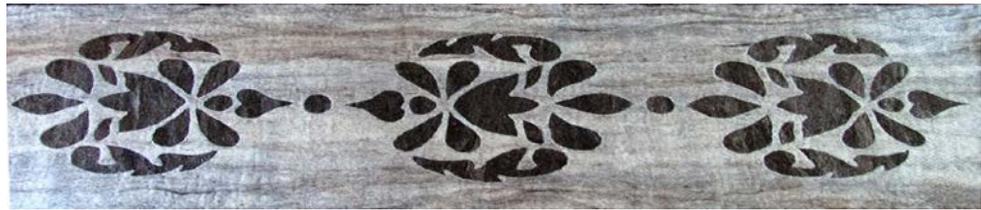
The first time the couple used the machine, they produced some small samples, experimenting with thickness, colour, patterns and backing fabrics and recording details of each process. On subsequent visits to the lab, they created some larger pieces and started layering the wools in different ways. Whilst the machine does the actual felting, they soon recognised that there is still a considerable hand work involved in the rug making process in order to achieve the desired effect. To create contrasting effects they used some naturally darker wools in combination with the white wool thereby producing totally naturally coloured products. Their next step in the process was acquire feedback to ascertain whether there is a market for their products.

### **Project Outcomes:**

'The TDL is the only facility in New Zealand that enables access to this type of technology', says Hewlett and the staff have been very accommodating towards us. The only factor that has slowed down our progress is the distance that we have to travel into Auckland. Had we been closer, it would have been much easier and we would have ended up doing more experimentation. The technology is wonderful and we're grateful to the TDL for enlightening us about this type of felt making technology.

### **Images:**





*Examples of some of the naturally coloured wool rug designs developed at the Textile and Design Lab by Sarah Hewlett and Chris Coffey*