

Feeling the magic of felt



Photos by STEVEN LANE/The Columbian

Felt artist Janice Arnold displays some examples of her work in her parents' downtown Vancouver home. At right, samples of Arnold's felt.



Vancouver native's work featured in 'Fashioning Felt' exhibition at a New York City design museum



Janice Arnold finishes installing her 20-foot-high felt yurt in the museum that once was Andrew Carnegie's mansion.

Christine Martens

By TOM VOGT
Columbian staff writer

Artistic and historic, transitional and traditional: They all describe the fabric that flows from Janice Arnold's studio.

But Arnold might use another word in discussing her craft.

Magical.

People have been turning wool into felt for thousands of years, a process she calls alchemy. And now the Vancouver native has added a silken glimmer and a metallic glow with her concepts of light and color and texture.

Arnold's take on an ancient craft recently got a premier showcase affiliated with the Smithsonian Institution. Her work is part of the "Fashioning Felt" exhibition at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in New York City.

For the exhibit, she created a yurt, inspired by the traditional circular tent of the Mongols but done on a palatial scale.

The artist is the daughter of longtime Vancouver residents Helen and Phil Arnold, who's been a Clark County mapmaker since 1950.

A 1971 graduate of Fort Vancouver High School, she attended Clark College and then earned a degree in art at The Evergreen State College, where she studied textiles, folk art and fashion.

While Arnold adds gossamer touches by

Did you know?

■ Janice Arnold recently appeared on Martha Stewart's TV show. To see a video of Stewart's segment on an exhibit at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum including Arnold's work, visit www.marthastewart.com/article/cooper-hewitt-felt-exhibit?xsc=ch.

■ The Cooper-Hewitt honors Peter Cooper. He built America's first locomotive and patented the dessert we know as Jell-O. www.cooperhewitt.org/EXHIBITIONS/Fashioning-Felt/.

combining wool with silk chiffon, she recognizes a basic piece of felt as something remarkable.

"It's as close to magic as you can get. The first time I saw it being made, I thought, 'You've got to be kidding.'

"It's a fabric of history. It was the intermediary stage, between animal skins and woven fabrics, as the material for human dwellings. Our ancestors lived in it for thousands of years."

Felt popped into Arnold's life in a much more upscale setting when she was working for Nord-

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strom. In 1999, the retailer decided to design its “Shapes of Fall” window displays around felt sculptures.

When it came to firming up the concept, Arnold recalled, the idea seemed to be: “Janice will figure it out.”

The designers were thinking of industrial felt, used for sound-proofing and insulation. But Arnold suggested a handmade product so they could control color, thickness and texture.

“I basically taught myself,” the 55-year-old artist said.

“I found a 1988 article in National Geographic showing people in Mongolia making felt, with a guy pulling a roller behind a horse.”

Arnold turned out material for felt carpets and felt sculptures. Then the Nordstrom designers asked for 40,000 oak leaves crafted from felt. Arnold flew to Nepal and found a fair-trade women’s cooperative.

“I taught 10 women to do handmade felt. And based on my pattern, they made 40,000 oak leaves.”

In 2001, Arnold was invited to the first international felt-making symposium in Kyrgyzstan.

“There were 35 people from around the world,” said Arnold, including only three Americans.

Arnold established connections in textile-art circles and was offered a spot in the “Fash-



CHRISTINE MARTENS

A Mongol horseman uses a traditional method to turn wool into felt.

ioning Felt” exhibition in 2007. She visited Mongolia in 2008 to get a sense of the felt yurt in its native land.

“Seventy percent of Mongols still live in yurts. When you get out of Ulan Bator” — the nation’s capital — Arnold said, “It’s a whole other world.”

That’s where Arnold got a first-hand look at the process she’d seen 20 years earlier in the National Geographic photograph: a Mongol herdsman on horseback making felt. Pulling a roll of wet wool behind a horse or a camel provides the agitation and pressure required to mat it into felt.

The yurt still represents traditional values to Mongols, not just traditional shelter. There are rituals to be observed in making felt.

“Sheep are blessed before they’re shorn,” she said, and Mongol felt-makers follow a seasonal routine established thousands of years ago.

The biggest yurts still are places for celebrations, ceremonies and epic poems. And that was Arnold’s inspiration. Her palace yurt measures 26 feet long by 15 feet wide by 20 feet high. She assembled it from 42 pieces of fabric created in her Centralia-area studio.

The biggest panels had to be felted outside in the middle of winter. The yurt’s biggest panel is 18 feet long and 9½ feet wide. But since wet wool shrinks, “It was 30 feet by 12 feet when we started,” Arnold said.

“It was 20 degrees when we were slapping and rolling these huge pieces in the snow. And you can’t wear gloves because you have to feel it as it changes form.”

A wool fiber has scales, which is why it feels itchy to some people. Those scales open when they’re moistened and heated and they interlock with adjacent scales. Felters use friction and pressure to mat the fibers together into a solid piece of

versatile, weatherproof fabric.

It’s a process Arnold calls “fiber alchemy.”

Early in her career, Arnold experimented with the Mongol method of felting by pulling a roll of wool behind a car on the grounds of her studio. Now she uses a mechanical roller.

It took a month to assemble the yurt in the museum, housed in the former Andrew Carnegie mansion on Fifth Avenue.

While the finished product echoes Central Asian ceremonial sites, her design reflects some of our own sacred spaces. The sun glows through a leaded-glass pattern on ceiling panels that Arnold calls “an ethereal canopy;” light shimmers through the fabric equivalent of ivory-on-cream stained glass windows.

Her other work includes fabrics for LA Opera’s production of “Grendel.” The designer wanted fabric for dragons’ costumes and also sent Arnold a photo of a glacier. So Arnold created 30 fabric variations on the theme of glacial ice. What the designer had in mind, as it turned out, was a queen’s gown.

If Arnold’s design elements seem to be all over the map ... well, a person whose childhood home doubled as a map-making office comes by it naturally.

“I credit my parents for my creative roots,” she said. “From my dad, I learned to look at things from a minute as well as a global scale.

“We made our own toys,” she continued. “Mom always had raw materials around, and a willingness to let us use them.”