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## **The Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw Felt Collection**

### **Abstract**

The collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw contains significant objects representing the culture of peoples from many regions of Asia, including Polynesia, Indonesia and even Papua New Guinea. The cultures of Turkish and Mongolian peoples of Central Asia are richly represented among them. Among the objects of these regions and cultures, a collection of felt products significantly distinguishes itself. However, these felts have never been exhibited as a whole collection, nor as a part of a monographic exhibition dedicated to the craft of felt. A significant part of them belongs to the earliest collections from the 1990's from Afghanistan. It represents many different cultural groups: Turkmen, Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Kyrgyz people and even Tajiks. From the historian's or art historian's point of view, it is a very young and new collection. But, taking into account the specifics of felt production and the ways it is used, as well as the fact that felt is rather underestimated by its producers, users, traders, researchers and collectors (in terms of the art market), it should be noted that felt products were rarely bought and collected by esteemed institutions. Apart from museums of Tsarist Russia, and later, their heirs: Soviet and post-Soviet museums in Central Asian countries, along with some western European museums, collections of felt products are rather rare in the world. The felt collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw appears to be a rare example here. The aim of this paper is to present the felt collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw, in terms of its objects, as well as its ethnographic and historical value.

Photographs from the Archive of the Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw were taken by Eugeniusz Helbert and Ewa Soszko-Dziwiśńska.

Photographs from the author's archive were taken by Marzena Godzińska.

**Keywords:** the Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw, felt, Afghanistan, Asian felt

The Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw was established in 1973 by Andrzej Wawrzyniak, whose private collection was donated to the Polish state. Andrzej Wawrzyniak became the first director of the Museum and, at the same time, working as a diplomat in Indonesia, Vietnam, Laos, Nepal and Afghanistan, he continued his passion for collecting. The basic collection consisted of ca. 4000 ethnographical objects from Indonesia but today the Museum houses nearly 24,000 ethnographic and art objects from almost all regions of Asia and Oceania.

About 200 objects are classified as felt products. About 100 of them come from Central Asia and Mongolia. In particular, the Central Asian part of the collection is worthy of close interest. Special attention should be paid to the Mongolian yurt with full fixtures and fittings, and particularly to the felt mats and small felt objects from Afghanistan and Central Asia. The felts of Afghanistan were collected mainly in the beginning of 1990s by Andrzej Wawrzyniak during his stay in Afghanistan as the charge d'affaires of the Polish Embassy in Kabul. A few additional objects were bought in 1976 by participants of the expedition EWA-76 (Etnograficzna Wyprawa Azjatycka), i.e. Asian Ethnographic Expedition from the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań.

Comparative material for analysis of the Asia and Pacific Museum felt collection was collected by the author during anthropological research conducted from 1996–2006 in Turkey and Turkmenistan, along with material found during studies of museum and private collections in Poland, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Russia, England and Austria.

Felt is the oldest known, non-woven textile product made from sheep's wool, and occasionally other animal hair (from goats, camels and others). It uses an extremely simple technology of production.<sup>1</sup>

### Technology of production

In Asia, usually lamb or sheep's wool is used to make felt. The wool must be shorn and cleaned, and sometimes washed. Then it is carded, usually either with a carding bow, a carding comb, stick beaters, or sometimes by machine. If the felt is to be decorated, then previously dyed wool must be used. For pressed felt patterns, the patterns are composed directly onto the natural or synthetic mat backing on which the wool for the felt is laid out. This pattern is then covered with non-dyed wool, which is usually brown or white. Then the mat is rolled up in the backing mat to form a kind of long cylinder. In city handicraft centers in Turkey, Iran or Egypt the wool is heavily wetted with hot soapy water before making the roll and in Central Asia clean cold water is poured into the roll. Then the hardening process begins, where the wool is pressed inside the roll to become a semi-compacted mat. In Central Asia, this work is carried out by small groups of women or young boys, who pull and drag the tied roll between them. In Mongolia people use horses to pull the roll of wet wool on the steppe, while in Anatolia, in city

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<sup>1</sup> Stephanie Bunn, *Moving People and the Fabric of Society: the Power of Felt Through Time and Place*, "Central Asian Survey", vol. 30, no. 3–4, September–December 2011, pp. 504–506; Mary E. Burkett, *An Early Date for the Origin of Felt*, "Anatolian Studies. Journal of the British Institute of Archaeology, in Ankara", vol. 28, 1977, pp. 111–115.

workshops since the 1970's, male felt makers have used machines. After the first stage of entangling the wool fibres for the felt, the most difficult part of the work begins. This is the fulling, which is most usually done physically, though in Turkey some workshop producers use machines for part of this work.<sup>2</sup>

There are some slight variations in methods of production and decorative techniques from place to place and group to group. In Turkish city workshops, and probably in Iran, aside from flat decorated felt mats, three-dimensional felted products are also made. A classic example is the shepherd's coat, or *kepenek*, which is made from one piece of felt in its entirety, without any seams<sup>3</sup>. In Central Asia felt cloth is sewn, just like a woven textile (illustration no. 1, 2). Usually felt rugs are decorated by fulling the pattern during the process of production, but Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks and Turkmen also use embroidery techniques, appliqué, quilting or mosaic, sometimes in the same product. What can also occasionally be seen for Central Asia, including Turkmenistan and Afghanistan, is felt mats made from two kinds of wool – sheep's wool in the central field and goat wool in the edges. The goat wool secures and protects more soft, central part of the product.



Illustration no. 1

Shepherd's coat, called *kepenek*, presented by the young boy on the left; on the right is a felt prayer mat called *namazlık*. Turkey, Afyon, 1996. (Photography from the author's archive).

<sup>2</sup> Mary E. Burkett, *The Art of the Feltmaker*, Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Kendal 1979, pp. 1–5; Michael Gervers, *Evidence for Ottoman Influence on Felt Making in Egypt*, "Textile History", vol. 20, no. 1, 1989, pp. 3–12; Veronica Gervers, *Felt Coats*, in: M.E. Burkett, *The Art of the Feltmaker*, pp. 31–39; Veronica Gervers, *Methods of Traditional Felt-Making in Anatolia and Iran*, "Bulletin du Liaison du Centre International D'Etude des Textiles Anciens", no. 38, 1973, pp. 152–163; Marzena Godzińska, *Felt – Remarks about Traditional Manufacturing and Decoration Methods in Anatolia and Central Asia*, "Fibres & Textiles in Eastern Europe", vol. 6, no. 2 (21), 1998, pp. 78–80; Ahmet Topbaş and Musa Seyirci, *Afyon Keçe Sanatı*, "Türk Föklörü, Aylık Halkbilim Dergisi", 63, Eylül, 1984, pp. 18–23.

<sup>3</sup> Veronica Gervers, *Methods of Traditional Felt-Making in Anatolia and Iran*, pp. 152–163; Irena Turnau, *Hand-Felting in Europe and Asia. From the Middle Ages to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of Polish Academy of Sciences, Warszawa 1997, pp. 62–88, 103.



Illustration no. 2

Turkmen shepherd wearing a felt coat called *oyluk*. Turkmenistan, Ahal Province, 1999.  
 (Photography from the author's archive).

### Producers – men and women

A notable characteristic of feltmaking traditions in Central Asia and the Near and Middle East is that felt producers usually comprise one or the other of two different kinds of group. Felt is either made by women in the villages and among nomadic and herding groups, or by men, who are the masters of felt crafts in the cities. In the west, in the former Ottoman Empire and Iranian-Persian State territories, men dominate felt production. Women in these regions used to make felts (and occasionally still do) mainly for their households. In Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan, women made felts for their families, as well as for sale in the market. Men did not produce felts among these groups as this was conventionally women's work and to do so could harm their male status.

In Afghanistan, the system is difficult to be sure of because of a lack of full and strict confirmation of information. In the countryside, we understand felt is generally made by women. However the author was told a few times that there are some craft-workshops managed by men in the towns. Here, it looks to be very likely that the felts are distributed by the men who sell them in the bazaars, in streets or in their shops, but none of informants had ever bought a felt product directly from the workshop.

It is very difficult also to confirm who made those felt objects in the Afghan collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum. We may confidently assume that those brought by the expedition EWA-76 were produced by women in the villages. But we do not have definite information about provenance of felts collected in 1990s by Andrzej Wawrzyniak.

## Examples of objects from the Museum's collection

I would like to present to you the most typical felt objects and the most valuable part of the Afghan felt collection. These are felts which are used to cover the floor, and in the literature are often called felt mats, felt carpets or felt rugs. These were mainly bought by Andrzej Wawrzyniak at bazaars and from street traders in Kabul in the beginning of the 1990s. Unfortunately, we have no information about who exactly had produced each particular felt, nor to what ethnic group or tribe the producer had belonged, nor about how the felts were used, nor by whom. This can be deduced only by comparison with other known artefacts produced by Turkmen, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, Baloch (Baluch) or other groups. Unfortunately, it is only in a few cases that we can be one hundred percent sure that the indicated provenance is correct.

Some Turkmen felts from the collection contain decorations which are highly reminiscent of felts from contemporary Turkmenistan. It looks highly probably that these felts were produced and used by one particular Turkmen tribe – the Saryks who live in Mary province in Turkmenistan, as well as in northern Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup>

One of the most interesting objects is a prayer mat, from Afghanistan (illustration no. 3). Because it was made for prayers and religious purposes, as a sacred artefact, the entire background of the felt is white, produced from the lamb or sheep's wool of natural colour, without the dark edge. The decoration in brown, red and dark blue, represents a *mihrab* niche that shows the direction of prayers in Islam. The niche is surrounded by a pattern known as ram's horn, which symbolizes prosperity and happiness.



Illustration no. 3

Felt prayer mat from the collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw. Afghanistan, the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, dim. 170 x 97, MAP15105.

<sup>4</sup> See: L. Beresneva, *The Decorative and Applied Art. of Turkmenia*, Aurora Art Publishers, Leningrad 1976; Marzena Godzińska, "Felic w kulturze ludów tureckich na podstawie współczesnych badań terenowych w Turcji i Turkmenistanie" (PhD diss., University of Warsaw, 2002) vol. 1, pp. 102–121.

In the niche, there are stripes of dark blue and white lattice. At the bottom of the mat, the decoration appears to be unfinished, but was probably intentional, so as not to close the pathway of the prayer. During author's research on Turkic speaking peoples' felt culture, which was conducted at the end of 1990s and the beginning of 2000s, very similar prayer mats were made by groups of Saryk Turkmen from the Mary province. Such kinds of prayer mats are used at home as well in public mosques (illustration no. 4, 5).<sup>5</sup>



Illustration no. 4

Interior of the mosque in Merv city, Turkmenistan, Mary Province, 1991.  
 (Photography from the author's archive).

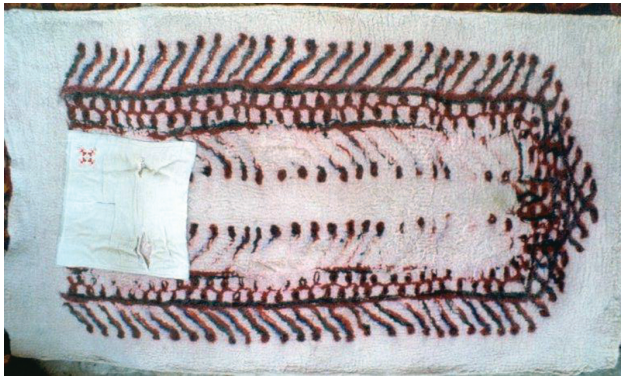


Illustration no. 5

Felt prayer mat, produced and used by Saryk Turkmen in in one of the mosques of Merv city, Turkmenistan, Mary Province, 1999. (Photography from the author's archive).

<sup>5</sup> Godzińska, "File w kulturze ludów tureckich na podstawie...", vol. 1, pp. 116–121.

The style of decoration of the Saryk tribe is so characteristic and unique that, although there is no precise provenance, several other objects in the Museum's collection can be easily described as products of this particular group. Probably the producers and users of those felt products, or their ancestors, had migrated to Afghanistan in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century fleeing from Soviet Russia.

However, analysing the decorations and colours of many felt mats does not always help us to identify the producers. Sometimes the decoration combines style characteristics for two or more tribes or even ethnic groups. This situation is not so very unusual in this region.

For example, one of the felt mats brought from Afghanistan, is decorated in a way typical for different Turkmen groups living on the borderlands of Afghanistan and Turkmenistan. Patterns of this mat combine elements of the chessboard and ram horns. The geometrical chessboard element suggests some influences of the Nohurli Turkmen tribe and the colours and shape of ram horns, though very popular in the region, indicates another tradition of decoration, possible from the Tekke tribe (illustration no. 6, 7, 8).<sup>6</sup>



Illustration no. 6

Felt mat from the collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw. Afghanistan, 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, dim. 150 x 130, MAP15105.



Illustration no. 7

Felt mat produced and used by Nohurli tribe from Nohur Mountains, Turkmenistan, Ahal Province, 1999. (Photography from the author's archive).

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, pp. 102–121.



Illustration no. 8

Felt mat, produced and used by Murçeli tribe from Murçe village, Turkmenistan, Ahal Province, 1999. (Photography from the author's archive).

Kazakhs have also produced some wonderful felts. Some of the objects brought from Afghanistan suggest Kazakh influence. The colours and the clear, strict decorative form of Kazakh felts made in the mosaic and appliqué techniques can be seen even in their pressed felts. The Museum of Asia and Pacific possesses quite a rich collection of Kazakh art and handicraft, including felt mats. The mosaic technique, in particular, is almost like a 'visiting card' of Kazakh felt handicraft. The mats are usually decorated with motifs referencing animal and floral elements. Special attention should be paid to floor-covering mats called *syrmak* or by Kyrgyz *shyrdak*. The patterns may be multicoloured or only two-coloured. Especially in the latter case, it is very difficult to determine which colour is the background, and which the foreground, because the patterns are constructed so as to be balanced 'positive and negatives' of one another (illustration no. 9). In the Museum's collection there are objects both made in mosaic and appliqué techniques, as well as pressed felts.



Illustration no. 9

Syrmak felt mat from the collection of the Asia and Pacific Muzeum in Warsaw, made in the patchwork and mosaic techniques, Kazakhstan, Alma-Ata, 1980/1990, dim. 170 x 102, MAP13455.



In the case of felt objects from Kazakhstan, the patterns may also combine styles of different groups. One excellent example of such a mixture of styles is a felt mat described as the product of Kazakhs from Kazakhstan which, however, has decorations typical for Saryks, along with influences of other Turkmen tribes. Round motifs of ram horns in the central field are typical for the Tekke (in Turkmenistan, Ahal Province) or Yomut tribes (in Turkmenistan, Balkan Province) but the loops surrounding the ram horns and the lattices and loops in the borders are rather characteristic for Saryk tribe (in Turkmenistan, Mary Province, illustration no. 10, 11, 12).<sup>7</sup>



Illustration no. 10

Felt mat from the collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw.

Although the mat was described as produced by Kazakhs, its decorations show similarities to the products of the Turkmen tribes, Saryk as well as Tekke or Yomut; Kazakhstan, the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, dim. 256 x 113, MAP17791.



Illustration no. 11

Detail of felt mat, produced and used by Saryk tribe with typical decoration with lattice and loops motifs. Turkmenistan, Ahal Province, 1999. (Photography from the author's archive).

<sup>7</sup> Beresneva, *The Decorative and Applied Art of Turkmenia*; Marzena Godzińska, *Dom i rodzina w symbolice turkmeńskich dywanów filcowych*, in: Zbigniew Jasiewicz (ed.), *Wschód w polskich badaniach etnologicznych i antropologicznych. Problematyka, badacza, znaczenia*, Biblioteka Telgte, Poznań 2004, pp. 99–110; Istvan Vidak, *Turkiestan Feltmakers, Yomud Felt Rug 'Keche'*, "Echoes", vol. 1985–1987, pp. 25–29.



Illustration no. 12

Felt mat, produced and used by Murçeli tribe from Murçe village, Turkmenistan, Ahal Province, 1999. (Photography from the author's archive).

Uzbek felt handicrafts are represented by several objects decorated with embroidery techniques. This is characteristic for Uzbek felts, along with felts made by the simple pressed felt method. Although the example in the Asia and Pacific Museum collection was acquired in Afghanistan and we have no information about the makers' ethnic group, the technique of decoration suggests that we are dealing with Uzbek art. Some felt mats brought from Afghanistan are analogous to Uzbek ones acquired by participants of the EWA-76 expedition. This is a significant indication of the endurance of the decorative motifs (illustration no. 13).



Illustration no. 13

Felt mat from the collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw, acquired in Afghanistan in the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is similar to a felt mat bought by the participants of the EWA-76 expedition from its producers and users, who were Uzbeks living in the north of Afghanistan (MAP3406). Afghanistan. 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, dim. 222 x 110, MAP16303.

Some artefacts which are especially richly decorated with pressed silk elements or embroidered with silk thread, were obtainable by people in Afghanistan through trade or exchange. That was probably the reason that Baloch (Baluch) or Kashmir felt mats

were sold in Kabul (MAP16586, MAP14961 or MAP15688). In contrast, people who are not very rich, and so cannot buy dyes to decorate the wool, and thus are not able to produce more richly decorated felt for sale, make the most simple decorations. At present it is absolutely impossible to decide where such kind of products originated. They could have been made in Afghanistan, Georgia or Anatolia. Sometimes the decorations show some artistic ambitions of their creators, sometimes the lack of aesthetic skills is obvious (illustration no. 14, 15).



Illustration no. 14

Felt mat from the collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw. Simple product, probably not made for sale. Afghanistan, the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, dim. 240 x 163, MAP15690.



Illustration no. 15

Felt mat from the collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw. Simple product, probably made not for sale. Afghanistan, the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, dim. 222 x 110, MAP16304.

Felt is used for many purposes and many different objects may be made from it. Along with simple floor mats, there can be clothes, forms of animal harness, elements of the yurt, bags, talismans and even souvenirs for tourists. One of the most beautiful

objects in the Asia and Pacific Museum's collection is the *khosay*, a ceremonial coat from Afghanistan. It is richly decorated with embroidery and with beautiful openwork sleeves (illustration no. 16ab).<sup>8</sup>



Illustration no. 16ab

Pushtuns' felt coat called *khosay* from the collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw. Afghanistan, Pushtuns, the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, dim. 222 x 110, MAP 8211.

Unfortunately, the Asia and Pacific Museum does not possess a Turkmen, Kazakh or Tajik yurt, but fortunately there are some elements of their interior equipment, decorations and bags for tools and home appliances in its collection. What is very interesting is that many of them, though acquired from different groups, show similar decorative motifs. Tent bags provide an excellent example of this – made from dark red felt with decoration of embroidered ram horns and bristle tassels are used by many nations and groups of Afghanistan – Uzbeks, Tajiks or Kyrgyz (illustration no. 17, 18).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Burkett, *The Art of the Feltmaker*, pp. 31–36.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 71–74.



Illustration no. 17

Felt tent bag, from the collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw. Afghanistan, Kyrgyz, the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, dim. 104 x 34, MAP13779. This bag, used for keeping spoons, was acquired from Kyrgyz users, but it could have been made by Uzbeks.



Illustration no. 18

Felt tent bag, from the collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw, Afghanistan, Kyrgyz, the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, dim. 110 x 37, MAP13780. This bag, used for keeping spoons, was acquired from Kyrgyz users, but it could have been made by Uzbeks.

Small products like tent bags, some tent decorations, animal covers, and hats, are relatively easy to produce and transport, without involving large numbers of people or arranging work at a specific time of the year. Thus, they are easy to collect, and small felt objects, such as elements of harness, animal covers, and all kinds of house decorations, including amulets, also show considerable mobility on the local market. Furthermore, contemporary amulets have begun to be made as a type of souvenir for the tourist. However, if the origin of the object was not recorded when it was bought, it may be difficult to achieve this information.

The Mongolian yurt (MAP15692) which is in the possession of the Asia and Pacific Museum must be also mentioned as a prestigious object, which has been exhibited in the

open-air for long time. Such objects are usually eagerly bought, collected and exhibited not only by art collectors but also by antiquity galleries and trading firms as an element of promotion of the institution.

### **The value of the collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw**

From the very beginning when the author started researching felt objects and felt handicrafts she was convinced that they were underestimated but valuable and unique products of culture. In the past, their meaning in the culture of nomad and shepherd societies was fundamental and extremely important. Modernization of life, especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, changed this situation.

Felts in general are relatively cheap, especially compared to woven carpets, kilims, silks or ikats. Although some ritual felts, like prayer mats or dowry mats that are richly decorated with some motifs of magical significance, are still very important, the young generation very often prefers modern and luxurious products.<sup>10</sup> This situation has not changed much despite the official promotion of folk culture, animation and conservation activities of NGOs, as well as growing popularity of small souvenir products.

As a matter of fact, felt handicraft became the focus of attention of researchers and collectors relatively late. In museums' collections felts appeared at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and mainly in the museums of the Russian Empire. In contemporary Russia one of the most valuable and the richest collections of felt products are in the collection of Museum of Oriental Arts in Moscow and in the Russian Museum of Ethnography in St. Petersburg. Some of the former Russian collections became a part of collections preserved in national museums in Central Asian countries, after these states gained independence as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union. In European and American Museums felt collections appeared in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for example in the British Museum, or even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, for example in the Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum.

Perhaps due to the fact that felt was less valued by collectors and museums, felts could avoid the ideological, political and even scientific pressure and manipulations which has damaged the archaic cultural values of other textiles of the region. Felt objects in Central Asia very often preserve the elements of social and spiritual culture of its producers and users.<sup>11</sup>

The felt objects in the Asia and Pacific Museum are relatively new. Some objects of the collection come from 1970s and 1980s, however the biggest part of the collection comes from the 1990s and was usually bought as newly produced objects. So they are only about 30 years old. Textiles in Museums collections are usually much older. But in the case of felt time goes much faster. The producers and users find the felt rather

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<sup>10</sup> Marzena Godzińska, *Humble Messenger of Past Epochs, Geçen asyrlary asylyly mirasy*, "Miras", 2007, s. 98–107.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem.

cheap, so it is not carefully stored but used in everyday life. It is even rarely repaired. For example a new felt mat is used in home, inside. When after some time the decorations are faded and some holes and abrasions appear the felt is used outside in the garden or in the field during harvest. When it begins to disintegrate into parts, it may be used as a litter in shoes or for young animals and even for sealing wooden walls. At the end nothing remains (illustration no. 19, 20).



Illustration no. 19

Turkmen house interior with felt mats on the floor, Turkmenistan, Balkan Province, 1999.  
(Photography from the author's archive).



Illustration no. 20

Turkmen old felt yurt interior with ten year old felt mats on the floor, Turkmenistan, Ahal Province, 1999. (Photography from the author's archive).

If someone uses a felt mat as it is intended, this process may take about 20–30 years. It is almost impossible now to find in some households in Afghanistan or in other countries felts made at the same time as those in museums and private collections. Therefore, every artifact should be highly appreciated. Although the felt collection of Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw is so incomplete in terms of the dearth of information about the objects included in it, it is still extremely valuable.

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