

The GCAA Presents:

## THE PAINTBRUSH BLOG

THIS MONTH AT GUELPH ARTISANS

by Gillian Joseph



### Heather Nagel

The felting of wool is a practice that has existed in Central Asia and parts of Europe for thousands of years. In fact, felt was used for many things including rugs, mattresses, protective armour, clothing and even for making boats and dwellings. For ancient Asian tribesmen, felt became important for more than just comfort and survival. It also became an expression of artistic, religious and ceremonial significance, as demonstrated through pieces that still exist in museums today. Flashing forward, anyone who has ventured into the *Guelph Artisans* in the Old Quebec Street Shoppes in Guelph has seen the beautiful fabric pieces and felt work of local fabric artist Heather Nagel. Heather's panels, felt pieces and felted jewelry are popular items in the store and they brighten the room with their vivid colours and shapes.



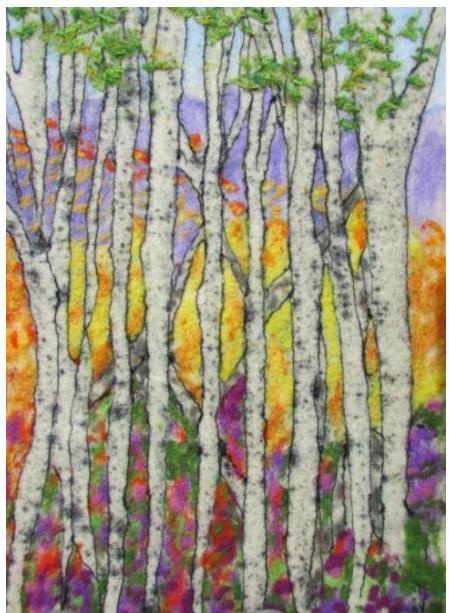
As a child, Heather grew up on a farm where the toys that gave her the greatest pleasure were those provided by nature, such as sticks and stones. Furthermore, one of the benefits of her rural upbringing was the opportunity to acquire the ability to look at objects differently and to explore new things, perhaps with fewer barriers and rules than city-dwelling children may have encountered. "Being outdoors inspires me," says Heather, "and this carries on through my artistic process even now. When I want to recreate a vintage garment, for example, it's with foliage, skeletal leaves, seed pods or even wild oats sewn or woven into a pattern". Not only does nature play an important role in her inspiration, but Heather



also loves to use vintage and upcycled fabric in her projects whenever she can – incorporating rough edges and worn-down spots of material and threads that encourage the observer to not only admire, but also to reflect when viewing her work. “I like to make my work a ‘story of life’,” says Heather. “An old worn quilt or a vintage garment reminds us that life is fragile, there is an end to it, and that is completely natural” she says. But where does she get her materials? Heather laughs at the question and suggests that she may have a reputation among her friends for collecting vintage treasures. “People have items that they drop off at my house - a dirty old fleece, or old blankets. Someone once dropped off more than a dozen 50-year-old cotton slips!” says Heather. She tries to use what she finds at her fingertips, or what people give to her, because she feels that it is important to use and re-use what we already have....to give that worn-down thread a bit more time.

The challenging process of felting, in particular, is a joy for Heather, who often incorporates coloured wool and silk into her creations. Even in this creative process she maintains the narrative of nature in her work. For example, in her Bee Series pieces she uses beeswax and draws fine bee bodies in a thin line on the fabrics. This

was inspired by research she found dating from 1910 that showed how bee wings, although fragile, can dramatically affect the quality of life of a bee. Heather also incorporates beeswax into her felting, which, she says, can be a challenge.



Yet, Heather doesn't come from a family of artists who set her on this creative path, at least not in the traditional sense. Her mother loved to sew and her Dad loved to garden; both tapping into a creative spirit that has obviously rubbed off well. Heather has built upon that creative spirit and encouraged it in her own children. One of her daughters is a potter with a degree in Fine Art, and the other is also very creative. Heather said it was important for her to encourage

her daughters to follow their own dreams and to pursue what they each love to do. She is pleased that they have both grown up to appreciate freedom and creativity in all of their projects.

This emphasis on creative freedom has produced, among other things, beautiful felted jewelry that is both stylish and bold. “I like to try different things and I follow the work of different artists around the world” says Heather. Prior to COVID,

Heather moved to Haliburton for a summer and studied Independent Studio Practice at Haliburton School of Art. She thoroughly enjoyed the challenge of being in a small class with contemporary artists and it refreshed her thinking. “It was summer. I lived in a cabin on a lake in Haliburton and came back from class to that beauty every night!” Heather has also had the pleasure and privilege of taking online courses over a one-year period given by well-known felt artist Fiona Duthie, who lives on Salt Spring Island in British Columbia. By taking these courses, Heather has learned more about creating felted jewelry and other three-dimensional shapes. “Felting is hard work,” she says, “you need a strong upper body and the felt has to be firm, to hold a shape”. Taking courses with people who challenge her to think differently, or to inspire her to see what she is doing in a different way, really excites her.



There are two distinct paths that Heather takes to promote her work. One is functional - making and selling items for summer, Christmas and wearable art shows, or by creating vases and other pieces for commissions. Her second promotional path is making big, unusual pieces for juried art shows which can be a very long, complicated processes so typical of creating contemporary art. Yet, as challenging as it can be, Heather enthusiastically offers suggestions for people who want to be creative and to move their work out for others to enjoy. “Identify what you love”, she says, “accept that we all like different things”. For example, Heather suggests that quilters can sometimes be very precise in each step of their process because the quality of their art depends upon accurate measurements. “I am not a quilter”, she says, “frayed edges and uneven threads, that’s what I love. It’s important to know who you are and to try your hand at anything creative ... don’t be afraid”. The bold and beautiful work of Heather Nagel reflects her love of nature and inspires us to appreciate the fearless, yet elegant, creativity of someone who knows exactly who she is!