

Felt Figures

The purpose of this project is to experience the natural properties of wool while making small figures for worship stories.



Supplies:

Several pieces of carded wool or wool roving—see source list at end
A metal bowl large enough to move your hands around in
Ivory liquid soap and warm water
Old towels to mop up spills
Plastic egg about 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches in diameter for manger

Project instructions:

1. Felt can be made just about anywhere. If it is a nice day, you can work outside. If you are inside, you will want to work near a sink. When working with a group of children, you can work at tables or sit on the floor.
2. Start with a bowl of warm water. Several children can be seated around one bowl. Do not use glass bowls as glass gets slippery when handled with soapy water.
3. Put one large squirt of liquid soap in the water. Liquid Ivory works very well. Soap augments the natural ability of water to swell the wool fibers and open the scales, which is an essential part of the bonding process. It also allows your hand to slide over the wool more easily.

4. Begin with the head of the figure. Take a piece of flesh colored wool and loosely tie an overhand knot in the center. The size of the wool depends on the size you want the finished figure. You may want to start with a piece of wool about 8 inches long and 1 inch wide for a figure that will stand about 4 inches tall.
5. Submerge the wool in the warm, soapy water and gently squeeze it about 10 times. Squeeze out the water, hold the damp wool in the palm of one hand and rub it with the fingers of the other hand. Rub gently in a circular motion, rotating the wool piece so that all sides are touched. This will encourage the wool fibers to tangle and mat together. Repeat this process of squeezing in the water and then rubbing with the fingers several times. You will see and feel a difference in the wool.
6. Start adding more layers of wool. For the **Baby Lord**, start out with a flesh colored wool. Then add two layers of white wool to form the swaddling cloths. Wrap the first layer of wool horizontally and repeat the process of submerging it in the water followed by rubbing. Add the second layer vertically. As you continue to dip, squeeze and rub the wool, you can also encourage it into the desired form. Children love this process. If the children are very young, an adult may need to do the final forming and encourage the desired shape.
7. To make a **manger** for the Baby Lord, use a plastic egg (readily available before Easter in craft stores) to form the oval shape. Take a piece of tan wool large enough to cover the egg and wrap it around the egg. Submerge it in the warm, soapy water for a few seconds in order to get it thoroughly wet. Hold the egg in one hand while gently rubbing the wool in a circular motion with the fingers of the other hand. When you feel the fibers matting, add another layer of darker brown wool, wrapping it in the other direction around the egg. Wet this and continue to gently rub the wool. The wool should be thick enough so that the plastic egg does not show through now. Let the wool dry completely. It will take several hours, depending on how much water was squeezed out of it. Then use a small manicure scissors to cut out an oval shape on one side of the egg. You will then have a manger in which to lay the Baby Lord and an extra piece that the children sometimes like to use as a blanket for the Baby.
8. For a **shepherd, wise man, angel, Mary** or **Joseph**, after starting with flesh colored wool for the head, add two layers of colored wool (or white wool for an angel) to make the garment. Again, the first layer is wrapped horizontally, the second layer is wrapped vertically. To make a figure that can stand easily, encourage the final shape to be conical. Use your finger to make an indent in the bottom of the figure and it will stand more steadily when dry. More colored wool can be used to add hair, a beard, head wrap, or stripes to the garment of the figure. Use small pieces of wool and follow the same steps of wetting and squeezing it in water, then manipulating the surface in order to felt the fibers together.

9. For **Mary**, use blue wool for her garment and white for the head wrap. Use your imagination to add special features to your particular figure: ribbon crowns for the wise men, staff for the shepherd and so forth.
10. Place your figures on a waterproof surface to dry. It will take several hours. If you are not satisfied with the end result or, if over time and with handling, the figures become misshapen, just rewet and reshape them.
11. If you try this process yourself first, you will see that it is simple and satisfying to do. You can also decide how big you want your figures and, therefore, what sizes you need of the wool pieces for each part. When working with a group of little children, it is a good idea to have the wool pieces ready and at hand before beginning the project.

Sources for wool roving:

The Spinnery
1367 Hy. 202 North
Neshanic Station, NJ 08853
908.369.3260

West Earl Woolen Mill
RD 2, 110 Cocalico Creek Rd.
Ephrata, PA 17522
717.859.2241