

# CRAFT DYNAMICS: EMPOWERING FELT MAKING THROUGH DESIGN

## DYNAMICS

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, we argue that design can empower a craftsperson and accordingly provides the ability to maintain her work and practice. In addition, it can provide new opportunities to the local community she is part of. The study presents case studies from the field of felting in Turkey, a rooted craft that has been transforming in the last two decades from design and product range views. With this study, we aim to understand the field of felting in Turkey and the role of design in the transitioning of felting. First, we present the general situation based on the interviews that we conducted with eight craftspeople. After that, we group their practices into three main approaches, namely artistic, design, or conventional craft, according to their way of idea generation, by following Ihatsu's (1998: 170) diagram for craft perspectives. Finally, we present in detail one craftsperson from each of the three approaches. Based on these findings, we argue that craftspeople who use design are more empowered: they can create their own craft identities, sustain their practice, and build productive relationships with the local community.

**Keywords:** craft, felting, design, empowerment.

## INTRODUCTION

Craft is a passionate and dedicated way of production (Sennet 2008: 20). Making craft becomes an attitude of the craftsperson in which the passion for creating becomes a part of the identity and everyday life of the maker (Adamson 2013: 4). Rooted in creative making, crafts are practised in various ways within which the production method may remain similar but the characteristics of the craftsperson differ.

In this paper, we present a case study in felting in Turkey to aid in understanding different types of craft production that have their foundations in traditional knowledge and experience. Based on our study, felting is practised in three ways: in a conventional manner in terms of idea generation and using old designs; with design thinking to develop new products; and with an artistic manner as a medium for personal exploration. In this study, we present the characteristics of major approaches to felting in Turkey. The results are based on interviews with felt makers in various cities and our field notes. Throughout our study, we have been particularly interested in how use of design empowers the craftsperson.

In this study, we use design to refer to making with creative thinking and empowerment as the ability or strength to accomplish something. Previous studies about craft and design interaction are typically conducted as case studies with two types of aims: In some cases, design is introduced to craftspeople as a way of new product development (Kaya 2015; Pokela 2006). In other cases, craft knowledge is presented to designers as a knowledge resource for production (Chuenrudeemol et.al. 2012; Tung 2012). In our research, we build our discussion upon the existing situation of design usage and its influences.

We argue that craftspeople who use design as an element in their making processes experience advantages as a result of which they empower themselves to sustain their work. In this way, the empowered craftsperson maintains her practice and provides new working opportunities for her local community.

## CRAFT MEETS DESIGN FOR EMPOWERMENT

Craft researcher Glenn Adamson (2013: 5) argues that since the beginning of modernism, crafts that are not associated with art are undervalued, and in the cases of crafts that are perceived as women's or ethnic crafts, the depreciation was even stronger. Contemporary art researcher Howard Risatti (2007: 2) argues that the prestige of craft is underestimated due to the lack of critical thinking based on certain theories. However, this is a changing trend. As Adamson (2013: 6) argues, craft is now studied from various perspectives, such as from the viewpoints of anthropology and economics. Recent studies in craft cover issues in activism (Greer 2014; von Busch 2010; von Busch 2014), heritage studies (UNESCO 2003: 2), and human-computer interaction (Wang & Kaye 2011).

Despite this undervaluation at times, craftspeople continue practising, and the field of craft remains inspiring for others. Sociologist Richard Sennett (2008: 20) argues that craft making is an intuitive desire to do a job well. This dedication might be the reason why a craftspeople continues creating. The life-long commitment of craftspeople also urged us to conduct this study to understand the craft discourse.

Craft researcher Anna-Marja Ihatsu (1998: 170) argues that the field of craft is not homogenous; it can be approached from different viewpoints – such as art, design, or conventional crafts. These perspectives are generated according to the use of creativity, anonymity of the maker, and aesthetic or functional value. She claims that different crafts production types adopt concepts from design and arts (*ibid.*) (Figure 3).

Similarly, social scientist Donald Schön (1988: 182-183) argues that creative makers develop personal manners towards the practice as a result of all the different types of personal interaction and interpretations that happen during the making. Different types of making are generated and they depict the coexistence of general and specific knowledge, practice, or experience (*ibid.* 183). Accordingly, ceramic artist Maarit Mäkelä and glass artist Riikka Latva-Somppi (2011) show in their study, that the creative process and its results can be strongly dependent on the maker's personal histories and experiences. Both Ihatsu (1998) and Schön (1988) describe different vehicles for making in relation to the personal approaches of craftspeople. Design is one of the vehicles for craft making.

Designer and researcher Victor Papanek (1981: 26) defines design as a tool to provide simple solutions to complex problems. In his definition, he argues that complexity comes from functionalities in different aspects of making, such as methods related to making or use of materials, association with community or culture, aesthetics, needs related to survival or identity, teleis, and use as a way of communication (*ibid.* 18-22). As a more focused definition, design researcher Nigel Cross (2001: 54) argues that design knowledge mainly focuses

on human-made artefacts and is generated from interactions with an artificial world during the self-reflection, production, and use phases. According to these perspectives, design and craft overlap as they both have a strong relationship between maker, material, and making process. In this regard, using design as a way of thinking can cover many possible situations in crafts that design can contribute to.

The notion of design thinking has been suggested as a way to expand the use of design elements in different fields in innovative ways. Design researcher Richard Buchanan (1992: 10-11) argues that design thinking is a way of conceptually repositioning existing signs, things, actions, and thoughts with the aim of making experimental innovation. Design practitioners Tim Brown and Jocelyn Wyatt (2010: 30) argue that design thinking is built upon local expertise and opportunities, and used in the inspiration, ideation, and implementation phases of making processes to provide new points of view concerning existing practices.

In previous research, design and craft are studied together from the collaborative practising view. These studies are typically conducted as case studies in which designers meet with local craftspeople and introduce new idea generation while gaining inspiration from indigenous knowledge. The motivations behind these studies are various, including those focusing on local knowledge as product development strategy (Tung, 2012), sustaining cultural heritage (Atalay 2015, Kokko & Kaipainen: 2015), sustainable tourism (Miettinen 2006), social welfare (Pokela, 2006), and empowerment of women (Kaya 2015).

Empowerment can be perceived as a hidden umbrella aim for these studies, since they all revisit a certain issue and propose ways of re-using that issue. In our study, we also discuss the empowering feature of design through case studies in felting. We differ from the previous studies mentioned above in that we do not propose a new project to connect design and craft for empowerment, but we study existing and naturally occurring use of design. Through our study that is based on the field trip in the areas of felting in Turkey, we examine how craftspeople who use design gain more advantages compared to those who do not use.

## CONTEMPORARY CRAFT IN TURKEY AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON FELTING

In Turkey, the craft paradigm has been shifting in idiosyncratic ways. This is firstly because Turkey is a late-industrialised country and, secondly, because of the transformations in social and economic policies in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Turkish art historian Ayla Ödekan (2008) claims that in the first half of the twentieth century, craftspeople were encouraged to maintain their practices in order to create national identities through crafts that have a rooted history in the local culture, such as weaving. At the same time, industrially produced products became

accessible and affordable for many parts of society, and craftspeople could not compete with the spread of mass-produced objects. As Ödekan argues, crafts have become oriental tourist artefacts based upon consumption, losing their authenticity, which was based on traditional knowledge and experience. Until the 2000s, crafts and local influences disappeared from creative practices (Karakuş 2007). During the 2000s, locality has become more visible both in design and art, and craft has been re-discovered as an input for local and at the same time global creative production (Karakuş 2007; Ödekan 2008; Turan 2008). Currently, as described by design researchers Kaya and Yançatrol-Yağız (2011), designers and craftspeople have developed a way for collaboration: designers generate the initial ideas and develop their products further together with craftspeople, through experiential making.

As a rooted craft practice, felting is a basic method of transforming wool into a compound piece through high pressure and water. The resulting products can be both two and three dimensional. In Turkey, felting is associated with rural areas since the material resources are rural based and typical products, such as carpets, saddle cushions, and the shepherd's felt cloak, are associated with rural life. Ethnographic researcher Burkett's (1979: 77) study indicates that felting has been losing its significance in daily use since industrial materials such as plastic and nylon artefacts are more affordable and accessible compared to felted artefacts. That said, in comparison to what she presented in 1979, felt making has had technical transformations: currently the production time is shorter and the product range is more diverse.

Felting is based on hand and hand-operated low-tech machine production. Traditional products are usually composed symmetrically in both axes with repetition of motifs (Figure 1). The uncoloured wool, ivory or brown, is usually used as the base colour, and dyed wool is used to decorate. Making traditional felt products requires muscle force due to their size and thickness. For example, a 1.5 x 2-metre carpet is made of ten kilograms of wool which requires three times more water. As a result, making felt pieces in big sizes requires the collaboration of at least two craftspeople.



Figure 1: Traditional carpet examples with symmetrical compositions. Tire, Turkey, 2016. Photograph: Author 1 (A1).

We conduct our study in the context of felting since its cultural linkage provides an existing understanding of design, while new implications have been emerging significantly over the last decade. Simultaneously, felt has been enlarging its practising area, reaching artistic and industrial mass production.

Despite the changes in the field, the production method remains the same, thus positioning design and creative thinking as the determinant feature for identifying the artefact and its maker. In order to understand the dynamics in the field of felting, and particularly how design influences the field, one of the authors made a field trip to Turkey.

#### METHODS OF COLLECTING DATA:

The data used in this study was collected in three phases, as illustrated in Table 1. In the first phase, we conducted a survey to identify different stakeholders that are part of the current craft discourse in the field of felting in Turkey. For this purpose, we started with mapping the felt practice in Turkey with an online archive search using the keywords *felt* and *city names*. We collected information about craftspeople who trained as fellows, and in addition artists and designers who use felt as a primary or subsidiary medium in their works. Based on this endeavour, we were able to recognise thirty-nine actors in the field. Some of them practise felting together in small scale workshops and some of them practise individually.

First Phase	
Method	Mapping the field of felting in Turkey
Aims and Research Questions	To understand the dynamics of the field. In what ways does felt making exist in Turkey? Questions include women's presence, size of the community, collaboration, and activities.
Sample	39 significant people, 20 sites that felt is practised, 4 communal studios for felting
Findings	Geographical illustration of felt presence. Demonstration of the scope of felt making that includes studies of art, design, cultural heritage, and woman empowerment.
Evaluation	Features of the sites are studied according to background of craftspeople, product types, and collaboration with other practitioners. Then, sites are grouped into three according to the general characteristics: traditional manner, transitional manner, contemporary manner. The second group was selected to be studied further since traditional and non-traditional approaches coexist in these sites.
Second Phase	
Method	Interviews with the sample created from the

	map
Aims and Research Questions	To understand specific features of the field. In what ways do craftspeople practise felting?
Sample	Visit to 5 sites. Interviews with 8 craftspeople, 1 hobby teacher, 2 communal studio directors (one of them is a craftsman).
Findings	Identification of significant differences and similarities among felt making.  Diversity in product types.
Evaluation	Three significant types of felt making exist that approach the practice from art, design, and conventional perspectives.
<b>Third Phase</b>	
Method	Case study of three craftspeople
Aims and Research Questions	To understand characteristics of different approaches.  Can design empower the field of crafts?
Sample	3 craftspeople, one representative from each approach: art, design, and conventional craft
Findings	Identification of interviewed craftspeople and positioning them within different types of felt making
Evaluation	Design is able to empower a craftsman, who then becomes able to maintain the practice and provide opportunities to the local community.

Table1: Three phases of collecting data.

Based on this mapping, we were able to geographically illustrate the key regions where felting is practised (Figure 3). We identified three different groups that had their own distinctive features for felting. The first group emerged around felt makers who work independently in the traditional manner in terms of production process and product range. Felt makers in the second group adopt new styles while preserving the traditional manner. They collaborate with each other and occasionally with other creative practitioners. Felt makers in the third group have developed their original styles and their only attachment to traditions is the method of felt making. For this study, we selected those representatives who belong to the second group of felt makers, since these craftspeople combine traditional and new elements in their practices.

In the second phase, we conducted semi-structured interviews with eight craftspeople. Interviewing was selected as a method to get as much information as possible, mainly about the practice. As Schön (1988: 183) proposes, the subjective perception of creatives generates different types of perspectives since the knowledge and practice used is personalised. As a result, we included questions about personal histories and experiences to identify different approaches.

We also included questions related to the current situation of felting and perceptions regarding the future of felting, as well as the making and ideation process. In addition, we studied the field notes that were written during and after the interviews. These accounts included the emotional reactions of interviewees, working space, and the neighbouring shops. We used the *cut and sort* method for classifying interviewees to find the main themes that characterise their practices (Ryan & Bernard, 2003: 94-96).

After identifying the different types of felt practitioners, we understood that the field is not homogenous and that a linear study of craft does not represent all the types of approaches that we discovered. Thus, we interpreted Ihatsu's (1998: 170) diagram on perspectives of crafts and grouped the different approaches of eight craftspeople into three: that is, conventional craft, craft-design, and art-craft. We located our interviewees on the diagram according to their use of art, design, and conventional elements (Figure 2).

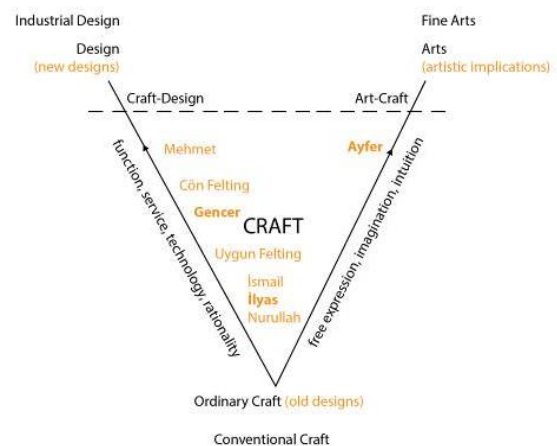


Figure 2: Ihatsu's diagram representing the field of craft. We positioned craftspeople we interviewed on the diagram (marked in orange). From these, we selected three people for further study (marked in bold). Two of the interviews are presented differently, Cön Felting and Uygun Felting, as they have family-run structures and there is no leading name.

In the third phase, we selected one craftsman from each perspective for further study (Figure 2). The aims and questions in the third phase build the main discussion of this paper. Since we aim to examine identical features of three different approaches more in detail, we conducted our study as cases. Yin (1981: 97) argues that case studies are research methods to be used for exploratory purposes. They are conducted in real-life contexts (ibid. 98) and, as Flick (2009: 134) argues, they present particular parts of a general field. After selecting three craftspeople, we examined these cases in more detail to understand the role of design in the practice of felting in Turkey.



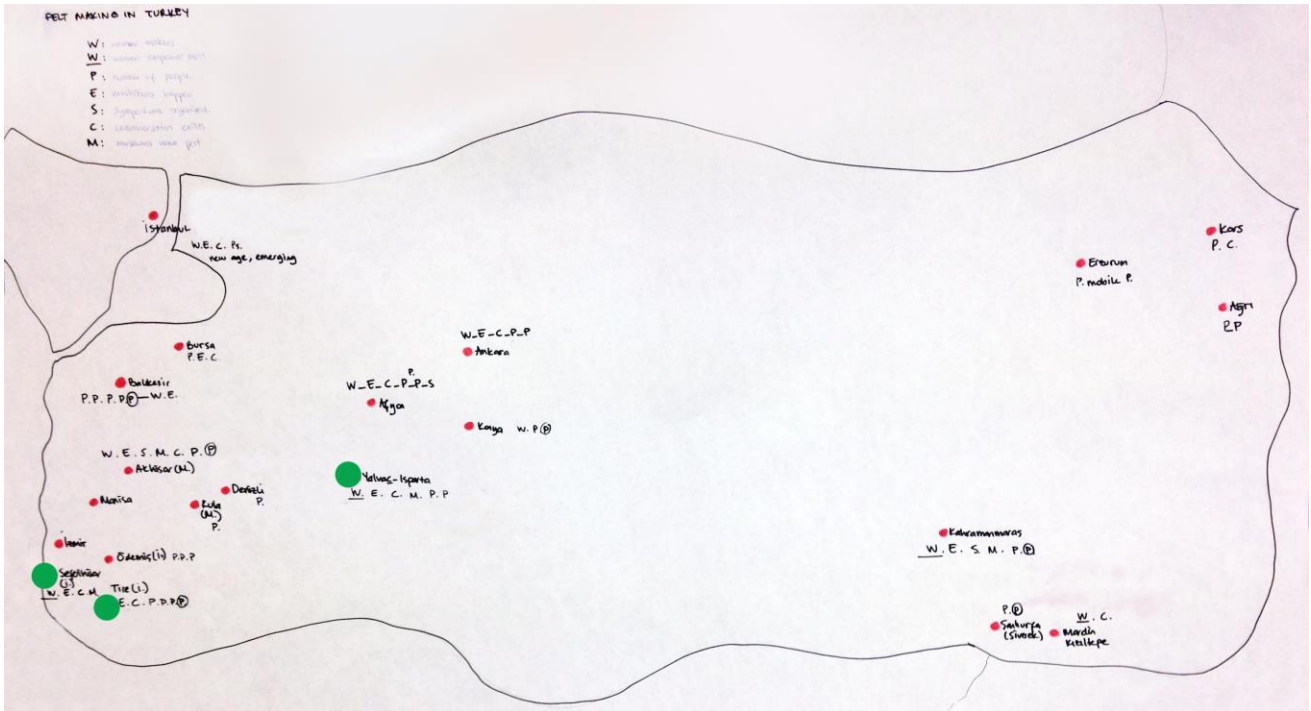


Figure 3: The craftspeople and regions are located on the map of Turkey. The map gives information about the regions, size of the felt community, background of the craftspeople, and events organised in the field. The three fields we present in this study are marked in green.

### THREE DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO FELT PRACTICE

For this study, we selected three craftspeople, each of them representing different corners of Ihatsu's triangle. We examined these cases more closely by looking at how the use of design influences their method of production, outcome, and interaction with the local community.

From the conventional craft perspective, we present the case of İlyas: a practitioner who works in a way similar to the traditional manner in terms of the artefacts he makes and communication instruments he uses. He is significantly different from other craftspeople we present, since he maintains the felting technique he learnt from his father. In his own felting, he applies interpreted versions of designs his father taught him (Figure 4). In his father's composition, the large motif in the centre, which is called round belly, *yuvarlak göbek*, would be repeated three times, whereas İlyas prefers to apply the motif just once.

His relationship with his customers is similar to ancient one since the person who needs a new product –usually locals from the surrounding villages – bring the wool, the raw material, and in exchange receive the carpet or shepherd's cloak. He co-operates his workshop with another craftsperson and they rarely engage with other felt makers or events in the field of felting. When asked about craftspeople who use design he says that

...they don't do this type of felt [traditional carpets]. They [scarf making and carpet

making] can't coexist [at one workshop], it [scarf making] is a clean job. For example, you can't dirty a scarf; a person coming from Istanbul won't buy it. But [a] shepherd cloak is not like that. The use areas are different.



Figure 4: Carpets made by İlyas. He uses public spaces to leave pieces to dry and to exhibit them. Tire, Turkey, 2016. Photograph: A1.

From the craft-design perspective, we present the case of Gencer, who is the third generation felt maker in his family. He describes his collaboration with a designer, during the 2000s, as the turning point in his practice, since after that time he has started using design as an element in making. Currently, he collaborates with a designer: his role as a craftsperson is to interpret and produce the instructions and sketches that the designer sends to him. The final outcomes are carpets he collaboratively produces with a designer (Figure 5).

In his own designs, he is open to experimenting with new product types, such as garments and accessories, as well as producing carpets with traditional designs. He collaborates with local women in the production of some pieces, such as stitching on purses and slippers. He rarely duplicates his products. As a second practice, he reconditions the wool he collects from locals: to produce fine and soft products, he compiles only thin wool pieces from the pile he collected. Recently, he started wool generation as an additional business to felting.



Figure 5: Carpets made by Gencer and his designer partner. Yalvaç, Turkey, 2016. Photograph: A1.

From the art-craft perspective, we present the case of Ayfer who studied painting at a fine arts university, and learned felting from a master later in her life. She has started her current studio to empower local women, who have become her colleagues now. She characterises her practice through three channels: the first is based on artefacts in demand in the felt market, such as scarves and garments (Figure 6) that are mostly produced by craftswomen working at the studio, after Ayfer prototypes her designs. In the second channel, the women makers produce accessories, such as purses and keychains, which are quick to produce and targeted at large groups of people. In her third channel, she is more experiential and artistic as she explores new colouring or form-giving ideas and produces her own designs. In this endeavour, she works alone and calls this her artistic production.

In all three cases, the production techniques are the same in terms of applying pressure on the wool, yet each craftsperson has her own characteristics concerning production procedure, production space, and produced artefacts. Design has different roles in each case that influences the visibility of the craftsperson in terms of engaging within several environments, such as mentoring workshops at the universities, offering courses for hobby teachers, or collaborating with the Ministry of Culture. As a result of the increase in visibility and size of the audience, craftspeople reconfigure their way of working as a means of creating new collaboration options with other craftspeople, like tailors, and skilful local women.



Figure 6: A vest by Ayfer. She identifies this piece as her artistic interpretation of a typical product. Wool is combined with silk fabric. Seferihisar, Turkey, 2016. Photograph: A1.

One of the main differences between these three people is the use of material: İlyas collects wool from the locals and use it as it is, Gencer collects wool from the locals and treats it to pick only the fine pieces, and Ayfer buys imported wool. Gencer and Ayfer use material in new ways. For example, they combine wool with fabric during the felting process to be able to use the outcome in a wide range of areas. They both make products for broader ranges of activity and Ayfer partially shifts to fashion by making scarves and garments.

The workspace of these craftspeople differ from each other as well: the conventional workshop looks like an environment that lives on its own, and workshops become more sterile or refined towards the art-craft workshops. This change is also reflective of the audience: while typically villagers and locals form İlyas's audience as customers, Gencer and Ayfer have more diverse audiences that include customers and people who follow their practice and works. As Ayfer states

[M]y customers are ... [people who] want to buy cultural products ... They tell me they are curious [about what] I have been making during the year ... and [even when they do not want to buy, the customers] ask me to send them photos [of my works] ... the customer doesn't end her relationship [with me]

Finally, the third major difference concerns the relationship that craftspeople build with their local community and their interactions with it. İlyas, from the conventional craft perspective, mostly works at his workshop and rarely interacts with the local community other than for commercial purposes. On the other hand, Gencer and Ayfer have larger networks that include



artists, designers, and scholars from Turkey and abroad. As a benefit from their large network, the practices of Gencer and Ayfer have become more accepted in the community. Accordingly, this gives them the ability to empower themselves and others. They both offer felting as an additional income for women who are mostly of low socio-economic status.

Using design interventions in craft production has been a tool to empower women of low socioeconomic status. Several research and practice examples are available from elsewhere in the world as well as from Turkey. These studies approach the collaboration between craft and design from cultural heritage (Atalay 2015), social welfare (Pokela 2006), or social innovation (Kaya 2015) perspectives, as mentioned above. However, our study is to be distinguished from these examples as we have been studying the field as it has occurred naturally – it is not a result of designer intervention. One reason for this is that piece work in Turkey especially in the textile practices such as carpet weaving, knitting, and garment making, is a long established working style for skilful women who are mostly of low socio-economic status (Harrell 1981; Quataert 1986; White 1994). Despite the problematic issues that piece work brings, such as informal economies, it is still valuable since working creates a social and economic space for women with socio-economic barriers.

#### EMPOWERING THE FIELD OF CRAFT

Through a case study in felting in Turkey, we aimed at understanding different types of craft practices and how using design empowers the craftsperson and the practice. In our study, we found out that design can empower the craftsperson and provide her with abilities to make significant changes in the field of craft through three channels.

First, design can empower the craftsperson to maintain her practice. In the interviews, craftspeople using design stated that they mentor at workshops at the local, national, and international level. This allows them to enlarge their network while obtaining inspiration from different approaches. Through participating at widely-accepted events, craftspeople overcome the limitations of locality and become more confident regarding making new experiments.

As one result of empowering the self, the craftsperson becomes able to sustain her practice. When we asked craftspeople about their predictions for the future, the replies of craftspeople who use design were significantly optimistic, while craftspeople working in the conventional manner stated that felting is dying. Ayfer states that all felt makers are capable of gaining a living through felting whereas İlyas states that he will stop working in a few years:

... there are only two people left who do this [carpet making] job [in Tire region]. Some days we just sit. It means it [the practice] is disappearing ... it is not suitable for two people

[to make] ... If I can, I will go and ask the district governor [to promote felting] to art school students [to practise at my workshop as] apprentices, so that the practice won't die and they [the students] will be knowledgeable [in a field] ... [If they [officers] can [arrange it] I will continue [felt making] as long as I am able to. Otherwise, I won't be able to do it [anymore].

As the other result of empowering the self, the craftsperson develops an ability to provide opportunities and potentials for her local community. Both Gencer and Ayfer collaborate with local women during the production process. For example, the local women make keychains (Figure 7) at Ayfer's studio and they charge Ayfer based on the number of pieces they produce during the day.



Figure 7: Keychains made by women at Ayfer's studio as piecework. Seferihisar, Turkey, 2016. Photograph: A1.

The perspectives and personal histories of each case are influential on their outcome, as their positions affect their perceptions. For example, İlyas and Gencer were born into felt making and, in a way, they naturally learned felting, whereas Ayfer learned felting from a master when she already had a career as a painter. After her fulfilling interactions with the material, she shifted her main interest to felting. Since Ayfer stepped into the field with her newly developing creative perspective for felting, she was more open to new experiments. On the other hand, İlyas and Gencer have developed their creative perspectives while making felt when young. Since they did not receive any other education, either on felting or crafts, their creative perspective is mainly shaped by their fathers' material interactions and their own early material interactions.

Apart from the existing benefits, a long-term result of empowering the self and the practice would be support of the local culture and the sustainable development of the local community. In their extensive investigation, Nancy Duxbury, researcher in cultural policy, and Sharon Jeannotte, researcher in urban sociology, (2010)

note that concerning the continuation of the wellbeing of communities and provision of sustainable local development, cultural sustainability has been suggested and studied by researchers from around the world. In this context, culture includes creative activities, local arts, heritage, and traditions (ibid. 10). Sustainability of culture can make an impact on economic, environmental, and social sustainability as a means of upholding cultural identities, focusing on local development, and creating a dialogue between local, national, and international stakeholders (ibid. 3-5).

The current situation of the field of felting presents different combinations of making, and the use of traditional knowledge in production. However, in each of the three cases personal paths and tastes in practice remain the most visible and powerful tools of craftspeople. Each craftspeople, practising in different forms, produces value through their knowledge and practice. As feminist cultural theorist Donna Haraway (1988: 580) argues, “we do need ... the ability partially to translate knowledges among very different – and power-differentiated – communities”. Through these translations, one can share her own visions from her point of view as part of the “situated knowledge” (ibid.). This research is a way of translating the value from different ways of crafts production through studying them within a multi-angle perspective. In this paper, we present craftspeople practising felting in Turkey as cases that show them translating different types of knowledge, like design knowledge, and inserting it into their practice to empower themselves.

Based on our findings, we argue that design and creative adoptions provide positive contributions to the practice: it empowers the craftspeople to generate value through idiosyncratic ways. As a result, self-empowerment proposes ways to maintain the practice and creates new ways of interaction with local community. These contributions propose that design is an empowering tool in crafts: craftspeople can use it to empower themselves, the practice, and possible new makers.

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