



Trashmagination Podcast #65 – Sweaters, Yarn and Wool

Welcome to Trashmagination, a podcast about reimagining trash. I'm Carla Brown.

In today's episode, we're going to talk about creative reuse of sweaters, yarn and wool. I'm guessing most of you have heard about people who put a sweater in the dryer and it felts, meaning that it shrinks and gets very dense. That can be sad news if it was one of your favorite sweaters to wear, but there are actually people who purposefully felt sweaters to make them into new items. Another way that people creatively reuse sweaters is to take them apart and reuse the yarn to make something more in fashion with what they want. So today we'll share fun project ideas if you have sweaters or wool blankets that just sit in your closet and are ready for a new life.

Will My Sweater Felt?

Step 1 for the creative reuse of sweaters is figuring out what type of yarn was used to make the sweater. It's great when your sweater still has a label on it, with words related to heep wool fibers (merino, Shetland or lambswool), goat wool fibers (mohair or cashmere) or rabbit wool fibers (angora). Some sweaters also contain linen, cotton or silk. All those words describe natural fibers but increasingly our clothing is made from synthetic fibers. Those will not felt when you put the sweater in the dryer. The words for synthetic fibers are nylon, rayon, spandex, fleece or acrylic.

Many sweaters are blends, meaning they have a certain percentage that is natural fibers and synthetic fibers. It's not easy to predict whether these will felt. The blogger Resweater used to do something called the Wool Blend Sweater Challenge where she would show the tag on the sweater and then she would try to felt the sweater. Her experiments showed that it was not always predictable which sweaters would felt. Sometimes the sweater was made from only 40% natural fibers and it felted great, while other times it was 60% and it didn't felt at all [http://resweater.blogspot.com/2011/03/wool-blends-sweater-challenge.html].

But what if you have a sweater with no labels? My family hates tags and we remove them from most of our clothing. If your sweater smells like a wet dog when it is wet, it has a higher quantity of natural fibers. Wool yarns will have hairy looking fibers while synthetic yarns will not. Another way to test a yarn is to burn a small piece of it. If it melts, it is mostly synthetic fibers. If it smells like burning hair, it is more natural fibers.

What to Make with Felted Sweaters

Once you have a natural fiber based sweater that is felted – on purpose or by accident – there are many things you can make with it. My favorite is mittens or hats. My favorites are cut from felted sweaters and lined with flannel. For inspiration, check out the designs by Josee Huard from Northern Smittens [https://www.instagram.com/northernmittens/]. She makes beautiful mittens from recycled sweaters often decorated with a red maple leaf. I will link to a video tutorial for how to make mittens from a felted sweater in the show notes [https://youtu.be/Km_nit9h9Fs].

There are lots of other projects you can make with a felted sweater such as fingerless gloves, dog sweaters, diaper covers, dryer balls, a cowl or scarf, hand warmers, hats, slippers, leg warmers, quilts, a wreath, potholders, pillows, stuffed toys and rugs. You can see inspiring pictures for all these projects on the Trashmagination Pinterest board - <https://www.pinterest.com/trashmagination/sweaters/>.

Recycled Wool Blankets and Clothing

Many of the projects that you can make with felted natural fiber sweaters can also be made with felted wool blankets or other wool clothing. Where I grew up in Nova Scotia, the thrift stores put aside all wool items in a specific area for rug hooking artists. Rug hooking is different from latch hooking. It's a type of rug hooking that uses a hook similar to a crochet hook, but you pull up little loops of wool through burlap, linen or monk's cloth. I have been rug hooking since I was a kid and it is one of my favorite creative reuse activities [<https://trashmagination.com/hooked-rug-gifts/>]. I will link to a blog on my website with photos of many rugs I have made. I have quite a collection of recycled wool that I cut in strips using a tool that looks like a pasta cutter.

Another way that we use up wool blankets and suits is a technique called a penny rug. This traditionally involved cutting out circle shapes the size of an old-fashioned penny (which is larger than a quarter) and sewing them in designs using a blanket stitch. My mom has made many penny rugs, and she has made many other items from recycled wool blankets and clothing. For example, she made me a Christmas tree garland from loops of recycled wool blankets, and she made me fingerless gloves as well.

Deconstructing Sweaters

Another fun way to creatively reuse sweaters is to deconstruct or unravel them. Nowadays there are actually small companies that specialize in deconstructing sweaters and when you purchase balls of yarn from them, you are supporting creative reuse. The company closest to where I live is called Reunion Yarn in Richmond, Virginia [<http://www.reunionyarn.com/>]. The owner, Emily Felix, also has an online membership site called the Unraveling Club where you can join a whole community of people who deconstruct sweaters [<https://www.unraveling.club/>].

When you purchase yarn from these companies, the yarn doesn't come all balled up and looking used. These companies use professional machines to put the yarn on cones and the yarn looks new. Reunion Yarn also sells vintage clothing, which makes sense. When you are scouring thrift stores for sweaters to deconstruct, it's likely you will also see great finds in terms of vintage clothing.

There are companies all around the world which make recycled yarn from deconstructed sweaters and other sources. Many have teams working in other countries – such as those who make yarn from recycled saris in India. I'll mention some so you can order yarn from the closest one to you:

- Adelaide Hills Yarn Company in Australia [<https://www.instagram.com/adelaidehillsyarnco/>] – t-shirt yarn
- Darn Good Yarn in New York [<https://www.darngoodyarn.com/collections/recycled-materials>]
- Martine Makes in the Channel Islands [<https://martinemakes.com/collections/recycled-yarn>]
- Recovertex in Spain [<http://www.recovertex.com/>]
- String Harvest in Australia [<https://stringharvest.com.au/>]
- Twice Sheared Sheep in Colorado [<https://twiceshearedsheep.com/>]
- Woolagain in Rhode Island [<http://www.woolagain.com/>]

Twice Sheared Sheep shows how she unravels and spins yarn from a sweater with her homegrown machine.

Using Up Small Amounts of Yarn or Yarn Remnants

Many knitters are left with small balls of yarn after working on a big project. Here are ideas for what to do with them.

My grandmother Rea and great-grandmother Violet were both incredible knitters. Rea struggles to knit these days but she and my sister Tracy did a fantastic project. Rea had gathered a bunch of those little balls of yarn from all the years of knitting. Individually they were too small to make any one project. These small balls of yarn were also sentimental because they reminded Rea of her many projects as well as my grandfather Bob who used to help wind the yarn. Tracy and Rea decided to knit lots of wool socks for Rea's five children from these small balls of yarn. They did their best to knit the socks side-by-side so they were somewhat similar. So they might knit a stripe on each sock with the same

yarn at the same place. This project gave Rea a chance to coach Tracy on knitting socks, and she helped with the less-tricky parts which she could do without really looking.

An artist who has recently talked about using up remnant yarn is Arounna from Bookhou [https://www.instagram.com/p/BnHlgcpAUfX/]. She has really helped popularize the art of punch needling and now she is using a tufting gun to make her work even faster. She is making a line of pillows from yarn remnants and sharing peeks of her designs on Instagram – so go check that out.

Emily Primbs from Loomshakalaka makes adorable tufted art like Arounna along with many other fiber arts. She now also makes yarn from all the leftovers she cuts while making her art [https://www.instagram.com/p/BrGcPHUjFE_/]. She takes all the little scraps of yarn, even the bits of yarn that she cuts off when making pompoms. She puts them on a spiky wheel-shaped carding tool and then spins it into yarn. She even takes yarn scraps from other artists to make them custom wool. I would love to hear about projects that you did to use up your yarn remnants.

Creative Reuse Artists Who Use Yarn

There are many artists I follow on Instagram for inspiration when it comes to creative reuse of yarn and wool. They don't always specify that they are using yarn or wool from recycled materials, but they still give me lots of ideas.

Check out the work of Elin Thomas, who make beautiful sculptures inspired by mold, fungi and lichen [http://www.elinthomas.com/photo_14159568.html]. She has a whole series called petri dishes which are exquisite.

In the show notes I will share a video about Moreno de Turco who makes portraits by gluing down yarn [https://morenodeturco.myportfolio.com/the-gallery-general]. I mentioned Moreno in the episode about creative reuse of CDs and DVDs because he made portraits from those as well.

I love it when creative reuse is combined with community building, and one of my favorite practices in this area is called “yarn bombing.” This can be a fun community project where you knit around items on the street like telephone poles or fences. The idea is that it is like graffiti except it doesn't damage the structures. Some say it is a more feminine form of graffiti because painted graffiti is mostly done by men. Some communities encourage yarn bombing at community events, and some artists have even been hired by global companies to make a yarn bombing advertisement. One of those is London Kaye [https://youtu.be/PqZ_rLsaxxY]. She will crochet around the poles in a subway car for example. She has crocheted giant installations for Miller Beer and Starbucks. I read she uses more than 1,000 pounds of yarn per year in her installations. I heard a great interview with London on the podcast The Crafty Planner which I will link to in the show notes [http://www.craftyplanner.com/2016/03/14/london-kaye/].

Another community building event that I admire is the International Back-to-Back Wool Challenge – [https://www.facebook.com/woolbacktoback/]. Team compete to make a sweater from the sheep to fully knitted in the fastest time. They need to have team member with diverse skills such as experts in sheep shearing, wool carding, spinning and knitting. I love this contest because it makes the whole process visible. So many makers only deal with the material at one moment in its life cycle. Part of creative reuse is being aware of the whole life cycle of an item and working to ensure it is sustainable every step of the way.

Thank you!

Thank you for listening! I would love to hear what you think about creative reuse of sweaters, yarn and wool at trashmagination@gmail.com.

Thank you to Kathy Saigon, who left a very nice review in Apple Podcasts about this podcast! She wrote “This podcast is full of creative ideas. I dare you to listen and not be inspired to try at least one! It makes the listener feel excited to reduce their trash output, either by crafting or by finding products that are crafted by others.” Thank you so much Kathy for taking a moment to let people know that you were inspired! It helps people to find the podcast when you rate and review it – so I hope you'll take a moment to do that. Until next time – may you see recycled sweaters, wool and yarn as a source of art in your life!