

Local art is in the bag

Sandy McDermott and family launch Felted 4 Ewe to create and sell handbags

By Vandy Duffy

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The warm, sunny days of summer are over. Now New Englanders snuggle down for the cold days of winter. Some people strap on their snow shoes or skis for adventure while others build fires in their wood stoves and settle in with a good long winter read.

McDermott had been knitting for nine years, "sporadically." Then three years ago her mother-in-law made her first felted handbag. McDermott and her sister-in-law both got excited about this new textile art form that took the traditional knitting and felting techniques and opened them up to funky possibilities.

All three began creating bags. When they brought all the bags together and saw how many they had, starting a business venture came to mind, and Felted 4 Ewe was born.

McDermott explains the felting process this way: "There is the folk way, where you take the fleece from the sheep and you hand agitate it in hot water and soap until the fleece becomes fabric. The hair has microscopic barbs, hot water agitation makes the barbs hook together and fabric is formed. We knit with 100 percent wool and use hot water and soap in the washing machine. We run it through agitation two or three times. We also use recycled sweaters. We put them in hot water, then they shrink, the strands of yarn from the sweater become a sheet of fabric."

From this sheet of fabric Felted 4 Ewe creates handbags. Each member of the team has a slightly different style. "My mother-in-law uses more traditional patterns and colors; my sister-in-law uses more funky textures and colors. I am a little traditional and then incorporate a little 'Pow.' I like colors to be in harmony and I like them to work together," says McDermott.

Working with color is not new to McDermott; she holds a master's degree in scientific illustration.

"I am a natural science illustrator; I draw from life. Scientific illustration can require a tremendous amount of accuracy. How accurate something is, is directed by the publisher/editor or author."

Four years ago McDermott began exploring color and looking for a medium to create works of art for her own pleasure. She is now using watercolor and following her interest in the outdoors, creating landscapes and animals. "Birds are a passion for me," she says.

From fine art to felted bags may seem like a strange leap to some, but McDermott had the business experience to make Felted 4 Ewe work. "Our bags don't look crafty. We make a product that requires the right needles, the right colors and yarn. I spend time looking for just the right buttons and finishing touches to make the bags sophisticated. A lot of effort goes into each bag but if a bag doesn't 'work' then we don't put it out there."

Felted 4 Ewe bags appeared in their first show in 2007, the Fine Fiber Fest in Exeter. Later that same year their work was in the Exeter holiday show. "We got a great response and a good number of commissions from these shows," says McDermott.

Their work has also been available at the Riverwalk Bead Shop in Amesbury, Mass., and is now also available at Coventry Cottage in downtown Exeter.

Felted 4 Ewe's goal is to have more bags available in more local shops. "I would also like to use wool supplies from local suppliers. I would like our bags to be 100 percent locally made," states McDermott.

In 2010 you can expect to see Felted 4 Ewe "breaking out" in more colors, shapes and finishing touches. So, if you are looking for a way to jazz up and add a little pow to your wardrobe this coming year you might buy a Felted 4 Ewe bag and wear some art.

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