

Product Spotlight



An Embellishing Experience Leanne McWaters*

Commonly seen in decorative and wearable arts, needle felting is a technique that is also useful for adding decorations and dramatic effects to historic or fantasy costumes. The author reveals how she selected her new embellishing machine.

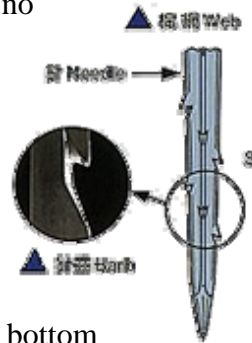
Have you ever thought of getting an Embellisher? You may be saying, “What is an Embellisher?”—or if you know about this machine, you might think, “and how would that help me in making a costume?”

I’m a wearable arts person and realize many costumes are just that: wearable art. And we use many of the same methods to achieve our results. This Embellisher is the best toy I’ve gotten myself in a long time. Let’s see how it could work for both areas.

Editor’s Note

An earlier version of this article appeared in the Peninsula Wearable Arts Guild newsletter, “The PenWAG Rag”. Thanks to Carole Parker for bringing it to my attention. For information about PenWAG, see the [Ongoing Events](#) section at the end of this issue.

If you haven’t heard of an Embellisher (also called a Needle Felting or Needle Punching Machine), it looks like a sewing machine but has no thread. Instead it has barbed needles (1 to 12) that produce interesting effects by forcing the threads of the top fabric/yarn/ribbon down into the bottom fabric and pulling up some of the fibers of the bottom fabric into the top one. Thus, one fabric becomes embedded into the other--no thread lines or glue needed, quick—who knew?



My interest in having this machine was not to do felting, per say, but rather working with combining Angelina, sheers, yarn, ribbon, etc. into fabulous fabrics for wearables, costumes and wall hangings. Linda Schmidt is an artist whose work has inspired me. Her [web site](#) includes examples of how her ideas might apply to fantasy costuming. She also does work with other needle felters at sites like [Fiberella.com](#). (see the [sidebar](#) at the end of this article).

There are five options for doing needle felting (see the [Resources](#) list at the end of this article).

1. A single barbed needle— definitely a lot of work, very cheap, but watch your fingers!
2. A hand tool— also a lot of work, but a cheaper alternative than the following choices
3. A needle felting adapter that permanently converts any sewing machine into an embellisher. This is a good choice if you own an old machine you no longer use.
4. A sewing machine attachment that allows a regular sewing machine to do needle felting. This entails pulling off one attachment, putting on another, rethreading, and resetting adjustments.
5. A stand-alone Embellisher or Needle Punching Machine. There are several models are on the market, with a widely varying set of features.

For me, needles and hand tools are too much work. I’ve found adapters on sale for around \$65, but I do not have a spare sewing machine to convert. There is an attachment for the Bernina I use as my regular sewing machine. With the required needle plate, it runs about \$190.

After considering the other options, I concluded that a stand-alone Embellisher was the way to go. I can just run over and

put on some beautiful scrap in a minute without having to remove my sewing machine attachment, put on another attachment and then rethread my sewing machine each time plus change features.

After asking several knowledgeable people and reading online reviews of available models I quickly focused on the [Babylock Embellisher \(EMB12\)](#).

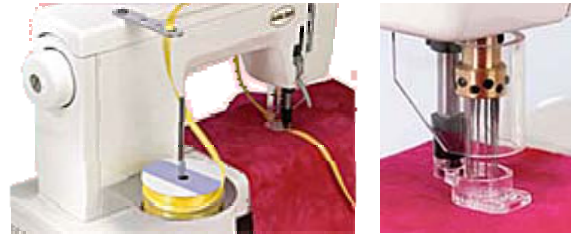


Some of the other stand-alone machines are cheaper, but I didn't think it was worth it to lose the features of the Babylock.

Many of the on-line reviews were written a while ago and only mention the older 7-needle Babylock Embellisher. Although this may be enough for your needs, the newest model has 12 needles, which allows you to work a bigger area faster. I like that I can take some of the needles out if I am doing something narrower plus these needles do break and I

can replace one or two at a time. I can also purchase needles that vary in size to create different effects or make smaller holes, which may show on some fabrics. I haven't tried this.

This model has a guide for threading ribbons or yarns down through the needles (e.g. to make lines or patterns) as well as a guard to protect your fingers.



If you decide that this is the machine for you, I recommend shopping price at both local and online stores. The reviews say they usually sell for between \$500-\$600, but I found a new one for \$499 in a local store. Before buying a new one, ask about machines used for classes that they might sell you for less, and negotiating on price.

I did all of these, and was able to purchase a 12-needle Babylock Embellisher that had been used a few times for classes at a local store for \$350. I decided not to purchase the plastic table that fits around the machine, which costs an additional \$85.

What do I love about this machine?

1. You often don't know just what it will look like when you put various types of materials on or on top of each other. The serendipity quality is a real

adventure--you get to be surprised! This, of course, can lead you to some new creation you hadn't thought of before. Or you can carefully plan your look.

2. If you don't like it, add more of

Sewcabulary

- **Angelina**[®] – iridescent, heat bondable fiber; perfect for fantasy costumes. This shredded fusible film changes color depending on heat setting of iron and length of time ironed.
- **Base** – the material into which you felt other fabrics and fibers.
- **Needle felting (or needle punching)** – a technique to mechanically bond fabrics and fiber material together. A needle with barbs or hooks travels through layers of fabric, fiber or yarn, pulling fibers through the layers.
- **Pintuck**– small, narrow fold of fabric stitched together to create the appearance of a line or stripe.
- **Roving**– any natural fiber yarn (usually wool) that has been drawn out and slightly twisted in preparation for spinning or use in needle felting.
- **Wearable Art**– an individually designed piece of clothing or jewelry, created as expressive or fine art, and intended as a serious and unique artistic creation or statement.

something until you do or pull something off (this is easily done).

3. I can cut my creations into shapes and appliqué them onto something else.
4. I can use my little it'sy bitsy, teeny-weeny stash treasures. And I can experiment with many fabrics and get different effects.
5. There are two sides to what you create--one more dominant and clear looking and one more subtle. I plan to make a reversible vest with some of my creations. You can also liven up the subtle side by adding a few pieces directly onto that side.
6. It's a quick and easy playtime in my busy life. I can leave the machine out and spend 5 minutes putting different weird materials on a piece of fabric and feel that creative surge of energy I'm giving myself--that is magic and fast!

Materials to use for a base:

- **Duck/canvas** cloth - the sturdiest (Joann's carries black duck cloth, not all stores do),
- **Fleece, felt, stabilizer** - experiment!

Types of materials to felt into the base:

- **Wool roving** is usually used by spinners but works well on the Embellisher. The look it creates is like that of felt, but way easier. It comes in lots of wonderful colors or white, which you can dye. You can layer the different colors and they combine to form a third color.



- **Any lightweight fabric** seems to work pretty well—silk, organza, lame, netting, Angelina, ribbon, yarn, feathers, etc. I find anything that has wire within it difficult to use and hard on the needles. Tissue paper and thin plastic can be integrated but I have found you need to put something like Angelina or yarn over it to hold it on. Try whatever you have around—that is a lot of the fun! You can add any stitching, sequins, whatever on top of your creation for even more fun.

In his book, "[Pillows: Designer Sewing Techniques](#)", Christopher Nejman suggests duck cloth, and he is right. It is much sturdier for many purposes. He cuts shapes of various soft supple fabrics and needle felts each one, cutting off the rest of the fabric swatch when he likes the result. He applies Angelina over the top, and uses circular, zigzag stitches all over the fabric. Visit his [web site](#) to see his creations.

I just got this machine so these pictures (right) show my first experiments. As you see, you can get interesting results—on both sides! Switch back and forth, adding fabrics to each side, to get various “looks”.



Here they are, appliquéed to a vest:



Resources

Here are resources I found while researching needle felting and Embellisher options:

- Single-barbed felters:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IkdGCiu7Tzk>
<http://gfwsheep.com/needlefelting/needlefelt1.html>
- Hand tools:
<http://www.howcast.com/videos/3024-How-To-Use-NeedleFelting-Techniques>
- Permanent needle felting adapters:
<http://www.crawforddesigns.net/catalog/catalog.php?item=67&catid=25&ret=catalog.php%3Fcategory%3D25>
- Sewing machine attachments:
<http://fembellish.wordpress.com/2007/03/15/tool-trove-4-bernina-needle-punch-accessory-set-also-called-decorative-punch-tool/>
<http://sarastexturecrafts.blogspot.com/2008/08/machine-embellishing-how-to-use-your.html>
- Comparison of stand-alone machines:
http://www.tryourdesigns.com/Felting_machines.htm
- General information on needle felting:
<http://www.tryourdesigns.com/FreeTutorials.htm>.

Leanne McWaters is a creative wild-woman wanna-be, with little free time. She loves creating wearable art, pastels, collage, mosaics, paintings, sculptures, – all of it! She is an active member of The Peninsula Wearable Arts Guild (PenWAG) and a new member of SiW.

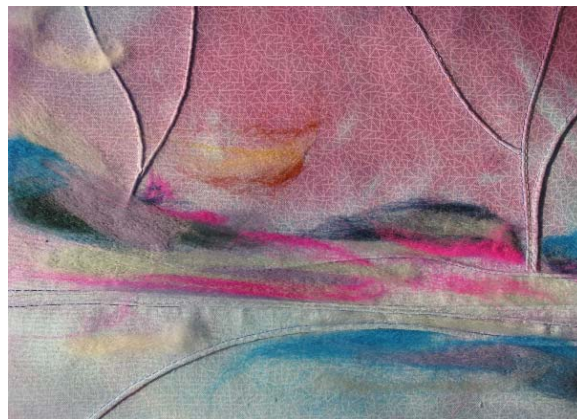
Ideas for Using Needle Felting in Costuming

A pair of tutorials by Paula Scaffidi on Fiberella.com, a website devoted to textile arts, illustrate potential uses of needle felting for costumes. See the [Resources](#) page on the site for detailed instructions, and several movie clips that show the Babylock Embellisher in action. Thanks to Paula Scaffidi for permission to reference her tutorials and use of these images.

Muraled Fabric Designs for Fantasy Costumes

Needle felting enables fantasy costumers to create unusual fabric designs that convey an otherworldly or artistic mood. You can use an Embellisher to “paint” muraled landscapes onto a fabric base with colored fibers rather than dyes.

Lightly sketch the scene you want on the fabric and decide what colors to use in each area. Then take small bundles of colored roving or other fibers and punch them into the fabric using the Embellisher, much as you would with paints in a paint-by-number picture. The fibers blend in soft lines where colors meet. You can optionally use pintucking to add dimensional lines.



Decorative Designs for Historical Costumes

Needle felting enables historical costumers to create decorative motifs to embellish costumes with trims of leafs and other designs. The designs can be created directly on the fabric, or done separately and appliquéd afterwards.

To create an autumn leaf, trace it onto stabilizer using a water-soluble pen. Apply roving in the appropriate colors and punch in using the Embellisher. Then, punch in twists of perl cotton to create the veins. Finally, cut the leaf out, using scalloped and zig-zag scissors to get the various angular and scalloped effects. A kit for this design is available on the web site.

